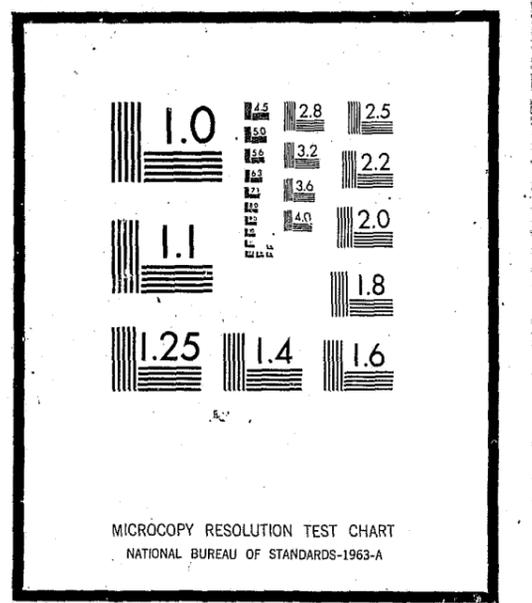


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A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE
ON PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR
CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

by

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The Metropolitan Criminal Justice Center operates the Pilot City program in Chesapeake, Norfolk, Portsmouth, and Virginia Beach, Virginia. Established in September, 1971, the Center is a research and program planning and development component of the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. The Center's Pilot City program is one of eight throughout the nation funded by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration of the U. S. Department of Justice. The basic purpose of each Pilot City project is to assist local jurisdictions in the design and establishment of various programs, often highly innovative and experimental in nature, which will contribute over a period of years to the development of a model criminal justice system. Each Pilot City team is also responsible for assuring comprehensive evaluation of such programs, for assisting the development of improved criminal justice planning ability within the host jurisdictions, and for providing technical assistance to various local agencies when requested.

The Pilot City Program has two primary responsibilities --to the host municipalities and to the improvement of the criminal justice system. In Virginia, responsibility for adult corrections, except for offenders sentenced for one year or less to local jails, rests entirely with the State Department of Welfare and Institutions. Thus the Pilot City Program's activities in the adult corrections area consist primarily of program planning assistance to local correctional efforts and research regarding such currently important issues in Virginia as sentencing procedures, criteria, and terms (as reflected in this monograph), community corrections and institutional programming and management.

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A Sociological Perspective on Public Support for
Capital Punishment

Although the legal, political, and philosophical issues that surround the topic of capital punishment have stimulated a voluminous literature, the scope of most empirical research in this area has been unusually restricted. The preponderance of what is available typically focuses on one of three basic problems. First, public opinion poll data have been collected over several decades to determine the extent of public support for the death penalty (cf. Erskine, 1970). Second, the discretionary or discriminatory manner in which the death penalty has been applied continues to elicit considerable attention (Ehrmann, 1952; Johnson, 1957; Wolfgang, Kelly, and Nolde, 1962; Bedau, 1964; Sellin, 1967; Federal Bureau of Prisons, 1968; Rubin, 1971; McCafferty, 1972; Wolfgang and Riedel, 1973). Finally, while beset by very difficult conceptual and methodological problems (cf. Kobrin, et al., 1972; Cousineau, 1973; Tittle and Logan, 1973), interest is rapidly developing in studies of the deterrent efficacy of both capital punishment and less extreme forms of formal legal sanctions (Schuessler, 1952; Savitz, 1958; Mattick, 1963; Sellin, 1964; Gibbs, 1968; Gray and Martin, 1969; Tittle, 1969; Bedau, 1970; Logan, 1972; Zimring and Hawkins, 1973; Tittle and Logan, 1973; Thomas and Williams, 1974).

A more thorough understanding of general public sentiment, further research into the manner in which capital punishment has been applied, and more sophisticated analysis of the deterrent effectiveness of such an extreme sanction are all clearly essential. The contemporary relevance of these three issues must not, however, be allowed to overshadow the similarly important need for other types of related research. In particular, given the substantive and theoretical concerns of such fields as criminal law, criminology, political science, psychology, and sociology, it is surprising that we know so little about the determinants of what appears to be an upsurge in recent years in public support for capital punishment and equally little about the relationships between these public attitudes and both the structure of existing legal codes and judicial decision-making. Most of the sociological attention has been directed toward examinations of what various groups of citizens view as appropriate levels of punishment for a variety of offenses. These evaluations have generally been related to existing legal provisions for punishment and/or actual judicial decisions (cf. Rose and Prell, 1955; Newman, 1957; Rooney and Gibbons, 1966; Gibbons, 1969). But, while sociologists have begun to acquire some limited information on the correspondence between public evaluations of appropriate sanction levels and those that are either permitted by law or that are actually applied in the courts, we continue to know very little about the determinants of the public attitudes which support the evaluations of appropriate types of sanctions. Thus,

this study examines selected determinants of public support for a very specific and extreme type of formal legal sanction: the death penalty.

