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Crime Media, Punitiveness, and Fear

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Motivating Questions

Public opinion and media framing of crime and race issues tend to ebb and flow, but they are generally in line with government policy (Kellstedt, 2003). Only recently has TV stations become a more prominent source of news for many Americans (Rosenthal, 2007), and many claim that this media's focus on certain types of violence and certain types of criminals elicits harsher punitive attitudes among viewers and reinforces racial & criminal stereotypes. Violence and crime are a national problem, not a racial problem (Convington, 2010).

Kellestedt (2003) writes that the media coverage of minorities have generally told of their crippling poverty and crime. Yet the question of whether there is bias in the judicial system remains controversial. Unspoken hierarchies (Durkheim's Anomie) may have slowly formed and are being reinforced. Over time, Gardner's Cultivation Hypothesis (Dyson, 2011) would say TV socializes its viewers into feeling more antipathy towards criminals, to overestimate crime rates (Mean World Syndrome) and to support harsher sentencing laws.

Allegations of racial bias or that the criminal justice system is broken have been shown to be countered with increased support for the punitiveness in whites (Peffley & Herwitz, 2007). It is therefore important to examine attitudes towards the efficacy of criminal justice in determining punishment.

Lipschultz & Hilt (2002) explain that the theme of crime news is disorder or harm, but only abnormal or heinous crimes are given priority. Given the incentives to sensationalize, it's no surprise that criminals are framed negatively. However, some have found that black criminals and political leaders are usually framed as more threatening and hostile (Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002). Also, when primed with racial stereotypes on TV, Gilliam et al (2002) found that whites in white neighborhoods endorsed more punitive policies to address crime.

Callanan (2005) found that the strongest predictors of support for the punitive 3-strikes law were fear of crime, crime media consumption, and the belief that the crime rate was on the rise. Accordingly:

Relevancy

Given the ongoing controversy over racial bias in law enforcement, given disproportionate sentencing, given the ongoing debate over affirmative action, given the ongoing financial impasse of the lower class, given that we have the a prison population irresponsibly large, given that the war on drugs is by all consensus a disastrous failure, given the resurgence of race-based riots in MO & MD and given that we are the only advanced country to still execute prisoners, I hypothesize the following:

Hypotheses

- H1: Consuming real crime media predicts higher perception of crime rate change than fictional crime media**
H2: Fear of violent crime predicts higher perception of crime rates
H3: Belief that crime is a moral issue predicts higher perception of crime rate and higher punitiveness
H4: Holding punitive attitudes towards criminals increases the perception of the crime rate
H5: Belief that crime is an economic issue predicts belief that the judicial system is racially biased

Correlational Data

H 1

WatchCrimeMedia*CrimeRateChange: $r=.27^{**}$
 WatchGeneralTV*CrimeRateChange: $r=.238^{**}$
 WatchFictionCrime*CrimeRateChange: $r=.167^{**}$
 WatchCrimeMedia*ViolentCrimeFear: $r=.163^{**}$

H 2

FearViolentCrimeIdx*CrimeRateChangeIdx: $r=.244^{**}$
 SafeWalkingAtNight*CrimeRateChange: $r=.172^{**}$
 AfraidBeingMurdered(a)*CrimeRateChangeIdx: $r=.213^{**}$
 RiotsAreMoreCommon*CrimeRateChangeIdx: $r=.234^{**}$

H 3

CrimeDueToEvilForces(a)*CrimeRateChangeIdx: $r=.32^{**}$
 CrimeDueToEvilForces(a)*PunitiveAttitudesIdx: $r=.408^{**}$
 CrimeDueToMorality(b)*CrimeRateChangeIdx: $r=.38^{**}$
 CrimeDueToMorality(b)*PunitiveAttitudesIdx: $r=.42^{**}$

H 4

PunitiveAttitudesIdx*CrimeRateChangeIdx: $r=.298^{**}$
 LimitingAppealsDeathRow*CrimeRateChangeIdx: $r=.27^{**}$
 WantsHarsherSentencing(e)*CrimeRateChangeIdx: $r=.26^{**}$
 WantsMoreEffectiveJustice(c)*PunitiveAttitudesIdx: $r=.48^{**}$
 WantsMoreEffectiveJustice(c)*CrimeRateChangeIdx: $r=.324^{**}$

