

HOW DO PEOPLE MEASURE THE SERIOUSNESS OF CRIME?

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Abstract

Crime is an undesirable aspect of social life. The nature and intensity of this undesirability is reflected in public perceptions of crime seriousness. These perceptions depend to some extent on the actual parameters of crime. At the same time, however, they are part of the social construction of contemporary reality and essential elements of normative culture. The study of these perceptions is an integral part of the study of social control. The present review attempted to examine to what degree is there agreement among individuals and groups in seriousness perceptions? Then, the degree to which perceptions of crime seriousness are consensually held between differing societies, and social groups over time is examined. Finally, the methodological debate over rating and ranking offence seriousness is considered.

Keywords: crime, public perceptions, crime seriousness

Introduction

In criminological and criminal justice research, popular perceptions of the nature of criminal behavior and of crime as a social problem constitute an important area of investigation. The way people perceive crime is a central aspect of normative culture in general and formal social control in particular. The study of perceptions of crime seriousness was introduced by Sheley (1980) who presented an alternative way to measure crime seriousness. They argued that, to assess the seriousness of crime as a social problem, one should not only look at the prevalence of criminal behavior (reflected in crime rates), but also consider the nature of criminal acts (severity of victimization, cost for society, etc.). They suggested that the widely used crime rates should be combined with measures of the seriousness of each criminal offense. Until then, the seriousness of each offense was decided by the legal experts. The classification of crimes in the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) is an example of such seriousness rating. Sellin and Wolfgang (1964) wanted to use an alternative measure of perceived seriousness, one that would reflect public opinion. This measure is the perceived seriousness of crime and it is obtained by the empirical measurement of perceptions.

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Our conceptualization of crime seriousness acknowledges the two dimensions of harmfulness and wrongfulness and, building on Greenfield and Paoli (2013), extends the concept of harmfulness. Greenfield and Paoli's framework draws on Feinberg's (1984) and defines harm – and by extension harmfulness – as a setback to legitimate interests. It also emphasizes 'total harm' (Sherman, 2007) and differentiates between severity and incidence, the latter of which depends on both the incidence of the crime itself and the incidence of harm in relation to that crime. On that basis, we define 'crime seriousness' in terms of two plus two constitutive elements or 'components': (a) the wrongfulness of a crime, defined as the severity of the violation of moral norms and sentiments implied by a criminal activity; (b) the severity of the harms of crime, defined as the gravity of the injury or damage that the crime inflicts; (c) the incidence of the crime, defined as the frequency with which this type of crime actually happens; and (d) the incidence of the harms of a crime, defined as the frequency with which a type or range of harms results from a crime event.

Whereas incidence was excluded from the original understanding of seriousness, we also consider the incidence of crime and of harms in relation to crime because they – depending on the policy uses – also contribute to seriousness and provide necessary information for crime control and prevention prioritization. A crime may entail the most severe harms but, if it occurs only rarely, it might merit less attention than a crime involving less serious harms but occurring more frequently. The question is, therefore, whether the respondents assess the seriousness of a standard event of a certain crime or the seriousness of all occurrences of that crime by simultaneously considering crime and harm incidence in addition to harm severity. The former – which we call 'typical' seriousness – is relevant for sentencing. The latter – which we label 'total' – is important for crime control and prevention priorities, but it may also play a role in other phases of criminal policy. Feinberg (1984: 216) and Simester and Von Hirsch (2011: 45), for example, stress the importance of the probability of harm – a concept related to incidence – in making policy decisions about criminalization.

