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The Influence of Media on Penal Attitudes

Jared S. Rosenberger[1] and Valerie J. Callanan[1]

Abstract

This study examines the influence of crime-related media consumption on individuals' perceptions of the most important purpose of criminal sentencing, using a statewide survey of 4,245 California residents. Consumption of various forms of crime-related media was regressed on four goals of criminal sentencing (punishment, incapacitation, deterrence, and rehabilitation) using multinomial logistic regression. The results suggest that consumption of television news and crime-based reality programs increased the odds of selecting punishment as the most important goal of criminal sentencing as opposed to rehabilitation. The more hours of television watched, irrespective of genre, the more likely respondents were to support punishment, deterrence, or incapacitation rather than rehabilitation. These results hold even after controlling for various sociodemographic characteristics and experiences with crime such as fear, past victimization, and prior arrests.

Keywords

penal attitudes, media, fear of crime, rehabilitation, punitiveness

Introduction

Incarceration rates have substantially risen over the last three decades in many countries, but most dramatically in the United States, which now has the highest incarceration rate among developed nations (Walmsley, 2009). From 1980 to 2006, the incarceration rate in the United States rose by well over 300% (Maguire & Pastore, 2007), but despite popular misconception, this striking increase did not correspond with an equally dramatic rise in crime. In fact, violent crime has been steadily dropping in the United States since 1991 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2008).

Some scholars have suggested that increases in incarceration rates are driven by increasingly punitive publics (Demker, Towns, Duus-Otterstrom, & Sebring, 2008), but others suggest the role of public opinion is more complicated (see Frost, 2010, for overview). Yet, all perspectives cite the importance of public opinion on crime-related policy, thus studies have endeavored to understand the sources of public opinion about crime.

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Beckett and Sasson (2004) note that studies have focused on three factors: fear of crime, crime as a social problem, and popular punitiveness. They argue that because fear of crime among the American public has been relatively stable over the last three decades, fearful sentiments could not be responsible for any increases in punitive attitudes. However, concern about crime as a social problem has waxed and waned over the last three decades. For example, only 3% of Americans cited crime and violence as the number one problem in the country in a Gallup poll in 1982, but concern for crime crept upward, reaching 9% in 1993, and jumping to 37% in 1994. Although this unprecedented level of concern was anomalous, and abated somewhat in the years following September 11, 2001, more than 20% of Americans still cited crime and violence as the number one problem in the country in 1998, the year before the study survey was administered.

With respect to popular punitiveness, empirical evidence has found that "get tough on crime" policies enacted and implemented in the 1980s and 1990s did have widespread public support (Gerber & Engelhardt-Greer, 1996; Sasson, 1995). As many have argued this "populist punitiveness" (Bottoms, 1995) is driven by politicians that exploit public sentiment for political gain (Beckett, 1997). Political campaigns using anticrime platforms began in the 1960s when crime in the United States began to rise (Davey, 1998; Scheingold, 1995). Many candidates became successful using this safe and popular topic as a focal point of their campaigns; consequently, during the 1980s and 1990s politicians introduced an unprecedented number of anticrime bills, most of which toughened sentencing laws. Policies were created using dramatic rhetoric such as "three strikes and you're out" and "zero tolerance" (Haghighi & Lopez, 1998). Public campaigns promoting these policies often used particularly heinous crimes involving innocent and young victims. A well-known example is the case of Polly Klaas, a 12-year-old California girl kidnapped and murdered by a repeat violent offender under parole supervision. This highly publicized case was used by the media and politicians to help pass the "three strikes law" in California, which mandated a sentence of 25 years to life for those convicted of three or more felonies (Males & Macallair, 1999).

Central to the growth of popular punitiveness is public ignorance about crime and crime policy. The American public overestimates the prevalence of crime and underestimates the punitiveness of criminal sentences (Cullen, Fisher, & Applegate, 2000; Roberts & Stalans, 1997). Most Americans receive their information about crime and criminal punishment from secondhand sources, most notably, the media (Graber, 1980; Tonry, 1999). This has led many to suggest that crime-related media is an important factor in popular punitiveness, especially given that over the same period that criminal justice policies became more punitive, media coverage of crime increased significantly (Roman & Chalfin, 2008).

Although crime has long been a staple of American news and entertainment (Einstadter, 1994; Rafter, 2000), the percentage of mass media devoted to crime increased during the 1980s and the 1990s, particularly on television (Cavender & Fishman, 1998; Dorfman & Schiraldi, 2001; Fox & Van Sickel, 2001). Crime news, for example, comprised one fifth to one third of local television news (Surette, 1992); and was often the lead story (Gerbner, 1996; Romer, Jamieson, & De Coteau, 1998). The percentage of news coverage devoted to crime on the three major television networks far surpassed any other topic, including politics and world affairs. Additionally, the advent of 24-hr news cable news channels, beginning with cable news networks in 1980, flood television with more news about crime. But like local television news, these outlets also provide more "soft news" about crime rather than coverage that analyzes and contextualizes information about crime (Britto & Dabney, 2010; Frost & Philips, 2011). Finally, in the late 1980s, sensational crime stories became the staple of a new form of entertainment—"reality" programming, such as *COPS* and *America's Most Wanted* (Cavender & Fishman, 1998).

Numerous studies have documented that crime-related media disproportionately attend to serious violent crimes, focus on the most heinous violence, and often portray a system that is ineffective at

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quelling crime (Barlow, Barlow, & Chiricos, 1995; Dowler, 2003; Sprott, 1996). As a consequence, individuals tend to overestimate the prevalence of violent crimes, think that sentences are too lenient, and believe that crime rates are increasing when they are not (Callanan, 2005; Hough & Roberts, 1999; Romer, Jamieson, & Aday, 2003). Thus, many have suggested the media focus on violent crime that was framed as a major and ever-present problem drove the punitive turn in American public opinion during the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Surette, 2007; Tonry, 1999). Few empirical studies, however, have tested this relationship. This study examines if consumption of crime-related media among respondents affects their attitudes toward punishment, incapacitation, deterrence, and rehabilitation.

