

What Impacts People's Perceptions and Judgement Regarding the Balance of Punishment and Rehabilitation in Criminal Justice Systems?

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ABSTRACT

In this paper our goal was to understand what impacts perception and judgment of the balance of punishment and rehabilitation so that we could learn how to better inform people on the benefits of rehabilitation. Previous research has determined punitiveness is affected by knowledge of criminology, media, perception of crime levels, and education. In our correlational study, we tested the strength of these relationships by examining naturalistic daily changes in their variables longitudinally over a two-week period. This was tested using a daily survey which measured exposure to media, criminological education, levels of fear of crime, and punitiveness. Data pooled from our study showed there was a correlation between the consumption of local news and an increased fear of crime, as well as a correlation between the consumption of media that promotes harsh on crime views and an increase in punitiveness. However, there was no correlation found between the consumption of criminological education tabloid news and an increase in punitiveness.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Problem

Perceptions of the public affect the method of dealing with those convicted of a crime. The psychological need for criminal actions to be punished demands understanding by those who wish to work in the criminal justice system because the desire for retribution plays a key role into how the justice system is designed. Groups such as news media, political parties and education systems have the ability to create content that can affect how people view

crime and punishment. The perceptions of the public are highly influenced by various types of interest groups, making the way individuals view crime and punishment a reflection of what is told or shown to them. We wish to better understand what different factors impact people's perceptions and judgments in terms of punishment and rehabilitation in the justice system.

1.2 Literature Review

Previous research indicates that a person's knowledge of criminology will impact their views on policies surrounding

crime, punishment, and rehabilitation. When researchers (Griffin et al., 2016) electronically surveyed both experts and members of the general public using national poll questions, their direct statistical comparison produced telling results. Criminal Justice experts were more liberal in their responses than the general public, clearly favouring rehabilitative policies over punitive ones. Criminal Justice experts were also more likely to be found in favour of drug legislation reforms than the general public. This confirmed the research's hypothesis that education in Criminal Justice led to an individual possessing a more empathetic and science-based view of crime and punishment.

Another factor previously found to influence an individual's perception of crime and subsequent punishment is media coverage. In a survey collected at three American universities and one Canadian university, researchers (Kohm et al., 2012) explored how different media coverage impacted university student's fears of crime. The research confirmed previous studies in which media salience is a significant predictor of fear of crime. The research concluded that television news and social media, particularly dating sites, increased the students' level of fear of crime. Factoring in controls for respondent characteristics, estimated risk of victimization, and concern about crime, the study ultimately concluded that those who identified Local TV news as their primary source of crime news were significantly more fearful of crime than those who sourced from other outlets.

In addition, factors such as perception of crime levels, and the type of media consumed affect the punitiveness of a population. Research done by Spiranovic et al. (2012) found that after surveying 5,571 randomly selected Australian participants,

measuring punitiveness with a survey using a five-point Likert scale. The scores ranged from a scale of 7 to 35, with 35 being the most punitive. Participants who had a higher than normal perception of the amount of crime that was being committed were more punitive, and the media consumed by a participant also impacted their punitiveness, with those who consumed tabloid news being the most punitive.

Repeated messaging by the media has also been found to affect how members of a survey in Wisconsin viewed the death penalty or rehabilitation of prisoners. In a 2001 study, Sotirovic found that after surveying 395 adults in Wisconsin that those who displayed more complex thoughts tended to have more moderate views on the death penalty or rehabilitation, while those with simpler thoughts tended to have more extreme attitudes towards the death penalty or rehabilitation. The media consumed by the simple thought process group was more likely to repeat messages supporting either the death penalty or rehabilitation (Sotirovic, 2001).

1.3 Hypotheses

- Hypothesis #1: If a person is exposed to a criminological education, they are less punitive.
- Hypothesis #2: The more local news a person consumes, the more likely it is for that person to experience fear of crime.
- Hypothesis #3: Consumption of tabloid news increases punitiveness.
- Hypothesis #4: Consumption of media that repeats messages of harsher punishment increases punitiveness.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

The two authors of this paper served as the participants in its studies. The participants ranged in age from 19-22 years old, with an average age of 20.5 years, and included one female and one male. The participants were all undergraduate students at Camosun College who completed the current studies as an assignment for Psyc 110 "Experimental Psychology" and were grouped together due to their mutual interest in what impacts people's perceptions and judgement regarding the balance of punishment and rehabilitation in criminal justice systems. Both participants are students of the Criminal Justice program at Camosun College.