Total seriousness might also occasionally affect the development of sentencing guidelines. The Sentencing Council of England and Wales (Sentencing Guidelines Council, 2004: 9) states that 'exceptional local circumstances ... may lead a court to decide that prevalence (of crime) should influence sentencing levels'. In addition, knowledge about the incidence of harms in relation to broad offence categories can assist in defining minimum and maximum sentences (Sentencing Guidelines Council, 2004). The idea of total seriousness also informs the newer, but related, concept of serious crime, which has become prominent in criminal policy debates at the EU level, and elsewhere, since the 1990s. In relation to this study, we propose three hypotheses with regard to the first aim of the article: 1. Crimes involving harm to individuals' physical and psychological integrity are rated as the most serious, followed by property crimes and crimes with no immediate individual bearers of harms. 2. Both perceived wrongfulness and typical – but not total – harmfulness (that is, harm severity) predict perceived crime seriousness, but follow different logics; the perceived incidence of crime and crime harms does not predict perceived seriousness. 3. Perceived crime seriousness is not affected by socio-demographic characteristics or victimization experiences.

Methods

Sample and questionnaire

We asked the Belgian National Register, which records data on all Belgian residents, to draw a random sample stratified by geographical area (according to postcodes and provinces). The National Register randomly selected six postcodes in each of the five Flemish provinces, giving a higher probability to postcodes with a larger number of inhabitants. Then it randomly selected 50 adult male and 50 adult female inhabitants from each postcode, yielding a representative sample of 3000 Dutch-speaking adults residing across provinces in Flanders.

We conducted the survey between April and June 2014. The National Register sent questionnaires to all 3000 individuals by mail, with a cover letter and reply envelope from the research team. The procedure guaranteed the anonymity of the respondents: our research team did not have access to their personal data in any phase of the data collection. Each copy of the questionnaire and reply envelope was marked with a numerical code and only the National Register could link the code to a specific individual. To incentivize responses, we developed a prize scheme and eventually distributed five vouchers from a multimedia store, three vouchers for a dinner for two in a famous Flemish restaurant, and an iPad mini. Three weeks after initial contact, we sent a reminder. Of the 3000 questionnaires distributed, 1297 were returned (43.2 percent). We retained 1278 questionnaires for the analysis, after eliminating 5 incomplete questionnaires, 10 with clearly patterned answers and 2 that had not been completed by the individual selected. Overall, our response rate was 42.6 percent. All individuals received the same set of questions, with the same ordering of questions and items

Variables

Selection of crimes. We selected 10 crimes for the survey using the following criteria: differences in the perceived seriousness of the crimes as established by previous studies (see Stylianou, 2003); the sentences meted by the Belgian criminal law and the crime frequency; representation of crimes against the person and property; and representation of individual as well as corporate and collective offenders, as in the cases of corporate and organized crime. Respondents were asked to consider three crimes against persons (murder, physical assault, sexual assault), three crimes against property (burglary, theft, vandalism), and four crimes belonging to the broad area of organized and corporate crime activities (cocaine trafficking, cannabis production and trafficking [hereinafter referred to as cannabis trade], corporate fraud, and terrorism). Two additional criteria also informed the selection.

To ensure a certain level of familiarity with the types of crimes among the public, we selected 9 of 10 crimes on the basis of a content analysis of the crimes shown on television in Flanders. Further, we chose organized crimes such as drug trafficking and terrorism because they are on the list of 'serious crimes' addressed by EU and national agencies. We added cannabis trade because it had recently been legalized in several jurisdictions and we thought that seriousness ratings might widely differ.

Respondents were asked five questions for each of the 10 offences, covering the four components of crime seriousness and overall seriousness. We used the categorical scaling method (see

Stylianou, 2003, for an overview and Kwan et al., 2002, for criticisms). First, respondents were asked to rate the incidence of each of the crimes by answering the question 'How often do you think that the following crimes take place in Belgium during one month?' For this question we used a four-point scale, ranging from 'rarely or never' to 'very often'. We used two types of questions to assess the severity of harm. For the crimes of burglary, physical assault and cocaine trafficking, which are the three crimes in each category that appear most frequently on Flemish TV, we used a list of items covering concrete examples of possible harms for individuals, private entities, government and society – applying the harm types and categories of bearers identified by Greenfield and Paoli (2013).

