

Selective punitiveness among social work students: A longitudinal study

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Abstract

This article presents the primary results of a longitudinal study on attitudes toward punishment, among social work students in Germany. This is particularly relevant because social workers, especially in the field of criminal justice, are part of the state control bodies required to set boundaries and decide for or against certain sanctions. The results show that punitive attitudes are not uncommon among first-year social work students but decrease during the course of their study, especially in students majoring in the field of criminal justice. Simultaneously, “selective punitiveness” was evident.

Keywords

Punitiveness, perceptions about crime and punishment, social work students, Germany

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Introduction

Studying punitiveness is complex, and the results depend on operationalization. Findings from European countries suggest that punitiveness is both decreasing and increasing (Ostaszewski et al., 2024; Tiratelli, 2025). However, even if no clear trends have been identified, findings regarding the increase in demand for harsher punishments are worrying (Carvalho et al., 2020; Streng et al., 2024). Social work, as a constitutive element of welfare states, is not exempt from such developments. Research indicates that a significant proportion of social work students and practitioners exhibit punitive tendencies that can affect their approach to client interactions and interventions (Beineke et al., 2023; Eno Loudon et al., 2018; Mohr, 2017; Pangritz and Berhan, 2020). Despite significant differences between social work in different countries (Vogt et al., 2022), this general trend is particularly concerning, as it may influence future professional practices and potentially compromise the core values of social work which emphasize empowerment and support rather than punitive measures. It is argued that the rise of neoliberalism has significantly influenced the context in which social work operates, contributing to the development of punitive attitudes among social workers (Brockmann and Garrett, 2022). The transformation toward an activating welfare state driven by neoliberal policies has led to a shift in how deviant behaviour is perceived, with an increased focus on individual rather than structural causes (Vogt et al., 2022). This ideological change has resulted in a recalibration of the balance between help and control in social work and has impacted the institutional framework of social work, subjecting it to economic pressures with an emphasis on cost-efficiency, quick labour market integration, and prioritization of short-term results over long-term needs-based support. This recalibration goes hand-in-hand with the increasing risk orientation and politics of securitization (Garland, 2001; see also Lutz, 2017 for social work).

These changes at the macro level could potentially have an impact on the attitudes of individuals, potentially leading to social workers' internalization of "blaming narratives" (Fenton, 2021: 4) against vulnerable groups that are undeserving of help and are responsible for solving self-inflicted problems. Such categorization can be seen as grounds for the implementation of more punitive measures for those deemed less deserving, (high) risk carriers, or less likely to be successfully "activated." It is important to note that research suggests that social workers generally exhibit less punitive attitudes than the general population (Baier, 2020; Beineke et al., 2023) and other professionals in the criminal justice system (Baier et al., 2017; Chen and Einat, 2015). Regardless of these comparisons, however, research also shows that there is at least a subgroup of social workers with authoritarian attitudes that contradict "humanistic educational ideals like maturity, autonomy, and participation" (Pangritz and Berhan, 2020: 12).

This contradiction raises questions regarding the effectiveness of current social work education and training programs in fostering empathetic and supportive approaches to client care. Even if there are some older studies with social work students (Lambert et al., 2005) or studies from other fields, such as police students

(Kemme et al., 2021), which point to a reduction in punitive attitudes through training, there are no empirical findings to date in the field of social work. The present study fills this research gap, using a longitudinal design with a German sample of social work students to depict the development of punitive attitudes from the beginning of the course to the end, and is therefore able to trace the developments at the individual level. The preliminary results of this study have already been published in German (Cornel et al., 2021, 2023). The present study goes well beyond this analysis as it uses an updated dataset to analyze a broad set of penal attitudes using both cross-sectional and longitudinal data. Based on the analyses, we propose the concept of “selective punitiveness,” resulting from the finding that the educational trajectories of social work students show a decline in punitive attitudes. However, with regard to the criminality of the powerful, there may even be an increase in punitive attitudes, suggesting that punitiveness has no deontological character based on overarching principles, but seems to be highly dependent on the perception of situational factors. This may point to the necessity to stronger emphasize the mechanism of othering in teaching.

Punitiveness among social work students

Punitiveness generally refers to attitudes that prefer retributive sanctions and reject conciliatory or balancing regulations over norm violations (e.g. Lautmann and Klimke, 2004). However, this is not a uniform concept, and different dimensions and subdimensions must be separated. Simonson (2011) distinguishes between legislative and judicial punitiveness, punitiveness as a supraindividual discourse (in mass and social media), and punitive attitudes in the population. Several dimensions must be distinguished even when focusing on individuals’ punitive attitudes. Adriaenssen and Aertsen (2015) differentiated between attitudes toward (1) punitive goals, (2) specific forms of criminal sanctions, (3) the intensity of individual forms of criminal sanctions, and (4) specific sanctioning principles (e.g. rejection of capital punishment or the death penalty).

Furthermore, punitiveness is not an absolute category but must be understood as a context-dependent continuum that is effective at different levels. Of particular interest are the attitudes toward punishment of certain professional groups (e.g. judges and prosecutors). While these attitudes represent individual attitudes, they may also influence actual sanctioning behaviour and, ultimately, judicial punitiveness at the macro level. Social workers are one of these professionals. They are not only a part of the criminal justice system (e.g. as probation officers), but often work in contexts where they decide on sanctions, such as residential facilities for young people.