Public Opinion of Criminal Sentencing

Goals of Sentencing

Prior research on the preferred goals of criminal sentencing among American and Canadian publics has produced mixed results. Deterrence and incapacitation are often cited as the preferred purpose of criminal sentencing among the public (Brillon, 1988; Gottfredson & Taylor, 1984; Thomas, Cage, & Foster, 1976), but others have found punishment/retribution to be the most important goal (Cohn, Barkan, & Halteman, 1991; Gerber & Engelhardt-Greer, 1996; Warr & Stafford, 1984). Research has attributed these inconsistent findings to the complex and multidimensional attitudes individuals have about appropriate sentencing for offenders (Roberts & Gebotys, 1989). These include balancing their concerns and empathy for victims, who might desire retribution or revenge, against the need of society to quell crime, which might necessitate punishment or rehabilitation to deter or prevent future crimes (Oswald, Hupfeld, Klug, & Gabriel, 2002). While some studies on the goals of imprisonment have shown a decrease in support for rehabilitation (Flanagan & Caulfield, 1984) other research shows that this is contingent on whether the crime committed was of a violent or nonviolent nature (Sundt, Cullen, Applegate, & Turner, 1998). Once case characteristics such as the type of crime committed are factored into a decision, results can differ significantly. For example, Flanagan's study (1996) found strong support for criminal rehabilitation as a goal of sentencing among respondents, but only when public safety was not threatened. Moreover, as many have argued, individuals still appear to support rehabilitation efforts, but also want criminals punished (Cullen et al., 2000).

Demographic Correlates of Opinions About Criminal Sentencing

Research on individual attitudes toward criminal sentencing has mainly focused on the sociodemographic factors of race/ethnicity, gender, age, social class, religion, and political ideology. With respect to race/ethnicity, Whites have been far more likely to support the death penalty than African Americans (Bohm, 1991; Cochran & Chamlin, 2006; Longmire, 1996), and Whites tend to favor harsher sentencing policies (Johnson, 2006), longer prison sentences (Rossi, Simpson, & Miller, 1985), and are less likely to support rehabilitation efforts (Gerber & Engelhardt-Greer, 1996). Some research suggests that women are less supportive of capital punishment than men (Cullen, Clark, Cullen, & Mathers, 1985; Longmire, 1996), more favorable of shorter sentences (Blumstein & Cohen, 1980), and significantly more likely to support rehabilitation or diversion programs (Applegate, Cullen, & Fisher, 2002; Haghighi & Lopez, 1998), especially for juveniles (Sprott, 1999). However, other studies have found that women may be equal to or even more punitive than men (Flanagan, 1996; Thomas et al., 1976).

Tests of the relationship between age and punitive attitudes have produced mixed results (Cullen et al., 1985; Haghighi & Lopez, 1998; McCorkle, 1993; Thomas et al., 1976). It may be that the

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relationship is curvilinear. Supporting this idea, research has suggested that younger and older citizens are more vulnerable to crime (Franklin & Franklin, 2009), which in turn may make them more likely to support punishment as a means of personal protection. Multiple studies have tested the effects of both education and income on penal attitudes (Cullen et al., 1985; Flanagan, 1996; Thomas et al., 1976). Studies have consistently found a strong negative correlation between education and punitiveness (Dowler, 2003; Hough, Lewis, & Walker, 1988; McCorkle, 1993; Rossi & Berk, 1997; Sprott & Doob, 1997), but the results of income have been mixed (Cullen et al., 1985; Dowler, 2003; Sprott & Doob, 1997; Thomas et al., 1976).

Two of the strongest predictors of penal attitudes are political ideology and religion. Political conservatives are much more punitive than political liberals (Gerber & Engelhardt-Greer, 1996; Langworthy & Whitehead, 1986; Stinchcombe et al., 1980) and more supportive of capital punishment (Bohm, 1991; Cochran & Chamblin, 2006). Religion has been tested as a predictor of punitive attitudes in multiple ways, which includes basic participation in a particular religion and literal adherence to biblical teachings. For example, Applegate, Cullen, Fisher, and Vander Ven (2000) found religious fundamentalists have more punitive attitudes than less fundamentalist respondents, and Grasmick and McGill (1994) found that Whites who adhered to a literal interpretation of the Bible were more punitive.

Perhaps, the most extensive research and most promising findings come from studies examining the relationship between perceptions of God and attitudes toward punishment. Unnever, Cullen, and Applegate (2005) found that respondents who see God as a powerful and dispassionate egalitarian figure are more likely to support punitive policies, while those who see God as caring and compassionate are less supportive. Similarly, Bader, Desmond, Mencken, and Johnson (2010) found that individuals who hold "angry and judgmental" images of God are significantly more punitive than those who view God as "loving and engaged in the world." Collectively, these findings suggest the belief in God or being affiliated with a religious institution is less important than the manner in which respondents view God's temperament. It may also suggest that more in-depth measures in addition to religious affiliation may be necessary to fully capture the relationship between religious views and punitiveness.

Finally, a few studies have included a variable measuring whether or not the respondent believes that the world is a just place (Applegate, Cullen, Fisher, & Vander Ven, 2000; Freeman, 2006; O'Quin & Vogler, 1989). Based on the just-world theory developed by Lerner (1965), which holds that individuals need to believe that bad things mostly happen to bad people (Freeman, 2006), belief in a just world has been found to be correlated with preference for more punitive sentences, and less sympathy for offenders (Freeman, 2006; O'Quin & Vogler, 1989).

Experiences With Crime and the Criminal Justice System

Previous research indicates the importance of personal experience with crime in predicting penal attitudes. For example, fear of crime has been found to predict punitive attitudes, especially among African Americans (Cohn et al., 1991; Johnson, 2001, 2006). Although a link between fear of crime and punitive attitudes has been found, Beckett and Sasson (2004) suggest that fear of crime could not have driven the increase in punitive attitudes since it has been relatively stable over the last three decades. Moreover, some studies have suggested that when fear of crime is reduced, individuals do not necessarily lower their punitive attitudes (e.g., Wanner & Caputo, 1987).

Despite the common perception that criminal victimization increases punitiveness, most studies find that prior victimization has little impact on penal attitudes (Baron & Hartnagel, 1996; Cullen et al., 1985; Hough & Roberts, 1999). King and Maruna (2009), who tested this relationship, suggest that punitiveness is more contingent on the belief that crime disturbs the moral order or threatens the

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stability of society than it is on victimization experiences. Moreover, since these attitudes are established early on, they may be not be affected by victimization.

