Standing in Prisoners' Shoes: A Randomized Trial on How Incarceration Shapes Criminal Justice Views

Arto Arman, Andreas Beerli, Aljosha Henkel, Michel André Maréchal*

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Abstract

We study the impact of incarceration experience on public attitudes towards punitive justice policies. We take advantage of a unique randomized controlled trial offering regular citizens the opportunity to undergo up to two days of incarceration in a newly built prison, replicating the real-life journey of inmates. Our results reveal that subjects who received an opportunity to gain firsthand incarceration experience exhibit a significant change in punitive attitudes, becoming less supportive of harsh criminal justice policies and donating more money to organizations advocating for moderate justice policies. While participants overestimated prisoner wellbeing, the experiment did not alleviate their misperceptions. Our results underscore the crucial role of personal experience in shaping support for criminal justice reform.

Key Words: Incarceration, Field Experiment, Criminal Justice Policy, Punitive Attitudes, Prison

*Arman: KOF Swiss Economic Institute, ETH Zurich (arman@kof.ethz.ch). Beerli: KOF Swiss Economic Institute, ETH Zurich (beerli@kof.ethz.ch). Henkel: KOF Swiss Economic Institute, ETH Zurich (henkel@kof.ethz.ch). Maréchal: Department of Economics, University of Zurich (michel.marechal@econ.uzh.ch). The study was pre-registered at the AEA RCT Registry (AEARCTR-0009150) and was reviewed and approved by the Human Subjects Committee of the Faculty of Economics, Business Administration, and Information Technology at the University of Zurich (OEC IRB #2022-013).

1 Introduction

Over the past few decades, many regions across the world have experienced a notable shift toward more punitive criminal justice policies. This trend is most evident in the widespread rise of mass incarceration, which has resulted in nearly 11 million individuals being confined worldwide (Fair and Walmsley, 2021). While public opinion is considered a key factor in shaping criminal justice policies (Baumer and Martin, 2013; Brace and Boyea, 2008; Enns, 2016; Jennings et al., 2017; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009), most individuals possess very limited knowledge about the everyday realities of life behind bars (Bryant and Morris, 1998; Doble, 1995; Farkas, 1993; Hough and Roberts, 2005; Roberts and Hough, 2005). Prisons, by their very nature, remain largely inaccessible for citizens, leaving public perceptions largely confined to media portrayals and fiction (Cecil and Leitner, 2009; Wilson and O'Sullivan, 2004).This raises the questions of whether public attitudes towards incarceration are rooted in an accurate understanding of prison life, and whether society's stance on criminal justice policies would remain unchanged if people experienced incarceration firsthand?

In this paper, we shed light on these questions by taking advantage of a unique randomized controlled trial that provided regular citizens with an opportunity to gain firsthand incarceration experience. The Department of Justice and Home Affairs from the Canton of Zurich in Switzerland organized a four-day test run for a newly built prison to test its operational and security procedures under simulated real-life conditions. Volunteering participants could experience up to 48 hours of incarceration, following standard procedures closely mirroring a real inmate's journey from intake to release, including strip searches, confiscation of all belongings, and a strictly regulated daily routine. Participants were locked away in their prison cells for the vast majority of the day and were only able to leave those for a 10-minute shower and a 90-minute window reserved for a courtyard walk. In sum, the unique setup provided participants with an experience as close as possible to real incarceration.[1]

Since the approximate 750 interested volunteers exceeded the prison's capacity, we randomly divided applicants into a treatment and a control group. The prison authorities were

[1] According to reports comparing prison conditions across developed countries, the incarceration experience in Switzerland generally ranks toward the less severe to moderate end of the spectrum, but exhibits significant heterogeneity across various dimensions (e.g., World Health Organization, 2023; Aebi and Cocco, 2024). For further details, see Section 2.

given the discretion to select any applicant from the treatment group and schedule a test run slot based on cell occupancy, the applicants' availability, gender, and smoking status. In contrast, we instructed prison authorities not to invite applicants from the control group to participate in the test run. This design enables us to estimate the intention-to-treat effect of providing the opportunity to gain firsthand incarceration experience. We conducted surveys with applicants before and after the test run to gauge their *punitive attitudes* and *beliefs about prisoner wellbeing*, using both behavioral and questionnaire measures.

We document several novel findings. First, our empirical results reveal that, compared to the control group, applicants who received the opportunity to participate in the test run became substantially less likely to support punitive policies. Moreover, they donated more money to organizations advocating for a more moderate, rather than a harsher, criminal justice system. We observe a significant reduction in punitive justice attitudes, exceeding 0.3 standard deviations. This treatment effect is substantial in magnitude and corresponds to about 30% of the difference in punitive attitudes (as captured by the percentage of the public favoring imprisonment for a recidivist burglar) between the United States and Norway — two countries often regarded as representing opposite ends on the spectrum in terms of the punitiveness of their justice systems.[2]

Since our sample comprises citizens who volunteered for this rather unusual experience, it may not be representative of the general population. We examine the generalizability of our results by using data on demographics, preferences, and attitudes from an additional survey conducted with a representative sample of the Swiss voting population and applying entropy balancing to reweight the experimental sample. Our main findings remain robust after reweighting the sample to better reflect the characteristics of the general population.

Second, we observe that the public significantly overestimates the wellbeing of prisoners. However, when asked to predict their own wellbeing during incarceration, their estimates align more closely with the self-reported experiences of actual prisoners. This finding suggests that, even without firsthand experience, the public has some intuitive understanding of how they might personally feel if incarcerated. The discrepancy between perceptions of prisoner's wellbeing and their own wellbeing indicates that citizens may view prisoners as

[2]The comparison of punitiveness is based on Dijk et al. (2007) who compiled data from the 2005 International Crime and Victim Survey (ICVS) and the 2005 European Survey of Crime and Safety (EU ICS).

better equipped to cope with the challenges of incarceration than they themselves would be.

Third, we find that the opportunity to participate in the test run did not significantly affect beliefs about wellbeing in prison, which is consistent with the nuanced nature of the public's misperceptions. Therefore, our results suggest that beliefs about wellbeing in prison are unlikely the underlying mechanism driving the change in punitive justice attitudes. Although we cannot definitively identify the exact mechanism for the observed pattern, additional analyses presented in the discussion help to narrow the range of potential explanations.

Our paper connects to several stands of the literature. First, a growing body of research in economics and psychology highlights the importance of personal experience (e.g., Foster and Rosenzweig, 1995; Malmendier, 2021; Hertwig and Erev, 2009). Personal experiences can have long-lasting and profound effects on individuals' beliefs and economic decisions, influencing factors such as inflation expectations, consumption behavior, attitudes to redistribution, and job preferences (Malmendier and Wachter, 2021; Roth and Wohlfart, 2018; Cotofan et al., 2023). Moreover, accumulating evidence from laboratory experiments compares the roles of experience relative to information in judgment and decision making (Weber et al., 2004; Hertwig et al., 2004; Barron and Erev, 2003; Miller and Maniadis, 2012; Simonsohn et al., 2008). For instance, Conlon et al. (2022), demonstrate that individuals value information they discover themselves far more than information provided by others. In the context of crime, Philippe (2024) examines how criminals learn about legal changes, underscoring the significance of direct sentencing experience compared to announcement and information from peers. Similarly, Haselhuhn et al. (2012) find that experience with fines increases compliance in returning video rentals.[3] Our study contributes to this literature by investigating how firsthand incarceration experiences influence policy preferences for criminal justice reform, thereby extending the scope of experience effects to new domains.

Second, previous studies have examined the potential of prison visits and encounters with incarcerated individuals as interventions to deter at-risk youth and former offenders from future crime (e.g., the well-known "Scared Straight" program). However, Petrosino et al. (2013)'s meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials indicates that these programs

[3]See also Dušek and Traxler (2022) and Gehrsitz (2017) for related evidence on the impact of punishment experience on future compliance, as well as Lochner (2007) for evidence on how arrest experiences shape beliefs about the probability of future arrest.

do not only fail to deter crime but often increase crime among at-risk youth. In contrast to Scared Straight and similar initiatives, our intervention targets the general population and focusses on firsthand incarceration experiences rather than confrontations with incarcerated individuals and their narratives of crime and prison life. Furthermore, our study does not aim to evaluate deterrence effects but seeks to understand the broader attitudinal impacts of incarceration experience.[4]

Third, our study relates to a vast literature highlighting that citizens are often poorly informed about crime and the criminal justice system (Apel, 2022). For example, many people hold profound misconceptions about sentencing practices and their severity (Roberts et al., 2022; Hough and Roberts, 2012). Additionally, citizens often misunderstand the demographic composition of prisoners and the realities of life in prison (see, e.g., Bryant and Morris, 1998; Roberts and Hough, 2005). Doble (1995) and Farkas (1993), for example, document that many people mistakenly believe prisoners spend their time idly or engaged primarily in leisure activities. However, little attention has been paid to the public perceptions of inmate wellbeing. Our study contributes by providing novel evidence that citizens systematically overestimate the wellbeing of prisoners. Interestingly, when asked to predict their own wellbeing during incarceration, citizens report levels more similar to those reported by actual prisoners. This finding suggests that citizens think prisoners as being better able to cope with incarceration.

Finally, our study is also connected to research analyzing the effects of information on attitudes toward the criminal justice system. These studies have experimentally varied the provision of information about sentencing practices, sentencing guidelines, the availability of alternative sanctions, and narrative accounts of incarceration (Mitchell and Roberts, 2011; Doble, 2002; Harney, 2023). Rather than relying on information-based interventions, which typically produce moderate effects on preferences (Haaland et al., 2023), our study goes beyond this by offering participants a deeply immersive experience of incarceration. This

[4]Prior research has also examined prison tours as an educational tool, primarily for criminology students. For example, Calaway et al. (2016) find shifts in students' perceptions of rehabilitation, while Murdoch (2020) highlights that such tours may reduce social distance between students and prisoners. However, Long and Utley (2018) report no significant changes in empathy or punitive attitudes. These studies are often constrained by small sample sizes and lack of randomization, limiting the generalizability of their findings. Our study differs by employing a randomized controlled trial design and focusing on a general population, thereby addressing these limitations and expanding the scope of this literature.

approach complements the existing literature on information provision by leveraging firsthand exposure to foster changes in attitudes, akin to Andries et al. (2024) who combined virtual reality with information provision to shape attitudes toward immigration.

2 Background

2.1 The Swiss incarceration experience in international comparison

Switzerland incarcerates 73 individuals per 100,000 citizens, a figure comparable to Norway or Germany, which have incarceration rates of 54 and 67 individuals per 100,000 citizens, respectively. In stark contrast, the United States has an incarceration rate of 614 inmates per 100,000 citizens (Institute for Crime and Justice Policy Research, 2024). Reports comparing prison conditions across developed countries suggest that the experience of incarceration in Switzerland varies substantially across different dimensions. However, it is generally considered less harsh than in some other developed countries, particularly the United States. Swiss prisoners — similar to inmates in other European countries — typically serve shorter sentences for equivalent offenses compared to their U.S. counterparts. For instance, the average sentence length for homicide in Switzerland is 9 years, compared to 40.6 years in the U.S. (Kazemian, 2023). Additionally, only 5.8% of Swiss prisoners serve sentences exceeding ten years, in contrast to 58% of U.S. inmates serving such sentences in 2019 (Kazemian, 2023). By comparison, the proportions of inmates serving sentences over ten years are 8.9% in Norway and 20% France in 2023 (Aebi and Cocco, 2024). Moreover, all Swiss prisoners have access to in-cell toilets, facilities for physical activity, and diverse food options catering to cultural or dietary needs. Inmates in Swiss correctional facilities also benefit from access to education, vocational training programs, and opportunities for paid work, which are not guaranteed in all European countries (World Health Organization, 2023).