The penal attitudes of social work students have been analyzed in several studies. Cross-sectional surveys of social work students from German universities (Dollinger et al., 2013; Oelkers, 2013) found punitive attitudes in about half of the students, which is reflected in the belief that punishment is an appropriate response to delinquency and that the punishments are too low. Lambert et al. (2005) found that at a Midwestern University in the United States, students majoring in social work, after controlling for other variables, were more likely to support rehabilitation and

significantly less likely to support punitive punishment than students with other majors. Baier (2020) compared attitudes toward punishment from first-year Swiss social work students with the general population. He found that the former were less punitive, with the exception of the punishment demanded for rape.

Other researchers have conducted repeated surveys of students and have thus been able to identify trends. In Germany, Streng (2014) and Streng et al. (2024) have been interviewing law students at the beginning of their studies since the late 1980s. His longitudinal study shows that over the last few decades students have decided to use increasingly higher sentences for the same offences. At the same time, rehabilitation is gaining importance as the purpose of punishment, as opposed to retribution. Habermann and Zech (2024) used six waves of data from the participants of a criminology lecture in Bochum between 2017 and 2021. They observed an increase in punitiveness during the pandemic.

Beyond comparing social work students with other groups or identifying trends, the question arises as to whether education can actually change punitive attitudes. Chen and Einat (2015) found lower punitive attitudes in the final-year students than the first-year students in education for correctional officers, but not for police officers in Israel. Kemme et al. (2021) observed that (academic) police students in Germany were significantly less punitive and more lenient in their third semester than in their first semester. However, this difference disappeared when attitudes in the first and fifth semesters were compared. The latter could have been caused by a "practice shock" during their internship. It is important to note this was not a longitudinal study. One of the few longitudinal studies on social work students found a decrease in punitive attitudes during the course of their study (Lambert et al., 2005). Although there is widespread agreement that social work training should go hand-in-hand with reflection on and a reduction in punitive attitudes, there is a lack of current evidence on its effects. Against this backdrop, our study aimed at understanding perceptions of punitive goals, different types of criminal sanctions, and additional (therapeutic) measures as well as the role of sanctioning principles by students of social work. We especially focus on how these perceptions changed during the course of studying implying possible effects of our teaching.

Methods

Data source

A working group of professors at German universities in criminology and criminal justice social work conducted a study on punitiveness in social work from 2015 onward. The core element was a broad, long-term survey of social work students at seven universities over 4 years. The study aimed to uncover the students' attitudes toward punishment and criminal sanctions at the beginning of their studies and the change in attitudes, if at all, over the course of their study (generally 3 to 4 years). It attempted to understand if teaching in social work and criminal justice has any impact on punitive attitudes as well as professional behaviour in social work and the criminal justice system. The analyses presented below synthesize the results of that study, already published in Germany (Cornel et al., 2021, 2023). Meanwhile

we extended our dataset and conducted new analyses that focus on this contribution: more cases could be included in the first wave compared to the 2021 study because it had not been completed at the time. Compared to the 2023 publication the consistency check of the longitudinal dataset was revised resulting in a slight sample size ($N=155$; see endnote 1).

Participants

For the first wave, social work students at the beginning of their study (hereinafter referred to as “freshmen”) were interviewed between summer term 2016 and summer term 2019. The lecturers involved in the project conducted the survey at the earliest possible stage of the course (usually in the first semester). The questionnaire was completed in class; however, participation was voluntary and anonymous. The second wave started in the summer term 2018 and ended in the winter term 2022 (hereinafter referred to as “seniors”). Owing to pandemic-related restrictions, a portion of the questionnaires were completed online. The link between the students who participated in both first and second waves was established via an individual code created by the students.¹

For the cross-sectional analyses, we used all the students who participated in the first wave (t_1) and were in their first to third semesters² ($N=2259$). Of these students, 79% were in their first semester, 16% in the second, and 5% in the third semester. Of these students 155 took part in the second wave (t_2). The focus of this study was this subsample that provided longitudinal data. Table 1 compares the sociodemographic variables between persons that participated only at t_1 and those who filled out both questionnaires. Compared to the first wave sample, the longitudinal sample had a significantly higher proportion of women (89–71%; $\chi^2(2) = 23.012, p < .001$) and more younger respondents <24 years (77–66%; $z = -2.931, p = .003$). The average difference between the two sampling points was 5.5 semesters. The actual sample sizes in the analyses presented below may have varied due to item nonresponse. For every analysis all cases with nonmissing information for the variables of interest were used.

Measures

There is no clear consensus on how punitiveness should be assessed (Suhling et al., 2005). First, one must choose the object of the attitude (e.g. punitive goals, specific forms of criminal sanctions, intensity of sanctions, etc.; see Adriaenssen and Aertsen, 2015; Suhling et al., 2005) and subsequently determine the operationalization. Penal attitudes are captured with general questions that can be combined with multi-item scales, as well as using fictive cases (vignettes) where respondents choose the appropriate sanctions (Simonson, 2011; Suhling et al., 2005). The issue of measurement is by no means academic. Kamenowski and Baier (2020), for example, show that the proportion of people with punitive attitudes varies widely depending on the indicator used.

Table 1. Sociodemographic variables by sample.