Conceptual Model

The limited previous work permits the development only of an incomplete and speculative theoretical model. The findings of a considerable number of public opinion polls provide at least some indication of levels of public support for capital punishment from as early as 1936 when a Gallup survey showed that some 62 percent of those interviewed supported the death penalty (cf. Erskine, 1970). These data show a gradual decline in levels of support for capital punishment that continued until the middle to late 1960's at which time somewhat less than 50 percent of those sampled indicated support. In recent years, this trend appears to have been reversed, and there has been a fairly pronounced increase in support for the death penalty. A recent Harris survey showed that some 59 percent of a nationwide sample of 1,537 responded positively to the question, "Do you believe in capital punishment (death penalty)...?" (Harris, 1973). Further, since the Supreme Court ruled in Furman v. Georgia, 408 U.S. 238 (1972), that the death penalty, as applied at that time, violated the prohibition of the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments against "cruel and unusual" punishment, almost one-half of the states have re-enacted the death penalty (Vidmar and Ellsworth, 1974). In short, support for capital punishment would appear to be considerable among private citizens and their legislative representatives.

Vidmar and Ellsworth (1974) aptly summarize the present state of our understanding of the basic correlates of public support for capital punishment:

Generally, people who support the death penalty tend to be older, to be less educated, to be males, to be more wealthy, to be white as opposed to black, and to be from urban areas as opposed to suburban or small-town areas. White collar workers, manual laborers, and farmers tend to favor capital punishment more than professional and business people. Catholics tend to favor capital punishment more than Protestants or Jews, and people who describe themselves as religious tend to favor it more than persons who describe themselves as non-religious."

Further, levels of support for capital punishment have also been shown to correlate with such factors as retributivism (Vidmar and Crinklaw, 1973; Vidmar, 1973), valuations as measured by several dimensions of the Rokeach (1968) value survey (Rokeach and Vidmar, 1973), and both authoritarianism and dogmatism (Boehm, 1968; Rokeach and McLellan, 1970; Vidmar, 1973).

The associations noted in these studies are important for both subsequent research and public policy. For example, Vidmar (1973), in reviewing his findings on determinants of support for the death penalty among a sample of Canadians, suggests that many people support the death penalty for reasons that are alien to basic democratic principles. Such conclusions could and should be carefully weighed when legislative bodies contemplate proposed statutes that provide for the death penalty. We believe (although we should acknowledge our own political and philosophical convictions--or biases--for the total

abolition of the death penalty) that two critical problems in such an interpretation of support for the death penalty must be carefully considered.

First, because the public opinion poll data cited earlier reflect such substantial levels of public support for the death penalty for offenses that include murder and rape, it is inherently hard to believe that this support is a function of basically anti-democratic beliefs and even more unlikely that supporters of capital punishment have personality problems of one type or another. At the policy development level, arguing that a majority of those who support capital punishment are also anti-democratic, prejudiced, and dogmatic unfairly demeans the pro-capital punishment position and might well lessen the credibility of opposing contentions.

Second, we remain wholly unconvinced that the broad support that has been noted for capital punishment can ever be adequately accounted for with reference to basic personality characteristics. Instead, we feel very strongly that a greater proportion of the variance in levels of support can be accounted for if we move toward a more sociological perspective.

The movement of American society away from subscription to moral, philosophical, and theological constants and toward a very utilitarian world-view has been frequently noted (Ezorsky, 1972; Gerber, McAnany, 1972). We believe that the issue of capital punishment provides a prime example. If one says

that he opposes capital punishment because it is an immoral act, his opposition is typically accepted or rejected as simply one man's opinion. If, on the other hand, he can marshall "hard evidence" that the death penalty does not fulfill some deterrent function, his position becomes defined as objective. It is important to understand that the former position of the humanitarian and the latter position of the utilitarian are both grounded on purely philosophical pre-
sumptions: The humanitarian proceeded from the premise that no human life should be terminated by the government; the utilitarian from the premise that the execution of an offender must be justified by the contribution which the execution makes toward the attainment of the goal of general deterrence.

