Article

Does Criminal Experience Affect a Person's Perceptual Deterrence of Sanctions and Controlling Mechanisms in China?

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Abstract

Two notable gaps remain undressed in deterrence literature: (a) few studies on perceptual deterrence were conducted in non-Western societies, and (b) a lack of direct comparison between offenders and nonoffenders. This study investigated the perceived risk levels associated with different sanctions and controlling mechanisms and whether criminal experience affects one's perceived risk levels based on the data drawn from non-offenders and active offenders in China. The study found that most of both offenders and non-offenders either agreed or strongly agreed that capital punishment, imprisonment, and police patrol serve as powerful deterrents to crime. Findings showed that offenders exhibited higher levels of perceived deterrence; personal criminal experience is a significant predictor for the perceived deterrence of neighborhood watches only.

Keywords

perceptual deterrence, deterrence theory, offender, non-offender, China

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Introduction

The perceived risks of apprehension and punishment have long been a focus of interest in criminal justice and criminology and have central importance to deterrence theory (Loughran et al., 2012). The concept of perceived risk or perceptual deterrence stems from the utilitarian assumption that human behavior is mainly driven by calculation, contingent on the perceived balance of rewards and punishments tied to a given action (McCarthy, 2002). Focusing on the punishment side of the argument, deterrence theory posits that the risks of prescribed and actual punishment are positively associated with perceived risks. The fear of apprehension and sanctions perceived by individuals in turn can act as a deterrent against engaging in criminal behavior (Beccaria, [1764] 1986; Pickett & Roche, 2016). The role of perceived risks of punishment serving as a consequence of prescribed or actual punishment has been the subject of empirical research (e.g., Apel, 2013; Chalfin & McCrary, 2017). While many studies found the positive relationship between perceived risks of punishment and objective punishment (Apel, 2013; Nagin, 2013; Nagin et al., 2015), some studies fail to confirm this relationship or reveal that the perceived risks lead to higher levels of criminal behaviors (Loughran et al., 2012; Pickett & Roche, 2016; Piquero & Pogarsky, 2002).

The inconsistent or contradictory findings marks the importance of further investigation on the factors that condition the effects of perceptual deterrence. For example, there have been two gaps remaining unaddressed in the extant literature: (a) the lack of research on perceptual deterrence conducted in non-Western societies, particularly in East-Asian societies, and (b) the lack of direct comparison between offenders, particularly active offenders, and general population (Bouffard et al., 2017; Loughran et al., 2012). First, preventive approaches, punishment practice, and the effectiveness of deterrence are context-specific (Tonry, 2008). Asian societies display substantial differences in cultural norms, political structures, and socioeconomic dynamics, setting them apart from the U.S. where the bulk of research on perceptual deterrence has been conducted. The differences are manifested by empirical research showing how cultural disparities can influence both the practice and the perception of criminal justice, subsequently impacting the effectiveness of crime control (e.g., J. Jiang & Liu, 2022; S. Jiang et al., 2014; Messner et al., 2017). For example, in Western societies, neighborhood watch programs as a means of social and crime control are rooted in civil society and voluntary citizen groups, whereas in East Asian context, these programs are typically organized and overseen by politically authorized neighborhood committees operating in coordination with local police stations (Messner et al., 2017). The contrasting cultural and administrative frameworks may differentiate the public's perception of deterrence in these two societies, with Western models emphasizing initiatives of individual agents and East Asian models focusing on empowerment of structural and governmental intervention. Currently, how and to what extent contextual variations affect salience of perceptual deterrence in East societies remain largely unclear.

Another limitation in the deterrence literature concerns the lack of empirical application of the deterrence framework to the samples of offenders. Deterrence research

has focused on how the threat of legal sanction provides a general deterrent against criminal behavior primarily through the examination of non-offending samples (Bouffard et al., 2017). The investigation on the implementation of legal sanctions related to specific deterrence particularly active offenders has remained notably scarce (Apel & Nagin, 2011; Loughran et al., 2012; Pickett & Roche, 2016). While regular citizens generally demonstrate familiarity with the surveyed types of sanctions was good, some scholars point out their limited knowledge concerning the legally prescribed level of punishment (Apel, 2013; Nagin, 2013). Limited research reveals that offenders' perceptions of punishment are consistently "better calibrated to actual punishments" than general population (Apel, 2013). More research on offenders' perceptual deterrence is needed. The comparison of data from offenders and general population allows contrasting evidence of heterogeneity in perceptual deterrence, and if data available, provides insights into the predictors and consequences associated with perceptual deterrence.

Therefore, this study aims to advance the literature by comparing the perceptual deterrence of active offenders and general population and provide applications in preventing crime among general population and reducing reoffending behavior of offenders. Specifically, this study was taken to examine perceived deterrence and its effects based on two independent surveys of offenders and regular citizens in two cities of China. Based on the analysis of the samples, this study attempts to (1) reveal the perceived deterrence levels of formal control and informal control and sanctions (e.g., policing, incarceration, public humiliation) between offenders and regular citizens; (2) examine whether the two groups differ in the levels of perceptual deterrence; and (3) investigate the role of personal criminal experience in explaining the differences.