	Gender at t_1			Age at t_1 (%)						
	% Women	% Men	% Other	<20	20 to 24	25 to 29	30 to 34	35 to 39	40+	
Participated only t_1	71.2 (N=2075)	28.1	0.6	18.0 (N=2090)	48.0	19.1	7.3	4.1	3.4	
Participated at t_1 and t_2	89.0 (N=155)	10.4	0.6	25.2 (N=155)	51.6	12.3	5.8	1.3	3.9	

In terms of the working hypothesis, we assumed the presence of a need for punishment and retributive thinking—in the sense of the doctrines of justification for state punishment, which are conceived of as absolute theories—as punitive. The idea of retribution for guilt built into this can also be understood as limiting punishment and being subject to preventive objectives. However, in our understanding, the assumption that sanctions are necessary at all in a retributive, guilt-compensating perspective is already punitive because it expresses a general need for punishment.

However, for the definition of punitiveness, not only the justifications but also the corresponding consequences are decisive. If demands for criminal sanctions and punishment-like measures are advocated in terms of incapacitation, we perceive this kind of “security mindset” to justify harsh interventions also as punitive in nature. This view is confirmed by the results of the study by Singelstein and Habermann (2019), according to which those who selected the purpose of safeguarding the general public as one of the purposes of criminal law had the highest punitiveness scores.

Here, we refrain from presenting the advantages and disadvantages of each type of measurement (for details, see Simonson, 2011; Suhling et al., 2005). Yet, it is important to note the complex nature of punitive attitudes: general questions usually yield greater punitiveness compared to when respondents are given more information (e.g. Drenkhahn et al., 2020; Gelb, 2006, 2008). However, the use of vignettes does not lead to the measurement of general punitive attitudes. Based on 26 case vignettes, Kury and Obergfell-Fuchs (2008) extracted five factors related to the type of offence described in the case histories. These five attitudinal factors were also differentially influenced by the predictors of punitive attitudes. To address this measurement problem, this study combined different types of measures (penal purposes, attitudes toward the death penalty, crime-specific attitudes, attitudes toward alternatives to sanctioning, beliefs about the causes of crime, and case vignettes from situations in social work practice) allowing for a comprehensive view of students’ punitive attitudes: a detailed description of the instruments used in this study is presented alongside the results in the section below.

Ethical considerations

The study participants were informed about the goal of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, option to withdraw from the study at any time, and usage of data in an anonymous manner only.

Data analyses

The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS 29.0 and we used the STROBE cohort reporting guidelines (Elm et al., 2025). For measure used, we start by presenting the answers for all the students who participated in the first wave (including the longitudinal sample) to present the broad picture of social work students’ penal attitudes at the beginning of their studies. Second, we assessed the impact of higher education on penal attitudes by comparing the responses of the longitudinal sample at

both measurement points (t_1 and t_2). Despite this sample being considerably smaller, it provides insights into the development of students' attitudes.

Results

This section presents the broad range of penal attitudes among social work students in Germany. We assessed penal purposes, specific attitudes toward rehabilitation/resocialization,³ attitudes toward the death penalty, and crime-specific attitudes.

Penal purposes

An important aspect of attitudes toward punishment is penal purpose; that is the reason why people think sanctions on rule breakers should be imposed. Students were asked to what extent they agreed with seven different penal purposes on a four-point scale from 0 "disagree" to 3 "fully agree," that is, higher values indicating higher consent. Figure 1 shows the mean values for all the students. Preventive purposes addressed to the public (i.e. clarification of norms) and regret (i.e. raising awareness of guilt), as well as resocialization and deterrence, yielded the highest approval. Victim-offender mediation and retribution were the least important purposes.⁴

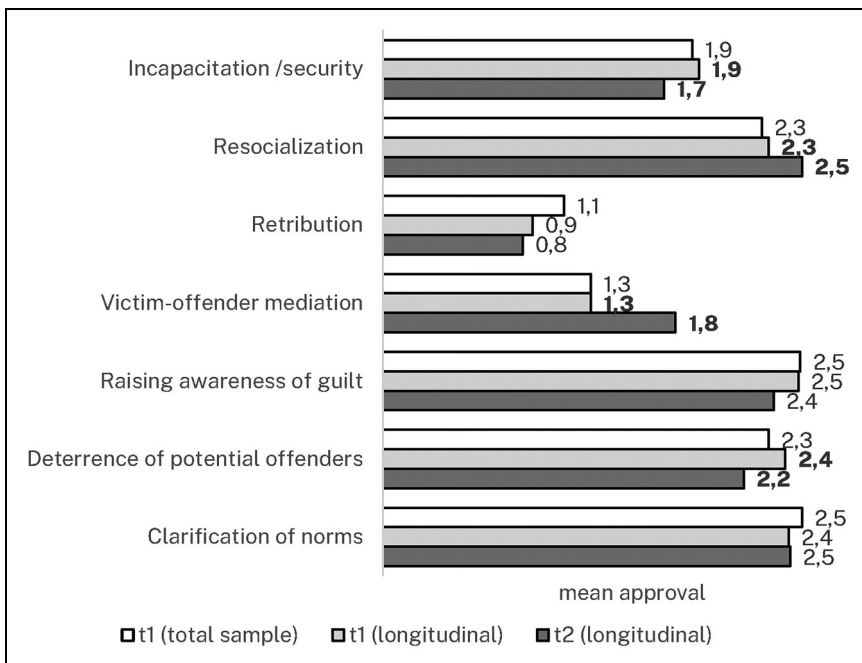


Figure 1. Approval of different penal purposes (significant differences between t_1 and t_2 are denoted in bold).

