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CRIMINAL JUSTICE STUDENT VIEWS OF THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM:
THE IMPACT OF EDUCATION AND SELF-SELECTION AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS
FOR THE HUMAN SERVICES

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines criminal justice student views of the criminal justice system. The purpose of the research is to investigate issues surrounding the influence of self-selection and criminal justice education on the opinions of criminal justice students toward the criminal justice system.

The research suggests that students choose criminal justice careers in part because their personal philosophies mirror the conflicting objectives of the criminal justice system. Criminal justice education seems to influence criminal justice student views of the criminal justice system, but in a direction that may make the transition to employment in criminal justice agencies a more difficult process.

It is recommended that criminal justice and social work education include efforts to equip students with the understanding and skills needed to utilize what they have learned in human service agencies. Such preparation should include internship opportunities and coursework in organizational behavior and organizational change strategies.

The Impact of Criminal Justice Education

Criminal justice education and criminal justice students have been the subject of considerable research in recent years. Much of this research has focused on the nature and impact of criminal justice education, or more specifically, police science education, on police attitudes and performance. Most of the empirical investigations have indicated that both police and the community may benefit from increasing the educational level of police officers. The benefits of increasing the educational level of police officers are reported to be both far-reaching and diverse, including:

1. Decreased dogmatism, authoritarianism, rigidity, conservatism and tolerance for minority groups;
2. Higher job aspirations, increased promotions and better performance in the police academy;
3. Fewer discipline problems, lower turnover and reduced use of sick days;

4. Decreased reliance on official criminal justice sanctions;
5. Increased perception of danger;
6. Tolerance of variety and excitement on the job.¹

Many of the preceding studies compared police officers who had attended, or were attending college, to police officers with no college experience; it was generally assumed that distinctions between the two groups could be attributed to the affects of higher education on police officers. A number of writers have pointed out the fallacy of this assumption, and the methodological weaknesses of research that attempts to measure the affects of higher education without considering pre-college differences between college educated and non-college educated police (Ingraham and Johnson, 1973; Weiner, 1974). These weaknesses are compounded by the varying definitions of criminal justice education and coursework employed in these studies (Bowker, 1978). The fact that similar positive results have been achieved in studies examining widely diverse forms of criminal justice education (ranging from two-year vocational programs to four-year academic programs) and levels of coursework (including students with less than one year of coursework as well as persons with undergraduate degrees) may well indicate that self-selection exerts some influence on attitudinal and behavioral distinctions between college educated and non-college educated police.

Comparisons of Criminal Justice and Non-Criminal Justice Students

The influence of education vs. self-selection has also been examined in empirical research that approaches the issue from a different perspective -- comparing college students majoring in criminal justice to college students majoring in other fields. In 1973, Ingraham and Johnson compared students majoring in law enforcement and criminology to non-criminal justice majors enrolled in criminal justice classes. Although the comparison focused on a number of dimensions, their assessment of student views of the criminal justice system revealed some of the most interesting findings. All students generally supported the "treatment or helping philosophy of crime control," and criminology students were more treatment oriented than either of the other two groups (Ingraham and Johnson, 1973:49). At odds with this finding were the students' views on deterrence. All groups felt that deterrence should receive more emphasis as a means of crime control; the law enforcement, and to a lesser extent, the criminology majors, supported this position more frequently than non-majors. Thus, it appears that criminal justice students, including both law enforcement and criminology majors, to varying degrees support the conflicting objectives of treatment and deterrence for the criminal justice system. All of their research led Ingraham and Johnson to conclude that:

There is something in the nature of self-selection at work attracting to the fields of law enforcement and criminology (corrections) students with differing philosophies and objectives in life, philosophies and objectives which are at least somewhat consistent with the role attributions and operating philosophies of the agencies toward which the students' career aspirations are directed (1973:51).

A more recent study by Fabianic (1979) also found differences between the views of criminal justice and non-criminal justice students. Criminal justice students and students from other departments of a university were compared on the use of their support for civil liberties. Criminal justice students were found to have the highest mean libertarianism score, followed by social work, social science and humanities students; nursing, education and general studies students had the lowest libertarianism scores. This research adds a new dimension to the data on criminal justice student views -- citizen rights and due process protections; criminal justice students supported these issues more strongly than non-criminal justice students. Because students in Fabianic's comparison group were enrolled in other university programs, he concluded that criminal justice education probably influenced the views of criminal justice students.