Negative experiences with the criminal justice system appear to impact penal attitudes, as one would suspect. The handful of studies that have examined the penal attitudes of arrestees or offenders (or their family members) tend to find these individuals are more supportive of rehabilitation programs and less punitive than individuals who have not been arrested or convicted (Callanan, 2005; Gottfredson, Warner, & Taylor, 1988).

Media and Punitive Attitudes

Research on the effects of mass media consumption was catalyzed by George Gerbner and the Cultural Indicators Project in the 1970s. The earliest approach drawn from the project was the "cultivation model," which suggested that heavy consumption of television fosters a world view that more closely reflects what is seen on television than actual reality. Because television is saturated with depictions of crime and violence, heavy viewers develop a "mean-world view" and are more likely to believe that people cannot be trusted than those who watch television less frequently (Gerbner et al., 1977). Moreover, this world view is shared by heavy consumers, irrespective of their sociodemographic differences. Contemporary media researchers have rejected the cultivation model as too simplistic because it fails to take into account the way that different people interpret the same televised depictions, as well as differences in the content and framing of different crime-related genres.

Studies began to include audience characteristics to ascertain if these resulted in different interpretations of the same media representations. Audience characteristics that have been explored in studies of crime-related media effects include race/ethnicity, age, gender, and experiences with crime and/or the criminal justice system (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Chiricos, Eschholz, & Gertz, 1997; Chiricos, Padgett, & Gertz, 2000; Dowler, 2002; Eschholz, Chiricos, & Gertz, 2003). Most of these studies have focused on fear of crime or attitudes toward the police, and in general, find some sociodemographic differences in crime-related media interpretation.

Initially, researchers simply used total hours of watching television as the only measure of media consumption (see Gerbner et al., 1977; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jefferies-Fox, & Signorielli, 1978). However, more current studies that have examined specific forms (also known as channels) of crime-related media, such as newspapers or television news, or various crime-related media genres (e.g., television crime dramas or television crime-reality programs) suggest that media channels and genres have differential impact (Dowler, 2002; Eschholz, Mallard, & Flynn, 2004).

Television news and crime-reality programs appear to have the strongest effects on perceptions of crime risk and fear of crime (Eschholz, Blackwell, Gertz, & Chiricos, 2002; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004). This is typically explained by the fact that viewers perceive these types of programs as realistic (Potter, 1986). This is relevant because television news is likely to be framed in a way that elicits an emotional response from its viewers by often depicting the most gruesome and heinous crimes with little or no contextual-level analysis (Iyengar, 1991). Television news also privileges stories that have the potential to shock viewers such as accounts of crimes with unusual motives or methods. Similarly, crime-reality shows such as *COPS* and *America's Most Wanted* usually portray dramatic crimes the moment they are unfolding, while explanations, causes, or other mitigating factors leading to the crime are seldom covered (Cavender & Bond-Maupin, 1993).

Another aspect of television news and crime-based reality programs is the connection of race to criminality, particularly linking violent crime with Blacks, who are disproportionately portrayed as perpetrators (Dixon, Azocar, & Casas, 2003). Violent crime stories are more likely to be covered when a perpetrator is Black and the victim is White (Dixon & Linz, 2000). Black suspects are also depicted as more menacing than White suspects in television news accounts—they are more likely to have their

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mug shot shown and they are more likely to be shown resisting arrest or being combative with police officers (Entman, 1990). Experimental research suggests that these racial depictions of criminality have an impact on White viewers, who are more likely to believe a perpetrator is Black even when no picture of a suspect is shown (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000), and they are more inclined to believe a Black suspect is guilty, deserving of punishment and likely to recidivate (Peffley, Shields, & Williams, 1996).

Television dramas about crime and criminal justice are extremely popular. Many crime dramas take real news stories and turn them into works of fiction, a tactic commonly referred to as the "ripped from the headlines approach" made famous by the television series *Law and Order* (Britto, Hughes, Saltzman, & Stroh, 2007). This can blur the line between fiction and reality and may create the perception that rare and particularly heinous crimes are common. Most prior research, however, has found little relationship between consumption of crime dramas and opinions about crime and criminal justice, such as attitudes about the police (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Dowler & Zawilski, 2007; Eschholz et al., 2002). Perhaps, crime dramas have little influence on viewers' opinions because these fictionalized accounts are not seen as realistic. Another reason that crime dramas may fail to produce as much reaction from viewers as crime reality or television news is that in a typical episode the crime is solved and justice is restored (Sparks, 1992).

Newspapers, unlike local and national television news, usually report on stories in their entirety and contain more information. This information could put some of the more "shocking" crimes in perspective, and explain offenders' backgrounds and motives that may make the crime feel less random and horrific. On the other hand, newspapers, like all forms of media, need to attract consumers, which can be done by printing shocking and disturbing stories about crime (Surette, 2007).

Although there are differences between media channels and various crime-related genres, the literature suggests that crime-related media may have similar influence on viewers' opinions about crime. This is attributed to the way in which crime-related media usually frame representations of crime and the criminal justice system. These frames not only help viewers interpret media representations of crime but they also guide viewer's opinions on what policies and actions are necessary to deal with the given problem (Surette, 2007). Scholars suggest that crime-related media, especially news, is framed in such a manner that the threat and likelihood of random violent crime is elevated (Sacco, 1995). Crime news and crime-reality programs seem to emphasize the "faulty criminal justice frame" that posits crime stems from an inefficient criminal justice system that does not deter criminal behavior because of lenient sentencing. The solution suggested by this frame, therefore, is to "get tough" on crime by enacting more punitive laws and policies. Thus, framing crime stories in this manner should be expected to contribute to punitive attitudes in viewers. In addition, most media representations of crime focus on individual-level explanations such as greed or anger, and rarely frame stories to include structural factors that can lead to crime. The focus on individual-level causal attributions of crime may also leave viewers more punitive toward offenders if they view criminal behavior merely as a matter of choice.

