

Determinants of public opinion on sentences and preferences for different types of sentences XXIX International Congress of Psychology, July 20-25, 2008, Berlin – Germany

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Background

Social and individual factors play important role in sentencing proclivities. By now studies did not show consistent effect of sociodemographic characteristics on sentencing preferences, but showed that the issue of sentencing is related to perceptions of the justice system in general, and motivational components of people's attitudes toward sentencing (Sprott & Doob, 1997). The role of individual differences in sentencing goals, attributions about the causes of crime, ideology, and personality seems to be very important in predicting variation in severity of sentences (Carroll, Perkowitz, Lurigio & Weaver, 1987). However, the role of those individual differences in understanding sentencing preferences is under researched.

Aim

To examine sociodemographic variables, crime attributions and sentencing goals as determinants of: sentencing leniency, the role of harsh punishment in crime prevention, and sentences for burglary.

Methodology

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

SOCIODEMOGRAPHICS gender, age, educational level, average monthly income

10 items. 5 point Likert scale (adapted from



SAMPLE

nationally representative sample of adults
N=1 004, 45 % males and 55% females
public opinion poll, 2005
response rate 76.1%

SENTENCING GOALS	Carroll et al, 1987) AND based on results of principal components FA with varimax rotation – 2 factor solution (punishment and rehabilitation)	DEPENDENT VARIABLES		
		SENTENCING LENIENCY	global sentencing measure – 1 item	
ATTRIBUTIONS ABOUT THE CRIME CAUSES	16 items , 5 point Likert scale (adapted from Carroll et al 1987), principal components FA with varimax rotation – 3 factor solution (social, economic and individual)	THE ROLE OF HARSH PUNISHMENT IN CRIME PREVENTION	4 point Likert scale - 1item	
		SENTENCES FOR BURGLARY	response to individual hypothetical case – 1 item	

Results

Respondents believed more in rehabilitation than punishment as a sentencing goal (t(975)=13.32; p<0.01). They attributed criminal behavior significantly more to social factors then to individual (t(997)=21.28; p<0.01) and economic (t(989)=23.70; p<0.01), and they also attribute criminal behavior more to individual than economic factors t(986)=4.75; p<0.01) (Table 1).

Majority of respondents (65.8%) believed that Croatian judicial practices are lenient or too lenient (Table 2). Data from other studies showed that regardless of crime trends or the actual severity of sentencing patterns, most part of the public believe that convicted offenders are treated with leniency by the courts (Sprott, & Doob, 1997), and that public opinion has varied very little over the time (Roberts, Crutcher, & Verbrugger, 2007).

Most of the respondents (62.4%) think that harsh punishment has very strong role in the crime prevention (Table 3).

Relative majority of the respondents preferred the sentence in the form of community work for burglary (41%), while almost one third preferred the prison sentence for the same crime (29%) (Table 4).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

VARIABLES – SUBSCALES	Alpha	М	Sd
Sentencing goal – punishment	.77	3.73	0.788
Sentencing goal – rehabilitation	.69	4.12	0.728
Individual causation of crime	.55	3.29	0.767
Social causation of crime	.71	3.84	0.721
Economic causation of crime	.73	3.15	0.842

Table 2: Sentencing leniency – answer distribution (%)

Table 3: Role of harsh punishment – answer distribution (%)

Table 3: Sentences for burglary – answer distribution (%)

Judicial practices in Croatia are		
Too harsh	1.7	
Harsh	1.7	
About right	19.1	
Lenient	37.2	
Too lenient	28.6	
Don't know/ no response	11.6	

Role of harsh punishment in crime prevention is			
Very strong	62.4		
Moderate	26.0		
Weak	7.0		
None	1.8		
Don't know/ no response	2.8		

Sentence for burglary should be		
Fine	16.1	
Prison sentence	29.0	
Community work	41.2	
Probation	7.7	
Something else	1.5	
Don't know/ no response	4.6	

Table 4: Summary of canonical discriminant analyses (structure matrix)

	Sentencing leniency		Role of harsh punishment in crime prevention		Sentences for burglary	
VARIABLES	FUNCTIONS		FUNCTIONS		FUNCTIONS	
	1	2	1	2	1	2
Gender	149	129	.049	308	.352	021
Age	181	300	.295	.392	350	.661
Educational level	.177	.720	018	026	.409	236
Average monthly income	.211	.503	062	144	.309	.333
Sentencing goal – punishment	676	.001	.856	.269	161	.042
Sentencing goal – rehabilitation	.007	049	.234	429	.723	.126
Individual causation of crime	041	660	.326	.342	.140	.437
Social causation of crime	.110	128	.487	182	.156	.460
Economic causation of crime	.561	329	136	.441	.138	.438
Wilks' Lambda	.875	.960	.851	.992	.931	.980
Canonical Correlation	.298	.199	.377	.091	.223	.141
Significance	.000	.000	.000	.615	.000	.087

On average, original grouped cases were correctly classified in 50.1% for sentences for burglary, in 50.9% for sentencing leniency, and 68% for the role of harsh sentencing in crime prevention.

For **sentencing leniency** two discriminant functions showed to be statistically significant. 70.3% of variance was explained by the first significant function, and 29.7% by the second significant function. Canonic correlation related to the first function was 0.30, while correlation related to the second function was 0.20. First significant discriminant function was mostly defined by positive association with attributing criminal behavior to economic reasons, and by negative association with punishment as sentencing goal. Second significant discriminant function was mostly defined by positive association with educational level and average monthly income, and by negative association with attributing criminal behavior to individual and economic reason. Accuracy of classification was 13.6 % for those who think that

Conclusion

judicial sentences are about right, 74.8% for those who think that judicial sentences are lenient, and 46.8% for those who consider judicial sentences to be too lenient.

For the role of harsh punishment in crime prevention one discriminant function was statistically significant, and 95.2% of the variance was explained by this function. Canonic correlation related to this significant first function was 0.38. Significant discriminant function was mostly defined by positive association with the punishment as sentencing goal. Accuracy of classification was 95% for those who think that harsh punishment plays very strong role in crime prevention, 17.2% for those who think that harsh punishment has moderate role in crime prevention, and only 1.7% for those who think that harsh punishment harsh punishment has weak role, or do not have influence on crime prevention.

For **the preference for sentence for burglary** one discriminant function was statistically significant, and 71.8% of the variance was explained by this function. Canonic correlation related to this significant first function was 0.22. Significant discriminant function was mostly defined by positive association with the rehabilitation as sentencing goal, gender, educational level and average monthly income, and by negative association with age. Accuracy of classification was 0% for those who prefer fine as suitable punishment for burglary, 40.3% for those who advocate prison sentence for burglary, and 76.7% for those who think that community work is appropriate punishment for the burglary.

Croatian public believed more in rehabilitation than punishment as a primary sentencing goal, and they attribute criminal behavior mostly to the social factors, then to individual or the economic factors. Majority of Croatian respondents, similar to those in other countries, believed that judicial practices are in general lenient or too lenient, but in the hypothetical case of burglary relative majority preferred community work as the most suitable punishment for this type of crime. Classification results showed that depending on the type of used dependent variable, and the type of response given to each variable, 0% to 95.2% of original grouped cases were correctly classified. Definition of each significant function showed to be related to the type of dependent variable. Regardless of the type of dependent variable, canonic correlation for the first significant discriminant function ranged from 0.22 to 0.30. Definition of the first significant function showed to be related to the type of dependent variable, but in each case it was mostly defined by the punishment or rehabilitation as sentencing goals.