Revue générale de droit

Sentencing, Public Opinion and the News Media

Julian V. Roberts

Volume 26, Number 1, March 1995

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1035852ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1035852ar

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Publisher(s)

Éditions Wilson & Lafleur, inc.

ISSN

0035-3086 (print)
2292-2512 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Roberts, J. V. (1995). Sentencing, Public Opinion and the News Media. *Revue générale de droit*, *26*(1), 115–125. https://doi.org/10.7202/1035852ar

Sentencing, Public Opinion and the News Media

JULIAN V. ROBERTS
Professor, Department of Criminology,
University of Ottawa

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INTRODUCTION

Central to the debate about sentencing reform in Canada and elsewhere has been the public apprehension about rising crime rates (see Roberts, 1994), provoked in part by several homicides which occurred in April 1994 and which attracted a great deal of news media attention across the country. This public concern has translated directly into demands for harsher penalties for offenders at the adult as well as youth court levels.

For over twenty years now, public opinion polls in the U.S., Canada, Great Britain and Australia have documented widespread dissatisfaction with sentencing practices (Walker and Hough, 1988). A recent nation-wide poll in Canada (conducted in June, 1994) found that 82% of respondents endorsed the view that sentences are too lenient (Roberts, 1994). The proportion of respondents endorsing this view has changed little over the past decade : in 1977 the figure was 75%

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(Roberts, 1992). An even higher percentage of U.S. respondents favour a more punitive sentencing policy (Nock and Sheley, 1979). Similar sentiments exist regarding the youth court system : most Canadians feel that sentences imposed upon young offenders are insufficiently harsh (Baron and Hartnagel, 1994).

Such statistics are cause for concern for the criminal justice systems in these jurisdictions; they suggest a substantial discrepancy exists between the views of the public and the practice of the courts. This is particularly critical at the present time when sentencing reform is taking place in all of these jurisdictions. In Canada, the recent *Corrections and Conditional Release Act* (Bill C-36) which became law in 1992 and the sentencing reform Bill (C-41) introduced in 1994 have generated widespread discussion of reforms in the areas of sentencing and parole. In the United States, the federal sentencing guidelines have radically altered the face of sentencing at the federal level. Similar reform initiatives exist in the United Kingdom and Australia.

Considerable interest has arisen in the structure and determinants of public opinion in the area of sentencing. This is reflected in the proliferation of articles analyzing surveys of the public in the U.S., Canada and elsewhere (see Roberts, 1992 for a review of this literature). Critical to the issue of public opinion is the role of the news media in shaping that opinion. We know a great deal about news media treatment of crime, and other areas of the criminal justice system (*e.g.*, Ericson, Baranek and Chan, 1991; Graber, 1980). And yet little is known about the way that the news media present information about individual sentencing hearings or the sentencing process. This brief article summarizes the results of a systematic content analysis of news media treatment of sentencing stories and relates the findings to the public demand for harsher sentences. As well, I discuss media coverage of some particular cases.

I. Previous Research on Crime Stories in the News Media

Content analyses have documented the news media's preoccupation with violent, interpersonal crime. Gordon and Heath (1981) found that 18% of front-page stories in U.S. newspapers dealt with violent crime. Sacco and Fair (1988) report that homicide accounted for almost 40% of crime stories in the *Vancouver Sun*. Doob (1985) reports that over 50% of the crime-related stories in Canadian newspapers dealt with offences involving violence. This trend is not restricted to the North American news media : Van Dijk (1978) reports that crime stories involving violence were ten times more frequent than actual offences of violence. It would also appear that the news media pay more attention to events that precede the sentencing hearing. A content analysis of Toronto newspapers (Roberts, 1980) found that only 13% of criminal justice newspaper stories dealt with the sentencing process. One consequence of the scant attention paid by the media to sentencing is that the picture of the sentencing process in general and of any particular hearing, will be very incomplete. Several commentators have noted this. For example, over 100 years ago the jurist Stephen (1883) wrote the following : "Newspaper reports are necessarily much condensed, and they generally omit many points which weigh with the judge in determining what sentence to pass" and : "The public's interest in what the courts do with convicted criminals is manifested in the discussions of sentencing policy [which] seems to be based on reports which omit some facts or emphasize others unduly" (p. 90).