Only a few studies have looked at the relationship between media consumption and penal attitudes, despite its recognized influence on other opinions toward crime and justice, like fear of crime and opinions of the police. Dowler (2003) tested the effect of viewing television crime programs on punitiveness but found no relationship. However, his study did not differentiate between different crime-related genres (e.g., reality, drama, and news). Roberts and Doob (1990) studied newspaper stories of crime cases and found that shorter stories elicited more punitive responses from readers compared to lengthier and more detailed accounts. Similarly, Demker et al. (2008) found a correlation between tabloid consumption and support for the death penalty. In a study looking at media influence on support for the "three strikes" law, Callanan (2005) was the only researcher to differentiate between the various types of crime-related media. She found that media influences on punitiveness were primarily due to indirect relationships with various attitudes and experiences, such as fear of crime and perception of neighborhood crime risk.

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The limited body of research conducted on media's influence on penal attitudes suggests a need for further research. In order to help fill this gap, this study investigates the relationship between media consumption and attitudes toward criminal sentencing utilizing data that includes multiple media genres. This study will allow us to not only identify possible correlations between crime-related media consumption and sentencing attitudes but also to gauge how different channels and genres may variably influence these attitudes.

Data and Method

The data come from a statewide representative sample of 4,245 California households surveyed between March and September 1999[1]. One adult respondent (over the age of 18) was interviewed within each household sampled using a computer-assisted telephone interviewing system, which allowed access to unlisted numbers to help reduce bias. The interview consisted of about 100 questions regarding the purposes of sentencing, media consumption, just-world beliefs, fear of crime, experience with the criminal justice system, a range of other criminal justice-related questions, and sociodemographic information. Interviews lasted about 35–40 min on average and were administered in English and if necessary, Spanish. The survey had a response rate of 69.9%.[2]

Measurement

Dependent variable. The dependent variable is a categorical measure of the most important purpose of criminal sentences. The survey question stated "There are four purposes for criminal penalties that we would like to ask you about. These include discouraging others from committing crimes [deterrence], to separate offenders from society [incapacitation], to train, educate, and counsel offenders [rehabilitation], and to give offenders the punishment they deserve [punishment]. Please tell me which of these four purposes you think should be the most important in sentencing adults?" Because the survey used for this study did not collect rank-ordered measures, a respondent who selects one goal as the most important does not necessarily mean that they do not also support the goals he or she did not choose.

Given the complexity of measuring attitudes toward the goals of criminal sentencing, rank-ordered data would be preferable to measure a respondent's preferred sentencing purpose in relationship to the other purposes. Allowing the respondents to rank-order their sentencing preferences would give researchers a clearer idea of how important each goal may be to the respondent, and if naming just one goal masks support for other goals. This idea is born out in studies that suggest while respondents may have a preference toward one goal, like punishment, their selection may be guided by or correlated to another (e.g., Roberts & Gebotys, 1989). Perhaps, individuals are becoming more punitive but not necessarily at the complete cost of rehabilitation. Respondents may simply feel the need to satisfy society's need for punishment first, and then worry about the concerns of the offender (Roberts & Gebotys, 1989).

Media variables. Crime-related media consumption was measured with five variables: the frequency of viewing crime dramas or crime-reality shows; the hours spent viewing television per week, and the number of days per week one read a newspaper or watched local television news. Respondents were asked about their consumption of the most popular crime-related programs on television at the time. These shows fit primarily into two genres; those that use actors in primarily fictional accounts of crime and the criminal justice system (crime dramas) and those that use real events and police footage (crime reality). The Crime Drama scale captured frequency of viewing *Law and Order*, *Homicide*, and *NYPD Blue*, and the crime-reality show scale measured consumption of *Cops*, *American Justice*, *America's Most Wanted*, and *Justice Files*; all of the items were recorded

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on a 5-point Likert-type scale (*Never, Occasionally, Once a month, A few times a month, and Every week*).[3] The Crime Drama scale had a Cronbach's α of .690; the α for the crime-reality scale was .724. Both newspaper readership and television news consumption were measured by the number of days per week spent viewing or reading these media. The hours of television viewed were measured with a question that asked respondents to estimate the number of hours spent watching television per week.

Experience and control variables. Four variables were used to control for experience with crime and the police. Prior criminal victimization was measured by an index from two dichotomous questions asking about personal criminal victimization and/or family victimization in the prior 3 years; (0 = *no victimization*, 1 = *self or family member victimized*, and 2 = *self and family member victimized*).[4] Household arrest was a dichotomous variable measuring if the respondent or anyone in the household had ever been arrested. Fear of crime was measured with eight questions that asked respondents on a scale of one to ten how fearful they were of burglary of their home while away and while at home, assault, rape, auto theft, robbery, vandalism, and fear of their children or partner being victimized. The fear of crime scale had a Cronbach's α of .921.

The sociodemographic control variables included gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, income, and political party affiliation. Gender, Black, Latino, Asian, Democrat, and Republican are dichotomous variables; females, Whites, and political independents/political "others" were the corresponding omitted categories. Education was measured with five categories ranging from *less than high school* to *advanced degree*, and income was a nine-category measure that ranged from *less than $5,000* to *more than $100,000*. Belief in a just-world combined responses from two questions stating, "Basically the world is a just place" and "By and large, people get what they deserve." Responses were recorded on a 4-point scale from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*; the higher the score the greater the belief in a just world.

Analytical Plan

This study uses multinomial logistic regression to test the effects of media across each of the perceived purposes of sentencing. Multinomial logistic regression is used with nominal dependent variables or ordinal dependent variables that violate the proportional odds assumption. In other words, multinomial logistic regression ignores the ordering of categories and assumes that the variable contains an unordered set of responses (Hoffman, 2004). This is a much stronger type of analysis than separate logistic regressions because it enters all the data into the same model and allows for comparisons between each category and to the reference category. Given that rehabilitation was negatively correlated with the other three goals, it was used as the reference category.[5]

Part of effective data analysis involves being able to demonstrate how each theoretical group of explanatory variables impacts the dependent variable. To do this, media variables will be entered into the model first, then experience variables, and finally sociodemographic controls. This will allow for a greater understanding of the impact of media consumption on opinions of the primary purposes of sentencing and how the effects of media change with the addition of each group of variables.

Results

Table 1 describes how the variables are measured and displays the descriptive statistics for the sample. Almost 37% of respondents selected punishment as their preferred purpose of criminal sentencing, followed by rehabilitation (24.5%) and incapacitation (21.8%). Only 14.5% of the respondents selected deterrence as their preferred purpose of sentencing.