Literature Review

The Background and Crime Deterrence Research in China

The belief in the deterrence as a fundamental goal of apprehension and punishment for crime has long been embedded in Chinese society. The legal code, tracing back to as early as the Tang Dynasty (618–907 ce), explicitly stated that imprisonment aimed to enslave and disgrace the convict (Wu & Beken, 2018). It was widely accepted that imprisonment for a criminal conviction carries with it a stigma in public which raises public humiliation, placing the convicts in a situation of feeling repentance, and therefore, deterring them from further criminal behaviors (Wu & Beken, 2018; Yang, 2017). With the recognition of the importance of stern punishment in suppressing crime, the implementation of the death penalty has been highly valued and has been considered ultimate punishment for crime throughout Chinese history (Liang et al., 2006). This deeply rooted traditional belief is reflected in many Chinese slogans such as "executing one deters one hundred" and "killing a chicken to scare the monkey" (S. Jiang & Wang, 2008; Liang et al., 2006). The belief persists in contemporary China, serving as the driving force behind the nation's strike-hard anti-crime campaigns (yanda in 1983, 1990, 1996, and 2001) (Bakken, 1993; Liang, 2005; Trevaskes, 2007), public

sentencing rallies (*gongkai xuanpan dahui*) (Trevaskes, 2003; Wu & Beken, 2018), and the extensive use of capital punishment (S. Jiang et al., 2007; S. Jiang & Wang, 2008; Miethe & Lu, 2005).

The persistent belief in the deterrence effect of apprehension and punishment is mirrored by the results of quantitative studies conducted in China, which explores levels of subjective deterrence related to punishment and various control mechanisms, as summarized in Table 1. Several studies in the table reported that most respondents drawn from the samples believed the death penalty in China is deterrent to crime (e.g., S. Jiang & Lambert, 2009; S. Jiang et al., 2010; S. Jiang & Wang, 2008; Liang et al., 2006). In addition, most respondents agreed or strongly agreed that incarceration is a powerful deterrent to crime (Lambert et al., 2007). Based on the in-depth interviews of 62 lawyers in China, van Rooij (2016) revealed that although actual state enforcement was weak, 92% of the respondents felt the deterrence of punishment against tax evasion. Similarly, using a sample of college students, Yao et al. (2021) found that at least 90% of the surveyed students believed that law against driving under the influence (DUI) effectively deter such behavior.

When explaining the mechanisms behind the effectiveness of punishment, Yao et al. (2021) in their DUI study suggested that the risk perception among drivers imposed by the justice system can deter drivers by significantly affecting their assessment of the costs and benefits related to DUI. Among the limited studies of perceptual deterrence, S. Jiang and Lambert (2009) in their examination of formal and informal crime control in China, found that shame and humiliation stemming from the public awareness of one's criminal acts serve as a powerful deterrent against committing crime. The effect of perceptual deterrence was echoed by van Rooij et al. (2017) who in their investigation on compliance decision-making among Chinese students found that, even in the absence of strict enforcement, the mere perception of deterrence reduced the likelihood of engaging in digital offending. Despite these findings, there is a notable research gap in understanding the predictor of perceptual deterrence and role of perceptual deterrence in mediating the relationship between punishment and crime in China, particularly when comparing active offenders and general population.

Personal Criminal Experience and Perceptual Deterrence

With regard to the predictor of perceptual deterrence, one's criminal experience stands as an important predictor of the perceived risk associated with sanctions, and this connection holds paramount significance in the framework of deterrence theory in the West (Anwar & Loughran, 2011). The notion of perceived deterrence emerges from the assumption of human rationality. In accordance with the classic deterrence choice theory, rational individuals make decisions based on self-interest, which guides them to take actions that yield maximum benefits while minimizing costs (Beccaria, [1764] 1986; Becker, 1968). An arrest, a conviction, or punishment subsequently raise the costs associated with a criminal. Drawing from Apel's (2013) comprehensive literature review, previous studies have consistently shown that individuals with criminal

Table 1. Levels of Perceived Deterrence of Sanctions and Controlling Agencies.

