



Individual Perception on Crime Severity among College Students



Wayne-Thomas La Pre
University of La Verne

INTRODUCTION

Studies investigating jurors and the length of sentence they render a person convicted for a crime tend to focus on factors affecting how they perceive the crime and their past experiences of that crime (Findlay, 2001; Marcus, Lyons & Guyton, 2000). A factor that is rarely looked into, is what an individual studies while in college and the type of educational degree they receive. This is an important factor when looking into perceptions of crime seriousness because even though students attend college to receive an education, unless they are specializing in the criminal justice field, they would not be formally educated in the laws of society nor know the degree of severity of particular crimes. In addition, a student would not share the same attitudes as another student who has received formal training in the criminal justice field (Wimshurt, Marchetti & Allard, 2004).

Even though previous studies have not investigated college major as a main factor of crime perception, studies have investigated victimization. As a result, they have indicated that there are 3 types of victimization; felony victims, misdemeanor victims and non-victims (Smith & Torstenson, 1997; Winkel, 1998). Felony victims are classified as people who were a victim of a felony crime. Felony offenses are crimes which are punishable by death and/or imprisonment in a state prison (West, 2004). In addition, felony crimes are considered the most severe type of crime in western society. Misdemeanor victims are classified as people who were a victim of a misdemeanor crime. Misdemeanor crimes are all crimes other than a felony crime and include punishments of payments, fines or by imprisonment not to exceed one year (West, 2004).

The severity of a crime would also affect an individual's perception of that crime and sentencing appropriate to that crime. This could be an important issue because depending on the level of severity a crime is, our perceptions would vary as well as what we think that person should receive for prison time (Herzog, 2003). It is also important to be able to determine how severe a crime is because what one individual may consider severe, another individual may consider it as moderately severe or as non-severe. Even though this area is important to investigate, this could cause some potential problems, because individuals do not always share the same perception regarding crime severity.

Generally, most research on this topic has not taken into consideration the educational level of the participants, as well as if they were a victim of a crime. In addition little research has been done in the area of how particular college students (criminology and psychology) perceive crime seriousness. Therefore, these issues inspire the current research. Does a person's college major and victim type affect the punishment (length of sentence) they give to convicted criminals for various crimes? The main objective of this study is to examine how college major (psychology and criminology) and victimization type (felony victim or misdemeanor victim or non-victim) influence college student's perception of crime seriousness.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this experimental study were forty-eight undergraduates that were psychology majors (n=28) and criminology majors (n=20) at the University of La Verne. Of the 48 participants, 14.6% classified themselves as victims of felony crimes, 12.5% as victims of misdemeanor crimes, and 72.9% as non-victims. Participants included 37.5% Latinos/ Hispanics, 31.3% Euro-Americans, 10.4% African Americans, and 6.3% Asian Americans. Most participants were female (81.3%).

Instruments

This experiment was a 2x3x3 mixed design, post-test only experimental design, using a demographic survey and vignettes with questions regarding length of punishment for 3 different crimes. The demographic questionnaire included questions regarding gender, age, ethnicity, college major and victimization.

The independent variables for this study were college major (psychology or criminology) and victimization type (felony victim, misdemeanor victim or non-victim).

The dependent variable was the length of sentence given for each crime.

Procedure

Participants signed up for various times to participate in the experiment which was held at the University of La Verne's psychology lab. At the psychology lab, participants were given a consent form and the researcher explained what the consent form consisted of and how to find out the results of the experiment upon completion of the research. Once the participants agreed to participate in the experiment they signed the researcher's copy of the consent form and returned it to the researcher. Once all the consent forms were return from participant, they were given a packet which contained a 6-item demographic questionnaire and 3 vignettes in randomized order describing a different crime taking place. The crimes that were described in the vignettes were sexual assault, battery and petty theft.

After the participants read each vignette they were asked to assume the role of a juror determining the sentence length for the person convicted in each crime scenario. They were then asked to assign the minimum number of time that person should go to prison. After the experiment was completed the participants were debriefed, thanked and offered and beverages and snacks were offered.

RESULTS

A repeated measures 3-way ANOVA (2 X 2 X 3) was used to test the four hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis tested that criminology students will give more serious punishment (longer sentence) for various crimes than psychology students Results indicated that there were no significant differences between criminology majors (M=17.75, SD= 5.95) and psychology majors (M= 26.07, SD=6.49) on length of punishment given, contrary to what was hypothesized $F(2,82)=.14 p>0.5, \eta^2=.87$.

Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis tested that the victim type would affect sentence length given to crimes. Results indicated no significant differences among victim types on length of punishment given, contrary to what was hypothesized $F(4,82)=1.55 p.>0.5, \eta^2=.20$. See Table 1 for means and standard deviations.

Table 1.

Means and Standard Deviations of College Major and Victim Type for Length of Punishment

College Major	M	SD	n
Criminology	17.75	5.95	20
Psychology	26.07	6.49	28
Victim Types	M	SD	n
Felony Victim	33.12	8.34	7
Misdemeanor Victim	11.42	9.46	6
Non-Victim	21.19	3.90	35

