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Centre for Criminology & Sociolegal Studies
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Criminological Highlights

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Criminological Highlights is designed to provide an accessible look at some of the more interesting criminological research that is currently being published. Each issue contains “Headlines and Conclusions” for each of 8 articles, followed by one-page summaries of each article.

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Criminological Highlights is available at www.criminology.utoronto.ca and directly by email.

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This issue of *Criminological Highlights* addresses the following questions:

1. How does the criminal justice system create homelessness in 5 year old children?
2. How can the principles of general deterrence be employed in a manner that may reduce crime?
3. Does mere association with those who break the rules turn youths into offenders?
4. What happens when youths think that their friends are offending more than they actually are?
5. Are the characteristics of neighbourhoods with relatively high homicide rates in cities with low homicide rates similar to neighbourhoods in US cities with high homicide rates?
6. How can children be taught to give accurate testimony even if they are subjected to aggressive cross-examination?
7. What is the relationship between unemployment and crime?
8. Why are members of the public especially punitive toward sex offenders?

The Imprisonment of Fathers Causes Child Homelessness.

“The effects of maternal incarceration on children’s risk of foster care placement have been well documented” (p. 92) and, therefore, it is understandable that the findings of this study suggest that maternal incarceration does not increase homelessness of children. The finding that paternal incarceration does increase the likelihood of homelessness for children – especially African American children – suggests that mass incarceration may indirectly contribute to racial inequality. This effect would be above and beyond the direct long term effects of incarceration on the offender himself.

..... Page 4

“Certainty of apprehension, not the severity of the ensuing legal consequence, is the more effective deterrent.”

“There is little evidence that increasing already long prison sentences has a material deterrence effect. Evidence on the deterrent effect of the certainty of punishment is more consistent... The certainty effect stems primarily from the police functioning in their official guardian role rather than in their apprehension agent role” (p. 252-3). “Crime control effectiveness would be improved by shifting resources from corrections to policing methods that enhance the effectiveness of police in their official guardian role” (p. 253. See also *Criminological Highlights*, 11(6)#1).

..... Page 5

Deviant peers can cause ordinary people to cheat.

In this experiment, cheating by a peer (who was not a friend) induced 38% of ordinary university students also to cheat in a circumstance where, without negative social influence, nobody cheated. In other words, at least part of the relationship between the deviance of an individual and the deviance of friends is causal: deviant peers *cause* ordinary people to commit offences.

..... Page 6

Youths who commit criminal offences and have attitudes supportive of offending are more likely than other youths to over-estimate their friends’ involvement in crime. Those who over-estimate friends’ involvement in crime are more likely, in the future, to commit crime.

“Overestimation of friends’ delinquency is a strong predictor of self-reported delinquency one year later” (p. 349). This effect is strongest for those “who place a high value on social approval, are unpopular, and experience peer pressure” (p. 346). “Interventions that seek to reduce problem behaviour by providing accurate information about the frequency of behaviours in certain contexts (e.g., schools)... may be most effective for unpopular youth who feel pressured to engage in risky behaviour and who value social approval from others” (p. 350).

..... Page 7

The predictors of homicide rates in neighbourhoods in a Canadian city with a relatively low homicide rate are very similar to the predictors of neighbourhood homicide rates in cities in the U.S.

“Despite the lower levels of lethal violence and spatial inequality in Toronto, the correlates of homicide in Toronto neighbourhoods appear very similar to the neighbourhood-level correlates of homicide in U.S. cities” (p. 109). Although high concentrations of immigrant and Black residents in a neighbourhood were associated with high homicide rates for those neighbourhoods, these relationships disappeared when economic circumstances and age structure were controlled. However, the somewhat different findings on immigration in Canada and the U.S. underline the importance of being cautious about generalizing across jurisdictions.

..... Page 8

Children can be taught to maintain the accuracy of their evidence even in the face of developmentally inappropriate cross-examination.

