

Moral reasoning and support for punitive violence after crime

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Abstract

In contexts marked by high violence and widespread impunity, how do citizens articulate and justify their preferences about crime and punishment? What kind of moral logic and reasoning do they employ when discussing punishments? Does support for punitive punishment derive from moralistic and deontological concerns that perpetrators need to be punished because it is right and proper? Or do people support punitive punishments because they feel they are effective? To address this question, we document and analyze stated preferences for punishment in response to crime from 62 in-depth qualitative interviews with individuals affected by violence in the Mexican state of Michoacán. We conduct a quantitative analysis of how different forms of moral justifications are related to preferred punishments for specific crime events, and a qualitative content analysis to investigate possible mechanisms. We find that two types of moral reasoning are more likely to be used to justify punitive violence: (1) consequentialist reasoning which involves weighing the costs and benefits of an action; (2) and reasoning that dehumanizes accused criminals. Deontological justifications about the right or just action, while extremely common, are used fairly equally across arguments for and against punitive violence. Our study sheds light on the diverse moral frames employed to justify the endorsement of punitive violence.

Keywords

crime, dehumanization, extralegal violence, Mexico, mixed-methods, moral reasoning, political attitudes, vigilantism

Introduction

‘Human rights are, precisely, for humans. Criminals are beasts that do not deserve any consideration.’ That was

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the message América Rangel, an opposition member of Mexico City's Congress, wrote on her social media accounts in August 2022 (Fragoso, 25 August 2022). This illustrates the use of *dehumanization* as a moral frame to justify punitive violence in response to crime, such as vigilante justice and tough-on-crime policies. Citizens don't solely use dehumanization frames. They may also use *consequentialist* (judging an action by its consequences) or *deontological* (judging an action by whether it follows rules or principles) moral frames when justifying their preferred crime responses.

In countries where persistent corruption and ongoing criminal violence have undermined the rule of law, perpetrators are rarely held accountable. Consequently, ordinary citizens face the dilemma of how to react to crime and when it is necessary to transcend the boundaries of the law. Lynching is widespread in 46 countries and has been documented in more than 100 over the last four decades (Jung and Cohen, 2019). Punitive violence involving state agents also occurs at alarming levels, particularly in Latin America (Magaloni and Rodriguez, 2020; Magaloni et al., 2020). Additionally, public opinion surveys show high levels of support for tough-on-crime policies and strong support for lynchings and self-help policing in countries as diverse as Mexico, Haiti, and South Africa (Jung and Cohen, 2019; Schedler, 2018; Visconti, 2020).

In this article, we examine how citizens employ moral frames when discussing and justifying their preferred responses to crime, as exemplified in the quote above. To make and justify decisions about the acceptability or desirability of punitive violence, individuals engage in moral reasoning – considerations and justifications of the right and wrong ways to respond to crime. Our study focuses on Mexico, where hundreds of attempted and realized lynchings have been documented in recent years, igniting public debates on due process rights against the backdrop of rising violent crime. Punitive violence involving harsh, physical punishments is by definition extralegal, 'an action [that goes] beyond the law [to punish] [. . .] moving in the same direction as the law, but exceeding its scope or severity' (Bateson, 2020). These actions include extralegal physical or lethal harm performed by state and non-state actors to punish accused perpetrators of crimes.

How are different moral frames used to justify support for punitive, extralegal violence in a context of high crime and impunity? Moral reasoning refers to cognition and often speech about what should be done and why. In this study, we explore its role in responding to crime. Specifically, we examine two domains of moral

reasoning relevant to discussions of crime responses. First, we investigate whether individuals dehumanize accused perpetrators – as representative Rangel did in the opening quote – or demonstrate empathy towards them. Second, we analyze whether individuals employ consequentialist or deontological reasoning to justify their preferred crime responses.

We draw on 62 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with residents in and around Morelia, the capital of Michoacán, Mexico. These interviews yield 570 unique crime events coded based on their content and the type of moral reasoning invoked by interviewees to justify their preferred crime response. The data provide a detailed picture of how people affected by crime and impunity make sense of their experiences and justify state and community responses in their own words. We use crime events as the unit of analysis to better capture respondents' reflections on real-world situations and to understand how moral reasoning justifications may be used differently depending on context. Our research design allows us to see how the same individual describes decisions about distinct crime events across both hypothetical and personal experiences.

Our approach to analyzing the data is primarily interpretivist. We are interested in understanding not the objective truth but how individuals perceive these events and communicate in social interactions. We use a qualitative coding of the interviews to understand how moral reasoning is invoked in this context, to identify unexpected themes, and to interpret the 'meta-data' of our interviews. We also use quantitative methods to assess and communicate commonalities across the interviews and test for expected correlations between types of moral reasoning justifications and punishment preferences.

We find that dehumanizing accused perpetrators and consequentialist moral reasoning are associated with support for punitive responses. Both subtle and blatant dehumanization are strongly related to support for punitive violence. The fact that interviewees also use consequentialist arguments to justify punitive violence challenges the conventional wisdom that careful consideration of costs and benefits can prevent retaliatory violence, including in high impunity settings (Blattman et al., 2017; Dinarte and Egaña del Sol, 2019; Heller et al., 2017). Using consequentialist reasoning, participants emphasized that different forms of punitive violence would reduce future crime either by incapacitating repeat offenders through physical harm or death, or by deterring other potential perpetrators. In a context of high crime and impunity like Michoacán, using careful cost-benefit considerations when discussing crime

responses was not associated with lower support for punitive violence.

Many of our respondents also use deontological justifications when discussing crimes, but these are only weakly associated with support for punitive violence. Our results suggest that, rather than deontological justifications in general, specific deontological arguments underlie support for punitive violence. Arguments for harsh punishments in this category emphasized the need to protect a moral, law-abiding community against criminal, immoral ‘outsiders.’ However, deontological arguments against punitive violence are also common, often underscoring a citizen’s duty to respect the rule of law or moral imperatives to do no harm. Overall, these results suggest that the way that individuals make decisions about crime responses is less predictive of their preferences than the beliefs that they hold.