Author/year	Sample	Question	%	Mean
Liang et al. (2006)	*N* = 110 (college students)	The death penalty deters future criminals. 1 = disagree, 2 = neither agree nor disagree, and 3 = agree.	Agree: 56*	2.28*
		The death penalty prevents criminals from committing another offence. 1 = disagree, 2 = neither agree nor disagree, and 3 = agree.	Agree: 65*	2.46*
S. Jiang et al. (2007)	*N* = 524 (college students) The answer categories were coded with 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree	(1) I feel that the death penalty deters others from committing crimes.	Agree and strongly agree: 53*	3.35
		(2) The death penalty punishment is a powerful deterrent to crime.	Agree and strongly agree: 74*	3.80
		(3) The death penalty will deter people from committing murder.	Agree and strongly agree: 46*	3.23
Lambert et al. (2007)	*N* = 522 (college students)	Incarceration is a powerful deterrent to crime. The answer categories were coded with 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree	Agree and strongly agree: 62*	3.50
S. Jiang and Wang (2008)	*N* = 524 (college students)	Deterrent effect of death penalty based on four questions		13.8 of 20
S. Jiang et al. (2009)	*N* = 109 (citizens) The answer categories were coded with 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree	(1) I feel that the death penalty deters others from committing crimes.	Agree and strongly agree: 75*	3.9
		(2) The death penalty punishment is a powerful deterrent to crime.	Agree and strongly agree: 50*	3.4
		(3) The death penalty will deter people from committing murder.	Agree and strongly agree: 81*	3.8
S. Jiang et al. (2010)	Same as that in S. Jiang, Lambert, and Wang (2007) in this table	Same as those in S. Jiang, Lambert, and Wang, (2007)	Same as those in S. Jiang, Lambert, and Wang (2007)	Same as those in S. Jiang, Lambert, and Wang (2007)
van Rooij (2016)	*N* = 62 (lawyers)	Under China's weak actual enforcement, do lawyers believe their tax evasion could be caught for breaking the relevant law?	57 of 62 (92%) respondents said "yes"	
Yao et al. (2021)	*N* = 109 (college students)	*Perception of DUI penalties*		
		Expect a jail penalty	90	
		Expect a fine penalty	100	
		Expect a license penalty	90	

Note. *The number was recalculated based on the data in the article.

experience tend to possess a better understanding of the existing statutory penalties for criminal behavior in contrast to those who lack such experience. Furthermore, when individuals have committed a crime and have been arrested, their perceived risk of arrest or punishment is heightened, leading to a reduction in their likelihood of engaging in further criminal behavior (Anwar & Loughran, 2011; Apel, 2013; Chalfin & McCrary, 2017; Nagin, 2013; Wodahl et al., 2009).

There are a variety of indicators of perceptual deterrence. They range from perceived deterrence of the death penalty to imprisonment, to law enforcement, to neighborhood watches, to public embarrassment. The following section presents a brief review of each deterrence and presents our hypotheses.

The death penalty is the most serious legal punishment. The existing research in the US has not provided a clear message on whether capital punishment has deterrence or perceptual deterrence to homicide rates (Nagin, 2013). Some Western studies propose a potential positive punishment effect, suggesting that experiences of receiving serious punishment can trigger reduced fear of punishment risks and heightened tendencies towards offending (e.g., Loughran et al., 2012). However, this may not be the case in China. China is often conceived as a homogenous society characterized by widely shared values and a common understanding of social problems and their solutions, with diffuse forms of ritual punishments being used to reaffirm collective values and denounce what is considered "evil" (Miethe & Lu, 2005). People tend to develop high expectations of the death penalty as a means of coping with crime problems in China. Accordingly, this study hypothesized that

1a. Most active offenders and general population perceive capital punishment as a powerful deterrence to crime and have high levels of perceived deterrence of capital punishment.

Although offenders generally have more criminal experience compared to regular citizens, no active offenders in this study had the capital punishment so that they did not have such criminal experience. In other words, both offenders and general population in this study did not have personal experience regarding capital punishment. Thus, we assumed that in China,

1b. There is no difference between active offenders and regular citizens in the level of perceptual deterrence of capital punishment.

In addition to the perceptual deterrence linked to the death penalty, Nagin's (2013) literature review suggests that police presence and incarceration play significant roles in enhancing the perceptual deterrence of crime. Empirical studies have revealed that people in China generally believe that police patrols and incarceration are powerful deterrents against crime (S. Jiang et al., 2014; Lambert et al., 2007). Such perception is expected to be stronger among offenders in China, where the rate of prosecution and conviction has remained continuously high (L. Li, 2014). Given the high conviction rate and the immediacy of legal procedures, convicted offenders who have previously

offended may feel more immediate and real about the consequences of crime. Thus, this study hypothesized that in China,

2a. Most active offenders and regular citizens perceive law enforcement as a powerful deterrence to crime.
2b. Active offenders have higher levels of perceptual deterrence of law enforcement than regular citizens.
3a. Most active offenders and regular citizens believe in perceived deterrence of imprisonment.
3b. Active offenders have higher levels of perceptual deterrence of imprisonment than regular citizens.

