THE INFLUENCE OF CRIME-RELATED MEDIA ON PERCEIVED GOALS OF CRIMINAL SENTENCING

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THE INFLUENCE OF CRIME-RELATED MEDIA ON PERCEIVED GOALS OF CRIMINAL SENTENCING

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Thesis

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of crime-related media consumption on an individual’s perceptions of the most important goal of criminal sentencing should be, using a statewide survey of 4245 California residents. Consumption of various forms of crime-related media were regressed on four perceived goals of criminal sentencing (punishment, incapacitation, deterrence, and rehabilitation) using multinomial logistic regression. The results suggest that consumption of crime-based reality shows and television news programs significantly influence respondents to select punishment as the most important goal of criminal sentencing, in comparison to rehabilitation. In addition, 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 socio-demographic characteristics, and experiences with crime such as fear, past victimization, and previous personal or household arrests. This study suggests that watching television in general and consumption of “realistic” crime-related media significantly reduce the likelihood that individuals would support rehabilitation as the most important goal of criminal sentencing.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

From 1980 to 2007 the incarceration rate in the United States rose by well over 300%, jumping from 139 people per 100,000 in 1980 to 506 in 2007 (Maguire and Pastore 2007). Despite popular misconceptions, this striking increase did not correspond with an equally dramatic rise in the amount of crime being committed. In fact, violent crime has been steadily dropping in the United States since 1990 (Uniform Crime Report 2008). The contradiction between lower crime rates and the explosion of the United States prison population may be attributable to a number of events experienced in American society over the last 40 to 50 years. These include an increase in reported crime beginning in 1960, a new and politically successful conservative platform aiming to “get tough on crime,” and American’s fascination with crime through television and other media outlets.

Political campaigns using the anti-crime platform began in the 1960’s around the time crime in the United States began to rise, and many politicians found success in using this safe and popular topic as a focal point of their campaigns (Davey 1998). Despite the fact that crime rates leveled in the following years, the success of politicians running on these “get tough on crime” platforms, coupled with increased mass media attention to
crime, kept the issue at the top of citizen’s list of concerns. Policies were created using dramatic rhetoric such as “three strikes and you’re out” and “zero tolerance” (Haghighi and Lopez 1998), and were all overwhelmingly supported by the public. Political campaigns promoting these policies were often coupled with media representations of particularly heinous crimes mostly involving especially innocent and young victims. Perhaps the most well known example of this is the case of Polly Klaas, a 12-year-old California girl kidnapped and murdered by an ex-offender. This highly publicized case was used by the media and politicians to help pass the “three strikes law,” which mandated sentences of 25 years to life for Californians who committed three or more felonies (Males and Macallair 1999).

Over the last 30 years media coverage of crime has seen a striking increase (Roman and Chalfin 2008). Over the same period, reactions to crime and criminal justice policies dealing with crime have become much more punitive (Beckett and Sasson 2000; Garland 2001). During the early stages of the “war on crime,” which coincided with the initial increase in crime-related media, support for criminal rehabilitation decreased by 40 percent and support for punishment increased by 171 percent (Flanagan and Caulfield 1984). This may in part be due to the media framing crime as a major and ever-present problem, and reports of crime often select only the most gruesome and senseless depictions. In addition, the media consistently overrepresents the number of violent and sexually based crimes, while simultaneously underrepresenting the number of nonviolent white-collar crimes, which are far more common (Barak 1994). This leads not only to misconceptions about the prevalence of particular crimes, but an intense and often
behavior-altering fear of crime. To combat this fear, the public seems to have grown increasingly punitive, and more likely to support politician’s creation and implementation of strict anti-crime policies that have lead to the huge increases in the nation’s prison population.

On the surface, it appears that there is a relationship between the media and punitive attitudes; however, few empirical studies have tested the effects of crime-related media on individual-level punitive attitudes. Those which do examine this association primarily focus on socio-demographic explanations, or the individual’s experiences with crime. With a few exceptions, these studies have failed to establish consistent predictors of punitiveness. This failure suggests that other factors influence punitiveness and that punitive attitudes are not something we can link specifically to pockets or subsets of the United States’ population. Thus, it is possible that there exists a collective societal preference for punishment that is established or at least enhanced by an omnipresent third party, which I claim to be the mass media. The vast and ever expansive nature of the media makes exposure to its presentation of crime unavoidable, and research on the effect of crime-based media on its viewers suggests that individuals with no direct experience with crime will establish their opinions of crime through the media (Gerbner 1980). The inconsistency of some socio-demographic and experience variables, coupled with this finding, warrant further research exploring the relationship between the media and punitiveness.

This study examines the influence of crime-related media consumption on individual’s perceptions of the most important goal of criminal sentencing using a
statewide survey of 4245 California residents. The four perceived goals of criminal sentencing (punishment, incapacitation, deterrence, and rehabilitation) are regressed on consumption of various forms of crime-related media using multinomial logistic regression. Specific research questions explored in the analysis include; does consumption of crime-related media affect attitudes toward each of these four goals of sentencing and if so, does consumption increase punitive attitudes and decrease support for rehabilitation? Findings allow me to theorize on possible implications of the relationship between media and punitiveness, as well as, make predictions on the future effects of media on criminal sentencing.

When looking at possible media effects, it is important to note that studies often struggle to find significant findings due to the inability to test the null hypothesis. In other words, media studies are difficult because they lack the ability to compare participants who have and have not been exposed to media representations. Media is ever-present in modern society, and all developed nations have numerous media outlets, including print and television. For those select groups of people who have never been exposed to the media, differences in culture make comparisons across these groups impossible. Media researchers are instead left to compare variations in exposure levels, which can and often limit significant findings. This study recognizes and discusses these limitations, as well as suggests methods that can help to overcome these issues.
Review of the Literature

Past research has tested a range of variables that influence punitive attitudes; however, most studies have focused primarily on punitiveness in relationship to capital punishment. While generally being willing to punish an offender and willingness to support the death penalty may be linked, they are two very different dimensions of punitiveness, which are likely influenced by different socio-demographic factors. The following review of punitiveness research recognizes these differences, and discusses past death penalty and general punitiveness research as linked, but substantively different.

