Public (Mis)Understanding of Crime Policy: The Effects of Criminal Justice Experience and Media Reliance

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Abstract

Scholars attribute the public’s low level of knowledge about sentencing and corrections to its lack of extensive criminal justice experience and consequent reliance on the media for justice-related information. However, scant research exists that evaluates how criminal justice experience affects media consumption, or how such consumption may influence knowledge about sentencing laws or the extent of imprisonment. To extend this literature, we develop and test three hypotheses about the relationships between prior criminal justice experience, reliance on the mass media for information about crime and justice, and knowledge about criminal punishment. Analysis of data from a random telephone survey of 1,308 adult Floridians reveal that individuals with prior criminal justice experience are less likely to rely on the media for crime-related information. The evidence also shows that media reliance is associated with lower levels of knowledge about criminal punishment, and that this effect is particularly strong for female respondents.
Understanding public opinion about criminal justice is important because of its potential influence on the development, implementation, and effectiveness of crime policies (Anderson, Sample, and Cain, 2013; Baumer and Martin, 2013; Enns, 2013; Garland, Wodahl, and Schuhmann, 2013; Mancini and Mears, 2013). In particular, considerable social and practical grounds exist for focusing greater empirical attention on popular knowledge about sentencing law and corrections. Whether the public is informed or uninformed about criminal sanctions has direct implications for the capacity of criminal justice reforms to achieve their stated goals—namely, to deter crime and increase public safety (Apel, 2013; Cullen, Fisher, and Applegate, 2000; Roberts, 1992). If public perceptions of criminal punishment are inaccurate and unrelated to objective levels of punishment, then the ability of crime policies to prevent offending through deterrence mechanisms would be substantially limited (Kleck et al., 2005; Nagin, 1998).

Because members of the public typically lack extensive experience with the justice system, they often rely on the mass media as a primary source of information about crime and its control (Callanan, 2012; Kort-Butler and Hartshorn, 2011). However, media coverage of crime and punishment is notoriously inaccurate and is biased toward sensationalized accounts (Dorfman and Schiraldi, 2001). The media typically depict crime rates as escalating regardless of actual trends in offending and portray “the criminal justice system as inefficient, ineffectual, and toothless” (Beckett and Sasson, 2004: 118). For this reason, scholars theorize that the inaccurate depictions of crime and punishment in the media explain “much of the public’s interest in criminal justice, as well as the limited extent of their knowledge of the criminal justice system” (Roberts and Stalans, 1997: 3).

Notwithstanding this theoretical scholarship, however, surprisingly few studies to date have examined public knowledge about sentencing laws or criminal justice policies, much less
explored the ways in which the mass media as well as other information sources may function to detract from or contribute to that knowledge. To be clear, prior research has shown that media exposure is associated with less accurate perceptions of the extent and nature of crime (Stalans, 1993). However, this line of inquiry has only rarely been extended to the study of the accuracy of public information about criminal justice policies and practices (Apel, 2013; Roberts and Stalans, 1997). Moreover, as discussed below, the findings deriving from the small handful of prior investigations that have assessed media effects on public knowledge about crime policies have been decidedly mixed. Most studies have also relied on indicators of media consumption that are measured with survey questions that ask individuals to self-report their quantity of exposure to a given medium. Such measures fail to account for the content retained during exposure, and have been found in recent empirical work to lack validity (Prior, 2009a, 2009b).

The goal of the current study is to begin to fill in the gap in the literature on the sources of public knowledge about crime policies. To this end, and using an alternative measure of media consumption, reliance on the media specifically for information about criminal justice, we test the key theoretical assumptions underlying scholarly accounts of public knowledge about criminal punishment. First, we examine whether, as scholars have argued, prior criminal justice experience is negatively associated with reliance on the mass media for information about criminal justice issues. We then evaluate whether, after controlling for criminal justice experience, media reliance has an independent negative effect on knowledge about criminal punishment. Next, and not least, we assess the degree to which the relationship between media reliance and knowledge is moderated by prior criminal justice experience and other theoretically relevant audience traits.
Theoretical Issues and Hypotheses

Prior Criminal Justice Experience and Media Reliance

Scholars argue that a widespread lack of experience with crime and the criminal justice system drives the public’s reliance on the mass media for information about trends in offending and developments in crime policy (Roberts et al., 2003). As Surette (1984:5) puts it:

In terms of justice, perhaps the most important effect of the media lies in providing a prime information base for the public concerning justice issues. A relatively small percentage of people deal directly with the justice system and therefore the general public’s knowledge of justice is drawn significantly from the media.

Similarly, Hans and Dee (1991: 136) assert that “because most of the public has little direct experience with the justice system, public knowledge and views of law and the legal system are largely dependent on media representations.” This assertion is consistent with the uses and gratification theory of media consumption, which holds that in the absence of alternative sources of information, such as personal or vicarious experience, people often turn to media accounts to gain an understanding of social issues and events (Krcmar and Strizhakova, 2009).

Despite the centrality of this argument to scholarly accounts of media effects, little evidence exists regarding its accuracy. Indeed, to our knowledge, only one study to date has examined whether experience with crime or the criminal justice system is related to the use of mass media outlets to gain understanding of criminal justice issues. And the only experience variable included in that study, a measure of victimization status, was inconsistently related to the use of television and newspapers as primary sources of information about crime (Lane and
Meeker, 2003; see also O’Keefe, 1984). Accordingly, the first hypothesis that we test is that:

(H1) Individuals with prior experience as either an employee of the criminal justice system, an offender, or a crime victim will be less likely to rely on the mass media for information about criminal punishment.

