Ranking Correctional Punishments

Views from Offenders, Practitioners, and the Public

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## Contents

List of Tables ix

Foreword xiii

Chapter 1 • Introduction to a Theory of Sanction Severity 3
   The Promise of Alternative Sanctions 4
   Toward a Theory of Sanction Severity 6
   Offender-Based Research on Sanction Severity 7
   Plan of the Book 11

Chapter 2 • Methods of Estimating Exchange Rates 13
   Measuring Punishment Exchange Rates 14
   Developing Exchange Rates Measures 15

Chapter 3 • Exchange Rates among Offender Populations 25
   Inmates’ Willingness to Participate in Alternative Sanctions 25
   The Punitiveness of Alternative Sanctions Compared to Imprisonment 30
   Probationers in Indiana 35
   Kentucky Parolees and Probationers 36
   Attitudinal Predictors of Exchange Rates 38
   Discussion 40
   Factors That Influence Variation in Exchange Rates among Offenders 43

Chapter 4 • Race and Gender Differences in Exchange Rates 47
   Race and Attitudes toward Criminal Justice and Punishment 48
   Race Differences in Exchange Rates 50
   Racial Differences in Perceptions of Alternatives Compared to Prison 54
   What May Account for the Observed Racial Differences? 57
   Racial Differences in Rankings of the Severity of Sanctions 61
   Discussion 63
   Gender Differences in Exchange Rates 65
   Summary of Gender Differences in Exchange Rates 72
   Conclusion 73
   Notes 74
## CONTENTS

Chapter 5 • Prison Experience and Differences in Exchange Rates  
Discussion 77  
Conclusion 81

Chapter 6 • Criminal Justice Practitioners’ and the Public’s Views of Exchange Rates  
Judges’ Perceptions of Intermediate Sanctions 87  
Correctional Officials’ Perceptions of Intermediate Sanctions 88  
Public Perceptions of Sanction Severity 90  
Results 91  
Judges’ Sample 91  
Public Sample 92  
Judges, the Public, and Corrections Officials 92  
Discussion 97

Chapter 7 • Are Correctional Sanctions Criminogenic?  
Testing for a Positive Punishment Effect among Incarcerated Offenders 103  
Deterrence versus the Positive Punishment Effect 105  
The Gambler’s Fallacy 108  
Recent Work on the Positive Punishment Effect and the Gambler’s Fallacy 109  
Limitations of Past Research 111  
Data and Methods 112  
Dependent Variables 114  
Independent Variables 115  
Findings 116  
Multivariate Results 118  
Evidence for a Criminogenic Effect 123  
Implications for Theory 127

Chapter 8 • Implications for Policy, Research, and Theories of Offender Decision-Making  
Deficits in Community Corrections Research 129  
Issues Associated With Deterrence and Offender Decision-Making 131  
Gender 133  
Race 134  
Correctional Experience 136  
Implications for Policy and Practice 137  
Conclusions 139
CONTENTS

Appendix A • Measuring Exchange Rates 145
Appendix B • Scales of Reasons to Avoid and Participate in Alternative Sanctions 155
References 157
Index 167
List of Tables

Chapter 2 • Methods of Estimating Exchange Rates
Table 2.1 Description of Samples Using Exchange Rates Measures 17