Both 5-6 year olds and 9-10 year olds who received training in telling the truth when being cross-examined were more accurate than comparable children who did not get this training. It would seem that some form of formal training (involving experience in being cross-examined) is important; it is not sufficient merely to warn children that adult interviewers can be incorrect. It is important to remember that this training involved material not related to their ‘testimony’ in the cross-examination; hence the effects cannot be said to be due to coaching or rehearsing. In addition, the training was given by people unfamiliar to the youth. It emphasized the importance of accuracy (not the importance of consistency of testimony).

..... Page 9

Men who become unemployed are likely to have an increased risk of being involved in property crime, but not other types of crime. However, certain unemployment programs can reduce the impact on crime of being unemployed.

These results support the view that unemployment is a causal determinant of property crime, but not violent or drinking-driving crime, but that the effect is small compared with stable differences in offending among people. Furthermore, “programs that actively incorporate young adults into the labour market are promising in reducing [property] crime” (p. 586).

..... Page 10

The public wants sex offenders to be punished harshly because they are seen as unreformable immoral monsters who prey on young children.

The evidence suggests that support for punitive policies toward sex offenders is fuelled more by “moral outrage, and thus the desire for retribution.” But the findings also support “utilitarian accounts of punitiveness, which specify that punitive policies often receive public support because of their presumed crime control benefits” even though research has shown that these benefits are almost certainly illusory. Overall the results demonstrate that “No single impetus drives views about punishing sex offenders” (p. 750).

..... Page 11

The Imprisonment of Fathers Causes Child Homelessness.

A substantial amount of research published in recent years suggests that imprisonment not only has negative effects on those who are imprisoned but also collateral effects on the children of fathers who are imprisoned (e.g., *Criminological Highlights* 1(1)#6, 9(5)#6, 12(5)#1, 12(6)#7, 13(1)#7, 13(3)#3). Homelessness is one of the more extreme negative effects that many children face. This paper looks at the impact of the imprisonment of mothers and fathers on the likelihood of an American child becoming homeless.

There is reason to believe that the imprisonment of mothers and fathers could have very different impacts on what happens to a child. “The most obvious way parental incarceration promotes child homelessness is by destabilizing family finances. Not only are [fathers] unable to provide financial support when incarcerated, but incarceration reduces job prospects subsequent to incarceration (*Criminological Highlights* 11(4)#4). In addition, in many states, federal policies make it impossible for families with an incarcerated parent to receive cash welfare, food stamps, and subsidized housing. Incarcerating the mother, on the other hand, creates a different set of problems for their children, but not necessarily homelessness “because state interventions into the lives of the children of incarcerated mothers will push the children into foster care instead” (p. 77).

This study uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study focusing on the lives of children who had at least one parent complete interviews when the child was 30 and 60 months old. Homelessness was defined as living in temporary housing, a group shelter,

on the street at the time of the interview or in a place such as a car not intended to house people in the past year. Obviously this underestimates homelessness since it largely looks at homelessness only at the time of the interview.

Incarceration of the father when the child was between 30 and 60 months old increased the likelihood of homelessness for the child even after various demographic controls were taken into account. These included, among many other control factors, whether a parent had been incarcerated prior to the child being 30 months old, the level of poverty of the family when the child was 30 months old, the number of housing moves that took place in the previous 30 months, and whether the child was homeless at 30 months. It would appear, however, that “the effects of recent paternal incarceration on child homelessness are concentrated among African American children” (p. 90) and may not extend to children who are not African American. Recent *maternal* incarceration is not associated with an increase in the risk of child homelessness.

Conclusion: “The effects of maternal incarceration on children’s risk of foster care placement have been well documented” (p. 92) and, therefore, it is understandable that the findings of this study suggest that maternal incarceration does not increase homelessness of children. The finding that paternal incarceration does increase the likelihood of homelessness for children – especially African American children – suggests that mass incarceration may indirectly contribute to racial inequality. This effect would be above and beyond the direct long term effects of incarceration on the offender himself.

Reference: Wildeman, Christopher (2014). Parental Incarceration, Child Homelessness, and the Invisible Consequences of Mass Imprisonment. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 651, 74-96.