This is important to know because research in Canada (Roberts and Doob, 1990) has documented the adverse consequences arising from incomplete coverage of a sentencing hearing. In that research, using members of the public as subjects, researchers compared the reactions of two groups. One group had read the newspaper account of a sentencing hearing, the other a summary of the sentencing hearing transcript. Participants' evaluations of the sentence, the offender, the offence as well as the judge were significantly different as a function of which account they had read. Subjects who were exposed to the news media version of the sentences held substantially more negative views of the sentence, the offender, the judge and the offence.

II. THE STUDY[1]

The aim of the analysis was to explore newspaper treatment of sentencing practice and policy, with a view to better understanding why public disenchantment with the courts is so pervasive in our societies. The newspapers — rather than the electronic media — were the object of study because research has shown that newspapers were the news source for two-thirds of the public who could recall a crime story (Canadian Sentencing Commission, 1987). In contrast, only 13% of these respondents had learned about a story from television news.

Stories about sentencing (or which contained a sentence) which were published over a one-year period were obtained from the following nine English language newspapers: the *Toronto Star*, *Globe and Mail*, *Winnipeg Free Press*, *Calgary Herald*, *Vancouver Sun*, *Halifax Chronicle*, *Edmonton Journal*, *Montreal Gazette* and *Ottawa Citizen* (see Tremblay, 1988, for information on the treatment of sentencing by French-language newspapers). Every sixth issue (on a rotating basis, to avoid associating a particular newspaper with a particular day) was examined for all nine papers. (This sampling ratio has been established by prior research to provide adequate representation (see Holsti, 1969). If a particular paper was not published on a day selected, the preceding day was chosen instead. Thus 50 days of each publication were included in the analysis. As a secondary source, the newspaper clippings provided by the Department of Justice, Canada, and the Ministry of the Solicitor-General were scanned for the same period and all relevant articles extracted. The criterion for inclusion was simply whether the article reported a sentence or dealt with a related issue, such as sentencing guidelines or sentencing reform (although there were few of these). These two methods generated a total of 761 stories which were then coded by two research assistants.

III. FINDINGS

A. CRIMES AGAINST THE PERSON VS. CRIMES AGAINST PROPERTY

Offences against the person were clearly over-represented relative to their actual frequency. Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) data show that in Canada, over the past decade, crimes of violence have accounted for approximately 10% of

1. Some findings reported here are drawn from a report written for the Canadian Sentencing Commission. I would like to acknowledge the assistance of researchers Rena Zaretsky and Gabriella Cavallero, as well as the research staff ot the Canadian Sentencing Commission.

all crimes reported to the police (Statistics Canada, 1994) whereas 58% (392) of the sentencing stories in this sample involved crimes of this nature. A further 15% of the sentencing stories (137) described crimes against the state, 17% (131) were crimes against property and 10% (101) involved firearms offences. Stories were then classified within offence categories. Homicide (first and second degree murder, manslaughter, criminal negligence causing death) accounted for 27% of stories in this category. A further 38% were devoted to assaults (including sexual assault).

Brillon, Louis-Guérin and Lamarche (1984) report the results of a survey in which Canadian respondents were asked to specify what type of offender they had in mind when they gave their opinions on the severity of sentences. Fully 60% were thinking of violent offenders. The pattern of sentencing stories reported in the newspapers may explain this finding. The majority of sentences reported are for convictions of offences against the person. The image of sentencing that is conveyed to the public concerns crimes of violence, particularly the more serious interpersonal offences.

