

# Releasing prisoners during COVID-19: the impact of the support for the early release, perceived insecurity and political orientation on attitudes towards released prisoners in Portugal

Paula Cristina Lopes, Isabel Rocha Pinto, José Mendes Marques and Magdalena Bobowik

Paula Cristina Lopes, Isabel Rocha Pinto and José Mendes Marques are all based at the Social Psychology Laboratory, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Porto, Porto, Portugal. Magdalena Bobowik is based at the Department of Interdisciplinary Social Science | ERCOMER |, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands.

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to examine how prisoners' early release affects other citizens' perceived insecurity and their attitudes towards those released prisoners, and how citizens' political orientation influences these variables.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A total of 383 Portuguese participants were presented with a recommendation from the United Nations for the release of prisoners because of COVID-19 and then asked to fill in a questionnaire measuring their political orientation, support for the early release of prisoners, perceived insecurity regarding such measure and their attitudes towards the released prisoners.

**Findings** – Results showed that support for the release of prisoners during COVID-19 is associated with perceived insecurity and both, in turn, predicts inclusive attitudes regarding these prisoners, while only perceived insecurity is associated with an agreement with an intensification of social control measures. Right-wing participants were found to express the negative side. The more participants felt insecure, the more they believed released prisoners should not have the same rights as common citizens and the more they should be left out of the community.

**Research limitations/implications** – The major limitation of this study concerns the sample: the authors collected answers from Portuguese participants exclusively, most of which held a university degree.

**Practical implications** – At least two major implications can be drawn from this study's results. These implications deal with prisoners' entrance in what can be considered a cycle of exclusion and the promotion of their social reintegration once they are released from prison.

**Social implications** – The findings point out the necessity to firstly put an effort in deconstructing the insecurity perception that results from the prospective of having prisoners back into society – that is to understand why it happens and how it can be reduced – promoting efficacy in the inclusion of these prisoners and preventing the emergence of controlling or protective approaches directed to these individuals in their return to society by enhancing people's awareness that the social reintegration of ex-prisoners will benefit the whole community.

**Originality/value** – The authors present a different perspective of the impact that managing COVID-19 in prisons has on society.

**Keywords** Social inclusion, COVID-19, Released prisoners, Perceived insecurity, Compensatory social control, Social reintegration

**Paper type** Research paper

Portugal ranks among the countries with the highest overcrowding in prisons. Prisoner numbers exceed prison capacity by approximately 23% (122.7 prisoners/100,000 inhabitants; [Aebi and Tiago, 2020](#)), and 12,634 people were under custody in

Portuguese prisons before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The prison population includes a significant number of elderly people, many of which suffer from chronic (e.g. cancer, cardiovascular diseases and diabetes) or from infectious (e.g. HIV and hepatitis B and C) diseases. Mental health problems are also frequent in this population. There is a risk that the COVID-19 pandemic could exacerbate the existing situation ([European Prison Observatory, 2020](#)); those who are already deprived of their liberty thus run the risk of becoming an even more vulnerable group than they were before.

Prisoners' ability to take preventive action is clearly limited by the restrictions imposed upon them by the prison setting ([European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, CPT – Council of Europe, 2020](#)). Indeed, prisons are generally not adequately equipped or designed to deal with a pandemic. Prison routines usually occur in shared environments ([Hurley, 2020](#)) and overcrowding makes it difficult to arrange isolation areas for infected individuals ([Burki, 2020](#)). This state of affairs puts the prisoner population under high risk of contagion by COVID-19. Evidence collected worldwide indicates that approximately 550,000 prisoners have tested positive for COVID-19 in a sample drawn from 122 countries, and that in 47 of these countries, more than 3,900 prisoners have died from the disease ([Justice Project Pakistan, 2020](#)).<sup>[1]</sup> No official data about the number of prisoners or prison staff who tested positive for COVID-19 existed in Portugal as we conducted the present research ([European Prison Observatory, 2020](#)). However, more recent reports (22 November 2020) indicate that 351 prisoners developed an active infection, and 502 had recently been clinically discharged ([Malta, 2020](#)). New COVID-19 outbreaks in prisons have nevertheless, been reported since then.