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Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of the Sample ($N = 4,245$)

Variable	Description	Range	*M*	*SD*
Dependent variables				
Reasons to incarcerate	Please tell me which of these four purposes you think should be most important in sentencing adults?			
Punishment	1 = *To give offenders the punishment they deserve*, *Other* = 0	0–1	0.364	0.481
Rehabilitation	1 = *To train educate and counsel offenders*, *Other* = 0	0–1	0.245	0.430
Incapacitation	1 = *To separate offenders from society*, *Other* = 0	0–1	0.218	0.413
Deterrence	1 = *To discourage others from committing crimes*, *Other* = 0	0–1	0.145	0.352
Media variables				
Crime drama	Frequency of viewing *Law and Order*, *Homicide*, and *NYPD Blue*. 1 = *never*, 2 = *occasionally*, 3 = *once a month*, 4 = 2 *or 3 weeks per month*, 5 = *every week*	1–5	1.861	1.050
Crime reality	Scale of viewing COPS, American Justice, America's Most Wanted, and Justice Files. 1 = *never* to 5 = *every week*	1–5	1.875	0.935
Newspaper	How many days a week would you say you read the national or local news section of a newspaper? 0 = *never*, 7 = *everyday*	0–7	3.641	2.989
Television news	Number of days per week watching local television news (1) local and (2) national news on television. 0 = *never*, 7 = *everyday*	0–7	4.607	2.321
All television	On the average, how many hours per week do you watch television?	0–97	18.155	16.501
Experience variables				
Victim	0 = *no victimization*, 1 = *personal or family victimization*, 2 = *personal and family victimization*	0–2	0.563	0.704
Fear of crime	Eight-item scale: fear of home burglary while away, while at home, assault, rape, auto theft, robbery, vandalism, and fear of family member being a victim. 0 = *not at all fearful*, 10 = *very fearful*	0–10	3.426	2.456
Household arrest	Have you or anyone in your household ever been arrested? 1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*	0–1	0.166	0.372
Control variables				
Male	*male* = 1, *female* = 0	0–1	0.422	0.494
Age	Current age of respondent	17–94	45.290	17.031
Black	*Black* = 1, *other* = 0	0–1	0.105	0.254
Latino	*Latino* = 1, other = 0	0–1	0.188	0.406
Asian	*Asian* = 1, *other* = 0	0–1	0.076	0.253
Education	1 = *not a high school graduate*, 2 = *high school graduate or GED*, 3 = *some college or trade school*, 4 = *college graduate*, 5 = *advanced degree*	1–5	3.123	1.127
Household income	1 ≤ *$5,000*, 2 = *5–$9,999*, 3 = *10–$14,999*, 4 = *15–$24,999*, 5 = *25–$34,999*, 6 = *35–$49,999*, 7 = *50–$74,999*, 8 = *75–$99,999*, 9 = *$100,000 and above*	1–9	5.869	2.051
Democrat	*Democrat* = 1, *other* = 0	0–1	0.401	0.487
Republican	*Republican* = 1, *other* = 0	0–1	0.269	0.444
Just-world beliefs	Combines responses to "Basically the world is a just place" and "By and large, people get what they deserve." Responses range from 1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree* on a 4-point Likert scale	1–4	2.484	0.511

Note. GED = general equivalency diploma.

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Table 2. Multinomial Logistic Regression of Media's Influence on Perceived Goals of Sentencing ($N = 3,422$)

	Punishment		Deterrence		Incapacitation	
	B (*SE*)	Odds	*B* (*SE*)	Odds	*B* (*SE*)	Odds
Media variables						
Crime drama	.066 (.046)	1.068	−.057 (.060)	.945	.121* (.051)	1.128
Crime reality	.060 (.050)	1.062	.008 (.064)	1.009	−.210*** (.060)	.810
Newspaper	.001 (.015)	1.000	−.002 (.019)	.998	.063*** (.017)	1.065
Television news	.049* (.021)	1.051	−.009 (.025)	.991	−.013 (.023)	.987
Television consumption	.010*** (.003)	1.010	.010** (.004)	1.009	.010*** (.004)	1.011

Note. $R^2 = .028$.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

On average, respondents viewed both crime dramas ($\bar{X} = 1.86$) and crime-based reality shows ($\bar{X} = 1.88$) "occasionally." Per week, they also read the newspaper an average of 3.64 days, watched television news 4.61 days, and spent over 18 hr per week watching television. The mean for criminal victimization of self and/or family member was .57 on a scale from 0 to 2. The sample mean for fear of crime was 3.43 on a scale that ranged from 0 = *not at all fearful* to 10 = *very fearful*. Only 17% of the sample had ever been arrested and/or had a member of their household arrested.

Over 60% of the sample was White, 7.6% was Asian, 10.5% was Black, and 18.8% was Latino. The mean age was 45.3 years, and 42.2% of respondents were male. The average respondent had at least "some college or trade school" education and an annual household income between $35,000 and $50,000. Forty percent were Democrats, 26% Republicans, and the remaining 34% were political independents or "other." Finally, the mean for the just-world scale was 2.48 (on a scale of 1–4); on average, respondents agreed that the world is a just place and/or that people get what they deserve.

Table 2 displays the results of the multinomial logistic regression of media influence on the preferred primary purpose of criminal sentencing, using rehabilitation as the reference category. All of the media variables influenced respondents' support for at least one of the preferred goals of criminal sentencing. Total television consumption elevated the odds that respondents would choose punishment, deterrence, or incapacitation over the odds they would choose rehabilitation. Both consumption of crime dramas and newspapers were positively correlated with support for incapacitation but neither influenced preference for punishment or deterrence as the primary goal of sentencing. Consumption of crime-based reality shows significantly decreased the likelihood of viewers to select incapacitation as opposed to rehabilitation, but viewing crime-reality programming had no effect on selecting punishment or deterrence. The more television news consumed the greater the likelihood of respondents to select punishment as their preferred goal of sentencing, but television news consumption did not influence support for deterrence or incapacitation over rehabilitation.