B. DISPOSITIONS REPORTED IN THE NEWSPAPERS

What kinds of sentences were reported in the newspapers? Once again the picture of sentencing that emerges from the newspapers is at considerable variance with reality. The most frequently reported disposition was a period of custody : fully 70% of the convictions in these stories resulted in sentences of imprisonment. A further 13% of stories involved a sentence of probation, 9% were fines and 8% other kinds of dispositions. Alternatives to incarceration — such as community service orders, or restitution — were seldom reported.

This pattern is the inverse of reality, where custodial terms are infrequently used relative to other dispositions. Research into sentencing patterns conducted by the Canadian Sentencing Commission (in 1986) revealed that a fine is the most frequent disposition for offenders convicted of all but the most serious offences. A more recent study found that only one sentence in four imposed in adult provincial courts involved a period of imprisonment, whereas a fine was imposed in slightly over half the cases studied (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1993).

If the public read about imprisonment more than other sentences it is not surprising that their initial reaction to crime invokes incarceration. The movement to promote alternatives to incarceration has always encountered resistance from a public that is unfamiliar with community-based sanctions such as community service orders. While the news media continue to emphasize imprisonment at the expense of non-carceral sanctions, public opposition to a more flexible sentencing philosophy is likely to continue.

C. PURPOSES OF SENTENCING MENTIONED BY NEWSPAPERS

It is clearly important to know whether, and to what extent, the news media communicate information about the purposes of sentencing. If a judge imposes a lenient sentence in order to promote the rehabilitation of the offender, it is imperative that this purpose be communicated to the public. Otherwise, readers are likely to attribute this "leniency" to unprincipled disparity in sentencing. How-

ever, in 90% of the stories sampled, no mention was made of any particular purpose of sentencing. General deterrence was cited in 6% of the stories, while the remaining 4% contained reference to one of several other sentencing aims (rehabilitation, special deterrence, incapacitation or retribution).

Additional analysis was performed upon the data to see to what extent the news media report the reasons for a sentence. It is possible that information is transmitted about the *reason* for the sentence, even if the formal sentencing purpose remains unclear. A statement was only classified as a *purpose* if the reporter included the actual phrase (*e.g.* general deterrence) or a close facsimile (*e.g.*, "in order to deter others"). By the term "reason" I refer to more general statements which may justify a sentence, such as "I am sending you away for a substantial period on account of your extensive criminal record". While this statement does not make it clear whether the purpose being served is individual deterrence or some other purpose such as incapacitation, there is at least some justification for the sanction. In any event, the results mirrored those of the analysis on sentencing purposes. Very little information was provided in terms of reasons : no reasons for sentence were reported in 70% of the stories; in 18% a single reason was given, while in 5% two reasons were given. In short, the public is not encouraged to think about sentencing as a rational process. These findings provide quantitative support for the observation made by a sentencing expert who noted : "judges who deal with robbers, rapists and other serious offenders by means of suspended sentences, fines or probation provoke storms of protest from newspapers and readers who [...] were not told of the reasons for such leniency" (Walker, 1981, p. 114).

D. MINIMUM PENALTIES, MAXIMUM PENALTIES AND AVERAGE SENTENCES

Research by the Canadian Sentencing Commission (1987) demonstrated that the public is quite unfamiliar with the maximum penalty structure. When a representative sample of the Canadian public was asked to estimate the maximum penalties for some common offences, few respondents had any accurate idea of the maxima contained in the Canadian *Criminal Code*. This was true even for an offence like impaired driving which has received a great deal of news coverage over the past few years, due to changes in the maximum penalty structure. Thus three-quarters of the respondents in the survey answered "don't know" when asked to state the maximum penalty for impaired driving. Of those who did respond, only 4% were correct. Public ignorance of minimum penalties was equally widespread. Most respondents were unable to state which offences carried a minimum penalty. Once again, the example of impaired driving was illuminating : despite the publicity surrounding the introduction of the revised minimum penalties for this offence in Canada, only one-quarter of the respondents knew there was a minimum penalty for driving while impaired. The public also had little accurate idea of the average sentence imposed for common offences. Most people underestimated the severity of sentences imposed at the trial court level.