The ability to generalize from the preceding research is limited by sampling techniques that were not designed to provide generalizable findings (Ingraham and Johnson, 1973). Additionally, the preceding data is purely descriptive in nature; no tests of statistical significance were performed in either study. Both studies were undertaken in comparable settings -- four-year, non-vocational criminal justice programs, but they employed different comparison groups. Based on this preliminary empirical foundation, the present study attempts to further explore student opinions toward the criminal justice system and the influence of education and self-selection on these views. In addition to considering differences in viewpoint between criminal justice majors and students from a random sample of university courses, inservice/preservice status and the number of criminal justice courses completed will be examined for influence on criminal justice student views.

METHODS

A questionnaire, originally developed and published in the Bill of Rights Newsletter in 1974, was administered by full-time faculty to all students enrolled in their basic courses of criminal justice, juvenile justice, corrections and law enforcement at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte; the administration occurred during the second week of classes, Fall, 1979. The UNCC Criminal Justice program employs a mixture of the professional and social science curricula described by Tenney (1971) and primarily enrolls preservice students. Most students pursue a concentration in general criminal justice, corrections or law enforcement; a smaller number concentrate their studies in criminal justice planning. All criminal justice courses require students to have achieved junior status.

A total of 158 students completed the questionnaires. This number represents 36% of the students enrolled in criminal justice courses during the fall semester. The 115 criminal justice majors who completed the questionnaire represent 52% of the junior and senior students majoring in Criminal Justice at UNCC. These criminal justice majors serve as the focus of this analysis and will hereafter be referred to as the criminal justice students.

The same questionnaire was also distributed to the instructors of 25 courses (including labs and single person independent study courses) randomly selected

from the junior and senior level courses appearing in the UNCC Fall, 1979 Course Schedule. Questionnaires were administered and returned by 21 instructors. A total of 308 questionnaires were completed by the university students.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLES

Seventeen percent (17%) of the criminal justice students and 14% of the non-criminal justice students were non-white. The criminal justice students were equally divided between males and females, while the non-criminal justice students showed a higher percentage of male students: 58% as opposed to 42%. Twenty-two percent (22%) of the criminal justice students were full-time employees of the criminal justice system; 41% were not employed and most of the remaining held part-time jobs. Non-criminal justice students had similar rates of unemployment; they were less likely to hold full-time jobs (13%) and more likely to be employed on a part-time basis (48%) than the criminal justice students. One-fourth of the criminal justice students were enrolled in their first criminal justice courses that semester; 30% had previously taken between one and three criminal justice courses and 45% had taken four or more.

FINDINGS

Criminal Justice Student Opinions

Criminal justice students generally feel that too many criminals are freed by the courts because of technicalities (Table 1). They do not view pretrial release as a dangerous practice, although their opinions are somewhat mixed. The students are more certain that ex-offenders do not require the close supervision of police -- almost three-fourths held this position. These positions seem to support the philosophy of non-intervention for defendants and those who have "paid their dues." Due process protections at adjudication seem to receive a less favorable evaluation.

Student views of the functions and objectives of the criminal justice system appear to be conflicting. The students generally agree that fear of punishment is the best means of deterring crime, but they also believe that prisons and jails are schools of crime and that criminals need counseling and education for jobs. They even supported, albeit by a relatively narrow margin, the use of probation for all but violent offenders. The students' acceptance of punishment as an effective deterrent would appear to be incompatible with their more treatment-oriented sentiments.²

On more general issues, students strongly supported the equitable treatment of all persons by justice system officials and favored showing more interest in victims of crime. Considering the seriousness of various criminal acts, they tended to view white collar offenses that may injure or defraud the public as seriously as selling dope, and favored comparable treatment for persons who commit these crimes.