The general acceptance of utilitarian logic has a very important link to public support for the death penalty. It is "common sense," we are frequently told, that the more severe the punishment is for a given act, the less likely people are to engage in the proscribed behavior. Nor is this dubious and overly simplistic folk wisdom restricted to the population at large. One need only examine the manner in which legislative bodies and courts have responded to violators of drug laws for ample illustration of the belief that one should have harsh punishments for those behaviors that one most wishes to suppress. Moreover, neither the structure of our criminal law nor public opinion appears to be swayed by the fairly well-documented argument that many of the offenses which we

most severely sanction are those which we are least likely to deter through the imposition of legal sanctions (cf. Chambliss, 1967; Thomas and Williams, 1973). Instead, as has often been our experience, when severe sanctions fail to produce the desired general or specific deterrent effects, the basic premise is left unchallenged and the levels of the sanctions are simply increased (cf. Lindesmith, 1965; Duster, 1970), particularly when the proscribed activity is shocking, fear-producing, or difficult to interpret as the behavior of a "normal" person.*

In addition to our assertion that increased subscription to utilitarian world-views correlates with public support for the death penalty, we also believe that it would be difficult for any citizen not to respond to the high priority that the

* Such reactions do not appear to have any truly utilitarian value. On the contrary, the available research rather clearly suggests that a more appropriate focus would be the certainty of punishment, the type of proscribed behavior, and the orientation of the actor toward the proscribed behavior if the intent is to maximize the deterrent effect of punishment (cf. Chambliss, 1966, 1967; Gibbs, 1968; Tittle, 1969; Chiricos and Waldo, 1970; Logan, 1972; Tittle and Logan, 1973). In addition, there is at least some evidence that suggests that judges and juries will be hesitant to apply severe sanctions to the point that there may well be an inverse relationship between the severity and the certainty of punishment (Gray and Martin, 1969; Bailey and Smith, 1972; Wilson, 1973). Nevertheless, there is clearly continuing public support for the belief that severe punishment will serve a utilitarian function and that is the important point for this discussion.

media have assigned to the problem of crime in contemporary American society and the extreme emphasis that has been placed on "crime in the streets" by local, state, and national politicians. There is also ample evidence that substantial numbers of citizens have been either directly or indirectly affected by criminal offenses (cf. Ennis, 1967). Thus, substantial segments of the public perceive the crime rate as rapidly increasing. Equally important in this regard is the tendency for people to selectively perceive disproportionately large increases in those types of offenses that are most visible and most feared. Under such circumstances it is quite natural for the public to fear to seek victimization and to seek effective means of avoiding it.

We are most certainly not proposing that support for the death penalty can be explained by some simplistic extension of the frustration-aggression hypothesis. Indeed, the perspective we wish to examine avoids the circularity of the psychoanalytic proposition that frustration breeds aggression. Our perspective suggests instead that a good deal of the variance in levels of support for capital punishment can be accounted for if we begin with the general premise that the majority of the population are fairly normal, reasonable people who:

- (1) have been socialized within a culture that places substantial emphasis on a utilitarian approach to problems;

(2) have been exposed to a curious and often over-simplified admixture of both basic operant and Freudian principles that have encouraged them to view punishment as a useful means of attaining goals of both general and specific deterrence; and,

(3) have become fearful of what they believe to be both increasing levels of crime and increasing probabilities of becoming the victims of criminal offenses.*

The central hypotheses, then, which can be derived from the conceptual model we have tried to develop in the preceding paragraphs and which are examined in this study are the following:

Proposition 1: The greater the perceived increase in rate of criminal behavior, the greater the fear of victimization.

Proposition 2: The greater the perceived increase in the rate of criminal behavior, the greater the perceived effectiveness of punishment.

Proposition 3: The greater the fear of victimization, the greater the perceived effectiveness of punishment.

Proposition 4: The greater the fear of victimization, the greater the belief in punishment as an appropriate means of response to criminal offenders.

* This is not to say that the ascription of legitimacy to legal sanctions does not rest in part on retributivist beliefs or that personality characteristics and disorders play no role in determining levels of support for punishment. In our data, for example, 29.8 percent of those in our sample indicated strong agreement to the basically retributivist notion that, "Regardless of whether the death penalty helps to control crime, it is the only moral and just way of punishing some kinds of criminals."

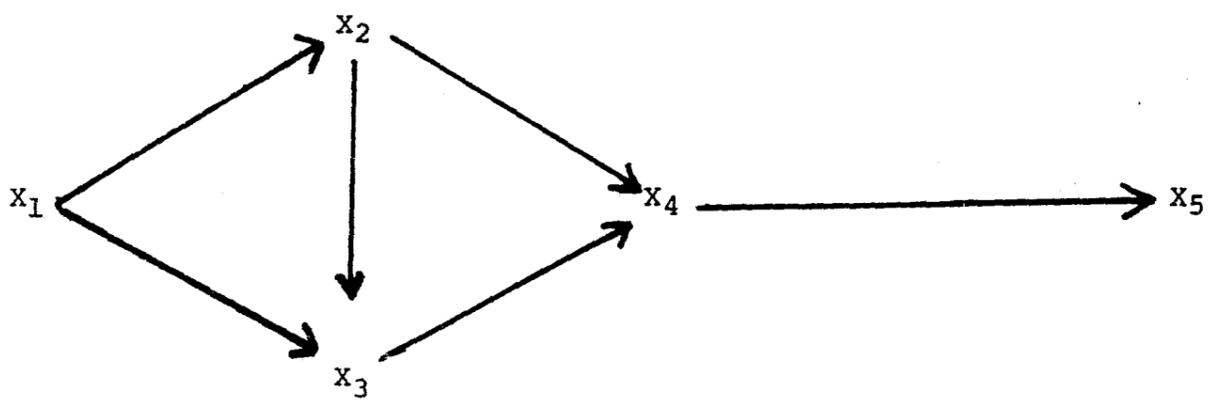
Proposition 5: The greater the perceived effectiveness of punishment, the greater the belief in punishment as an appropriate means of response to criminal offenders.