However, the Swiss National Commission for the Prevention of Torture has repeatedly criticized the stringent conditions in pretrial detention (National Commission for the Prevention of Torture NCPT, 2017, 2022). Until recent years, pretrial detainees in most Cantons were confined to their cells for up to 23 hours a day, with minimal or no contact with the

outside world. The NCPT has also highlighted issues such as overcrowding in some Swiss prisons and insufficient access to therapeutic measures. Consistent with these findings, Aebi and Cocco (2024) report that the suicide rate among Swiss prison inmates is one of the highest in Europe, at 201 per 100,000 inmates, compared to the European median 50 per 100,000 inmates.

2.2 Test run for a newly built prison

The Department of Justice and Home Affairs of the Canton of Zurich in Switzerland organized a four-day test run for a newly built prison to test its operational and security procedures under simulated real-life conditions. Volunteering participants could experience up to 48 hours of incarceration, following standard procedures closely mirroring a real inmate's journey from intake to release. After participants arrived at the prison (individually or via police transport)[5], the prison staff confiscated all belongings. Subsequently, participants underwent a strip search[6] and received their prison uniform. Next, they were put into a waiting cell for an undetermined amount of time, which lasted more than 3 hours for some participants before being transferred into their assigned prison cell. While the prison features both single and double cells, the majority of cells used for the test run (53 out of 57) were double cells measuring 13 square meters.[7] See Figure 1 for images of a double cell and the courtyard.

The test run participants followed the same strictly regulated daily routine as regular inmates. They were locked up in their prison cells for the vast majority of the day and could only leave the cell for a 10-minute shower in the morning and during a 90-minute window in the afternoon reserved for the courtyard walk. For an overview of the daily schedule, see Table 1.

The key feature of the test run is that participants' incarceration experience was as close as possible to a real inmate's journey from intake to release. Two aspects, however, were

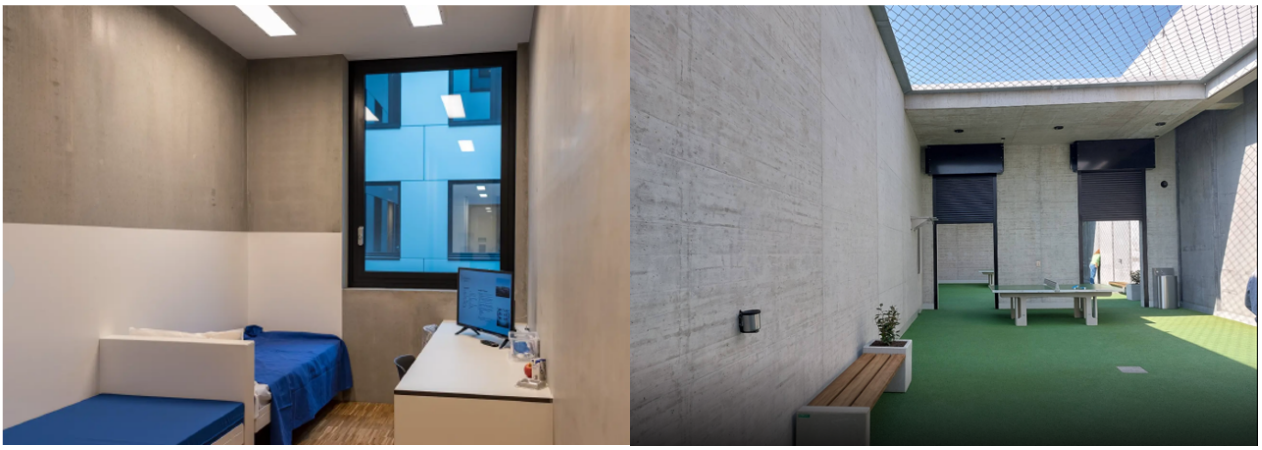
[5]The majority of test run participants arrived at the prison individually. The police transported a small subset of test run participants to the prison to simulate the organizational challenge of a large group of inmates entering at the same time.

[6]The strip search was the only voluntary element of the test run. Despite this, in the online application process more than 80% of all applicants opted into having the strip search.

[7]The prison features four additional single cells and five additional double cells that were not used for the test run.

Figure 1: Images of the prison

(a) Double cell (b) Courtyard



Note This figure shows a double cell in panel (a) and the courtyard in panel (b) of the prison in which subjects were incarcerated during the test run.

different: (i) participants had the possibility of terminating their incarceration with an individual "safe word" that they defined with the guards during the entry process, (which, according to the prison staff, only two participants made use of), and (2) participants would not share their cells with suspected criminals, but regular citizens with clean criminal records and no ongoing proceedings. Together with the fact that they were held in a modern uncrowded prison[8], our estimates will likely represent a lower bound of the effects of firsthand incarceration experience.

Anecdotal accounts reveal that participants often struggled with the lack of autonomy and the psychological burden of incarceration. One participant described the challenge of losing control over basic daily decisions: "It was exciting at first, but you soon realize that you can no longer decide anything yourself: When to eat, when to shower, when to get fresh air. Not being able to decide this yourself was a challenge — despite the test situation." Another participant highlighted the emotional toll of incarceration, emphasizing the monotony: "In no other place does time pass so quickly as in the courtyard. Back in the cell, I am overcome by a great wave of boredom. I feel like I'm a dog and only look forward to eating and going

[8]At peak times, 77 test run participants were occupied simultaneously. Given the prison's capacity for 124 inmates, this corresponds to a maximum occupancy share of 62%.

Table 1: Daily schedule

Time	**Schedule**
6:45 AM	Wake-up call
7:15 AM	Breakfast in cell
8:30 AM	Kiosk at cell door (to borrow books or buy snacks / cigarettes)
10:00 AM to 11:00 AM	10-minute slot for daily shower
12:00 PM	Lunch in cell
1:15 PM to 2:45 PM	90-minute window for courtyard walk
5:00 PM	Dinner in cell
10:00 PM	Lights off

Note This table shows the daily routine subjects followed during the prison test run mirroring the routines of regular inmates.

for a walk."[9]

3 Experimental design

Online application process and randomization

After the announcement of the prison test run by the Department of Justice and Home Affairs of the Canton of Zurich through various media outlets, the authorities opened an online application portal in early February 2022. During the online application process, interested citizens had to indicate their contact details, canton of residence, availability for each of the four days of the test run, interest in staying overnight, consent to a strip search at prison entry, meal preferences, and smoking status. Applicants were only eligible to participate in the test run if they were adults living in the Canton of Zurich and had a clean criminal record and no ongoing proceedings. The authorities were overwhelmed with applications and ultimately left with a sample of 747 eligible applicants from the general population.[10] This

[9]These quotes stem from an additional qualitative survey conducted with participants guaranteed a slot in the test run (VIPs, judges, and media professionals), as well as from newspaper articles written by participating media professionals.

[10]In addition to the applicants from the general population, 65 further people were guaranteed a slot in the test run. These included 18 VIPs (politicians and employees in managing positions at the Justice Department), 28 judges, and 19 media professionals. While we invited the VIPs and judges to our surveys, the Department of Justice and Home Affair did not want members of the media to participate in the surveys. All of these additional 65 people were not randomized and are therefore excluded from all analyses in this paper.

number by far exceeded the available capacities for the test run, providing an opportunity to randomize access. We randomly assigned eligible applicants into a treatment and a control group, stratified for state employees and non-state employees. We implemented the stratified randomization because we expected a high number of applications from state employees working for the justice department who might have visited a prison before.

Test run allocation plan

We provided the prison authorities with the list of individuals from the treatment group, and they had the discretion to select any applicant from this group and schedule a slot in the test run based on cell occupancy as well as applicants' availability, gender, and smoking status. To provide prison authorities flexibility in scheduling the cell allocation plan, we oversampled the treatment group relative to the number of available slots. Consequently, we provided them with a list of 200 people for the 163 initially planned test run slots, consisting of the 182 subjects who were randomized into the treatment group and the 18 VIPs who were guaranteed a slot.[11] On the contrary, we instructed prison authorities not to invite applicants from the control group for the test run.

Baseline survey and invitation for the test run

After the randomization, we invited all applicants to complete the baseline survey.[12] We included the questionnaire measures for each of the primary outcomes to increase the precision of our regression analyses. In addition, we measured subjects' trust in institutions, beliefs about procedural fairness, criminal attitude, and risk preferences. Lastly, we collected information on occupation status, highest completed education, whether they work in law enforcement, and whether they had visited a prison before.

[11] After the randomization, we were informed that the 163 slots did not only have to accommodate the 18 VIPs, but in addition 28 judges and 19 media people, which further decreased the number of available slots for applicants randomized into the treatment group (see Section 4 for further details).

[12] Due to the relatively short window for the prison authorities to create the test run allocation plan, we had to conduct the randomization before we administered the baseline survey. However, the outcome of the randomization was communicated to most of the participants only after they completed the baseline survey. Of the 418 subjects included in the regression analyses, just three completed the baseline survey after they were informed about the outcome of the randomization. We show in Table A.4 that our results are robust to excluding these three subjects.

After the baseline survey and eight days prior to the start of the test run, prison authorities communicated whether the applicants were invited for the test run or not, explaining that the decision was based on a lottery draw due to excess demand. Subjects from the treatment group invited to participate in the test run received additional information about their entry and release dates and times. The test run took place between March 24th and 27th, 2022.

Endline survey

After the test run, we invited all subjects to our endline survey. To incentivize participation, we offered a raffle in which every fourth participant received 10 Swiss francs, conditional on survey completion. In the endline survey we elicited our two primary outcomes: (i) punitive attitudes and (ii) beliefs about prisoner wellbeing. For each outcome, we included both a behavioral and a questionnaire measure. As pre-registered, we created an index for each outcome out of the two individual measures using principal component analyses, but also report results separately.

To elicit subjects' *punitive attitudes*, we used a donation task. We measure their support for, or opposition to, policies targeting a tougher criminal justice system by giving them the option to direct a monetary donation of up to 5 Swiss francs (corresponding to roughly 5 US dollars and 40 cents) to a civic organization that either actively supports or actively opposes such policies. In particular, we ask the following question:
"Do you lean more towards instructing us to donate on your behalf to an organization that supports a tougher criminal justice system, or to donate to an organization that supports a more moderate criminal justice system?"
Conditional on their answer, they had to indicate how much of 5 Swiss francs we shall donate on their behalf to the respective organization they lean towards.[13] In addition to their donation decision, we measured participants' punitive attitudes by asking them how strongly they support strict law enforcement and harsh sentencing on a Likert-scale from 0 (do not support at all) to 6 (completely support).[14].

[13]We deliberately withheld the organizations' identities to prevent participants from making donation decisions based on their subjective perceptions.