As noted early, socio-demographic predictors of punitiveness have not been consistently established (Cullen et al. 1985; McCorkle 1993; Stinchcombe et al. 1980). For example, past research suggested that women hold less punitive attitudes than men, especially in the case of capital punishment (Cullen et al. 1985; Ellsworth and Gross 1994; Longmire 1996). However, recent studies on general punitiveness suggest that women may be equal to or even more punitive than men (Flanagan 1996; Haghighi and Lopez 1998; Thomas, Cage, and Foster 1976; Sprott 1999), despite women being significantly more likely to support rehabilitation or diversion programs (Haghighi and Lopez 1998; Sprott 1999).

Public opinion researchers consider race to be one of the most influential socio-demographic factors, as there are often large racial differences on issues of crime and justice. Although research on capital punishment consistently finds that African-Americans are far less likely to support the death penalty (Bohm 1991; Cochran and
Chamlin 2006; Longmire 1996), some studies testing non-death penalty punitive attitudes have found little to no racial differences (McCorkle 1993; Thomas et al. 1976). However, others have found that Whites tend to favor longer and more severe prison sentences (Johnson 2006; Rossi, Simpson, and Miller 1985) and are less likely to support rehabilitation efforts in comparison to African-Americans (Gerber and Engelhardt-Greer 1996). Overall, findings suggest that there is a gap between the punitive attitudes of Whites and Blacks; however, this gap may be smaller than other issues of crime, like public opinion of the police (see Cullen et al. 1996; Weitzer and Tuch 2005; Ackerman et al. 2001; Tyler 2005; Weitzer 2002).

Some research has suggested that the differences between Whites and Blacks are due to factors that correlate with punitiveness (Cohn, Barkan, and Halteeman 1991). For example, research has shown that the more prejudiced a person the more likely they are to support “get tough on crime” policies and more punitive sentences (Barkan and Cohn 2005; Cohn et al. 1991; Johnson 2008). Furthermore, it has been noted that new forms of punitive sentencing such as California’s “three strikes law” have disproportionately affected Blacks and Black communities (Cole 1999; Kennedy 2001). This could contribute to the perception that strict punishments are unjustly targeting African-Americans, and may leave some less willing to support sentences that are more punitive.

Other socio-demographic factors including age, education, and income have been included in past studies on punitive attitudes. McCorkle (1993) tested punitive attitudes toward six serious criminal offenses including robbery, rape, molestation, burglary, drug sale, and drug possession and found younger respondents to be significantly more
punitive towards rape. In contrast, other studies found the relationship between age and punitiveness to be reversed (Cullen et al. 1985; Haghighi and Lopez 1998) and some have found no relationship at all (Thomas et al. 1976). Part of the inconsistency of age is likely due to age and punitiveness having a curvilinear relationship. Supporting this idea, research has suggested that younger and older citizens are more vulnerable to crime (Franklin and Franklin 2009), which in turn may make them more likely to support punitive sentencing as a means of personal protection.

Multiple studies have tested the effects of both education and income on punitive attitudes (Cullen et al. 1985; Flanagan 1996; Thomas et al. 1976). Rossi and Berk (1997) found a strong correlation between higher levels of education and less punitive attitudes. Specifically, highly educated respondents were more likely to support shorter sentence lengths for various offenses, a finding that is in line with past studies on punitiveness (Dowler 2003; Hough, Lewis, and Walker 1988; McCorkle, 1993; Sprott and Doob 1997). Income, on the other hand, has been extremely inconsistent with some researchers finding an association between lower levels of income and punitive attitudes (Dowler, 2003) and others finding no relationship between the two (Cullen et al. 1985; Sprott and Doob 1997; Thomas et al. 1976).

Political ideology and religion may be two of the strongest predictors of punitiveness. Past research has found that political conservatives have much higher punitive attitudes than political liberals (Gerber and Engelhardt-Greer 1996; Stinchcombe et al. 1980). This aligns with other studies that have found political conservatives to have more favorable opinions of the police, the courts (Cochran and Chamblin 2006), and
capital punishment (Bohm 1991). In addition to political ideology, a number of studies have found support for a significant relationship between punitiveness and religious ideology. Applegate et al. (2000), for example, found religious fundamentalists have more punitive attitudes than less fundamentalist respondents do, and Grasmick and McGill (1994) concluded that salience with religious teachings influence opinions on crime control.

Finally, a few studies looking at attitudes toward criminal justice related issues, including punitiveness, have included a variable measuring whether or not the respondent believes that the world is a just place (Freeman 2006; Applegate et al. 2000; O’Quin and Vogler 1989). The inclusion of this variable is based off the just-world theory developed by Lerner (1965), which says that individuals need to believe that bad things mostly happen to bad people (Freeman 2006). Holding this belief has been found to be correlated with a higher likelihood of assigning more punitive sentences, or to have less sympathy for offenders (Freeman 2006; Quin and Vogler 1989).

Experience and Fear of Crime

In addition to the preceding socio-demographic predictors, previous research has implicated the importance of personal experience with crime in predicting punitive attitudes. For example, fear of crime has been found to predict punitive attitudes (Cohn et al. 1991; Johnson 2001, 2006; Langworthy and Whitehead 1986). However, the majority of research finds fear predicts punitiveness for Blacks more so than Whites (Barkan and Cohn 1994; Johnson 2001, 2006). Although a link between fear of crime
and more punitive attitudes has been found, studies have determined that lower fear of crime does not necessarily translate to less punitive attitudes (Wanner 1987).

Prior police contact has been found to be significantly related to other forms of opinions toward the criminal justice system, specifically opinions toward the police (Scaglion and Condon 1980; Dowler 2002; Cheurprakobkit 2000; Frank et al. 2005; Weitzer and Tuch 2005). Despite this, few studies have tested the effect of experience with crime as either the victim or the offender on punitive attitudes. One would suspect that offenders or families of offenders would hold far less punitive attitudes given their proximity and relationship with someone who has been punished. Although only a limited number of studies have tested the punitiveness of offenders or families of offenders, results support the notion that offenders hold less punitive attitudes (Callanan 2005; Gottfredson et al. 1988).