Proposition 6: The greater the belief in punishment as an appropriate means of response to criminal offenders, the greater the support for capital punishment.

A graphic presentation of the major assertions of our argument is provided in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1

A Schematic Presentation of the Theoretical Model



X₁ = Perception of Crime Rate

X₂ = Fear of Victimization

X₃ = Perception of the Effectiveness
of Punishment

X₄ = Willingness to Employ Punishment
as a Response to Criminality

X₅ = Support for Capital Punishment

Research Design and Methodology

In order to operationally test these hypotheses, data were collected from a sample of citizens who were residents of a geographical zone in a south eastern state that includes at least seven contiguous incorporated areas. The 1970 census materials were utilized to estimate the number of households within each of the seven areas. On the basis of this information, and on the basis of rather severe limitations placed on us by limited sources of funds, we decided to mail questionnaires to a proportionate stratified systematic random sample of 3,000 households. The March, 1973, Polk Directory provided an adequate source for our mailing list, and our sampling technique produced an initial sample of 2,963 cases. (The sample proportion was .095.) This initial sample was reduced by such factors as migration, death, illness, and so on from the original sample of 2,963 to an actually available sample of 2,576. As we expected on the basis of the social and demographic characteristics of the population being sampled, the complexity of the questionnaire, and the time period during which the study was conducted, we experienced considerable sample attrition due to both non-responses and incompleted or uncodeable responses. Still, properly completed questionnaires were received from 839 respondents, 32.6 percent of the sample. We are fully aware of the limitations that such losses place on the study. In addition, the reader should carefully note that we coded responses on the basis of the census tract from which they came and that a comparison of the social and demographic characteristics of our returns with the 1970 census

materials shows that our returns contained disproportionately large numbers of relatively older, better educated, more affluent, and white residents, all demographic characteristics that have been related to relatively high levels of support for capital punishment.

In order to properly examine the adequacy of our model, operational measures had to be developed for each of the five major concepts. These measures are briefly described below.

Perception of the Crime Rate. We have suggested that a number of factors, particularly such things as media coverage and emphasis, encourage the public to view crime as a problem of rapidly increasing proportions. To measure perceptions of increases or decreases in the crime rate we constructed a number of Likert-type attitude items. Item selections from the initial pool of items for this scale as well as those described in the following paragraphs were accomplished by computing a Pearsonian correlation between item responses and a summated scale calculated from the summated responses to all of the attitude items in the initial pool of statements. Any item which did not yield an item-to-scale correlation that was equal to or greater than .50 was automatically deleted. The total scale score was then recomputed on the basis of the remaining items, and a final item-to-scale correlation was computed. The same criterion for inclusion was employed in the second step of the item selection process. The final scale contains five items. The mean of the scale is 13.67 with a standard deviation of 4.21. The lower the scale score on this measure, the greater the perceived increase in the crime rate.

Fear of Victimization. We have hypothesized that fear of becoming the victim of crime will increase both the level of willingness to view punishment as an appropriate response to criminality and the level of the perceived effectiveness of punishment as a deterrent to crime. The final Likert scale that we constructed contains five items. The mean of this scale is 12.80 with a standard deviation of 4.53. The lower the score on this measure, the greater the fear of becoming the victim of a criminal offense.

Perception of the Effectiveness of Punishment. If our assertion that the American cultural system strongly supports utilitarian principles is correct, and if substantial emphasis is placed on punishment as a utilitarian response to deviance, then it seems probable that many people will view punishment as an effective means of reducing the magnitude of the crime problem. To explore that possibility, we constructed a six-item Likert scale. The mean of the scale is 14.80 with a standard deviation of 5.60. The lower the scale score on this measure, the greater the perceived effectiveness of punishment as a means of deterrence.