Our study contributes to a growing literature on support for harsh, extralegal responses to crime (Jaffrey, 2020; Ley et al., 2019; Moncada, 2021; Phillips, 2017; Wilke, 2024). We provide micro-level evidence for understanding this phenomenon by showing the cost-benefit considerations justifying pro-vigilante decisions in the words of those actually making the decisions. Additionally, we contribute to the understanding of the psychological factors influencing punitive violence. Previous work has found that perceptions of the legitimacy of legal processes (Jung and Cohen, 2019; Smith, 2019; Tankebe and Asif, 2016), individual need for cognition (Sargent, 2004), and emotional responses (García-Ponce et al., 2023) can drive support for punitive violence. Our findings point to the important role of dehumanization and strong beliefs that punitive and vigilante punishments have good consequences.

Moral reasoning and responses to crime

In this section, we outline expectations about how individuals in violent communities with low rule-of-law make decisions about responding to crime. We focus on two dimensions of moral reasoning: the beliefs or assumptions about accused criminals that go into decisions, and the criteria that individuals use to make decisions. Specifically, we look at whether individuals use consequentialist or deontological logic to justify a response. Consequentialist moral reasoning is characterized by considerations of the outcomes of an action, such as its costs and benefits, while deontological reasoning focuses on the appropriate action according to a set of rules or principles regardless of its consequences.

Beliefs: Dehumanization of or empathy with the accused

Perceiving others as less than fully human overrides moral imperatives against the use of violence and removes inhibitions against harming others (Haslam and Stratemeyer, 2016). A growing body of empirical work finds that dehumanization is associated with retributive violence and aggression (Leidner et al., 2010, 2013). Yet, few studies on dehumanization have paid attention to criminal violence (Bastian et al., 2013; Viki et al., 2012).

We conceptualize dehumanization as a set of beliefs about accused criminals, which can coexist with both consequentialist and deontological thinking (Bastian et al., 2013). Prior work on dehumanization and support for violence often focuses on forms of ‘righteous’ violence, in line with deontological justifications. Other research refers to consequentialist arguments indicating that dehumanized individuals must be treated with violence because they cannot be reasoned with (Bastian et al., 2013; Haslam and Loughnan, 2014).

In contrast to dehumanization, we expect people who view accused criminals with empathy to be less supportive of punitive violence. Empathetic reasoning involves taking the perspective of another person, having emotional reactions to the other’s situation, and feeling sympathy or concern for them (Hoffman, 1984). Studies in the US have found that experimental treatments encouraging empathy improved attitudes towards perpetrators and reduced punitiveness (Batson et al., 1997; Johnson et al., 2002). Others have found that empathy is negatively related to support for violence and escalation of conflict (Richardson et al., 1994; Rosler et al., 2017).

Moral reasoning: Consequentialist and deontological

Several scholars have argued that individuals are sensitive to the expected risks and rewards of justice processes (Jaffrey, 2020; Skogan, 1990; Wilke, 2024). The perceived benefits of punitive violence could include deterring future crime, or incapacitating repeat offenders. Perceived costs of punitive violence include the risk of punishment by the state, or retaliation by the target or their allies. These theories of punitive violence implicitly assume that its supporters use consequentialist moral reasoning to compare the expected costs and benefits of available responses and support their best option. Consequentialist arguments are at the heart of utilitarian theoretical approaches to criminal justice (Bentham, 1996).

Although the relationship between consequentialist moral reasoning and support for harsh punishments should depend on context, recent research suggests that engaging in deliberate consequentialist reasoning often decreases support for retaliatory violence, even in high-violence contexts. Several studies have found that engaging individuals in high-violence communities in decelerated, more deliberative decision-making can reduce participation in violence or other anti-social behavior (Blattman et al., 2017; Dinarte and Egaña del Sol, 2019; Heller et al., 2017). Many of these studies took place in high-impunity settings, including Liberia and El Salvador. Surveys and experiments in Mexico show that decision-making in angry affective states, which tends to be less deliberative, is associated with higher support for punitive violence (García-Ponce et al., 2023).

Deontological reasoning, on the other hand, argues that an action should be taken because it adheres to a moral principle, duty, or rule, not necessarily because it will have desirable consequences. Deontological arguments prioritize what is 'right' over what is 'beneficial.' The logic of retribution argues that perpetrators deserve to be punished in proportion to the severity of the crime they have committed regardless of that punishment's consequences. In Kantian terms, the moral imperative that criminals deserve to be punished creates an obligation in society that can justify violating the law (Kant, 1887).

A significant body of recent research argues that support for harsh responses to crime is driven by deontological logic (Darley et al., 2000; Roberts et al., 2002; Vidmar and Miller, 1980). Most of these studies have been conducted in the US, raising questions about their validity in contexts of higher crime and impunity. Nevertheless, several scholars of vigilantism have emphasized the importance of deontological reasoning. Kloppe-Santamaría (2020: 5), for instance, argues that it is not crime levels but 'perceptions and representations of wrongdoers as individuals who deserved to be punished by physical, swift, and extralegal means' that drove support for lynchings in post-revolutionary Mexico. Similarly, Smith (2019) argues that vigilantism arises during democratic state formation when citizens believe that the formal legal system overemphasizes the rights of the accused. In these accounts, vigilantism arises not from a comparison of the risks and rewards of punitive violence but rather from a sense that community punishment is just.

Emotions like moral outrage play an important role in many deontological explanations of punitive violence.

Individuals have strong emotional reactions to violations of moral codes, particularly anger, contempt, and disgust (Tetlock et al., 2000). These emotions have been linked to deontological thinking and preferences for harsher punishments (Bastian et al., 2013; Darley and Pittman, 2003; García-Ponce et al., 2023). The social and emotional rewards associated with upholding the moral code may justify the risks of participation in vigilante acts (Smith, 2019).