*Media Reliance and Public Knowledge about Criminal Justice*

In the area of crime and justice, news and entertainment media typically receive the blame for public misinformation and misunderstanding (Beale, 2006; Chiricos, 1996; Pickett, Mancini, and Mears, 2013: Roberts, 1992). For example, scholars suggest that the media’s biased coverage of crime is a key factor perpetuating inaccurate stereotypes about victims and offenders (Pickett and Chiricos, 2012; Welch, 2007). This view stems largely from the finding that there are considerable discrepancies between the reality of crime and justice and the depictions of these phenomena in the media. For example, studies find that media coverage of crime disproportionately reports on violent crime, overrepresents the rarest and most serious types of offenses, underrepresents white offenders and non-white victims, and deemphasizes or ignores contextual causes of offending (Dorfman and Schiraldi, 2001). In addition, the extent of media coverage of crime bears little relation to objective rates of offending (Beckett, 1997), often increasing even as the latter declines (Dorfman and Schiraldi, 2001).

In regard to crime control, and with the exception of police activities, the mass media generally pay little attention to the functioning of the justice system or the contours of crime policy, except when occasions arise to highlight negative aspects of either the legal process or sentencing practices (Surette, 2011). In these instances, news and entertainment media engage in
what Garland (2001: 158) characterizes as “victim discourse”—focusing on examples of the system’s ineffectiveness, emphasizing the leniency of the courts, drawing attention to cases in which offenders’ due process rights seemingly derail justice, and ignoring successful crime prevention efforts (Beckett and Sasson, 2004; Roberts, 1992; Surette, 2011). In short, as Beckett and Sasson (2004: 118) explain, “the mass media … mislead the public about criminal justice practices” by highlighting “only the institutions’ most egregious failures, such as the early release of offenders who go on to commit new violent crimes.” For this reason, Surette (2011: 197) likens “learning about the criminal justice system from the media … to learning geology from volcanic eruptions.”

Prior studies have shown that media exposure may contribute to the public’s misinformation about crime rates and the nature of criminal offending (Goidel, Freeman, and Procopio, 2006; Johnson, Braima, and Sothirajah, 2001; Kort-Butler and Hartshorn, 2011). For instance, in a seminal study, Stalans (1993) demonstrated that college students who both lacked interpersonal sources of crime information and reported having recent exposure to crime stories in the media—that is, students who were media reliant—were more likely to overestimate the prevalence of injury during robberies.

To our knowledge, however, there are only two published multivariate studies—conducted in the U.S. or internationally—that specifically examine whether media exposure affects the accuracy of individuals’ information about crime policy or criminal punishment, and the findings from these studies are mixed. Hough and Roberts (1999) show that individuals who report reading tabloid newspapers are more likely to underestimate the imprisonment rate for rapists, muggers, and burglars. Proctor and colleagues (2002), by contrast, find that neither exposure to newspapers, television, or the radio, nor the degree of attention paid to crime news in
these media outlets are related to knowledge of Megan’s Law. In a second set of models examining respondents’ knowledge about a specific notification law passed in their state, an inconsistent pattern of media effects emerges: attention to crime news on television reduces knowledge, while radio use increases knowledge, though this latter effect diminishes as attention to crime news on the radio increases.

Other related prior research includes studies that assess the effects of media use on estimates of the characteristics of punishment, but that do not specifically evaluate how the former is related to the accuracy of such perceptions. Findings from these studies also offer little support for the assumption that media exposure explains public ignorance about criminal justice. Specifically, this work demonstrates that news consumption does not significantly influence individuals’ estimates of the certainty, severity, or swiftness of criminal punishment (see, e.g., Kleck and Barnes, 2013; Kleck et al., 2005; Sprott, Webster, and Doob, 2013).

One probable explanation for the lack of consistent evidence of media effects on either knowledge about, or estimates of the characteristics of, criminal punishment is the particular measurement strategy used in previous studies to capture media exposure. In his discussion of the broader body of media research, Prior (2009a: 893) notes, for example, that “null findings may reflect not the absence of media effects, but flawed measures of exposure.” Specifically, most previous studies of media effects on views about crime and punishment employ self-reported indicators of respondents’ extent of general exposure to a given medium, which are considered to be the weakest measures of media use for two reasons (Johnson, Braima, and Sothirajah, 2001; Price and Zeller, 1993; Prior, 2009a). First, as Prior (2009b: 137) demonstrates, “self-reports of regular news exposure … lack validity.” Most members of the public are not able to accurately recall episodes of media use, and the resultant response errors
are neither random nor uniform (Prior, 2009a; 2009b).

Second, the indicators of media exposure employed in prior studies tap media use rather than the content that is actually taken in by individuals. However, as Weitzer and Kubrin (2004: 506) explain, measures of general exposure may “include people who read only the business section of the newspaper or television viewers who watch the local news simply for sports or weather—thereby limiting their exposure to crime news.” More important still is the fact that even those measures specifically tapping exposure or attention to media depictions of crime and justice cannot speak to whether individuals actually extract information from those depictions. In their discussion of the research examining media effects on political knowledge, Price and Zeller (1993: 134) state the point succinctly: “Only people who actually acquire information from the news can use it in forming and changing their political evaluations.” The same axiom would seem to hold equally well for the public and their understanding, based on media accounts, of crime and punishment. The acquisition of information about crime and punishment from media sources should be most consequential for individuals’ knowledge levels when this information alone is relied upon to make judgments about criminal justice issues (Stalans, 1993). Given the forgoing, then, we investigate the following hypothesis: (H2) Reliance on the mass media for information about criminal justice will be associated with lower levels of knowledge about criminal punishment.