In the new global health emergency setting early in February 2020, prior to the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Portugal, the Directorate-General for Reintegration and Prison Services (DGRSP)<sup>[2]</sup> set up a COVID-19 Contingency Plan. The plan included measures such as:

- keeping clinically vulnerable and infected prisoners isolated from the rest of the prison population;
- implementing a 14-day quarantine period for suspected cases of infection;
- providing information about how to prevent the infection, and;
- increasing prisoners' sensitivity to COVID-19 symptoms.

According to the Director of DGRSP, prisoners who tested positive for COVID-19 were generally asymptomatic, were isolated and clinically monitored. Education, professional training and work activities, as well as visits (except for lawyers), were suspended in prisons with COVID-19 outbreaks. Finally, the staff working in spaces devised for infected prisoners received the appropriate protective equipment, namely, FFP2 masks ([Mendes, 2020](#)).

The above measures notwithstanding, prison overcrowding and insufficient health services hampered adequate care for infected prisoners. Prisoner-supporting associations Associação Portuguesa de Apoio ao Recluso (APAR) argued that prison overcrowding and lack of human and material health resources would hinder the successful implementation of the contingency plan ([Ropio, 2020](#)). To prevent the potential emergence of a high-risk contagion environment which, in turn, would be an increased threat to society in general, world organizations, such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organization, urged governments to release prisoners during this pandemic ([Hurley, 2020](#)). In line with these organizations, and prior to the pandemic, the Council of Europe was recommending the release of prisoners, before completion of their sentences, as a means to facilitate their reintegration into society ([Padfield et al., 2010](#)). As of April 2020, several reports have shown that approximately 580,000 prisoners in at least 80 countries have been selected for early release. Of these, 128,000 are from 20 European countries. However, European countries felt short of fully implementing the prisoners' release plan, as only 5% of the

expected number of prisoners actually benefited, and a significant number of release orders were not fully implemented ([European Prison Observatory, 2020](#); [Human Rights Watch, 2020](#)).

Similar to other countries, (e.g. France, Germany, Spain and Italy), Portugal followed the UN recommendation to release a significant number of prisoners. Observing that a dignified state should leave no citizen behind, including their prison population, Portuguese Minister of Justice ([Van Dunem, 2020](#))[3] stated that an early release would help protect the most fragile prisoners and free enough prison space to carry out preventive measures, while ensuring public health order.

On 10 April 2020, by issuing Law No. 9/2020, the Portuguese Parliament legislated on several exceptional measures applying to prisoners (excluding those convicted for crimes such as homicide, robbery or crimes against sexual freedom and self-determination [4]). This law also included pardons for those with two years or less remaining on their prison sentence, those aged 65 or older and those suffering from physical or mental disabilities or whose degree of autonomy is incompatible with normal life in prison. In addition, prisoners could benefit from a 45-day renewable furlough and an anticipation of parole. Importantly, left-wing parties consensually supported these measures and right-wing parties consensually opposed them ([Rodrigues and Sapage, 2020](#)). Nevertheless, the measures prevailed, so that 1,945 prisoners were granted amnesty, 14 were given a presidential pardon and 906 benefited from renewable 45 day leave ([European Prison Observatory, 2020](#); [Henriques, 2021](#)). In brief, in this specific context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Portuguese prisoners could enjoy a temporary or a permanent premature release from prison under the premise of public health protection.

In this work, we explore citizens' (dis)agreement with the early release of prisoners, depending on the perceived insecurity associated with such release and on their political orientation. We also examine the association between perceived insecurity and citizens' defensive standing against early release of prisoners, materializing in terms of harsher attitudes towards released prisoners, stronger disagreement with inclusive measures and agreement with more strict social control over them. Indeed, there seems to be a general disagreement in civil society regarding the premature release of prisoners. According to [Dilulio \(1997\)](#), citizens tend to support policies that do not return criminals to the streets without regard for public safety.

### Concerns about the early release of prisoners during the COVID-19 pandemic and attitudes towards released prisoners

Clearly, the prospect that prisoners return to the community generates social distrust and resistance to institutional measures on the part of common citizens. As a case in point, a poll conducted in Portugal with a representative sample shows that more than half of the participants disagreed with the early release of prisoners ([Curvelo, 2020](#)).

The public seems to view prisoners' early release as a threat against normative values especially when it occurs along with a justice system that is perceived as too lenient ([Cunha, 2008](#); [Patto, 2008](#); [Boavida, 2018](#)). The public's negative attitudes towards released prisoners thus arise as part of a seemingly protective strategy ([Leverentz, 2011](#); [Manza et al., 2004](#); [Park, 2009](#); [Thurber, 1998](#)). As a result, social exclusion becomes a readily available path for released prisoners ([LeBel, 2012](#); [Smith, 2019](#); [Rade Desmarais and Burnette, 2018](#)).