2.2 Materials and Procedure

We first performed a correlational study to test concurrently all of our hypotheses by examining naturalistic daily changes in their variables longitudinally. Each participant kept a study journal with them at all times over this study's two-week period in order to record self-observations of the following six variables: (1) level of education in criminology (2) consumption of local news (3) consumption of tabloid news, (4) consumption of programs with repeated messaging of harsh punishment of crime, (5) punitiveness, and (6) fear of crime.

Participants indicated their exposure to criminological education on a daily basis. This could be done through reading academic articles or consuming programs created by criminologists. The participants measured their exposure by recording each time they consumed material from the discipline of criminology. This number was tallied at the end of the day and recorded.

In a daily survey, participants recorded their intake of local news in a study journal. The amount of local news was recorded by the minute and the total number of minutes was recorded at the end of each day.

To measure the levels of tabloid news consumed by participants daily, they kept a journal to measure the amount using time as a measurement. For example, one might record that they consumed 20 minutes of tabloid news on a given day. Tabloid was defined using the Merriam-Webster Dictionary definition "featuring stories of violence, crime, or scandal presented in a sensational manner".

The participants also measured how much of the content they consumed in a day, repeated messaging of harsh criminal punishment. This was measured on a five-point Likert scale. In their study journal they recorded on a content to content basis; this could be news stories, social media posts or television shows etc.... The scale ranges from 1= not crime related, 2= not tough on crime, 3= fair on crime, 4= tough on crime, 5= harsh on crime. At the end of the day the participants averaged their results for that day and recorded that average.

Study participants recorded in their study journals each time they felt punitive throughout the day. Punitiveness was defined as 'feeling that someone should be punished for a crime'. The participants added the number of times they felt punitive up at the end of the day to record a daily total.

Participants also recorded in their study journals their fear of crime on a daily basis throughout the two-week study. They indicated their fear of crime on a five-point scale: 1= no fear of crime, 2= little fear of crime, 3= fear of crime, 4= very fearful of crime, and 5= Immense fear of crime. The survey was taken at the end of each day.

To assess the strength and statistical significance of associations between variables predicted by our four hypotheses, we performed Pearson product moment correlations of their predictor variables (criminological education, consumption of local news, consumption of tabloid news, and consumption of content with repeated messaging) with their outcome variable (punitiveness). For testing Hypothesis #1, we correlated the amount of criminological education with the participants' punitiveness. For testing Hypotheses #2, we correlated the amount of consumption of local news with the level of fear of crime based on the participants' daily response. For testing Hypothesis #3, we correlated the amount of tabloid news consumed in a day with the level of punitiveness the respondent recorded they felt on that day, and their perception of crime levels. For testing Hypothesis #4, we correlated punitiveness, with the amount of content the respondent consumed that had repeated messages that promoted harsh punishment for crime. We performed all of the above correlations separately for each participant as well as using data pooled across all of the participants. For the correlations using pooled data, in addition to using the raw data, we also performed correlations after we had first transformed the data from each participant into *z*-scores in order to standardize differences in averages and variability seen between the participants in their data and thus make them more comparable. A correlation coefficient was considered statistically significant if the probability of its random occurrence (*p*) was $< .05$ (i.e., less than 5% of the time expected by chance alone).