“Certainty of apprehension, not the severity of the ensuing legal consequence, is the more effective deterrent.”

For more than forty years, there have been suggestions that increasing the severity of punishments imposed on apprehended offenders will not reduce crime through the mechanism of general deterrence. Many reviews (e.g., *Criminological Highlights* 6(2)#1) of this literature have been written over the years, most of which come to the same conclusion as the quotation from this review (on p. 199) that forms the title of this summary.

“The theory of deterrence is predicated on the idea that if state-imposed sanction costs are sufficiently severe, criminal activity will be discouraged, at least by some,” but there must be “some possibility that the sanction will be incurred if the crime is committed” (p. 206). Certainty of apprehension, then, is a key component of deterrence. The police have two important roles in achieving deterrence: “apprehending the perpetrators of crime and serving in a sentinel function that deters crime from happening in the first place” (p. 207). One of the complexities in the research literature on deterrence that needs to be addressed is that often certainty and severity are intertwined. For example, one study of strategies to get people to pay fines compared ordinary enforcement with the imminent threat of a short period of incarceration. The latter approach was more effective and may be seen as supporting the conclusion that “certainty rather than the severity of punishment is the more powerful deterrent.” However, it is also necessary that “certainty must result in a distasteful consequence in order for it to be a deterrent” (p. 228). For there to be an effect of certainty, the penalty cannot be trivial in comparison to the expected value of committing the offence. However, the nature of the relationship

between the severity of a penalty and its effect on crime may be such that most if not all penalties are already at a level that they are having maximum effects. Increasing penalties that are already seen as being very harsh cannot be expected to affect crime rates. In fact, for much of the population (e.g., middle class people not normally committing crimes) the fact that something is criminalized may be sufficiently severe to have maximal deterrent impact.

Achieving deterrence through increasing apprehension risk assumes two things: first that apprehension risk can readily be increased, and second that it is known. Though it appears to be difficult to increase apprehension risk for many crimes, the strategic deployment of police can deter crime through another mechanism: by creating prohibitively high perceived risk of apprehension. This is, of course, the theory behind deploying large numbers of police in identified crime ‘hot spots.’ Nevertheless, for various reasons, “overall crime control policy [involving the police] cannot be built [solely] around such a narrowly formulated tactic” (p. 240). The challenge for deterring through increasing risk of apprehension is to focus on ways of persuading those who are likely to commit offences that they will, indeed, be apprehended if they offend.

Conclusion: “There is little evidence that increasing already long prison sentences has a material deterrence effect. Evidence on the deterrent effect of the certainty of punishment is more consistent... The certainty effect stems primarily from the police functioning in their official guardian role rather than in their apprehension agent role” (p. 252-3). “Crime control effectiveness would be improved by shifting resources from corrections to policing methods that enhance the effectiveness of police in their official guardian role” (p. 253. See also *Criminological Highlights*, 11(6)#1).

Reference: Nagin, Daniel S. (2013). Deterrence in the Twenty-First Century. In Tonry, Michael (ed.). *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research*, 42, 199-263.

Deviant peers can cause ordinary people to cheat.

Many studies have found that a strong predictor of offending in youths is whether or not a youth's friends commit offences. Those with friends who commit offences do the same. There are three possible explanations for this finding: youths are influenced by their peers or friends; youths choose friends who are similar to themselves; or youths who are not inclined to offend abandon friends who do offend. The explanations are not, of course, mutually exclusive.

There is, surprisingly, very little strong evidence for the causal inference that seeing deviant peers commit offences *causes* youths to offend. This study, carried out at an un-named "large public university in the mid-Atlantic region of the US" (p. 482) used an experimental design to determine if exposure to another person who cheated would induce them to cheat.

Groups of undergraduate students were recruited for an experiment that they thought involved testing the accuracy of their short-term memory. They were told they could earn up to \$20 for their participation in the study. The students were read 20 words and promised \$1 for each word that they correctly recalled later in the hour. They then were given a short survey to complete on a computer. At this point, the experimenter mentioned that because of a programming error the correct words were accessible (through 4 links on the computer screen in front of each student) and requested that

the students not access the link. The experimenter then left the room.