In addition, the fear of crime heightens the attractiveness of harder crime control strategies ([Simon, 2007](#)). Indeed, fear and perceived insecurity lead people to demand for more social control ([Altheide, 2017](#)), and individuals increase their agreement with, and adoption of, intensive scrutiny of ex-prisoners, as they believe that social control mechanisms in the community are ineffective ([Campos et al., 2017](#); [Carlsmith and Darley, 2008](#); [Carlsmith et al., 2002](#); [Strelan and van Prooijen, 2013](#); [Pinto et al., 2016](#)). Interestingly, a poll

conducted in the USA showed that, irrespective of the type of offence, participants strongly preferred that prisoners be released prior to the end of their sentence, rather than being released without supervision at the end of their sentence, as long as they are subject to parole (Public Opinion Strategies & The Mellman Group, 2020).

### Role of perceived insecurity and political ideology

In line with the above ideas, we propose that the early release of prisoners during the COVID-19 pandemic should increase citizens' perceived insecurity, and that this will be reflected by their attitudes towards the released prisoners and beliefs about whether they may effectively be reintegrated into the community. This should prompt citizens to demand compensatory control strategies over these individuals, namely, by advocating the social exclusion of ex-prisoners, under the assumption that social control, and specifically social exclusion, will warrant public safety (Fischer and Poland, 1998).

The presence of released prisoners in the community generates *social alarm* in the community, i.e. strong disapproval, decreased tolerance towards prisoners, fear of recidivism (Griffiths *et al.*, 2007) and an amplification of perceived insecurity in daily life (Skogan, 1999). This, in turn, should promote adherence to more repressive action (Innes, 2003; Innes and Fielding, 2002). Indeed, regarding prisoners, it seems that the higher the number of offenders imprisoned, the safer people feel (Harmon, 2007). It follows that actors in the justice system should be aware of the discomfort/social alarm that early prisoners' release may generate in the community (Boavida, 2018).

We also propose that citizens' beliefs and attitudes associated with the early release of prisoners should be associated with their political orientations. In this vein, more conservative citizens should express more negative beliefs and attitudes towards ex-prisoners as compared to those who hold a more progressive orientation (Rade Desmarais and Mitchell, 2016; Unnever *et al.*, 2007).

### Present study: overview and hypotheses

With the present study, we test the relationship between Portuguese citizens' political orientation, support for government authorized early release of prisoners, perceived insecurity associated with this measure, attitudes regarding the reintegration of prisoners and agreement with the implementation of compensatory social control strategies. Our study tested two general hypotheses. Firstly, we expected that the farther right the participants' political orientation, the more they would:

- disagree with the early release of prisoners;
- feel insecure regarding this measure;
- disagree with the social inclusion of prisoners (e.g. that prisoners should have equal rights and be full members of the community); and
- support compensatory social control measures (e.g. law enforcement or community surveillance) in respect of released prisoners.

Secondly, we predicted that participants' political orientation would affect perceived insecurity, which in turn would affect participants' demands for social control. In other words, participants' perceived insecurity should mediate between participants' political orientation and their support for compensatory social control action. Concretely, the more politically right-wing people are, the more insecure they will feel about the early release of prisoners, and it is this feeling of insecurity that leads them to call for the enactment of social control processes in the community.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 254 female and 128 male ( $N = 383$ ) [5] Portuguese citizens, aged between 18 and 68 years ( $M = 34.13$ , standard deviation [ $SD$ ] = 10.59). All were currently living in Portugal. Most participants were employed (72.8%), and the remaining were students (16.2%), unemployed (9.1%) or retired (1.8%). The majority (74.2%) had a higher education, 8.9% were college students and the remaining participants had high-school (13.3%) or basic-level education (3.6%). This sample size warrants sufficient power for analyses, with a minimum of  $1-\beta = 0.95$ , a small sample size (0.15) and four factors for each model analysis (see Dependent Measures).