Another two important indicator of perceptual deterrence is related to community watch programs and public humiliation. Crime control in China is characterized by a total society approach, in which the government ''mobilizes a variety of social forces, such as political, economic, cultural, judicial, educational, and the media, to prevent crime and keep social order'' (S. Jiang et al., 2010, p. 461). In the domain of community corrections, the local justice office collaborates closely with community committees and relevant units or groups such as offenders' former employers, schools, and families to form a team to supervise, educate and reform offenders. Citizens in the communities believe that they have the right and duty to intervene in behavior leading to crime. In this context, community watch programs literally consist of volunteers and voluntary groups. However, in practice, they are a part of the total society approach in community order maintenance and crime prevention (S. Jiang et al., 2014). They are led by a semiformal or semiofficial organization called residential committee (*ju wei hui*) in urban area. A residential committee is directed by the city-street government and closely works with the neighborhood police station (*pai chu suo*) (Zhang et al., 2007, 2017). Thus, neighborhood watch programs in China are an informal governance mechanism but are heavily marked by semiformal and formal organizations. China's neighborhood watch programs do not encourage residents to fight with crime directly, but monitor and report suspicious or criminal behaviors to their residential committees or the neighborhood police station (X. Li, 2010).

In addition, China is a collectivistic society. Collectivism generally puts the group's welfare over individual interests. An individual's privacy in China was historically ignored and is still often sacrificed today under the name of public interest. Under collectivism, a resident in a community is supposed to communicate with other neighbors and participate in community activities. Meanwhile, the community, represented by residential committee in urban areas, is expected to take care of its residents (S. Jiang & Lambert, 2009). Neighborhood watchers are from the local community and know their neighbors, which allows them to easily recognize strangers and monitor their behaviors. Another term related to collectivism in China is *mianzi*, meaning saving face, or keeping "dignity" or "prestige" (J. Liu et al., 2020). "As part of their collectivistic culture, Chinese people are attuned to how others view them in order to gain *mianzi*" (Lin et al., 2019, p. 5). "One of the worst things that can happen in Chinese

culture is to lose face" (J. Liu et al., 2020, p. 807). *Mianzi* makes neighborhood watch programs effective in preventing residents within the neighborhood from engaging in deviant behaviors or committing crime since they are afraid of being caught by neighborhood watchers and losing family face.

Offenders may also have the heightened sense of deterrence because they are more likely to perceive themselves as threats to the community and therefore may more fully perceive the collective resistance they would face if they were to reoffend. Previous empirical studies conducted in China have shown that a majority of respondents hold the view that neighborhood watches are a powerful deterrent to crime (S. Jiang et al., 2014). According to the above discussion, this study hypothesized that:

4a. Most active offenders and regular citizens perceive neighborhood watch programs as a powerful deterrence to crime.
4b. Active offenders have higher levels of perceptual deterrence of neighborhood watches than regular citizens.

Public humiliation or embarrassment represents a part of the contemporary deterrence theory (Grasmick et al., 1993) and contributes to the development of perceived deterrence. Confucianism in China has long emphasized the importance of moralized effect of shame and embarrassment and continues to be employed to deter people from committing deviant and criminal behavior (E. Li, 2023; Wu & Beken, 2018; Yang, 2017). Until recently, public sentencing rallies in China served as one of the practices in criminal justice to educate and deter the public from committing crime and to discourage offenders from recidivism (Trevaskes, 2003). A few previous studies revealed that people either agree or strongly agree that the fear of public humiliation is a powerful deterrent to crime in China (e.g., S. Jiang & Lambert, 2009). Offenders who have previously faced public shaming or embarrassment due to their criminal actions may be more deterred by the prospect of facing it again compared to general population. Moreover, many offenders, once experience public humiliation, face difficulties reintegrating into society due to the associated stigma, which may further increase their perceived deterrence. According to the above discussion, this study hypothesized that:

5a. Most active offenders and regular citizens perceive public humiliation or embarrassment as a powerful deterrence to crime.
5b. Active offenders have higher levels of perceptual deterrence of public embarrassment than regular citizens.

Previous studies in the West have also suggested that the level of a perceived deterrence is conditional on individual socio-demographic characteristics (Crouch, 1993; Lee et al., 2018; Nagin, 1998; Wodahl et al., 2009; Wood & Grasmick, 1999). For example, it was found that women are more likely than men to view prison as more punitive than community corrections due to increased familial responsibilities and the greater geographical separation of prisons from their families. In other words, imprisonment would be more costly for women than for men (e.g., Wood & Grasmick, 1999).

In addition, based on social control theories, Crouch (1993) suggested that "persons with weak ties to conventional institutions such as marriage and education might be more likely to reject the state's utilitarian hierarchy of punishment severity and to regard prison as a much less devastating personal experience than penal codes presume" (p. 70). His empirical research found that married, more educated respondents were less likely than the unmarried, less educated to choose prison compared to other alternative sanctions. Employment status is also an indicator of investment or involvement in conventional institutions, increasing the likelihood that employed individuals would accept the state's hierarchy of punishment severity. Similarly, age represents a measure of life experience and maturity. Older individuals may align more positively with conventional risk assessments of sanctions. For an older, more educated, married, or employed person, a punishment would cost more compared to a person who is younger, less educated, unmarried, or unemployed.

Since China does not have this type of assessment, we were not sure about whether the above individual characteristics mediate the relationship between personal criminal experience and the perceived deterrence of a sanction or a crime controlling mechanism. Thus, we did not make an assumption about them. They are included in this study as control variables.