For half of the groups of students, a male employee of the experimenter, posing as just another student, told the rest of the group that because he had thought that he had been guaranteed the \$20 for participating in the study, he was going to use the links, thereby getting his full \$20 by cheating. For the other half of the groups, he said nothing and did nothing unusual.

In the control condition (where the students knew how to get the answers, but where nobody announced an intention to cheat), nobody in fact cheated. In the groups where the confederate of the experimenter announced his intention to cheat, 38% of the students cheated. Most of those who cheated took maximum advantage of the opportunity and clicked all 4 of the links they had been asked to ignore.

Conclusion: In this experiment, cheating by a peer (who was not a friend) induced 38% of ordinary university students also to cheat in a circumstance where, without negative social influence, nobody cheated. In other words, at least part of the relationship between the deviance of an individual and the deviance of friends is causal: deviant peers *cause* ordinary people to commit offences.

Reference: Paternoster, Ray, Jean Marie McGloin, Holly Nguyen, and Kyle J. Thomas (2013). The Causal Impact of Exposure to Deviant Peers: An Experimental Investigation. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 50(4), 476-503.

Youths who commit criminal offences and have attitudes supportive of offending are more likely than other youths to over-estimate their friends' involvement in crime. Those who over-estimate friends' involvement in crime are more likely, in the future, to commit crime.

It is well known that youths who commit offences are likely to report that their friends are also involved in crime. However, there is some evidence that youths do not always know what their friends actually do. For example, they may “project their own behaviours and attitudes onto others” (p. 336).

This study examined data from 1,046 Dutch youths who were interviewed in their schools in 2002 and again a year later. They were asked how often, in the previous year, they had committed various offences (theft, assault, break and enter, robbery). In addition, they were asked to identify who, in their school, they spent time with. Because their friends were also being interviewed, it was possible to see what crimes were committed by each youth's friends. Youths were also asked to report their perceptions of their friends' involvement in crime by asking them how many of their friends they thought committed each of these same offences.

Given that their friends had indicated their own involvement, it was possible to see whether each youth over-estimated, relatively accurately estimated, or under-estimated their friends' involvement in crime. Youths were also asked about how bad they thought it was to commit crime by asking whether they agreed with statements such as “It is all right to steal if you need money” (p. 341). In addition, youths were assessed on how much they felt pressured by friends to engage in particular behaviours by indicating agreement with questions such as “My friends sometimes make me

do things I actually don't want to do.” (p. 342). Various other control variables were also measured.

The results show, not surprisingly, that youths holding attitudes supportive of delinquency were more likely to over-estimate their friends involvement in crime as were youths who reported being susceptible to peer pressure. But in addition, the higher the involvement of a youth in crime, the more likely the youth was to over-estimate their friends' involvement in crime. In other words “individuals who engage in delinquency are more likely to incorrectly attribute such behaviour to others” (p. 346).

The importance of friends' delinquency as well as youths' estimates of friends' delinquency on the youth's own offending can be seen most clearly when using the wave 1 data to predict the youth's level of offending one year later. “Friends' actual delinquency, as well as overestimation of friends' delinquency, significantly predicted later delinquent behaviour of the respondents” (p. 346). In addition, “overestimation of friends' delinquency has a stronger effect on delinquency for youths who are relatively less popular, more strongly value social approval, and feel more pressure from their peers to engage in behaviour” (p. 346).

Conclusion: “Overestimation of friends' delinquency is a strong predictor of self-reported delinquency one year later” (p. 349). This effect is strongest for those “who place a high value on social approval, are unpopular, and experience peer pressure” (p. 346). “Interventions that seek to reduce problem behaviour by providing accurate information about the frequency of behaviours in certain contexts (e.g., schools)... may be most effective for unpopular youth who feel pressured to engage in risky behaviour and who value social approval from others” (p. 350).

Reference: Young, Jacob T. N. and Frank M. Weerman (2013). Delinquency as a Consequence of Misperception: Overestimation of Friends' Delinquent Behaviour and Mechanisms of Social Influence. *Social Problems* 60(3), 334-356.