While deontological reasoning has typically been linked to a preference for harsh punishment, it can also be used to justify non-punitive crime responses, and to support legal punishments. Deontological arguments that killing another human under any circumstance is wrong have driven opposition to the death penalty (Steiker, 2011). People may also perceive that they have a moral duty to respond to crimes through the formal justice system, especially when it is 'procedurally just' (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003).

Context: Violence and citizen responses in Michoacán

The Americas constitute the most violent region of the world and Mexico is one of the most severe cases (Hyder et al., 2022; Muggah and Tobón, 2018; van Dijk et al., 2022). More than 100,000 people have disappeared and around 400,000 have been killed in Mexican territory over the past 15 years.¹ Amidst this dramatic intensification of violence, there has been increased support for harsh, extralegal punishments. Nearly half of Mexican citizens support lynching and 60% favor the self-organization of community police forces or self-defense groups (Schedler, 2018). In addition to punishments from ordinary citizens, extrajudicial responses to crime by state security forces are pervasive. This includes the unlawful use of lethal force, torture, and the systematic violation of human rights (Magaloni and Rodríguez, 2020; World Justice Project, 2019). Furthermore, in the legal and political imaginary of Mexico's war on drugs, criminals are not only branded as enemies of the state or the community but often dehumanized and ostracized (Madrado Lajous, 2016).

Violence dynamics in the state of Michoacán illustrate how violent crime and punitive justice approaches reinforce each other, a phenomenon observed in several other parts of Latin America (Bonner, 2019; Moncada, 2022; Yashar, 2018). Michoacán has been characterized by high levels of violent crime, rampant impunity, and strong support for harsh and extralegal responses since the start of the so-called Drug War (December 2006). In

2013, rural self-defense militias emerged throughout the state to fight organized crime. Despite additional militarized strategies rolled out by state authorities to tackle organized crime (Flores-Macías and Zarkin, 2019), Michoacán's violence has worsened. Our study was conducted in and around Morelia, the capital city. In 2018, Morelia registered 26 intentional homicides per 100,000 people and the highest rates of home burglaries and business robberies in the state.

Morelia and the surrounding municipalities are home to a range of citizen efforts to prevent and respond to crime. Around 80% of Morelia's residents feel unsafe in their neighborhood and 82% consider that violence levels are likely to increase in the near future. Citizen initiatives to address crime include neighborhood watch groups that cooperate with the police, a social media personality that encourages citizens to apprehend criminals and film confessions for public consumption, and more formal citizen vigilante authorities with established codes for how accused criminals are dealt with in their neighborhoods.

Research design

Semi-structured qualitative interviews

We developed a methodology based on multi-session, semi-structured interviews to collect rich information on emotions, beliefs, and preferences. This open-ended format has several advantages. First, it enables us to capture a wider range of thought processes and opinions than a close-ended questionnaire, including those that are unanticipated at the outset of the research. Second, open-ended personal narratives allow us to observe how individuals work through normative ambivalence, common in the process of considering harsh punishments. Our interviews capture a set of socially constructed beliefs, preferences, arguments, and justifications around responses to crime. When interviewees describe a crime and how they would like it to be handled, they are expressing justifications for their preferences in the social setting of an interview.

Our interviews were broken into two sessions. The first was a 20-minute session of primarily close-ended questions. The second was a two-hour session involving open-ended questions following a semi-structured guide. We asked participants about recent incidents of violence and crime in their community and their desired responses. Interviewers initially asked participants to volunteer experienced crimes, and then asked about specific types of crime if the interviewee had not already

raised them, including extortion, theft, and homicide. Each event was discussed in detail before moving on. This section of the interview forms the basis of our 570 crime events.²

We took steps to minimize the risk that participants would feel pressured to provide particular responses. First, we trained our interviewers to present as neutral, interested, and sympathetic regardless of what the interviewee said. We reinforced these practices during a ten-day training that involved multiple days of field-based practice and feedback. Second, we used interviewer observation and debrief questionnaires to keep track of the 'meta-data,' such as discomfort or perceived insincerity, that can indicate that a respondent feels uncomfortable speaking freely (Fujii, 2010).³ We also treated adhering to ethical principles such as beneficence and respect for persons as first-order considerations in our research design (Baron and Young, 2022). A full discussion of ethical considerations for this project is in Online Appendix A.

Sampling

We used a multi-stage sampling strategy to identify participants who could provide rich data. We sought participants who had relevant personal experiences and were willing and able to discuss them in detail. In the first stage, we identified five communities affected by violence in and around Morelia that were secure enough for interviewers to safely conduct interviews and return to Morelia each night. Within each community, we recruited participants representing a mix of genders and ages. At least half of the participants were recruited using a random walk method, and the rest through referrals. At the end of the recruitment questionnaire, interviewers scheduled the longer follow-up interview within a few days. We recruited 78 individuals to complete the initial interview and 66 completed the second.⁴

Table 1 presents summary statistics of our participants for each of the six communities included in our sample. Women made up between one-third and three-quarters by community. A sizable proportion in every community reported having experienced a traumatic life experience, and between zero and one-third met the standard threshold for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Finally, on the attitudinal measures of confidence in government, the average responses across eight government institutions varied from 1.15 to 1.66 (on a four-point scale of 0 to 3, with higher values indicating more confidence) across the six communities.

Table 1. Individual-level summary statistics.

	<i>Locality Codes</i>					
	<i>A</i>	<i>B*</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E*</i>	<i>F</i>
Interviewees (N)	11	10	12	10	7	12
% Female	0.73	0.40	0.33	0.40	0.71	0.50
% 18–39 years old	0.55	0.50	0.92	0.30	0.43	0.67
% 40–59 years old	0.45	0.40	0.08	0.50	0.29	0.33
% 60+ years old	0.00	0.10	0.00	0.20	0.29	0.00
% Married	0.82	0.40	0.17	0.70	0.71	0.58
% HS Degree	0.36	0.60	0.17	0.40	0.00	0.42
% Social Aid	0.36	0.20	0.58	0.60	0.57	0.50
% Traumatic Life Event	0.55	0.70	0.42	0.40	1.00	0.58
% PTSD	0.18	0.40	0.42	0.20	0.57	0.50
Confidence in Govt. (mean)	1.52	1.40	1.66	1.35	1.15	1.24

*Communities B and E are neighborhoods within the capital city of Michoacán.