H 5

Crime'sAnEconIssue(f)*WantsMoreEffectiveJustice: $r=.34^{**}$
 Crime'sAnEconIssue(f)*There'sBiasJudicialSys(g): $r=.29^{**}$

** $p<.001$ (a) 78.2% YES (b) 84.8% YES (c) 83%YES (d) 23.4% YES
 (e) 56.6% YES (f) 82.7% YES (g) 45% YES

Multivariate Regression: Modeling Perception of the Crime Rate (DV) through Crime Media Consumption, Fear of Crime, Perceived Cause of Crime & Punitive Attitudes

Model 1	Unstandardized Coefficient	Unstandardized Coefficient	Standardized Coefficient	Sig.
	B	Std. Error		
(Constant)	6.313	.802		.000
Index of fear of Mugging thru shooting, $\alpha=.928$.225	.026	.222	.000
Overall watching, true crime, fiction crime, $\alpha=.676$.472	.056	.208	.000
Want to [make sentences more severe for all crimes]	1.418	.175	.202	.000
White_DummyVariable	-1.784	.333	-.137	.000

Dependent Variable: Crime Rate Change battery, $\alpha=.924$. $R^2=.174$. Adjusted $R^2=.171$. Std. Error of Estimate=5.6. $n=1,356$

Interpretation

After checking correlations between the variables, multivariate regression analysis was performed to test the effects of 4 IVs on Perception of Crime Change Battery (DV). Model 1 summarizes the results of this analysis. They suggest that these 4 factors explain 17.1% of the variance in the sample (Adj. $R^2=.171$, $F(4,1385) = 72.5$, $p<.001$). The variable 'Index of fear Mugging thru Shooting' represents fear of violent crime, and held the most significant predictive power ($\beta = .222$, $p<.001$). The next most predictive term was crime media consumption ($\beta = .208$, $p<.001$). Punitiveness, operationalized by the question 'we should make sentences more severe for all crime' was the third most predicative factor, ($\beta = .202$, $p<.001$). Finally, being white had a negative beta, ($\beta = -.137$, $p<.001$), which means that white individuals were less likely see the crime rate go up than other ethnicities, though it is the weakest predictor overall. This model stands in contrast to another, in which an index of punitive attitudes ($\alpha=.871$), the index of fear of mugging thru shooting ($\alpha=.928$), watching shows about real crime, and the belief that the crime rate would be lower if we 'had stronger moral values in this country'. That last variable was the way we operationalized the belief in the cause of crime being individual-level moral traits and not macro-level economic conditions. While the overall model predicted more of the variance ($R^2.228$. Adjusted $R^2=.226$), the predictive power of all the variables dropped significantly, while it was the highest ($\beta = .281$, $p<.001$).

Crime Rate Change battery (DV): 'Compared to 20 years ago, how common is [child abduction, gang violence, human trafficking, pedophilia, school shooting, serial killers, sexual assault], seen in light of the generally downward trends of those crimes since the 1990's.
Index of Punitive Attitudes: Consider criminals, would you '[want more severe sentencing, use death penalty for youth, limit appeals for death row, use three strikes laws, use chemical castration on sex offenders, or reduce prisoner recreational privileges].
Index fear violent crime: 'how afraid are you to fall victim to [mugging, stalking, murder, ID theft, mass shooting, rape, hate crime]'

Findings

H1: Confirmed. Crime media consumption fits well into the model, and correlational data shows that true crime is indeed different than fiction or TV in general.

H2: Confirmed. Fear of violent crime fits well into the model, and features crimes that news typically covers.

H3: Confirmed. Viewing crime as due to evil or a moral problem predicted both crime rate change and punitive attitudes.

H4: Confirmed. This is almost the foundation of the model, where punitiveness and crime rate perception are positively correlated. Using 'should criminal justice should be more effective in reducing crime' as a measure of endorsing harsher enforcement, we can link punitive attitudes towards criminals to increase perceived crime rate.

H5: Mixed. Belief that crime is an employment issue is associated with the same measure as H4, 'criminal justice should be more effective', suggesting that the measure can also be seen as becoming more lenient to become 'effective'. It also predicted the belief that there is bias in law enforcement

Conclusions

The data seems to support the basic premise that crime media consumption, punitive attitudes, and crime rate perception tend to increase parallel to each other. Nevertheless, the connection between punitiveness and crime rate perception is still somewhat substantial even without crime media consumption. Blaming economic causes of crime predicts seeing racial bias in justice system. Believing crime media caused crime was insignificant.

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