**Audience Effects**

Arguments outlined in the original and reformulated versions of the cultivation hypothesis have constituted the theoretical motivation for much of the prior research on attitudes
about crime. That hypothesis predicts that media use will affect audience members’ mental images of social reality by cultivating the view that the real world is comparable to that depicted by the mass media (Gerbner and Gross, 1976). Reformulations of the hypothesis, prompted by the recognition that the meaning of media messages is differentially activated and interpreted by individuals in accordance with their specific backgrounds and social situations, suggest that cultivation effects will vary systematically with audience characteristics. For example, some scholars predict that media use will be most consequential for attitudes about crime among those with greater exposure to crime, such as males and non-whites (Doob and Macdonald, 1979; Gerbner et al., 1980). This variant of cultivation theory is known as the resonance hypothesis. Others expect media effects to be greater among groups, such as women and the elderly, who may believe they are especially vulnerable to victimization (Skogan and Maxfield, 1981) or among individuals more closely resembling the image of the typical victim constructed in media coverage of crime (Gerbner et al., 1978). These predictions are generally characterized as the vulnerability and affinity hypotheses, respectively.

The evidence to date overwhelmingly supports the argument that media effects interact with audience traits to influence views about crime, but it is mixed in regard to the specific pattern of interaction effects (Chiricos, Eschholz, and Gertz, 1997; Chiricos, Padgett, and Gertz, 2000; Eschholz, Chiricos, and Gertz, 2003; Weaver and Wakshlag, 1986). In turn, and despite advances in scholarship, the extant research has been unable to adjudicate between the competing differential reception hypotheses. For instance, Weitzer and Kubrin (2004) show that identifying local television news as one’s most important news source is associated with increased fear of crime among blacks and those living in high crime areas, but not among whites or those living in low crime communities. Weaver and Wakshlag (1986) find that television
exposure increases fear only among non-victims. And Chiricos and colleagues (1997: 352, emphasis in original) demonstrate that “all television ‘news effects’ are limited to women.”

Notably, prior studies on audience effects focus exclusively on attitudes and anxieties about crime rather than knowledge about criminal punishment or crime policy. In our view, it seems most probable that media reliance will be especially consequential for knowledge about criminal justice among individuals with greater exposure to crime—the resonance hypothesis—because crime and justice issues will likely be more salient for such persons. More specifically, we expect that such individuals will likely pay greater attention to, as well as comprehend and retain a larger proportion of, the crime-related information conveyed by the media (see Doob and McDonald, 1979; O’Keefe, 1984). Accordingly, we test the following: (H3) The negative relationship between reliance on the mass media for information about criminal justice and knowledge about criminal punishment will be stronger for members of groups who, on average, have greater exposure to crime and the justice system.

Methods

The data for this study come from a random telephone survey of 1,308 adult (18 and older) residents of the state of Florida. The survey was designed to gauge Floridians’ attitudes about the state correctional system. It was administered between January and April of 2006 by the Research Network, a public opinion polling firm in Tallahassee, Florida. To maximize control over the interviewing process and minimize data-entry errors, trained interviewers conducted all of the interviews at a central call center equipped with computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). Survey administrators implemented a 15-callback rule before number
substitution to provide ample opportunities for sampled respondents’ to participate. When calculated in accordance with the recommendations of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR, 2004), the overall response rate was 48.6 percent. This response rate compares favorably with those obtained in other recent public opinion studies (e.g., Anderson, Sample, and Cain, 2013; Garland, Wodahl, and Schuhmann, 2013). In addition, the break-off rate, another important indicator of the potential for nonresponse bias in public opinion polls, was low in this survey—91 percent of those who began the interview completed the questionnaire. Below we describe the measurement of the variables used in the analyses. The descriptive statistics for these measures are presented in Table 1.

Knowledge About Criminal Punishment

We include four measures that gauge the extent of Floridians’ knowledge about sentencing laws and the extent of imprisonment in Florida. A particular strength of our study is that the knowledge measures are all derived from close-ended, item-specific, multiple-choice questions, which minimize bias from stylistic responding (see Gibson and Calderia, 2009; Pickett and Baker, 2014). The first two items measure individuals’ understanding of two “get tough” policies enacted in Florida that are representative of those commonly advocated for in contemporary law-and-order discourse. The first assesses whether respondents are familiar with Florida’s 10-20-Life Law, which was implemented in 1999 to deter gun crimes. It mandates a minimum of 10 years for offenders who use a gun to commit a crime, 20 years for those who fire a gun, and 25 years to life for those who shoot a victim (FDOC, 2007). The survey question asked: “What is the purpose of the new 10-20-Life law?” Respondents were given several
possible response options such as “I’m not sure but I have heard of the 10-20-Life law” and “I’ve never heard of the 10-20-Life law.” The correct answer was “to provide harsher penalties to offenders if they use a gun in the commission of a crime.” Only 46 percent of respondents chose this answer. They were coded “0” on the 10-20-Life Law variable, while the 54 percent of respondents who answered incorrectly were coded “1.”

Before proceeding, it is important to note that we use questions that ask about detailed knowledge of specific aspects of criminal punishment in Florida to measure the outcome variables in this study, including the 10-20-Life Law variable, because it is exactly this type of information that is assumed to be conveyed to the public through the enactment and enforcement of “get tough” policies. As Kleck et al. (2005) explain, the most common justification for punitive policies like Florida’s 10-20-Life and Law is deterrence—tougher punishments should reduce crime “by ‘sending a message,’ ‘getting the word out’ that crime will not be tolerated, that criminals will be ‘taught a lesson’ that crime will not be ‘coddled,’ and that punishment will surely follow crime” (p. 627). However, the desired deterrent effect is only possible if members of the public are aware of punitive reforms and recognize the associated increase in objective levels of punishment. Put simply, Florida’s 10-20-Life law can only deter gun crimes—the policy’s explicit goal—if potential criminals in the state are familiar with it and consider the specific consequences allocated therein when contemplating firearm offenses.