The other four municipalities are largely rural and within a one-hour drive of the capital.

Coding interview content

We conducted two parallel analyses on the data: (1) a quantitative coding based on a guide to identify expected patterns in the interviews; and (2) a less structured content analysis to identify emerging and more refined findings. In this section we describe each of those in turn. For our quantitative analysis we converted interview transcripts into individual crime events. We further coded crime characteristics, types of moral reasoning, and punishment preferences for each crime event. Using the software Dedoose, research assistants coded transcripts following a codebook.⁵ Table 2 summarizes our coding categories.

Our outcome variable of interest is whether a participant says that they would prefer an extralegal physical or lethal response to a particular crime event. Lethal responses, whether carried out by state agents or community members, are coded as extralegal lethal.⁶ Other physical responses such as non-lethal beatings or torture are also included in our outcome variable in some specifications. Our coding of a preferred response as legal or extralegal are based on whether the response was legal under Mexican law at the time of the interviews, rather than whether the participant explicitly stated that they wanted to carry out a response legally or extralegally. Non-physical, legal responses are the default category. This includes jail time, community service, rehabilitation, or no response at all.

Two research assistants independently coded each anonymized transcript. All research assistants were masters or advanced undergraduate students at Mexican

universities who met with the researchers in weekly meetings. Because we had two independent coders score each interview, we can calculate a measure of inter-rater reliability (IRR). Since each coder identified both the excerpt itself and the tags associated with that excerpt, the first step in calculating the IRR is identifying which excerpts from the two coders identify the same event. Coders were instructed to identify unique crime events starting at the beginning of a discussion of an event and the discussion of the interviewee's preferred response. Between 15% and 54% of our crime event excerpts could be matched across the two sets of coders depending on the matching criteria that we used. For exact matches, the IRRs range from 0.86 to 0.99. Online Appendix B.2 presents a complete analysis of the reliability of our coding process.

Table 3 presents summary statistics for the 570 unique crime events in our dataset. On average, participants discussed just over 11 unique crime events in each interview. Each crime event is approximately 840 words long, excluding interviewer speech, but there is a significant range (the shortest crime event excerpt is 20 words and the longest nearly 5,000). Deontological moral reasoning is the most frequent, with an average of 0.44 usages per crime event. There are also, on average, 0.21 usages of consequentialist moral reasoning, 0.06 usages of dehumanization, and 0.04 usages of humanizing or empathetic moral reasoning in the crime excerpts.⁷ About one in five of the crime events discussed were personally experienced (by the participant or an immediate family member), two in five were crimes that occurred in their community, and almost two in five were general or hypothetical crimes. More than half of the crimes discussed involved physical violence. Respondents ultimately said that they preferred a lethal punishment in 13% of the crimes discussed, and a physical punishment (including lethal punishments, torture, or other physical abuse) in 24%. Respondents did not identify a preferred response in about 150 identified crime events. These were often hypothetical crimes mentioned briefly during the interview and are dropped from the dataset.

Second, we analyzed the interviews inductively in a parallel content analysis to identify emerging, refined themes. First, at least one of the study PIs reviewed all excerpts on crime events, preferred responses, and moral reasoning justifications produced by the coders. We looked for sub-themes within each umbrella category of moral reasoning justifications. Second, one of the PIs listened to and read through all of the interview transcripts in the original Spanish. In this analysis, we

Table 2. Codebook categories and values.

<i>Category</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Severity of the crime	Violent (harm to physical integrity)	–Murder, femicide, kidnapping, disappearance, assault, rape, sexual abuse
	Other	–Theft, extortion, house robbery, threats
Relationship to the crime event	Personal	–Personally victimized –Family victimized
	Heard/Witnessed	–Witnessed crime in community –Heard about crime in community or elsewhere in Mexico
	Hypothetical/General	–Hypothetical crime introduced by interviewer or interviewee –Crime discussed generally such as ‘home burglary,’ ‘theft’ or ‘rape’
Type of moral reasoning	Consequentialist	–‘Prevents crime’ –‘Makes the community safer’
	Deontological	–‘Deserves the same violence they committed’ –‘Has a right to the law’ –‘It’s the duty of state authorities to punish’
	Dehumanization	–‘Contaminates people’ –‘Is like a dog’
	Empathy	–‘Has a family too’ –‘My son also makes mistakes’
	Legal	–Jail time –Community service
Preferred crime response	Extralegal physical	–Nothing –Non-lethal beatings –Torture
	Extralegal lethal	–Death penalty –Lynchings –Police killings

Table 3. Crime event summary statistics.

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Number of words	843.54	687.66	20.00	4820.00
MR: Deontological	0.45	0.50	0.00	1.00
MR: Consequentialist	0.21	0.41	0.00	1.00
MR: Dehumanization	0.06	0.24	0.00	1.00
MR: Empathic	0.06	0.24	0.00	1.00
Relationship: Personal	0.23	0.42	0.00	1.00
Relationship: Heard/Witnessed	0.42	0.49	0.00	1.00
Relationship: Hypothetical	0.35	0.48	0.00	1.00
Crime: Physical violence	0.58	0.49	0.00	1.00
Preferred response: Lethal	0.13	0.33	0.00	1.00
Preferred response: Any physical	0.24	0.43	0.00	1.00

reviewed each interview holistically, keeping in mind how the discussion developed and varied across different crime events. In this more interpretive analysis, we sought to identify cross-cutting themes, justifications, and phrases that uncover ‘shared understandings of what it means to act appropriately, legitimately, or strategically,’ in our case vis-a-vis crime and punitive violence (Fujii, 2018: 74).