Examination of the sentencing stories contained in this sample provides an explanation for this widespread public ignorance of sentencing statistics. It is unnecessary to provide a table to illustrate the point. A maximum penalty was mentioned in only 23 of all 761 stories. And, although there were a number of stories involving cases of impaired driving, mandatory minimum penalties were noted in only seven articles. Finally, in terms of information about current practice, not a single story made reference to the average sentence for any particular offence.

These findings are important because they show that the news media do not provide any *context* for the public to evaluate sentences in specific cases. If a three-year term is imposed for manslaughter, for example, the public has no idea whether this is lenient or harsh, relative to other sentences for the same offence, or other dispositions imposed for different offences.

E. PROPORTIONALITY IN SENTENCING

Making comparisons between offences raises the issue of proportionality in sentencing. Most members of the public endorse a sentencing model which demands that a relationship exist between the severity of the sentence and the seriousness of the crime for which the sentence was imposed. Andrew von Hirsch (1985) distinguishes between two kinds of proportionality : ordinal and cardinal. By the term "ordinal proportionality", he simply means that penalties should be graded in severity so that they reflect gradations in crime seriousness. Sexual assault should be punished more severely than assault which should be punished more severely than theft, and so on.

And yet it is not proportionality in sentencing that makes its way into the newspapers, but the absence of proportionality. Thus a great deal of media attention was devoted to the case of David Smith, who, in 1989 was sentenced to 29 months in prison for failing to pay fines. The news media were quick to note that this sentence was significantly harsher than other dispositions imposed for much more serious crimes such as robbery. Reading of such cases is likely to encourage the perception that sentencing patterns in Canada display a complete lack of ordinal proportionality. Although we do not have annual sentencing statistics for different crimes that would permit comparisons, the few studies that have examined sentencing statistic show that proportionality does underlie sentencing patterns in this country (see Turner, 1993; Roberts, 1994a).

F. NEWSPAPER TREATMENT OF MANSLAUGHTER : A CASE STUDY

The small number of cases in the newspapers for any specific offence prevents us from drawing firm conclusions from comparisons between the sentences reported in the media and sentencing patterns. However, an examination of the manslaughter articles contained in this sample of stories does provide insights into the process by which newspaper readers acquire the view that sentences are too lenient. Of the cases reported in the sample, 94% resulted in sentences of incarceration, with an average of five years.

On the face of things this is not atypically lenient : the median sentence in Canada for manslaughter is approximately four years (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1993). It does not seem to be the case then that the public infer judges are too "soft" by reading about excessively lenient sentences. Rather, they would appear to derive this impression because the news media selectively report those cases of manslaughter that are among the most serious committed.

In the vast majority of manslaughter stories examined in this content analysis, the offenders were charged with first degree murder, but the case resulted in a guilty plea to the lesser charge of manslaughter. The news accounts however, describe events that would in all probability strike members of the public as first or second degree murder, and not manslaughter. A "repulsive slaying" — to use one

example — is not a description most people would associate with manslaughter. In fact, sometimes the stories fail to mention the fact that the offender was convicted of manslaughter; they simply describe the crime as a "killing". Some of the other headlines in this sample of manslaughter cases illustrate the point: "Killer's six years sentence a 'farce' : victim's parents" (*Ottawa Citizen*, November 28, 1985); "Man who killed wife with axe gets suspended sentence" (*Montreal Gazette*, May 24, 1985); "Plot ends in lover's death; woman draws probation" (*Ottawa Citizen*, December 18, 1984). Public reaction to these cases and their sentences is likely to be extremely negative. The readers of those newspapers may well be "sentencing" the offender for a more serious crime than the offence of conviction.

