



Punitive attitudes in Australia: Investigating the rural-urban divide

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ABSTRACT

Research exploring punitive attitudes across different geographic locations is limited. Available research suggests that rural residents may be less tolerant of crime and more likely to hold punitive attitudes when compared to their urban counterparts. However, we have little understanding of this difference. Drawing on survey data from a representative sample of the Australian public (Urban 77.1 %, $N = 401$ and Rural 22.9 %, $N = 119$), this study explores differences in punitive attitudes among rural and urban Australians and examines the factors contributing to this difference. The findings indicate that Australians hold somewhat punitive attitudes, with rural respondents being significantly more punitive than urban respondents. Moreover, increased fear of crime and a lack of confidence in the criminal justice system moderate the difference in punitive attitudes across rural and urban areas. The findings provide support for the role of spatiality in shaping attitudes, including those towards crime and punishment. The practical and theoretical implications of these findings are discussed.

1. Introduction

The concept of punitive attitudes refers to attitudes towards crime and punishment. These attitudes typically involve what people think about punishment particularly the goal of punishment, the type of penal sanctions given to offenders, the severity of penal sanctions and support for sentencing policies (Adriaenssen and Aertsen, 2015). Individuals are thought of as 'punitive' when they express preferences for more severe sanctions, such as favouring imprisonment over non-custodial options (Matthews, 2005).

Punitive attitudes have been consistently identified in Western nations including Australia (Roberts and Indermaur, 2007; Spiranovic et al., 2012), Canada (Roberts et al., 2007; Doob, 2016), the United Kingdom (Barrett et al., 2023), and the United States (Enns, 2014; Carson and Mulako-Wangota, 2017). Numerous factors have been identified as important in shaping punitive attitudes including perceptions of rising crime rates, fear of crime, conservative political ideology and negative racial attitudes (King and Wheelock, 2007; Unnever and Cullen, 2010). In Australia, Davey et al. (2024) conceptualised four frameworks that influence punitive attitudes which included: (1) geographic location, (2) ideological perceptions of offenders, (3) misinformation about crime and (4) perceptions about minorities and

racial association with criminality.

Previous research on public punitiveness in Australia typically takes an urban-centre perspective or does not examine these attitudes specifically in rural areas, despite almost one third of the Australian population residing in a rural area (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2023). However, the few studies that have considered the relationship between geographic location and punitiveness consistently show that rural residents held significantly more punitive attitudes than urban residents (Walker et al., 1987 Kelley and Braithwaite, 1990; Gelb, 2011).

This paper aims to expand on the current literature by drawing on a representative sample of the Australian public ($N = 520$) to determine a) if there are differences in punitive attitudes in urban and rural areas, b) if the prediction of punitive attitudes is shaped by different factors across geographic areas and c) what specific factors contribute to the difference in punitiveness across geographic locations. By developing this understanding, we can begin to grasp the socio-cultural norms and perceived need for punishment throughout Australia, how these differ across different geographic areas and, therefore, determine how to best engage with them. There is a broader political need to understand how perspectives on crime and punishment differ across regions as public opinion is an important factor that policymakers consider when creating

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policy (Pratt, 2007; Pratt and Miao, 2017).

The paper begins by exploring the theoretical foundations of spatiality and justice. Following this, we will delve into the factors that could influence punitive attitudes (namely perceptions of crime and criminal justice, perceptions of offenders, political ideology, and trust), specifically contextualising these within a rural setting. Next, we will outline the aims and contributions of the current study before moving onto our methodology and presenting the results of the study. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of our findings and propose potential future directions for research and development in this field.

1.1. Spatiality and criminal justice

Rural communities are often thought of as harmonious, idyllic, cohesive places that have a different social dynamic from urban areas (Scott and Biron, 2016). Classic sociological examples such as Tönnies' (1957) *Gemeinschaft* vs. *Gesellschaft* dichotomy or Durkheim's (1951) mechanical vs organic societies describe rural communities as small tight-knit societies where interests and values are shared and social cohesion and collective efficacy flourish. By contrast, urban communities are described as having large numbers of strangers with diverse and sometimes conflicting goals and values, where anomic conditions flourish (Sampson, 2012). However, we know the reality is much more complex. Thinking of the rural/urban dichotomy in this way has been subject to much criticism, as these theories posit that crime is merely an urban problem due to social disorganisation or a lack of social control that enables criminal behaviour (Barclay et al., 2004; Neal and Walters, 2006; Harkness et al., 2016). However, crime is not simply an urban issue, as Mawby (2015, p. 262) point out, crime rates in rural Australia are often above average (specifically for violence and public disorder) (see also, Hogg and Carrington, 2006).

Thinking more about the rural environment broadly, the architecture of rural life refers to the complex structure of social, cultural, economic, and environmental characteristics which define and shape rural life including population size and density, density of acquaintanceship and an absence of anonymity, presence of agricultural or extractive industries, dominance of tradition and particular ideologies (Hogg and Carrington, 2006; Carrington, 2007; Lee, 2007; Sampson, 2012; Peterson, 2024). Therefore, rural areas must be considered as more than simply tangible space, rather they are symbolic landscapes that influence and shape the mental processes of people living in these areas, impacting on everyday thought and action (Liepins, 2000; Scott and Hogg, 2015; Halfacree, 2017). Carrington and Hogg (2006), for example, noted how the unique composition of these factors in rural spaces shapes the nature of crime and policing more specifically. Likewise, Mulrooney and Wise (2019) suggested that as populations may be widely dispersed from central metropolitan to very remote areas it is reasonable to consider that locational context and cultural geography play an integral role in matters of law and order, including issues of crime salience, criminal justice responses (and capacity), and related social attitudes.