Analysis

Quantitative patterns in moral reasoning and punishment preferences

Our central research question is how different forms of moral reasoning are used to justify support for punitive, extralegal violence. In this section we test for correlations between the type of moral reasoning used in discussions of a crime and whether participants want the crime to be punished with physical violence. Though this analysis collapses a lot of the variation in types of moral reasoning rhetoric down to just a few dimensions, it enables us to analyze and visualize broad patterns in our interviews.

Our outcome variable is an indicator for whether a participant wanted a harsh physical punishment for a particular crime. We construct two versions of this variable: one that takes a value of 1 if the respondent prefers a lethal punishment, and a second that takes a value of 1 if the respondent preferred either a lethal or non-lethal physical punishment. The death penalty and other physical punishments are illegal in Mexico, so these variables also indicate support for an extralegal response.

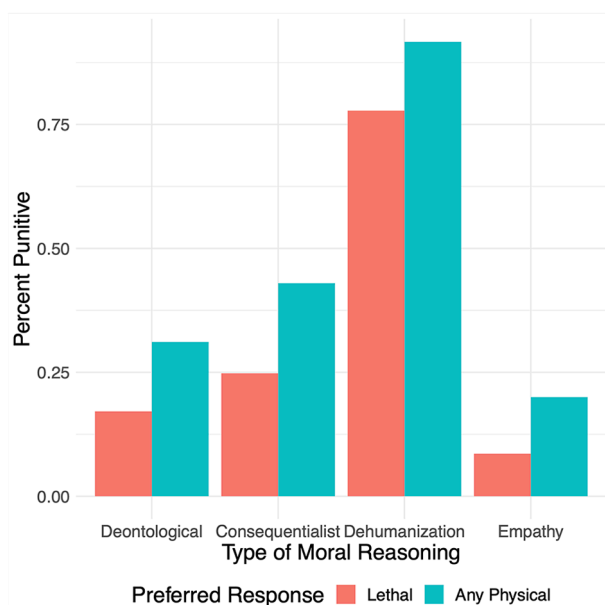


Figure 1. Proportion of crime events in which a lethal or physical response was preferred, by type of moral reasoning used.

Figure 1 breaks our data down into cases where each type of moral reasoning was used, and then calculates the percentage of those events in which the interviewee preferred a lethal or any physical response. Starting from the left, the figure shows that when an interviewee uses deontological moral reasoning to discuss a crime response, they prefer a lethal response in 17% of cases, and a physical response (including lethal violence) in 31% of cases. By contrast, when an interviewee uses consequentialist moral reasoning, they prefer a lethal response in 25% of cases, and a non-lethal physical response in 43% of cases. This analysis therefore suggests that consequentialist reasoning is more strongly associated with a preference for harsh punishment than deontological reasoning. However, both deontological and consequentialist reasoning are less associated with a preference for lethal punishment than dehumanization: when an interviewee uses dehumanizing moral reasoning, they prefer a lethal response in 78% of cases, and a generally physical response in a full 92% of cases. Finally, when interviewees express empathy with the perpetrators of crime they are least likely to prefer a harsh response.

The evidence suggests that interviewees are most likely to prefer a punitive response when they use dehumanizing moral reasoning, and to a lesser extent consequentialist reasoning. Do those correlations hold up to controls for some of the factors that might make different types of moral reasoning and response

preferences more likely? Since our outcome variable is binary and we are interested in characteristics that vary both at the individual level and across the specific type of crime, we use a multilevel logit model (Gelman and Hill, 2006). We control for characteristics of the crime and characteristics of the individual respondent and test for a systematic relationship between using the four types of moral reasoning and preferring a punitive response to a crime.

The multivariate analysis presented in Online Appendix Table A2 confirms that the patterns in Figure 1 hold up to these controls. Consequentialist moral reasoning is strongly associated with both measures of preference for harsh, physical punishment. Averaging across our interviewees, the predicted probabilities imply that using consequentialist moral reasoning more than triples the average marginal probability of preferring a lethal punishment from 4% to 13%, holding other variables at their means or modes. Deontological reasoning is also positively correlated with a preference for harsh punishment, but the relationship is smaller and less consistently significant.

Moral reasoning that dehumanizes the perpetrator is also very strongly associated with a preference for a lethal punishment. When dehumanizing moral reasoning is used, the probability of preferring a lethal punishment implied by the analysis in Column 5 of Table A2 jumps from 4% to 79%. This result is in line with the expectation that dehumanizing moral reasoning would be used to justify extremely harsh punishments. By contrast, expressing empathy for accused perpetrators is not significantly associated with the likelihood of supporting harsh physical punishments.

The analysis so far has shown that across many different types of crime events and respondents, there is a persistent correlation between consequentialist and dehumanizing moral reasoning and support for harsh punishments. In the next sections we use interpretivist methods to better understand why these relationships exist, and what specific forms different arguments for and against harsh punishments take.

Emerging themes

Why is dehumanization so strongly associated with arguments for punitive violence? Are there common types of consequentialist or deontological arguments that are invoked, and where might they come from? To identify unanticipated themes and explore the origins of different arguments, we use an interpretive approach to analyzing the interview data.

Dehumanization and empathy toward alleged perpetrators. Respondents who employed dehumanization in their justifications of their preferred crime responses used both animalistic and mechanistic blatant dehumanization, as well as more subtle forms that suggested that accused perpetrators did not have essential human traits like emotionality. Dehumanizing arguments were almost always employed to justify lethal punishments by state authorities, other incarcerated perpetrators, and ordinary citizens.

Blatant dehumanization involved explicitly reducing accused perpetrators to animals or to mechanistic processes. One respondent justified capital punishment for accused murders as the appropriate response, likening perpetrators to rabid dogs: 'as my grandmother used to say, when the dog dies the rabies ends' (10C). Another participant described community self-defense as a process of 'herding' criminals to watch them and track their movements. He viewed constant surveillance as necessary because criminals could not be deterred: '[a] dog that swallows butter, even if its snout burns, swallows it again, right?' (11A). In another case, a respondent argued that a mother accused of infanticide should be killed in jail because when crimes like infanticide occur, 'it is always better, it is preferable that such a type of person doesn't exist, to contaminate or intoxicate other people' (22B).