Table 3 adds the experience variables into the model to determine how past arrests, victimization and fear of crime moderate the relationships between media consumption and the perceived goals of sentencing. Overall, controlling for these experience variables had minor impact on the effects of media on the perceived goals of criminal sentencing. Those with household arrests were less likely to choose punishment and incapacitation over rehabilitation than respondents without arrest experience. Unexpected, fear of crime reduced the likelihood of someone choosing incapacitation as opposed to rehabilitation. This counterintuitive relationship more than likely reflects the positive correlation between race/ethnicity and fear of crime. Blacks and Latinos have higher fear of crime

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Table 3. Multinomial Logistic Regression of Media's Influence on Perceived Goals of Sentencing, with Experience Variables ($N = 3,331$)

	Punishment		Deterrence		Incapacitation	
	B (*SE*)	Odds	*B* (*SE*)	Odds	*B* (*SE*)	Odds
Experience variables						
Victim	−.126 (.066)	.882	.036 (.081)	1.037	.033 (.074)	1.033
Fear of crime	−.034 (.019)	.966	−.040 (.024)	.961	−.079*** (.022)	.924
Arrest	−.358** (.122)	.699	−.177 (.149)	.837	−.463*** (.142)	.629
Media variables						
Crime drama	.074 (.046)	1.077	−.043 (.060)	.958	.128* (.052)	1.137
Crime reality	.082 (.052)	1.085	.027 (.065)	1.028	−.169** (.062)	.845
Newspaper	−.007 (.016)	.993	−.010 (.020)	.990	.055*** (.018)	1.057
Television news	.053* (.021)	1.054	−.006 (.026)	.994	−.010 (.024)	.990
Television consumption	.010** (.003)	1.010	.010* (.004)	1.009	.012*** (.004)	1.012

Note. $R^2 = .039$.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 4. Multinomial Logistic Regression of Media's Influence on Perceived Goals of Sentencing, Full Model ($N = 2,748$)

	Punishment		Deterrence		Incapacitation	
	B (*SE*)	Odds	*B* (*SE*)	Odds	*B* (*SE*)	Odds
Control variables						
Male	−.129 (.109)	.879	.190 (.132)	1.209	−.018 (.132)	.982
Age	.005 (.004)	1.005	.001 (.004)	1.001	.018*** (.005)	1.018
Black	−.244 (.201)	.783	.064 (.241)	1.066	−.667** (.248)	.514
Latino	−.347* (.142)	.707	.007 (.172)	1.007	−.406* (.171)	.666
Asian	−.413* (.199)	.662	.107 (.226)	1.113	−1.232*** (.272)	.292
Education	−.208*** (.056)	.812	−.091 (.068)	.913	.178** (.062)	1.195
Income	.083** (.029)	1.086	.040 (.035)	1.041	.182*** (.034)	1.200
Democrat	−.117 (.121)	.889	.038 (.149)	1.039	.006 (.139)	1.007
Republican	.761*** (.145)	2.139	.783*** (.171)	2.092	.566*** (.162)	1.762
Just-world scale	.283*** (.102)	1.327	.099 (.124)	1.104	−.006 (.114)	.992
Experience variables						
Victim	−.093 (.076)	.912	.040 (.091)	1.040	−.021 (.086)	.980
Fear of crime	−.004 (.023)	.996	−.018 (.028)	.982	−.016 (.027)	.984
Arrest	−.287* (.137)	.750	−.138 (.164)	.871	−.309* (.159)	.734
Media variables						
Crime drama	.065 (.053)	1.067	−.032 (.067)	.968	.121* (.058)	1.128
Crime reality	.118* (.059)	1.126	.020 (.074)	1.020	.049 (.070)	1.051
Newspaper	.001 (.019)	1.001	−.013 (.023)	.987	−.011 (.021)	.989
Television news	.048* (.024)	1.049	−.009 (.030)	.990	−.003 (.028)	.997
Television consumption	.009* (.004)	1.009	.010* (.005)	1.010	.010*** (.004)	1.014

Note. $R^2 = .124$.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

than Whites, but they are far more supportive of rehabilitation than Whites. As seen in Table 4, the relationship between fear of crime and support for rehabilitation over incapacitation is rendered insignificant once controls for race/ethnicity are added to the model.

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Table 4 displays the results of the final model, which adds the sociodemographic variables.[6] With the inclusion of all sociodemographic variables the sample size is significantly reduced due to listwise deletion; however, all media variables, with the exception of newspaper consumption, continued to influence respondents' choices of sentencing purpose. While the large reduction in the sample size could be troublesome, most of the findings still hold, suggesting no systematic bias in missing cases. The number of television hours watched still increased the odds that viewers would select any of the other goals of sentencing over the odds of choosing rehabilitation as the most important purpose of sentencing. While the odds ratios seem relatively low, watching 10 additional hours of television per week increased viewers' odds of selecting any sentencing goal besides rehabilitation by approximately 10%. Consumption of crime dramas raised the likelihood of selecting incapacitation over rehabilitation and consumption of crime-based reality shows increased the likelihood of respondents choosing punishment. Consuming television news just one additional day per week increased the odds of respondents choosing punishment over the odds of choosing rehabilitation by nearly 5%.

Many of the sociodemographic variables had significant impact on the perceived goals of sentencing. The biggest impact was political party; Republicans were significantly more likely to select any other goal of sentencing besides rehabilitation. The odds of selecting punishment and deterrence over rehabilitation, moreover, were more than double for Republicans compared to political independents/others. In general, racial minorities were more likely to support rehabilitation compared to Whites. Having a higher income generally increased the likelihood of selecting other goals besides rehabilitation. Education significantly lowered support for punishment but was positively correlated with increased support for incapacitation.

The changes that occurred when adding the experience variables in Model 2 and the control variables in Model 3 require further explanation. Consumption of crime-based reality programs was negatively related to incapacitation in the first two models, suggesting that viewers of crime-reality shows were more likely to select rehabilitation as opposed to incapacitation. This was surprising considering that research on this genre suggests that criminals are often depicted as dangerous because of some biological or psychological predisposition toward crime (Kooistra, Mahoney, & Westervelt, 1998). However, with the addition of sociodemographic controls, this relationship completely diminished and switched direction. Subsequent analysis determined that when controlling for race, the variable became nonsignificant, suggesting that the original relationship was negative for racial minorities, but not for White viewers.