3. Results

As shown in Table 1, there was a significant correlation between the amount of local news watched in a day and the time spent worrying about crime. There was also a significant correlation between how harsh on crime the media consumed was and the amount of punitiveness felt in a day. There was not a significant correlation between criminological education, and tabloid news on punitiveness felt in a day. While significant for Participant #1 ($r = .58, p = 0.03$), criminological education was not significantly correlated with punitiveness with the data from Participant #2 ($r = -0.26, p = 0.37$), with the pooled raw data ($r = .03, p = .87$; see Figure 1), nor with the pooled standardized data ($r = 0.16, p = .42$). Local News was significantly correlated with the amount of time spent worrying about crime for both participants ($r \leq .76, p \geq .001$), with the pooled raw data ($r = .76, p = 6.28E-07$; see Figure 2), and with the pooled standardized data ($r = .75, p = 1.26E-06$) were both significant. Tabloid news consumption was significantly correlated with punitiveness using the data from Participant #1 ($r = .72, p = .003$), but not from Participant #2's ($r = -0.10, p = 0.74$), with the pooled raw data ($r = .16, p = .42$; see Figure 3), nor with the pooled standardized data ($r = .31, p = .11$). Media with harsh messaging on crime was significantly correlated with punitiveness for both participants ($r \leq .73, p \geq .002$) with the pooled raw data ($r = .57, p = .001$), and with the pooled standardized data ($r = .65, p = .0001$). The association between the amount of time spent watching local news and the amount of time spent worrying about crime showed the strongest correlation with an *r*-value of .76 based off the pooled raw data.

4. Discussion

4.1 Summary of Results

Based on previous research we hypothesized that three variables would lead to an increase in punitiveness; these were low levels of criminological education (hypothesis #1), consumption of tabloid news (hypothesis #3), and consumption of news that promotes a harsh on crime message (hypothesis #4). Based on the pooled data of our participants in the correlational study, only the consumption of harsh on crime media supported the prediction of increased punitiveness. We also hypothesized based on previous research that the amount of time participants spent watching local news everyday would correlate to an increase in the amount of time they spent worrying about crime (hypothesis #2). The pooled data from the correlational study showed that there was support for the prediction that it did increase the amount of time spent worrying about crime.

4.2 Relation of Results to Past Research

If a person is exposed to a criminological education, they are less punitive (Hypothesis #1) did not share the same results as the previous study. The original study outlined a strong correlation between an educational background in criminology and the favouring of rehabilitation over punishment done through an electronic survey (Griffin et al., 2016). Our study with two participants over a two-week period showed little correlation between criminological education and the need for punishment. It is important to note however, that both participants hold similar levels of criminological education and that a two-

week time period is not sufficient for the level criminological education to change. It is possible that both the limited number of participants and the limited time period skewed the results of Hypothesis #1.

Hypothesis #2 stated that the more local news a person consumes, the more likely it is for that person to experience fear of crime. This hypothesis was based on a survey done by Kohm et al. (2012) that collected surveys from three American universities and one Canadian university, and showed how different media coverage impacted university students' fears of crime. Our study done by two people over two weeks showed the more consumption of local news there was then the more fear of crime was displayed. This finding is in line with the previous research.

Our finding on tabloid news (Hypothesis #3) is not in line with previous studies. Research done by Spiranovic et al. (2012) found that people who consume tabloid news are more likely to be punitive than those who do not. This study was conducted with over 5,000 participants. In our correlational study the participants consumed very little tabloid news, which may have led to insignificant results. Future studies should be done with a larger participant group to gain for diverse results, as well as doing an experiment in which tabloid news can be controlled as a variable. This may be able to determine whether there is a correlation between tabloid news and punitiveness, while controlling for the confounding variable of the type of people who watch tabloid news by choice.

The findings on media with harsh messages of crime (Hypothesis #4) is in line with previous research. Sotirovic (2001) found through a survey done on adults in Wisconsin that those surveyed who agreed with the death penalty tended to consume media that promoted messages of a harsh on

crime stance. While our study was different in that it measured the amount of harsh on crime media that participants consumed and how many times they felt punitive in a day; we still found similar results in that the more media you consume that promotes a harsh on crime message leads to higher rates of punitiveness.