G. NEWS MEDIA COVERAGE OF SENTENCING REFORM

In light of the fact that most Canadians are dissatisfied with the sentencing process, an important topic of interest to the public is that of sentencing reform. And in fact, there have been a number of landmark reports and legislative proposals advanced in recent years. In the mid 1980s, the Law Reform Commission of Canada released several documents pertaining to sentencing reform. The 1987 report of the Canadian Sentencing Commission was followed in 1988 by the report of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Justice and Solicitor General (the Daubney report) which examined sentencing and parole. The federal government released its reform proposals ("Directions for Reform") in 1990. These resulted in parole legislation in 1992 (Bill C-36) and sentencing reform Bills in 1993 (C-90) and 1994 (C-41). There has been no shortage of events to report to the Canadian public.

No systematic content analysis has addressed this issue; accordingly, evidence must be anecdotal. However, two illustrations are revealing. When the recommendations of the Canadian Sentencing Commission were released in 1987, there was considerable media attention paid to the report. One of these recommendations called for the abolition of full parole for all inmates except those serving life terms. Implementation of this recommendation would have meant that inmates would have served at least three-quarters of their sentences in prison, with the final quarter in the community.

This proposed reform was represented to the public in several newspapers as an example of leniency. The *Ottawa Citizen* described the Canadian Sentencing Commission as making "an astonishingly uninformed recommendation that [...] all criminals should be *eligible for parole after serving only 25 percent of their sentence*" (*Ottawa Citizen*, November 27, 1987, p. A9, emphasis added). The article's author had been expecting a lenient reform proposal, and was determined to find it, even if it meant reversing the Commission's actual recommendation. When coverage of reform is an inaccurate as this, one does not need to look far for an explanation of public dissatisfaction.

In another news story (*Montreal Gazette,* 1987), the Sentencing Commission's recommendations were described under the headline "Judge recommends 12-year maximum for most serious crimes, more non-prison sentences". This also suggests a more lenient sentencing policy was advocated. It, of course, ignores the fact that the current maxima bear very little relation to the sentences imposed for even the most serious cases, as the maximum penalty structure is out of date and needs overhauling. As well, it omits reference to the fact that the Com-

mission also recommended a mechanism which would permit judges to increase the sentence by up to 50%, thus making the maximum penalty under the Commission's proposed structure effectively 18 years and not 12 as indicated by the newspaper headline. Finally, the revised maximum penalty structure would operate in a sentencing environment in which parole would have ceased to exist, thus making a six-year sentence much closer to six years in prison than under the *status quo*.

The second example is more recent. As noted earlier, in June 1994, the federal government released a sentencing reform Bill (C-41). This Bill has many features, including a statutory statement of the purposes of sentencing, specific aggravating factors for crimes motivated by racial hatred, and a provision that would require judges to provide reasons for their sentencing decisions. How was this Bill reported? Its complexities were largely ignored by Canada's largest-selling newspaper. The banner headline in the *Toronto Star* was "Ottawa Aims to Put Fewer In Prison" (*Toronto Star*, 1994). Once again the news media attention was focused on any evidence that sentencing would become more lenient. To the public, sentencing reform was equated in this instance with sentencing leniency. The reality of course is quite different. Not even the most staunch advocate of Bill C-41 would expect it to have a great impact upon sentencing patterns at the trial court level. These examples are anecdotal, nevertheless, they suggest that news media coverage of sentencing reform is no better than coverage of individual sentencing decisions.

