

Public opinion on probation, punitiveness and sentencing goals

International Society of Political Psychology Annual Scientific Meeting

July 03 - 07 2014, Rome – Italy



Ines Sučić

Background

The media plays an integral part in creating public opinions and beliefs on various social issues, including crime and criminal justice, but also influences the views and practices of the major social institutions they report on, including the criminal justice system.

Public and individual perceptions of criminal punishment and sentencing not only can give insight into the level of information the public have about different correctional measures, but can also affect how the criminal justice system responds to criminal behavior.

Personal and crime-related characteristics as well as attitudes and beliefs have been shown to be highly influential factors in the punishment preferences of the public but not yet fully investigated.

Methodology



SAMPLE 1

- newspapers' and magazines' articles on probation (2009 – 2013)
- 533 newspaper articles identified - 390 articles suitable for analysis
- 82,5% published in daily newspapers



SAMPLE 2 & 3

- nationally representative samples of adults
- public opinion poll 2005 and 2014
- 2005: N= 913, 45 % males
- 2014: N = 1 000, 48,3% males

Results

Related to the creation and definition of public image of contemporary probation service and its' purposes in the media over the five-year period, in only 13,6% cases probation emerged on the newspapers' cover pages, and in only 38,5% articles probation was the main topic. Thus probation has relatively low visibility. Moreover, in 81% of analyzed articles issues surrounding probation were superficially elaborated. The majority of the coverage of probation was either positive (41%) or neutral (24%) in tone, but in 2011 and 2012 a negative tone also became more pronounced. In about quarter of analyzed articles following broad theme were mentioned: expectations from inducing probation service, collaboration of probation officers with other professionals, instruments and technologies officers use in practice. In newspaper articles introduction of probation service was the most commonly promoted by stressing the reduction of prisons' overcrowding, reduction of financial costs, and offenders' resocialization. However, over the years accent given to potential benefits of probation slightly shifted. Thus recently probation was more attached to offenders' resocialization than to reduction of prisons' overcrowding in media discourse. During the five-year period raised the number of newspaper articles in which expectation from probation and collaboration with other professionals were mentioned, and in which specific experiences from practice were described.

In 2014 survey, 87,3% respondents indicated they never heard about the term probation, but when explained what it is one third (35,3%) was in favor and third (34,4%) opposed probation.

Table 1: Victims of crime – life time prevalence (%)

victims of crime			
YEAR	any crime	violent crime	non-violent crime
2005	26	6	24.4
2014	28.1	11.8	23.9

Table 2: Fear of crime

t-test (years)		2005		2014	
		M	SD	M	SD
Safety	t=2.649 df=1164 p=.008	1.82	.660	1.95	.711
Worry	t=0.695 df=1168 p=.487	2.27	.749	2.23	.710

Table 5: Summary of the multiple regression analysis (only statistically significant β in third step are shown)

VARIABLES	sentence leniency		goal - punishment		goal - rehabilitation	
	2014	2005	2014	2005	2014	2005
Gender					.094	
Age			.100	.119		
Education						
Income						
Urbanization						-.135
I STEP - R ²	.010	.014	.032	.032	.017	.036
Victimization				-.087		
Feelings of safety						
Worry						
II STEP R ² CHANGE	.002	.000	.002	.012	.004	.006
Individual causes of crime			.226	.170		
Social causes of crime	-.110	-.142			.124	
FINAL STEP R ² CHANGE	.012	.018	.052	.027	.015	.011

SOCIODEMOGRAPHICS

age, sex, educational level, income, urbanization

CRIME – RELATED CHARACTERISTICS

previous victimization (life time prevalence) – 1 item (yes / no)
fear of crime – FA - 2 scales - feelings of safety & worry - 4 point Likert scale

ATTITUDINAL VARIABLES

attributions about the crime causes (4 items, 5 point Likert scale - adapted from Carroll et al 1987) AND principal components FA with varimax rotation – 2 factor solution (social and individual)

SENTENCING LENIENCY

global measure (1 item, 5 point Likert scale)

APPROVAL OF PROBATION MEASURES

global measure (1 item, 5 point Likert scale)

SENTENCING GOALS

sentencing goals (4 items, 5 point Likert scale (adapted from Carroll et al, 1987) AND principal components FA with varimax rotation – 2 factor solution - punishment and rehabilitation

A bit more than quarter of the respondents were at least once victim of crime during lifetime (26% in 2005, and 28.1% in 2014) (Table 1). On average respondent feel fairly safe and mostly not worried about becoming a victims of crime (Table 2). The majority of respondents (66.2%; 62.1%) believed that Croatian judicial practices are lenient or too lenient (Table 3). In 2005 respondents believed more in rehabilitation than punishment as sentencing goal (t(906)=7.045; p<.00), while in 2014 respondents believed more in punishment than rehabilitation as a sentencing goal (t(806)=11.998; p<0.01) (Table 4). In 2005 and 2014 respondents attributed criminal behavior significantly more to social factors than to individual factors (t(903)=5.036; p<0.01 in 2005; t(729)=8.542; p<0.01- in 2014) (Table 4).