Methods

Sample and Questionnaire

This study used the data from two different surveys: one focusing on probationers while the other on regular citizens. The offender data were collected in City W, China in 2016. At the time of this survey (August–September 2016), city W had approximately 10.6 million permanent residents. The city comprised 13 districts, included 162 local justice offices, and had a population of 3,307 offenders under community corrections. The research team initially selected four districts out of the thirteen based on their accessibility and geographical distribution throughout the city. In August and September 2016, two of these selected districts arranged meetings or trainings for all offenders and allowed the research team to distribute questionnaires to them. As a result, the respondents selected from these two districts were exclusively offenders who participated in the district-organized meetings or trainings. However, due to the unavailability of such meetings or trainings in the other two districts, the research team sent interviewers to local justice offices to collect data and collaborated diligently with them to conduct surveys with the offenders under their supervision. In each local justice office, one or more offenders participated in the surveys at one time. This led to the approach of 370 offenders and 351 of them finished the survey.

Regarding the regular citizen's data, the study collected information from City Z, China, in 2016, where the total population was about 1.67 million. The survey used a purposed sample method to select participants from two groups: college students and non-college student citizens. The student sample was drawn from a college offering majors in social sciences, law, and social work, along with a wide range of other

majors. After the survey organizers sought and obtained approval from the college authorities to conduct the survey, trained interviewers were sent to various locations within the college, such as cafeterias, libraries, and student dormitories, engaging with students and asking agreements from those willing to participate. Interested students were then invited to a few classrooms to complete the questionnaire. A total of 240 questionnaires were distributed and 210 valid questionnaires were successfully collected. As for the non-college student citizen survey, the survey organizer obtained official approval from authorities and the police to select four communities with size varying from 5,000 to 100,000 residents. These diverse communities reflected different city areas and socioeconomic backgrounds. Within the chosen communities, trained interviewers randomly selected residents' homes guided by community committee members. In each chosen household, the community committee selected one member aged 18 or above to visit a community recreational facility and complete the questionnaire. This process ensured the representation of diverse family types and essential resident characteristics. Out of 225 questionnaires distributed, 216 valid responses were collected from respondents.[1] Combining the college student and non-college student citizen surveys in city Z, 426 questionnaires were completed and used in this study.

The surveys in City W and City Z were based on the international collaboration. The questionnaires were developed through the integration of literature reviews and field observations in China, further refined through several rounds of pretests and revisions. Both surveys used a face-to-face interview approach to enhance their validity and reliability. Interviewers for each survey underwent training led by the survey organizers and assisted by international collaborators, covering effective questioning and accurate response recording techniques. During interviews, participants were informed of the survey's scholarly nature and the utilization of findings for policy-making implications, the confidential treatment of survey data to ensure no identification in publications, and the voluntary nature of survey participation.

Measures

Dependent Variables. The questions used to measure the dependent variables in this study are identical in the City W and City Z surveys. All the questions asked the respondents to give their choices based on the answer categories of strongly disagree (=1), disagree (=2), uncertain (=3), agree (=4), and strongly agree (=5). The measure of each dependent variable is as follow:

Deterrence of capital punishment: this variable was measured by the question "Capital punishment is a powerful deterrent to crime." *Deterrence of imprisonment*: measured by this question "Imprisonment is a powerful deterrent to crime." *Deterrence of police patrol*: measured by this question "Police patrol is a powerful deterrent to crime." *Deterrence of neighborhood watches*: measured by this question "Neighborhood or community watches (or committees) are a powerful deterrent to crime." *Deterrence of public humiliation*: measured by this question "The fear of public humiliation is a powerful deterrent to crime."

Independent Variables. The measurement of the independent variables for the City W and City Z are also the same. *Personal criminal experience* was measured by type of respondents with non-offender coded as 0 and offender as 1. *Age* was measured by years. *Gender* was coded as male = 1 and female = 0. *Education* was measured by primary school (=1, or completed 1–6 years of formal education), middle school (=2, or 7–9 years), high school (=3, or 10–12 years), college (=4, or 13–16 years), and graduate (=5, or at least 17 years). *Employment status* was measured by asking whether a respondent was employed at the survey time with yes = 1 and no = 0. *Marital status* was measured by asking if a respondent was married at the survey time with yes = 1 and no = 0.

Analytic Strategies

The dependent variables in this study are the five-point Likert scale variables. First, we used t-test to examine the difference between two sample (offenders vs. regular citizens) means. Then we treated the dependent variables and two groups (active offenders vs. regular citizens) as two categorical variables and used a chi-square test as a robust test to see if the two variables are correlated. In other words, the test was used to examine whether active offenders and regular citizens differ in terms of likelihood in the perceived deterrence of each sanction or criminal justice agency.