The second outcome variable incorporated in the analyses, Minimum Sentence Law, assesses the accuracy of respondents’ understanding of a law passed to eliminate offender early releases from Florida prisons. The question was: “What minimum percentage of their sentence must all new Florida inmates serve?” The listed response options ranged from “50%” to “100%.” By law, inmates in Florida prisons who committed their crimes on or after October 1,
1995 are required to serve at least 85 percent of their sentence (FDOC, 2005). Only 20 percent of respondents were aware of this sentencing policy. They were coded “0” on the Minimum Sentence Law variable, while the 80 percent who answered incorrectly were coded “1.”

The third outcome variable examines whether respondents know the Number of Inmates in Florida prisons and, thus, are aware of the extent of imprisonment in their state. This item speaks directly to the ability of the public to accurately estimate imprisonment rates as well as to the validity of scholars’ assumptions about the public’s lack of awareness of “the mounting numbers of persons in prison” (Roberts and Hough, 2005: 14). The specific question was: “How many inmates do you think currently are in Florida State prisons?” Interviewers listed several possible response options for respondents, which ranged from “Less than 25,000” to “More than 100,000.” The correct answer was “75,000 to 100,000” as the FDOC held just under 85,000 at the time of the survey (FDOC, 2005). Only 17 percent of respondents answered this question correctly. These respondents were coded “0” on the Number of Inmates variable, and the 83 percent who answered incorrectly were coded “1.”

The fourth outcome variable indicates whether a respondent gave Multiple Incorrect Answers. It is coded “1” if the respondent provided more than one incorrect answer and coded “0” if he or she either answered all of the questions correctly or just answered one item incorrectly. Only 2 percent of respondents answered all three questions correctly. Fewer than 20 percent answered only one question incorrectly. The majority—78 percent—provided multiple incorrect answers.

Media Reliance
As noted above, the weakest measures of media use are those derived from questions that ask respondents to report their amount of exposure to a given medium during some previous time period (e.g., the past week). Specifically, research shows these items impose “unrealistic demands on respondents’ memory,” because most individuals are incapable of accurately recalling their past episodes of media use (Prior, 2009a: 904). Thus, the indicators resulting from these measures are not valid (Prior, 2009b). Additionally, such measures of exposure do not speak to what types of information individuals actually obtain from the utilized media sources (Price and Zeller, 1993; Weitzer and Kubrin, 2004). In this study, we are interested in actual sources of information rather than mere exposure to potential information sources. We also take seriously the problems associated with employing questions to gauge media use that overtax respondents’ memories. For these reasons, we measure Media Reliance with an item that specifically asked respondents to list their sources of information about corrections in Florida, but that did not require them to recall individual episodes of exposure to these sources.

The specific survey question was “Where do you get information about Florida prisons?” We asked specifically about “Florida prisons” because asking broadly about “criminal justice in Florida” may have introduced measurement error if respondents answered in reference to different dimensions of the system (e.g., policing, recent arrests, etc.). Interviewers read the following list of potential sources to respondents and asked them to select all that applied: “1. Friends or family; 2. Internet; 3. Newspapers; 4. Television; 5. Magazine articles; 6. Other.” Respondents who selected the “Other” category were asked to name the specific sources. Examples of the cited sources included, among others, the following: “radio,” “library lecture,” “school,” “classes,” “church group,” “work,” “conferences,” “police department,” and “first-hand knowledge.”
Our original intention was to separately analyze the predictors and effects of reliance on different media outlets (e.g., television, newspapers). However, while a significant proportion of respondents (33 percent) reported that they obtained their information about the Florida correctional system exclusively from media outlets, few respondents reported relying on only a single medium. For example, just 4.6 percent of respondents reported relying solely on television for information, and only 3.5 percent of respondents reported relying solely on newspapers. Put simply, the data demonstrate that the vast majority of respondents who rely on the media for crime-related information draw on multiple media sources. Thus, to measure *Media Reliance*, we separate respondents into two groups: those who *only* received their information from media outlets (i.e., newspapers, television, magazine articles, and radio) and those who also received information from at least one non-media source (e.g., family and friends, work, classes, internet, etc).\(^1\)\(^2\) The first group was coded “1” on the *Media Reliance* variable and the second was coded “0.”

*Prior Criminal Justice Experience*

We engage three measures of respondents’ prior experiences with crime and the criminal justice system. The first, *Contact with Offenders*, is measured with the following survey question: “Have you, any of your immediate or extended family members, or friends ever been placed in the Florida prison system or on state probation?” where 1 = yes, and 0 = no. The second, *Household Victim*, indicates whether a respondent has prior experience—personal or vicarious—with criminal victimization. The specific question was: “Over the past five years, has anyone in your immediate family been the victim of a crime?” where 1 = yes, and 0 = no.
Finally, the third variable, \textit{Household CJS Employment}, comes from a series of questions that asked if anyone in the respondent’s immediate or extended family is employed by law enforcement, the criminal justice system, or the corrections system. Respondents who said yes to any of these items were coded “1” and those who said no were coded “0.”