Willingness to Employ Punishment. To perceive something to be an effective deterrent and to be willing to actually employ it as an appropriate response to a type of behavior we seek to proscribe are two quite different things. Still, one who views crime as rapidly increasing, becomes fearful of victimization, and views punishment as an effective means of reducing that which is feared is likely to be willing to employ punishment as a reaction to crime. A ten-item Likert scale was, therefore, constructed

to measure the degree of willingness to employ punishment. The mean of the scale is 24.78 with a standard deviation of 8.44. The lower the scale score, the greater the willingness to employ punishment.

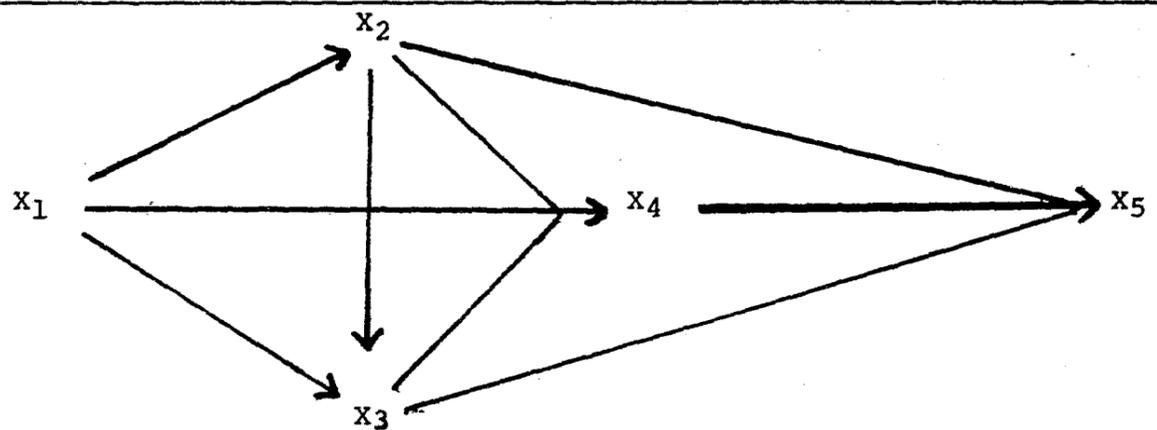
Support for Capital Punishment. Finally, and the primary focus of this paper, a measure of the willingness of our respondents to support capital punishment was necessary. Certainly the variance in support for capital punishment is determined by a broad spectrum of factors, far more than we have included in this restricted analysis. Nevertheless, the primary object in the analysis which follows is to examine the proportion of the variance in support for capital punishment that can be attributed to the direct and indirect effects of perceived increases in the rate of crime, fear of victimization, belief in the effectiveness of punishment, and willingness to employ punishment as a response to criminality. Our measure of support for capital punishment contains eleven items. The means of the scale is 24.89 with a standard deviation of 10.55. The lower the scale score on this measure, the greater the level of support for capital punishment.

Even with the relatively small number of variables on which we have chosen to concentrate, a considerable number of alternative orderings of the variables, in addition to the hypothesized relationship reflected in Figure 1, could have been selected. For example, one might argue that people who are fearful of becoming victims of criminal offenses develop perceptions of increasing crime rates, view punishment as a deterrent, and are

willing to employ punishment, including capital punishment. This over-simplifies the alternative ordering but does demonstrate that a variable which we have defined as intervening could, given a different theoretical orientation, be viewed as the initial variable in the causal sequence. Our theoretical discussion also does not provide a rationale for predicting direct linkages between perception of the crime rate and willingness to punish, fear of victimization and support for the death penalty, and perceptions of the effectiveness of punishment and support for the death penalty. These additional possibilities are outlined in Figure 2 and we will proceed with an examination of the more complete set of linkages outlined in this Figure. The general hypothesis is that the more complex model presented in Figure 2 may be simplified by careful controlled analysis. To the extent that our theoretical model is adequate, the simplified model that results from this analysis should approximate the theoretical expectations presented in Figure 1.

FIGURE 2

A Schematic Presentation of Major Potential Linkages
Between Variables in the Empirical Model



X₁ = Perception of Crime Rate
X₂ = Fear of Victimization
X₃ = Perception of the Effectiveness
of Punishment

