THE POST-TRUTH MYTH AND THE CRISIS OF CREDIBILITY

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In his compelling recent essay, Chris Sullivan discusses what he perceives as criminology's current evidence problem: the failure of criminological evidence to effectively inform public debate and policy in what he aptly calls a "fractious society" and "shaky information ecosystem". Sullivan describes the source of the problem as evidence misuse: the distortion or rejection of criminological evidence by policymakers and the public, which undermines our ability to effectively influence policy or practice. He argues that politicians and publics are increasingly making claims about crime detached from empirical evidence, relying instead on sensationalized stories, politics, or fear. In addition to outlining challenges, Sullivan offers constructive suggestions for adapting our communication strategies "to effectively inject evidence into democratic debates about crime and justice," including taking a "'principled argument' stance" and "being humble without surrendering expertise".

In this response, I aim to build on Sullivan's thoughtful discussion by elaborating and contextualizing some of his arguments and the broader narrative in which they are embedded. To wit, this is a "yes, but also" response.[1] I submit that what he calls an evidence problem is more accurately labeled an influence problem, and it is not merely about evidence misuse but about declining credibility, a deeper condition that precedes and shapes it.

Although Sullivan gestures at new challenges in evidence production (data quality, analytic rigor), the causes of the problem are depicted as largely external to the discipline or the academy: a "post-truth" society characterized by media and political distortion, confirmation bias, ideological polarization, and declining receptivity to expertise and scientific evidence. While I agree that these are problems—we are experiencing a decline in the authority of scientific evidence and expertise, I contend that the causes are not simply "post-truth" politics or public indifference to evidence but are also self-inflicted. Our influence problem is primarily a credibility problem, which the 'post-truth' narrative obscures.

The Post-Truth Myth

Much has been made of society's supposed crisis in a "post-truth" era, where expertise and evidence are said to have lost their influence, and scientific authority is being "attacked" by ideology and disinformation (McIntyre, 2018; Nichols, 2017). The term "post-truth," Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year in 2016, was characterized by McIntyre in his eponymous book as involving the "obfuscation of facts, abandonment of evidential standards in reasoning, and outright lying" (p.1). Although a catchy shorthand (and it may feel accurate at times), we are not in a "post-truth society" or a "post-truth criminology". We are in a highly politicized, fragmented information environment where evidence competes with ideology—just as it always has, albeit at a higher tempo with social media amplification.

To be sure, Sullivan himself uses the term cautiously, attributing it to others and acknowledging that "the relationship between science and politics has long had its tensions". My concern is the broader narrative implied by the label and approach to the problem. The "post-truth" label is a mischaracterization of our present condition, which obscures more than it explains and impedes our ability to respond to the deeper challenge facing us: declining credibility.

Defining our current era as "post-truth" necessarily implies a break from (and nostalgia for) a prior "Truth era". When, exactly, was this "Truth era"? Was it the 1990s, when the "superpredator" panic fueled punitive policy? The 1980s war on drugs? The 1960s "law and order" era? The 2000s Patriot Act and war on terrorism? The reality is there was no golden age of Truth (or influence) when criminological research guided policy unimpeded by ideology, sensationalized events, or political expedience, as Sullivan also recognizes.[2] For its part, the field of criminology has always operated in contested terrain, where evidence competes with political pressures and anecdotes drown out data. Thus, although the quantity and channels of information have changed, the problem remains that evidence competes with ideology as it always has, now amplified by new technologies and political dynamics. What we misleadingly call "post-truth" names both the waning influence of experts as established truth-tellers and the growing public visibility of the uncertainty and contestation that have always characterized knowledge production.