References

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Table 1

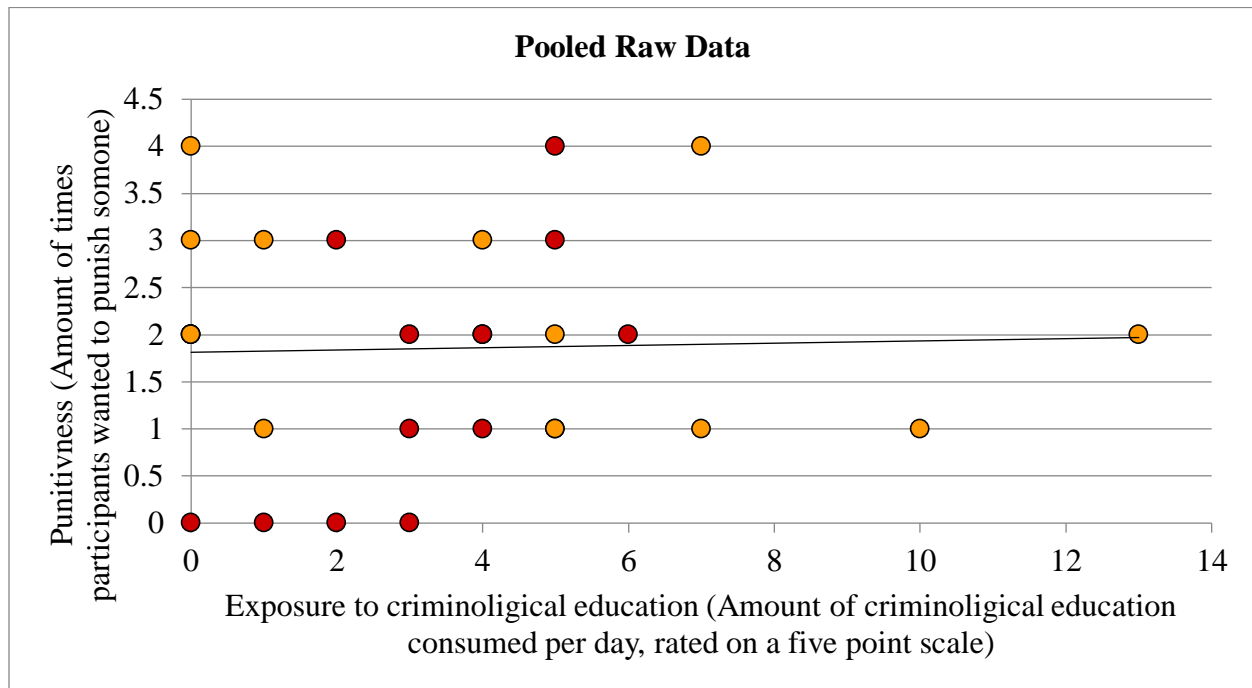
Correlation coefficient (r) values, with number of daily trials (n) per correlation in brackets.

Variables correlated	Participant #1	Participant #2	Pooled raw data	Pooled standardized data
Criminological Education & Punitiveness	.58(14)	-0.26(14)	.03(28)	.16(28)
Local News & Fear of Crime	.76(14)	.74(14)	.76(28)*	.75(28)*
Tabloid News Consumption & Punitiveness	.72(14)	-0.10(14)	.16(28)	.31(28)
Harsh on Crime Media & Punitiveness	.73(14)	.57(14)	.57(28)*	.65(28)*

* $p < .05$.