In the initial models, newspaper consumption was positively related to choosing incapacitation as the goal of sentencing but was reduced with the inclusion of income and education into the model. Since the highly educated and the wealthy are far more likely to read the newspaper (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007), holding these constant negated the relationship between newspaper reading and choosing incapacitation as the goal of sentencing.

Discussion

The findings imply that consumption of various crime-related media, as well as total hours of television viewing may increase punitiveness by decreasing support for rehabilitation. Gerbner et al.'s (1977, 1978) television violence profile was a pioneering piece of research that explored the relationship between television consumption and beliefs about the "real world." Their research determined that regardless of sex, age, education, or race, heavy viewers of television consistently held higher "mean world" views; the propensity to be distrustful and fearful of a world they see as a mean and scary place. As Gerbner and Gross (1976) state, "Ritualized displays of any violence (such as in crime and disaster news, as well as in mass-produced drama) may cultivate exaggerated assumptions about the extent of threat and danger in the world and lead to demands for protection"

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(p. 193), which may lead to increased demands for punitive sentencing and fewer rehabilitation programs in the criminal justice system, as our findings suggest.

Consumption of crime-based reality shows and television news increased the odds of respondents selecting punishment over rehabilitation. This finding is in line with past research that finds crime reality and television news are two of the most influential media variables (Eschholz et al., 2002; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004). This has been attributed to viewers being more likely to accept these representations as reality (Surette, 2007) because both reality-based crime shows and television news use police footage. The manner in which crime is framed in these television genres could cause viewers to interpret crime as a real and ubiquitous threat and consequently increase their support for punitive approaches. Furthermore, depictions of criminals primarily focus on individual (e.g., greed) motives of crime, which may decrease support for rehabilitative policies.

Consumption of crime dramas was found to increase the likelihood of choosing incapacitation over rehabilitation, although the relationship is relatively small. Researchers argue that viewers are less likely to accept crime dramas like *Law and Order* and *NYPD Blue* as representations of reality; however, many of the fictionalized stories they present are based on actual crimes (Britto et al., 2007; Eschholz et al., 2004). This blurs the lines between fiction and reality, and even though viewers may interpret these as mostly fictional, they may still think the portrayals closely mirror actual crime cases. Since these dramas focus on the most violent street crimes, viewers may overestimate the extent of violent crime, which could increase support for incapacitation to keep communities safe from violence. For example, qualitative analyses of crime dramas have noted that criminals are often depicted as extremely sinister who prey exclusively on innocent victims, such as young children (Britto et al., 2007). It is possible that these representations influence viewers to believe that criminals are so inherently evil that rehabilitation or even punishment would have little effect. This could lead viewers to believe that simply separating criminals from society is the most important goal of sentencing. But the relationship is relatively weak and this finding has not been substantiated in past media studies, so it is possible this could be a statistical anomaly. Further research is needed to substantiate this finding.

Newspaper consumption was the only media variable that did not significantly influence any of the perceived goals of criminal sentencing in the final model. Compared to other crime-related media, newspapers usually contain the most detailed information. The inclusion of additional details about crimes in newspapers may introduce some structural-level explanations, perhaps slightly reducing punitive responses among readers. Research has found that television viewers are more likely than newspaper readers to attribute crime to individual-level causes (Chiricos et al., 1997; Romer et al., 2003).

One of the strongest and most consistent correlates with attitudes favoring more punitive forms of sentencing over rehabilitation is consumption of total hours of all types of television. This is significant across all three sentencing goals and suggests that watching just one additional hour of television raises a viewer's odds of selecting any goal of punishment except rehabilitation by 1%. As our survey only measured consumption of three crime dramas and four crime-reality shows, it is likely that total television hours also captured the influence of other crime-related television programs.

It is surprising that including experience variables did not significantly alter the effects of media. Past research on media and various other criminal justice related issues has proposed that those who do not have significant experiences with crime would be more influenced by media representations than those with crime experiences (Adoni & Mane, 1984; Maxson, Hennigan, & Sloane, 2003). Having a past household arrest significantly decreased the likelihood of respondents supporting punishment or incapacitation in the final model. However, fear of crime and prior criminal victimization failed to reach significance after the inclusion of sociodemographic controls. Although most studies do not find a relationship between prior criminal victimization and punitive attitudes (Baron & Hartnagel, 1996; Cullen et al., 1985; Hough & Roberts, 1999), the lack of significance of prior

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victimization may be due to the measure used in the analysis. Past criminal victimization included both personal and vicarious experience, but the severity and other important details surrounding the victimization are not included. Having a measure that included information on the severity of the criminal act, including physical and emotional costs to the victim, may have significantly impacted our model.

To our knowledge, this is the first study to explore the relationship between media consumption and the goals of criminal sentencing controlling for both sociodemographic and experience variables. The results suggest that consumption of crime dramas, crime-based reality shows, television news, and total hours of television viewed, enhance the likelihood that respondents will not choose rehabilitation as the primary goal of sentencing. These findings are consistent with the cultivation thesis posited by George Gerbner and associates. The more television watched, regardless of content, the more likely viewers were to select any goal of sentencing besides rehabilitation. It may be that this preference for more punitive goals is due to cultivation of "mean world" views, or the idea that strangers are not to be trusted and are potentially predacious and often violent. These findings have implications for the future influence of media on punitive attitudes because of recent media trends that suggest lurid depictions of violence in media are likely to remain prevalent.

For example, although crime-related media has been commonplace for decades, its growth has been substantial, in large part due to cable television. Many of the popular crime dramas and crime-based reality shows have lead to a number of related spin-offs (Britto et al., 2007), and most of these programs have Internet websites and chat rooms, as do news broadcasts, which increases audience involvement. This trend links television representations of crime to alternative forms of media, like the Internet, and recreates the same messages in a readily available and interactive public forum. Additionally, the demands for profitability have increased for both news and entertainment media. This trend is likely to contribute to television news programs that focus as much, if not more so, on the entertainment aspect of crime as they do on presenting accurate representations of crimes, presenting even more shocking depictions of crime to keep viewers interested and entertained (Surette, 2007). Thus, we can expect the messages about crime that are delivered through the media to continue to influence viewer's attitudes and beliefs toward sentencing criminals.