Other respondents used more subtle forms of dehumanization that removed critical elements of humanity from the accused. Respondent 13A argued that those who treat victims as less than human must be less than human themselves, or people 'who do not have feelings' (13A). Yet others argued that the perpetrators of crimes could never change. One participant explained their preference for the death penalty by arguing that criminals 'are irredeemable' and that it is therefore impossible to integrate them into society (18B). Another suggested that becoming criminals makes individuals subhuman, arguing that members of organized criminal groups should be punished with the death penalty because 'there are people who can no longer improve, eh? They no longer have . . . there's no longer a fix, [they are] already criminals' (6F).

While most of these examples pair dehumanization with consequentialist reasoning, it is notable that individuals using dehumanizing moral reasoning also invoked both deontological arguments. In the discussion of infanticide in interview 22B, for example, dehumanizing reasoning was used in conjunction with deontological arguments that perpetrators should suffer the pain that they had themselves inflicted on others

before an eventual lethal punishment. Whether paired with deontological or consequentialist reasoning, dehumanization was almost always used in pro-punishment arguments.

In contrast, other participants explicitly rejected the logic of dehumanization, instead emphasizing perpetrators' inherent humanity or putting themselves in the position of the accused. One respondent imagined the pain that punitive violence would cause to its target when discussing why she was opposed to it: 'because they are people, they are human beings, and one well . . . does not have to cause that pain to . . . to the bodies, because well, every stone, every stick is a pain that they give him, it is a pain he suffers, and even if he is the most criminal in the world, because I think that no, one should not do justice by his own hand' (13E).

Some of the ability to empathize appears to come from actual social ties between victims and accused perpetrators of crimes, and sometimes through active imagining of the life conditions or motives of the accused. Respondent 7A shared a story in which she interacted with the mother of a boy who broke into her house and by recognizing the mother's suffering came to consider that the accused might also have the capacity to change his behavior. In her telling, the interaction with the mother enabled her to see a shared ability for growth between herself and the accused. In some cases without known social ties, respondents began imagining the life conditions of the accused. When discussing the case of a man who was beaten by neighbors after stealing bread, respondent 10E walked us through her reflections: 'the fact is that sometimes people steal out of hunger, or, I don't know, out of necessity. One does not know what need they have, maybe they have young children . . . In other words, you cannot know what, what forced you to do that, and the other people arrive and with violence, it's not right' (10E).

In sum, participants who used dehumanizing arguments to describe their preferred punishment preferences used both blatant animalistic or mechanistic metaphors or subtle dehumanization that portrayed them as incapable of essential human capacities like emotions. Dehumanizing arguments were often but not always used in conjunction with consequentialist reasoning. In contrast, those who expressed empathy toward alleged perpetrators put themselves in the shoes of the accused or their family members, and also emphasized the inherent, embodied humanity of individuals to argue against inflicting physical pain, as well as a person's capacity to change and moral strictures against judging others.

Consequentialist reasoning: Incapacitation, inducing fear, and cycles of violence. Two main expressions of consequentialist reasoning were associated with preferences for punitive violence. First, a number of participants expressed that harsh punishments, such as castration, especially for rape, or capital punishment, would incapacitate repeat offenders or induce fear in potential offenders and thus reduce future crime. Consequentialist reasoning against punitive violence was most often expressed as fear of retaliation and contributing to harmful cycles of violence.

Multiple participants cited capital punishment as their preferred response to prevent future crime by the same perpetrator, particularly for severe offenses like murder and kidnapping. For *sicarios* or hired assassins, for example, one participant remarked, 'as I told you, they are already *sicarios*, and if you give them jail time, if they leave, they will continue working [as assassins]. Few people can change [. . .] they are *sicarios* and they are going to be *sicarios*' (11A). Another suggested, 'if they have already killed several people, I feel that they deserve to die, because if you give them jail time and they escape, they are going to continue doing the same thing, but to avoid that [. . .] you reduce [the number of] those people, just like that' (10C). For kidnappers suspected of organ trafficking (a prevalent rumor in Mexico) one participant expressed: 'Well, the truth is that I would like them to be punished, but I would not like them to be killed because we cannot take justice into our own hands, but I would like them to be punished the same, with death, so that there wouldn't continue to be more of those people' (2C). Currently prohibited in Mexican law, capital punishment was mentioned favorably by multiple participants. Some explicitly made reference to a desire for it to be made legal, as in the United States, and others simply mentioned a desire for the death penalty (*pena de muerte*) without reference to whether it should be legal or extrajudicial.

Second, many participants indicated a belief that severe punishments are effective deterrents of crime because they induce fear of the consequences of potential transgressions or intimidate perpetrators by signaling that the community is capable of punishing criminal behavior. Participants cited both state and non-state punitive violence as deterrents: '[to prevent future crime], for example, uniting among the entire community, so that when one sees a person, a kidnapper or a rapist, if one takes justice into their own hands and then those guys realize that the whole community is united to defend ourselves, well I think that would be good . . . I think [the community] would be safer, because as the whole community comes together, they see that we are all together and they

think about it, with fear, that the same thing will happen to them' (2C). Another participant suggested the community is safer with self-help justice as potential perpetrators become aware of the likelihood of extralegal punishments: 'we know which neighbor does indeed help. By taking justice into our own hands, thieves also know that they are not going to get out of here alive, so in that way we do help each other' (1A).

While consequentialist reasoning was generally associated with support for harsh punishments, participants who used consequentialist reasoning but rejected punitive violence tended to focus on its costs. One participant said that even for a crime like kidnapping, she would not favor punitive violence because of the possibility that it could set off a cycle of violence. In her words, 'I would not like [the response] to be with violence, because the truth is violence brings about more violence and more violence, so I don't know, [the crime should be punished] with jail time.' This participant recognized that violence could have benefits for the victim, but she saw these benefits as outweighed by the risk that 'we will never end it, violence brings more violence and more violence' (10E). By contrast, participants who used consequentialist reasoning and favored punitive violence were more likely not to mention any potential costs.