Figure 1

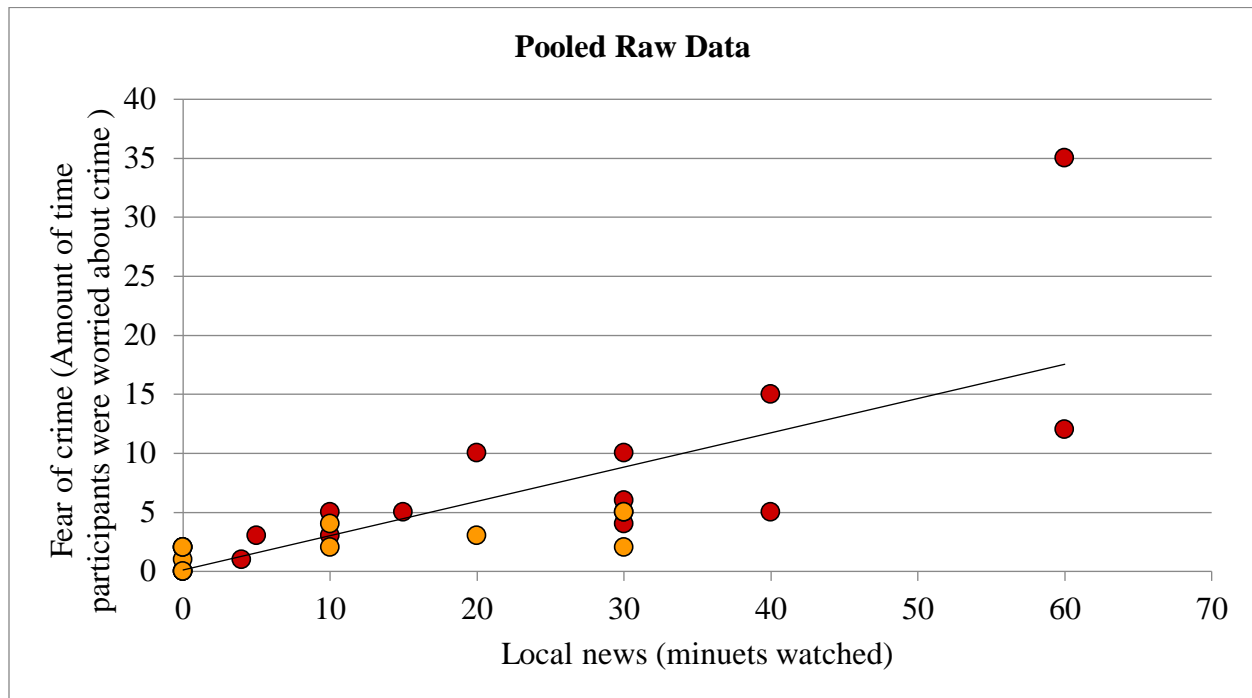
Scatterplot of daily exposure to criminological education and the outcome it has on the amount of time participants felt punitive in a day using pooled raw data across participants.



Marker color indicates which participant data is from: red = participant #1, and orange = participant #2. Some data might not be visible in the figure due to overlapping markers.

Figure 2

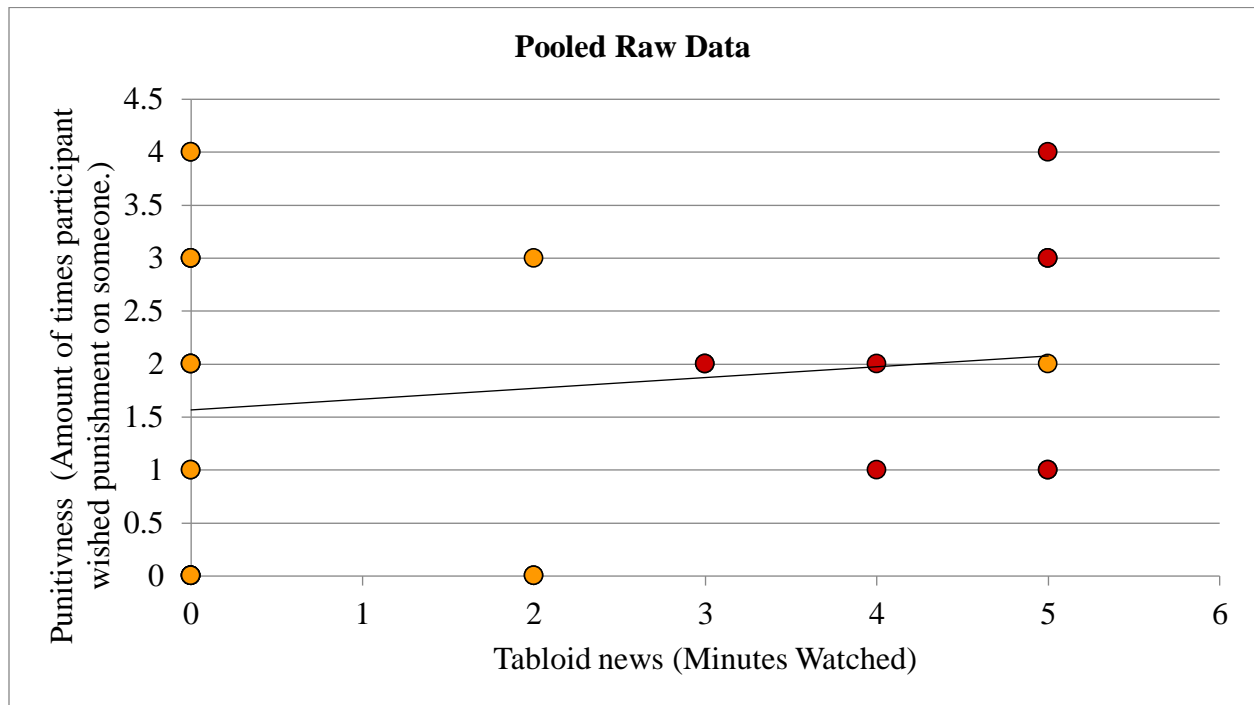
Scatterplot of minutes of local news consumed in a day and the amount of time in minutes, participants worried about crime, using pooled raw data across participants.