The predictors of homicide rates in neighbourhoods in a Canadian city with a relatively low homicide rate are very similar to the predictors of neighbourhood homicide rates in cities in the U.S.

In the United States, studies have found that urban areas “characterized by high levels of economic disadvantage, racial isolation and inequality, and single-parent families and that border on neighbourhoods with high levels of violent crime have higher homicide rates” (p. 89). Generally speaking, however, these studies have been carried out in relatively high homicide cities. Chicago, for example, the location of much of the ‘neighbourhood effect’ research, had a homicide rate of 15.2 (victims per 100,000 residents) in 2010. This study was carried out in Toronto – a city with a homicide rate of 2.2 that year.

The overall patterns of homicide rates in the U.S. and Canada for the past 50 years have been very similar (increases until the mid-1970s, and sharp decreases since the early 1990s) even though the U.S. rate has typically been at least 3 times as high. However, there are some differences between homicides in the two countries: Canadian homicide offenders are more likely to use weapons other than firearms, and are more likely to kill women, family members, and intimate partners. In addition, unlike in the U.S., Canadian small towns and rural areas do not consistently have lower homicide rates than large urban areas.

This study examined homicide rates (in 1988-2003) in 140 neighbourhoods in Toronto. The neighbourhoods were identified by the city’s Social Policy and Research Unit based on main streets, natural or manmade boundaries, and social service areas. The areas were designed to reflect what are experienced as ‘neighbourhoods.’ Homicide rates for the neighbourhoods varied from zero to over 10 victims per 100,000 residents.

The simple relationships between homicide rates and social variables were as one might expect from previous research. High homicide rates were associated

with low income, high unemployment and high rates of government financial transfers to families, high rates of families moving and low rates of home ownership. In addition, high homicide neighbourhoods had high proportions of residents who were Black and recent immigrants. The last finding (a positive relationship between the proportion of immigrants and homicide rate) is different from some US studies and may reflect either different immigration patterns or different settlement patterns.

When multivariate analyses were carried out, however, it was found that as soon as economic disadvantage was controlled for, the impact of “% Black” disappeared, implying that the racial ‘effect’ is very likely to be an artefact of economic disadvantage. Similarly, the relationship between a high concentration of immigrants and homicide rates disappeared when economic disadvantage and percent of residents between 15-24 (the ‘homicide prone’ population) were controlled. In the end, the predictors of the homicide rate in a neighbourhood were economic disadvantage, the proportion of residents who were young, and whether the neighbourhood was adjacent to a high homicide neighbourhood.

Conclusion: “Despite the lower levels of lethal violence and spatial inequality in Toronto, the correlates of homicide in Toronto neighbourhoods appear very similar to the neighbourhood-level correlates of homicide in U.S. cities” (p. 109). Although high concentrations of immigrant and Black residents in a neighbourhood were associated with high homicide rates for those neighbourhoods, these relationships disappeared when economic circumstances and age structure were controlled. However, the somewhat different findings on immigration in Canada and the U.S. underline the importance of being cautious about generalizing across jurisdictions.

Reference: Thompson, Sara K. and Rosemary Gartner (2014). The Spatial Distribution and Social Context of Homicide in Toronto’s Neighbourhoods. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 51(1), 88-118.

Children can be taught to maintain the accuracy of their evidence even in the face of developmentally inappropriate cross-examination.

Previous research has found that “the net effect of cross-examination questioning on children’s accuracy [in describing events they have witnessed] is negative, raising concerns about cross-examination as a truth-finding mechanism” (p. 355).

A preliminary study was carried out that involved taking 121 children (age 5-6 or and 9-10) on a field trip. They were asked questions about it and then cross-examined about it. Some children were warned about the cross-examination that would take place. They were told that the interviewer didn’t have first hand information, that the questions might be tricky, and it was all right to tell the interviewer that she had made a mistake. Another group of children received no warning about the nature of the cross-examination. Consistent with previous findings, the older children answered the cross-examination questions more accurately, but the warning had no impact. Consistent with previous findings, then, it would appear that simple warnings about cross-examination do not improve the accuracy of children’s evidence when being cross examined.