With this theoretical foundation of spatiality as our starting point, we propose that the geographic divide in punitiveness is not simply due to geographic location, but rather to deeply rooted differences across these locations, which shape perspectives and attitudes and come to be expressed in subsequent policy preferences.

1.2. Perceptions of crime and criminal justice

Three interlinked aspects of perceptions of criminal justice, including public perceptions of rising crime, fear of crime and confidence in the criminal justice system, have emerged as significant predictors of punitiveness in Australia (Roberts and Indermaur, 2007; Spiranovic et al., 2012; Brookman and Wiener, 2017).

The public regularly express the perception that crime rates are rising (Gelb, 2011; Roberts and Indermaur, 2009; Davis and Dossetor,

2010; Roberts, 2018). Specifically in rural communities this may be the case due to increased social density, for example, smaller populations in more concentrated areas meaning that people may be more perceptually aware of crime (Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy, 2014). In rural communities, people are more likely to know each other and have closer proximity and personal connection to victims or perpetrators meaning that news of crime or 'crime talk' may spread more rapidly and become a focal point of discussion within the community. This, in turn, influences perceptions of crime incidence in the community, amplifying fear of crime and contributing to the perception that crime is more prevalent than it is (Scott and Hogg, 2015; David, 2023). Several studies have found that rural areas tend to be associated with higher perceptions of personal safety and that remoteness and geographic isolation may support these feelings (Abraham and Ceccato, 2022). Yet, others have noted that this isolation may feed fear as perceptions of crime incidence and feelings of vulnerability increase (Mawby, 2007; Ceccato, 2016; David, 2023).

Importantly, these perceptions of crime and feelings of safety, are also linked to perceptions of the criminal justice system (CJS), specifically the police and courts. In rural contexts, residents typically hold low levels of confidence and satisfaction with police compared to their urban counterparts (Mulrooney and Harkness, 2021) and have lower trust in the government as a whole (Ceccato and Abraham, 2022; McIntyre et al., 2017; Smith and Byrne, 2017). This lack of confidence has been linked to a mixture of cultural and practical barriers that lead to feelings of neglect (Donnermeyer and Barclay, 2005; Harkness, 2017; Hale and Harkness, 2022; Smith, 2020). Taken together, a lack of institutional confidence together with high levels of perceived crime and subsequent anxiety and fear may create political pressures toward more repressive means to handle crime (Lappi-Seppälä, 2011).

1.3. Perception of offenders

Davey et al. (2024) suggest that what people think and feel about crime causation is a precursor of punitive attitudes (see also, Maruna and King, 2009). Typically, people attribute negative behaviours (i.e., offending) to the internal characteristics of a person they view as 'different' (Maruna and King, 2009). Such thinking has important implications for the punishment of offenders and by proxy public punitiveness. Specifically, if the public believe that offenders are innately immoral or bad, they may also be seen as irredeemable and unable to desist from crime and positively contribute to the wider community, therefore justifying punitive sentiments towards offenders (O'Sullivan et al., 2017).

Narrowing focus, crime in rural communities is often portrayed as committed by 'others', 'outsiders' or the 'unpredictable stranger' such as First Nations Australians or migrants (O'Connor and Gray, 1987; Harris et al., 2017; Ceccato, 2015; Ceccato, 2017; Yarwood, 2010; Ceccato and Abraham, 2022). 'Othering' could have psychological ties to beliefs of racial essentialism whereby an individual perceives race as an inherently important characteristic in shaping a person's behaviour (No et al., 2008). Following this line of thought, 'others' may be viewed not only with suspicion but with racially essentialist views in which crime and criminality is conflated with perceived race-based traits. The 'othering' of First Nations Australians may be especially pertinent in the Australian context where Indigenous Australians have historically been subject to injustice and exclusion, often remaining on the periphery of rural communities (Moreton-Robinson, 2021; Broadfield et al., 2021). This is of particular interest in the rural context as rural areas are often more racially homogeneous compared to urban areas (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2018; Forrest and Dunn, 2013) and some research has suggested that residents of rural communities display higher levels of racial prejudice than urban areas. However, more recent research has had conflicting findings, suggesting that the incidence of discrimination in regional Australia is much the same as in urban Australia (Markus, 2018).

1.4. Political Ideology

Rural communities typically display more conservative ideologies and/or traditionalist ideas that emphasize individualism, self-reliance, order, and adherence to conventional social norms, greater reliance on informal social controls, voluntarism, cooperation, and interdependence from the government (Hogg, 2016). By contrast, metropolitan regions are linked to liberal or progressive ideals emphasising social transformation, public welfare, and shared responsibility (Luca et al., 2023). Such ideals are often expressed in terms of party politics in Australia. Baker (2022) found that eight of the top ten most left-leaning (liberal) electorates in Australia were in capital cities, while six of the top ten most right-leaning (conservative) electorates were in rural areas. Such political divisions may lead to divisions in ideas surrounding law and order. Conservative ideals regarding personal responsibility for offending may emphasize the individualised nature of crime causation outlined above, shaping a general lack of belief in redeemability for offenders. This may result in low support for rehabilitation and an appetite for policies that deal with crime and offending in a punitive manner (Pratt, 2007). More liberal conceptions of collective responsibility and social transformation place greater emphasis on the role of wider social forces external to the individual, such as poverty and inequality, in crime causation.