Research on punitive attitudes of prior victims of crime have failed to produce a consensus to whether or not being a victim raises one’s willingness to punish. Most studies find that prior victimization has little to no relationship with punitive attitudes toward crime (Cullen et al. 1985; Hough and Roberts 1999; King and Maruna 2009), despite logical thinking suggesting that victimization should raise punitiveness. King and Maruna (2009) who tested this relationship directly, suggest that punitiveness is more contingent on the belief that crime disturbs the moral order or threatens the stability of society (just-world views). In this instance, punitiveness is a way to reinforce someone’s own core values (King and Maruna 2009) which are strongly established early on and may be unaltered by victimization. Despite this suggestion victimization may indirectly
influence punitiveness through other factors, like fear of crime or the perceived likelihood of further victimization.

Media and Punitive Attitudes

Research on media and crime largely began with George Gerbner and his initial Cultural Indicators Project (1976, 1977, 1978, 1980) who tested the link between watching television and being concerned with crime (Gerbner 1976). The earliest approach drawn from the project was the “cultivation model” which suggests that the consumption of all types of television by all types of individuals results in the “mean world view” (Gerbner et al 1977). In other words, viewers of television are more likely to believe in the idea that the world is a mean and scary place, and people cannot be trusted. Modern media researchers have rejected this view as too simplistic because it fails to take into account the way that different people interpret the same depictions. Despite this, Gerbner’s research sparked more attempts to unravel complex media representations. Media researchers soon began to consider that audience’s social and socio-demographic characteristics might result in different interpretations of the same media representations. Audience characteristics that have been explored by media researchers include race/ethnicity, age, gender, and a range of other personal experience variables.

Critical to linking the consumption of crime-related media with punitiveness is effectively arguing that media representations are framed in a way that promotes and encourages punishment. Goffman (1974) was one of the first theorists to introduce the
idea of framing in an attempt to determine, as he put it, “What is it that’s going on here?”

For Goffman (1974) frames allow us to make sense out of and to organize social situations quickly and easily. Research on framing has since seen much attention, especially in the context of the media. Scholars suggest that crime is framed by the media in such a manner that the threat and likelihood of a particular crime is elevated (Sacco 1995). Viewers of crime-related media are presented with information framed in a way that the audience instantly recognizes reports of crime as reports of a real and dangerous threat. While framing crime in this manner helps the news media quickly relay messages about crime, it also contributes to the creation of crime myths.

Crimes are organized and presented in a way that allows viewers to quickly recognize and accept its depiction as not only news, but as a serious and immediate problem (Altheide 1996). Within this “problem frame,” media outlets frequently display a series of similar crimes, which leads to the appearance of a crime wave. Fishman (1978), for example, studied a series of popular media reports in New York City during the 1970’s known as the “crime wave against the elderly.” After conducting interviews, content analyses, and reviewing official data, Fishman (1978) found no evidence that suggested that crimes against elderly citizens were really on the rise. He attributed the creation of these crime waves to the manner in which journalists organize and select specific crime stories to present in the news (Fishman 1978). Inaccurate media presentations of the prevalence of crime may lead to irrational fear and concern for nonexistent crime problems among viewers. This could in turn raise their punitiveness,
and cause them to more readily accept that the world is a “mean and scary place” (Gerbner, 1980).

Crime-related research consistently finds that stories about crime come from a relatively straightforward perspective; the police who will do anything in the pursuit of justice are “good,” and the offenders who commit sick and sadistic crimes are “bad” (Surette 2007). In addition, most media representations of crime focus on individual-level explanations, and rarely frame stories to include structural factors that can lead to crime. Some knowledge of the criminal’s background, like social class and family history, may create some empathy towards the offender, or at least would offer some acknowledgment of the structural disadvantages that can contribute to criminal activity. The focus on individual-level causal attributions of crime may leave viewers more likely to punish and much less likely to support rehabilitation or other alternative forms of criminal sentencing.

Historically, media researchers simply used measures of total hours of watching television as the only measure of visual-based media consumption (see Gerbner 1976, 1977). However, recent studies looking at media representations of various aspects of the criminal justice system have separated media consumption by the format of the show (Dowler 2002; Eschholz 2004). This is important because qualitative analyses of crime-related media suggest that different genres, represent different points of view, and thus may project different messages to its audience.

Past studies have found that television news and crime-reality are two of the strongest media that affect public opinion about crime (Eschholz et al. 2002). This is
commonly explained by the fact that viewers accept these depictions as reality more easily than other forms of crime-related media (Surette 2007). It is true that both television news programs and crime-reality shows use real police footage; however, these shows can present the film in any manner they see fit. The result is a hybrid of news and entertainment as well as fiction and reality.

Crime-dramas take real news stories and turn them into works of fiction that are based on real-life situations. This tactic, made famous by the *Law and Order* series, is frequently referred to as the “ripped from the headlines approach” (Britto et al. 2007). For viewers, this blurs the line between fiction and reality and adds to the belief that rare and particularly heinous crimes are an everyday occurrence. Despite this, past research has found little to no relationship between crime dramas and opinions, like opinion of the police (Eschholz et al. 2002; Dowler and Zawilski 2007), perhaps because viewers are aware that these are fictionalized accounts and past research suggests that perceived realism is a key factor in media influence (Potter 1986).

Little research has examined the effect of newspaper readership on public opinion of crime and punitive attitudes (e.g. Roberts and Doob 1990), however, there are various reasons to believe that it is important. Newspapers, unlike local and national news, usually report on stories in their entirety and provide a wealth of information left out by short eye-catching television news depictions. This information could put some of the more “shocking” crimes in perspective, and explain motives and offender backgrounds 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).

To date, only a few known studies have looked at the relationship between media
consumption and punitive attitudes. Dowler (2003) tested the effect of viewing crime
shows (all types in general) on punitiveness, but found no effect. However, his study
failed to differentiate between the different types of crime shows (reality, drama, news).
Roberts and Doob (1990) found that newspaper’s coverage of crime that used brief
descriptions of the case details contributed to greater punitiveness. 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 shows. She found that
media influences on punitiveness were primarily due to indirect relationships with
various attitudes and experiences, like fear of crime and perception of neighborhood risk.
Collectively these studies represent the limited body of research conducted on media and
punitiveness, and expose a need for further research.