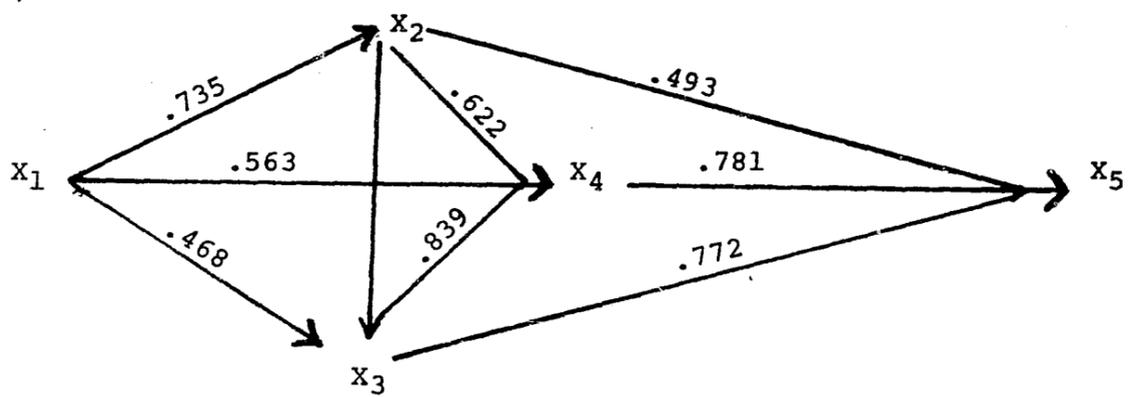
X₄ = Willingness to Employ Punishment
as a Response to Criminality
X₅ = Support for Capital Punishment

Figure 3 provides the necessary statistical information for an evaluation of the numerous linkages illustrated in Figure 2. The zero-order correlations indicate that each of the linkages in the more complex model are initially supported and that no immediate simplifications of the model can be suggested by virtue of insignificant zero-order associations.

However, because a number of the initial associations are quite large, we would be led to expect fairly substantial residual correlations (cf. Blalock, 1962a, 1962b, 1964). Thus a more careful examination of the zero-order correlations is important. For example, the .622 correlation between fear of victimization and willingness to punish coupled with the .781 correlation between willingness to punish and perception of the effectiveness of punishment would lead to the prediction of a residual correlation between X_2 and X_5 of approximately .486. The actual correlation between these two variables is .493. Thus, the predicted residual correlation and the actual correlation between fear of victimization and level of support for capital punishment are not significantly different. This, in turn, points to the need for controlled analysis in order to determine whether the zero-order correlations are reliable indicators of direct linkages between the variables in the model or if one or more of these apparent direct linkages is merely a residual effect of the intercorrelations observed among the variables in the model (see Table 1 for an intercorrelation matrix).

FIGURE 3

Survey of Statistical Information on Empirical Model



I	II	III	IV
$X_1X_4 \cdot X_2 = .201$	$X_2X_3 \cdot X_1 = .383$	$X_3X_4 \cdot X_1 = .788$	$X_4X_5 \cdot X_1 = .715$
$X_1X_4 \cdot X_3 = .355$	$X_2X_4 \cdot X_1 = .371$	$X_3X_4 \cdot X_2 = .788$	$X_4X_5 \cdot X_2 = .696$
$X_1X_4 \cdot X_2X_3 = .210$	$X_2X_4 \cdot X_3 = .315$	$X_3X_4 \cdot X_1X_2 = .753$	$X_4X_5 \cdot X_3 = .384$
$X_1X_5 \cdot X_2 = .149$	$X_2X_4 \cdot X_1X_3 = .121$	$X_3X_5 \cdot X_2 = .687$	$X_4X_5 \cdot X_2X_3 = .374$
$X_1X_5 \cdot X_3 = .157$	$X_2X_5 \cdot X_3 = .096$	$X_3X_5 \cdot X_4 = .345$	
$X_1X_5 \cdot X_4 = .019$	$X_2X_5 \cdot X_4 = .015$	$X_3X_5 \cdot X_2X_4 = .345$	
$X_1X_5 \cdot X_2X_4 = .013$	$X_2X_5 \cdot X_3X_4 = .029$		

TABLE 1
Intercorrelation Matrix

	X ₁	X ₂	X ₃	X ₄	X ₅
X ₁	1.000	.735	.468	.563	.450
X ₂		1.000	.574	.622	.493
X ₃			1.000	.839	.772
X ₄				1.000	.781
X ₅					1.000

X₁ = Perception of Crime Rate

X₂ = Fear of Victimization

X₃ = Perception of the Effectiveness
of Punishment

X₄ = Willingness to employ Punishment
as a Response to Criminality

X₅ = Support for Capital Punishment

It is convenient to work from right to left in the model in an examination of the controlled analysis. The most relevant partial correlations are provided at the base of Figure 3. The first potential simplification of the model is the possible elimination of the direct linkage between perception of the crime rate (X_1) and perception of the effectiveness of punishment (X_3). The alternative that requires consideration is the possibility that the only effect of X_1 on X_3 is operating indirectly through X_2 , fear of victimization. If this were the case, the relationship between X_1 and X_3 should approach zero when X_2 is held constant. As can be seen in Figure 3, the partial correlation reduces the zero-order correlation from .468 to .084. Thus, a simplification in the model is called for, a simplification that was not anticipated in our theoretical discussion and one which negates Proposition 2 of our model. Similarly, the theoretical model implies that the only linkage between perception of the crime rate (X_1) and willingness to punish (X_4) is the indirect association through the connection between perception of the crime rate and both fear of victimization (X_2) and perception of the effectiveness of punishment (X_3). Given that we have already determined that there is no direct link between perception of the crime rate and perception of the effectiveness of punishment, we are immediately led to expect that perception of the crime rate will only affect willingness to punish through the intervening link provided by fear of victimization. Again, however, the theoretical model appears to need revision because of the fact that a control for fear of victimization does not reduce the association between perception of crime rate and willingness to