1.5. Interpersonal Trust

Trust among other community members is crucial to social cohesion, solidarity, and human capital (Lappi-Seppälä, 2011). Some scholars have argued that social capital networks are strongest in rural communities where the population is smaller, anonymity is less, and face-to-face contact between community members is frequent, with people building trust through long-term relationships and interdependence alongside the presence of few strangers (Hughes et al., 1999). At the individual level, those with lower interpersonal trust may express reservations about offenders' ability to be rehabilitated and desist offending, leading to a preference for more punitive punishments (Tyler and Boeckmann, 1997). At a more macro level, low-trust societies, experiencing a lack of social cohesion and social solidarity, may prefer punitive approaches to re-affirm collective values and reinforce social solidarity, particularly in times of flux and social anxiety (Kennedy, 2000). The perception of rural communities as high-trust societies has contributed to the perspective that social cohesion may increase the capacity of rural communities to prevent crime, while also reducing fear and worry about crime (Gearhart, 2022; Lee et al., 2020). On the other hand, Barclay et al., 2004 have noted what they called "the dark side of Gemeinschaft" to describe how the informal social norms in rural communities may serve to tolerate certain types of crime.

1.6. The current study

There is likely significant difference in punitiveness depending on geographic location throughout Australia. However, Australian literature has not explored how specific elements of spatiality such as perceptions of crime and criminal justice, perceptions of offenders, trust and political ideology are related to punitive attitudes. Broadly, there is a political need to understand punitive attitudes generally and how these may differ across geographic areas. It is well-argued that public opinion is crucial in shaping public policy, not least on more emotive topics such as crime and criminal justice (Pratt and Miao, 2017). Therefore, by developing our understanding of these attitudes generally, we can begin to grasp the sociocultural norms and perceived need for punishment throughout different parts of Australia and specific criminal justice policies and responses can be tailored to specific areas rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

This study explores the relationship between geographic location (rural vs urban) and punitive attitudes drawing on a representative

sample of Australia's population. We do this by accounting for the influence of demographic factors, perceptions of crime and criminal justice, perceptions of offenders, political ideology and interpersonal trust. These factors have been identified as predictors of punitive attitudes in Australia in general and may also be uniquely relevant to place and space. As such, we aim to answer the following three questions.

1. Do punitive attitudes differ between rural and urban locations? The hypothesis is that rural respondents will be more punitive than urban respondents.
2. Does the prediction of punitive attitudes vary across geographic locations? The hypothesis is that different factors will predict punitive attitudes depending on geographic location.
3. Which individual factors contribute to the observed difference in punitiveness across geographic locations? The hypothesis is that perceptions of crime and criminal justice, offender ideology, political ideology, trust, or racial attitudes will contribute to the observed differences in punitive attitudes across geographic locations.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

Recruitment was conducted by the Online Research Unit's (ORU) Australian Consumer Panel which creates a representative participant panel by recruiting through online and offline methods. The ORU utilised random stratified sampling techniques to determine which of their panel would be invited to participate in the study. Once selected, respondents aged 18 and over were invited to complete an online survey sent via email. Data collection took place between March 1 and 13 2022. Respondents provided their consent prior to commencing the survey which took approximately 30–45 min to complete. A total of 4271 people were invited to participate in the survey, 576 commenced the survey and after data cleaning and removal of respondents who did not complete the survey, 536 cases remained for analysis, resulting in a response rate of 12.5 %. However, upon scrutinising the rural and remote samples further, the remote respondents (3.1 %; $N = 16$) were excluded as these were qualitatively different from those in the rural group and the sample was too small to be considered its own category. This left 520 cases for analysis.

Sex was evenly split among the sample between males (47.6 %; $N = 247$) and females 51.9 %; $N = 270$). Age was evenly distributed. The sample was highly educated with 30.2 % ($N = 163$) having completed a professional certificate (certificate i - iv, diploma or advanced diploma) and 49.2 % ($N = 261$) having completed a bachelor's degree or post graduate degree. The sample was distributed across urban, rural and remote areas as expected, with 77.1 % living in an urban area ($N = 401$), compared to 22.9 % in rural areas ($N = 119$). Refer to Table 1 for further breakdown of respondent demographics. A comparison with 2021 census data confirmed that our sample was representative of the Australian population across sex, age and geographic location by state (See Online Supplement 1).

2.2. Measures

The measurements used in this study were selected as they are multi-item measures that have been validated and extensively used in previous research to ensure response stability. A comprehensive list of the items in each scale has been included in online supplement 2.

Punitive Attitudes. Roberts et al. (2011) developed this scale to measure multiple elements of punitive attitudes including sentencing practices and severity of sanctions. The scale comprised 7 items measured on a 5-point Likert Scale, with higher scores indicating more punitive attitudes. Roberts et al. reported Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$ which was similar in the current study (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$). A sample item included e.g. 'Courts are too soft on offenders'.

Table 1
Respondent characteristics.

Demographic Factor	Current sample % (N)
Sex	
Female	51.9 (270)
Male	47.6 (247)
Non-binary	0.6 (3)
Age	
18-24	11.5 (60)
25-34	20.8 (108)
35-44	17.1 (89)
45-54	16.9 (88)
55-64	14.6 (76)
65-74	13.1 (68)
75+	5.8 (31)
Geographic Location Classification	
Urban (Capital City)	51.5 (268)
Urban (population 100,000+)	25.6 (133)
Large Rural (population between 25,000 and 100,000)	10.4 (54)
Small Rural (population between 10,000 and 24,999)	8.3 (43)
Other rural area	4.2 (22)
Education	
Did not go to school	0.02 (1)
Primary School	1.2 (6)
Year 11 or below	7.5 (39)
Year 12 or equivalent	11.7 (61)
Certificate I/II/III/IV	18.7 (97)
Diploma or Advanced Diploma	11.5 (60)
Bachelor's Degree	30.2 (157)
Graduate Diploma/Certificate	5.2 (27)
Post Graduate Degree	13.8 (72)

Geographic Location. The Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Area (RRMA) Scale (AIHW, 2004) categorises Australia into seven areas by population density and relative remoteness (accessibility to services). The categories include (1) a capital city, (2) an 'other' metropolitan urban centre (a non-capital city with a population equal to or greater than 100,000) (3) a large rural centre (population 25,000 to 99,999), (4) a small rural centre (population 10,000 to 24,999), (5) other rural area, (6) remote Area (population between 5000 and 9999) and (7) Other remote area. For analysis, geographic location was dichotomised as 'rural' = 0 and 'urban' = 1. The 'urban' category consisted of RRMA categories 1 and 2, while the 'rural' category consisted of categories 3, 4 and 5.