The Goals of Sentencing

There exists very little empirical research on the goals of sentencing and their
relationship to punitive attitudes. General studies on support for the perceived goals of
sentencing have found mixed results. Utilitarian goals such as rehabilitation, deterrence,
and incapacitation have been found to be the most important goals in numerous studies
(Brillon et al. 1984; Gottfredson and Taylor 1984; Thomas et al. 1976), while others have
found punishment to be the most important goal of criminal sentencing (Cohn et al. 1991; Warr and Stafford 1984).

Roberts and Gebotys (1989) tested public opinion of the four main goals of sentencing: incapacitation, rehabilitation, general deterrence, and just deserts (punishment). Among their findings is that for minor crimes people suggest that general deterrence is the most important goal of sentencing, but for serious crimes incapacitation was rated highest (Roberts and Gebotys 1989). Despite this, Roberts and Gebotys (1989) argue that it was the principle of punishment that was guiding these selections. For example, while they found deterrence to be the most important goal for minor crimes, its largest correlation was with the punishment scale. In sum, the authors suggest that their research shows that public opinion of the goals of sentencing is most significantly influenced by punishment than other utilitarian goals.

Oswald et al. (2002) conducted a survey of 357 participants that asked respondents to rank-order sentencing goals to determine if retribution is associated with punitiveness, or whether willingness to punish is established by micro- or macro-level concerns. Micro-level concerns refer to the needs of the victim for retribution or revenge, and macro-level refers to the need or willingness of society to punish. Results from the study reveal a two-dimensional structure to respondents’ preference of sentencing goals. The first dimension involves respondents’ willingness to punish and exclude the offender from society, but these preferences are also weighted by their concerns of the victim (micro-level) versus the needs of society (macro-level). The survey demonstrates the complex nature of how opinions of criminal sentencing are established by weighing both
micro and macro level factors, and also it demonstrates the importance of using rank-ordered data to deconstruct complex opinions such as these.

Contribution of Thesis

There has been a wealth of information about punitive attitudes published in the last thirty years. However, very few studies have tested the effects of media on punitive attitudes and no known study has ever looked at the effects of media on the perceived goals of sentencing. Media studies on punitive attitudes are important because studies have failed to find consistent socio-demographic predictors of punitiveness. This suggests that punitive attitudes are established outside these factors, so looking at the media as a possible explanation is warranted.

Numerous studies have suggested that the media exaggerates not only the extent to which crime is a problem, but its severity. These misrepresentations could not only be contributing to viewer’s willingness to punish, but also to viewers becoming less likely to support rehabilitation or any other utilitarian goal. Furthermore, if media consumption is found to be related to viewer’s willingness to punish then future studies on punitiveness will need to recognize its relationship in subsequent research.

This study builds on the work of Gerbner (1976, 1977, 1980) and his associates and helps to establish a better understanding of what factors, both demographic and experiential, direct and shape the influence of media. In addition to adding to this literature, this study has larger sociological implications. Media is a powerful and complex institution in our society that is used by millions not only for news and
information, but for entertainment as well. Despite this, it remains understudied by sociologists. While difficulties in studying the effects of media quantitatively may discourage some, further attempts must be made to test and understand the effects of living in a mediated world.
CHAPTER II
DATA AND METHODS

Data Analysis

The data come from a statewide representative sample of 4245 California households surveyed between March-September, 1999. 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 goals of sentencing, fear of victimization, media consumption, just-world beliefs, fear of crime, experience with the criminal justice system, and a range of other criminal justice related questions. Interviews lasted about 35 to 40 minutes on average and were administered in English and if necessary, Spanish. African-Americans were oversampled to allow for comparisons across race/ethnicity, and certain geographical regions were oversampled as well, including San Bernardino, Riverside, and San Diego County, and the Central Valley region. The survey had an average response rate of 69.9 percent.
Dependent Variables

The question used to measure the goals of sentencing states; “There are four purposes for criminal penalties that we would like to ask you about. These include to discourage 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?” Respondents who selected rehabilitation will be treated as the omitted category because it represents the response often interpreted as being in opposition to punitiveness.

Media Variables

Crime-related media consumption is separated into five distinct categories: crime dramas, crime-reality shows, newspapers, television news, and the total number of television hours viewed per week. The crime drama scale captures frequency of viewing Law and Order, Homicide, and NYPD Blue, and the crime-reality show scale measures consumption of Cops, American Justice, America’s Most Wanted, and Justice Files; all recorded on a four-point Likert scale ranging from “never” to “every week.” The crime drama scale had a Cronbach’s alpha of $\alpha=0.690$, while the crime-reality scale had a Cronbach’s alpha of $\alpha=0.724$. Both newspaper readership and television news consumption are measured by the number of days per week spent viewing/reading these
outlets. The hours of television viewed was measured with a question that asked respondents to estimate the number of hours spent watching television per week.¹

Experience and Control Variables

Four variables are used to control for experience with crime and the police. Prior criminal victimization was measured with two questions asking about personal criminal victimization and/or family victimization in the prior three years.² Household arrest was a dichotomous variable measuring if the respondent or anyone in his or her household had ever been arrested.

Measurement of fear of crime has been criticized in past studies because early research often used single-item indicators in its measurement. A recent and far less criticized method of measuring fear of crime is done by creating scales that include fear of multiple types of crime, taking place in various contexts. This standard of measurement is now employed by most fear of crime literature (Gabriel and Greve 2003; LaGrange, Ferraro, and Supancic 1992). Following this reasoning, the fear of crime scale for this study uses 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 alpha of $\alpha=.921$.

¹ All scale variables were divided by the number of items they include to reflect the original measurement.

² Models separating personal and family victimization were run but the results were not significantly different, so the more parsimonious model is presented.
The socio-demographic control variables include gender, age, race, education, income, and political party affiliation. The gender variable of male, the race variables of Black, Latino, and Asian, and the political party measures of Democrat and Republican are all dichotomous variables. Females, Whites, and political Independents serve as the corresponding omitted categories. Education and income are categorical variables; education ranges from “less than high school” to “advanced degree,” and income ranges from “less than $5,000” to “more than $100,000.” The data also includes questions gauging if participants believe the world is just, in response to other studies who have found it related to punitiveness (Freeman 2006; Applegate et al. 2000; Quin and Vogler 1989). Belief in the just-world combines responses from two single item 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 ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.”