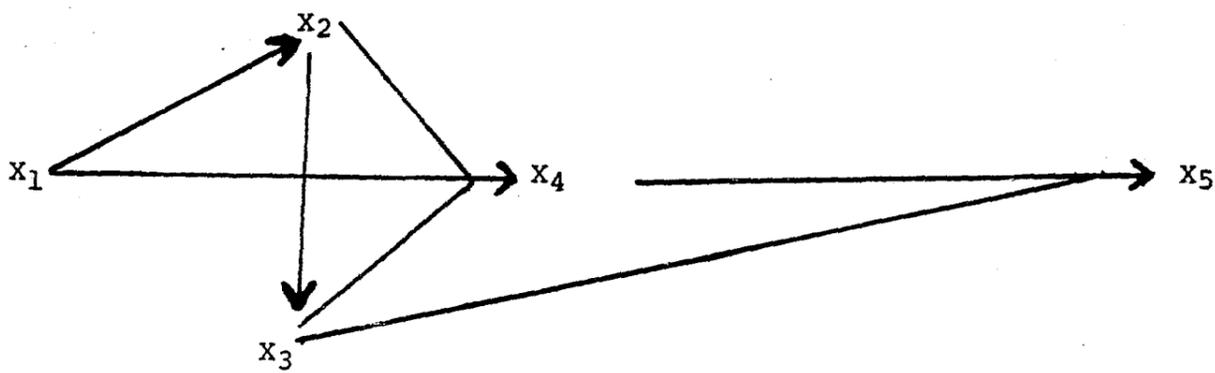
punish as much as would be expected (.563 reduced to .201). Still, the primary effect of X_1 on X_4 does appear to be indirect.

Although these initial attempts at simplifying the model shown in Figure 3 provided only partial support for the assertions of the theoretical model illustrated in Figure 1, the partial correlations provided in Figure 3 show that all is not lost. Specifically, the predicted direct linkages between fear of victimization (X_2) and both willingness to punish (X_4) and perception of the effectiveness of punishment (X_3) are strongly supported. Further, the prediction of only an indirect linkage between fear of victimization and support for capital punishment (X_5) is upheld by virtue of the fact that the zero-order correlation of .493 between these variables is reduced to .015 when the intervening variable of willingness to punish is held constant.

As we move to the possible linkages between perception of the effectiveness and both willingness to punish and support for capital punishment, we see the need to make still another modification in our explanatory model. Specifically, although the predicted direct linkage between perception of the effectiveness of punishment and willingness to punish is supported, we did not hypothesize a direct link between X_3 and X_5 . Nevertheless, while a control for willingness to punish reduced the level of correlation from .772 to .345, thereby suggesting that the primary effect is indirect, the alternative suggestion of a direct linkage appears supported.

The several modifications which this controlled analysis appears to call for lead us to construct the revised model that is presented in Figure 4.

FIGURE 4
Revised Model



X₁ = Perception of Crime Rate

X₂ = Fear of Victimization

X₃ = Perception of the Effectiveness
of Punishment

X₄ = Willingness to Employ Punishment
as a Response to Criminality

X₅ = Support for Capital Punishment

In brief, our interpretation of these findings is that the basic assertions contained in our theoretical model are upheld. Perceptions of increasing crime rates are directly linked with both fear of victimization and a willingness to support a punitive reaction to criminal offenders. Fear of victimization is also strongly associated with both a willingness to support a punitive reaction and with the belief that punishment provides an effective method of deterring crime. Finally, among those who view punishment as an effective deterrent and who are willing to support the actual utilization of punishment, there is a very strong tendency to also support the utilization of capital punishment. These independent levels of association do not allow us to determine exactly how much of the variation in levels of support for capital punishment can be accounted for strictly by reference to the several independent variables in our model. Indeed, the strong intercorrelations among the independent variables tend to imply that the unique contribution of each of the independent variables to the variance in support for the death penalty may be low.