Finally, with the convergence of mass media outlets in the United States ownership of media corporations is continually shrinking, which has resulted in fewer alternative viewpoints, including those regarding crime (Jenkins, 2004). This is especially true given that vertical ownership of media formats is no longer prohibited (McChesney, 2000). Now a given news story is transmitted and reciprocally looped across multiple media formats including the Internet, 24-hr news channels, national network news, local television news, and national talk shows (Surette, 2007). Given what this study has found about the relationship between media and punitiveness, a decrease in alternative perspectives about crime could increase the media's influence on penal attitudes among the general public.

Findings from this study support the idea that media may be an important part in the establishment of individual's attitudes about sentencing and punitiveness. With the continued popularity of crime-related media, research on penal attitudes should begin to include media variables in analytical models.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

There were some limitations to this study that can hopefully be corrected in future research. First, the dependent variable does not directly measure punitiveness. The idea of "punishment" is convoluted and whether support for punishment represents support for just deserts (punishment fits the crime) or a more draconian type of sentence is unclear. There is an extensive literature devoted to the proportionality of punishment (e.g., Hamilton & Rytina, 1980; Hirsch, 1992; Finkel, Maloney, Valbuena, & Groscup, 1996), which underscores the complexity measuring the concept and identifies the need

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to clearly define punishment. While our measure may limit the results of this study, our findings do suggest that media formats reduce support for rehabilitation, which we argue, is evidence of a preference toward more punitive sentencing outcomes.

Another issue is that the dependent variable forces respondents to choose the most important purpose of sentencing, which loses valuable information about how a respondent feels toward other purposes. For example, research has suggested that there are high levels of support for rehabilitation among the public but only after the offender has been punished (Roberts & Gebotys, 1989). In this study, the problem was dealt with by using multinomial logistic regression, which allowed for all of the respondents to be included in the model by using a reference category. Although this is an effective technique, the complexity of attitudes toward sentencing is very difficult to capture. Rank-ordering sentencing goals may be one way to capture respondents' sentencing preferences in relation to the other goals; however, it still forces individuals to select one-dimensional goals. This limitation likely influenced the results of our analysis, as multinomial logistic regression would separate and compare respondents who may have very similar attitudes toward penal sentencing. Two individuals who would have ranked-ordered the goals of sentencing identically with the exception of the primary goal are essentially treated as opposites.

These and other methods likely fail to capture the complexity of individual's opinions toward sentencing, and limit the validity of findings. While measurement problems are often viewed as a necessary limitation of quantitative survey data, it is possible to capture the complexity of individual punitive attitudes using survey methods. One of the best examples is from the work of Rossi, Simpson, and Miller (1985) that used the fractional survey technique. They offered respondents multiple computer-generated vignettes in which up to 20 dimensions were randomly presented. Results of their analysis suggest that many factors are important in determining what individuals deem appropriate in criminal sentencing, which include the type of crime, prior criminality of the offender, the monetary loss from the crime, and injuries caused from the crime. Without considering these contextual variables, existing studies similar to ours fail to capture all of the factors that influence individual's sentencing preferences. Future studies that design and collect data should account for these factors.

Another limitation of the data was the lack of religious measures since religion is an important determinant of penal attitudes (Applegate et al., 2000; Grasmick & McGill, 1994; Unnever, Cullen, & Applegate, 2005). Further, some may consider the age of the data a limitation given that it was collected over 10 years ago. However, the increase in alternative media such as the Internet and social media is not likely to change the influence of media on punitive attitudes if the messages about crime remain the same. As long as media conglomerates dominate the media landscape, there is no reason to think that crime stories will vary much from current content and framing. Nevertheless, a longitudinal study of media effects would be interesting and relevant given some of the changes in media formats and its availability over the last 10 years. Future work might utilize longitudinal data to study trends in media depictions of crime and justice.

Finally, it is important to note that media studies often struggle to find significant findings due to the inability to test the null hypothesis. In other words, given the ubiquitous nature of mass media, studies lack the ability to compare participants who have and have not been exposed to media representations. Media researchers are left instead to compare variations in exposure levels, which can and often limit significant findings. This limitation often leads to models that produce insignificant results and/or explain low levels of variation in the dependent variable (as is the case in this study as seen in Table 2). Given this issue, it seems reasonable that even findings that border on statistical significance may indicate a real relationship. Given the lack of true control groups, it seems reasonable for media research to focus more on the direction, then the strength of tested relationships (Morgan & Shanahan, 1997).

This study is one of the few to explore media's influence on penal attitudes. The results suggest that consumption of various types of crime-related media and television in general influence viewers

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to select alternative forms of sentencing goals over rehabilitation. These findings can be added to the media effects literature, which have already established media's influence on various actions and opinions, such as violent behavior (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963; Hearold, 1986; Paik & Comstock, 1994), fear of crime, and opinions of law enforcement (Dowler, 2002; Dowler & Zawilski, 2007; Eschholz et al., 2002). Given the popularity of crime-related media, and the expansive nature of mass media, it is likely that these representations will be reproduced in the future. This suggests a need for future research to consider the influence of media on attitudes toward criminal sentencing.

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Notes

1. The sample was stratified by geographic population.
2. American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Response Rate 4 (AAPOR 2006), generated from Sawtooth WINCATI Version 4. The equation for RR4 is (I + P)/ (I + P) + (R + NC +O) + e(UH +UO), in which I = completed interview, P = partial interview (set at a minimum of 60% of questions answered), R = refusal, NC = noncontact, O = other, UH = unknown if household occupied, UO = unknown, e = estimated proportion of cases of unknown eligibility that are eligible. The data collection were conducted by the Social and Behavioral Research Institute at California State University, San Marcos, which used the Centers for Disease Control calling occasion protocol so that every number was called a minimum of 15 times at multiple days per week and multiple times per day. The sampling frame came from a list screened for working household numbers. The generated sample was proportionate to the state's race/ethnic population at the household level in 2000.
3. All scale variables were divided by the number of items they included to reflect the original metric.
4. Models separating personal and family victimization were run but the results were not significantly different, so the more parsimonious model is presented.
5. Tests for multicollinearity included examination of the correlation matrices and an ordinary least squares regression of the full model looking at variance inflation factor, tolerance, and condition indices. All tests suggested multicollinearity was not an issue.
6. Tests for media interactions by race, age, gender, political party, and just-world beliefs were conducted, but no significant results were found.

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