Table 3: Sentencing leniency – (%)

Judical practices in Croatia are....		
YEAR	2005	2014
too harsh and harsh	3.5	7
about right	19.2	17.0
lenient and too lenient	66.2	62.1
M	4.01	3.98
SD	.876	.999
t-test (years)	t(1678)=0.797 p=.426	

Table 4: Sentencing goals and causation of crime – descriptives and differences

VARIABLES	t-test (years)	2005		2014	
		M	SD	M	SD
Sentencing goal – punishment	t=1.415 df=1814 p=.157	3.88	.902	3.92	.772
Sentencing goal – rehabilitation	t=17.611 df=1730 p<.001	4.14	.811	3.37	.995
Individual causation of crime	t=1.010 df=1701 P=.312	2.97	.942	2.99	.857
Social causation of crime	t=4.514 df=1721 p<.001	3.15	.903	3.35	.827

In 2014 in comparison to 2005 respondents felt less safe in Croatia (t(1164)=2.65, p<.001) (Table 2), argued less in favor of rehabilitation as sentencing goal (t(1730)=17.611, p<.001 η^2 = .163) and attributed criminal behavior more to social circumstances (t(1721)=4.514, p<.001), η^2 = .014 (Table 4).

In 2014 approval of probation was positively associated with favoring rehabilitation as sentencing goal (r(817)=.171), and negatively with favoring punishment as sentencing goal (r(900)=-.130). However, when put in multiple regression analysis socio-demographic variables, crime-related characteristics, and attitudinal variables were not significant predictors of probation approval.

In 2014 attributing criminal behavior to individual characteristics was positively related with favoring punishment as sentencing goal (r(900)=.269), while attributing criminal behavior to social circumstances was positively related with favoring rehabilitation as sentencing goal (r (733)=.139). Those who thought that judicial practices in Croatia are too lenient approved probation less (r(856)=-.101), believed more in punishment as sentencing goal (r(806)=.171), and attributed criminal behavior less to social causes (r(730)=-.126).

To analyze contribution of socio-demographic variables, crime-related characteristics, and attitudinal variables in predicting the observed severity of sentences and views on sentencing goals multiple regression analysis was performed for the 2005 and 2014 data separately (Table 5). Overall, in both years contributions of the crime-related characteristics to the prediction of sentencing leniency and sentencing goals were non-significant, as well as contribution of socio-demographic characteristics to observed sentencing leniency. Of all dependent variables, favoring punishment as a sentencing goal was the best predicted by chosen set of predictors in both years. In both years, after controlling for socio-demographic and crime-related characteristics, older age remained significant predictor of favoring punishment as sentencing goal, and attributing criminal behavior more to individual characteristics was the best predictor of favoring punishment as sentencing goal. Attributing criminal behavior less to social characteristics was the best predictor of observing sentences in Croatia as too lenient. Only in 2014, being of female gender and attributing criminal behavior more to social characteristics predicted favoring rehabilitation as sentencing goal after controlling for other variables.

Conclusion

Based on the media representation but also public opinion (only 12,3% respondents heard about term probation) it can be concluded that probation has relatively low visibility. Overall, majority of the newspaper coverage of probation was either positive or neutral in tone, and one third of public was in favor of this alternative sanction. As expected, approval of probation was positively associated with favoring rehabilitation, and negatively with favoring punishment as sentencing goal. In newspapers articles, probation service was the most commonly promoted by stressing the reduction of prisons' overcrowding, reduction of financial costs, and offenders' resocialization, but overall issues surrounding probation were superficially elaborated. In 2005 and 2014 respondents attributed criminal behavior significantly more to social than to individual factors, but in 2014 respondents felt less safe in Croatia, argued less in favor of rehabilitation as sentencing goal and attributed criminal behavior more to social circumstances than in 2005. In both years, after controlling for socio-demographic and crime-related characteristics, older age and attributing criminal behavior more to the individual characteristics predicted significantly favoring punishment as sentencing goal. Also attributing criminal behavior less to social characteristics was the best predictor of observing sentences in Croatia as too lenient.