Perceptions of Crime. Spiranovic et al. (2012) developed this scale to explore how respondents' perception of crime rates have changed over time (Spiranovic et al., 2012). This scale comprises 3 items measured on a 5-point Likert Scale, with higher scores indicating greater perception of rising crime rates. Spiranovic et al. reported Cronbach's $\alpha = .71$ which was higher in the current study (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$). A sample item included 'In your opinion, do you think that the level of overall crime in your State/Territory has increased, decreased, or remained the same over the last two years?'

Fear of Crime. Spiranovic et al. (2012) developed this scale to measure preoccupations over becoming the victim of a crime. This scale comprises 3 items measured on a 4-point Likert Scale, where higher scores indicate more fear of crime. Spiranovic et al. reported Cronbach's $\alpha = .69$ which was higher in the current study (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$). A sample item included 'How safe do you feel when alone at home after dark?'

Confidence in the CJS. Kautt and Tankebe (2011) developed this scale to explore overall confidence in the CJS as a whole. It contains 7 items measured on a 5-point Likert Scale, with higher scores reflecting higher confidence in the CJS. Kautt and Tankebe reported Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$ which was similar in the current study (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$). A sample item included 'How confident are you that the criminal justice system is effective in bringing people to justice?'

Attribution of Crime Causation. Templeton and Hartnagel (2012) developed this scale to measure the internal-external locus of crime

causation, where internal attribution is attributed to the offender's character and personal disposition while external attribution is attributed to a situational or environmental characteristics that influence an offender's behaviour (e.g., poverty). The scale consists of two subscales: internal attribution (3 items) and external attribution (6 items). All items were measured on a 5-point Likert Scale, with higher scores indicating stronger internal or external attribution of offending depending on the subscale. Templeton and Hartnagel reported Cronbach's $\alpha = .66$ for the internal attribution subscale and .71 for the external attribution subscale. Reliability was higher in the current study (.76 internal attribution subscale and .78 external attribution). A sample item included 'most criminals know fully well what they are doing when they break the law'.

Belief in Redeemability. O'Sullivan et al. (2017) developed this scale to explore feelings that offenders could 'redeem' themselves by desisting offending and becoming productive members of society. The scale comprises 10 items arranged on a 5-point Likert Scale, with higher scores reflecting a stronger belief in the redeemability of offenders. Items 7, 8, 9 and 10 are reverse coded. O'Sullivan et al. reported a Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$ which was similar in the current study (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$). A sample item was 'After committing a crime, changing your life is more about personal effort than luck.'

Attitudes towards Indigenous Australians. Attitudes towards Indigenous Australians was measured using the 'Attitudes towards Indigenous Australians' Scale (Pedersen et al., 2004). The original scale included 18 items rated on a 7-point scale, with higher scores indicating negative attitudes. Pedersen et al. reported Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$, which was lower in the current study but nonetheless acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .75$). For consistency with other scales in the survey, participants were asked to rate the items on a 5-point Likert Scale, where higher scores indicated negative attitudes. Offensive reference to Indigenous Australians as 'Aborigine' on items 1, 6, 7, 9, 12, 13 and 14 was replaced with 'Aboriginal'. Items were worded either positive (e.g., 'Aboriginal people work as hard as anyone else') or negatively (e.g., 'Aboriginal People should work harder to fit into society').

Racial Essentialism. No et al. (2008) developed this scale to explore how respondents perceive race; either as a social construct or with essentialised perceptions where a person's race is a determinant of their behaviour. The original scale comprised 8 items measured on a 5-point Likert Scale, with higher scores indicating greater essentialised perceptions of race. The social constructionist items (5–8) were reverse coded. No et al. reported Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$ which was lower in the current study (Cronbach's $\alpha = .59$). However, as this reliability is unacceptable, item analyses were conducted and found that removing the social constructionist items (items 5, 6, 7 and 8) improved the overall reliability of the scale to an acceptable level (Cronbach's $\alpha = .70$). Therefore, the decision was made to only include the racial essentialist items in our analyses. A sample item included 'How a person is like (e.g., his or her abilities, traits) is deeply ingrained in his or her race. It cannot be changed much'.

Political Ideology. Dimock et al. (2014) developed this scale to explore conservative or liberal ideology. It consists of 10 items where responses were scored as +1 for a conservative and -1 for a liberal. Respondents were presented with two statements and asked to pick which statement aligned with their views. An example of a conservative statement was 'Most corporations make a fair and reasonable amount of profit' Whereas an example of a liberal statement was 'Business corporations make too much profit'. Dimock et al. reported Cronbach's $\alpha = .72$ which was lower in the current study (Cronbach's $\alpha = .63$). Item analysis was conducted and removing 1 item (item 1), improved the overall reliability of the scale to an acceptable level (Cronbach's $\alpha = .67$).

Interpersonal Trust. Yamagishi (1986) developed this scale to explore trust in others. The scale consists of 5 items measured on a 5-point Likert Scale, with higher scores reflecting lower interpersonal trust. Item 4 was reverse coded. Yamagishi did not report the reliability of the scale; however, this was low in the current study (Cronbach's $\alpha = .57$). Item

analyses revealed that removing 1 item (item 4) improved the overall reliability of the scale to an acceptable level (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .63$). A sample item included ‘Most people tell a lie when they can benefit by doing so’.