Marker color indicates which participant data is from: red = participant #1, and orange = participant #2. Some data might not be visible in the figure due to overlapping markers.

Figure 3

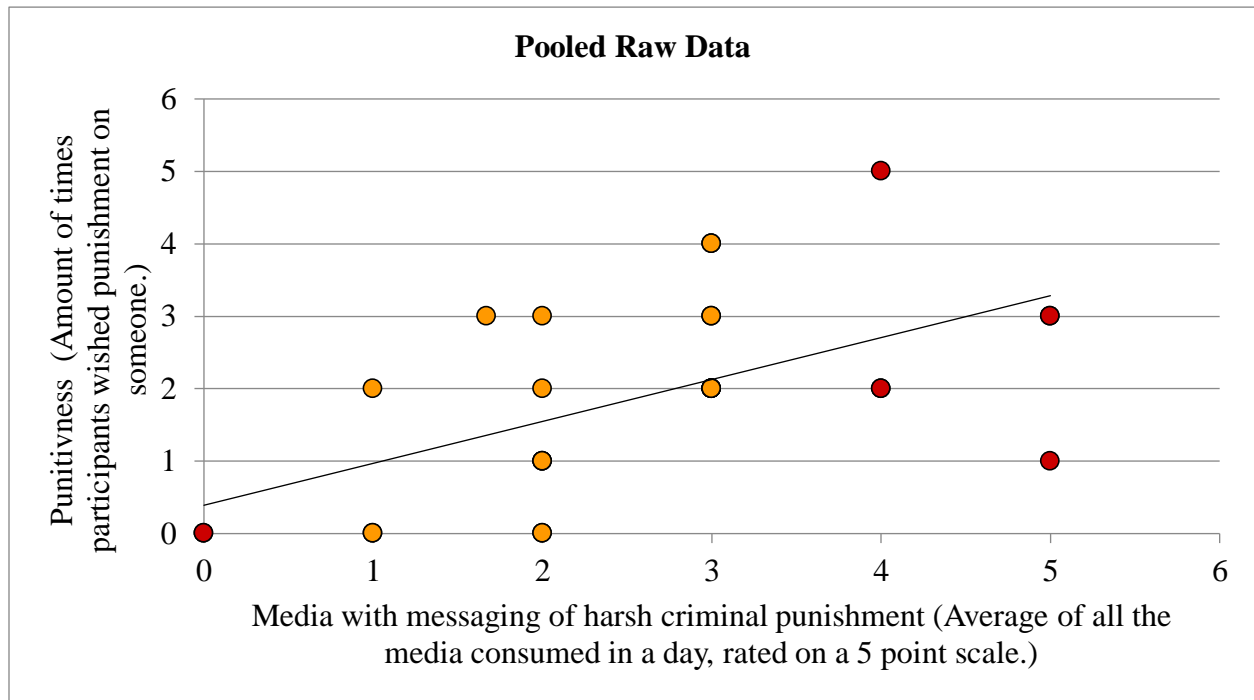
Scatterplot of tabloid news consumed in a day and the amount of times participants felt punitive, using pooled raw data across participants.



Marker color indicates which participant data is from: red = participant #1, and orange = participant #2. Some data might not be visible in the figure due to overlapping markers.

Figure 4

Scatterplot of daily consumption of harsh on crime media and the amount of times participants felt punitive in a day, using pooled [type here “raw” or “standardized”] data across participants.



Marker color indicates which participant data is from: red = participant #1, and orange = participant #2. Some data might not be visible in the figure due to overlapping markers.