\textbf{Control Variables}

To reduce the risk of omitted variable bias, we control for factors that prior research suggests may be related to knowledge about criminal punishment, media reliance, and prior experiences with crime or the criminal justice system (see e.g., Kleck et al., 2005; Lane and Meeker, 2003; O’Keefe, 1984; Proctor, Badzinski, and Johnson, 2002). These include: gender (\textit{Male} = 1), race (\textit{Black} = 1), ethnicity (\textit{Hispanic} = 1), \textit{Age}, \textit{Education}, marital status (\textit{Married} = 1), parental status (\textit{Parent} = 1), religious affiliation (\textit{Conservative Protestant} = 1), political ideology (\textit{Conservative} =1, \textit{Moderate} =1, reference = \textit{Liberal}), and residential location (\textit{Urban} = 1). \textit{Age} and \textit{Education} are ordinal variables. \textit{Age} is coded: 1 = 18-24, 2 = 25-34, 3 = 35-44, 4 = 45-54, 5 = 55-64, 6 = 65-74, 7 = 75 and over. \textit{Education} is coded: 1 = high-school degree or less, 2 = some college, 3 = college graduate, 4 = attended and/or completed graduate school.

\textbf{Results}

Because the outcome variables in the analyses are binary measures, we estimate all
models using logistic regression. Multicollinearity is not problematic—the largest variance inflation factor in any of the models is 1.71. We begin by investigating the relationship between prior criminal justice experience and media reliance. Table 2 displays the results of logistic regressions of media reliance on the three measures of criminal justice experience and the controls. Inspection of model 1 in Table 2 reveals that all three types of prior criminal justice experience are associated with a lower likelihood of reliance on the media for information about criminal punishment. For example, the odds of media reliance among individuals who had contact with offenders are 67 percent lower than the odds of media reliance among individuals who had no such contact (odds ratio = .329). Similar effects emerge in model 2, which incorporates the controls. The results here show that the odds of being media reliant for persons with prior experience with crime or the justice system are between 38 and 68 percent lower, depending on the type of experience, as compared to those for their counterparts without similar experience. Other notable findings are that younger persons and conservative Protestants are both less likely to be media reliant. Indeed, the standardized logistic regression coefficients, which are listed in the table in parentheses, show that age is the strongest predictor of media reliance in the model.

Table 2 about here

We turn now to the question of whether media reliance affects levels of public knowledge about criminal justice issues. Table 3 reports the results for logistic regression models that examine the effects of media reliance on knowledge while controlling for the other covariates. An examination of the findings for models 1-3 in Table 3 reveals that for each of the three
knowledge questions, media reliance is associated with a higher likelihood of providing an incorrect answer (p < .05). Specifically, the odds of answering incorrectly to the knowledge questions are between 34 and 51 percent higher, depending on the model and associated knowledge domain, for media-reliant persons than for their non-media-reliant counterparts.

Model 4 in Table 3 presents the regression results for the relationship between media reliance and the likelihood of answering multiple knowledge questions incorrectly. Here the consequence of relying on the mass media for information about crime policy is readily apparent. Independent of the effects of prior criminal justice experience and the controls, media reliance is positively associated with the likelihood of answering multiple questions incorrectly. Indeed, the odds of answering multiple questions incorrectly are 147 percent higher for media-reliant persons than for their non-media-reliant counterparts. Additionally, inspection of the results reveals that Media Reliance is the strongest predictor in the model. In short, the results suggest that reliance on the media for information about criminal justice issues is associated with significantly lower levels of knowledge about criminal punishment.

In this context, it is noteworthy that the findings in Table 3 show that prior criminal justice experience is associated with higher levels of knowledge about criminal punishment. Specifically, individuals with prior criminal justice experience were less likely to provide incorrect answers to two of the three questions about crime policy and were also less likely to answer multiple questions incorrectly. However, these respondents were just as likely as their counterparts without prior experience to inaccurately estimate the number of inmates in correctional facilities. Notably, prior victimization is only significant in the model predicting knowledge about Florida’s 10-20-Life law, indicating that respondents with prior victimization experience were more likely than non-victims to possess accurate information about this policy.
The final portion of the analyses tests the resonance hypothesis. Recall that this hypothesis suggests that media effects should be larger for those individuals with greater exposure to crime and the justice system (Gerbner et al, 1980). To test this hypothesis, we first divide the sample into groups based on factors associated with the likelihood of offending and victimization: prior criminal justice experience, gender, race, age, education, marital status, and residential location. Next, for each of these groups, we reestimate model 4 in Table 3—that is, the full model predicting the likelihood of answering multiple knowledge questions incorrectly. Too few respondents reported each type of prior criminal justice experience to estimate reliably the regression model separately for each group that had a given experience. We thus create a combined measure, Criminal Justice Experience, coded “1” for respondents who gave at least one affirmative answer to the experience questions (i.e., Contact with Offenders, Household Victim, and Household Employment in CJS) and “0” for all others; the two Criminal Justice Experience groups (some experience vs. none) are derived from this measure.

Table 4 displays the results of the disaggregated analyses. Two panels are presented. The left panel provides, for the high resonance group, the estimated effects of media reliance on having incorrect knowledge of crime and punishment in Florida. The right panel provides the comparable effects for the low resonance group. As noted in the table, the high resonance group consists of individuals for whom crime and justice can be anticipated to have more salience because of their membership in groups with greater exposure to offending and victimization. Conversely, the low resonance group consists of individuals for whom crime and justice can be
anticipated to have less salience.

