

Community context and sentencing decisions: a multilevel analysis

Ph.D Dissertation

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Abstract

This dissertation uses data on a large sample of felony defendants processed in a nationally representative sample of large urban counties, in conjunction with data on the characteristics of the jurisdictions in which their cases were adjudicated, to examine the influence of community characteristics on sentencing decisions. Drawing on prior theoretical and empirical research, hierarchical linear and generalized linear models (HLMs and HGLMs) are estimated to determine whether various characteristics of the jurisdictions (e.g., racial composition, age structure, sex ratio, political affiliation, religious affiliations, geographic location, unemployment rates, violent crime rates, and sentencing guidelines) affect the likelihood that criminal defendants receive harsher punishments, net of other factors associated with these outcomes. In addition, this research examines whether community characteristics condition the effects of defendant age, race, and sex on sentencing, including whether any observed race disparities in sentencing outcomes vary in magnitude across jurisdictions and, if so, whether contextual features such as racial composition, age structure, or sex ratio help to explain that variation.

With one notable exception, the results from a series of logistic, multinomial, and linear multilevel models suggest that the community characteristics included in the analysis do not affect the in/out incarceration decision, the likelihood of prison versus probation/fine, jail versus probation/fine, prison versus jail, or the sentence length imposed on convicted defendants. Religious affiliation--measured as the percent of community residents who are Protestant--exerted a consistent positive effect on the sentence length outcome. Specifically, convicted defendants adjudicated in counties with a relatively larger proportion of Protestants receive longer custodial sentences than convicted defendants in other counties. The findings also indicate that none of the community characteristics condition the effects of defendant age, race, or sex on any of the sentencing outcomes. However, there is statistically significant variation in each of these sentencing outcomes, across the counties included in the analyses. Due to the null effects observed for most of the community characteristics and the significant amount of sentencing variation, across counties, to be explained, the limitations, strengths, and implications of the present findings are discussed and future research goals outlined.