[14]Using data from an additional survey conducted with a representative sample of the Swiss voting population, we find that a lower score on the punitive attitudes index correlates with having stronger policy

To gauge subjects' *beliefs about prisoner wellbeing*, we used a guessing task, which we incentivized for accuracy. For this, we surveyed actual inmates in a Swiss prison (the Prison Pfäffikon in the Canton of Zurich) about their personal wellbeing on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means they are extremely bad and 10 means they are extremely good. In the endline survey, we asked the prison test run subjects to guess the average value of the actual prison inmates' answers. We encouraged subjects to be as precise as possible, with the three most accurate answers each winning 50 Swiss francs. We additionally elicited participants' own expected wellbeing in prison by asking them to imagine they would be incarcerated for six months and to indicate what they think their personal wellbeing during incarceration would be, again using an 11-point Likert-scale as in the incentivized guessing task.[15] In Appendix D, we report a summary of the study timeline.

Sample size

678 of the 747 applicants (90.8%) participated in the baseline survey, with no difference in response rates between the experimental groups (Table C.1in Appendix C). 435 of these 747 invited subjects participated in the endline survey. We face differential attrition, as the response rate in the treatment group with 69.2% is higher than in the control group with 54.7% (Table C.2 in Appendix C). Importantly however, punitive justice attitudes at baseline are not predictive of participation in the endline survey. Nonetheless, we estimate bounds and conduct a within-subject analysis to address selective attrition (see Section 4). Data from the baseline survey is available for 418 of the 435 subjects that participated in the endline survey. Thus, the final sample of 435 subjects included in the main analyses consists of 126 subjects in the treatment group (from the 182 subjects originally randomized into it), and of 309 subjects in the control group (from originally 565 subjects).[16]

preferences for (i) less strict prison conditions (e.g., open prisons), (ii) a greater focus on reintegration into society (e.g., rehabilitative offers for continuing vocational training), and (iii) an increased use of alternative sanctions as opposed to incarceration (e.g., electronic ankle bracelets, community service). For graphical visualizations of these correlations, see Figure A.4 in Appendix A

[15]In the endline survey, we also elicited subjects' trust in institutions and their beliefs about procedural fairness. The results for these secondary outcomes are reported in Appendix B.

[16]We initially pre-registered sample sizes of 185 and 560 participants for the treatment and control groups, respectively. However, these figures were incorrectly recorded in the pre-registration due to a document versioning error.

4 Results

Sample description and randomization check

Our final sample contains 435 subjects. The average age in our sample is 39 years and nearly 51% of subjects are male. Almost every fifth subject is a state employee at the canton of Zurich (18%), while 23% work in law enforcement. 27% of applicants have previously visited a prison (see Appendix Table A.1). This relatively high proportion of participants who have previously visited a prison can be attributed to the sizable share of individuals employed in law enforcement.[17] While these descriptive statistics illustrate that our experimental sample does represent the general population, we find similar results if we re-weight observations using additional data from a representative sample (see Table 7).

Table 2 contains the balance check for our sample. We use a Pearson's Chi-squared test to compare binary variables and a Wilcoxon rank-sum test to compare continuous variables. Subjects in the treatment and control groups are comparable on all characteristics elicited during the application process and the baseline survey. Additionally, when regressing all observable characteristics on the treatment assignment and testing whether the they are equal to zero, the result is not significant at conventional significance levels ($p = 0.68$, F-test).

First stage results

We intentionally oversampled the treatment group relative to the number of available slots in the test run to provide more flexibility to the prison authorities when creating the cell allocation plan. Additionally, given the voluntary nature of the test run, some invited subjects from the treatment group canceled their participation shortly before the test run or simply did not show up. In a first step, we therefore analyze how treatment assignment affected incarceration status and duration. We estimate the following regression model using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS):

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 T_i + \beta_2 Z_i + \epsilon_i \tag{1}$$

[17] The Spearman's correlation between working in law enforcement and previous jail visit is 0.58 ($p = 0.000$).

Table 2: Balance Check

	Control N = 309		Treatment N = 126		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	*p-val*
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Punitive Attitudes (baseline)	4.377	(1.40)	4.372	(1.29)	0.369
Wellbeing in Prison (baseline)	4.141	(2.41)	4.240	(2.54)	0.227
Procedural Fairness (baseline)	4.721	(0.90)	4.760	(0.90)	0.180
Trust in Institutions (baseline)	7.939	(1.37)	8.050	(1.52)	0.286
Criminal Attitudes	1.384	(1.25)	1.331	(1.19)	0.849
Willingness to take Risk	4.852	(2.11)	4.967	(2.14)	0.998
Age	39.152	(13.65)	38.230	(11.81)	0.819
Male	0.511	(0.50)	0.508	(0.50)	0.589
Available on Thursday	0.573	(0.50)	0.540	(0.50)	0.626
Available on Friday	0.725	(0.45)	0.651	(0.48)	0.197
Available on Saturday	0.744	(0.44)	0.833	(0.37)	0.550
Available on Sunday	0.628	(0.48)	0.706	(0.46)	0.904
Interested in Overnight Stay	0.926	(0.26)	0.921	(0.27)	0.896
Consented Strip Search	0.790	(0.41)	0.706	(0.46)	0.328
Smoker	0.142	(0.35)	0.151	(0.36)	0.958
State Employee	0.181	(0.39)	0.190	(0.39)	0.522
Works in Law Enforcement	0.226	(0.42)	0.240	(0.43)	0.797
Previous Jail Visit	0.276	(0.45)	0.256	(0.44)	0.600
Tertiary Education	0.589	(0.49)	0.678	(0.47)	0.372
Joint significance test (P-value) = .676					

Note The table presents descriptive statistics of the treatment and control group, respectively. It includes baseline measures of punitive attitudes, citizens' anticipated wellbeing in prison, perceptions of procedural fairness, trust in institutions, criminal attitudes, and willingness to take risks. Additionally, it reports participants' age, the share of males, the share available on each of the four test run days (Thursday to Sunday), the share interested in staying overnight, the share consenting for a strip search, the share of smokers, the share working in the public sector, the share working in law enforcement, the share who has previously visited a jail, and the share with a completed tertiary education. Column (6) contains p-values from Chi-square tests for binary variables and Wilcoxon rank-sum tests for continuous variables, respectively. The p-value at the bottom is from an F-test to test whether all variables have a null-effect.

The dependent variable Y_i specifies whether subject i participated in the test run, the total number of hours subject i was incarcerated during the test run, and whether subject i spent at least one night (i.e., between 11:00 PM and 6:00 AM) in prison during the test run. The dummy variable T_i indicates the treatment assignment, Z_i is a dummy for the strata fixed effect (i.e., state employment), andϵ_i is the idiosyncratic error term. Column (1) in Table 3 shows that the treatment had a significant positive effect on all three measures of test run participation: Subjects in the treatment group had a 57.7 percentage points higher likelihood of attending the test run ($p = 0.000$). The treatment group were incarcerated for on average 11.6 additional hours ($p = 0.000$, column 2 of Table 3). Participants who actually attended the test run spent on average 21 hours in prison, with a maximum of 48 hours. Finally, column (3) shows that the treatment increased the likelihood of staying at least one night in prison by 48 percentage points ($p = 0.000$). As the control group means in Table 3 demonstrate, 13 of the 565 subjects randomized into the control group nevertheless participated in the test run. Discussions with the prison authorities revealed that three of those subjects were treated as VIPs (i.e., prison authorities guaranteed them a slot from the beginning without informing us beforehand), and the other ten subjects were accidentally invited by the prison authorities because of organizational mistakes.

Effects on punitive attitudes

Panel (a) in Figure 2 depicts the average score from the punitive justice index in the endline survey (normalized to a control group mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1) by treatment status. A higher score indicates stronger support for punitive justice policies. Participants in the treatment group scored on average -0.3 standard deviations lower than those in the control group ($p = 0.006$, Wilcoxon rank-sum test). Panels (b) and (c) in Figure 2 show the results separately for the two individual components of the punitive justice index. We coded all donations in favor of a more moderate criminal justice system with negative values and donations in favor of a tougher criminal justice system with positive values. Our variable *punitive justice donations* thus ranges from -5 Swiss francs (if respondents made the largest possible donation for a more moderate criminal justice system) to +5 Swiss francs (if the respondents made the largest possible donation for a tougher criminal justice system). Panel

Table 3: First Stage Regression

	Attended Test Run (1)	Hours in Prison (2)	Overnight in Prison (3)
Treatment Group	0.577***	11.583***	0.480***
	(0.050)	(1.187)	(0.050)
Strata FE	✓	✓	✓
Control group mean	0.023	0.522	0.019
Observations	435	435	435

Note This table shows the effect of treatment assignment on subjects' participation in the prison test run (i.e., treatment take-up) using OLS regressions. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. The dependent variable measures participation with a dummy for subjects' attendance in the test run (column 1), their hours spent in prison (column 2), and a dummy for whether they spent a night in prison (column 3; defined as being in the cell between 11pm and 6am), respectively. All regressions include strata fixed effects, i.e., a dummy for participants working in the public sector. Levels of significance: $^{*}p < .1$, $^{**}p < .05$, $^{***}p < .01$.

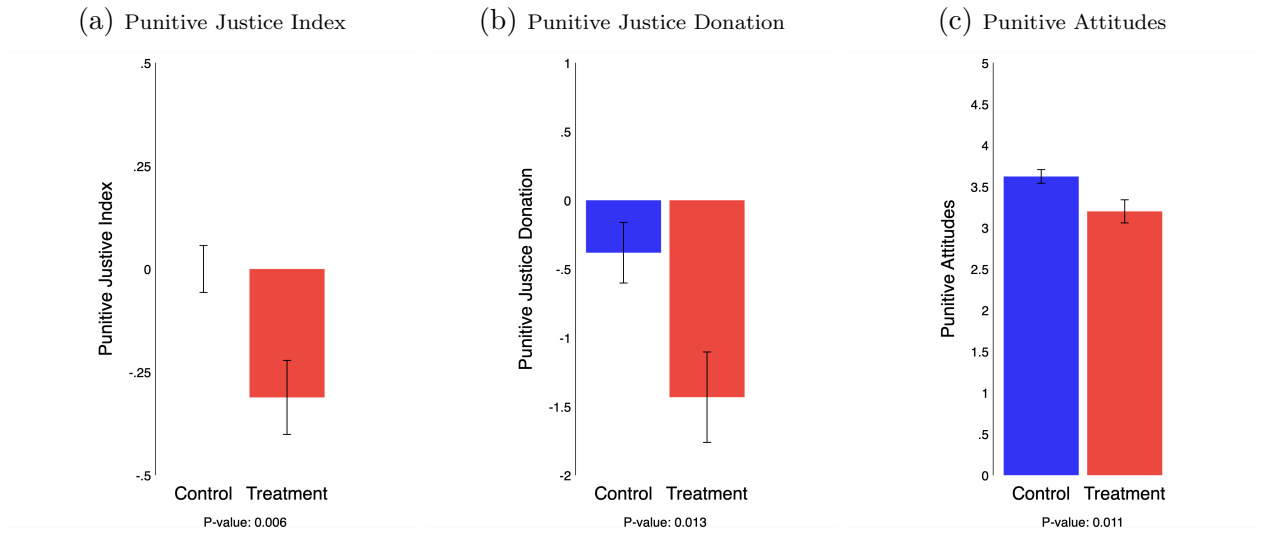
(b) highlights that punitive justice donations were on average roughly 1 Swiss franc lower in the treatment group than in the control group, highlighting greater support for a more moderate criminal justice system in the treatment group ($p = 0.013$, Wilcoxon rank-sum test). We find similar results for the questionnaire measure of punitive attitudes (see panel c). While the control group reported an average score of 3.6 on the punitive attitude scale, the punitive attitudes are significantly lower in the treatment group with an average score of 3.2 ($p = 0.011$, Wilcoxon rank-sum test).