As inspection of the table shows, the findings provide no support for the resonance hypothesis. That is, we find little evidence that media reliance is more consequential for knowledge about criminal punishment among members of groups who, on average, have greater exposure to crime and the justice system. Instead, it appears the reliance on the media for information about crime reduces knowledge about criminal justice among all but two of the subsamples examined: males and nonwhites. The effect of media reliance for female respondents is especially striking; here, the odds of answering multiple questions incorrectly are over 500 percent higher for media-reliant women than non-media-reliant women. Media reliance also appears to have a larger negative effect on knowledge among whites than non-whites. To formally test whether the differences in the effects shown in Table 4 are statistically significant, we estimate a series of models for the full sample including interaction terms between each of the audience traits and media reliance (not shown). The only statistically significant interaction is between gender (Male) and the media reliance measure (odds ratio = .228, p < .01). In short, the analyses demonstrate that media reliance is associated with lower levels of knowledge about criminal punishment, regardless of one’s exposure to crime and the justice system, and that this effect is particularly strong for females.

Table 4 about here

Discussion and Conclusion

Extant evidence shows quite convincingly that variations in objective levels of
punishment do not translate into comparable shifts in citizens’ assessments of the formal sanction costs for offending (Kleck et al., 2005; Sprott, Webster, and Doob, 2013). Scholars direct the blame for this disconnection toward the mass media (Beale, 2006; Beckett and Sasson, 2004). The assumption is that many members of the public rely on the mass media to gain an understanding of criminal justice issues because they lack experience with crime or the justice system (Surette, 2011). A further assumption is that media reliance reduces knowledge about criminal punishment because the information conveyed by the media is inaccurate and biased (Roberts, 1992). The current study provides the first systematic test of these two predictions. It is also the first to examine the differential reception hypothesis as it applies to public knowledge about criminal justice issues. Several important findings emerged from our analyses.

First, the analyses reveal that, consistent with scholars’ assumptions (Hans and Dee, 1991; Surette, 2011), individuals with prior criminal justice experience are less likely to rely on the media for information about criminal punishment. This effect is observed for all three types of criminal justice experience examined herein. The second central finding to emerge from the analyses is that reliance on the mass media for crime-related information is associated with lower levels of knowledge about criminal punishment. Indeed, the results show that media reliance is a stronger predictor of answering multiple knowledge questions incorrectly than any other variable examined, including prior criminal justice experience and education.5 This finding supports Roberts and Stalans’s (1997: 4) assertion that while information derives from “direct and indirect experiences, in the area of crime and justice, the news media are predominant.” In addition, supplementary analyses (available upon request) reveal that knowledge about criminal punishment is extremely low among both media-reliant and non-media-reliant respondents. For instance, a large majority of both groups (90 percent and 73 percent, respectively) answered
multiple knowledge questions incorrectly. Taken together, these findings suggest that general deterrence effect of criminal justice policies might be negligible in so far as deterrence effects depend on citizens being aware, at least to some extent, of the actual sanctions for offending (Kleck et al., 2005; Roberts and Stalans, 1997).

That said, we also find that prior criminal justice experience is related to knowledge about criminal punishment. Specifically, the analyses show that personal or vicarious contact with the justice system as an offender or employee increases the likelihood of knowing the purpose of the 10-20-Life law and being aware that inmates in Florida must serve a minimum of 85 percent of their sentences. That offenders and persons who know offenders tend to be more familiar with objective punishments suggests there may be some cause for optimism about the potential for certain types of specific deterrence approaches to reduce reoffending by influencing perceptions of the severity of sanctions. The findings here thus provide a contrast to Kleck et al.’s (2005: 655) results, which demonstrated “that neither news media information, nor personal experiences of the actor or his associates … provide an adequate foundation for forming even minimally accurate perceptions of the certainty, severity, or swiftness of punishment.” At least in terms of the severity of sanctions, the results in the current study show that media reliance reduces the accuracy of knowledge about criminal punishment, while prior criminal justice experience either as an offender or employee increases knowledge about criminal punishment.

A final finding from the analyses is that media reliance is associated with lower levels of knowledge among most subgroups of respondents. That is, the relationship between media reliance and knowledge about criminal punishment does not appear to be conditional on audience traits. The one exception to this rule is gender. Our data show that the negative effect of media reliance on knowledge about criminal punishment is substantially stronger among
female respondents. This finding parallels the results from two studies by Chiricos and colleagues (1997, 2000), which demonstrate that the effect of media use on fear of crime is exclusively limited to or is especially pronounced for women.

One possible explanation for gender differences in media effects on knowledge about criminal justice may be that, relative to men, women have greater cumulative exposure to news and crime-related media content because they spend more time watching TV (Nielsen, 2011). Alternatively, it may be that there are differences in the types of media used by men and women (see, e.g., Ahlers, 2006). It is also plausible that women, more so than men, may perceive that using the media for the express purpose of obtaining crime-related information is an activity that is necessary for ensuring their safety as well as the safety of their children (Morely, 1986; Valentine, 1992). Accordingly, women may be more likely to pay attention to, comprehend, and remember the depictions of crime and criminal justice in the media. Given the consistent evidence of gendered media effects, future studies exploring such possibilities are important.

Two limitations of our analyses bear mention. First, due to the small number of respondents who reported relying on a single media source for information about prisons, we were unable to examine the relationships between reliance on different media and knowledge about criminal punishment. Thus, our results likely provide a conservative estimate of the effect of media reliance on knowledge. Future research ideally will assess the extent to which reliance on a given medium (e.g., television vs. newspaper), as well as specific types of content within that medium (e.g., news vs. entertainment, local vs. national), for crime-related information is associated with knowledge about criminal punishment and crime policy. Second, we analyze data from a survey of residents of a single state. That said, almost every state in the country has undertaken “get tough” measures similar to those in Florida. Additionally, there is little
theoretical reason to expect a priori that the relationships observed herein would be limited to Florida residents. Even so, future studies ideally will investigate the extent to which these relationships hold for residents of other states as well as the nation more broadly.