The respondents were asked 'How severe do you consider this harm for the [crime]?' Answer categories ranged from 'no harm at all' to 'very severe harm', on a five-point scale. For each of the three crimes, we constructed a scale based on the mean scores on the different aspects of harm asked about ($\alpha = .695$ for physical assault, $.667$ for burglary and $.738$ for cocaine trafficking). For the seven other crimes, we asked one general question on the severity of the crime harms, but instructed the respondents to consider different types and bearers of harm in their assessment of the severity of crime harms. The question was: 'As the preceding questions show that crime-related harm can include physical injuries and financial losses, as well as financial costs for the government and feelings of unsafety, indicate how severe you think the total harm for the following crimes in Belgium.'

We measured the perceived incidence of crime harms similarly. For burglary, physical assault and cocaine trafficking, respondents rated the incidence of all the harms described in the items used for measuring severity. The question here was: 'How frequently do you consider this harm occurs for the [crime]?' Answer categories ranged from 'rarely or never' to 'very often' on a four-point scale. For each of the three crimes, we constructed a scale based on the mean scores on the different aspects of harm asked about ($\alpha = .818$ for physical assault, $.815$ for burglary and $.847$ for cocaine trafficking). For theft, terrorism, sexual assault, vandalism and corporate fraud we asked respondents to rate the incidence of five types of harms (physical injury, psychological harm, privacy, financial costs, loss of dignity and reputation) for individual victims only ('Indicate how frequently the following types of harms occur for individual victims'), using the same fourpoint scale. For each of these five crimes, we constructed a scale based on the mean scores on the five types of harm asked about (α ranging from $.643$ to $.854$).

Given the focus on individual victims, we did not measure the incidence of the harms for murder; nor did we do this for cannabis, because this crime was added at a later stage. The double-track operationalization of the severity and incidence of crime harms was primarily dictated by pragmatic reasons – preventing the questionnaire from becoming too long. Because the scores for burglary, physical assault and cocaine trafficking were sufficiently robust, we use them in the same way as the more simplified measurement of severity and incidence of crime harms for the other seven crimes. Even if the more extensive operationalization might result in slightly higher or lower scores (which we cannot check), the overall ranking of the three crimes among the other seven crimes demonstrates that the two operationalization methods can be used simultaneously.

Following this, the wrongfulness of each of the 10 crimes was measured using questions developed by Warr (1989) and Wikström et al. (2012); respondents were asked to rate 'how

wrong' [they] think it is, if somebody commits this crime' on a nine-point scale ranging from 'not at all wrong' to 'very wrong'. Finally, respondents rated the perceived seriousness of the 10 crimes on a nine-point scale, ranging from 'not serious at all' to 'very serious'. Respondents were instructed to reflect on the components of seriousness by asking: 'Taking into account the wrongfulness of the crime, the severity of its harms and the incidence of the crime and its harms, how serious do you think the following crimes are?' After constructing the scales as described above, all scales were transformed into 100-point scales for the analyses.

Control variables. We used seven demographic variables as controls: self-identified gender, age, socio-economic status (five-point scale consisting of seven items, $\alpha = .929$), educational level (five categories, dummy-coded as none/primary v. secondary/higher), country of origin of the respondent and of both parents (dummy-coded as Belgian or foreign origin) and religion (seven categories of faith, dummy-coded as no-religion versus faith). Victimization experience was included as a control, because it could affect the assessment of harmfulness seriousness. Respondents were asked about their victimization experience during the past five years: whether they had been personally a victim of crime (direct victimization experience; yes/no) or whether one of their friends, family members, neighbours or acquaintances had been a victim (indirect victimization experience; yes/no). Respondents answered for 6 of the 10 crimes: burglary, assault, theft, sexual assault, vandalism and corporate fraud.