Table 1

Criminal Justice Student Views of
the Criminal Justice System

Opinion	Student Response as Percentage of Total Responses		
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
Too many criminals are set free by the courts because of technicalities in the law.	78%	9%	13%
It's dangerous to release people on bail because they can then commit other crimes while they wait for their trials.	29%	30%	41%
Ex-convicts can't be trusted; to protect society they should be closely watched by the police.	10%	16%	74%
Fear of punishment is the best way to discourage criminal acts.	49%	24%	27%
Prisons and jails are schools of crime, teaching inmates to be better crooks when they get out.	59%	18%	23%
Most criminals come from broken homes and poor backgrounds. What they need is help such as counseling and education for jobs.	65%	11%	24%
Except for violent criminals, probation is a better penalty than prison for those who break the law.	45%	24%	31%
In a just society, the police, judges and others in the system must treat everyone the same whether they are black, brown or white; rich or poor.	89%	6%	5%
It's time we stopped worrying so much about criminals and showed some interest in the victims of crime. They're the ones who really suffer.	59%	17%	24%
Selling unsafe cars, toys or toasters is just as serious as selling dope; those found guilty of such offenses should be treated in the same way.	49%	18%	33%

Note. The total number of students responding to each question was 115.
All percentages have been rounded.

Comparison of Criminal Justice and Non-Criminal Justice Student Opinions

The comparison of criminal justice and non-criminal justice student views of the criminal justice system focused on the dichotomous variable of student agreement/disagreement with each of the 10 opinion items. It was decided that distinctions as to decision/indecision on the issues identified were inappropriate for this study, because they would be difficult to interpret and might well confuse distinctions associated with the nature of student views. Chi-square tests of significance were performed on all 10 items.

Only two comparisons revealed significant differences between criminal justice majors and non-criminal justice students at the $p < .05$ level or better. Criminal justice majors were significantly less likely to reject the practice of pretrial release on the basis of offender dangerousness and more likely to support probation for all but violent offenders (Table 2). These distinctions seem especially meaningful because they represent a strong rehabilitation/reintegration orientation, an aversion to incarceration and support for one of the most widely debated practices in the area of due process guarantees for defendants. It should be noted that all comparisons between criminal justice students and non-criminal justice students revealed this same pattern of association -- criminal justice students supporting treatment and due process issues more strongly than non-criminal justice students; only two comparisons, however, achieved statistical significance.

The Influence of Preservice/Inservice Status and Criminal Justice Coursework on Criminal Justice Student Opinions

The criminal justice student's preservice/inservice status and the number of criminal justice courses he or she had completed were examined for their influence on student views. Chi-square tests of significance were performed on the dichotomous variable agreement/disagreement with each of the 10 opinion items. No assessment revealed an association between preservice/inservice status and student opinion significant at the $p < .05$ level or better. Two assessments revealed an association between the number of criminal justice courses a student had completed and his views of the criminal justice system. Students who were enrolled in their first criminal justice course were more likely to agree that a "fear of punishment is the best way to discourage criminal acts" than students who had previously completed one or more criminal justice courses (Table 3). In fact, there seems to be a linear relationship between the number of courses taken and a declining belief in the effectiveness of punishment as a deterrent.

The number of criminal justice courses completed also influenced student perceptions of the seriousness of white collar crime. Students who had never before completed a criminal justice course were less likely to view "selling unsafe cars, toys or toasters" as comparable to selling dope than students who had completed one or more courses in criminal justice.

Table 2

Comparison of Criminal Justice and Non-Criminal Justice
Student Views of the Criminal Justice System

It's dangerous to release people on bail who are accused of crimes because they can then commit other crimes while they wait for their trials.

Student Group	Agree	Disagree	Total
Criminal Justice Majors	33 (41%)	47 (59%)	80
Non-Criminal Justice Students	142 (62%)	87 (38%)	229 ^a

Except for violent criminals, probation is a better penalty than prison for those who break the law.

Student Group	Agree	Disagree	Total
Criminal Justice Majors	51 (59%)	36 (41%)	87
Non-Criminal Justice Students	100 (44%)	127 (56%)	227 ^b

Note. Totals refer only to the number of students who responded agree/disagree. All percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

^a $\chi^2 = 9.5745, p < .002.$

^b $\chi^2 = 4.7792, p < .028.$

Table 3

Number of Criminal Justice Courses Completed and Criminal Justice Student Views of the Criminal Justice System

Fear of punishment is the best way to discourage criminal acts.