Although certainly not a definitive solution for the problem at hand, multiple regression provides at least one useful technique for examining both the total amount of variance in the dependent variable that the entire set of independent variables can account for taken as a set rather than one at a time and for obtaining some idea of the relative importance of the several independent factors (cf. Kerlinger and Pedhazur, 1973: 281-333). Which of the several multiple regression techniques is most appropriate is

problematic, but we elected to utilize a stepwise solution in hopes of shedding some light on the problem of the relative importance of each of the variables used as predictors of support for capital punishment. This technique has the advantage of partially resolving the problem involved when one specifies the order of inclusion of each of the independent variables in the regression equation, a problem which becomes particularly difficult when there is a high level of intercorrelation among the predictor variables (cf. Kerlinger and Pedhazur, 1973: 296).

The resulting equation with the appropriate Beta weights was:

$$X_5 = -.287 + .046 X_1 + -.051 X_2 + .406 X_3 + .446 X_4$$

The squared coefficient of multiple determination was .657; thus, using only these four predictor variables we are able to account for some 66 percent of the variation in levels of support for capital punishment. Moreover, as is reflected by both the standardized regression coefficients and the order of the entry of the independent variables into the regression equation, the most important variable appears to be willingness to support the utilization of punishment as an appropriate mode of response to criminality. The second most important factor appears to be the belief that punishment is an effective deterrent. The individual contribution of the remaining two variables is minimal, though they do appear to be important determinants of perceived effectiveness of punishment and willingness to employ punishment. These findings, in turn, lend very strong support to the appropriateness of the model presented in Figure 4.

Summary and Conclusions

The determinants of public support for capital punishment have been only infrequently examined in the existing literature. More thorough examination of these determinants is essential both because it would contribute to our basic knowledge in the area and because such information is critical for decisions that have and will continue to confront legislative bodies in the wake of the 1972 United States Supreme Court decision in the Furman case. Our theoretical model is premised on the notion that support for the death penalty can be interpreted as a fairly logical response to the widely held beliefs that (1) crime rates are going up rapidly; (2) the average citizen is in danger of becoming the victim of a criminal offense; (3) punishment provides an effective means by which we can control deviant and criminal behavior; and (4) punishment is an appropriate response to criminality.

We are not arguing, of course, that earlier work which has linked support for the death penalty to such traits as dogmatism, authoritarianism, punitiveness, and retributivism has been misleading; we agree that such characteristics will account for some proportion of the variation in levels of support for the death penalty. We disagree, however, for several reasons, on how large a proportion of the variance can be ascribed to the influence of these types of characteristics. In at least a few cases we suspect that researchers were simply trying to question the normality of the personality structures of those who support a level of punishment which the researchers found offensive for moral, theological, or philosophical reasons. While we share

their convictions, we see little place for such personal feelings in behavioral science research. More importantly, we find it difficult to accept explanations of support for capital punishment which necessarily imply that very substantial segments of the population are, for example, authoritarian. In our data, for instance, 32.7 percent of the respondents felt that death was an appropriate penalty for kidnapping, 38.0 percent would punish skyjacking with death, 29.9 percent would put a rapist to death, and 65.7 percent would view death as a just penalty for murder. These findings appear to be too closely related to the type of offense under consideration to be so simply interpreted; in addition, one would be hard-pressed to argue that well over one-half of the population is authoritarian, dogmatic, or punitive.

Our analysis provided substantial support for the adequacy of our theoretical model. Perceptions of increasing crime rates do appear to stimulate heightened fears of victimization. This fear is directly linked to both increased valuations of the effectiveness of punishment and willingness to employ punishment as a response to criminal offenders. Increased valuations of the effectiveness of punishment are, in turn, directly linked to both heightened willingness to employ punishment and increased levels of support for capital punishment. The modifications in the original model that seem called for by our multivariate analysis may be quickly noted through a comparison of the linkages in Figures 1 and 4.

In conclusion, the basic model which we have proposed seems viable, particularly as it was modified by the controlled analysis described in the preceding section. Two findings seem particular-

ly noteworthy. First, the variables in this model provided a means by which a very substantial proportion of the total variance in levels of support for capital punishment could be explained. Second, our interpretation of these findings is simple. It appears that many people support the death penalty because they fear being the targets of criminal acts and view punishment, including capital punishment under some circumstances, as an effective, appropriate and rational means of solving the fear-producing problem that confronts them. Ironically, the research that has been completed rather clearly demonstrates that the types of offenses most likely to be feared (e.g., assault, rape, murder) are the least likely to be deterred through the imposition of severe legal sanctions. This situation emphasizes the need to find methods of providing more accurate information to the public about the issues of crime and punishment. It also raises the serious question of the responsibility of public, especially elected officials to assume such leadership responsibilities and, ultimately, poses issues which cut even more closely to the core of a democratic society than the problem of capital punishment vel non: These are whether it is proper under such circumstances for legislators to support capital punishment in accordance with substantial but misinformed public opinion and whether the legislatures and the courts can, in a democratic republic, begin to distinguish between public opinion and informed public opinion in their deliberations.

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