Chapter 3 • Exchange Rates among Offender Populations
Table 3.1 Descriptive Statistics of the Oklahoma Inmate Sample, Men, and Women 26
Table 3.2 Percentages of Oklahoma Inmates Who Refuse to Participate in the Specified Alternative Sanction to Avoid 4, 8, or 12 Months of Medium-Security Imprisonment 26
Table 3.3 Reasons Why Oklahoma Inmates Would Participate in an Alternative Sanction: Percentages 28
Table 3.4 Reasons Why Inmates Would Avoid an Alternative Sanction: Percentages 29
Table 3.5 Average/Median Amount of Alternative Sanction Inmates Would Be Willing to Serve to Avoid 4, 8, and 12 Months of Medium-Security Imprisonment 31
Table 3.6 Ranking of Sanction Punitiveness Based on Responses from Oklahoma Inmates Who Have Served the Specific Sanction 34
Table 3.7 Average Number of Months of Alternative Sanction Indiana Probationers Are Willing to Serve to Avoid 4, 8, and 12 Months Medium-Security Imprisonment 35
Table 3.8 Descriptive Statistics of the Sample of Kentucky Probationers and Parolees 36
Table 3.9 Exchange Rates among Kentucky Probationers and Parolees to Avoid 12 Months in State Prison 37
Table 3.10 Multivariate OLS Regression Amount of 3 Community Sanctions Offenders Will Serve to Avoid 12 Months Imprisonment 39
Table 3.11 Severity Rankings of Correctional Sanctions Based on a 12 Month Index for Oklahoma Prisoners, Indiana Probationers, and Kentucky Probationers and Parolees 41
Chapter 4 • Race and Gender Differences in Exchange Rates
Table 4.1 Descriptive Statistics of Black and White Respondents 52
Table 4.2 Average Number of Months of Alternative Sanction Probationers Are Willing to Serve to Avoid 4, 8, and 12 Months Medium Security Imprisonment 53
Table 4.3 Percentages of Probationers Who Refuse to Participate in the Specified Alternative Sanction to Avoid 4, 8, or 12 Months of Medium-Security Imprisonment 56
Table 4.4 Average Months of Alternative Sanction Probationers are Willing to Serve to Avoid 4, 8, and 12 Months Medium-Security Imprisonment. Comparison of Blacks v. Whites 56
Table 4.5 Reasons Why Probationers Would Avoid an Alternative Sanction by Race 60
Table 4.6 Ranking of Sanction Punitiveness, Blacks v. Whites 62
Table 4.7 Descriptive Statistics of the Oklahoma Inmate Sample, Men and Women 66
Table 4.8 Percentages of Male v. Female Inmates who will not participate in the Specified Alternative Sanction to Avoid 4, 8, and 12 Months of Medium-Security Imprisonment 67
Table 4.9 Average Amount of Alternative Sanctions Inmates Would Be Willing to Serve to Avoid 4, 8, and 12 Months of Medium-Security Imprisonment: Males v. Females 69
Table 4.10 Average Amount of Alternative Sanctions Kentucky Probationers and Parolees Would Be Willing to Serve to Avoid 12 Months of Medium-Security Imprisonment: Males v. Females 70
Table 4.11 Ranking of Sanction Punitiveness, Kentucky and Oklahoma, Males and Females 71

Chapter 5 • Prison Experience and Differences in Exchange Rates
Table 5.1 Amount of Alternative Sanction Offender Will Serve to Avoid 12 Months in State Prison 78
Table 5.2 Full OLS Models for Amount of Each Sanction Offenders Will Serve to Avoid 12 Months Imprisonment 79
Table 5.3 Severity Ranking of Criminal Justice Sanctions among Kentucky Probationers and Parolees 80

Chapter 6 • Criminal Justice Practitioners’ and the Public’s Views of Exchange Rates
Table 6.1 Descriptive Statistics for Officers and Judges 92
Table 6.2 Characteristics of the Sample of Kentucky Residents 93
LIST OF TABLES

Table 6.3  Comparison of Mean Exchange Rates among Offenders, Judges, Officers, and the Public  95
Table 6.4  Comparison of Sanction Severity Rankings Among Offenders, Judges, Officers, and the Public Based on Mean Exchange Rates in Table 6.3  97

Chapter 7 • Are Correctional Sanctions Criminogenic?
Table 7.1  Sample Characteristics  117
Table 7.2  Descriptive Statistics for Punishment Indicators and Predictor Variables  118
Table 7.3  Perceived Certainty of Arrest Regressed on Socio-Demographics and Measures of Punishment Experience  119
Table 7.4  Likelihood To Re-offend Regressed (OLS) on Socio-Demographics, Perceived Certainty and Severity, and Measures of Punishment Experience  121
Table 7.5  Likelihood To Re-offend, Regressed on Socio-Demographics, Perceived Certainty and Severity, and Measures of Punishment Experience  122
FOREWORD

By Michael Tonry

Systematic thinking about the imposition of punishments in individual criminal cases began late in the eighteenth century with Jeremy Bentham and Immanuel Kant. Kant believed that punishments should be proportioned to the wrongfulness of crimes. An intentional crime signifies a wrong moral choice and punishments should be calibrated to the degree of wrongfulness. Respect for the offender’s moral autonomy requires proportionate punishment. Anything more or less is unjust.

Bentham believed punishments should be designed to maximize human happiness and should be calibrated so that the unhappiness avoided as a result of punishment for crime always exceeds the unhappiness produced by the punishment itself. The references to happiness as the goal of punishment ring strangely in contemporary ears, but the basic idea is familiar. Judges in every case should make an individualized cost-benefit determination. Contemplated punishments whose costs—to the offender and others affected—exceed the benefits they could foreseeably accomplish cannot be justified.

Bentham and Kant are often portrayed as embodying polar retributive and utilitarian ways of thinking and theorizing about punishment. It is seldom in our time recalled, however, that they shared a basic and fundamental belief that punishments, however rationalized, should be tailored to the circumstances and characteristics of individual offenders. For very different reasons, both believed that measures of punishment should be subjective, not objective. What mattered was the effect of this punishment on that person, not the effect of this kind of punishment on the average person. Bentham in particular wrote a good bit about the need to subjectivize punishments to the offender’s “sensibility.”