The regression analysis corroborates the previous non-parametric results. We estimate the following linear regression model using OLS:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 T_i + \beta_2 X_i + \beta_3 Z_i + \epsilon_i c \tag{2}$$

The dependent variable Y_i specifies subject i's punitive attitudes, punitive justice donation, or punitive justice index in the endline survey. It is regressed on a dummy variable T_i indicating the treatment assignment. The vector X_i represents a subset of controls elicited during the application process or during the baseline survey. We used pre-registered control

Figure 2: Effect on Punitive Attitudes



Note: The figure shows average values of punitive attitudes in the endline survey, disaggregated by treatment status. Error bars represent standard errors of the mean. Panel (a) reports the average score of the punitive justice index (normalized to a control group mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1). A higher score indicates stronger support for punitive justice policies. Panel (b) depicts the average donation in the donation task (ranging from -5 to +5 Swiss francs). Donations in favor of a more moderate (a tougher) criminal justice system are coded with negative (positive) values, respectively. Panel (c) shows the average response to punitive attitudes survey question: how strongly they support strict law enforcement and harsh sentencing on a scale from 0 (do not support at all) to 6 (completely support).

variables elicited at baseline, namely: punitive attitudes, own expected wellbeing in prison, trust in institutions and procedural fairness. Additionally, we control for criminal attitudes, willingness to take risk, age, gender, previous jail visit, working in law enforcement, and completed tertiary education.[18] Z_i are the strata fixed effects. We cluster standard errors at the prison cell level, i.e., accounting for dependencies in the error term $\epsilon_i c$ for individuals who spent time in the same cell.

Column 1 in Table 4 contains the result for the punitive justice index, controlling for a basic pre-registered set of baseline outcomes. We find a significant decrease in the punitive justice index by 0.33 standard deviations ($p = 0.000$, t-test). In Column 2, we present the result for the punitive justice index, including the full set of controls. We find a similar significant decrease in the punitive justice index of 0.33 standard deviations ($p = 0.000$, t-test). Columns 3 and 4 show the results for the donation task and punitive attitude question separately, including the same set of controls. Both regressions report significant treatment effects of -0.3 standard deviations ($p = 0.000$ and $p = 0.001$, t-tests).

To assess the impact of attending the test run on punitive attitudes, we estimated the local average treatment effect (LATE) through a two-stage least squares approach, with treatment assignment as an instrument for test run participation. The results, presented in column (1) of Table A.2 indicate a LATE of -0.57 standard deviations on the punitive justice index ($p = 0.000$, t-test).[19]

To summarize, the opportunity to gain firsthand incarceration experience significantly increased support for a more moderate justice system. To gauge the magnitude of the effect, we use survey data from the 2005 International Crime and Victim Survey (ICVS) and the 2005 European Survey of Crime and Safety (EU ICS) compiled by Dijk et al. (2007). In particular, we use the percentage of survey respondents favoring imprisonment for a recidivist burglar[20] to compare the United States and Norway, two countries commonly seen to represent two opposing ends of the spectrum in terms of the punitiveness of their justice systems (Bhuller

[18] We present results throughout the paper for both specifications, using only pre-registered controls and the full set of controls. Both specifications yield similar findings.

[19] See Table A.2 for estimates of the LATE on the two individual components of the punitive justice index. We find a LATE of -0.53 for punitive justice donations ($p = 0.001$, t-test) and -0.51 for punitive attitudes ($p = 0.000$, t-test).

[20] The recidivist burglar was specified as a man aged 21 who is found guilty of burglary for the second time, having stolen a color television

Table 4: Regression Analysis: Punitive Attitudes

	Punitive Justice Index		Punitive Justice Donation	Punitive Attitudes
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment Group	-0.326***	-0.331***	-0.299***	-0.297***
	(0.081)	(0.081)	(0.092)	(0.079)
Strata FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Baseline Outcomes	✓	✓	✓	✓
Criminal and Risk Attitudes	×	✓	✓	✓
Previous Jail Visit	×	✓	✓	✓
Socio-Demographics	×	✓	✓	✓
Adjusted R-squared	0.443	0.447	0.258	0.489
Observations	418	418	418	418

Note This table shows the effect of treatment assignment on punitive attitudes in the endline survey, using OLS regressions. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the prison cell level. In columns 1 and 2, the dependent variable is the punitive justice index. In column 3 and 4, the dependent variables are punitive justice donations and punitive attitudes, respectively. All regressions include baseline outcomes and strata fixed effects, i.e., a dummy for participants working in the public sector. Baseline outcomes include measures of wellbeing in prison, punitive attitudes, trust in institutions, perceptions procedural fairness from the baseline survey. Columns 2 to 4 include further controls for baseline criminal attitudes and risk attitudes, whether participants previously visited a jail and socio-demographics, including subjects' age, and dummies for males, tertiary education, and employment in law enforcement. Levels of significance: $^{*}p < .1$, $^{**}p < .05$, $^{***}p < .01$.

et al., 2020). n average, the difference in punitive attitudes between these two countries is 18 percentage points (47% in the U.S. and 29% in Norway, respectively) or 1.1 standard deviations.[21] Thus, our intention-to-treat effect accounts for about 30% of the gap in punitive attitudes between the United States and Norway.

We also explore whether treatment effects are heterogenous across different subpopulations. We examine the two pre-registered moderators: previous prison visit and state employees. Additionally, we perform the same exploratory analysis for subjects working in law enforcement and subjects with low and high baseline punitive attitudes (based on a median split). Appendix Figure A.2 indicates that, the treatment effect remains stable within the range of -0.2 and -0.4 standard deviations for all subpopulations. We summarize these findings in the following result:

Result 1: *The opportunity to gain firsthand incarceration experience significantly reduces punitive attitudes. This effect is similar across different individual characteristics.*

Effects on beliefs about wellbeing in prison

We first assess the accuracy of citizens' perception of wellbeing in prison, by comparing the subjective wellbeing of actual inmates from a Swiss prison (the Prison Pfäffikon) with the control group's beliefs regarding these prisoners' wellbeing. Panel (a) in Figure 3 reveals that the control group's beliefs about prisoners' wellbeing are far from reality. While the prisoners indicated an average wellbeing of 3.2, control group subjects estimated the wellbeing to be around 6.2 on average ($p = 0.000$, Wilcoxon rank-sum test).[22]

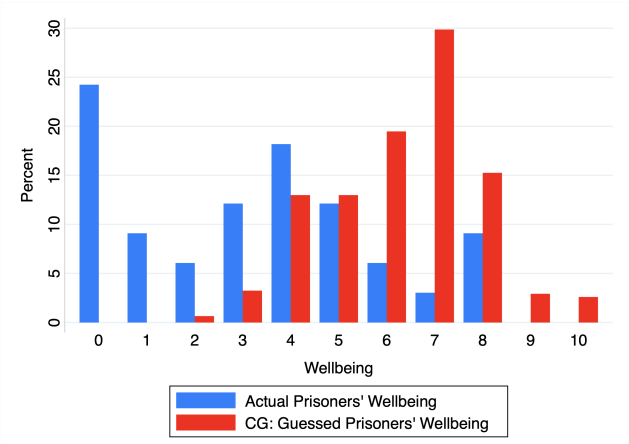
Panel (b) in Figure 3 compares the control group's beliefs about prisoners' wellbeing with their own expected wellbeing in prison. While the control group subjects guess an average wellbeing of 6.2 for prisoners in Pfäffikon, they indicated an average expected wellbeing in prison of 4.3 for themselves ($p = 0.000$, Wilcoxon rank-sum test). This suggests that they

[21] The average percent favoring imprisonment is 32.8% for the 32 included countries, with a standard deviation of 16.2%.

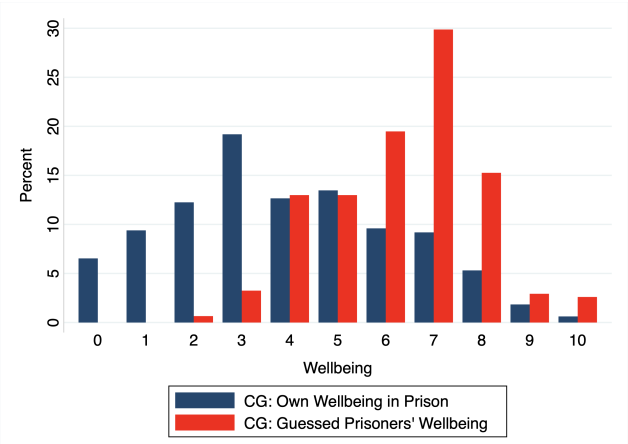
[22] Although the level of wellbeing estimated by the control group is much higher than the wellbeing indicated by prisoners, it is still substantially lower ($p = 0.000$, t-test) than the wellbeing in the general population which is 8.02 in 2022 according to Swiss Household Panel data (Robin et al., 2022).

Figure 3: Guessed Prisoner's Wellbeing

(a) Actual Prisoners' Wellbeing compared with the Control Groups estimated Wellbeing of Prisoners



(b) Control Group's own expected Wellbeing in Prison compared with Control Groups estimated Wellbeing of Prisoners



Note: The panel (a) shows distributions of i) the wellbeing of actual inmates from the prison of Pfäffikon on a scale from 0 (extremely bad) to 10 (extremely well) and ii) the control group's incentivized guess about the wellbeing of actual inmates from the prison of Pfäffikon. The panel (b) shows distributions of i) the control group's own estimated wellbeing in prison on a scale from 0 (very bad) to 10 (very good) and ii) the control group's incentivized guess about the wellbeing of actual inmates from the prison of Pfäffikon.

expect prisoners to cope better with imprisonment than they themselves would.[23] These findings are summarized in the following result:

Result 2: *Participants in the control group overestimates prisoners' subjective wellbeing, but expect their own well-being in incarceration to be significantly lower.*

Turning to the effects of treatment assignment, we find no differences in beliefs about wellbeing in prison between the treatment and control group. Panel (a) in Appendix Figure A.1 illustrates that the average wellbeing index (normalized to a control group mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1) is almost identical between the treatment and the control group ($p = 0.443$, Wilcoxon rank-sum test). Similarly, Panels (b) and (c) in Appendix Figure A.1 show no significant differences between experimental conditions for either citizens' expected wellbeing in prison or their estimates of prisoners' wellbeing. The average citizens' anticipated wellbeing in prison is 4.3 in the control group and 4.4 in the treatment group ($p = 0.735$, Wilcoxon rank-sum test). Likewise, participants in the control and treatment group estimated the prisoners' wellbeing to be 6.2 and 6.25, respectively ($p = 0.893$, Wilcoxon rank-sum test).

The regression results, presented in Table 5, support the nonparametric analysis and reveal no significant differences for any of the beliefs about wellbeing ($p > 0.87$, t-tests).