Results

Table 1 summarizes the sample characteristics. Compared with the general population, our sample is representative for gender but not for age and education. Young people under the age of 34 are underrepresented ($\chi^2 = 15.360$, $df = 4$, $p < .05$), whereas those above 50 are overrepresented. Similarly, people with lower educational levels are underrepresented, whereas people with higher educational levels are overrepresented ($\chi^2 = 2068.370$, $df = 3$, $p < .05$). Respondents of Belgian origin accounted for 86 percent of the sample. About one-third had been direct victims of theft (36.1 percent) and vandalism (31.7 percent) followed by burglary (14.3 percent). The victimization rates for physical and sexual assault and for fraud were below 10 percent. Two-thirds of the respondents had had indirect victimization experiences of theft (66.7 percent) and burglary (63.5 percent) and about half of vandalism (49.4 percent), whereas the rates of indirect victimization of other crimes were all lower than one-third.

Table 2 gives an overview of mean values and the resulting rank ordering for seriousness and all four components. Respondents rank violent crimes as the most serious, followed by burglary and theft, which are the most common property crimes. Crimes often related to organized crime, such as cocaine trafficking and cannabis trade, or to powerful actors, as in the case of corporate fraud, obtain low ranks for seriousness, along with vandalism. The assessments of the wrongfulness of the crime deliver exactly the same ranking. In contrast, assessments of harm severity follow this 'logic' only for the three violent crimes that respondents have also deemed most serious and wrongful. Corporate fraud, cocaine trafficking and vandalism are seen as more harmful than the two property crimes of burglary and theft, and physical assault and cannabis trade are seen as the least harmful ones. The severity of harms mirrors neither the moral judgement nor the overall perceived seriousness of crime. Harm severity presumably reflects the 'potential' for large-scale harm that corporate fraud and cocaine trafficking have with many victims (or dependent users),

whereas many of the property crimes or even assaults are deemed to be crime incidents that cause only little or minor harm.

When assessing the incidence or frequency of crime, respondents seem to rely largely on local knowledge from neighbourhoods and communities. Property crimes including damage to property – as in vandalism – are realistically seen as the most frequent crimes, followed by cannabis trade and physical assault, where presumably the minor incidents are kept in mind.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics and victimization experiences of the respondents

Variable	N	Percent
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	596	47
Female	673	53
<i>Age</i>		
18–24	116	9.2
25–34	162	12.8
35–49	322	25.5
50–64	372	29.4
65+	292	23.1
<i>Educational level</i>		
None	33	2.6
Primary education	116	9.2
Secondary education	563	44.9
College	391	31.2
University	131	10.4
<i>Origin</i>		
Belgian	1077	86.4
Other	169	13.6
<i>Direct victimization</i>		
Burglary	180	14.3
Theft	457	36.1
Physical assault	108	8.5
Sexual assault	54	4.3
Fraud	98	7.8
Vandalism	402	31.7
<i>Indirect victimization</i>		
Burglary	796	63.5
Theft	841	66.7
Physical assault	344	27.2
Sexual assault	126	10
Fraud	156	12.3
Vandalism	623	49.4

Cocaine trafficking ranks sixth. Severe violent crimes such as sexual assault, murder and terrorism are correctly deemed much less frequent, as is corporate fraud, which might be less visible because it primarily affects higher social strata. The latest Belgian victimization survey, conducted in 2008, confirms a realistic ranking in the assessment of the incidence of four of the selected crimes by the Flemish public. Victimization rates for the last 12 months among the participants of the Belgian Safety Monitor were highest for the property crimes of burglary and theft (6.08 percent and 4.48 percent respectively). Physical assault had a lower victimization rate than property crimes (2.72 percent), sexual assault figured with 1.19 percent as the lowest victimization rate among the participants (Federale Politie, 2009).