Comparing the punitive purposes between t_1 and t_2 , there was a statistically significant decrease in incapacitation ($t(146)=2.410, p=.017$) and deterrence ($t(149)=3.313, p=.001$), as well as an increase in the importance of resocialization ($t(150)=-3.151, p=.002$) and victim-offender mediation ($t(152)=-6.343, p<.001$). The decrease in the approval for raising awareness of guilt was only significant at the 10% level.

Forced choice between penalty and resocialization

Students were presented with a forced choice between penalty and resocialization. The questionnaire described a (fictitious) case scenario in which students were asked if they favoured a therapeutic program for sexual offenders that produces lower rates of recidivism than incarceration over sending such offenders to prison. The program was described as “therapeutic horse-riding trip” to imply it would be effective but rather fun than punishment. More than two-thirds (68%) of the total sample favoured the implementation of the therapeutic program as an alternative to incarceration, indicating that one-third of the respondents decided to impose sanctions, even though this meant an increase in the risk of recidivism. Considering the longitudinal data, we saw a significant increase in approval of resocialization from 72 to 86% (McNemar: $\chi^2(152)=9.587, p=.002$), indicating an increase in approval for resocializing approaches over the course of this study.

Attitudes toward the death penalty

One of the classic measures in the field of punitiveness is attitudes toward the death penalty. This question has been criticized for its hypothetical nature (in many countries) (Kury and Obergfell-Fuchs, 2008) and the fact that support for the death penalty also depends on specific wording. For example, the more the question is limited to certain serious offences, the higher the level of approval, and whether respondents are offered the category “undecided” (Reuband, 1980; see also Simonson, 2011). Despite its criticism, attitudes toward the death penalty are often used as an indicator of penal attitudes in the general population (e.g. McCarthy and Brunton-Smith, 2024) as well as in student surveys (e.g. Baier, 2020; Streng et al., 2024). Therefore, students in this study were also asked if they approved of capital punishment for severe crimes, on a six-point scale from 0 “Fully agree” to 5 “disagree.” Two-thirds of all the respondents rigorously opposed the death penalty. However, this also means that every third student approved it, at least to a certain degree and in selected cases. An analysis of the longitudinal sample showed a significant increase of the disapproval of capital punishment from 75% to almost 84% (McNemar: $\chi^2(154)=6.036, p=.014$).

Crime-specific penal attitudes

Penal attitudes are not a unidimensional construct. Research has shown that the longing for harsher or more lenient sanctions differ among different types of

crimes (Kamenowski and Baier, 2020; Kury and Obergfell-Fuchs, 2008). To assess these differences among the students of social work, the study asked them to assess the work of the criminal justice system with respect to six different types of offences. The items were worded as statements about the work of prosecutors and courts so that higher scores on the four-point scale (from 0 “does not apply” to 3 “fully applies”) indicated greater punitiveness. The mean values are shown in Figure 2. The cross-sectional sample preferred harsher sanctions for environmental crimes, economic and fiscal offences, and assault, whereas those in the longitudinal sample were slightly less punitive compared to freshmen.

By closely examining the development of penal attitudes between t_1 and t_2 in the longitudinal sample, differentiated developments became visible. Senior students were significantly more convinced that environmental crimes need to be given harsher punishments ($t(145) = -2.416, p = .017$). By contrast, respondents became significantly more lenient with respect to assault ($t(138) = 3.738, p < .001$), larceny ($t(135) = 4.716, p < .001$), juvenile offences ($t(140) = 4.478, p < .001$), and drug offences ($t(135) = 5.458, p < .001$).

Alternatives to sanctioning

The study also examined the appropriateness of punishment for certain offences. The participants were asked to choose the appropriate sanction for a selection of 13 offences

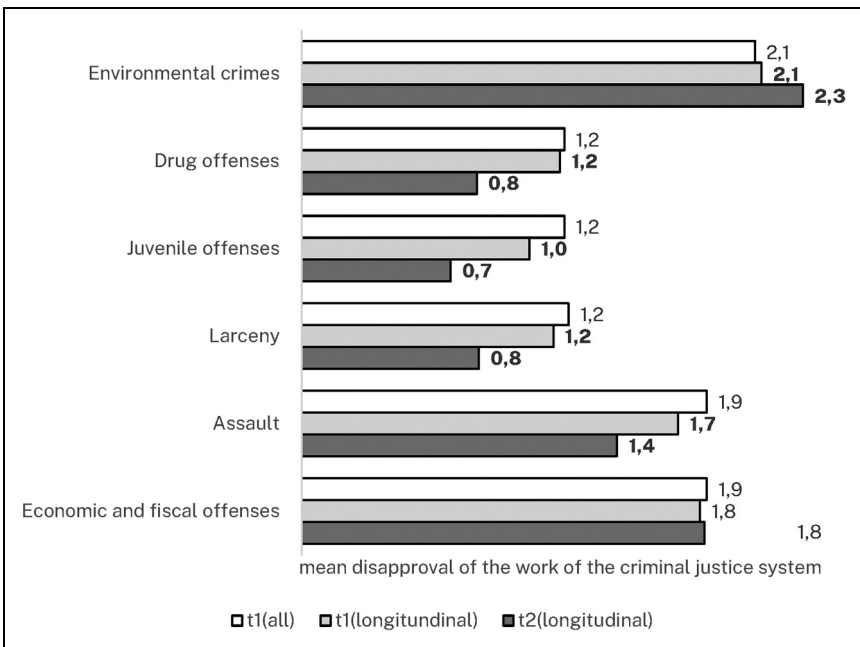


Figure 2. Punitiveness by offence and sample (significant differences between t_1 and t_2 are denoted in bold).

with the following possibilities: "no penal sanction," "restitution," "fine," "prison sentence on probation," and "imprisonment." Once again, the longing for sanctions varied by offence. More than half (57%) of the respondents at the beginning of their studies did not see the need for penal sanctions in the case of squatting a vacant house. Also fare evasion (26%) and use of illicit drugs (37%) were regarded by a large proportion of respondents as actions that should not result in criminal prosecution.