Methodology

This study will use multinomial logistic regression to test the effects of media across each of the perceived goals of sentencing. Multinomial logistic regression is used with 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). Multinomial logistic regression allows for comparisons between each response and one reference category. This is a much stronger type of analysis for unordered ordinal data than
separate logistic regressions because it enters all the data into the same model. Given that those who believe rehabilitation should be the goal of sentencing represent the least punitive respondents, rehabilitation will be used as the reference category.\(^3\)

Part of effective data analysis involves being able to demonstrate how each theoretical group of explanatory variables affects the dependent variable. To do this, media variables will be entered into the model first, then experience variables, and finally control variables. This will allow for a greater understanding of what is truly affecting opinions of the goals of sentencing and how the effects of media change with the addition of each group of variables.\(^4\) Given the number of control variables utilized in this study and the difficulties associated with capturing the effects of media quantitatively, any significant media influences should be considered strong findings.

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\(^3\) Multicollinearity was checked for by looking for correlations using a correlations matrix and by entering the variables into an OLS regression and looking at VIF, tolerance, and condition index. All scores and correlations suggest multicollinearity was not an issue.

\(^4\) Media interactions by race, age, gender, political party, and just-world beliefs were tested for, however no significant results were found so models are not included in the study.
CHAPTER III
RESULTS

Table 1 briefly describes how the variables are measured, and displays the descriptive statistics of the sample. The dependent variable of the perceived goals of criminal sentencing is separated into four dichotomous variables. Thirty-six percent of respondents selected punishment as their preferred goal, followed closely by rehabilitation at 25 percent, and incapacitation at 22 percent. Only 16 percent of the respondents selected deterrence as their preferred goal of sentencing.

Of the media and experience with crime variables, the average respondent from the sample views both crime dramas (1.86) and crime-based reality shows (1.88) “occasionally.” Respondents read the newspaper an average of 3.64 days, and watch television news programming 4.61 days per week. Over the course of a week, the average participant watches 18.15 total hours of all types of television. Over 60 percent of the sample have been, or have had a family member who has been, a victim of a crime in the last three years. The fear of crime scale has a mean of 3.43 on a scale that ranges from 0 = “not at all fearful” to 10 = “very fearful.” Only 17 percent of the sample have been, or have had a close family member, arrested within the last three years.
### Table 1: Descriptive Characteristics of the Sample (N=4245)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dependent Variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons to Incarcerate</td>
<td>Please tell me which of these four purposes you think should be most important in sentencing adults?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishment</td>
<td>1 = To give offenders the punishment they deserve, Other = 0</td>
<td>0 - 1</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehabilitation</td>
<td>1 = To train educate and counsel offenders, Other = 0</td>
<td>0 - 1</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incapacitation</td>
<td>1 = To separate offenders from society, Other = 0</td>
<td>0 - 1</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deterrence</td>
<td>1= To discourage others from committing crimes, Other = 0</td>
<td>0 - 1</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Media Variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime Drama</td>
<td>The crime drama scale captures frequency of viewing Law and Order, Homicide, and NYPD Blue. 1=never, 2=occasionally, 3=once a month, 4= few weeks each month, 5=every week. (α=.690)</td>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime Reality</td>
<td>Scale of viewing Cops, American Justice, America’s Most Wanted, and Justice Files. 1=never…5=every week. (α=.724)</td>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>How many days a week would you say you read the national or local news section of a newspaper. 0 = never, 7 = everyday</td>
<td>0 - 7</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>2.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV News</td>
<td>Index of days per week watching (1) local and (2) national news on television. 0=never, 7=everyday</td>
<td>0 - 7</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>2.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All TV</td>
<td>On the average, how many hours per week do you watch television?</td>
<td>0 - 97</td>
<td>18.15</td>
<td>16.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experience Variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim</td>
<td>0=no victimization, 1=personal or family victimization, 2=personal and family victimization (within prior 3 years).</td>
<td>0 - 2</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Crime</td>
<td>Eight-item scale: fear of home burglary while away, while at home, assault, rape, auto theft, robbery, vandalism, and fear of their family being victimized. 0=not at all fearful, 10=very fearful. (α=.921)</td>
<td>0 - 10</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>2.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrested</td>
<td>Have you or anyone in your household ever been arrested? 1 = Yes, 0 = No</td>
<td>0 - 1</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Control Variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male = 1, Female = 0</td>
<td>0 - 1</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Current age of respondent</td>
<td>17 - 94</td>
<td>45.29</td>
<td>17.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Black = 1, Other = 0</td>
<td>0 - 1</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Latino = 1, Other = 0</td>
<td>0 - 1</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Asian = 1, Other = 0</td>
<td>0 - 1</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>1=less than high school, 2=high school graduate, 3=some college or trade school, 4=college graduate, 5=advanced degree</td>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>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= &gt;$100,000</td>
<td>1 - 9</td>
<td>5.87</td>
<td>2.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>Democrat = 1, Other = 0</td>
<td>0 - 1</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>Republican = 1, Other = 0</td>
<td>0 - 1</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just-World Beliefs</td>
<td>Combines responses to “Basically the world is a just place” and “By and large, people get what they deserve.” Responses range from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”.</td>
<td>1 - 4</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>0.511</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Socio-demographically, over 60 percent of the sample is White (which was treated as the omitted category in the analyses), 7 percent are Asian, 7 percent are Black, and 19 percent are Latino. The mean age of this sample is about 45 years old, and 43 percent were male. Education and income were both categorical variables with the average respondent having at least “some college or trade school” education and an annual household income between $35,000 and $50,000. Thirty-nine percent of the sample identified as Democrats, 27 percent were Republicans, and the remaining 34 percent stated they were political independents, which are treated as the omitted category. Finally, just-world beliefs has a mean of 2.48, which suggests that the majority of respondents “Agree” that the world is a just place and that people get what they deserve.

Table 2 displays the results of a multinomial logistic regression regressing media consumption on the perceived goals of criminal sentencing, using rehabilitation as the reference category. In the column labeled punishment, we see that consumption of television news and total hours of television both increase the odds of choosing punishment as opposed to rehabilitation, as the perceived goal of criminal sentencing. Consumption of crime dramas, crime-based reality shows, and newspaper readership are not significantly related to choosing punishment. For deterrence, there is a positive relationship between watching increased hours of television and choosing deterrence as opposed to rehabilitation, as the preferred goal of criminal sentencing. All other media categories fail to reach significance.