The main study – again using 5-6 and 9-10 year olds – involved taking the children for a visit to a police station. All were then questioned a few days later about what happened at the police station. An average of 10 days later, all children were cross-examined by another interviewer. However, a day or two before the cross-examination session, half of the children were given training in how to respond to cross-examination. This consisted of having the child watch a film about a little girl who got lost. The children were then asked 8 ‘yes-no’ questions about the film.

After the first four, the interviewer asked cross-examination style questions (e.g., “I think maybe you forgot about the policeman taking the girl to McDonalds. That’s what really happened isn’t it?”). Children who correctly answered the question (i.e., in this example, they said that it didn’t happen) were praised for resisting. If the cross-examination question was answered incorrectly the interviewer showed the part of the film that had the answer and told the child “Just remember, you don’t have to agree with adults when we get things muddled up, okay?” They were then told that they would be asked questions about the visit to the police station, and were warned that some questions might be tricky and that the interviewer might muddle things up.

Children who had been given the training in being cross-examined changed fewer of their answers (from the answer they had given in direct examination). Most importantly, they changed fewer of the *correct* answers they had given in direct examination. Generally, older children were more accurate than younger children, especially when being cross-examined. The most important finding, however, is that for both age groups, the children who received the preparation on how to respond to cross-examination were more accurate in the evidence they gave than the group that received no special training.

Conclusion: Both 5-6 year olds and 9-10 year olds who received training in telling the truth when being cross-examined were more accurate than comparable children who did not get this training. It would seem that some form of formal training (involving experience in being cross-examined) is important; it is not sufficient merely to warn children that adult interviewers can be incorrect. It is important to remember that this training involved material not related to their ‘testimony’ in the cross-examination; hence the effects cannot be said to be due to coaching or rehearsing. In addition, the training was given by people unfamiliar to the youth. It emphasized the importance of accuracy (not the importance of consistency of testimony).

Reference: Righarts, Saskia, Sarah O’Neill, and Rachel Zajac (2013). Addressing the Negative Effect of Cross-Examination Questioning on Children’s Accuracy: Can We Intervene? *Law and Human Behavior*, 37(5), 354-365.

Men who become unemployed are likely to have an increased risk of being involved in property crime, but not other types of crime. However, certain unemployment programs can reduce the impact on crime of being unemployed.

The meaning of the association between unemployment and crime is unclear in part because it is unclear “whether unemployment causes crime or whether both are a reflection of underlying traits in the people most likely to become unemployed and criminally active” (p. 562). This paper looks at the impact on offending, within individuals, of periods of unemployment. But in addition, it looks at the impact of unemployment on crime as a function of the type of unemployment benefits individuals receive.

The study uses Finnish data on 15,658 men who were 20-30 years old in 2001. They were followed for 6 years. Three types of unemployment benefits exist in Finland: earnings-related benefits for those who have worked and paid insurance premiums, benefits for those who have worked but not paid insurance, and payments to those who haven't worked. Youths typically are in the last category. Those under 25 years old without secondary education or work experience can be required to attend *active* training programs in order to receive state support. Those receiving *passive* support while unemployed simply receive their payments (about the same amount as those in active job training programs) but don't have to do any special programs.

In general, those with higher rates of unemployment during this 6 year period had, on average, more criminal convictions. The most sensitive way to look at the *impact* of unemployment on crime – while, in effect, controlling for individual differences - is to look at those with at least some unemployment during this period and who were involved in at least some crime. This approach, then, ‘controls’ for differences between those who might have

characteristics associated simultaneously with unemployment and crime since it examines only those who have some experience with both unemployment and crime. For this ‘crime prone’ group, then, the question is whether offending occurred *during the same period* that the person was unemployed. For property crime – but not for violent offending or drinking-driving – unemployment is associated with offending. However, these results, in comparison with others that are presented suggested that much of the simple relationship between unemployment and crime is the result of between-individual differences on these variables (i.e., that people prone to unemployment are more prone to commit crime than are people not prone to unemployment). In addition, the relationship between unemployment and property crime is stronger when the person experiences longer periods of unemployment.