Despite these limitations, the current study provides important insights about the sources of public knowledge about criminal punishment. It presents the first empirical evidence that reliance on the media for crime-related information is a key factor explaining public misunderstanding of criminal justice policies. It also is the first to demonstrate that media reliance is highest among those without criminal justice experience, and that the consequences of media reliance are moderated by audience gender, being most pronounced for women.

Several policy considerations flow from these results. Broadly, given that large swaths of the public hold inaccurate perceptions about the correctional system along a range of dimensions, we recommend policymakers consider strategies designed to counter public misunderstanding. Scholars have made similar recommendations in prior work (see Hough and Roberts, 1999; Pickett et al., 2013; Roberts and Stalans, 1997). However, our finding that media reliance is associated with reduced knowledge about correctional policy suggests that such public education efforts may be most effective if they are delivered through media outlets; for example, in the form of TV commercials or advertisements in newspapers and magazines. It may also be helpful to implement targeted information campaigns aimed at viewers of those shows that are likely to have the greatest impact on attitudes about criminal justice (e.g., crime drama [e.g., CSI] and criminal justice reality [e.g., COPS] programs, and national or local news broadcasts).

In any such public education initiative, to effectively facilitate retention of criminal justice facts, efforts should be made to take advantage of insights from the current literature on information communication. For instance, research strongly suggests that simply providing
either base rate statistical information (e.g., the incarceration rate, or the average sentence length) or factual descriptions (e.g., the specifics of a given policy) to individuals is unlikely to yield information retention or long-term attitude change (Kahneman, 2011). A more promising approach would involve the use of personal accounts or stories—narratives or exemplars—that are emotionally charged (Betsch et al., 2011; Heath, 2009; Zillmann, 2006), outline causal linkages between events, and surprise audience members (Kahneman, 2011: 166-174). This communication strategy increases audience engagement and influences intuitive judgments. Thus, in a commercial or advertisement, coupling emotional personal accounts with statistical or factual information may represent a particularly effective method for informing members of the public about crime policy and corrections. As but one example, policymakers might commission commercials that show the sentencing of specific offenders, include a brief interview with someone impact by the sentences (e.g., his/her parents, spouse), and then provide factual information about the laws that were broken and the associated sentencing statutes.

Beyond supporting the need for broad public education campaigns, our findings suggest it would be useful to require any implemented criminal justice policy that has as one of its goals to have an impact on community members—e.g., to affect citizens’ sanction perceptions, levels of knowledge about and use of sex offender registries, etc.—to meet two conditions. First, such policies should include a mandatory allocation of some ratio of the total funds to communicating relevant information to the public. For example, for every $10 million invested in incarceration or other penal policies, $100,000 could be allocated to educational media campaigns. It makes little sense to spend billions of dollars on corrections without taking sufficient steps to ensure that citizens know how their tax dollars are being spent and are aware of the key features and consequences of the funded policies. Second, on the back end, crime policies should undergo
what could be termed a “public awareness evaluation,” which would involve assessing the extent
to which members of the public have been made aware of the enactment and specifics of an
implemented policy. Mears (2010) details the importance of subjecting crime policies to a series
of different evaluative assessments, ranging from a needs evaluation through a cost-efficiency
evaluation. A public awareness evaluation should be added to this list to make certain that the
process of disseminating policy information to the public does not escape official attention.

In short, there is a need for criminal justice agencies to systematically implement and
evaluate public educational campaigns that convey facts about the criminal justice system—
including the intent of new laws, incarceration trends, daily operations and procedures, and
additional features of the correctional system. This may mean using multiple modes of media
such as newspapers, television, and the Internet to disseminate accurate and easily digestible
information about corrections. To the extent that such campaigns are successful in increasing
public knowledge about the criminal justice system is ultimately an empirical question.
However, given the potential benefits of such interventions—enhanced public safety and greater
public confidence in the correctional system—such an approach, at the very least, merits
additional policy consideration.
Notes

1 An additional benefit of focusing on respondents’ reliance on mass media broadly rather than on a given medium, such as television, is that the approach answers recent calls for researchers to begin to assess media relationships broadly rather than focusing only on the sources and effects of exposure to specific types of media (Krcmar and Strizhakova, 2009: 65).

2 We classify internet information as a non-media source because while the internet does offer access to news websites, it also provides—through government websites and online academic publications—perhaps the most readily accessible sources of factual information about criminal punishment. Indeed, when users search for the term “Florida sentencing” in Google, the very first result that is returned is a Florida Department of Corrections web page that details the history of sentencing in the state. The internet also makes available various other non-media sources of information such as advocacy websites, private blogs, and social networking websites.

3 For the race measure, we divided the sample into subsamples of non-Hispanic whites and non-whites rather than dividing separately according to both race and ethnicity. This approach was necessary given the relatively small number of blacks and Hispanics in the sample.

4 We conducted supplementary analyses in which we estimated a series of interactions between each of the separate measures of prior criminal justice experience and media reliance. None of the estimated interactions revealed statistically significant interaction effects.

5 It is of course possible that some respondents’ constructed their answers to the knowledge questions “on the spot,” rather than drawing on their preexisting understanding of criminal justice issues. Here the implications of the observed media effects would be especially interesting. An emerging body of research in social psychology documents the strong influence of heuristic shortcuts on individuals’ attitudes and perceptions (see Kahneman, 2011). Thus, if
media reliance reduces the accuracy of individuals’ “on the spot” thinking about criminal justice issues it may indicate that the former is associated with the development of frames or schemas that dispose persons to evaluate criminal punishments as being insufficient for deterring crime or reducing recidivism.