Restitution was regarded as an appropriate reaction, especially for graffiti (55%), minor shoplifting (43%), and for forcibly snatching a handbag from a person (22%). A suspended sentence (probation) was deemed adequate for assault (50%), burglary (48%), stealing a car (46%), and forcibly snatching a handbag (46%). Students saw imprisonment as adequate for injuring a person with a knife or firearm (87%), or sexual offences (89%).

Comparing penal attitudes between freshmen and seniors in the longitudinal sample, we observed a tendency toward greater leniency for the seniors. First, the offences in which an increase in the proportion of respondents who did not see the necessity for a penal sanction at all were: fare evasion (23–34%), graffiti (13–17%), minor shoplifting (3–9%), and use of illicit drugs (30–51%). Second, the choice of restitution as a form of restorative justice as an appropriate sanction increased for all offences, with greater increase for burglary (24–32%), graffiti (58–63%), assault (19–32%), minor shoplifting (44–56%), forcibly snatching a handbag (35–40%), and car theft (8–21%) in t_2 .

To examine whether willingness to forgo punishment for certain actions increased over the course of the study, possible reactions were dichotomized (no punishment or restitution vs. fine and prison sentence with or without probation). McNemar tests revealed a significant tendency to waive punishment for fare evasion ($\chi^2(151) = 6.113, p = .013$), graffiti ($\chi^2(144) = 4.225, p = .04$), assault ($\chi^2(143) = 5.224, p = .022$), consumption of illicit drugs ($\chi^2(141) = 17.161, p < .001$), minor shoplifting ($\chi^2(149) = 12.569, p < .001$), and car theft ($\chi^2(143) = 9.818, p = .002$). Thus, the results showed a clear trend toward less severe punishment preferences over the course of their studies.

Therapy

The students had the opportunity to state whether therapy should be administered (in addition to punishment) to the perpetrator in the 13 offences described in the previous section. Students recommended therapy primarily for sexual, violent, and drug offences; for offenders who had forced a person to commit sexual acts, 75% of the respondents considered therapy to be useful. For assault (43%), drunk driving (42%), and illicit drug use (52%), the numbers were lower, but still remarkable. For the other offences investigated in this study, which were primarily property crimes (including theft, fare evasion, graffiti), a maximum of 8% of the respondents suggested therapy. Against the backdrop of these offences, which per se do not allow any conclusions to be drawn about the need for treatment, these approval ratings nevertheless appear to be interestingly high.

The preference for therapy increased over the course of the study for all offences, with the exception of fare evasion, graffiti, and squatting a vacant house.

The greatest increases were found for drunk driving (43–50%) and sexual offences (81–87%), though these were not statistically significant, with the exception for Internet fraud from 1 to 8%.⁵

Beliefs about the causes of crime

Studies have shown that beliefs about the causes of crime affect punitive attitudes (Chen and Einat, 2015; Hartnagel and Templeton, 2012). Thus, attitudes toward punishment can also be altered when students discover the role of society in the emergence of crime during their studies. Therefore, students were asked to rate six statements about the causes of delinquency on a four-point scale from 0 “does not apply” to 3 “fully applies.”

Figure 3 shows the agreement levels on specific causes. Students believed that crime was primarily caused by unsuccessful socialization, economic factors, and family deficits. In the course of their studies, this changed in only two aspects: societal exclusion processes were considered significantly ($t(152) = -4.100, p < .001$) more responsible for criminality, whereas unsuccessful socialization was considered less responsible ($t(154) = 2.751, p = .007$).

As argued above, knowledge of crime causation should reduce penal attitudes. To test this assumption, we compared students who chose criminal justice social

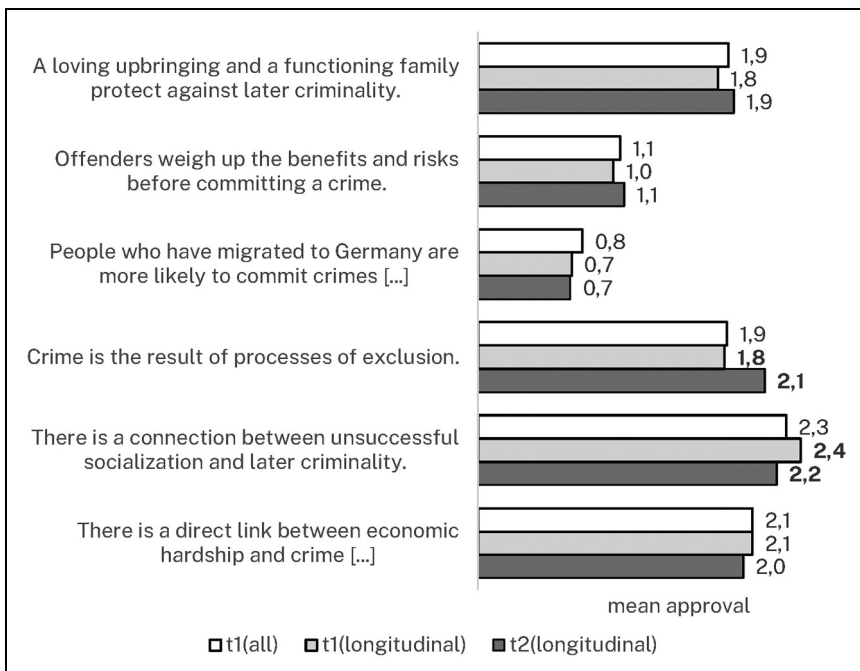


Figure 3. Beliefs about the causes of crime (significant differences between t_1 and t_2 are denoted in bold).

work as their major field of study with those with other majors. Therefore, the two groups differed in the intensity of their exposure to criminological content. Of the students who participated in both surveys, 23 had criminology as their major field of study, and 109 had a different major.