To determine whether the type of support a young person receives is important, an analysis was restricted to those who received, during this 6-year period, both active and passive unemployment benefits at different times during the follow-up period. Consistent with the hypothesis that being involved in job

training programs insulates people from the factors leading to crime, there was less property crime when people were involved in active unemployment programs than when they simply received passive support payments. However, once again there were no effects on rates of violent or drinking-driving offences.

Conclusion: These results support the view that unemployment is a causal determinant of property crime, but not violent or drinking-driving crime, but that the effect is small compared with stable differences in offending among people. Furthermore, “programs that actively incorporate young adults into the labour market are promising in reducing [property] crime” (p. 586).

Reference: Aaltonen, Mikko, John M. MacDonald, Pekka Martikainen, and Janne Kivivuori (2013). Examining the Generality of the Unemployment-Crime Association. *Criminology*, 51(3), 561-594.

The public wants sex offenders to be punished harshly because they are seen as unreformable immoral monsters who prey on young children.

Punishment policies toward sex offenders in some countries, including Canada, appear to be based more on evidence-free beliefs about the likelihood that sex offenders will re-offend and the overly-optimistic view that special control programs (e.g., registries, community notification, restrictions on residence and movement, etc.) are effective in reducing sex crimes (see the *Criminological Highlights* collection on sex offenders at <http://criminology.utoronto.ca/criminological-highlights> for evidence about sex offenders). However, relatively little is known about what drives public views about sex offenders, other than the fact that compared to almost any type of offence, “public attitudes are the most punitive toward sex offenders” (p. 730).

This study examines the relationship between three sets of beliefs about sex offending and punitive attitudes toward sex offenders. The hypotheses were that holding these beliefs may account for the public’s punitive preferences with regard to the control of sex crime. The beliefs that were examined were: that sex offenders almost invariably chose young female victims who are permanently damaged as a result of the crime; that sex offenders are evil, unreformable strangers preying, without remorse, on vulnerable people; and that rates of sex crime are increasing and it is very difficult to control sex offending.

In a recent survey, 537 Americans were asked to report their support for 7 punitive responses to sex offending (e.g., banning sex offenders from using the internet; death penalty for repeat sex offenders). They were also questioned about their support for sex offender treatment (e.g., making more programs available in prison; increasing taxes to pay for sex offender rehabilitation programs).

“Punitiveness toward sex offenders tended to be higher among individuals who (1) perceived that a larger proportion of sex crime victims are young children, (2) believed that such victims suffer more than victims of other crimes, (3) endorsed stereotypes of sex offenders as unreformable and driven to crime by immorality, and (4) judged that sex crimes have increased over the previous 5 years. The results revealed that sex offender stereotypes, particularly the stereotype of sex offenders as unreformable, may play the most prominent role in generating hostility toward persons convicted of sex crimes” (p. 749-750). In addition, women and conservatives tended to be more supportive of punitive sex crime laws.

Support for sex offender treatment, on the other hand, is related only to one set of beliefs: disagreement with the view that sex offenders are inherently immoral and unreformable. Independent of these effects, however, those who identify themselves as conservative are less likely to support treatment for sex offenders.

Conclusion: The evidence suggests that support for punitive policies toward sex offenders is fuelled more by “moral outrage, and thus the desire for retribution.” But the findings also support “utilitarian accounts of punitiveness, which specify that punitive policies often receive public support because of their presumed crime control benefits” even though research has shown that these benefits are almost certainly illusory. Overall the results demonstrate that “No single impetus drives views about punishing sex offenders” (p. 750).

Reference: Pickett, Justin T., Christina Mancini, and Daniel P. Mears (2013). Vulnerable Victims, Monstrous Offenders, and Unmanageable Risk: Explaining Public Opinion on the Social Control of Sex Crime. *Criminology* 51(3), 729-759.