Demographics. Respondents provided information about their sex, age and education. Sex measured as ‘male’ and ‘female’. Age was reported in years. Education was coded as a continuous variable where 1 = Did not go to school, 2 = Primary School, 3 = Year 11 and below, 4 = Year 12 or equivalent, 5 = Certificate I/II/III/IV, 6 = Diploma or Advanced Diploma, 7 = bachelor’s degree, 8 = Graduate Diploma/Certificate and 9 = Post Graduate Degree.

3. Results

The data was cleaned and analysed using IBM SPSS v29 software. The assumptions of normality, linearity and multicollinearity were checked with no issues found. Descriptive statistics for the full sample are provided on Table 2. The mean and standard deviation for each location can be found in Online Supplement 4 and 5. For analysis, a composite variable was created for each measure. The scales were computed by summing the responses of their respective items.

3.1. Do punitive attitudes differ between rural and urban locations?

Preliminary analysis identified the presence of punitive attitudes across the sample that were significantly above the scale’s neutral midpoint of 21 ($t(519) = 15.03, p < .001$). To answer the first research question, a *t*-test was conducted to determine if any differences existed between respondents from different geographic locations. The results were statistically significant, with the rural group ($M = 27.34, SD = 5.65$) reporting higher punitive attitudes, 95 % CI $[-4.048, -1.463]$ than the urban group ($M = 24.59, SD = 6.48$), $t(518) = -4.19, p < .001, d = .045$. This indicates that rural and urban samples both displayed punitive attitudes, however, rural respondents were significantly more punitive.

3.2. Does the prediction of punitive attitudes vary across geographic locations?

To answer the second research question, we started by examining the correlations between each variable for the full sample, urban-only sample and the rural-only sample (Refer to Online Supplements 3, 4 and 5 respectively). In the full sample, punitive attitudes were significantly positively correlated with conservative political ideology, perceptions of rising crime rates, fear of crime, a lack of confidence in the CJS, low trust, internal attribution of crime causation, racial

Table 2
Descriptive information of measurement scales.

Measure	M (SD)	Possible Range	Skewness (SE)	Kurtosis (SE)
Punitive Attitudes	25.2 (6.40)	7–35	-.389 (.11)	-.273 (.21)
Crime Perception	10.51 (2.50)	3–15	.079 (.11)	-.440 (.21)
Fear of Crime	6.36 (2.40)	3–12	.512 (.11)	-.544 (.21)
Confidence in the CJS	19.54 (5.54)	7–35	.123 (.11)	-.070 (.21)
Interpersonal Trust	13.73 (2.57)	4–20	-.252 (.11)	.615 (.21)
Internal Crime Causation	11.15 (2.39)	3–15	-.406 (.11)	-.010 (.21)
External Crime Causation	19.05 (4.23)	6–30	-.454 (.11)	.765 (.21)
Belief in Redeemability	24.34 (5.34)	10–43	.202 (.11)	.129 (.21)
Attitudes towards Indigenous Australians	49.59 (10.94)	18–90	-.126 (.11)	-.035 (.21)
Racial Essentialism	11.69 (3.14)	4–20	-.296 (.11)	.107 (.21)
Political Ideology	14.93 (2.21)	9–18	-.539 (.11)	-.373 (.21)

essentialism, and negative attitudes towards Indigenous Australians, and significantly negatively correlated with belief in redeemability. External attribution of crime causation was not significantly correlated with punitive attitudes and was excluded from the following analyses.

To answer this research question, we considered conducting a moderation regression. However, power analyses revealed that the current sample was too small to include such a large number of moderations. Therefore, we computed separate hierarchical regressions to determine how different variables predict punitiveness across the rural and urban samples. A power analysis indicated that the urban sample held sufficient power to support this approach, while the rural sample was slightly below the estimated required sample size and as such, the results were interpreted with caution. The regression analyses included demographic factors (age, sex, educational attainment) as control variables in Model 1; political ideology in Model 2; interpersonal trust in Model 3; perceptions of crime and criminal justice variables (perception of crime incidence, fear of crime and confidence in the CJS) in Model 4; variables measuring perceptions of offenders (internal attribution of crime causation, belief in redeemability) in Model 5, and racial attitude variables (racial essentialism and attitudes towards Indigenous Australians) in Model 6. The full results are shown on Tables 3 and 4 and the main findings are summarised below.

The multiple regressions were followed by a Chow Test (Chow, 1960) to determine if the two final models varied significantly in their prediction of punitive attitudes. The Chow test yielded significant results, $F(15, 490) = 1.69, p = .012$, indicating a significant difference between the two models. We then followed the Chow test with a series of moderation regressions to identify which individual factors varied significantly across location in their prediction of punitive attitudes.

3.2.1. Rural

In Model 1, the demographic factors accounted for a non-significant 7.5 % of variance in punitive attitudes. Age was the only significant predictor; as age increased, so did punitive attitudes. The overall model was significantly improved with the addition of political ideology in Model 2, with conservative political ideology predicting more punitive attitudes, explaining an additional 10.4 % of variance in punitive attitudes. Entering trust in Model 3 significantly improved the overall model, with lack of trust significantly predicting punitive attitudes, explaining an additional 4.6 % of variance in punitive attitudes. Adding the perceptions of crime and criminal justice variables in Model 4 again significantly improved the overall model, explaining an additional 20.6 % of the variance. In this model, perceptions of rising crime rates and a lack of confidence in the CJS were significant predictors of punitive attitudes, meaning that perceiving crime rates to be rising and low confidence in the CJS predicted more punitive attitudes. Adding the perception of offenders’ variables in Model 5 explained a further 7.3 % of variance in the overall model, with internal attribution of crime and belief in redeemability predicting stronger punitive attitudes. Finally, adding the racial attitude variables in Model 6 did not significantly improve the overall model, explaining an additional 1.1 % of the variance in punitive attitudes.

