

THE ROLE OF EMPATHY IN CRIME, POLICING, AND JUSTICE

by Chad Posick, Northeastern University

Empathy refers to a person's ability to understand the emotions of others and share in their feelings. Researchers in many fields have shown that empathy – or its absence – matters greatly in many aspects of social life. For example, empathetic people are more likely to have strong ties to family members and others with whom they regularly work or interact. And individuals capable of empathy have higher self-esteem and enjoy life more fully. The flip side is also true: people who have trouble empathizing with others tend to suffer from poorer mental health and have less fulfilling social relationships.

Researchers are showing that empathy also matters in crime and punishment, and recent findings suggest important steps that can be taken to reduce juvenile delinquency and improve relationships between communities and police.

How Empathy Matters

My associates and I have reviewed recent research and done some additional analyses to pin down what is currently known about empathy – and perceptions of empathy – in the realm of crime and justice. When other factors, like age, sex, race, education, and income are taken into account, empathy turns out to matter in several ways:

- ***Empathetic people are less likely to engage in delinquency or crime.*** But those who have trouble perceiving how others feel, and have difficulty sharing those feelings, are more likely to engage in wrongful acts – everything from minor juvenile delinquency to the most serious of violent crimes.
- ***Empathy affects how people think about crime and punishment in complex ways.*** People capable of empathy tend to support tough punishments for crime, but at the same time they are less likely to call for the harshest punishments, such as the death penalty.
- ***Empathy and perceptions of empathy help to shape the interactions of police and members of the communities they are assigned to protect.*** Research on citizen interactions with the police has consistently indicated that the way officers behave determines how they are evaluated by people with whom they interact. When we probe in detail, it turns out community members have more positive evaluations of the police when officers communicate that they understand the issues that matter to community members. Studies specifically show that the police are more likely to be trusted and considered effective at their jobs when they display empathy with the community's concerns.

Researchers have more to learn about how empathy and perceptions of empathy help to shape crime and interactions between citizens and agents of the justice system. But enough is known

already to help us make improvements. Policymakers, police and courts, and nonprofit and community groups are already taking useful steps toward these improvements – and more can be done in several key areas.

Preventing and Dealing with Juvenile Delinquency

Few social issues are more pressing than heading off misdeeds by children and teenagers that lead to trouble with police and courts – and can set young people off on the wrong paths in adult life. Empathy research shows that we can make real gains by paying careful attention to how people think, feel, and perceive others in their surroundings, including how young people learn to identify with others and show concern for their feelings.

- Reaching children early with efforts to help them understand how others feel can reduce the likelihood of youthful wrongdoing. Schools, for example, can do role-playing exercises that ask children how the others feel about a mishap.
- When delinquent acts do happen, part of the response should go beyond punishment (and efforts to separate the perpetrator from misbehaving peers) to include educating the delinquent about victims' reactions and feelings.

The Emotions of Criminals and Victims

When punishment is exacted for crimes, research suggests that society's responses should consider the emotional reactions of victims and offenders. Punishments certainly need to be perceived by all citizens as just and appropriate to particular crimes. But overly harsh punishments – such as the death penalty or overly long prison sentences for relatively minor offenses – may not actually reduce future crimes. Other approaches might achieve more good.

In addition to efforts to prevent deficits in empathy among children and young people, criminal justice authorities can also look for ways to have criminals provide restoration to victims. Restorative justice measures – such as required community service, or having perpetrators learn about and teach others about the sad effects of misdeeds on families, friends, and themselves – might help to prevent future crimes and build confidence and satisfaction about the criminal justice system. Certain kinds of restorative justice can also promote a sense of healing among those victimized by crimes.

Take Account of Empathy in Police Training

This is one of the most promising areas for improvements. Curricula for the training and retraining of police can provide officers with ways to be more effective and improve community reactions to their efforts. Training can include steps to help officers learn about and show empathy for the concerns of the specific communities and neighborhoods where they work. Likewise, training can show new officers how to display their understanding of community values and needs when they interact with citizens. Showing such empathy, we know, increases trust and confidence in the police. And when citizens have greater trust in the police during daily interactions, officers get more cooperation and find it easier to protect themselves along with the communities they serve.

Read more in Chad Posick, Michael Rocque, and Nicole Rafter, "[More Than a Feeling: Integrating Empathy into the Study of Lawmaking, Lawbreaking, and Reactions to Lawbreaking.](#)" *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* (November 2012).