Number of Criminal Justice Courses Completed	Agree	Disagree	Total
None	17 (85%)	3 (15%)	20
One to Three	18 (67%)	9 (33%)	27
Four or More	21 (53%)	19 (48%)	40 ^a

Selling unsafe cars, toys or toasters is just as serious as selling dope; those found guilty of such offenses should be treated in the same way.

Number of Criminal Justice Courses Completed	Agree	Disagree	Total
None	8 (38%)	13 (62%)	21
One or more	48 (66%)	25 (34%)	73 ^b

Note. Totals refer only to the number of students who responded agree/disagree. All percentages have been rounded.

^a $\chi^2 = 6.2306, p < .044.$

^b $\chi^2 = 4.0954, p < .043.$

DISCUSSION

Treatment vs. Deterrence

An examination of the present study in light of prior research reveals several potentially meaningful findings. First, criminal justice majors appear to have conflicting views of the objectives of the criminal justice system. Although they are generally treatment-oriented and have negative perceptions of the impact of incarceration, they nevertheless support the use of deterrence as a crime control measure. It may well be that the conflicts long viewed as endemic to the criminal justice system or inherent in the roles of particular criminal justice officials (e.g., probation and parole officers) may lie within the minds of persons attracted to the field of criminal justice prior to their employment in that field. It is plausible that this particular conflict in perspective distinguishes criminal justice majors from persons studying in other "helping" fields such as social work or mental health. It may further distinguish law enforcement from corrections students within the field of criminal justice, as indicated by Ingraham and Johnson's research (1973).

On the other hand, the conflict between the objectives of treatment and deterrence may be more a difference in emphasis than a general philosophical debate. When the results of the research were discussed with the student respondents, many of them reported perceiving no necessary conflict. They generally supported the use of punishment for persons who chose to commit criminal acts without extenuating circumstances; it was hoped that such punishment would serve a deterrent function. Education, training and counseling were considered appropriate when the offender's problems or deficiencies served as mitigating factors. Conflicting viewpoints became apparent only when individual case histories were discussed. Although there was a tendency to classify certain crimes as requiring punishment or treatment, an examination of offender case histories frequently produced disparate judgements regarding the extent to which circumstances were mitigating.³

Further research is needed to identify individual and situational characteristics that influence judgments regarding mitigating factors (e.g., the characteristics that lead one individual to view unemployment as mitigating the crime of theft while another person perceives no legitimate extenuating circumstance). Much of the criminological coursework in criminal justice education examines determinants of criminal behavior that, in a different context (such as a sentencing hearing), may be viewed as mitigating factors. A focus on the impact of criminal justice education on judgments regarding extenuating circumstances may prove more productive in our effort to evaluate the results of learning than the more superficial focus on treatment vs. deterrence.

Criminal Justice and Non-Criminal Justice Students

Second, criminal justice majors appear to be more willing to strongly support the philosophy and practice of rehabilitation/reintegration and to oppose incarceration than non-criminal justice students. They also seem more willing to accept pretrial release for persons accused of crimes than their student peers, a finding that supports Fabianic's conclusions on student support for civil liberties. Both

distinctions appear meaningful because of the precise nature of the opinion items and the overall pattern of the association between criminal justice and non-criminal justice student views. Criminal justice majors seem more willing to support rehabilitation/reintegration objectives and due process protections than non-criminal justice students.

The Impact of Employment in the Criminal Justice System

Employment in the criminal justice system seems to have no bearing on the views of criminal justice students toward the criminal justice system. This finding is difficult to interpret because the pre-employment and pre-college opinions of the students are unknown. Additionally, the length and type employment may be influencing the student's attitudes in unknown and varying directions. Although this lack of a relationship between employment and opinion is somewhat puzzling in view of prior research and clearly merits additional attention, it would seem inappropriate at this time to unquestioningly assume that viewpoints must change in direction as a result of employment in the criminal justice system. Employment may serve instead to strengthen or weaken pre-existing attitudes.

The Impact of Criminal Justice on Education

Finally, the number of criminal justice courses a student has completed seems to have a fairly specific impact on student attitudes. Perceptions of the seriousness of white collar crime increase and views of the effectiveness of deterrence appear to decline with increased coursework. These findings seem meaningful because of the considerable attention devoted to the impact of white collar crime and the effectiveness of deterrence in criminal justice literature and debate. Instructors in criminal justice may be reflecting this emphasis in their courses, attempting to inform about white collar crime and its impact, since it generally receives little attention or understanding from the general public, and to instruct students regarding the empirical literature on deterrence, which generally indicates that deterrence merits little confidence as a crime control measure.