To further test whether relationships between the two variables above are mediated or explained by other variables, we used multiple regression analyses. First, we used the ordinary linear regression (OLS) to estimate the effect of personal criminal experience (active offenders vs. regular citizens) on the perceived deterrence of each type of sanctions or criminal justice agencies. Although using ordinary linear regression for estimates may not be as robust as ordinal regression as the dependent variables are ordinal, we chose to present OLS results for ease of interpretation. OLS regression provides a straightforward interpretation of the relationship between predictors and outcomes, whereas ordinal regression often produces odds ratios, which can be more difficult to interpret. Meanwhile, this study also conducted the generalized linear regression (ordinal regression) for robust checks. By comparing the results from ordinal regression models with those from the OLS models, we found no changes in the statistical significance of the regression coefficients. Given the robust checks, we decided to report estimates in Table 3 based on the results from the ordinary linear regression analyses. This approach allows us to have both the robust estimates and simple interpretation of the results.

Findings

Table 2 presents the data on the perceived deterrence of each sanction or criminal justice agency for offenders and regular citizens. The percentage of the perceived deterrence varies from 52 (public humiliation) to 80 (police patrol) for offenders and from 48 (public humiliation) to 70 (capital punishment) for regular citizens. For both offenders and regular citizens, formal sanctions (capital punishment, imprisonment,

Table 2. The Perceived Deterrence Comparisons Between Offenders and Regular Citizens.

Question	Mean	*t*-Test (sig)	Frequency (%) SD	D	U	A	SA	Total	Chi-square (sig)
Capital punishment is a powerful deterrence to crime		0.179							0.052
Offender	3.86		5 (1)	15 (3)	79 (23)	175 (50)	74 (21)	348	
Regular citizens	3.77		9 (2)	39 (9)	76 (18)	212 (50)	84 (20)	420	
Imprisonment is a powerful deterrence to crime		0.001							0.017
Offender	3.81		8 (2)	16 (5)	72 (21)	191 (55)	61 (18)	348	
Regular citizens	3.60		13 (3)	42 (10)	10 (2)	210 (50)	55 (13)	421	
Police patrol is a powerful deterrence to crime		0.001							0.001
Offender	3.97		3 (1)	6 (2)	60 (17)	208 (60)	71 (20)	348	
Regular citizens	3.71		6 (1)	32 (8)	111 (26)	201 (48)	70 (17)	420	
Neighborhood watches (or committees) are a powerful deterrent to crime		0.001							0.001
Offender	3.88		2 (1)	11 (3)	68 (20)	212 (61)	54 (16)	347	
Regular citizens	3.33		9 (2)	80 (19)	122 (29)	178 (42)	30 (7)	419	
The fear of public humiliation is a powerful deterrent to crime		0.003							0.003
Offender	3.50		7 (2)	31 (9)	128 (37)	143 (41)	38 (11)	347	
Regular citizens	3.30		18 (4)	62 (15)	138 (33)	178 (42)	24 (6)	420	

Note. SD = strongly disagree; D = disagree; U = uncertain; A = agree; SA = strongly agree.

police patrol) are more deterrent than informal sanctions (neighborhood watches and public humiliation). The results in the table show the full support for hypotheses 1a, 2a, and 3a. That is, the majority of respondents (offenders or regular citizens) agreed or strongly agreed that capital punishment, imprisonment, and police patrol are powerful deterrence to crime. The results in Table 2 also provide partial support for hypotheses 4a and 5a. That is, the majority of the offenders agreed or strongly agreed neighborhood watches (77%) or the fear of public humiliation (52%) is a powerful deterrent to crime while slightly less than the majority of regular citizens said so (49% and 48%, respectively).

Both *t*-tests and chi square tests were used to compare offenders and regular citizens in perceived deterrence. According to Table 2, both types of tests showed the consistent results in terms of statistical significance. The perceived deterrence of imprisonment, police patrol, neighborhood watches, and public humiliation differs between offenders and regular citizens, supporting the hypotheses 2b, 3b, 4b, and 5b. The perceptual deterrence of capital punishment is the same for the two groups, supporting the hypothesis 1b.

Multiple regression analyses were used to further investigate whether offenders and regular citizens differ in the perceptual deterrence of each sanction or criminal justice agency, controlling for other variables. A visual inspection of Table 3 shows that the status of respondents (or personal criminal experience) is a predictor of neighborhood watches, but not a predictor of the other four dependent variables.

In addition to our major focus on whether personal criminal experience affects their perceptual deterrence of sanctions or criminal justice agencies, individual characteristics were included to examine differential deterrence. Age, education, and employment status were significant predictors of the perceived deterrence of capital punishment. Gender, age, and employment status were significant predictors of the perceptual deterrence of police patrol.

In sum, findings in this study show that compared to regular citizens, offenders exhibited higher levels of perceived deterrence associated with most sanctions or criminal justice agencies. Furthermore, all the differences between offenders and regular citizens in the perceived deterrence except for capital punishment were statistically significant. These findings are consistent with findings from the West that personal criminal experience such as arrests, prosecutions, or convictions amplifies the perceived risks of potential punishment (Anwar & Loughran, 2011; Apel, 2013; Chalfin & McCrary, 2017; Nagin, 2013; Wodahl et al., 2009). It is noteworthy that all offenders in this study were serving their community corrections during the survey period, indicating that each of them had experienced the entire process from arrest to sentencing. These findings imply that personal criminal experience could predict perceptual deterrence concerning sanctions and controlling agencies in China.