We also explored whether heterogenous treatment effects could obscure this null result. Following the same approach used for punitive attitudes, we regress treatment assignment on the wellbeing index across different subsamples. The analysis reveals no significant treatment effects in any subsamples (see Appendix Figure A.3). These findings are summarized in the following result:

Result 3: *The opportunity for firsthand incarceration experience does not affect beliefs about wellbeing in prison.*

[23]This finding is consistent with psychological literature finding biases towards out-group individuals on the dimension of pain (Hoffman et al., 2016; Staton et al., 2007; Todd et al., 2000).

Table 5: Regression Analysis: Beliefs about Wellbeing in Prison

	Wellbeing Index		Guessed Prisoners' Wellbeing	Own Wellbeing in Prison
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment Group	0.005	0.001	-0.011	0.013
	(0.091)	(0.091)	(0.101)	(0.083)
Strata FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Baseline Outcomes	✓	✓	✓	✓
Criminal and Risk Attitudes	×	✓	✓	✓
Previous Jail Visit	×	✓	✓	✓
Socio-Demographics	×	✓	✓	✓
Adjusted R-squared	0.251	0.253	0.098	0.308
Observations	416	416	416	416

Note This table shows the effect of treatment assignment on beliefs about wellbeing in prison, using OLS regressions. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the prison cell level. In columns 1 and 2, the dependent variable is the wellbeing index. In columns 3 and 4, the dependent variables are beliefs about the wellbeing of prisoners' and the citizens' anticipated wellbeing in prison, respectively. All regressions include baseline outcomes and strata fixed effects, i.e., a dummy for participants working in the public sector. Baseline outcomes include measures of wellbeing in prison, punitive attitudes, trust in institutions, perceptions procedural fairness from the baseline survey. Columns 2 to 4 include further controls for baseline criminal attitudes and risk attitudes, whether participants previously visited a jail and socio-demographics, including subjects' age, and dummies for males, tertiary education, and employment in law enforcement. Levels of significance: $^{*}p < .1$, $^{**}p < .05$, $^{***}p < .01$.

External validity and attrition

Next, we explore the external validity of our findings and assess their robustness by addressing attrition and exploiting within-subject variation.

External validity Individuals who volunteered for the prison test run are likely to differ from the general population. To evaluate the generalizability of our findings, we conducted an additional survey in collaboration with CINT, using an online sample (N=497) broadly representative of the Swiss voting population with respect to age, gender, and income. Table 6 compares the experimental sample with the representative sample from the Swiss voting population in terms of socio-economic characteristics and all baseline attitudes measured in our experiment.[24] It is reassuring that our sample does not differ significantly from the representative sample in the two main outcome dimensions: punitive attitudes and own expected wellbeing in prison.

However, our experimental sample differs markedly from the general population in several other characteristics, such as trust in institutions and criminal attitudes. Given these differences, we assess the robustness of our results by reweighting our sample to better reflect the Swiss voting population. Specifically, we use entropy balancing, as described in Hainmueller (2012), to reweight the experimental sample according to the mean and variance of all the eleven variables measured in the representative sample. Table 7 and Appendix Table A.3 present the results for the effects on punitive attitudes and wellbeing in prison, respectively, using the reweighted sample. The findings indicate that the treatment effect on punitive attitudes generalizes to a sample representative for Swiss voting population. If anything, the effect is even larger in the reweighted sample and remains highly significant ($p \leq 0.003$, t-tests). By contrast, the treatment effect on wellbeing remains small and insignificant even after re-weighting ($p \geq 0.884$, t-tests).

[24]The wording of the survey questions on punitive attitudes differs slightly between the experimental sample at baseline and the representative sample. We asked subjects in our experiment, "How strongly do you support strict and tough criminal prosecution of criminals?", whereas in the representative sample, the question was phrased "How strongly do you support strict criminal prosecution and a tough penal system?".

Table 6: External Validity: Comparison with Representative Sample

	Experiment (baseline) N = 418		Prepresentative Sample N = 497		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	*p-val*
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Punitive Attitudes (baseline)	4.376	(1.37)	4.276	(1.36)	0.160
Wellbeing in Prison (baseline)	4.170	(2.45)	4.169	(2.83)	0.649
Willingness to take Risk	4.885	(2.12)	4.171	(2.75)	0.000
Trust in Institutions (baseline)	7.971	(1.41)	6.952	(2.13)	0.000
Procedural Fairness (baseline)	4.732	(0.90)	4.322	(1.23)	0.000
Criminal Attitudes	1.368	(1.23)	1.074	(1.09)	0.000
Age	39.237	(13.20)	43.950	(12.99)	0.000
Male	0.519	(0.50)	0.481	(0.50)	0.249
Previous Jail Visit	0.270	(0.44)	0.171	(0.38)	0.000
Works in Law Enforcement	0.230	(0.42)	0.054	(0.23)	0.000
Tertiary Education	0.615	(0.49)	0.352	(0.48)	0.000

Note The table displays descriptive statistics of the experimental sample at baseline (columns 1 and 2) and a representative sample of the Swiss population (columns 3 and 4). The descriptive statistics include measures for punitive attitudes, citizens' anticipated wellbeing in prison, willingness to take risks, trust in institutions, perception of procedural fairness and criminal attitudes, the participants' age, the share of males, the share who previously visited a jail, the share working in law enforcement, and the share with a completed tertiary education. Column (5) contains p-values from Chi-square tests for binary variables and Wilcoxon rank-sum tests for continuous variables, respectively.

Table 7: Regression Analysis; Using Weights to Reflect the Swiss Voting Population

	Punitive Justice Index		Punitive Justice Donation	Punitive Attitudes
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment Group	-0.650***	-0.664***	-0.694***	-0.561***
	(0.171)	(0.157)	(0.138)	(0.188)
Strata FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Weighted OLS	✓	✓	✓	✓
Baseline Outcomes	✓	✓	✓	✓
Criminal and Risk Attitudes	×	✓	✓	✓
Previous Jail Visit	×	✓	✓	✓
Socio-Demographics	×	✓	✓	✓
Adjusted R-squared	0.564	0.577	0.470	0.593
Observations	418	418	418	418

Note This table shows the effect of treatment assignment on punitive attitudes in the endline survey, using weighted OLS regressions (i.e., the experimental sample is re-weighted based on the means and covariance of the 11 baseline variables shown in Table 6). Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the prison cell level. In columns 1 and 2, the dependent variable is the punitive justice index. In column 3 and 4, the dependent variables are punitive justice donations and punitive attitudes, respectively. All regressions include baseline outcomes and strata fixed effects, i.e., a dummy for participants working in the public sector. Baseline outcomes include measures of wellbeing in prison, punitive attitudes, trust in institutions, perceptions procedural fairness from the baseline survey. Columns 2 to 4 include further controls for baseline criminal attitudes and risk attitudes, whether participants previously visited a jail and socio-demographics, including subjects' age, and dummies for males, tertiary education, and employment in law enforcement. Levels of significance:*$p < .1$, **$p < .05$, ***$p < .01$.

Attrition While the survey response rate is lower in the control group (54.7%) than in the treatment group (69.2%, $p = 0.000$, see Appendix Table C.2), we find reassuring evidence that the baseline measure of punitive attitudes does not significantly predict survey attrition in either group (see Appendix Table C.3). Similarly, the baseline measure of own expected wellbeing in prison does not predict attrition in the treatment group but is significantly associated with attrition in the control group ($p = 0.030$). To account for potential attrition bias, we calculate bounds for the treatment effect on both outcomes in Table 8 and Appendix Table C.4. Using Lee (2005)'s approach, we find that the bounds are relatively wide, making them less informative for our conclusions. However, we leverage our sequential data collection efforts by applying the approach proposed by Behaghel et al. (2015). In particular, assuming monotonicity in the relationship between participants' reluctance to respond and the number of attempts required, we use the number of reminders sent during the endline survey to estimate tighter bounds. We find that the treatment effect bounds range from -0.43 (lower bounds) to -0.29 (upper bounds), depending on the measure of punitive attitudes. These bounds are statistically significant ($p \leq 0.037$, t-tests).

Table 8: Bounds for Punitive Attitudes following Lee (2005) and Behaghel et al. (2015)

	Punitive Justice Index		Punitive Justice Donation		Punitive Attitudes	
	Lee	Behaghel et al.	Lee	Behaghel et al.	Lee	Behaghel et al.
Lower Bound	-0.71***	-0.43***	-0.67***	-0.38***	-0.68***	-0.39***
Upper Bound	-0.09	-0.29**	-0.27**	-0.30**	0.31**	-0.30**
Effect 95% CI	(-0.93, 0.13)	(-0.64, -0.07)	(-0.91, -0.07)	(-0.59, -0.10)	(-0.95, 0.55)	(-0.62, -0.05)
Observations	435	402	435	402	435	402

Note This table presents bounds and 95% confidence intervals for the treatment effect on the punitive justice index (columns 1 and 2), punitive justice donations (columns 3 and 4), and punitive attitudes (columns 5 and 6) using the methods of Lee (2005) and Behaghel et al. (2015). Levels of significance: *$p < .1$, **$p < .05$, ***$p < .01$.

Second, to further address potential concerns about attrition, we make use of the fact that both outcome dimensions are measured before and after the intervention. This enables us to conduct a difference-in-differences analysis, which remains valid as both treatment and control groups follow parallel trends, even if they are not perfectly balanced. The results from this within-subjects approach fully align with our main analysis. As shown in Table 9, the treatment reduces punitive attitudes by approximately 0.36 standard deviations ($p = 0.000$,

t-tests), while there is no significant effect on own expected wellbeing in prison ($p \geq 0.460$).[25] Taken together, these results suggest that our findings are unlikely to be driven by selective attrition.

Table 9: Within-Subject Analysis: Punitive Attitudes and Citizens' Anticipated Wellbeing in Prison

	Punitive Attitudes		Own Wellbeing in Prison	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment Group	0.080	0.066	0.111	0.076
	(0.083)	(0.077)	(0.091)	(0.091)
Post	0.000	-0.029	-0.000	0.022
	(0.052)	(0.050)	(0.053)	(0.054)
Treatment Group x Post	-0.371***	-0.364***	-0.075	-0.010
	(0.093)	(0.088)	(0.102)	(0.103)
Strata FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Baseline Outcomes	×	✓	×	✓
Criminal and Risk Attitudes	×	✓	×	✓
Previous Jail Visit	×	✓	×	✓
Socio-Demographics	×	✓	×	✓
Adjusted R-squared	0.007	0.214	-0.002	0.066
Observations	1085	1065	1083	1065

Note This table presents difference-in-difference estimates (treatment group × post) for the main outcomes, using OLS regressions. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the prison cell level. The dependent variables are punitive attitudes (columns 1 and 2) and citizens' anticipated wellbeing in prison (columns 3 and 4). All regressions include strata fixed effects, i.e., a dummy for participants working in the public sector. Columns 2 and 4 further include baseline outcomes (i.e., citizens' anticipated wellbeing in prison or punitive attitudes, as well as trust in institutions, and perceptions procedural fairness) , and controls for baseline criminal attitudes and risk attitudes, whether participants previously visited a jail and socio-demographics, including subjects' age, and dummies for males, tertiary education, and employment in law enforcement. Levels of significance: $^{*}p < .1$, $^{**}p < .05$, $^{***}p < .01$.