The assessment of the incidence of harms from crime covered all crimes except murder and cannabis trade and, even with those exceptions, spanned a range of very harmful and presumably rather less harmful crime. Sexual assault is seen as most frequently entailing harms for individual victims, followed by the property crimes of burglary and theft. Around an average of 70 we find terrorism, physical assault and cocaine trafficking. Corporate fraud and vandalism are perceived as the crimes that least frequently entail harms for individual victims, as they might be seen to generate harm for communities and the government rather than for individuals. We also tested whether the means and the resulting ranks represented significant differences notwithstanding the compression of mean values in the respective assessments of the crimes. Because respondents had not been asked to compare pairs of crimes (Kwan et al., 2000, 2002), it is essential that the rank ordering represents meaningful distinctions. The results of pairwise t-tests for all consecutive back-to-back crimes in the respective rank order are presented in Table 2, indicating significant differences from one rank to the next higher one ($p < .01$).

Overall seriousness ratings all differ significantly with one exception: theft and cocaine trafficking. This implies that the assessment of the seriousness of the eight other crimes represents a perspective of distinct differences and a clear hierarchy of crimes. In the case of moral wrongfulness, there is no significant distinction between burglary and physical assault, possibly owing to the attack on the integrity of both body and home and on the general security of the victim. In addition, the difference between cocaine trafficking and vandalism is not significant. These rankings make a clear statement on the importance of individual victimization for the perceptions of moral wrongfulness and overall seriousness, as the crimes with no immediately identifiable victim rank at the bottom of the two rankings.

Table 3 presents both the restricted model (Model 1) and the full model (Model 2). We first present the six crimes – burglary, theft, physical assault, sexual assault, vandalism and corporate fraud – for which we have measurements of all components and all controls, including victimization. We then consider murder, terrorism, cocaine trafficking and cannabis trade without controls for victimization, and for murder and cannabis trade without measures of crime harms. Table 3 demonstrates that across all crimes the components that shape and inform seriousness ratings have a consistent and similar impact; that is, different crimes are mostly judged by the same yardstick, even if for a particular crime additional information might be taken into account. The models explain between 38 percent (murder) and 84 percent (cannabis trade) of the variance, which are sufficiently high levels given that no other attitudes or beliefs are included in the model. The models demonstrate the weight of the moral wrongfulness and to a

Table 2: Rank order of crime seriousness and its components for 10 crimes (mean, standard deviation and t-test for differences between adjacent ranks (p < .01)

Seriousness	M	SD	P	Wrongfulness	M	SD	P	Harm severity	M	SD	P	Incidence of crime	M	SD	P	Incidence of crime harms	M	SD	P
1. Murder	99.50	4.06		Murder	99.51	3.36		Murder	93.96	13.62		Burglary	86.14	16.99		Sexual assault	82.26	14.06	
2. Terrorism	97.99	7.39	**	Terrorism	98.55	6.55	**	Terrorism	93.06	16.45	*	Theft	86.14	17.14	ns	Burglary	77.83	12.35	**
3. Sexual assault	96.31	8.32	**	Sexual assault	97.04	7.95	**	Sexual assault	87.76	14.74	**	Vandalism	79.71	19.16	**	Theft	75.48	12.08	**
4. Physical assault	92.44	11.92	**	Physical assault	93.84	11.74	**	Corporate fraud	75.68	20.62	**	Cannabis Trade	75.94	20.16	**	Terrorism	70.26	20.08	**
5. Burglary	89.75	14.36	**	Burglary	93.18	12.11	ns	Vandalism	74.39	16.94	ns	Physical assault	74.31	19.41	ns	Physical assault	69.45	13.20	ns
6. Theft	88.68	15.13	**	Theft	92.13	12.37	**	Cocaine trafficking	74.32	11.83	ns	Cocaine trafficking	70.78	20.52	**	Cocaine trafficking	69.16	12.68	ns
7. Cocaine trafficking	88.28	16.81	ns	Cocaine trafficking	90.69	14.85	**	Theft	72.18	17.29	**	Sexual assault	69.69	19.36	ns.	Corporate fraud	62.19	16.32	**
8. Vandalism	85.40	17.02	**	Vandalism	89.70	13.87	ns	Burglary	71.85	11.70	ns	Corporate Fraud	67.69	20.60	*	Vandalism	55.75	16.90	**
9. Corporate fraud	84.16	17.91	*	Corporate fraud	87.30	16.63	**	Physical assault	69.85	10.31	**	Murder	51.84	17.10	**				
10. Cannabis trade	81.39	23.13	**	Cannabis trade	84.45	21.13	**	Cannabis trade	66.64	21.54	**	Terrorism	33.48	16.56	**				

Note: ns: not significant at p < .01 level, * p < .01, ** p < .001.

much lesser extent, harm severity, with controls having little or rare impact on seriousness.