Discussion and Conclusion

Some issues are worth further discussion. First, the deterrence power of formal control or punishment (capital punishment, imprisonment, and police patrol) is high (more

Table 3. Regression Results with the Types of Perceived Deterrence as the Dependent Variables.

	Dependent variable				
Independent variable	Capital punishment	Imprisonment	Police patrol	Neighborhood	Public humiliation
Respondent (offender = 1)	−0.112 (0.107)	0.041 (0.108)	−0.127 (0.095)	0.458*** (0.102)	0.093 (0.109)
Gender (male = 1)	0.041 (0.083)	0.081 (0.084)	0.242*** (0.074)	0.049 (0.080)	−0.022 (0.085)
Age	0.009** (0.003)	0.006 (0.003)	0.011** (0.003)	0.003 (0.003)	0.006 (0.004)
ED	0.111** (0.042)	−0.005 (0.043)	0.026 (0.038)	−0.009 (0.040)	−0.001 (0.043)
Marital status (married = 1)	0.130 (0.086)	0.014 (0.087)	0.093 (0.076)	0.005 (0.082)	0.063 (0.087)
Employment (employed = 1)	0.185* (0.072)	0.052 (0.073)	0.244*** (0.064)	0.093 (0.069)	−0.092 (0.073)
R^2	.045	.024	.107	.109	.019

Note. (1) The results above were from the OLS regression analyses. The numbers in each cell include regression coefficient and standard error (in the parenthesis). The results from the ordinal regression analysis of the dependent variables are the same as those shown in the table in terms of whether a coefficient is statistically significant. (2) Numbers in each cell are regression coefficients and standard errors (in parenthesis), respectively. (3) ED stands for education.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

than 50% for both active offenders and general population. This is consistent with findings from the previous studies shown in Table 1. Furthermore, a couple of comparative studies found that the perceived deterrence power of formal control (e.g., death penalty) is stronger in China than in the US (S. Jiang et al., 2007, 2010). Jiang et al. (2007) explained why Chinese people strongly believe in the deterrence power of capital punishment and their perceived deterrence was higher than that of their American counterparts. One of the reasons is that China lacks published scientific research on deterrence of capital punishment while the US has a lot of this type of studies. Meanwhile, Chinese people have long believed in the deterrence of the death penalty and trust government and government's supportive view of the deterrence of capital punishment while American people are more critical of government and more access to scientific research results on the deterrence of the death penalty. Another possible explanation is that deterrence is more socially acceptable in supporting the death penalty than retribution or incapacitation while it is opposite in the US.

Second, when individual characteristics were added into the multiple regression analysis personal criminal experience is still a significant predictor for the perceived deterrence of neighborhood watches. Personal criminal experience accounted for slightly more than 9% of the observed variance in the perceived deterrence of neighborhood watches. The remaining 91% of variance was attributed to other unexamined variables.

The strong deterrence power of neighborhood watch programs can be better understood with further investigation of them in China. Chinese neighborhood watch programs are quite different from those in the West, particularly in the US. First, as noted before, neighborhood watches are led by residential committees—semiformal organizations and a part of the government-led total society system in maintaining community order and safety. Thus, they are not voluntary programs in a Western sense. Second, neighborhood watch programs operate under collectivism in China compared to those programs operating under individualism in the West. That means, citizens' privacy is secondary to the local community interests, resulting in more acquaintance among neighbors, including knowledge of their private lives compared to their Western counterparts. The combination of mianzi and acquaintance under collectivistic China allows neighborhood watchers to easily recognize strangers in the local community and deter residents within the community from committing deviant or criminal behaviors since they have heightened concern about not only personal face but also family face or prestige (S. Liu et al., 2020, p. 807). Third, although neighborhood watch programs in China have less professional training (Jiang et al., 2014; X. Li, 2010), they may have closer collaboration with the community police and residential committees in monitoring and reporting suspicious or criminal behavior. They believe that "the social group has the right and duty to intervene in behavior that might lead to crime" (Bracey, 1984 cited by Jiang et al., 2014, p. 39). In the US, although it is needed, residents in most high-crime neighborhoods do not participate in neighborhood watch programs (Rosenbaum, 1987). All the differences described above may explain why neighborhood watch programs were perceived as a powerful deterrent to crime in China.