5 Discussion and conclusion

How does incarceration experience affect societal attitudes toward criminal justice policies? In a randomized controlled trial, we offered regular citizens the opportunity to expe-

[25] The minimal detectable effect for a within-subjects approach with our sample is 0.13 standard deviations.

rience up to two days of incarceration in a newly constructed prison, designed to simulate real-life conditions and replicate the procedures experienced by actual inmates. Participants who received the chance to experience incarceration firsthand became substantially less supportive for harsh criminal justice policies and donated more money to an organization advocating for a more moderate criminal justice system. These findings remained robust after reweighting our sample to better reflect the demographics and attitudes of the general voting population. Because participants were incarcerated alongside fellow citizens rather than convicted criminals and could terminate their incarceration upon request, our estimates likely represent a lower bound of the effects of firsthand incarceration experience.

What mechanisms drive these changes in attitudes toward criminal justice policies? One possibility is that citizens underestimate the harshness of life behind bars and update their beliefs following their firsthand experience. Our results, however, do not support this hypothesis: we find no significant treatment effects on beliefs about wellbeing in prison. We also explore whether interactions with fellow participants sharing the same cell influenced punitive attitudes. To test for peer effects, we examine whether cellmates' baseline punitive attitudes correlate with the endline attitudes of participants who shared a cell. We find no significant correlation ($p \geq 0.139$, t-tests), and the sign of the correlation is opposite to what we would expect (Table A.5). Additionally, participants who were not assigned a cellmate exhibited no significant differences in punitive attitudes compared to those who shared a cell ($p \geq 0,209$, t-tests, Table A.6). Overall, the evidence does not indicate that peer effects are responsible for the observed changes in attitudes toward criminal justice policies.

While we cannot pinpoint the exact mechanism driving the changes in punitive attitudes, we propose several plausible alternatives. First, the time spent in confinement may have provided participants with a rare opportunity to reflect deeply on the criminal justice system, potentially prompting a more critical perspective on punitive policies. However, such reflection could theoretically result in attitude shifts in either direction. Second, the monotonous daily routine, combined with a perceived lack of rehabilitative programming, may have heightened participants' preference for greater emphasis on rehabilitation over punishment. Third, the immersive nature of the incarceration experience might have fostered greater compassion toward inmates, thereby reducing support for harsher criminal justice policies.

Overall, our results underscore the role of personal experience in shaping support for

criminal justice reform. We thus contribute to the growing literature on the impact of personal experiences on beliefs and preferences. By extending this literature to the domain of criminal justice, our findings provide novel evidence of how experiential interventions can shape public opinion.

From a policy perspective, our findings suggest that incorporating immersive experiences, such as educational correctional tours—which have been frequently recommended as part of the curriculum in legal and criminal justice studies (Murdoch, 2020; Long and Utley, 2018)—could serve as a valuable tool for fostering critical reflection about the criminal justice system among policymakers, judges, lawyers, and others working within the system.

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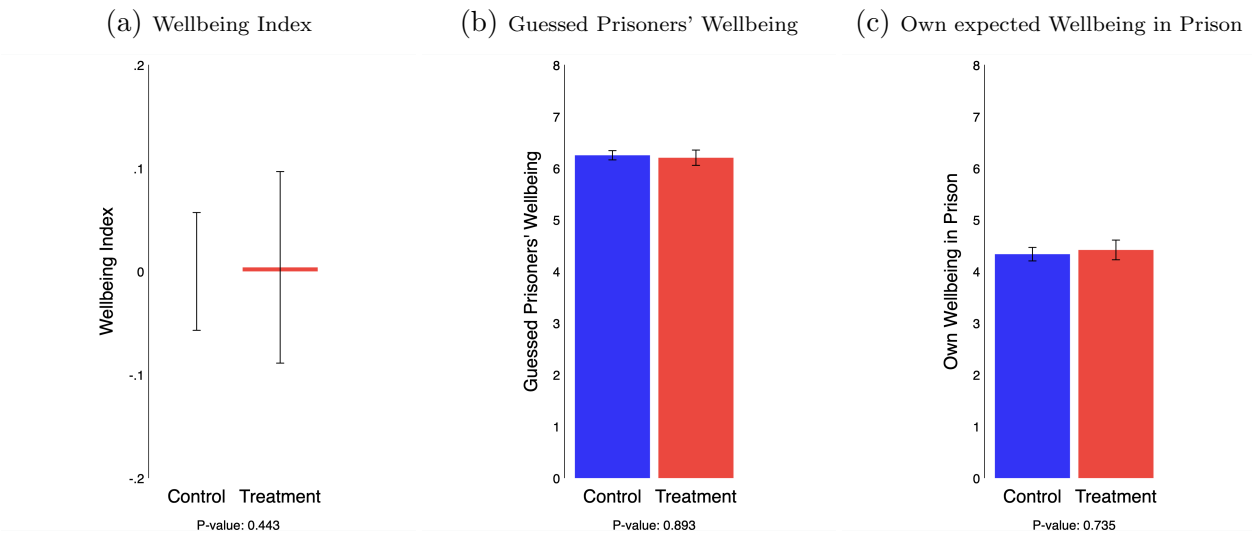
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Online Appendix

Standing in Prisoners' Shoes:
A Randomized Trial on How Incarceration Shapes Criminal Justice Views

A Additional tables and figures

Figure A.1: Mean Outcomes of Wellbeing Outcomes



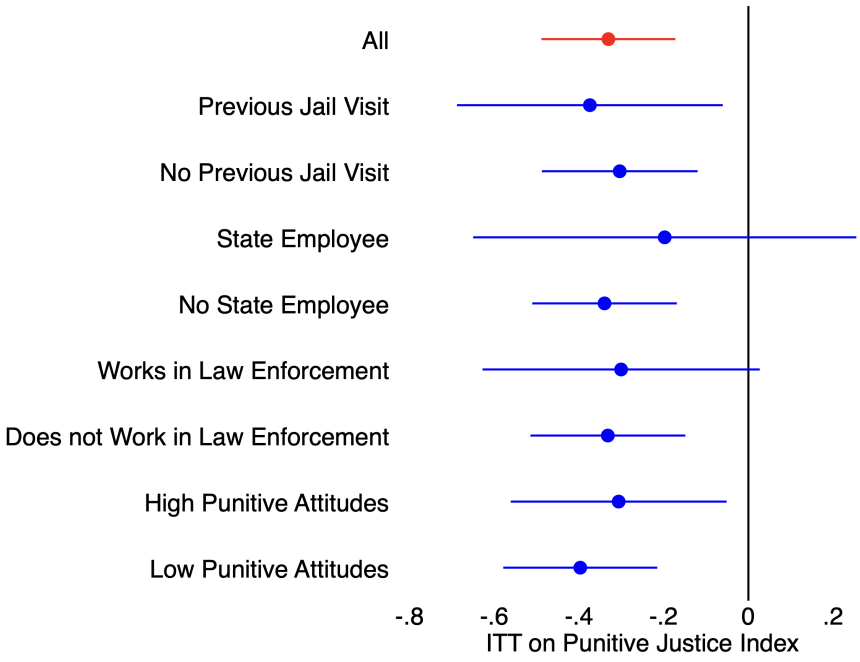
Note: The figure shows average values for wellbeing in prison in the endline survey, disaggregated by treatment status. Error bars represent standard errors of the mean. Panel (a), reports the average score of the wellbeing in prison index (normalized to a control group mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1). A higher score indicates greater wellbeing. Panel (b) depicts the participants' average estimate of wellbeing of prisoners on a scale from 0 (extremely bad) to 10 (extremely good). Panel (c) shows the average of citizens' anticipated wellbeing in prison, i.e., they were asked about their personal wellbeing if they were incarcerated for six months on a scale from 0 to 10.

Table A.1: Summary Statistics

	Final Sample N = 435	
	Mean	SD
	(1)	(2)
Age	38.885	(13.14)
Male	0.510	(0.50)
Available on Thursday	0.563	(0.50)
Available on Friday	0.703	(0.46)
Available on Saturday	0.770	(0.42)
Available on Sunday	0.651	(0.48)
Interested in Overnight Stay	0.924	(0.27)
Consented Strip Search	0.766	(0.42)
Smoker	0.145	(0.35)
State Employee	0.184	(0.39)
Criminal Attitudes	1.368	(1.23)
Procedural Fairness (baseline)	4.732	(0.90)
Punitive Attitudes (baseline)	4.376	(1.37)
Trust in Institutions (baseline)	7.971	(1.41)
Wellbeing in Prison (baseline)	4.170	(2.45)
Willingness to take Risk	4.885	(2.12)
Works in Law Enforcement	0.230	(0.42)
Previous Jail Visit	0.270	(0.44)
Tertiary Education	0.615	(0.49)

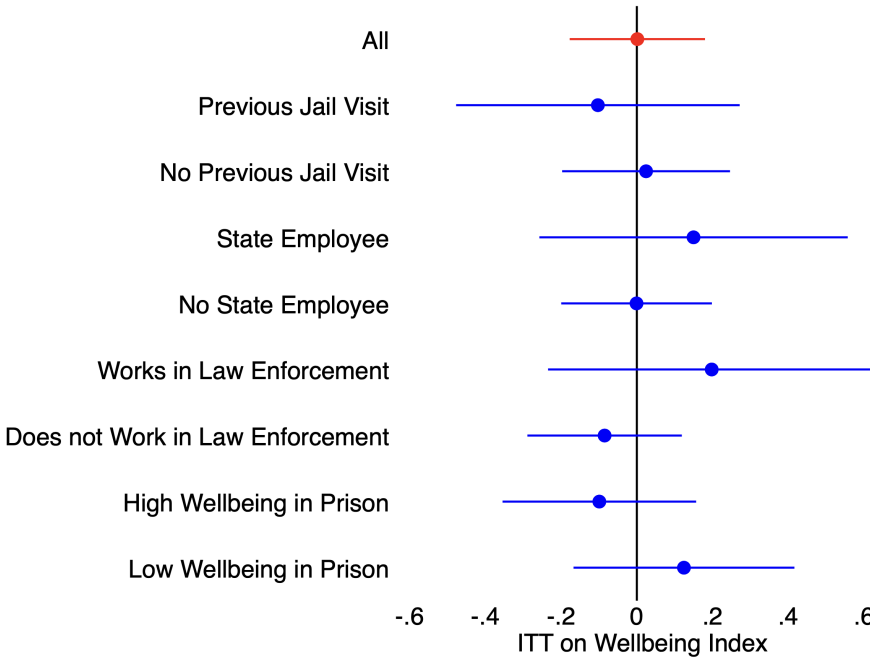
Note This tables displays descriptive statistics of our main sample (mean and standard deviation in parentheses). The descriptive statistics include the participants' age, the share of males, the share of participants available on each of the four days of the test run, the proportion of participants willing to stay overnight in the test run, the share consenting to a strip search, the share of smokers, the share working as state employees, the share working in law enforcement, the share who previously visited a jail, the share with tertiary education and baseline measures on criminal attitudes, punitive attitudes, citizens' anticipated wellbeing in prison, perception of procedural fairness, trust in institutions, and the willingness to take risks; the number of observations for variables elicited at baseline is 418, while the number of observations for variables from the application data is 435.