In this important book about differences in how people experience and characterize punishments, David May and Peter Wood follow a sentencing path that Jeremy Bentham first laid out 200 years ago, but which few have attempted to follow since. Their new work on this old subject became imaginable only from
the 1970s onwards when the institutions and ideologies of indeterminate and individualized sentencing began to collapse. For a century before that, judges and corrections officials mostly believed they should in every case try to balance rehabilitative and incapacitative considerations, and sometimes think about deterrence. There was no need to develop general rules. Without general rules linking crime to punishment, the question of whether the same punishment might affect different offenders in different ways did not come up.

Since the 1970s, indeterminate sentencing has been out of vogue. Most jurisdictions have enacted mandatory minimum and truth-in-sentencing laws, or promulgated sentencing guidelines that are meant to establish general, binding rules. A theoretical literature on retributive punishment, or “just deserts,” as it is more popularly known, has come into being. That literature, forgetting that Kant himself wanted account taken of the offender’s sensibilities (Bentham’s term), argues for fairly rigid sentencing rules in which crimes and punishments are objectivized: X years in prison following conviction of crime Y. What this neglects is that criminal code categories are general and broad and often encompass acts of widely divergent degrees of harmfulness, and that punishment categories are likewise broad. The qualitative experience of a year’s imprisonment depends both on the prison (super-max, maximum security, or campus-style minimum security; whether it is well or poorly managed, overcrowded, violent or gang-dominated) and the prisoner (young or old, healthy or sick, robust or delicate, claustrophobic or not, mentally stable or not, a gang member or an employed father of four).

Those are the reasons why Norval Morris and I two decades ago began to play with ideas about interchangeability of punishment. As May and Wood note, we assumed a rough scale of punishments ranging from unsupervised probation to lengthy imprisonment. We wanted to devise a scheme that was respectful of ideas about deserved punishment, but also allowed judges to take account of differences between offenses within a single category, and differences between offenders. In particular we wanted to figure out a way to allow judges to choose between different kinds of punishments (prison v. intensive probation v. home confinement) in particular cases.

We tried various devices. One was to create a system of generic “sanction units” with which punishments could be valued. A year’s imprisonment might be X units, a month of community service Y units, a fine equal to a day’s pay Z units. The sentence might be for A units and the judge could juggle the Xs, Ys, and Zs as he or she believed most appropriate. In the end we decided a punishment unit scheme could never be made workable. University of Pennsylvania law professor Paul Robinson also wrote a few articles on punishment units but nothing emerged from his work either.
Morris and I finally decided that the best we could do was to propose a general scheme of rough interchangeability and urge developers of sentencing guidelines to authorize use of prison terms or other kinds of punishments as alternatives for particular categories of offenses and offenders. A few jurisdictions, most extensively North Carolina and Pennsylvania, did that. Most guidelines systems, trapped in the view that only prison counts as a serious punishment, did not or did so only a little.

The fundamental problem is that American political and popular culture is remarkably harsh in relation to convicted offenders. For most non-trivial crimes, most people, including most practitioners, believe that only prison counts and that almost all other punishments are less severe. Sometimes the lesser severity is described as inherent (“I’d be happy to spend six months at home sleeping late and watching TV on ‘house arrest’”); sometimes it is a consequence of skepticism that state bureaucracies have the capacity or the will to administer seemingly intrusive punishments. Whatever the reason, it is difficult to devise a system for the United States (as occurs in many European countries) in which a week’s community service is regarded as equivalent to a month’s imprisonment, or a fine equal to a day’s net pay is regarded as equivalent to a day in jail.

May and Wood’s observation that people have different views about the severity of particular punishments is not new. It is implicit in Bentham’s idea that punishments be individualized to take account of individual offender’s sensibilities. And it was a frequent finding in evaluations of “intermediate sanctions” in the 1980s: some offenders eligible for a community penalty in lieu of imprisonment always declined, preferring to serve their time and be done with it. They preferred not to be hassled by intrusive and sometimes demeaning conditions and risk failing on the community punishment and winding up in prison at day’s end anyway.

What is new and important in May and Wood’s work are the efforts to systematically see how groups of people differ in their views about the seriousness of particular punishments, and the findings that there are systematic difference between men and women, blacks and whites, and presumably between and within many other groups. Bentham and Kant would have applauded, as would Norval Morris were he alive, and as I do. This is an important work that picks up threads that others dropped.