Analysis of variance was used to assess whether the intensity of crime-related content in social work education correlated with approval for certain penal purposes. As a dependent variable, we examined the approval of penal purposes (see above). This analysis revealed two significant interaction effects. The approval of compensation as a goal of sanctioning saw a greater increase in students with a criminological focus ($F(129) = 5.165, p = .025, \eta^2 = .039$). At t_1 , both groups had a similar mean approval of 1.22 (criminology major) and 1.27; at t_2 , the approval increased to 2.17 (criminology major) and 1.72. Thus, students who are exposed to more criminological content as part of their curriculum are less likely to be punitive toward the end of their studies.

Interestingly, students with a criminology major favoured incapacitation/security to a greater extent (2.26 vs. 1.84) at the beginning of their studies, but showed a sharper decline resulting in a lower agreement with the penal purpose incapacitation/security (1.52 vs. 1.70) compared to the group that had no criminological focus in their studies ($F(124) = 6.454, p = .012, \eta^2 = .049$). Here again students with a criminology major tend to get more lenient over the course of their studies.

Punitiveness in social work practice

Punitive attitudes found in casework with clients are of particular interest in the field of social work.

To address this aspect, a case vignette from a situation in a halfway house was presented to the participants in which an ex-offender convicted of rape repeatedly violated the ban on alcohol consumption.⁶ The participants were asked what they would do as social workers in such a situation. They could select one or multiple reactions from a set ranging from "letting things rest" to "administration of a nausea-inducing drug on alcohol consumption" (see Figure 4).

The most frequently selected option (freshmen sample) was clarification of norms (92%), followed by offering support to deal with alcohol abuse (sending the person to a counseling center, 86%). What is surprising about this high level of approval is that the description did not specifically state that the resident was an alcoholic. Moreover, measures related to sanctioning and control were also often considered as appropriate responses; increased control and confiscation of alcohol was the third most frequently chosen option (67%), followed by removing the desired activity and risk assessment. Only approximately one-quarter reconsidered the rules of the institution.

Over the course of the study, significant changes were observed in three items. More than two-thirds of the freshmen favoured regular room checks, compared to 52% of the seniors (McNemar: $\chi^2(143) = 8.820, p = .003$). At the end of their studies a relaxation of the ban on alcohol was regarded by 33% of the respondents as a viable option compared to 19% at the beginning (McNemar: $\chi^2(149) = 8.889, p = .003$). Also, the approval of sanctions (remove desired activity) decreased (McNemar: $\chi^2(148) = 5.311, p = .021$), indicating a decline in punitive attitudes.

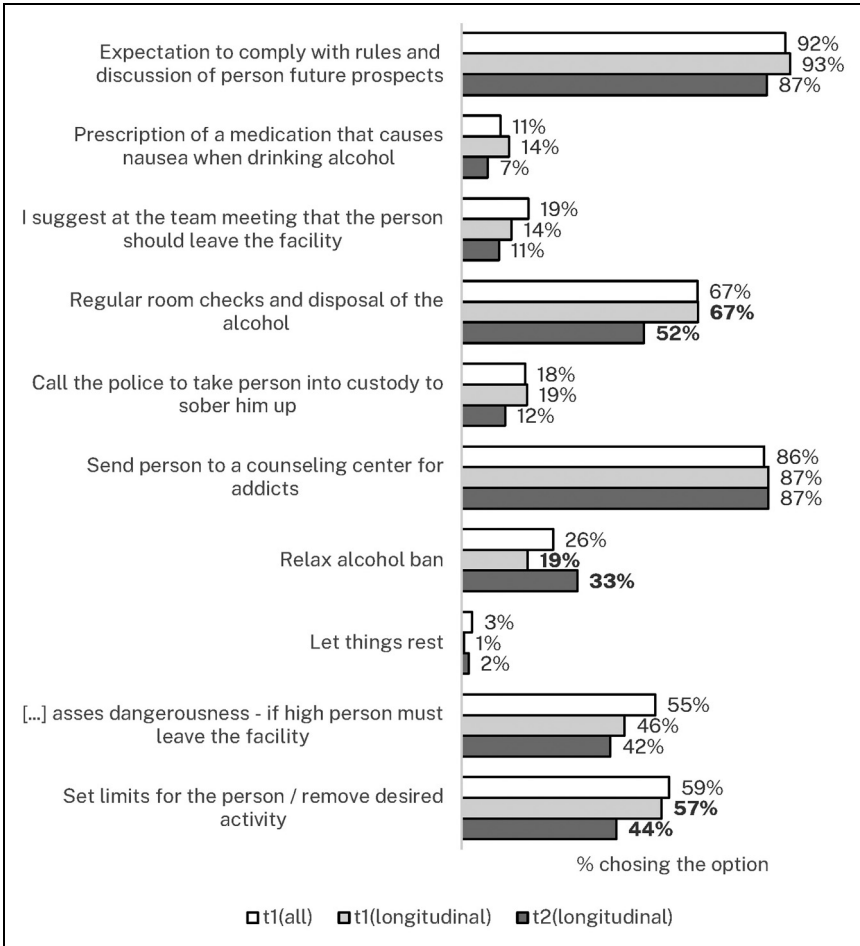


Figure 4. Approval of different reactions to rule breaking behaviour (significant differences between t_1 and t_2 are denoted in bold).