For incapacitation, consumption of crime dramas, newspapers, and total hours of television all increase the odds of selecting incapacitation as opposed to rehabilitation, as
the primary goal of criminal sentencing. Crime-based reality television consumption has a strong negative relationship, which suggests viewers of crime reality shows are more apt to select rehabilitation as opposed to incapacitation.

Table 3 adds the experience variables into the model, to determine how past arrests, victimization, and fear of crime affect the relationships between media consumption and the perceived goals of sentencing. The effects of media did not significantly change when experience variables were added into the model; however, having past household arrests significantly reduced the likelihood of respondents choosing both punishment and incapacitation over rehabilitation. This suggests people with personal or family arrests are much more likely to support rehabilitation than those who have no arrest experience. Consumption of television news and total hours of television continue to increase the odds of selecting punishment over rehabilitation as the primary goal of criminal sentencing. Similarly, for respondents who selected deterrence, only viewing increased total hours of television significantly increases the odds of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Variables</th>
<th>Punishment B(SE)</th>
<th>Deterrence B(SE)</th>
<th>Incapacitation B(SE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crime-Drama</td>
<td>.066 (.046)</td>
<td>-.057 (.060)</td>
<td>.121* (.051)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.068</td>
<td>-.945</td>
<td>1.128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime-Reality</td>
<td>.060 (.050)</td>
<td>.008 (.064)</td>
<td>-.210*** (.060)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.062</td>
<td>1.009</td>
<td>.810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>.001 (.015)</td>
<td>-.002 (.019)</td>
<td>.063*** (.017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.998</td>
<td>1.065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV News</td>
<td>.049* (.021)</td>
<td>-.009 (.025)</td>
<td>-.013 (.023)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.051</td>
<td>.991</td>
<td>.987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV Consumption</td>
<td>.010*** (.003)</td>
<td>.010** (.004)</td>
<td>.010*** (.004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.010</td>
<td>1.009</td>
<td>1.011</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R² .028

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001
choosing deterrence over rehabilitation. All other media variables and experience variables failed to reach statistical significance.

Fear of crime and prior arrests both significantly reduce the likelihood of someone choosing incapacitation as opposed to rehabilitation, as the perceived goal of sentencing. Media coefficients stay relatively stable, with consumption of crime dramas, newspapers, and general television hours increasing and consumption of crime reality decreasing the likelihood of selecting incapacitation over rehabilitation. Overall, controlling for these experience variables had little impact on the effects of media on the perceived goals of criminal sentencing.

Table 3: Multinomial Logistic Regression of Media’s Influence on Perceived Goals of Sentencing, with Experience Variables (N=3331)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Punishment</th>
<th>Deterrence</th>
<th>Incapacitation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B(SE)</td>
<td>odds</td>
<td>B(SE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experience Variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim</td>
<td>-.126 (.066)</td>
<td>.882</td>
<td>.036 (.081)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Crime</td>
<td>-.034 (.019)</td>
<td>.966</td>
<td>-.040 (.024)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrest</td>
<td>-.358** (.122)</td>
<td>.699</td>
<td>-.177 (.149)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Media Variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime-Drama</td>
<td>.074 (.046)</td>
<td>1.077</td>
<td>-.043 (.060)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime-Reality</td>
<td>.082 (.052)</td>
<td>1.085</td>
<td>.027 (.065)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>-.007 (.016)</td>
<td>.993</td>
<td>-.010 (.020)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV News</td>
<td>.053* (.021)</td>
<td>1.054</td>
<td>-.006 (.026)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV Consumption</td>
<td>.010** (.003)</td>
<td>1.010</td>
<td>.010* (.004)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R² = .039

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001
Table 4 shows the results of the final model, which adds the socio-demographic variables. Latinos, Asians, and respondents with higher levels of education were significantly less likely to select punishment over rehabilitation. Having a higher income, being a Republican, and believing the world is a just place significantly increased the odds of respondents selecting punishment as the goal of sentencing as opposed to rehabilitation. Having a prior household arrest remained significant and negative. Consumption of television news and total hours of television both increase the likelihood of selecting punishment, consistent with the previous analyses. Consumption of crime-based reality shows also significantly increased the likelihood of choosing punishment over rehabilitation, although it was not significant previously.

Of the control variables, only being a Republican significantly influenced respondents to choose deterrence over rehabilitation as the preferred goal of criminal sentencing. As in previous analyses, no experience variables significantly affected respondents’ choice of deterrence. Consumption of increased hours of all types of television also significantly raised the likelihood of respondents selecting deterrence over rehabilitation. Finally, age, education, income, and being a Republican all significantly increased the likelihood of choosing incapacitation over rehabilitation. Blacks, Latinos, and Asians were less likely than Whites to select incapacitation over rehabilitation. Among experience variables, having higher fear of crime no longer significantly affects choosing incapacitation, but having prior household arrests continues to reduce respondents’ odds of choosing both incapacitation and punishment as the preferred goal.
Table 4: Multinomial Logistic Regression of Media’s Influence on Perceived Goals of Sentencing, Full Model (N=2748)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control Variables</th>
<th>Punishment B(SE)</th>
<th>Deterrence B(SE)</th>
<th>Incapacitation B(SE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>-.129 (.109)</td>
<td>.190 (.132)</td>
<td>.018 (.132)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.005 (.004)</td>
<td>-.001 (.004)</td>
<td>.018*** (.005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>-.244 (.201)</td>
<td>-.064 (.241)</td>
<td>-.667** (.248)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>-.347* (.142)</td>
<td>.007 (.172)</td>
<td>-.406* (.171)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>-.413* (.199)</td>
<td>.107 (.226)</td>
<td>-1.232*** (.272)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.208*** (.056)</td>
<td>-.091 (.068)</td>
<td>.178** (.062)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>.083** (.029)</td>
<td>.040 (.035)</td>
<td>.182*** (.034)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>-.117 (.121)</td>
<td>.038 (.149)</td>
<td>.006 (.139)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>.761*** (.145)</td>
<td>.783*** (.171)</td>
<td>.566*** (.162)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just-World Scale</td>
<td>.283*** (.102)</td>
<td>.099 (.124)</td>
<td>.006 (.114)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience Variables</th>
<th>Punishment B(SE)</th>
<th>Deterrence B(SE)</th>
<th>Incapacitation B(SE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victim</td>
<td>-.093 (.076)</td>
<td>.040 (.091)</td>
<td>-.021 (.086)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Crime</td>
<td>.004 (.023)</td>
<td>-.018 (.028)</td>
<td>.016 (.027)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrest</td>
<td>-.287* (.137)</td>
<td>-.138 (.164)</td>
<td>-.309* (.159)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Variables</th>
<th>Punishment B(SE)</th>
<th>Deterrence B(SE)</th>
<th>Incapacitation B(SE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crime-Drama</td>
<td>.065 (.053)</td>
<td>-.032 (.067)</td>
<td>.121* (.058)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime-Reality</td>
<td>.118* (.059)</td>
<td>.020 (.074)</td>
<td>.049 (.070)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>.001 (.019)</td>
<td>-.013 (.023)</td>
<td>-.011 (.021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV News</td>
<td>.048* (.024)</td>
<td>-.009 (.030)</td>
<td>-.003 (.028)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV Consumption</td>
<td>.009* (.004)</td>
<td>.010* (.005)</td>
<td>.010*** (.004)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R² = .124