Figure A.2: Heterogeneous Effects on the Punitive Justice Index



Note: The figure presents regression coefficients and the corresponding 95% confidence intervals for the effect of treatment assignment on the punitive justice index across different subpopulations using OLS regressions. Row 1 shows our main intention-to-treat effect (ITT) using the entire sample as in Table 4, column 2. The following rows present the ITTs for different subpopulation by previous jail visits (rows 2 and 3), by employment in the public sector (row 4 and 5), by employment in law enforcement (rows 6 and 7), and by above or below median score of punitive attitudes at baseline (row 8 and 9). The regressions include the same control variables as in Table 4, column 2.

Figure A.3: Heterogeneous Effects on the Wellbeing Index



Note: The figure presents regression coefficients and the corresponding 95% confidence intervals for the effect of treatment assignment on the wellbeing index across different subpopulations using OLS regressions. Row 1 shows our main intention-to-treat effect (ITT) using the entire sample as in Table 5, column 2. The following rows present the ITTs for different subpopulation by previous jail visits (rows 2 and 3), by employment in the public sector (row 4 and 5), by employment in law enforcement (rows 6 and 7), and by above or below median score of citizens' anticipated wellbeing in prison at baseline (row 8 and 9). The regressions include the same control variables as in Table 5, column 2.

Table A.2: Local Average Treatment Effects on the Punitive Justice Index

	Attended	Punitive Attitudes	Punitive Justice Donation	Punitive Justice Index
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment	0.577***			
	(0.050)			
Predicted: Attended		-0.514***	-0.531***	-0.573***
		(0.138)	(0.163)	(0.140)
Strata FE	×	✓	✓	✓
Baseline Outcomes	×	✓	✓	✓
Criminal and Risk Attitudes	×	✓	✓	✓
Previous Jail Visit	×	✓	✓	✓
Socio-Demographics	×	✓	✓	✓
Adjusted R-squared	0.413	0.489	0.258	0.447
Observations	435	418	418	418
F-statistic = 132.561				

Note This table shows the first stage effect of treatment assignment on attendance in the test run using OLS (column 1) and the local average treatment effect (LATE) of test-run attendance on punitive attitudes using two-stage least squares regressions (columns 2–4).Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the prison cell level. The dependent variables are a dummy indicating whether a subject attended the test run (column 1), punitive attitudes (column 2), the punitive justice donation (columns 3) and punitive justice index (columns 4). Regressions in column 2–4 include baseline outcomes and strata fixed effects, i.e., a dummy for participants working in the public sector. Baseline outcomes include measures of wellbeing in prison, punitive attitudes, trust in institutions, perceptions procedural fairness from the baseline survey. They further include controls for baseline criminal attitudes and risk attitudes, whether participants previously visited a jail and socio-demographics, including subjects' age, and dummies for males, tertiary education, and employment in law enforcement. Levels of significance: $^{*}p < .1$, $^{**}p < .05$, $^{***}p < .01$.

Table A.3: Regression Analysis: Effects on Wellbeing; Using Weights to Reflect the Swiss Voting Population

	Wellbeing Index		Guessed Prisoners' Wellbeing	Wellbeing in Prison
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment Group	0.022	0.013	0.030	-0.010
	(0.211)	(0.203)	(0.208)	(0.175)
Strata FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Weighted OLS	✓	✓	✓	✓
Baseline Outcomes	✓	✓	✓	✓
Criminal and Risk Attitudes	×	✓	✓	✓
Previous Jail Visit	×	✓	✓	✓
Socio-Demographics	×	✓	✓	✓
Adjusted R-squared	0.338	0.354	0.134	0.447
Observations	416	416	416	416

Note This table shows the effect of treatment assignment on measures of wellbeing in prison in the endline survey, using weighted OLS regressions (i.e., the experimental sample is re-weighted based on the means and covariance of the 11 baseline variables shown in Table 6. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the prison cell level. In columns 1 and 2, the dependent variable is the wellbeing index. In columns 3 and 4, the dependent variable is subjects' beliefs about the wellbeing of actual prisoners and subjects' beliefs about their own expectations wellbeing in prison, respectively. All regressions include baseline outcomes and strata fixed effects, i.e., a dummy for participants working in the public sector. Baseline outcomes include measures of wellbeing in prison, punitive attitudes, trust in institutions, perceptions procedural fairness from the baseline survey. Columns 2 to 4 include further controls for baseline criminal attitudes and risk attitudes, whether participants previously visited a jail and socio-demographics, including subjects' age, and dummies for males, tertiary education, and employment in law enforcement. Levels of significance: $^{*}p < .1$, $^{**}p < .05$, $^{***}p < .01$.

Table A.4: Regression Analysis: Sub-sample including Participants finishing the Baseline Survey before Treatment Assignment

	Punitive Justice Index		Punitive Justice Donation	Punitive Attitudes
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment Group	-0.326***	-0.330***	-0.300***	-0.298***
	(0.082)	(0.082)	(0.093)	(0.082)
Strata FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Baseline Outcomes	✓	✓	✓	✓
Criminal and Risk Attitudes	×	✓	✓	✓
Previous Jail Visit	×	✓	✓	✓
Socio-Demographics	×	✓	✓	✓
Adjusted R-squared	0.440	0.443	0.256	0.485
Control group mean	0.005	0.005	0.005	0.005
Observations	415	415	415	415

Note This table shows the effect of treatment assignment on punitive attitudes measured in the endline survey using OLS regressions and *excluding* the three subjects that completed the baseline survey after being informed about their treatment assignment. In columns 1 and 2, the dependent variable is the punitive justice index. In column 3 and 4, the dependent variables are punitive justice donations and punitive attitudes, respectively. All regressions include baseline outcomes and strata fixed effects, i.e., a dummy for participants working in the public sector. Baseline outcomes include measures of wellbeing in prison, punitive attitudes, trust in institutions, perceptions procedural fairness from the baseline survey. Columns 2 to 4 include further controls for baseline criminal attitudes and risk attitudes, whether participants previously visited a jail and socio-demographics, including subjects' age, and dummies for males, tertiary education, and employment in law enforcement. Levels of significance: $^{*}p < .1$, $^{**}p < .05$, $^{***}p < .01$.

Table A.5: Mechanism Analysis: Cell Mate's Punitive Attitudes

	Punitiv Justice Index	Punitive Justice Donation	Punitive Attitudes
	(1)	(2)	(3)
PA of cell mate	-0.151	-0.037	-0.240
	(0.144)	(0.152)	(0.157)
Adjusted R-squared	0.085	0.042	0.096
Observations	49	49	49

Note This table shows the effect of a cell mate's baseline punitive attitudes on a participant's punitive attitudes measured in the endline survey using OLS regressions. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the prison cell level. In column 1 the dependent variable is the punitive justice index. In column 3 and 4, the dependent variables are punitive justice donations and punitive attitudes, respectively. All regressions include dummies for males, smokers, and for treatment group assignment. Sample size constitutes itself from participants that finished the endline survey and shared a cell with a participant that finished the baseline survey. Levels of significance: $^{*}p < .1$, $^{**}p < .05$, $^{***}p < .01$.

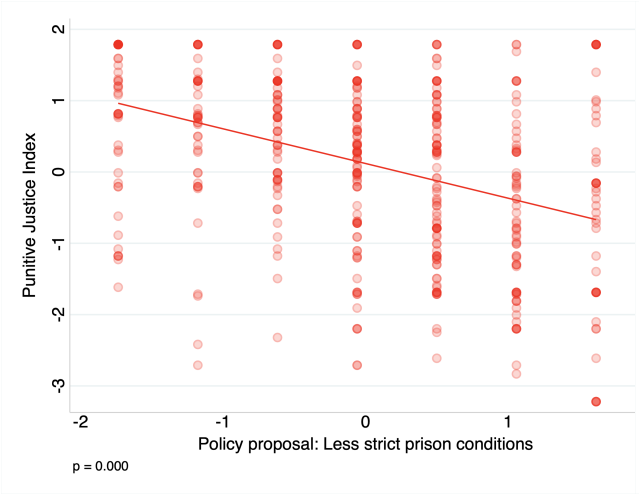
Table A.6: Mechanism Analysis: Cell Mate

	Punitive Justice Index (1)	Punitive Justice Donation (2)	Punitive Attitudes (3)
Cell mate	-0.247	-0.240	-0.205
	(0.205)	(0.190)	(0.206)
Controls	✓	✓	✓
Observations	126	126	126

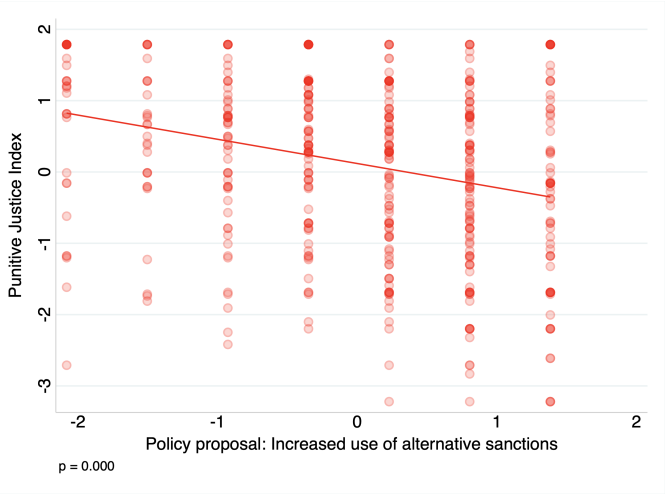
Note This table shows the effect of being assigned a cell mate on a participant's punitive attitudes measured in the endline survey using OLS regressions. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the prison cell level. In column 1 the dependent variable is the punitive justice index. In column 3 and 4, the dependent variables are punitive justice donations and punitive attitudes, respectively. All regressions include dummies for males, smokers, and for treatment group assignment. Sample size constitutes itself from participants in the treatment group. Levels of significance: $^{*}p < .1$, $^{**}p < .05$, $^{***}p < .01$.

Figure A.4: Correlation Analysis: Punitive Justice Index and Policy Preferences

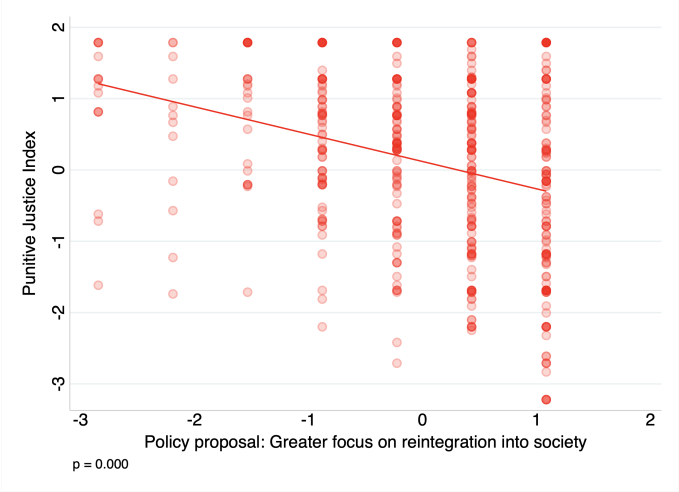
(a) Less strict prison conditions



(b) Increased use of alternative sanctions



(c) Greater focus on reintegration into society



Notes: This figure shows the correlation between the punitive justice index and preferences for three criminal justice policy proposals (all normalized to a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1). The data was elicited in collaboration with CINT in an online sample ($N = 497$) broadly representative of the Swiss voting population with respect to age, gender and income. Subjects' policy preferences were measured using a standardized Likert scale from 0 (do not at all support) to 6 (fully support), answering to the question: "How strongly do you support the following practices in the penal system?". Panel (a) reports the correlation with policy preferences for "less strict prison conditions (e.g. open prison, more opportunities for contact with the family, etc.)" (Spearman's $\rho = -0.396$). Panel (b) shows the correlation with policy preferences for "increased use of alternative forms of punishment as opposed to imprisonment (fines, electronic ankle bracelets, community service, etc.)" (Spearman's $\rho = -0.276$). Panel (c) reports the correlation with policy preferences for a "stronger focus on reintegration into society (e.g. offering further vocational training, access to therapy places)" (Spearman's $\rho = -0.312$).