Beliefs about the effectiveness of punitive and non-punitive responses, such as recidivism and impunity rates, institutional corruption, and the capacity of accused criminals to retaliate should shape their perceived trade-offs. Why would one individual in the same community perceive punitive violence as carrying some costs while another would not? First, people could have different vulnerability to the risks of punitive violence. However, many of the costs cited by participants are not strictly personal, but are about risks to the community broadly or high-risk groups like young men. An alternative explanation could be that the same costs are perceived or weighed differently by different individuals. Individuals who do not perceive any costs of punitive violence may be more focused on immediate costs and benefits, rather than long-term risks of cycles of retaliation. They may also perceive that punitive violence is more effective than it actually is.

Deontological reasoning: A moral community in self-defense versus committed to the law. In our interviews, deontological reasoning was used to describe preferences for physical and lethal punishments, on the one hand, and commitments to the rule of law, on the other, including the hope that perpetrators can be rehabilitated. Pro-punitive deontological justifications tended to emphasize the justness of violent

punishments for those who have inflicted violence, irrespective of their effects on future crime, as well as the obligation of the community, depicted as morally just and law-abiding, to protect itself against criminal ‘outsiders.’ Deontological reasoning was also the most common form of moral reasoning in our interviews, occurring in 45% of the excerpts. In 11% of our crime events, participants employed both deontological and consequentialist reasoning, supporting the idea that these two modes of reasoning represent two distinct categories on a spectrum of moral reasoning.

Pro-punitive deontological arguments advanced the moral imperative of retribution to justify lynching and other harsh punishments. For example, one participant argued that ‘if you have already killed several people . . . you also deserve to die as well’ (10C). Others using deontological reasoning to justify harsh punishments emphasized the need for perpetrators to ‘pay’ for what they had done (7A) and to experience themselves the same or similar forms of harm that they had caused others, such as physical abuse in jail, particularly in the case of sexual abuse of children (3C). Other deontological arguments for punitive violence emphasized the moral imperative to protect the law-abiding ‘community’ or ‘neighbors’ against criminal outsiders when the state does not do so. These arguments revealed a view of the ‘community’ as a solidaristic identity group. Multiple participants highlighted a duty to protect the community, not only because it would be an effective deterrent, but also because it was right to act in solidarity with neighbors against criminals. Accused criminals themselves were often framed as geographic ‘outsiders,’ although this term seemed to apply to those who found themselves outside the community’s morality instead of physical boundaries. Some participants even recognized that this view of a moralized community introduced a risk that innocent ‘outsiders’ might be misperceived as criminals and targeted with violence (10E).

However, participants also used deontological reasoning to explain their preferences for less punitive responses to crime and for the importance of due process. Much of the conventional wisdom is that deontological thinking plays a central role in support of violence, and consequentialist thinking with the rule of law. Our interviews suggest that this is not necessarily the case. Nevertheless, arguments linking deontological reasoning to an aversion to harsh punishments or a preference for the rule of law are not common in the scholarly literature. Our interviews show numerous examples of deontological arguments in favor of the formal legal system, despite its ineffectiveness. For example, one participant argued that meting out justice ‘is not a task that is directly our

responsibility as citizens; it is our responsibility indirectly to help and prevent [crime], but not to do justice by our own hand’ (15A). Similarly, 13C reflected that she is against self-help justice despite knowing that the formal justice system is ineffective and believing that lynching might make her community safer because she is committed to the rule of law. She argued that an accused criminal ‘also has the right, as I said, to be tried in court. You cannot give a verdict to a person, to a criminal; not on my part, for that there are laws.’ Others emphasized the moral imperative to give the accused the chance to rejoin society: as 15A argued, even those convicted of home invasion ‘should also have a second chance to join the productive part of life and society.’

In sum, deontological reasoning was the most commonly used justification in both pro-punitive and anti-punitive preferences. Commitments to the rule of law and the rightful duties of citizens versus authorities shaped explanations for anti-punitive preferences; the idea that a moralized community should act against crime and eye-for-an-eye retributive justifications were the most common pro-punitive explanations. Participants often articulated anti-punitive deontological justifications with the acknowledgement that working with judicial rules of the game would not necessarily redress harm, and pro-punitive justifications without explicit considerations of potential negative consequences.

Interpretation

Our evidence shows how individuals in a high-crime, low rule-of-law setting use moral reasoning to decide on appropriate punishments for different crimes. Understanding how moral reasoning is used in the setting of an interview about crime responses illuminates how people view and make meaning of crime events and responses in a social environment. While individuals are much more likely to prefer a harsh physical punishment when they dehumanize accused perpetrators, deontological and consequentialist reasoning are used to make arguments both for and against harsh punishments and extralegal violence. Consequentialist reasoning can be used to argue for harsh punishments when individuals focus on effectively incapacitating or deterring the accused, but when individuals consider the potential cost of cycles set off by harsh punishments, they are less likely to endorse punitive violence. Deontological arguments that emphasize the moral imperative to protect a righteous community are deployed in favor of harsh punishments, while those that consider the normative roles of citizens vis-a-vis the state or the need to give offenders second chances weigh against them.

Could these findings be explained by social desirability bias? As previously discussed, we used a number of practices to make participants feel comfortable expressing opinions for and against punitive violence. We ultimately think that the social and political context at the time of our interviews provided little pressure to hide or embellish support for harsh punishments. Both citizens and opinion leaders in our context discuss legal and extralegal punishments openly.⁸

Where should we expect these patterns to generalize? We conducted these interviews in and around the city of Morelia, a context with high levels of civilian victimization and high levels of impunity. The patterns around dehumanization and empathy that we identified in our interviews seem likely to hold in many different contexts. The relationship between dehumanization and support for punitive violence has been documented in places with relatively reliable state responses to violence like the US and Australia (Bastian et al., 2013), as well as in violent conflicts where the ability of the state to respond is less certain (Bruneau and Kteily, 2017; Leidner et al., 2013). Qualitatively, dehumanization has seemed to play a role in many atrocities with civilian participation in violence against co-citizens in relatively low-capacity states in conflict such as Rwanda or Sudan. What is in some ways surprising in our interviews given the level of civilian victimization is that is that dehumanization is relatively rarely used. We suspect that this may be because there are no highly salient identity cleavages in our context, and that in contexts with more ethnic diversity or migration that dehumanization may be more common.