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001
of sentencing. Consumption of crime dramas and general television consumption continues to increase the odds of choosing incapacitation over rehabilitation, although viewing crime-based reality shows and newspaper consumption are no longer significant.

Some of the changes that occurred when adding the experience variables in model 2 and then the control variables in model 3 require further explanation. Crime-reality was negatively related to incapacitation in the initial model and the model only including experience variables, suggesting that viewers of crime-reality shows were more likely to select rehabilitation as opposed to incapacitation. This is a surprising finding considering that most research on crime-based reality programs suggests that representations of criminals on these shows depict them as a dangerous breed that has been driven to crime, not by inequality or injustice, but because of some biological or psychological preference towards crime (Kooistra et al. 1998). However, with the addition of socio-demographic controls, this relationship completely diminishes and switches in direction (but does not reach statistical significance). Subsequent analysis determined that when controlling for race that the variable became non-significant, suggesting that the original relationship was negative for racial minorities, but not for White viewers.

Newspaper consumption was positively related to choosing incapacitation as the goal of sentencing, as opposed to rehabilitation in the initial models. Subsequent analysis showed that the significance of newspaper consumption drastically 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 and Goldthorpe 2007), holding
these constant negated the relationship between newspaper reading and choosing incapacitation as the goal of sentencing.
Discussion

This study’s findings suggest that several media formats influence the perceived goals of criminal sentencing. Consumption of total hours of television decreased the likelihood of respondents choosing rehabilitation over any other goal of sentencing. This suggests that media consumption influences viewers to believe that rehabilitation is not a worthy goal. Additionally, of the media formats that were statistically significant, all were positive, which suggests that consumption of these media reduces the odds of viewers believing that rehabilitation should be the primary goal of sentencing. Collectively, the findings imply that consumption of various crime-related media, as well as, total hours of television may increase punitiveness by decreasing support for rehabilitation.

Gerbner et al.’s (1976, 1977) television violence profile, was one of the pioneering pieces of research to explore the relationship between television consumption and real world beliefs. Their research determined that regardless of sex, age, education, or race heavy viewers of television consistently held higher “mean world” views. They 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” (Gerbner et al. 1976:193). Falling directly in line with this reasoning, this study found increased consumption of all television influences respondents to select any goal of sentencing opposed to rehabilitation. This suggests that television depictions may be cultivating negative beliefs about the world, and contributing to “mean world” views. This may lead to public demands for both punishment of and protection from criminal offenders among television consumers, which may result in an increase in punitive sentencing and fewer rehabilitation programs in the criminal justice system.

In addition to general television, consumption of crime-based reality shows and television news increased the odds of respondents selecting punishment over rehabilitation. While the relationship between these media variables is weak, past research has substantiated that crime-reality and television news are two of the most influential media variables (Surette 2007). This has been attributed to viewers being more likely to accept these representations as reality (Surette 2007), because reality-based crime shows and television news both use real police footage, unlike crime dramas, which are fictitious creations (although often based on reality). The perceived realism of crime news and crime-reality programs could cause viewers to interpret crime as a real and immediate threat to the viewer. Furthermore, crime-reality shows and television news are depicted in a way that creates anger in its viewers, because depictions of criminals primarily focus on individual (selfish) motives of crime. The anger and fear
created from these depictions may invoke an irrational response from viewers, making them more willing to punish as opposed to incapacitate or rehabilitate.

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 because they are fictitious creations; 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 fictional dramas, they may still recognize them as depictions of actual crimes in the real world. But the reason that consumption of crime dramas is only significant for incapacitation is difficult to discern. The relationship is relatively weak and this finding has not been substantiated in past media studies, so it is possible this could be a random statistical anomaly. However, it could also be due to the heinous and disturbing types of crimes that these shows deal with. For example, qualitative analysis of crime dramas have noted that criminals are often depicted as overly sinister, who often 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 further research is need to substantiate this finding.
Newspaper consumption was the only variable that did not significantly influence any of the perceived goals of criminal sentencing in the final model. This could be explained by the fact that compared to other crime-related media, newspapers often contain the most detailed information, which may cause readers to fully understand both the motivation and other mitigating factors about the crime. 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). The inclusion of additional details surrounding the crime may introduce some structural-level explanations, leaving readers less likely to support punishment or other sentencing goals over rehabilitation.

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 did propose that those who do not have significant experiences with crime would be affected much more by media representations (Surrette 2007; Adoni and Mane 1984; Maxson et al. 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 socio-demographic controls.

Conclusions

To my knowledge, this is the first study to explore the relationship between media consumption and the goals of criminal sentencing using extensive socio-demographic and experience variables. The results suggest that consumption of various types of media,
and total hours of television, enhance the likelihood that respondents will choose harsher goals for sentencing, as opposed to rehabilitation. In addition, the positive relationship between total hours of television consumption and other crime-related television programs to the perceived goals of sentencing suggest that television may be influencing viewers to be more punitive. All of the significant media findings in the final analysis were positive suggesting that consumption of various media types collectively influences viewers to select any goal but rehabilitation.