Even more concerning than its ahistoricity is the way the "post-truth" label functions not merely as a structural description but as a moral narrative, and one that casts scholar-experts as the guardians of Truth, and the public, particularly the political right, as irrational, ignorant, or deceitful opponents. The label thus reproduces both an epistemic hierarchy and a familiar "us-versus-them" moral frame. Even McIntyre acknowledges that the term is "irreducibly normative … an expression of concern by those who care about the concept of truth and feel that it is under attack" (p. 5). In this narrative, virtue and rationality are aligned with the academic or progressive left, while ignorance and deceit are assigned to the conservative right. Indeed, we can see this in Sullivan's essay as he illustrates the evidence problem exclusively through examples of right-wing misinformation, whereas popular accounts such as McIntyre's *Post-Truth* and Nichols's *The Death of Expertise* are explicit in their diagnosis of the problem as primarily on the right. In this way, "post-truth" often functions less as neutral diagnosis than a moral judgment.

Although the moral clarity of this "post-truth" story--with its neat division between enlightened experts and irrational, ideological publics--is appealing, it is misguided. As a wealth of research has demonstrated, selective reasoning and motivated cognition are not the province of any one ideology. Instead, they are universal features of human psychology (Clark et al., 2019; Haidt, 2012; Stanovich, 2021). What distinguishes the academy is not immunity from these biases but institutionalized mechanisms for detecting and correcting them: methodological rigor, peer review, and norms of transparency and critique. However, those mechanisms depend on a diversity of perspectives to function properly (e.g., Duarte et al., 2015). And much of social science lacks this necessary heterogeneity in perspectives. Instead, the social sciences are increasingly ideological homogeneous (specifically, adhering to a Left-liberal ideology) and this ideological homogeneity has produced (left-leaning) epistemic distortions (e.g., Burt, forthcoming; Duarte et al., 2015; Smith, 2014; Wright & DeLisi, 2015). The public has noticed, and our credibility has suffered as a result.

The Credibility Crisis

The post-truth narrative situates the source of the problem as being the (especially right-leaning) public: people have changed for the worse, becoming more polarized, emotional, and suspicious of experts. Although true, this is only part of the story. The academy has changed too. Over time, universities, especially in the social sciences and humanities, have become more ideologically uniform and more confident in the moral rightness of their views (Magness & Waugh, 2022; Wright & DeLisi, 2015). Perceptually, this has widened the gap between scholars and a segment of the public who do not share these political-ideological views. Thus, although the information environment has grown more partisan, so too has the culture of expertise.

This is not just a perceptual problem, but a substantive problem as well. In criminology, as in the social sciences more broadly, our overwhelmingly Left-liberal commitments shape the questions we ask, their framing, the methods we apply, and our interpretations of the findings. These shared assumptions can narrow our interpretive range, dull sensitivity to inconvenient evidence, and foster skepticism that tracks ideological valence more than scientific rigor (Burt, forthcoming; Clark & Winegard, 2020; Honeycutt & Jussim, 2020; Iceland & Silver, 2024; LaFree, 2025; Wright & DeLisi, 2015). In some cases, scholars have explicitly substituted activist for scientific logics, where theoretical and methodological rigor can take a back seat to activist aims and ideological alliances (Pratt et al., 2025; Rubin, 2025).

The result is a credibility problem, which is rooted in substance and amplified by perception. As our political and moral commitments have become more visible, the boundary between scientist and advocate has blurred. Among many right-leaning publics, social scientists now represent not neutral arbiters of evidence but participants in a progressive moral project (Smith, 2014). This blurring of epistemic and moral authority lies at the heart of the credibility challenge: it reinforces the perception (grounded in some truth) that what we call "truth" is profoundly influenced by our shared moral and political commitments.