### *Procedure*

Participants anonymously filled in a survey about “COVID-19 and measures regarding the Prison System” via Facebook adverts (which were randomly delivered to Portuguese nationals above 18 years old) or researchers’ acquaintances. The data were collected on April 2020, after the Portuguese Government announced their agreement with the UN recommendation for the early release and before the effective release of prisoners in Portugal. The data were recorded in an SPSS database, which was only accessed by the present researchers. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and no sensitive data was collected. Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of University of Porto. Participation was fully voluntary and not monetarily compensated.

### *Stimulus excerpt*

Participants were presented with an excerpt published by a Portuguese news TV channel (TVI24) about the prison system during the COVID-19 pandemic. The excerpt read as follows: “[The] High Commissioner of the United Nations (UN) for Human Rights has asked the Portuguese Government, as well as those of other EU countries, to release the most vulnerable prisoners from prisons”. This aimed to ensure that all participants were familiar with the early release of prisoners’ measure, and that they held accurate information about it. In the excerpt, the UN High Commissioner asked authorities of all countries to quickly reduce the number of imprisoned people. This could be done, for example, by releasing the “elderly and sick, as well as low-risk prisoners” as a means to ease tensions in overcrowded prisons. In a televised interview, the President of the National Union of the Prison Guard Corps (SNCGP), admitted that this could apply to prisoners “who are at a final stage of the sentence”. In another interview, the head of the DGRSP recognized that “the adoption of this measure could protect, not only the prisoners themselves, but also the community as a whole” by preventing large-scale contagion.

### *Dependent measures*

Participants then responded to a series of questions on seven-point scales. These questions targeted their political orientation, support for early release of prisoners, perceived insecurity because of the release of prisoners and attitudes towards released prisoners (Table 1).

### *Data analysis strategy*

We tested two sequential mediation models using PROCESS 3.3 version, Model 6, with 5,000 bootstrap samples (Hayes, 2018). Both models took political orientation as the predictor variable, support for early release as the first mediator, perceived insecurity as the second mediator and inclusive attitudes (model 1) and compensatory social control (model 2) as outcome variables.

**Table 1** Means, SDs, factor loadings and scales' reliability scores (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) of questionnaire items

(a) <u>Political orientation</u> ("How do you position yourself in terms of your political orientation?") (1 = extreme left wing; 7 = extreme right wing)	<i>M(SD)</i>	
	3.75 (1.02)	
(b) <u>Support for early release</u> ("In your opinion, adopting this recommendation for the early release of prisoners due to COVID19 pandemic is...") (1 = inadequate, 7 = adequate)	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>F</i>
(1 = reckless; 7 = prudent)	4.09 (1.98)	0.93
(1 = unfair; 7 = fair)	3.97 (1.88)	0.92
(1 = not promoting public health; 7 = promoting public health)	3.62 (1.76)	0.87
(1 = not protecting the community; 7 = protecting the community)	4.63 (1.89)	0.86
(1 = exaggerated; 7 = not at all exaggerated)	3.89 (1.82)	0.85
	4.14 (1.68)	0.76
(c) <u>Perceived insecurity</u>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>F% <math>\lambda = 59.25</math></i>
"Prisoners' release, due to COVID-19 represents a risk for public safety (1 = I strongly disagree; 7 = I strongly agree)	4.72 (1.55)	$\alpha = 0.76$
"How does prisoners' early release make you feel?" (1 = not at all insecure; 7 = very insecure)	4.52 (1.57)	84
"Once released, the risk that these prisoners commit crimes again is..." (1 = very low; 7 = very high)	4.90 (1.37)	82
"Prisoners' early release due..." (1 = does not provoke an insecurity feeling; 7 = provokes an insecurity feeling)	4.72 (1.74)	80
<u>Attitudes towards released prisoners</u>		0.59
(d) <u>Inclusive attitudes</u>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>F% <math>\lambda = 34.01</math></i>
"I would feel comfortable if a released prisoner went to live in my area of residence" area" (1 = I strongly disagree; 7 = I strongly agree)	3.53 (1.73)	$\alpha = 0.79$
"I would feel comfortable if one of these released prisoners was admitted by my employer" (1 = I strongly disagree; 7 = I strongly agree)	3.99 (1.78)	0.77
"Released prisoners should be entitled to the same social benefits as other citizens" (1 = I strongly disagree; 7 = I strongly agree)	4.98 (2.01)	0.77
"Released prisoners should be entitled to the same health care as other citizens" (1 = I strongly disagree; 7 = I strongly agree)	6.39 (1.34)	0.76
(e) <u>Compensatory social control</u> ("In your opinion...")	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>F% <math>\lambda = 25.78</math></i>
"Released prisoners should remain in their residence and be monitored with electronic tagging (house arrest)" (1 = I strongly disagree; 7 = I strongly agree)	6.06 (1.41)	$\alpha = 0.68$
"Released prisoners should do community work (cleaning, replacement of essential goods, manufacture of protective materials, etc.)" (1 = I strongly disagree; 7 = I strongly agree)	4.87 (1.94)	0.80
"The community should demand stronger control by the police in released prisoners' residence areas" (1 = I strongly disagree; 7 = I strongly agree)	4.83 (1.81)	0.71
"The community should be able to decide about the reintegration of released prisoners" (1 = I strongly disagree; 7 = I strongly agree)	3.94 (1.96)	0.60
		0.47