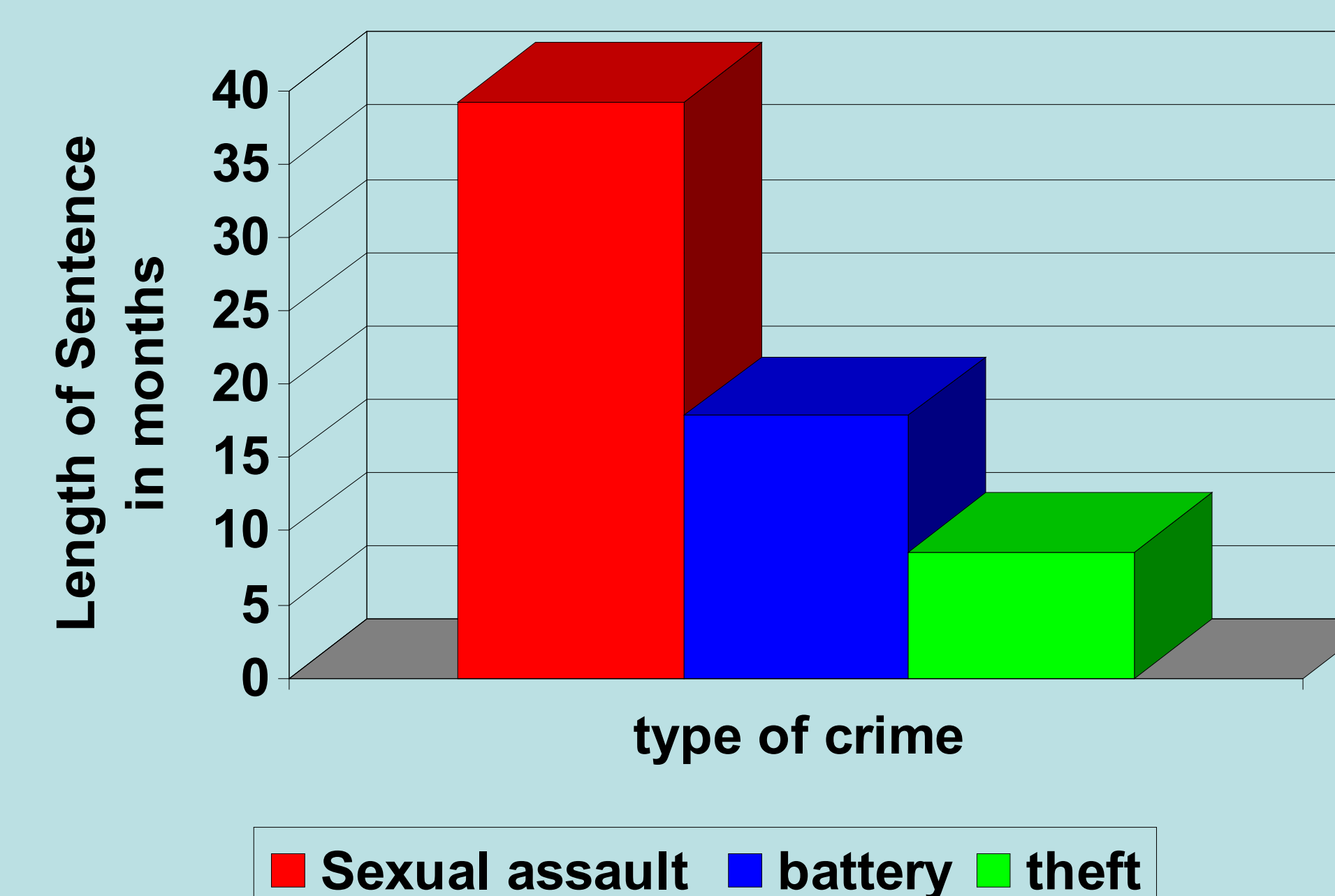
Hypothesis 3

The third hypothesis tested if there was an interaction among college type, victim type and type of crime. Specifically it was expected that criminology students who were felony victims would perceive the sexual assault vignette as the most severe crime, when compared to other groups. Results, however, indicated that there were no interaction effects of college major, type of victim, and type of crime on length of punishment and, therefore, this did not support the hypothesis $F(4,82)=.17 p>0.5, \eta^2=.95$.

Hypothesis 4

The fourth hypothesis tested whether the type of crime would affect the punishment given. It was hypothesized that the more severe the crime (sexual assault), the longer the sentence rendered. Results indicated significant differences in punishment given among the various types of crime, $F(2,82)=10.23 p<0.01, \eta^2=.20$. Post hoc tests showed that the sexual assault crime (M= 39.22, SD= 7.10) was given significantly longer ($p <.05$) punishment than the battery crime (M= 17.91, SD= 7.17) and the theft crime (M= 8.61, SD= 2.06). There were no significant differences between theft and battery crimes. See Figure 1 for mean length of sentence.

Figure 1.
Mean Length of Sentence in Months for type of crime



CONCLUSION

- The perpetrator in the sexual assault vignette was given a longer punishment than perpetrators in either battery or petty thief vignettes.
- There were no differences in crime perceptions among college majors or victim types.

Despite the significant finding of crime type on crime perception, this study could be limited in that there was a lack of information regarding if participants were previously convicted of a crime. This is important because if a participant was previous convicted of a crime then their outlook on crime seriousness would be different from someone who has never been convicted of a crime. For example, if a person was convicted for driving under the influence of a controlled substance (DUI) they would not perceive this crime as seriousness as someone who has never been convicted of a DUI. Another limitation of this study was that there was a small sample size of participants. Gender comparisons were not examined either. Perhaps if the sample size was larger and gender comparisons were examined the study may have yielded different results.

Future research may wish to incorporate gender as a factor to see how males and female perceive crime as well as if there are any differences between the two groups. Furthermore, if we are able to examine how people who were previously convicted of a crime would perceive crime serious, this could have an impact on juror selection. This would be interesting to examine because prosecutors might possibly try and get non-convicted people on a jury and the defense might try and get convicted people on the jury. Future researchers may wish to examine those factors pertaining to perceptions of crime seriousness.