The full model explained 51.6 % of variance in punitive attitudes, where an examination of the standardised regression coefficients revealed that perceived rising crime rates was the strongest predictor, followed by internal attribution of crime, lack of confidence in the CJS, a lack of belief in redeemability and fear of crime.

3.2.2. Urban

In Model 1 demographic factors accounted for a non-significant 1.6 % of variance in punitive attitudes, with no significant predictors. Adding political ideology in Model 2 significantly improved the overall model, with conservative political ideology predicting punitive attitudes and explained 7.8 % of variance in punitive attitudes. Unlike the rural sample, adding interpersonal trust in Model 3 significantly improved the overall model with a moderately large effect size, whereby stronger

Table 3
Regression modelling predicting punitive attitudes: Rural.

Step	Predictor	β	SE	sr^2	R^2	R^2 change	F
1	Age	.181*	.032	.177	.075*	.075*	3.127*
	Sex	.118	1.014	.118			
	Education	-.135	.285	-.136			
2	Age	.190*	.031	.186	.180**	.104**	6.246**
	Sex	.059	.975	.058			
	Education	-.060	.276	-.057			
	Political Ideology	-.336**	.228	-.323			
3	Age	.153	.030	.148	.226**	.046**	6.594**
	Sex	.055	.952	.054			
	Education	-.064	.270	-.061			
	Political Ideology	-.267*	.233	-.245			
	Interpersonal Trust	.229*	.208	.215			
4	Age	.044	.028	.041	.432**	.206**	10.448**
	Sex	.045	.831	.044			
	Education	.009	.238	.009			
	Political Ideology	-.218*	.205	-.197			
	Interpersonal Trust	.124	.187	.113			
	Perception of Crime	.351**	.209	.290			
	Fear of Crime	-.124	.186	-.109			
	Confidence in the CJS	-.289**	.087	-.256			
5	Age	.049	.027	.044	.504**	.073**	10.996**
	Sex	.049	.784	.048			
	Education	.066	.233	.060			
	Political Ideology	-.174*	.195	-.156			
	Interpersonal Trust	.057	.181	.051			
	Perception of Crime	.290*	.214	.220			
	Fear of Crime	-.143	.184	-.120			
	Confidence in the CJS	-.259*	.083	-.228			
	Internal Attribution of Crime	.285**	.215	.233			
	Belief in Redeemability	-.171*	.088	-.151			
	6	Age	.071	.027			
Sex		.033	.828	.030			
Education		.089	.237	.079			
Political Ideology		-.119	.231	-.090			
Interpersonal Trust		.026	.187	.022			
Perception of Crime		.307**	.216	.231			
Fear of Crime		-.169*	.188	-.138			
Confidence in the CJS		-.254*	.084	-.219			
Internal Attribution of Crime		.264*	.218	.213			
Belief in Redeemability		-.162*	.088	-.143			
Attitudes Towards Indigenous Australians		.109	.048	.073			
Racial Essentialism		.080	.129	.075			

Note. ** = $p < .001$; * = $p < .05$; β = standardised regression coefficient; SE = standard error; sr^2 = semi-partial correlation coefficient; VIF statistics ranged from .447 to .937 indicating no issues of multicollinearity.

distrust of others predicted more punitive attitudes and explained 23.2 % of variance in punitive attitudes. Adding perception of crime and criminal justice in Model 4 slightly improved the overall model, explaining 8.7 % of variance in punitive attitudes, but only perceptions of crime significantly predicted punitive attitudes, with the perception that crime rates are rising predicting stronger punitive attitudes. Adding perceptions of offenders in Model 5 further improved the overall model, explaining 9.9 % of variance in punitive attitudes; with internal attribution of crime and belief in redeemability predicting more punitive attitudes. Finally, adding the racial attitude variables in Model 6 significantly improved the overall model, explaining 1.7 % of variance in punitive attitudes, with both variables significantly predicting of punitive attitudes.

The full model explained 52.9 % of variance in punitive attitudes, where an examination of the standardised regression coefficients revealed that internal attribution of crime causation was the strongest predictor, followed by perceptions of rising crime rates, then a lack of belief in redeemability and a lack of interpersonal trust. Unlike the rural sample, attitudes towards Indigenous Australians and racial essentialism

significantly predicted punitive attitudes. Finally, like the rural sample, political ideology became non-significant after adding the racial attitudes variables.

3.3. Which individual factors contribute to the observed difference in punitiveness across geographic locations?

The Chow test revealed an overall difference between the models. We followed this with a moderation regression on each independent variable included in the models to determine which individual factors drove this effect (see [Online Supplement 6](#)). Each moderation examined the effect of geographic location on punitive attitudes as moderated by perceptions of crime, fear of crime, confidence in the CJS, trust, internal crime causation, belief in redeemability, attitudes towards Indigenous Australians, racial essentialism and political ideology. Only two moderation models yielded significant results: fear of crime and confidence in the CJS.

Fear of crime. The moderation model accounted for a significant unique variance in punitive attitudes, $R^2 = .54$, $F(24, 495) = 24.15$, $p <$

Table 4
Regression modelling predicting punitive attitudes: Urban.