## Results

### Data reduction

Table 1 summarizes the results of principal components factor analyses (PCA) conducted on items measuring support for early release of prisoners, perceived insecurity associated with prisoners' release and attitudes towards released prisoners.

The analysis of support for early release items yielded one factor (75.10% of the total variance). We averaged these items to a support for early release index [Cronbach's alpha = 0.93;  $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ; Table 1(b)]. A separate PCA conducted on the items pertaining to perceived insecurity also yielded one factor (59.26% of the total variance). We averaged these items to a perceived insecurity index [Cronbach's alpha = 0.76;  $M = 4.61$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ; Table 1(c)]. Finally, a third PCA computed on the eight items measuring attitudes towards ex-prisoners yielded two factors [34.01% and 25.78% of the variance, respectively; Table 1(d) and 1(e)]. We averaged the items with higher loadings in the first factor to an

inclusive attitudes (Cronbach's alpha = 0.79;  $M = 4.71$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ), and those with higher loadings on the second factor to a compensatory social control (Cronbach's alpha = 0.68;  $M = 4.93$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ) indexes.

### Correlation analysis

We ran two serial models based on the assumption that a right-wing political orientation would lead participants to disagree with the early release measure and to believe that such a measure triggers insecurity in the community. As a result, the more politically right-wing participants are, the less inclusive attitudes they should hold, and the more they should agree with compensatory social control measures directed at ex-prisoners.

As shown in Table 2, all correlations between the variables in our study were significant. Particularly strong were the correlations between support for early release and perceived insecurity ( $r = -0.752$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Not surprisingly, the more participants felt insecure regarding the early release of prisoners, the less they supported early release. Perceived insecurity and inclusive attitudes were also negatively correlated ( $r = -0.582$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The higher the participants' perceived insecurity the less inclusive they are as shown by their agreement with the early release of prisoners, and the more they advocated for the adoption of compensatory social control measures ( $r = 0.491$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Consistent with this result, inclusive attitudes and support for early release were positively correlated ( $r = 0.541$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), such that the less inclusive were participants' attitudes, the less they supported prisoners' early release. Also, the correlation between inclusive attitudes and compensatory social control ( $r = -0.441$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and that between support for early release and compensatory social control ( $r = -0.312$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) indicate that the less inclusive participants were and the less they supported early release, the more they advocated for the adoption of compensatory social control measures.

The correlations between political orientation and the remaining variables were generally weaker than the abovementioned, but they were still significant. Political orientation correlated positively with perceived insecurity ( $r = 0.155$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and compensatory social control ( $r = 0.182$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and negatively with support for early release ( $r = -0.119$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and inclusive attitudes ( $r = -0.224$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The more politically right-wing oriented participants were, the less they supported prisoners' early release, the more insecure they felt regarding that release, the less inclusive were their attitudes towards released prisoners and the more they advocated compensatory social control. In the whole, this correlation pattern is consistent with our predictions. We therefore proceeded to test our predicted models.