Like the publics we criticize, we also selectively scrutinize ideologically inconvenient facts and amplify congenial ones. For example, when evidence runs against the Left-liberal ideological grain of the academy—as when Fryer's (2019) research found after accounting for contextual and situational differences, "no evidence of racial discrimination in officer-involved shootings"—we tend to respond with especially intense scrutiny (even to dismiss such findings as flawed, biased, or "anti-truth") (see also, Cesario et al., 2019). Such unorthodox work is typically subject to inordinate scrutiny and critique, which painstakingly outline limitations of data, uncertain assumptions, overstated conclusions, and alternative explanations (Honeycutt & Jussim, 2020; Savolainen, 2024). To be sure, the issue is not the high scrutiny itself (indeed, rigorous examination strengthens our science), the problem is its ideological asymmetry. When theory or findings are ideologically congenial the scrutiny is generally (or relatively) lax (e.g., Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Duarte et al., 2015; Rubin, 2025; Savolainen, 2024; Smith, 2014; Wright & DeLisi, 2015).

We can see this as well with our public engagement. When tragic but statistically rare events occur, our responses often reveal how ideology structures our evidentiary reasoning. We contextualize some events (usually those discordant with progressive priors) as anomalies, while others are taken as emblematic of systemic truths. We condemn public outcry to some tragic anecdotes as distortions (e.g., Laken Riley's killing) while elevating others as representative proof of systemic problems (e.g., George Floyd's killing),[3] while cases such as Tony Timpa's eerily similar death, fade from view (McWhorter, 2020, 2023).[4]

To be clear, extensive evidence documents racial disparities in police use of force, and George Floyd's killing was a horrifying event uniquely visible and consequential—captured in graphic video, involving state violence, and aligned with longstanding evidence of racial disparities in police use of force. Yet, the tragic killing was used as evidence that the police, in general, are racist and 'bad', which is a drastic conclusion not warranted by the evidence. As horrific as it was, the killing did not prove race or racism in policing, just as the nearly identical death of Tony Timpa, a white man restrained and killed by Dallas police in 2016, did not demonstrate that police target whites. The difference lies not in what the cases show but in how we interpret them. Floyd's killing became emblematic of systemic racialized violence, while Timpa's was never known enough to even be forgotten. This divergence reflects an asymmetry in our epistemic habits: we tend to treat cases that resonate with our moral priors as representative, and those that do not as anomalies. The issue, then, is not whether racial disparities exist (they do) but whether our evidentiary reasoning is applied evenhandedly when linking individual cases to systemic claims. When criminologists adopt these selective standards--privileging

certain cases as evidence of broader truths insufficiently moored to evidence, while dismissing others as "fearmongering" or "sensationalizing," we risk appearing partisan rather than scientific, which erodes our credibility.

To the question of whether our standards of evidentiary weight and generalization are applied evenly, the pattern is unmistakable: they are not. When the framing aligns with Left-liberal ideology, we echo and even encourage sensationalized claims that overgeneralize and minimize nuance, whether about an "epidemic" of fatal police shootings of unarmed Black men, an "epidemic" of criminal violence against LGBT people, or the so-called (epidemically framed) school-to-prison pipeline. When the framing does not align with that ideology (e.g., an "epidemic" of urban crime, 'immigrant crime', or, more recently, 'transgender offending'), we call it out as distortion or oversimplified and aim to add relevant evidentiary features to add context. This tension is evident in Sullivan's own essay: he cautions against the misuse of anecdotes, pointing to the (right-leaning) public response to the Laken Riley killing, while at the same time urging criminologists to tell stories of "people affected by policy." But isn't the Laken Riley case itself a story of people affected by (immigration) policy?

The point is that if we want to enhance our credibility, authority, and influence, criminology cannot condemn anecdotes when mobilized by political opponents while simultaneously valorizing them when they fit our ideological commitments and activist goals. This does not require that we abandon our political goals or even our ideology. Instead, it requires us to treat all evidence with the same standards of scrutiny. We must maintain an attitude of epistemic vigilance to ideological biases in our work and in that of our peers. Moreover, while we can (and can't help but) disagree with our political-ideological opponents, we must guard against viewing them as inferior. Not only does this further widen the gap between criminological experts and segments of the public, but also it neglects the considerable (and increasingly visible) uncertainty of our findings. We must recognize that our subject matter—human social behavior—is uniquely difficult to study, and requires a host of untestable assumptions, data limitations, or other uncertainties, which leaves more room for the influence of ideological priors in interpretation. Without an increasing attitude of epistemic vigilance and humility, which Sullivan also acknowledges, we will continue to further erode our standing with those who do not share our priors, narrowing our influence to friendly audiences and undermining the credibility needed to shape policy and public debate.