Based on the bivariate association analysis, personal criminal experience is associated with imprisonment, police patrol and public humiliation. However, after controlling for individual socio-demographic characteristics in the model, personal criminal experience is no longer a predictor of the perceptual deterrence of them. That means, socio-demographic variables mediate the relationship between personal criminal experience and these dependent variables. Specifically, for police patrol, a visual inspection of Table 3 shows that gender, age, and employment status are the mediators. The appendix at the end of this paper shows that offenders were older and had a significantly higher percentage of males and being employed at the survey time than the general population, which included a lot of college students. These differences explain why offenders were more likely to believe that police patrol is a powerful deterrence to crime. For imprisonment and public humiliation, although the relationship between these and personal criminal experience is no longer significant after controlling for individual socio-demographic characteristics, none of these characteristics is a statistically significant predictor in Table 3. It is worth noting that in order to control for the same variables across all the dependent variable regressions, these regression models used a variable selection procedure in which all the control variables were entered as a block in a single step, which produced the results shown in Table 3. To further examine whether the imprisonment—personal criminal experience relationship and the public humiliation—personal criminal experience relationship are each mediated by any individual characteristics, a forward variable selection method was used. Age was the only significant mediator for these two relationships (results available upon to the request). This may be explained by developmental theory which suggests that "psychological traits such as sensation seeking, impulsivity, future orientation, and delay discounting follow developmental patterns across age" (Lee et al, 2018, p. 1764). It may also be explained by the collectivistic culture. In such a culture, older people are more likely to protect their *mianzi* and care more about understanding and accepting widely shared values or views (e.g., deterrence of criminal justice control mechanisms and/or sanctions). Losing *mianzi* can be one of the worst things in their lives (J. Liu et al., 2020). Thus, the social cost of losing *mianzi* is high.

A further visual inspection of Table 3 shows that, for all the dependent variables, at least 89% of the observed variance cannot be explained by the variables included in the models. There is a need for future research to incorporate a broader range of independent variables that could potentially shed light on the mechanisms explaining the dependent variables.

In addition to the modest explanation power of personal criminal experience and the included control variables, the current study has other limitations. First, the samples in this study were not randomly selected, potentially raising two concerns. The two groups may not be comparable. Even though we used multiple regression to statistically control for some variables, there remains possibility that unexamined variables may contribute to the relationships between independent and dependent variables. For example, offenders and regular citizens were selected from two different cities. Neighborhood conditions from these cities may differ from each other and may affect

the respondents' perceived deterrence of formal control, informal control, and sanctions. Moreover, findings from the current study cannot be generalized to the larger populations from which the samples (offenders and regular citizens) were drawn. Second, measurement is also a limitation. While employing multiple questions generally enhances the content validity of a variable, each of the dependent variables in current study was assessed using a single question.

Nonetheless, this study advances the existing literature in several ways. First, it marks the first comparative exploration of the perceptual deterrence of punishment and control mechanisms between offenders and general population in China. Second, in line with expectations, both offenders and general population in China exhibit high levels of perceived deterrence of capital punishment, imprisonment, police patrol, neighborhood watches, and public humiliation, with the offenders demonstrating higher levels of the perceived deterrence for each dependent variable. Third, although personal criminal experience was associated with the dependent variables except for capital punishment, it was a predictor solely for the perceived deterrence of neighborhood watches after controlling for other variables. Age was an important mediator between personal criminal experience and the perceived deterrence of formal and informal control mechanisms and sanctions, which may be explained by developmental theory or by Chinese collectivistic culture. Future research is warranted to investigate the perceptual deterrence of formal and informal sanctions in China and other non-Western countries. This demand is especially valid for offenders, as they are arguably a more policy-relevant group for deterrence studies (Loughran et al., 2012).

Appendix

Control Variables: Active Offender—General Population Comparison.

	Mean		
Variable	Active offender	General population	Sig
Sex (m = 1)	0.85	0.25	$\alpha < .001$ (χ^2 test)
Age (in year)	41.50	25.93	$\alpha < .002$ (*t*-test)
Ed	2.98	3.88	$\alpha < .001$ (χ^2 test)
Marital status (married = 1)	0.70	0.21	$\alpha < .001$(χ^2 test)
Employment (employed = 1)	0.67	0.39	$\alpha < .001$(χ^2 test)

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Data Availability

The dataset analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

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Ethical Considerations

The data was adopted from a survey organized by Zhuhai Lingnan Social Governance Research Institute and approved by its Ethics Committee. This study complied with local regulations and received the necessary approvals from relevant authorities in China.

Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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Note

1. Surveys in China are easier to yield a high response rate when researchers get access and official approval from the government. This is due to the Confucianism that government can be trusted, and the long-time propaganda "Serve the People" (*Wei Ren Min Fu Wu*). Chinese government is called "People's Government" (*Ren Min Zheng Fu*), which means citizens' own government, literally. This gives researchers opportunity to achieve high response rates if they get access and official approval from the government, as the respondents are then very likely to trust, accept, and complete the research questionnaire carefully. Besides, the collectivist orientation prevalent in East Asian societies, including China, is likely a key factor contributing to the high response rates in surveys (Holtom et al., 2022; Zhuo et al., 2023). Furthermore, it is a common phenomenon that studies conducted in China receive high responses rates (S. Liu & Liu, 2018). For example, 89.8% in Liang et al.'s (2024) study, 98.9% in Zhuo et al.'s (2023) study, and 90.4% in Wu et al.'s (2023) study. Table 2 provides more examples.

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