### Mediation models

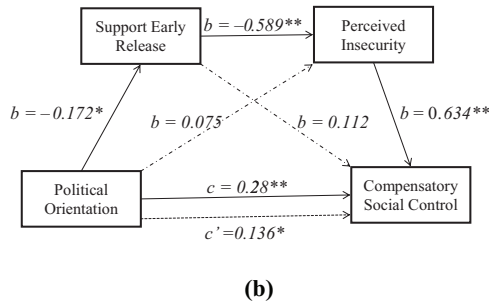
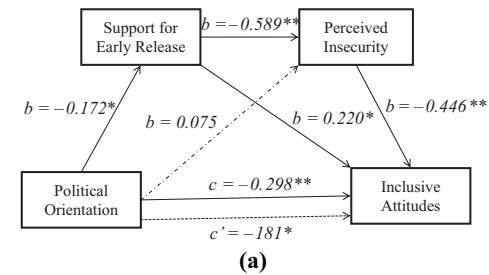
*Model 1: inclusive attitudes.* We examined the mediation of support for early release (first mediator) and perceived insecurity (second mediator) between political orientation and inclusive attitudes [Figure 1(a)]. Political orientation, support for early release and perceived insecurity significantly explain 38.3% of the variability of inclusive attitudes ( $F_{3,377} = 78.15$ ,

**Table 2** Pearson's product moment correlations between dependent measures

	Political orientation	Support for prisoners' release	Perceived insecurity	Inclusive attitudes	Compensatory social control
1. Political orientation	1	-0.119	0.155**	-0.224***	0.182***
2. Support for prisoners' release	-	1	-0.752***	0.541***	-0.312***
3. Perceived insecurity	-	-	1	-0.582***	0.491***
4. Inclusive attitudes	-	-	-	1	-0.441***
5. Compensatory social control	-	-	-	-	1

Notes: \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

**Figure 1** Serial multiple mediations



**Notes:** Effects of political orientation, support for early release and perceived insecurity on (a) inclusive attitudes and (b) compensatory social control. Non-standardized beta values. Political orientation scores range from left-wing (= 1) to right-wing (= 7). \* $p < 0.05$  and \*\* $p < 0.001$

$p < 0.001$ ). Political orientation was negatively associated with inclusive attitudes (total effect:  $c = -0.298$ , Standard Error (SE) = 0.067,  $t = -4.47$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that the more politically right-wing oriented participants were, the less supportive they were ( $b = -0.172$ , SE = 0.074,  $t = -2.34$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ) and the more insecure they felt about the early release of prisoners ( $b = 0.075$ , SE = 0.039,  $t = 1.95$ ,  $p = 0.052$ ).

In addition, support for early release was negatively associated with perceived insecurity ( $b = -0.589$ , SE = 0.027,  $t = -22.11$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Support for early release and perceived insecurity were also significantly related to inclusive attitudes (respectively,  $b = 0.220$ , SE = 0.057,  $t = 3.88$ ,  $p < 0.001$  and  $b = -0.446$ , SE = 0.072,  $t = -6.16$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Finally, when we entered the two mediators into the regression equation, the direct effect of political orientation on inclusive attitudes remained significant ( $c' = -0.181$ , SE = 0.054,  $t = -3.33$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ).

Overall, we observed a serial multiple mediation occurred (indirect effect of the serial model:  $b = 0.045$  [0.023], 95% confidence interval [CI] [-0.093; -0.003]), such that participants' support for the early release of prisoners and perceived insecurity mediated the relation between their political orientation and their attitudes towards social inclusion. Concretely, the more participants leaned to the right-wing political spectrum, the less they agreed with the release measure, the more insecure they felt about that measure and the less they agreed with the social inclusion of released prisoners.

*Model 2: compensatory social control.* We checked for the mediation of support for early release (first mediator) and perceived insecurity (second mediator) between political orientation and compensatory social control [Figure 1(b)]. Political orientation, support for early release and



perceived insecurity significantly account for 26.5% of the variability found in compensatory social control ( $F_{3,377} = 45.27, p < 0.001$ ). A significant direct association emerged between political orientation and compensatory social control (total effect:  $c = 0.228, SE = 0.063, t = 3.61, p < 0.001$ ). In addition, political orientation was associated with support for early release and with perceived insecurity (respectively,  $b = -0.172, SE = 0.074, t = -2.34, p = 0.002$  and  $b = 0.075, SE = 0.039, t = 1.95, p = 0.052$ ). Support for early release was also negatively associated with perceived insecurity ( $b = -0.589, SE = 0.027, t = -22.11, p < 0.01$ ). However, in partial support of our prediction, support for early release was only marginally associated with compensatory social control ( $b = 0.112, SE = 0.058, t = 1.91, p = 0.056$ ), although a clear association emerged between perceived insecurity and compensatory social control ( $b = -0.634, SE = 0.074, t = 8.52, p < 0.001$ ). When we entered the two mediators into the regression equation, the direct effect of political orientation on compensatory social control remained significant ( $c' = 0.136, SE = 0.056, t = 2.42, p = 0.016$ ).