Conclusion

As Sullivan recognizes, "policymakers and political operatives sometimes make accusations of bias in social science as a rationale for dismissing study findings or empirical evidence more generally." Of course, such accusations are often cynical, a convenient way to sidestep inconvenient truths, but they are sometimes correct. When our scholarship visibly reflects our own moral sympathies or political alignments, we make it easier for critics to question not only our conclusions but our capacity for impartial inquiry (Wright & DeLisi, 2015). This is the heart of criminology's influence challenge: not that our evidence is wrong but that it is partial and ideologically inflected, such that our credibility and thus authority to interpret it is increasingly suspect by those who do not share our ideological priors.

Of course, the elephant in the room is Trump. Although politicians have always distorted evidence to support their side, Trump is an extreme case of political mendacity, remarkable for his brazenness in the face of incontrovertible evidence. However, I encourage us to consider that his rise and the resonance of his performative truth denial are better understood as symptoms of a deeper underlying problem—the crisis of credibility—rather than the problem itself, (even as, surely, we can all agree, it is a problem). The erosion of public trust in institutions of knowledge, from science to journalism, long preceded him, born of decades of overreach, ideological conformity, and selective truth-telling by elite gatekeepers. The digital information age amplified these flaws, while episodes like the intentional public-health misinformation on mask efficacy during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed them unmistakably. Trump's ability to thrive while blatantly lying did not cause the collapse of elite epistemic authority, it emerged from the vacuum left by it. Focusing on Trump, or the populist right more broadly, risks mistaking symptom for cause and ignoring the selective blindness of the 'post-truth' narrative. The deeper problem is not the existence of truth denialism by politicians, but the gradual loss of public confidence in the institutions that enjoyed epistemic authority, including our own, to check it.

In sum, Sullivan's essay is an important discussion of the ongoing challenges criminology faces in influencing policy and public understanding, and his suggestions for principled argument, humility, and effective communication should be heeded. I agree with Sullivan that political actors' deliberate distortion of evidence and the publics' ideological information processing are profound challenges, but our problems are not simply external. We must acknowledge and address our own biases to strengthen our credibility and epistemic authority.

In the end, criminology's influence problem will not be addressed by lamenting a mythical era of Truth or by blaming hostile or ignorant publics or self-interested politicians alone, but by a reflexivity, transparency, evenhandedness, and a willingness to confront our own biases as we confront those of others. That is a more difficult path, but it is the only one consistent with the scientific enterprise we claim to advance.

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[1] Sullivan's essay, like this one, is necessarily (relatively) circumscribed; mine is not a critique of his piece but an extension of it, with which Sullivan may or may not agree.

[2] To be sure, the 2000s might be described, if not a golden, at least a 'silver age' of influence, as a moment when criminologists' expertise was unusually valued amid the evidence-based momentum and rhetoric of the time (Pratt et al., 2025).

[3] Sullivan is, of course, right to caution against sensationalized narratives that exploit tragic but atypical cases like Riley's killing to paint immigrants as uniquely dangerous. But the same evidentiary standard requires us to contextualize cases like George Floyd's killing. Like immigrants, the overwhelming majority of police officers are not predatory or "bad" and are just trying to make their way in a tough world.

[4] Interestingly, the responses to both tragic events (the Left's outrage and outcry following Floyd's killing and the Right's outcry and outrage to Riley's killing) seem to be drawing moral energy from violations of normative expectations: "This shouldn't happen". Each side moralizes a breach of trust in the state: for progressives, the state's abuse of its lawful authority; for conservatives, the state's failure to enforce its lawful authority (i.e., "the state should control its borders and protect citizens").