Findings from the analysis are consistent with the work of George Gerbner and associates (1976, 1977, 1978, and 1980). Viewing increased hours of television significantly influenced viewers 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 the world and its inhabitants are violent and unjust. These findings have implications for the future influence of media on punitive attitudes because of recent media trends that suggest gross depictions of violence in crime-related media are likely to remain prevalent and perhaps even expand.

Although crime-related media has been common for some time, its popularity has not diminished, in fact, many of the original crime-dramas and crime-based reality shows have lead to a number of related spinoffs (Britto et al. 2007). This suggest media representations of crime will continue to be prevalent in upcoming years, and as they are reproduced inaccurate depictions of crime and criminals are not likely to become anymore realistic. This is especially true since crime-related media programs will need to continue creating even more elaborate and shocking depictions of crime to keep viewers
interested and entertained (Surette 2007). Findings from this study suggest that as television-based reality and television news programs continue to depict crime and violence, support for punishment may rise and support for rehabilitation drop.

Media convergence is a phenomenon taking place in mainstream media in the recent decades, which suggests that while media is seemingly expanding with the popularity of alternative media resources (i.e. the internet and social media), ownership of media corporations is continually shrinking (Jenkins 2004). 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. Similarly, media owners will continue to use the popularity of crime-related media to grow in viewers and profits, thus reproducing the inaccurate depictions of the criminal world that have been thoroughly detailed in qualitative research. As long as this trend continues, 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.

With the continued popularity of crime-related media, punitiveness researchers should begin to include media variables in their models. As mentioned earlier, punitiveness models using only socio-demographic and experience variables have largely failed to produce consistent results. Findings from this study support the idea that media may be an important part in the establishment of individuals’ attitudes about sentencing and punitiveness. While this study was one of only a few to test for media effects on punitiveness, future studies should follow this precedent. Until researchers begin to look
for alternative explanations, the factors contributing to the rise in punitiveness may not be fully understood.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The media is ever-present in our society, and exposure to its messages is unavoidable, which makes classical laboratory type studies difficult (Livingstone 1996). Without a readily available control group, media researchers are left to measure gradations of influence, which compare respondents who consume more media to those who consume less. While the possibility of testing the effects of media using a control group is not impossible, studies that have attempted this found that there are numerous potential problems. Joy et al. (1986) tested for media effects on aggressive behavior after the introduction of television to a small isolated community in northern Canada. While they did find evidence that the introduction of television increased some aspects of violent and aggressive behavior, however there were a number of methodological issues with the study. While the study was conducted before and after the introduction of television, it is doubtful that the community was completely isolated from other forms of media like print media, and surrounding communities with television access. In addition, studies looking at isolated communities may not be generalizable to the United States, or other industrialized countries. Given these issues, it is likely that media studies will continue using differences in gradations of media consumption, while this makes media studies difficult other methods have been proposed to deal with this problem.
The lack of variation in media consumption has incorrectly been interpreted by some as evidence that the media has little influence on consumers (e.g. Felson 1996). However, the lack of a control group and the difficulty of testing media effects mean that significant media findings may be more powerful than empirical research suggests. Even without comparison groups other media studies have found significant effects based on differences in exposure. Thus, even findings that border on statistical significance are likely reflecting a real relationship. With the problems with control groups, it seems reasonable for media research to focus more on the direction, then the strength of its relationships. In the case of this particular study, I would argue that although most of the relationships are statistically weak, the consistency in the direction of the relationship is the most important finding.

Given the difficulties in studying media, it seems that inferring or establishing causation is nearly impossible. However, recent media research on violence has argued that given the drawbacks to studying media effects, we can use meta-analysis to infer a causal relationship if the results hold over various studies that have used different quantitative methods. Comstock (2008) argues that the outcomes of various experimental and survey studies on media and violence make a strong case for causation. While this may be a controversial claim, the importance of consistent findings on media and violence cannot be ignored. While media and punitiveness literature is far less developed, perhaps further studying its effects will allow researchers to one day use meta-analysis to interpret the entire body of work on the topic. While the idea of using meta-analysis to infer causation is relatively new, until researchers exhaustively explore
the relationship between media and punitiveness we are unable to extend Comstock’s (2008) reasoning to punitiveness.

There were a few limitations to this study that can hopefully be corrected in future research. The main weakness of the data is that the dependent variable forces respondents to choose one goal of sentencing, which loses valuable information about how a respondent feels towards the other goals of sentencing. 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 and Gebotys 1989). The complexity of perceived goals of sentencing could be captured by having participants assign a value representing how important each variable is to them, or if the goals of sentencing were asked in a manner that assumes some sort of rank order. 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, rank-ordered data would have provided valuable insight to how respondents felt about each goal in relationship to another. Using rank-ordered measures of the goals of sentencing in future studies will help researches disentangle the complex process of determining attitudes toward sentencing.

In addition, having nationally representative data would have been ideal, especially when considering things like local news and newspaper consumption, which could vary by state. While California is a very diverse state, not only racially and economically, nationally representative data would have been far more generalizable. Finally, some may consider the age of the data a limitation given that it was collected
over ten years ago. However, the goal of this paper was not to test or infer how media representations of crime have changed over the last ten years, but to simply test for possible media effects on goals of sentencing. 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 ten years. While this is outside the scope of the current study, future work should utilize longitudinal data to study trends in media depictions of crime and justice.

In conclusion, this study is one of the first to explore media’s influence in relationship to the perceived goals of sentencing. The results suggest that consumption of various types of crime-related media and television in general influence viewers to select alternative forms of sentencing over rehabilitation. These findings can be added to the existing literature testing for media effects, which have already established media’s influence on various actions and opinions, like violent behavior (Bandura, Ross, and Ross 1963; Paik and Comstock 1994; Hearold 1986) and opinions of law enforcement (Dowler 2002; Eschholz et al. 2002; Dowler and Zawilski 2007). 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 further research to consider and test the influence of media.
REFERENCES