In brief, we observed a serial-multiple mediation (indirect effect of the serial model:  $b = 0.064 [0.032], 95\% CI [0.004; 0.129]$ ). Perceived insecurity mediated the association between political orientation and compensatory social control, such that the more politically right-wing oriented participants were, the more insecure they felt about prisoners' release and the more they agreed with the adoption of compensatory social control strategies.

## General discussion and conclusions

In this study, we examined the association between citizens' political orientation, support for the early release of prisoners and perceived insecurity. We also examined whether and how participants' political orientation affects participants' agreement or disagreement with the social inclusion of those prisoners in the community. Our results are in line with previous research about the role of political orientation on attitudes towards ex-offenders (Buen *et al.*, 2019; Rade *et al.*, 2016). Indeed, we found that individuals' increased perceived insecurity associated with the early release of prisoners during the COVID-19 pandemic ensues from these individuals' right-wing political orientation, and that such insecurity triggers individuals' disagreement with the social inclusion of released prisoners and support for the implementation of compensatory measures of social control in the community.

These findings are consistent with the idea that perceived insecurity reinforces citizens' strategic allegiance to hard-line crime control strategies (Simon, 2007), and shed light on the social-psychological processes that take place when prisoners' re-enter the community. Indeed, perceived insecurity appears to account, at least in part, for the rejection of social inclusion programmes by some (right-wing) sectors of public opinion. These sectors also demand the implementation of compensatory control measures by institutions, including reinforcement of police surveillance, as well as more informal actions, such as community vigilance.

We also found that the more insecure participants felt about the presence of released prisoners, the less they agreed with an equality of rights between released prisoners and the other citizens (e.g. health and social security; Clear, 2007). Perceived insecurity thus seems to mediate between people's political attitudes and their positions regarding the way criminals should be treated (Innes and Fielding, 2002), explaining, at least in part, how the fear of crime damages social cohesion in the community (Hummelsheim-Doss *et al.*, 2011).

Our findings allow us to speculate that the early release of prisoners may induce perceptions of ineffective social control mainly in politically right-wing individuals, and that this leads these individuals to claim for compensatory action from institutions (Carlsmith and Darley, 2008; Carlsmith *et al.*, 2002; Strelan and van Prooijen, 2013; Abrams *et al.*, 2005). Specifically, we may assume that politically right-wing participants in our study equated early prisoners' release with social control ineffectiveness. As a result, we may wonder whether, to these participants, the early release of prisoners during the COVID-19 pandemic represented evidence of a failing justice system (Cunha, 2008; Patto, 2008;

Boavida, 2018), justifying, in their eyes, a demand for compensatory social control and opposition to the social inclusion of released prisoners.

Finally, our findings are consistent with research suggesting that a heightened concern about the possibility of being at “risk” motivates individuals to focus on risk estimations and to deploy strategies aimed to avoid perceived significant risks. In this case, individuals engage in exclusive behaviour towards released prisoners (Beck *et al.*, 1994), including requests for compensatory control measures, because of their belief that released prisoners are a threat to their security.

## Implications of our results

We may draw at least two major implications from our results. These implications deal with prisoners’ entrance into what can be considered a cycle of exclusion and the promotion of their social reintegration once they are released from prison.