B Secondary outcomes

As pre-registered, the secondary outcomes included the subjects' trust in intuitions and the subjects' beliefs about procedural fairness, both elicited through a questionnaire measure. To elicit subjects' trust in institution, we asked them to indicate how much trust they have in the Swiss legal system on a Likert-scale from 0 (no trust at all) to 10 (complete trust). To gauge subjects' beliefs about procedural fairness, we asked them to indicate their opinion on how fairly affected persons are treated by the Swiss justice system from 0 (not fair at all) to 6 (very fair). We then standardized the outcomes over their respective control group means.

Table B.1: Regression Analysis for Secondary Outcomes

	Trust in Institutions		Procedural Fairness	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment Group	0.006	0.004	0.025	0.025
	(0.074)	(0.109)	(0.094)	(0.094)
Strata FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Baseline Outcomes	✓	✓	✓	✓
Criminal and Risk Attitudes	×	✓	×	✓
Previous Jail Visit	×	✓	×	✓
Socio-Demographics	×	✓	×	✓
Adjusted R-squared	0.503	0.501	0.403	0.403
Observations	432	432	432	432

Note This table shows the effect of treatment assignment on trust in institutions and beliefs about procedural fairness in the endline survey, using OLS regressions. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the prison cell level. In columns 1 and 2, the dependent variable is trust in institutions (normalized to a control group mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1). In column 3 and 4, the dependent variable is beliefs about procedural fairness (normalized to a control group mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1). All regressions include baseline outcomes and strata fixed effects, i.e., a dummy for participants working in the public sector. Baseline outcomes include measures of wellbeing in prison, punitive attitudes, trust in institutions, perceptions procedural fairness from the baseline survey. Columns 2 and 4 include further controls for baseline criminal attitudes and risk attitudes, whether participants previously visited a jail and socio-demographics, including subjects' age, and dummies for males, tertiary education, and employment in law enforcement. Levels of significance: $^{*}p < .1$, $^{**}p < .05$, $^{***}p < .01$.

C Attrition

Table C.1: Attrition Analysis: Baseline Survey

	Baseline Participation	
	(1)	(2)
Treatment Group	0.013	0.014
	(0.024)	(0.024)
Strata FE	×	✓
Socio-Demographics	×	✓
Application Data	×	✓
Adjusted R-squared	-0.001	0.020
Control group mean	0.904	0.904
Observations	747	746

Note This table shows the correlation of treatment assignment on baseline survey participation using OLS regressions. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the prison cell level. The dependent variables is the share of participants completing in the baseline survey. In column 2, the regression includes controls for socio-demographics, application data and strata fixed effects, i.e., a dummy for participants working in the public sector. Socio-demographic controls include participants' age and dummies for males. Application data controls include a dummies for participants' availability on each of the four test run days (Thursday to Sunday), interest in staying overnight, consenting for a strip search, and being a smoker. Levels of significance: $^{*}p < .1$, $^{**}p < .05$, $^{***}p < .01$.

Table C.2: Attrition Analysis: Endline Survey

	Endline Participation	
	(1)	(2)
Treatment Group	0.145***	0.142***
	(0.041)	(0.041)
Strata FE	×	✓
Baseline Outcomes	×	✓
Criminal and Risk Attitudes	×	✓
Previous Jail Visits	×	✓
Socio-Demographics	×	✓
Application Data	×	✓
Adjusted R-squared	0.015	0.036
Control group mean	0.547	0.547
Observations	747	649

Note This table shows the correlation of treatment assignment on endline survey, participation using OLS regressions. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the prison cell level. The dependent variable is the share of participants completing the endline survey. In column 2, the regression includes baseline outcomes and strata fixed effects, i.e., a dummy for participants working in the public sector. Baseline outcomes include measures of wellbeing in prison, punitive attitudes, trust in institutions, perceptions procedural fairness from the baseline survey. Columns 2 further controls for baseline criminal attitudes and risk attitudes, whether participants previously visited a jail and socio-demographics, including subjects' age, and dummies for males, tertiary education, and employment in law enforcement. Application data controls include a dummies for participants' availability on each of the four test run days (Thursday to Sunday), interest in staying overnight, consenting for a strip search, and being a smoker. Levels of significance: $*p < .1$, $**p < .05$, $***p < .01$.

Table C.3: Attrition Analysis: Interaction Effects in Endline Survey

	Endline Participation			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Punitive Attitudes (baseline)	-0.032		0.016	
	(0.028)		(0.015)	
Wellbeing in Prison (baseline)		0.002		0.020**
		(0.013)		(0.009)
Strata FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sample	Treatment Group		Control Group	
Adjusted R-squared	0.009	-0.001	0.001	0.008
Mean	0.692	0.692	0.547	0.547
Observations	160	160	490	490

Note This table shows the correlation of baseline measures of punitive attitudes and wellbeing in prison on endline survey participation, using OLS regressions. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the prison cell level. The dependent variable is the share of participants completing the endline survey. In column 1 and 2, the regressions includes only participants assigned to the treatment group. In column 3 and 4, the regressions include participants assigned to the control group. All regressions include strata fixed effects, i.e., a dummy for participants working in the public sector. Levels of significance: $^{*}p < .1$, $^{**}p < .05$, $^{***}p < .01$.

Table C.4: Bounds for Wellbeing Outcomes following Lee (2005) and Behaghel et al. (2015)

	Wellbeing Index		Guessed Prisoner's Wellbeing		Wellbeing in Prison	
	Lee	Behaghel et al.	Lee	Behaghel et al.	Lee	Behaghel et al.
Lower Bound	-0.32**	-0.08	-0.34**	-0.13	-0.32**	0.00
Upper Bound	0.43***	0.04	0.41***	-0.02	0.35***	0.09
Effect 95% CI	(-0.55, 0.65)	(-0.31, 0.25)	(-0.58, 0.61)	(-0.34, 0.20)	(-0.56, 0.55)	(-0.22, 0.28)
Observations	433	401	433	401	433	401

Note This table presents bounds and 95% confidence intervals for the treatment effect on the wellbeing index (columns 1 and 2), guessed prisoners' wellbeing (columns 3 and 4), and wellbeing in prison (columns 5 and 6) using the methods of Lee (2005) and Behaghel et al. (2015). Levels of significance: $^{*}p < .1$, $^{**}p < .05$, $^{***}p < .01$.

D Timeline

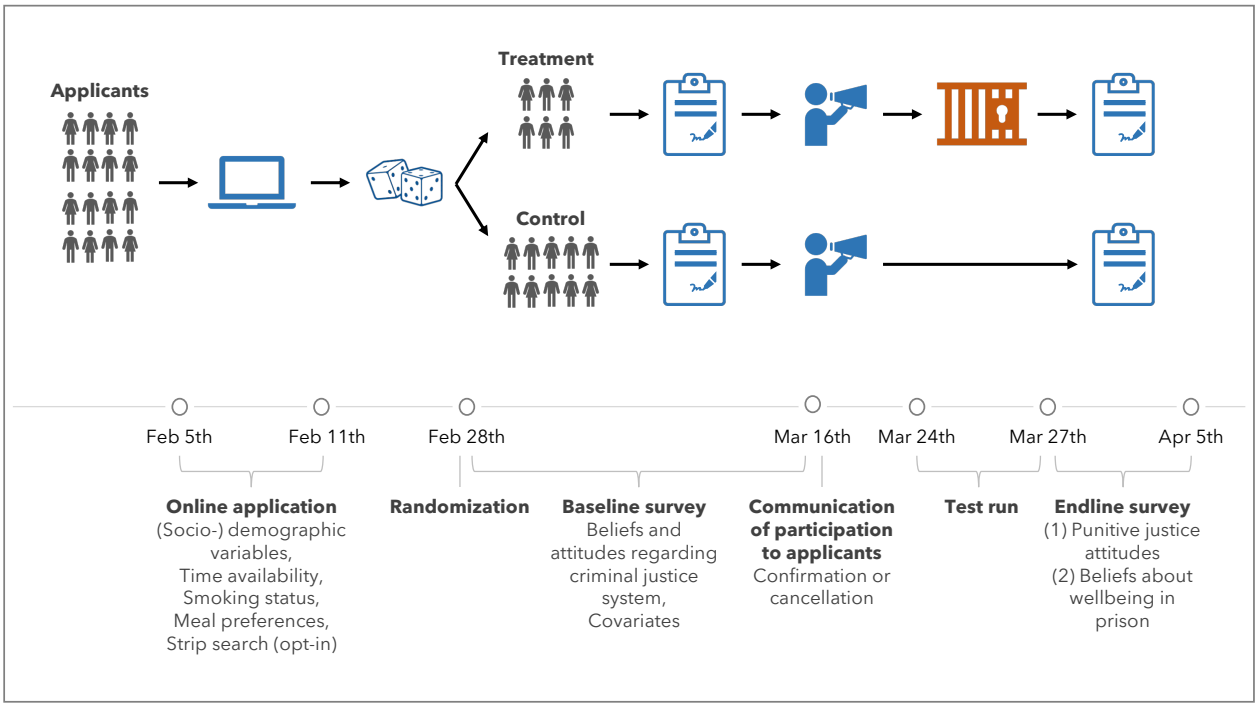


Figure D.1: Timeline of the study

Note: The figure shows the chronological timeline of the study. The majority of applicants (98%) indicated their interest for the test run between February 5th, 2022 and February 11th, 2022. The baseline survey was scheduled to take place between February 28th and March 15th, 2022, and the majority of subjects (709 of 726, or 98%) participated in the baseline survey by then. However, 17 subjects participated after March 15th, 2022, i.e., after their involvement in the test run was communicated. Only three of these 17 subjects also participated in the endline survey and are, thus, included in the main analyses. We show in Table A.4 that our results are robust to excluding these three subjects.

E Conflicts of Interest

Aljosha Henkel, a member of this study's research team, is affiliated as a PhD candidate at ETH and as a scientific project manager at the Department of Justice, which presented a potential conflict of interest. To mitigate this, we pre-registered the experiment, main outcomes, and hypotheses in advance. Aljosha Henkel was involved in this study solely in his capacity as a PhD candidate at ETH. Additionally, the Department of Justice did not have access to any non-anonymized survey data; it only provided the research team with an anonymized version of key subject information. This data was matched with survey responses using a unique identifier, which we then replaced with our own before Aljosha Henkel gained access. These measures ensured that no member of the Department of Justice could link survey data back to individual subjects.

Arto Arman, Andreas Beerli and Michel Maréchal do not have any conflicts of interest regarding this paper.