

Investigating the views of young adults in Greece on criminal behaviour, psychological influences, and the role of media in shaping beliefs about responsibility and rehabilitation

Evangelou K¹, Pavlidou L¹, Belimezakis N¹, Zervas V¹, Hadjiphilippou M², Louka C³

¹ Department of Medicine, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece

² Department of Nursing, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece

³ Department of Chemistry, University of Cyprus, Nicosia, Cyprus

INTRODUCTION

Public ideas about “what makes a criminal” are shaped by psychological concepts and widespread crime-related media.

Beliefs about causes of crime, mental disorder, and punishment versus rehabilitation influence expectations of forensic psychiatry.

AIM

To examine how young adults understand the causes of criminality, the role of psychological factors, and the impact of crime-related media on beliefs about legal responsibility, mitigation, and rehabilitation.

METHODS

We conducted a cross-sectional, self-administered survey with 32 young adults in Greece (13 males, 40.6%; 19 females, 59.4%), aged 18–30 years.

The structured questionnaire comprised 10 multiple-choice items plus demographics (gender, education).

Causal beliefs were assessed with items on the main perceived cause of criminal behaviour (five options: childhood trauma, genetic/biological factors, mental illness, moral failure, social environment) and on whether criminals are “born,” “made,” or both.

Legal attributions were explored with questions on acceptance of childhood trauma/abuse as a mitigating factor, perceived responsibility of people with psychological disorders, and whether mental illness can explain criminal acts.

Affective reactions were captured by an item on change in sympathy toward offenders after learning about their background or mental health.

Media-related items assessed frequency of crime-content consumption (five-point scale from “never” to “daily”) and perceived media influence on views of criminals (four-point scale from “no influence” to “strong influence”).

Two items asked about support for increased psychological assessments and whether punishment should focus on rehabilitation, retribution, or depend on the crime.

Descriptive statistics (counts, percentages) were calculated, and Chi-Square tests examined associations between key variables.

RESULTS

For the main cause of criminal behaviour, 34.4% (n=11) chose childhood trauma, 28.1% (n=9) social environment, 21.9% (n=7) moral failure, 12.5% (n=4) mental illness, and 3.1% (n=1) genetic/biological factors. Consistently, 40.6% (n=13) believed criminals are “made,” 43.8% (n=14) saw both nature and nurture as equally important, and only 15.6% (n=5) believed criminals are “born.”

Regarding childhood trauma as mitigation, 15.6% (n=5) endorsed it as always a mitigating factor, 56.3% (n=18) “sometimes,” 18.8% (n=6) “rarely,” and 9.4% (n=3) “no.” Mental illness was recognised as an explanatory factor, with 40.6% (n=13) stating it can completely explain some crimes, 40.6% (n=13) partially, and 18.8% (n=6) rejecting it as an explanation.

Views on legal responsibility were more restrictive: 34.4% (n=11) saw offenders with

psychological disorders as fully responsible, 28.1% (n=9) partially responsible, 12.5% (n=4) not responsible, and 25.0% (n=8) reported that responsibility depends on the disorder.

After learning about an offender’s history or mental health, 6.3% (n=2) reported no sympathy, 40.6% (n=13) “somewhat” increased sympathy, 21.9% (n=7) “significantly” increased sympathy, and 31.3% (n=10) no change. Gender was not significantly associated with sympathy levels ($\chi^2(3)=3.431$, $p=0.330$).

Crime-related media exposure: 3.1% (n=1) consumed such content daily, 34.4% (n=11) several times a week, 43.8% (n=14) once a week, 15.6% (n=5) rarely, and 3.1% (n=1) never.

Perceived media influence on views of criminals was reported as slight by 25.0% (n=8), moderate by 40.6% (n=13), strong by 25.0% (n=8), and absent by 9.4% (n=3).

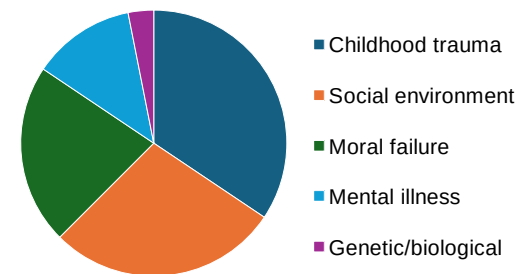
Frequency of crime-content consumption was significantly associated with beliefs about the main cause of crime ($\chi^2(16)=39.787$, $p=0.0008$), with heavier consumers more often endorsing psychological causes (childhood trauma or mental illness).

Education level was not significantly related to perceived responsibility of offenders with psychological disorders ($\chi^2(9)=4.736$, $p=0.857$).

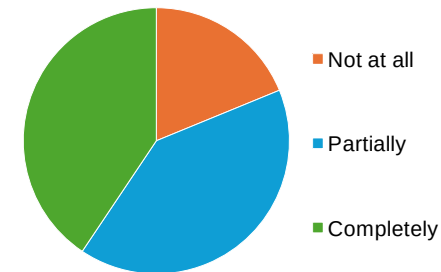
Similarly, whether respondents believed criminals are born, made, or both was not significantly associated with their support for childhood trauma as a mitigating factor ($\chi^2(6)=6.025$, $p=0.420$).

Belief that mental illness explains crime was not significantly linked to responsibility ratings ($\chi^2(6)=8.584$, $p=0.198$), although those endorsing “yes, completely” more often chose partial or reduced responsibility categories.

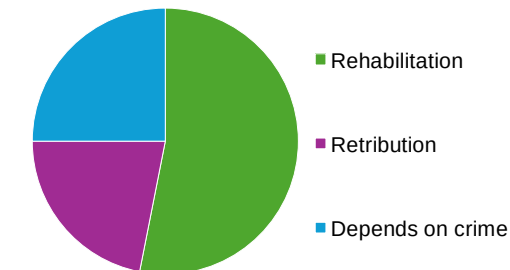
What makes a criminal?



Can mental illness explain crime?



Punishment: rehabilitation or retribution?



A majority (71.9%, n=23) supported increased psychological assessments for defendants, with a further 12.5% (n=4) supporting this at least in violent cases.

Regarding sentencing philosophy, 53.1% (n=17) prioritised rehabilitation, 21.9% (n=7) favoured retribution, and 25.0% (n=8) stated that the appropriate focus depends on the crime.

CONCLUSION

In this sample of young adults in Greece, criminal behaviour seems to be predominantly understood as environmentally shaped, with childhood trauma and social environment central.

Mental illness is widely acknowledged as explanatory, but it does not automatically translate into support for reduced legal responsibility.

Media consumption, rather than gender or education, emerges as the key correlate of how criminality is conceptualised, underscoring the relevance of media literacy and nuanced forensic psychiatric communication with the public.

CORRESPONDENCE

Kyriacos Evangelou;

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens;
evangeloukyriacos@gmail.com

Lydia Pavlidou;

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens;
lydiapav00@gmail.com