By contrast, we expect that our findings around types of moral reasoning may be more context dependent. Consequentialist justifications are especially dependent on beliefs shaped by context about the costs and benefits of different actions. In a context where it is more plausible that the state would effectively incapacitate offenders, consequentialist arguments that punitive violence is necessary to deter or disable them should be less convincing. Of course, in many high capacity states there are populations who do not trust the state for whom consequentialist arguments may still fall in favor of punitive violence, including far-right extremists, marginalized minorities, and those engaged in other illegal activities. To this end, we expect our findings on consequentialist justifications for violence to generalize primarily to other countries with nationally high levels of violence and impunity, including other parts of Latin America and the Caribbean. However, it is important to note that consequentialist justifications depend on

beliefs about costs and benefits, as we note above, rather than objective values. To this end, they could also hold in places where criminal justice has been politicized, such as in the US in the wake of the 'war on terror' (Hassner, 2023).

Conclusion

In this article we have presented rich descriptive evidence about how individuals living in violent contexts justify their preferences for how to respond to crime. The evidence from our semi-structured interviews supports the view that how people talk about crime responses is associated with their views about how crime should be punished. Conditional on characteristics of individuals and crime events, the justifications that individuals use when discussing their preferred response to a crime are strongly associated with whether they favor punitive violence.

The results provide support for some theories in the existing literature and raise new questions. In line with others, we find that individuals who dehumanize criminals are much more supportive of harsh, physical punishments. In addition, there is evidence that deontological reasoning is associated with support for harsh punishments, although the correlation is less robust. Our qualitative analysis shows that deontological justifications are extremely common and take a variety of forms, including arguments that harsh punishments are morally wrong. Finally, our interviews show little support for the idea that consequentialist reasoning is less likely to be used to justify punitive violence. In fact, the use of consequentialist moral reasoning in this context is associated with support for a harsher response to a crime.

Two of our findings merit particular attention for further discussion. First, our finding that consequentialist justifications are linked to increased support for punitive violence raises questions about how individuals perceive and weigh the costs and benefits of punitive violence. Are individuals' perceptions of the costs and benefits of punitive violence accurate? Why do some people perceive that punitive violence has few costs, while for others the risks of it are too high? It is possible that different individuals face different costs. However, it is also possible that they differ in how much they discount future versus present welfare, or overestimate the benefits and underestimate the costs of punitive violence. Our findings here echo past research on the importance of efficacy beliefs in support for torture in the US (Houck et al., 2019). Future research is needed to investigate the accuracy and roots of the beliefs in the efficacy and costs of punitive violence,

and whether support for it is related to steeper discounting of future welfare.

Second, our findings show the importance of separately investigating deontological and dehumanizing moral reasoning justifications. Prior research on sacred values has conceptualized deontological reasoning as inextricably connected with dehumanization (Atran et al., 2007; Atran and Ginges, 2015). Individuals identify with a group, sacralize their values as moral imperatives, and then dehumanize the outgroup. We find that dehumanization and deontological thinking are separable, and are used to argue for or against punitive violence in a variety of ways. Finally, our findings also show the importance of careful research design when studying support for violence. For example, researchers trying to understand support for punitive violence should analyze arguments both for and against violence. Our data also finds that deontological justifications are more commonly used than consequentialist ones in arguments in favor of violence. But deontological justifications are also very common in arguments against violence, so deontological justification in and of itself is not highly associated with support for punitive violence. Therefore, our analysis highlights the benefits of combining both qualitative and quantitative text analysis to analyze interview data, and the more general utility of taking a mixed methods approach to study violence.

Replication data

The dataset, codebook, and do-files for the empirical analysis in this article, along with the Online Appendix, can be found at <http://www.prio.org/jpr/datsets>.

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Notes

1. These estimates are based on official data from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) and the National Registry of Missing or Disappeared Persons (RNPDO).
2. We also asked introductory questions, and a final set of more general questions about crime and justice. After breaking our interviews into specific crime events, we coded each event for passages that used the four types of moral reasoning. We coded each application of moral reasoning as a separate 'usage,' marking where the respondent started and stopped using a certain type of moral reasoning when discussing a specific crime in the transcript.
3. See Online Appendix F for the interviewer observation and debrief questionnaire.
4. Two female participants could not complete the second interview due to restrictions from male family members. Three second interviews had to be canceled by field staff due to security concerns in one locality; another second interview was canceled due to scheduling incompatibilities; four participants declined to complete the second interview; and two participants could not be interviewed after multiple attempts. Audio recordings of two interviews were not successful and recruitment questionnaires for two participants were not registered.
5. See Online Appendix G for the codebook.
6. Capital punishment was formally abolished in Mexico in 2005.
7. After breaking our interviews into specific crime events, we coded each event for passages that used the four types of moral reasoning. We coded each application of moral reasoning as a separate 'usage,' marking where the respondent started and stopped using a certain type of moral reasoning when discussing a specific crime in the transcript.
8. For instance, in the most recent presidential election, independent candidate 'El Bronco' repeatedly suggested that corrupt officials' hands should be cut off, and the national Green Party has campaigned on the reinstatement of the death penalty. Recent surveys also show that citizens feel comfortable talking about vigilantism (García-Ponce et al., 2023; Schedler, 2018). We were concerned that participants might believe that a more dramatic narrative of events would be more desirable in this research and try to please the interviewer by embellishing events. However, even if some participants were keen to invent 'untruthful' narratives about crime events, follow-up questions asking participants how these events make them feel and preferences about responses can reveal sincere emotional experience and moral convictions (Fujii, 2010).

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