H. ESCALATING PUBLIC DEMANDS FOR PUNITIVENESS

One of the consequences of continual media attention to sentences that appear to be lenient, and serious violent crime, is an escalating public demand for punitiveness. This tendency is exacerbated by the absence of any discussion of sentencing purposes other than punishment. A recent example of this comes from the sentencing decision in a case of child sexual abuse which took place in Perth, Ontario in 1994. The offender in this case was a 65-year old whom the sentencing judge described as a diabetic with a short life expectancy. The judge sentenced the man to six years in prison for a number of counts of child sexual abuse. This sentence was described as a "slap on the wrist" and as evidence that the court had turned itself inside out to give the offender "a break" (*Ottawa Citizen*, 1994). The same newspaper contained a strongly-worded editorial demanding a harsher penalty for the offender. Regardless of whether six years was too harsh or too lenient, few people familiar with the Correctional system would argue that six years in a penitentiary is a slap on the wrist for anyone, least of all a 65-year old paedophile with diabetes. In the event, the Court of Appeal upheld the original sentence. The point, though, is that if the public comes to accept that a six-year penitentiary term is a slap on the wrist, then demands for harsher sentences are going to escalate even further.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Offences against the person are most likely to be reported by the newspapers. This fact, coupled with an examination of the individual stories themselves, suggests that the primary determinant of whether a sentence appears in the newspapers is the seriousness of the offence for which it was imposed. Seriousness

includes both the seriousness of the offence category as well as the severity of this particular crime. Support for this hypothesis comes from research which has focused on personnel working in the news media (Rosenfeld, 1988; Tremblay, 1988). Two surveys of journalists and editors explored the editorial policies in the area of sentencing of newspapers, radio and television news teams. The results of those surveys confirmed that the seriousness of the crime was the reason cited most often in determining whether a particular sentencing hearing was reported or not.

It would appear that the newspapers encourage the public to consider sentencing strictly as an exercise in punishment. The primary response to crime is punishment, and punishment translates into terms of imprisonment. The central point here is that the newspapers represent individual sentencing hearings, as well as information about sentencing reform, against a background of punitiveness. Specific dispositions become newsworthy only when they appear to be too lenient, and sentencing reform is conveyed to the public in terms of the effect it will have upon the severity of sanctions imposed at the trial court level.

A. THE FORMATION OF PUBLIC ATTITUDES

If the public has the view that sentences are too lenient, it is not solely as a result of the sentences reported in the media. Part of the explanation is to be found in the way in which most people process information and form attitudes. A great deal of research in the social sciences has investigated the way in which public attitudes are formed (Nisbett and Ross, 1980). It is clear from this literature that people often form attitudes on the basis of little concrete information. Members of the public frequently generalize from single instances to an entire population (see Hamill, Wilson and Nisbett, 1980).

The average layperson, then, is not sensitive to the importance of the representativeness of a particular event. It is clear that attitudes towards sentencing may well be affected by this shortcoming in social judgment. Readers of newspapers may well infer that most or all sentences are too lenient after learning about one or two sentences that appear (given the description of the offence) to be insufficiently harsh. Thus when the public learn of a "razor killing which resulted in a sentence that could be served in the community after six months" (to quote one newspaper story from this sample) they may well infer that *most* sentences in homicide cases are inappropriately lenient.

This inference will in all probability be made without readers pausing to consider how representative this sentence was of all sentences for this type of crime. It also appears to be the case that although these opinions are easily formed, they are not so easily modified or discarded. At least part of the explanation for this paradox is that many attempts at public education consist of statistical information concerning, for example, sentencing trends or parole "success" rates. This kind of material is pallid and lacks the impact of a single, vivid case in which a serious crime resulted in a "lenient" penalty.

B. CONCLUSION

The public perception that sentences are too lenient can be directly traced to the news media. A systematic content analysis of the most important news medium (for this particular criminal justice issue) revealed that the public

receives inadequate information upon which to form an opinion of individual sentencing decisions or the sentencing process. The image of sentencing conveyed by the news media is a highly distorted representation of reality. Moreover, sentences are almost never justified and little contextual information in terms of either the case or the legal parameters of the offence is ever presented. Newspapers convey an impression of a sentencing system which has to deal in the most part with offences involving violence. It responds to crimes of this nature primarily by the imposition of terms of imprisonment, and little justification is ever provided for the use of incarceration. It is not surprising then that the vast majority of Canadians know little about, and hold negative views of, the sentencing system in Canada.

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Julian V. Roberts
Department of Criminology
University of Ottawa, 1 Stewart
OTTAWA (Ontario) K1N 6N5
Tél. : (613) 564-7852
Téléc. : (613) 564-3871