Discussion

Acquiring leniency and selective punitiveness

The significance of punitive attitudes, both in the general population and those professionally involved in criminal politics, is a subject of constant debate in criminology. The starting point is usually Garland’s (2001) thesis of the return of punitiveness after the departure from the welfare paradigm and the so-called “punitive turn” in the United States and later in Great Britain. In Germany, the academic debate about whether punitive attitudes among professionals in law and social services, including students of social work, refers to different indicators and, therefore, yield diverse results on whether and how a punitive turn has taken place (Busker, 2022).

Answering the question on the punitive turn in German society as a whole or in the field of social work is beyond the scope of this study. However, the cross-sectional results showed that social work students perceived resocialization as an important purpose of sanctioning. Together with the approval of the death penalty, this provides an ambivalent picture of whether students are punitive. Approval of the death penalty, even if only for certain extremely severe offences, could be an indicator of the punitiveness of this section of students. This finding is particularly remarkable in light of the finding that punitive attitudes are moderated by actual penal practices (Ostaszewski et al., 2024) and there have been no death penalties in Germany since 1948.

When confronted with the decision between therapy and incarceration, one-third of the students favoured the latter, even though it was less effective with respect to the recidivism rate. In addition, the approval of the death penalty (even if only under specific circumstances) by a third of the students highlighted the fact that some favoured harsh sanctions at the beginning of their studies.

Students were also confronted with the question that what kind of reaction by the state they consider appropriate for 13 different types of crimes, with the continuum ranging from "no penal sanction" to "imprisonment." Unsurprisingly, students favoured harsher sanctions for sexual and violent offences, whereas more than half of the respondents believed that the occupation of a vacant house does not require criminal prosecution.

During the course of their study, we observed a trend toward greater leniency. While the approval of deterrence and incapacitation as penal purposes decreased, the importance of victim-offender mediation and resocialization increased. Furthermore, during the course of their study, the proportions of respondents that significantly favoured no criminal prosecution or compensation instead of sanctions (fine, prison sentence with probation, or imprisonment) significantly increased for fare evasion, graffiti, assault, minor shoplifting, and car theft. However, as opposed to Kemme et al.'s study (2021), there were no indications of a "practice shock" (that induces higher punitiveness), despite the fact that for most students, their mandatory practical training phase would have taken place between t_1 and t_2 .

Further analyses showed that the tendency toward less punitiveness was stronger in students majoring in criminological content. This is possibly due to the fact that this group could have had more knowledge about the processes that lead to crime. Various authors have shown that beliefs about the causes of crime affect punitive attitudes (Chen and Einat, 2015; Hartnagel and Templeton, 2012).

One of the most interesting findings of this study was that senior students showed a more critical view of the social structures and processes of marginalization. Thus, a structural view seems to be developing in students that not only considers social conditions as the cause of delinquency but is also reflected in the fact that senior students in the case vignette frequently questioned the rules in the residential home. This could additionally reflect developments due to practical experience acquired through field placements regarding a closer view of what can be realistically implemented as well as concerning the effort for control work that is then missing for actual pedagogical work.

Even though our study shows a general decline in punitiveness among social work students, the finding that the demand for state-prescribed therapy is increasing must be critically reflected. For example, we were able to show that the demand for therapy was also being made for offences that do not appear to be related to a need for treatment (e.g. Internet fraud), which might be an indicator of an education-induced therapeuticization effect (cf. Kam, 2014).⁷ Owing to the relatively small sample size (especially in the case of those who advocated therapy for Internet fraud), more studies are required to reliably infer this effect. It would also be interesting to examine the extent to which the expressed need for therapy is a placeholder for delegating responsibility, in certain cases, to other professions.

Furthermore, the results demonstrated selective punitiveness. At the beginning of their studies, the students (cross-sectional sample) preferred harsher sanctions for environmental crimes, economic and fiscal offences, and assault. However, toward the end, they were more lenient toward assault, juvenile, and drug offences but wanted harsher sanctions for environmental crimes. Accordingly, the decline in punitiveness does not appear to be based on deontological grounds but depends on the context. One explanation for this could be that the typical perpetrators of these offences are usually not considered a target group of social work, and therefore, less knowledge about the background to these offences is acquired during studies. These findings could also be based on a political attitude that is acquired during studies and denounces inequalities and problematizes the crimes of the powerful (Frauley, 2018). These findings show that a context-dependent attitude seems to have developed during the study program. It is possible that students learn and think about the inadequacy of punishment only with respect to groups of offenders to whom they somehow build a basis of understanding while they perceive them as their future clients. However, it seems that the punitive attitudes are not abandoned but simply moved to another group of offenders who are now seen as "the other."