6 Given the strong evidence that, relative to other media, local news has an especially strong effect on audience members’ attitudes about crime (Chiricos, Padgett, and Gertz, 2000; Weitzer and Kubrin, 2004), future studies should give particular attention to the effects of reliance on local news sources for crime-related information on levels of knowledge about criminal justice issues.
References


Hans, Valerie P., and Juliet L. Dee. 1991. Media coverage of law: Its impact on juries and the


Kleck, Gary, and J.C. Barnes. 2013. Do more police lead to more crime deterrence? *Crime and Delinquency*. Published online before print.


Table 1.  Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Inmates</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-20-Life Law</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum Sentence Law</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Incorrect Answers</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Reliance</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact with Offenders</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Victim</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household CJS Employment</td>
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<td>.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>.49</td>
</tr>
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<td>Education</td>
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<td>Married</td>
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<td>.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative Protestant</td>
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<td>.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.38</td>
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Table 2. Logistic Regression of Media Reliance on Select Predictors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contact with Offenders</td>
<td>.329*** (-.254)</td>
<td>.391*** (-.204)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Victim</td>
<td>.564*** (-.135)</td>
<td>.622*** (-.106)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Employment in CJS</td>
<td>.330*** (-.168)</td>
<td>.322*** (-.161)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1.061 (.014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.672 (.014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.668 (-.052)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1.314*** (.219)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.996 (-.002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1.220 (.048)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.985 (-.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative Protestant</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.736* (-.072)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.828 (-.044)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.860 (-.037)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1.141 (.024)</td>
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<tr>
<td>$X^2$</td>
<td>102.21***</td>
<td>172.72***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R$^2$</td>
<td>.063</td>
<td>.112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1288</td>
<td>1217</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

†p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001 (two-tailed).

Note: Presented are odds ratios (with standardized logistic regression coefficients in parentheses).
Table 3. Logistic Regression of Knowledge about Criminal Punishment on Media Reliance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1: Number of Inmates</th>
<th>Model 2: 10-20-Life Law</th>
<th>Model 3: Minimum Sentence Law</th>
<th>Model 4: Multiple Incorrect Answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media Reliance</td>
<td>1.513*</td>
<td>1.343*</td>
<td>1.497*</td>
<td>2.471***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact with Offenders</td>
<td>(.104)</td>
<td>(.071)</td>
<td>(.097)</td>
<td>(.212)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Victim</td>
<td>1.092</td>
<td>.734*</td>
<td>.473***</td>
<td>.554**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Employment in CJS</td>
<td>.802</td>
<td>.541***</td>
<td>.417***</td>
<td>.345***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>.974</td>
<td>.511***</td>
<td>.569***</td>
<td>.561***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1.037</td>
<td>1.571†</td>
<td>.848</td>
<td>1.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>1.023</td>
<td>1.718*</td>
<td>1.790†</td>
<td>1.527</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.999</td>
<td>1.295***</td>
<td>.998</td>
<td>1.054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.922</td>
<td>.948</td>
<td>1.091</td>
<td>.947</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1.130</td>
<td>1.159</td>
<td>1.816**</td>
<td>1.628**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>.901</td>
<td>.858</td>
<td>.858</td>
<td>.827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative Protestant</td>
<td>.698*</td>
<td>.930</td>
<td>.942</td>
<td>.809</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>1.875**</td>
<td>.853</td>
<td>1.067</td>
<td>1.095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>1.209</td>
<td>.749†</td>
<td>1.119</td>
<td>.946</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>.704†</td>
<td>.904</td>
<td>.990</td>
<td>.862</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(X^2)</td>
<td>22.91†</td>
<td>127.53***</td>
<td>85.63***</td>
<td>103.47***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R(^2)</td>
<td>.022</td>
<td>.078</td>
<td>.077</td>
<td>.095</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1129</td>
<td>1192</td>
<td>1107</td>
<td>1036</td>
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</table>

\(\dagger p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001\) (two-tailed).

**Note:** Presented are odds ratios (with standardized logistic regression coefficients in parentheses).
Table 4.  Disaggregated Analyses: Estimates of the Effect of Media Reliance on the Likelihood of Getting Multiple Answers Incorrect for Select Subsamples of Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Effect of Media Reliance</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Effect of Media Reliance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Resonance Groups</td>
<td></td>
<td>Low Resonance Groups</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Crime and Justice are More Salient)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(Crime and Justice are Less Salient)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal J. Experience</td>
<td>2.763** (.215)</td>
<td>No Experience</td>
<td>2.538** (.233)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 529</td>
<td></td>
<td>N = 507</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1.265 (.056)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6.562*** (.413)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 417</td>
<td></td>
<td>N = 619</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonwhite</td>
<td>1.829 (.121)</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2.694*** (.234)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 210</td>
<td></td>
<td>N = 826</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age &lt; 45</td>
<td>2.342* (.169)</td>
<td>Age 45+</td>
<td>2.515*** (.225)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 396</td>
<td></td>
<td>N = 640</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No College</td>
<td>2.183† (.173)</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>2.600*** (.222)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 308</td>
<td></td>
<td>N = 728</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Married</td>
<td>2.011* (.157)</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2.933** (.251)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 427</td>
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<td>N = 609</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>3.354* (.272)</td>
<td>Not Urban</td>
<td>2.474*** (.210)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 176</td>
<td></td>
<td>N = 860</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

†p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001 (two-tailed).

Note: Presented are odds ratios (with standardized logistic regression coefficients in parentheses). Estimates shown are from equations that include all additional independent and control variables. The criminal justice experience subsample includes respondents who answered affirmatively to at least one of the three prior experience variables (i.e., Contact with Offenders, Household Victim, and Household Employment in CJS).