For all crimes, seriousness ratings are determined first and foremost by moral wrongfulness and moral judgement, rather than by the potential harmful consequences or frequency of these crimes. The coefficients of wrongfulness by far exceed the weight of harm severity, the next most influential component. The incidence of harms as a consequence of a crime has no impact on seriousness ratings, with vandalism being the exception. This is in line with the results of Innes and Fielding (2002) that vandalism is a crime with a considerable 'social harm footprint' of high scale and high intensity and is experienced as 'incivility' in public space. The incidence of crime does not inform public assessments of the seriousness of crime in a significant or substantial way. The exception is burglary, where crime incidence has a small impact, presumably owing to experiences in local neighbourhoods and communities.

With regard to the control variables, they mostly do not increase the explained variance substantially and significantly. Only age has a consistent and significant impact, with the exception of the most serious crimes of murder and terrorism; older people generally rate crimes as more serious. Higher social status affects seriousness ratings for only a small number of crimes; this applies to physical assault but not to sexual assault, to theft but not to burglary, and to corporate fraud, where it reduces seriousness in all cases. Level of education is not related to seriousness ratings at all. Citizens of non- Belgian origin – either respondents themselves or their parents – do not differ from others in their seriousness ratings, with two exceptions where they find the crimes more serious: terrorism and theft. Being aligned to a faith does not change seriousness ratings either, with the exception of theft. Indirect experiences of victimization are not related to seriousness at all. In our analysis, direct and own victimization changes assessments of the seriousness of crime only if the person has been a victim of a burglary; victims rate burglary as significantly more serious than do non-victims. Otherwise the experience of victimization does not change the assessment of the seriousness of a specific crime.

Conclusion

We specified two aims at the outset: first, to explore the logic – or normative philosophical principles – that the public uses to assess the seriousness of crime and, second, to consider how that logic aligns with legal principles and policy requirements. Our results are based on a small number of crimes (10) and a regional survey (Flanders), a relatively low response rate, a sample with some biases (age, education), subject to known methodological challenges (Kwan et al., 2002), and might raise questions of generalizability, but, with these caveats in mind, we address each aim in turn. With regard to the first aim, the data confirm our first two hypotheses and, with some caveats, also the third. The public, as manifest in our sample of 1278 respondents, ranks crimes involving harm to individuals' physical and psychological integrity as most serious, property crimes as second, and crimes with no immediate individual bearers of harms as the least serious (Hypothesis 1).

Table 3: Predictors of crime seriousness ratings for 10 crimes (standardized coefficients).

