

Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

Perceptual Deterrence

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Deterrence is a process in which threatened or actual sanctions discourage criminal acts. There are official sanctions, such as incarceration or probation. There are also non-legal punishments; for example, people may refrain from offending to avoid disapproval from others. Three dimensions of punishment are believed to affect crime. In the aggregate, crime rates should diminish as the certainty, severity, and celerity (swiftness) of punishments increase. And, the likelihood that an individual will commit a given crime should relate negatively to that individual's perceptions of the certainty, severity, and celerity of punishment for that crime.

Various approaches have been taken to estimate the existence and size of deterrent effects. Research has investigated the association between crime rates in a place and the authorized punishments in that place. Authorized punishments are the behavioral restrictions authorities are empowered to enforce. They consist of criminal statutes and other behavioral regulations. For example, Radha Iyengar found that mandatory arrest laws for domestic violence increased intimate partner homicide, but decreased "other family" homicides. And David McDowall, Colin Loftin, and Brian Wiersema have investigated the impact of both mandatory sentencing laws and concealed firearms laws on crime rates. Studies have also related crime rates to indicators of actual police activity or enforced punishments. The most prominent examples of this approach model crime rates as a function of the arrest clearance ratio; this ratio consists of the number of arrests divided by the number of crimes known to the police.

While highly informative, these approaches do not directly address *perceptual deterrence*, the subject of this entry. Authorized or actual punishments are expected to reduce criminal activity [p. 700 ↓] through their impact on individual perceptions. Thus, perceptual deterrence entails two linkages: threatened or actual punishments must affect perceptions of sanction risk, and in turn, these perceptions must affect decisions to commit or refrain from crime. As for the first linkage, perceptions must be predictably malleable. That is, a deterrence initiative must logically elevate at least one of the three deterrence perceptions (certainty, severity, or celerity); and the net impact of the deterrence initiative on perceptions must be that the targeted individuals are less crime prone.

Sanctions and Perceptions

There is little evidence that sanctioning effects changes in perceptions of informal sanctions or changes in perceptions of the severity or celerity of legal sanctions. However, research has tested how sanctioning affects the perceived certainty of legal punishments. Such research has taken one of two approaches. One approach has been to relate an individual's perception of the certainty of punishment to any consequences that individual has experienced from past offending. Mark Stafford and Mark Warr theorized that being punished for a crime should increase and avoiding punishment for a crime should reduce an individual's estimate of the certainty of punishment for that crime. Another approach to studying deterrence perceptions has been to test the relationship between indicators of sanctioning in a place (typically a county) and residents' perceptions of sanctioning in that place. In testing these expectations, Gary Kleck, Brion Sever, Spencer Li, and Marc Gertz found that individuals' estimates of total arrests per 100 offenses known to the police for homicide, robbery, aggravated assault, and burglary for 1988–1998 in their county of residence were uncorrelated with the actual clearance rate for their counties. Lance Lochner produced similar null results. However, in the most recent application of this approach, using a national sample of school students, Robert Apel, Greg Pogarsky, and Leigh Bates reported a positive association between the objective and perceived risk of being disciplined in school for transgression. All told, some evidence suggests that individuals indeed update their perceptions of sanction certainty based on past punishment experiences, as the perceptual deterrence framework predicts.

Perceptions and Offending

Research has also addressed the second linkage in perceptual deterrence; that perceptions of the certainty, severity, and celerity of legal punishments should relate negatively to the probability of offending. This is an inherently individual-level proposition. Investigating it requires data on individuals' perceptions about the risks of criminal justice punishments and indications of their offending propensity and/or behaviors. There have been two basic approaches to this general question.

One involves scenario or vignette studies. Individuals read fairly detailed scenarios outlining potential crime opportunities and then answer questions based on the scenario. Among the information respondents provide are their perceptions about the risk of punishment and projections of the likelihood they would offend. This approach tends to show that the perceived certainty of legal punishment is a more potent deterrent of criminal activity than the perceived severity or celerity of legal punishment is. Among the advantages of this approach are that respondents give context-specific information, as offending decisions are believed to be unique and dependent on situational features. Another advantage of the scenario approach is that both perceptions and projections of offending probability are elicited contemporaneously (rather than at distinct points in time). This is important because perceptual deterrence is viewed as a contemporaneous process (Grasmick & Bursik, 1990), meaning that behavior is a function of perceptions existing at the time such behavior is contemplated and imminent. There are, however, weaknesses in the scenario approach. One is that the outcome measure is an individual's projection of his or her future, hypothetical behavior, rather than actual offending behavior. Also, the approach most often uses college student and other non-criminally experienced samples.

Another approach to studying the second linkage in perceptual deterrence—offending as a function of perceived sanction risk—uses longitudinal data on perceptions of sanction risk and offending behavior from a sample of individuals at repeated points in time. Thus, assume that data are gathered at n points in time (t_1

t_2

, ... t_n

). Offending between t_1

and t_2

is modeled as a function of risk perceptions at t

1

, offending between t

2

and t

3

is modeled [p. 701 ↓] as a function of risk perceptions at t

2

, and so on. Recent applications of this approach have produced strong evidence that offending relates negatively to perceptions of the certainty of punishment. Unlike the scenario approach, the outcome variable in longitudinal perceptual deterrence research is actual offending behavior. However, this approach does not estimate the contemporaneous relationship between perceptions and behavior; it measures, rather, the relationship between perceptions at the outset of a time period and criminal behavior occurring during that time period.

Perceptual deterrence research identifies individual perceptions of sanction risk as the key intervening variables that determine the impact of deterrence initiatives on the behavior of citizens. Even studies that find empirical relationships consistent with the perceptual deterrence perspective (e.g., individuals who experience punishment elevate their perceptions of sanction certainty) do not explain a large amount of variation in perceived sanction certainty. Beyond this, there are significant unaddressed research questions on perceptual deterrence. These involve the formation and updating of severity and celerity perceptions. As well, perceptual deterrence research has yet to fully explore the potential applicability of heuristics and biases from the judgment and decision making literature and the role of emotion in contemplative criminal behavior (Nagin, 2007).

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See also

- [General Deterrence Theory](#)
- [Gibbs, Jack P.: Deterrence Theory](#)
- [Incarceration and Recidivism](#)
- [Nagin, Daniel S., and Raymond Paternoster: Individual Differences and Deterrence](#)
- [Pogarsky, Greg: Behavioral Economics and Crime](#)
- [Pogarsky, Greg, and Alex R. Piquero: The Resetting Effect](#)
- [Sherman, Lawrence W.: Defiance Theory](#)
- [Stafford, Mark C., and Mark Warr: Deterrence Theory](#)
- [Williams, Kirk R., and Richard Hawkins: Deterrence Theory and Non-Legal Sanctions](#)

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