

The Sentencing Project

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/deterrence-in-criminal-justice-evaluating-certainty-vs-severity-of-punishment/>

Policy Issue Resources

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Sentencing systems and incarceration traditionally have a variety of goals, which include incapacitation, punishment, deterrence and rehabilitation. In recent decades, sentencing policy initiatives have often been enacted with the goal of enhancing the deterrent effect of the criminal justice system. Under the rubric of getting tough on crime, policies such as mandatory minimums, truth in sentencing, and three strikes and you're out have been designed to deter with the threat of imposing substantial terms of imprisonment for felony convictions.

While the criminal justice system as a whole provides some deterrent effect, a key question for policy development regards whether enhanced sanctions or an enhanced possibility of being apprehended provide any additional deterrent benefits. Research to date generally indicates that increases in the *certainty* of punishment, as opposed to the *severity* of punishment, are more likely to produce deterrent benefits. This briefing paper provides an overview of criminological research on these relative impacts as a guide to inform future policy consideration.

To read this paper, download the PDF below.

People in prison is serving a life sentence

Sentencing Policy

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