	Burglary (n = 683)		Theft (n = 717)		Physical assault (n = 701)		Sexual assault (n = 721)		Vandalism (n = 715)		Corporate fraud (n = 730)	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
<i>Components seriousness</i>												
Wrongfulness	.58***	.56***	.63***	.60***	.61***	.58***	.66***	.67***	.57***	.55***	.76***	.73***
Severity of crime harms	.24***	.22***	.15***	.15***	.17***	.16***	.16***	.16***	.25***	.24***	.12***	.09***
Incidence of harms	-.03	-.03	.04	.01	-.02	-.03	.03	.05	.11***	.09***	.03	.03
Incidence of crime	.05	.06*	-.04	-.01	-.05	-.01	.01	.01	-.05	-.03	.01	.01
<i>Control variables</i>												
Gender (men = 0)		-.00		.01		.05		-.01		.04		.03
Age		.11***		.14***		.10**		.05*		.09***		.10***
SES		-.04		-.06*		-.08*		-.04		-.05		-.08***
Education (0 = none/ primary)		-.03		.00		.02		.01		-.00		.00
Origin (0 = Belgian)		.02		.06*		.03		.02		.01		-.01
Religion (0 = none)		.01		.06*		.04		-.01		.02		.00
Victimization (0 = no)												
Direct victim		.06*		.05		-.04		.00		.01		.03
Indirect victim		-.04		-.02		-.01		-.01		-.01		.00
Adjusted R ²	.46	.48	.51	.54	.43	.45	.57	.57	.60	.61	.67	.68
F change	146.50***	3.63***	184.00***	6.63***	132.69***	3.92***	237.03***	1.08	267.29***	2.94**	366.63***	5.69***

Table 3: (Continued)

	Murder (n=729)		Terrorism (n=725)		Cocaine trafficking (n=684)		Cannabis trade (n=748)	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
<i>Components seriousness</i>								
Wrongfulness	.59***	.58***	.67***	.67***	.83***	.82***	.83***	.81***
Harm severity	.12***	.12***	.02	.02	.08***	.07**	.13***	.13***
Incidence of crime harms			.05	.04	-.01	-.00		
Incidence of crime	-.02	-.02	-.02	-.02	.04	.03	.00	.01
<i>Control variables</i>								
Gender (men = 0)		.01		.04		.02		.00
Age		.00		-.02		.07***		.07***
SES		.01		-.01		-.03		-.03
Education (0 = none/primary)		-.02		-.04		-.03		-.01
Origin (0 = Belgian)		.02		.06*		.02		.02
Religion (0 = none)		-.00		-.03		-.00		-.00
Adjusted R ²	.38	.38	.47	.47	.77	.77	.84	.84
F Change	151.24***	0.17	160.64***	0.01	571.11***	3.41**	1272.16***	4.18***

In assessing crime seriousness, the public shows ‘scope insensitivity’ (Nordgren and McDonnell, 2011) and makes stereotypical assessments of the seriousness of crimes. Among the three components that pertain to harmfulness, only the severity of harm – and thus typical harmfulness – is taken into account. The incidence of crime and crime harms, and thus total harmfulness, are ignored – even when the public makes realistic estimates of the incidence of crime (Hypothesis 2). Moreover, the public adheres to moralism more than to consequentialism: seriousness ratings are defined primarily by the perceived moral wrongfulness. The latter’s relatively strong predictive power confirms O’Connell and Whelan’s (1996) and Alter et al.’s (2007) findings on the primacy of wrongfulness, but it partially contradicts Warr’s (1989) and Rosenmerkel’s (2001) results as well as Stylianou’s (2003) and Eisner et al.’s (2017) summaries. Beyond the specific literature on perceived crime seriousness, it also empirically supports Wikström et al.’s (2012) conceptualization of crime as a breach of moral rules. Concerning the third hypothesis, the data show that socio-demographics are generally not relevant, with the major exception of age. The same is generally true for victimization, in line with previous findings that crime victims rank crime seriousness similarly to non-victims (Pease, 1988) and without apparent inflation (Ignatans and Pease, 2016: 187).

It has already been indicated that seriousness findings and the degree of social consensus discerned can have practical implications for policing and sentencing. In the former case, it may be desired to reallocate police resources from the prevention, detection, and prosecution of crimes which are less serious (or are declining in seriousness) in the public perception to those which are more (or increasingly) so. Even if adopted, such a policy will no doubt be tempered by other considerations, such as frequency of occurrence of different crimes. In sentencing, the imperative of proportionality requires a benchmark by which the relative gravity of crimes can be assessed, which empirical findings in respect of perceived offence seriousness can provide. In turn, any lack of equivalence between sentences currently imposed and the perceived seriousness of offences may constitute a ground for criticism of present practice.

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