Step	Predictor	β	SE	sr^2	R^2	R^2 change	F
1	Age	.077	.003	.077	.016	.016	2.095
	Sex	-.055	.647	-.055			
	Education	-.071	.179	-.071			
2	Age	.079	.003	.078	.094**	.078**	10.253**
	Sex	-.089	.626	-.088			
	Education	-.076	.172	-.075			
	Political Ideology	-.282**	.141	-.280			
3	Age	.083*	.003	.083	.326**	.232**	38.148**
	Sex	-.080	.541	-.079			
	Education	-.048	.149	-.047			
	Political Ideology	-.202**	.123	-.198			
	Interpersonal Trust	.489	.104	.481			
4	Age	.055	.003	.055	.412**	.087**	34.355**
	Sex	.026	.547	.024			
	Education	-.025	.141	-.025			
	Political Ideology	-.186**	.116	-.180			
	Interpersonal Trust	.354**	.108	.316			
	Perception of Crime	.304**	.121	.251			
	Fear of Crime	.077	.116	.070			
	Confidence in the CJS	-.025	.046	-.024			
5	Age	.053	.002	.053	.512**	.099**	40.850**
	Sex	-.010	.504	-.009			
	Education	-.012	.129	-.012			
	Political Ideology	-.122*	.110	-.115			
	Interpersonal Trust	.163**	.113	.127			
	Perception of Crime	.210**	.117	.164			
	Fear of Crime	.039	.110	.034			
	Confidence in the CJS	.003	.042	.003			
	Internal Attribution of Crime	.373**	.126	.279			
	Belief in Redeemability	-.196**	.046	-.179			
6	Age	.052	.002	.051	.529**	.017**	36.311**
	Sex	-.022	.500	-.020			
	Education	-.010	.128	-.009			
	Political Ideology	-.075	.121	-.063			
	Interpersonal Trust	.137*	.112	.106			
	Perception of Crime	.196**	.115	.152			
	Fear of Crime	.023	.110	.020			
	Confidence in the CJS	-.007	.042	-.007			
	Internal Attribution of Crime	.360**	.124	.268			
	Belief in Redeemability	-.144**	.048	-.124			
	Attitudes Towards Indigenous Australians	.113*	.027	.087			
	Racial Essentialism	.096*	.082	.084			

Note. ** = $p < .001$; * = $p < .05$; β = standardised regression coefficient; SE = standard error; sr^2 = semi-partial correlation coefficient; VIF statistics ranged from 1.005 to 1.797 indicating no issues of multicollinearity.

.001, with the interaction accounting for a significant .44 % of the variance in punitive attitudes, $F(1, 495) = 4.73, p = .030$, with a significant effect for rural residents ($B_{rural} = -.949, LLCI/ULCI \neq 0, p = .045$) and not for urban residents ($B_{urban} = .223, LLCI/ULCI = 0, p = .400$). These results suggest that fear of crime plays a role in the difference in punitive attitudes across geographic locations.

Confidence in the CJS. The moderation model accounted for a significant unique variance in punitive attitudes, $R^2 = .54, F(24, 495) = 24.15, p < .001$ with the interaction accounting for a significant .65 % of the variance in punitive attitudes alone, $F(1, 495) = 4.73, p = .008$. Like fear of crime, the effect of confidence in the CJS was significant in the rural location ($B_{rural} = -1.522, LLCI/ULCI \neq 0, p = .003$) and not the urban location ($B_{urban} = .046, LLCI/ULCI = 0, p = .847$). These results suggest that confidence in the CJS plays a role in shaping the difference in punitive attitudes across geographic locations.

4. Discussion

Our findings suggest that on average Australians express somewhat

punitive attitudes towards offenders, with people residing in rural areas holding significantly more punitive attitudes than those in urban locations. This aligns with research conducted by Walker et al. (1987), Kelley and Braithwaite (1990), Gelb (2011) and Davey et al. (2024), showing some stability of these effects long-term.

The regression models identified substantial differences in the factors predicting punitive attitudes across geographic areas. Across both geographic locations, punitiveness was predicted by perceptions of crime and perceptions of offenders, albeit how this manifested was different. In urban areas, punitive attitudes were most strongly predicted by internal attributions of crime causation. In contrast, in rural areas, punitive attitudes were most strongly predicted by perceptions of rising crime in society (i.e., perceptions of crime and a lack of confidence in the criminal justice system). These findings may align with the continuum of life in these spaces, where urban life may be characterised by more individualistic perspectives, compared to rural communities where there may be an increased level of sociocultural interconnectedness and contact with other members of the community (Ponzetti, 2003; Husband, 2005; Belanche et al., 2021). With this in mind, we can

consider that, in formulating punitive attitudes, urban residents may place the onus of offending on the individual whereas rural residents may place more emphasis on the increase in crime more generally within the community.

Following this line of thinking and delving further into what factors can account for the differences in punitive attitudes across geographic locations, the findings from the moderation analyses suggest that fear of crime and confidence in the criminal justice system are key in understanding punitiveness in rural areas. There is often a disjuncture between how people perceive crime rates and the reality of crime itself (Weatherburn and Indermaur, 2004). However, this may be unique in rural areas for reasons related to spatial characteristics and the social construction of crime. While total crime may be higher in urban areas, crime rates are often significantly higher in rural areas. In the Canadian context, Carleton et al. (2014) found that rural areas had a higher proportion of violent crime while urban areas specialised in property crime. Building on this, Hodgkinson and Martino (2023) found that rural and remote areas in Queensland, Australia, specialised in violent crime, particularly domestic violence and assault. This suggests that violent crime may be disproportionately represented in rural areas and, as such, people who are victimised are more likely to be victims of violent crime in even places with a more generally low risk of victimisation (Hodgkinson and Martino, 2023).