### *Exclusion cycle*

There is consensus about the fact that the attitudes of the general public towards released prisoners have a significant impact on the success of their social integration (Amaro, 2019; Hirschfield and Piquero, 2010; Patto, 2008). However, despite the authorities’ warranty that early release is granted to low-risk detainees exclusively, such warranty does not seem to prevent public perceptions of insecurity and demands for compensatory control strategies. This raises the question of how society deals with the general perspective of prisoners being released. Indeed, it appears that for the “person-in-the-street”, no matter what officials may assert, released prisoners will sooner or later engage in crime again (Sarbin, 1979; Travis, 2000), that having served time in prison is the epitome of a dangerous individual, and that keeping such individuals incarcerated is the most effective way to reduce crime (Gaynes, 2005). This can be an important reason why, in spite of the tolerant position of the Council of Europe (cf. Introduction) and, perhaps, not surprisingly, released prisoners face difficulties in regaining a regular life and suffer from social exclusion (DeLamater, 1968; Gaynes, 2005; Goffman, 1963; Kirk and Sampson, 2013; La Vigne *et al.*, 2005; LeBel, 2012; Ornell *et al.*, 2020; Padfield *et al.*, 2010; Smith, 2019; Travis, 2000). These difficulties become even more acute because of the fact that many prisoners are drawn from low social strata, have undergone social exclusion before entering the justice system, come from problematic families, are educationally disadvantaged and/or have poor access to health services and weak prospects in the labour market (Rabuy and Kopf, 2015; Social Exclusion Unit, 2002; Wakefield and Uggem, 2010; Western and Pettit, 2010). Adding to these problems is the fact that serving time is associated with lower wages, poor job conditions and unemployment (Western and Pettit, 2010), which often results in recidivism and re-incarceration (Chiricos *et al.*, 2007), a predicament that can be dramatically accentuated by the adverse economic and social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Amaro, 2019; Hirschfield and Piquero, 2010; Patto, 2008). Thus, there seems to be a downward spiral, whereby society progressively encloses targeted individuals inside a web of social exclusion (Goffman, 1963; Chapman, 1968).

### *Promoting the social reintegration of ex-prisoners*

Our findings are in line with the idea that it is important to try and debunk stereotyped and preconceived ideas about ex-prisoners, and the belief that releasing them into the community has negative consequences for other citizens. For instance, increasing citizens’ awareness of the fact that the recidivism rate among released prisoners – during COVID-19 – is low (Henriques, 2021; Morais, 2020), could minimize their perceived insecurity. Support for social inclusion might increase, if authorities succeed in lowering such perceptions, hence contributing to a decrease in public demand for compensatory control strategies. Interestingly, promotion of government programs aimed to assist ex-offenders to rebuild their lives instead

of a focus on punitive surveillance and catching violations (Phelps, 2019), might create conditions for released prisoners to demonstrate their ability and willingness to reintegrate themselves (Cherney, 2021). To fight the spiral cycle of exclusion, governments may need to work on strategies aimed at restraining feelings of insecurity associated with the presence of ex-prisoners and to prevent the emergence of intense (and abusive) control attitudes directed at ex-prisoners. Future research about the processes involved in changing the public's perceptions of and beliefs about prisoners' coming back to the community should give particular attention to strategies aimed at diluting existing stereotypes, by demonstrating the benefits (as well as the liabilities) of the early release of prisoners during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research could be embedded into large-scale interventions focussing on the inclusion of this particular social group, while preventing former prisoners from being continuously hampered by social exclusion. Of course, effective social reintegration for ex-prisoners may demand a high contribution from governments and, as Rabuy and Kopf (2015) state, reversing the decades-old policies that make it more difficult for people with criminal records to succeed may require much political courage.

### Limitations of the present study and future directions for research

To conclude, we should address one recognizable limitation of the present study. First, we collected answers from Portuguese participants exclusively, many of which hold a university degree. We believe that these problems do not prevent the extension of our results to other countries and other categories of the population. However, future research should account for the heterogeneity of the populations under scrutiny, e.g. by using statistically representative samples, or stratified samples according to political orientation. This issue notwithstanding, it appears that the sense of insecurity reported by the general public and its causes, as well as their relation with people's political orientations, should be thoroughly investigated as major determinants of the success or failure of efforts at socially reintegrating ex-prisoners and as fuelling elements of communities' self-protection efforts which, paradoxically, may drive them either to increased social cohesion or to internal tensions and divisions.

### Notes

1. Last update: 20 April 2021.
2. Direção Geral de Reinserção e Serviços Prisionais.
3. Portuguese Minister of Justice: Francisca Van Dunem.
4. Exceptions: homicides; sexual abuse of minors; drug dealing; and domestic violence. Other exceptions: crimes against personal liberty, sexual liberty and sexual self-determination and cultural identity and personal integrity; crimes committed as a member of the police and security forces, of the armed forces or prison officials and guards, a holder of political office or high public office and judicial magistrate or prosecutor; violence after subtraction; intentional fire deflagration of fire when intentionally committed; criminal association; money laundering; corruption crimes; and crimes of offence to physical integrity.
5. 1 participant chose the "prefer not to answer" option.

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## Corresponding author

Paula Cristina Lopes can be contacted at: [paulaclopes19@gmail.com](mailto:paulaclopes19@gmail.com)

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