Considering the issues of self-selection and education, it appears that criminal justice majors may well be self-selecting their careers on the basis of their own philosophies regarding what the criminal justice system should and should not be doing. Their philosophies seem to complement the goals, if not always the practices, of the criminal justice system. The criminal justice students are distinguishable from non-criminal justice students on the issues of their support for rehabilitation/reintegration and due process guarantees; these distinctions do not seem to be the product of criminal justice education. Instead, criminal justice education seems to be "enlightening" students and modifying their perceptions regarding what offenses can harm society and what measures have some degree of success in controlling crime. In effect, criminal justice education appears to be producing better informed future employees of the criminal justice system.

However, one potential dilemma seems fairly evident. If students choose criminal justice education and careers on the basis of views on deterrence and rehabilitation that complement criminal justice system goals, and then learn that deterrence holds (or is believed to hold) little promise as a crime control measure, how

will they adapt to employment in agencies in which the use of official authority for deterrence purposes is an unquestioned policy? Having become more treatment-oriented because they are less deterrence-minded, will they modify their newly learned views, attempt to restructure their roles, or reject empirical studies that provide findings they cannot seem to use?

Implications for the Human Services

It is obvious that the preparation of students for careers in the fields of law enforcement, corrections and other human services is a very complex undertaking. It requires an acknowledgement of student objectives in entering their chosen fields and an understanding of the probable impact of employment in the criminal justice system on the educated student. The transition from student to employee status is already addressed by educational programs that provide students with internship opportunities in criminal justice and social service agencies. However, exposure to "the real world" alone is not enough to equip students with the tools they need to manage this critical transition. Such exposure is essential, but it is only a preliminary step in the educational process.

Criminal justice education can "program" students for "burnout" or it can provide students with the understanding and skills required to use what they have learned. An understanding of organizational behavior and organizational change strategies is invaluable to the prospective employee; it may also be the "missing link" that enables the inservice student to utilize the information and ideas that he acquires. Coursework in these areas may serve as catalysts to employee self-direction as well as organizational change. Without such catalysts, the impact of education may be muted, if not negated, by the force of the status quo.

Providing criminal justice and social work students with an understanding of organizational behavior can also benefit criminal justice and social service agencies. A well-educated employee with good intentions, who possesses little understanding of bureaucracies and the functioning of persons in organizations, may do a disservice both to himself and his colleagues. His or her impatience with the difficulty, slow pace and limited objectives of change may lead to carelessly planned efforts to "speed the process along." Such efforts may impede the change process and encourage recalcitrance on the part of co-workers. A more knowledgeable employee can facilitate and promote realistic change in a more positive manner.

The future of criminal justice education may well depend on our willingness to continue to define, evaluate and redefine the nature of our effort. In recent years, the struggle has focused on the appropriateness of academic and vocational coursework, and the relative benefits of social science, liberal arts and professional curricula. Future struggles may well focus on developing and evaluating methods to ensure that whatever is learned can be used, a task inherent in human service education.

NOTES

¹ For a review of the affects of criminal justice education on police performance, see Bowker (1978): Empirical research on police performance reviewed here includes: Dalley (1975); Finckenaure (1975); Geary (1970); Guller (1972); Sander-son (1977); Smith, Locke and Walker (1967); Smith, Locke, and Fenster (1970); Sterling (1972, 1974); Trojanowicz and Nicholson (1976);and Weiner (1976).

² All students were not equally committed to the objectives of deterrence and treatment. However, regardless of the students' position on deterrence (fear of punishment is the best way to discourage criminal acts), 43-46% of the students supported probation for all but violent criminals and 64-68% agreed that offenders need counseling and educational programs. It appears that the same students who support treatment objectives also support deterrence. In other words, supporting deterrence does not seem to affect the students' support of treatment objectives.

³ The students perceived an abundance of mitigating factors; two-thirds be-lieved that "most criminals come from broken homes and poor backgrounds" and need "help such as counseling and education for jobs."

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