The advocacy for the death penalty by a small group of students could also be considered selective punitiveness in the sense that students seem to reserve extremely harsh punishments for a small group of offenders. Further research should address whether this implies perceiving a minor group of offenders as undeserving of rehabilitation. Following the study by Fenton (2021), further research on punitiveness should additionally focus on whom social workers, as gate keepers of the welfare state, perceive as "deserving" versus "undeserving." This is an important aspect, because a low level of retributory desires could otherwise be equated with neglect. Fenton's results raised the concern that social work students in Scotland had already internalized neo-liberal narratives; a survey of first-year students showed similar results for students in Denmark and England, for example, with respect to attaching help to conditions. However, this did not apply to students in Austria and Germany, whereas Spain was somewhere in the middle (Vogt et al., 2022).

Strengths and limitations

The aim of the present study was to closely examine penal attitudes of students of social work who are future professionals. The unique dataset, with the answers of

more than 2200 social work students from seven German universities, contained a large set of measures of penal attitudes that allowed us to draw a broad picture of the punitiveness of social work students at the beginning of their study. Furthermore, the answers of approximately 150 students interviewed at the beginning and end of the study provided insights into the possible effects of education on penal attitudes. Having said this, we are aware of certain limitations with respect to causality. For example, maturation effects during the course of the study that are independent of the content of the teaching may also be responsible for the observed differences. Selection effects may also partially explain some of these findings. For example, it can be assumed that students specializing in criminal justice and social work differ from other students in relevant aspects, indicating that the causal statements of training courses must be interpreted with caution. Given that the study is based on data from multiple German universities, a certain degree of generalizability can be assumed. Nevertheless, the longitudinal sample is modest in size. A notable strength of the study is the utilization of diverse measurement instruments to assess punitive attitudes, thereby ensuring the robustness of the findings and the ability to draw nuanced conclusions.

Finally, an important aspect of this study should be emphasized. This study identified a possible decline in punitive attitudes across multiple dimensions during the social work program. However, it must be noted that a group of students could be identified with clear punitive attitudes, such as advocating the death penalty or invasive medical interventions for a minor violation of rules in the halfway house, as described in the case vignette. These are findings that must especially raise awareness among educators as it can be assumed that punitive attitudes are associated with antidemocratic attitudes which are "in contradiction to humanistic educational ideals like maturity, autonomy, and participation" (Pangritz and Berhan, 2020: 12).

Selective implications for teaching and professional development

Concerning the pathologizing tendencies visible in the vignette and further therapy-favouring findings, which reflect the neoliberal logic of an activating welfare state (e.g. Anhorn and Balzereit, 2016), it is worth expanding the development and promotion of a critical view of social structures and processes of marginalization to social work education and training. This is due to the effect on leniency and problem solving in line with the Global Definition of Social Work (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014), which stresses facilitation of conflicts and "doing no harm" attitudes. Furthermore, it highlights the relevance of criminological theories, which substantiate knowledge about the extent and causes of crime and the effect of punishment, along with beliefs about the causes of crime.

This knowledge and its reflective analysis should be a core component of professional knowledge. The implementation of criminological theories in the study programs for social work students appears necessary because the confrontation with knowledge and practices had a substantial impact on orientations and attitudes.

Hence, it can be inferred that the relationship between analytical knowledge and practical action, that is, the dialogue between theory and practice, should be strengthened and expanded.

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Author contributions

Michael Hanslmaier was responsible for the statistical analysis of the data set. Christian Ghanem, Christine Graebisch, and Tilman Lutz contributed to contextualizing the study within the academic discourse on related subjects and discussion of results. Christine Graebisch and Tilman Lutz were also part of the research team who conducted the study. All authors drafted and revised the manuscript.

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Data availability statement

Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.


Declaration of generative AI

During the preparation of this work, the authors used DeepL translations and writing to assist with translations and refine the language for clarity and accuracy. After using these tools, the authors reviewed and edited the content as required and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

Ethical approval and informed consent statements


The study participants were informed about the goal of the study, voluntariness of participation, the option to withdraw from the study at any time, and the usage of data in an anonymous manner only.

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Notes

1. The coding consisted of a combination of the first letter of the mother's first name, her date of birth, and the first letter of her own place of birth. In total, 888 students participated in wave 2 of which 155 could be matched. The remaining either did not provide a code ($n=213$), provided a new code ($n=460$), or provided a wrong code or had inconsistencies regarding gender and age between t_1 and t_2 ($n=60$).
2. The length of one semester is 6 months.
3. In Germany, the term "resocialization" is generally used synonymously with the English term "(offender) rehabilitation." Even though some definitions of resocialization are largely reduced to behaviour and attitude correction, in the German context it can be understood as a combination of social integration and rehabilitation (Cornel, 2023).
4. Looking at the students who participated in both waves, we see small differences that indicate that this group may be slightly more punitive as those students who approve incapacitation and deterrence more but are less retributive and less into raising guilt.
5. Binomial test ($N=144/p=.022$).
6. "You work as a specialist in a residential group for ex-offenders. Your client has previously served a sentence for raping his ex-girlfriend. Alcohol is banned in the facility. Your client is found with a bottle of beer in his hand and reminded of the ban. Two days later, you find him very drunk with an almost empty bottle of vodka. A week later, he brings someone with him and the two of them drink a bottle of vodka together in the house. After each of these incidents, you had a conversation with the resident about the facility's house rules and cooperation agreement and explained the importance of the rule (...). In your opinion, just another conversation with him is no longer enough. What would you do?"
7. For a critical discussion of therapeutization in various fields of social work in Germany see Anhorn and Balzereit (2016).

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