When the crime rate and violent crime specialisation are considered in the context of social density (i.e., smaller populations in more concentrated areas) (Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy, 2014), people residing in rural places may be more perceptually aware of crime and feel 'closer' (Mellberg, 2022). This can contribute to an exaggerated sense of threat from crime as the community processes crime events more collectively. This may be especially true of violent crimes which, while statistically unlikely in general, can amplify the awareness and emotional impact of crime, making rural residents feel closer to crime even if the actual total incidence rates are lower compared to urban areas. Additionally, repeated exposure to 'crime talk', proximity and personal connection to victims or perpetrators, and the perception of crime as the product of 'outsiders' can amplify fear of crime and contribute to the perception that crime is more prevalent than it is (Scott and Hogg, 2015; David, 2023). Notably, Mellberg et al. (2022) found that temporal, social and hypothetical psychological distance significantly predicted crime-related worry. Additionally, Mellberg et al. (2024) found that community members who perceived crime as psychologically proximal, that is as being likely to happen soon in their immediate environment, experienced more intense feelings of worry about crime.

Once again aligning with the extant literature, the current findings indicate that a lack of confidence in the CJS appear to be related to greater punitive attitudes. This lack of confidence in the CJS is even more prevalent in rural areas. Some reasons for the lack of confidence in rural areas may centre around the lack of accessibility to justice both in terms of the physical distance and that the workings of the CJS are often inefficient and delay the carriage of justice causing feelings neglect and resentment (Hale and Harkness, 2022; Smith, 2020). Other rural-specific factors that contribute to this include police capacity/unavailability (i.e., unmanned stations), infrequent court sittings, and limited courtroom facilities that often place victims and offenders in close proximity (Coverdale, 2011; Harris et al., 2014; Mulrooney et al., 2024). For example, research into farm crime victimisation has noted that farmers tend not to report crime because they lack confidence in the police interest and capacity to be able to respond to these crimes and view the courts as lacking in awareness around the harms associated with these offences and, therefore, as being soft on crime (Mulrooney, 2021; Mulrooney et al., 2022). These feelings of neglect, lack of accessibility and low confidence more broadly, can lead to increased punitive sentiments as a solution to 'controlling' the crime problem (Peterson et al., 2024).

Taken together, a distorted picture of crime combined with the

spatial realities of rural areas may contribute to a discourse of fear which increases the expectation of danger (Altheide, 2003), reduces the public confidence in criminal justice institutions, ultimately, fostering punitive attitudes and associated political pressure. These findings provide an important theoretical and empirical contribution for the relationship between geographic location and punitive attitude formulation. Difference exists in punitive sentiments across Australia and the evidence suggests that differences in fear of crime and overall confidence in the CJS moderate the differences observed in punitive attitudes across urban and rural locations. As rural communities grapple with crime and associated social unrest (Cook and Fitzgerald, 2024), the spatial dimensions of crime and criminal justice is something that policymakers should directly consider when engaging with public perceptions, demands around law and order, and ameliorative solutions to crime problems.

4.1. Limitations and future research

One limitation to consider is the racial essentialism scale. The significantly low reliability of this scale compared to the original paper questions the validity of the scale in an Australian sample. We stabilised the scale and improved the reliability greatly, however, as mentioned in the methodology, this was done by removing the social constructionist items as we were focused on racial essentialism, not social constructionism. Therefore, the results related to racial essentialism should be interpreted with some caution.

The second limitation to be mindful of is how geographic location was classified. The RRMA is based on Statistical Local Areas drawn from census data in 1991 and has not been updated since. This could pose issues for classifying areas as urban, rural or remote, as it uses data that no longer reflects current population patterns, infrastructure, or service accessibility. Moreover, the RRMA oversimplifies geographic differences by focusing on straight-line distance to urban centres to classify remoteness while ignoring real-world travel routes and service availability (AIHW, 2004). For example, the centre of a town may be 50 km from a large urban centre 'as the crow flies'; however, the road distance to that centre could be twice the distance, which has implications for accessing services and goods. The largest implication of this is that the boundary between urban and rural spaces may become blurred into what has been termed as 'rurban' (Mulrooney and Wise, 2019). As such, the results should be interpreted with this in mind.

Future research should engage with these findings qualitatively to develop a deeper understanding of what shapes fear of crime and a lack of confidence in the criminal justice system and the flow-on this has to punitive attitudes in the rural context. This approach will help uncover the underlying reasons and personal experiences that contribute to these perceptions. By understanding these factors in more detail, researchers can better grasp how these perceptions influence punitive attitudes, particularly in rural areas.

5. Conclusion

The influence of geographic location on punitive sentiments in Australia is under-researched and needs more attention given that a considerable proportion of Australia's population resides in these areas. By developing an understanding of punitive attitudes and how these differ across geographic locations in Australia, policymakers can engage with the public on matters of criminal justice, especially as criminal justice policies are often informed by public opinion. The findings highlight that rural residents are significantly more punitive than urban residents and that fear of crime and a lack of confidence in the CJS moderated stronger punitive sentiments in rural areas.

Moreover, the findings suggest that markedly different factors shape punitive attitudes depending on where respondents reside (urban or rural). Specifically, that punitive attitudes among urban residents are best predicted by perceptions of offenders generally (i.e., internal

attributions of crime causation and a lack of belief in redeemability), compared to rural areas where these attitudes are best predicted by perceptions of rising crime rates and responses to crime (i.e., perceptions of rising crime rates and a lack of confidence in the criminal justice system). These findings have important implications for theory and speak to the importance that geographic location and aspects of spatiality play in shaping attitudes of the public towards crime and punishment. In Australia, crime in rural communities continues to be a focal point of community and political attention. While policy efforts to prevent and control crime have long been urban-centric (Abraham and Ceccato, 2022) policymakers should consider the spatial dimensions and, indeed, uniqueness of crime and criminal justice in rural areas when addressing public perceptions, law and order demands, and strategies to mitigate crime problems.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Caitlin B. Davey: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kyle J. D. Mulrooney:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Susan E. Watt:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: Caitlin Davey reports financial support was provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Higher Degree Research (HDR) Scholarship. The Authors recognise would like to acknowledge the contribution of Mr Guido Posthausen. If there are other authors, they declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2025.103740>.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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