

Introduction

Punishment is pricey

- Taxpayers spend over \$250 billion to incarcerate offenders each year. The cost to incarcerate a single inmate is \$30,000 per year [1].
- Sentencing policies and practices are supported by public opinion.
- Understanding how people formulate punishment attitudes and decisions is essential to the health of our correctional system.

People are irrational

- Human decision-making frequently violates rational expectations [2].
- People do not place equal consideration on all relevant costs and benefits of a decision, but tend to underweight indirect and opportunity costs [3, 4].
- People make riskier choices when bargaining with other people's money [5].

Indirect costs are an inherent part of criminal sentencing

- Dollars spent on incarceration can no longer be used for other government-funded programs such as education and job training (opportunity cost).
- Corrections budget is composed of public tax dollars (other people's money).

Does cost neglect operate in criminal sentencing judgments?

H1: Punishments made after presentation of information about the costs of incarceration (post-cost) will be smaller than pre-cost punishments.

H2: As the putative cost of incarceration increases, recommended punishments will decrease.

H3: a) Punishments will be smaller when cost is direct rather than externalized or unspecified. b) However, punishments with externalized or unspecified costs will not differ.

Methods

Participants - Exp. 1 | Exp 2.

- 105 | 229 Georgia State University undergraduates participated for course credit
- 70.2 | 76% female; 16.2 | 11.8% Hispanic or Latino; 43.8 | 35.8% White/Caucasian, 32.4 | 46.3% Black or African American, 24.8 | 18.3% Asian, 10.5 | 7% Mixed.

Methods (contd.)

Experiment 1: w/i subjects

- **Crime:** Home invasion
- **IV1:** Cost Salience (pre vs. post)
- **IV2:** Cost Size (\$30k increments)
- **DV:** Sentence recommendation



Illustration: Christina Martinez Byvik

Experiment 2: b/w subjects

- **Crime:** Aggravated robbery
- **IV:** Cost Type
 - Unspecified
 - Externalized (taxpayers bare no cost)
 - Direct cost (\$31,000/yr, \$200 per taxpayer)
 - Direct cost (\$101,000/yr, \$200 per taxpayer)
- **DV1:** Sentence recommendation
- **DV2:** Subjective punishment recommendation

Results

Exp. 1: Main effects of cost salience and size on sentence length

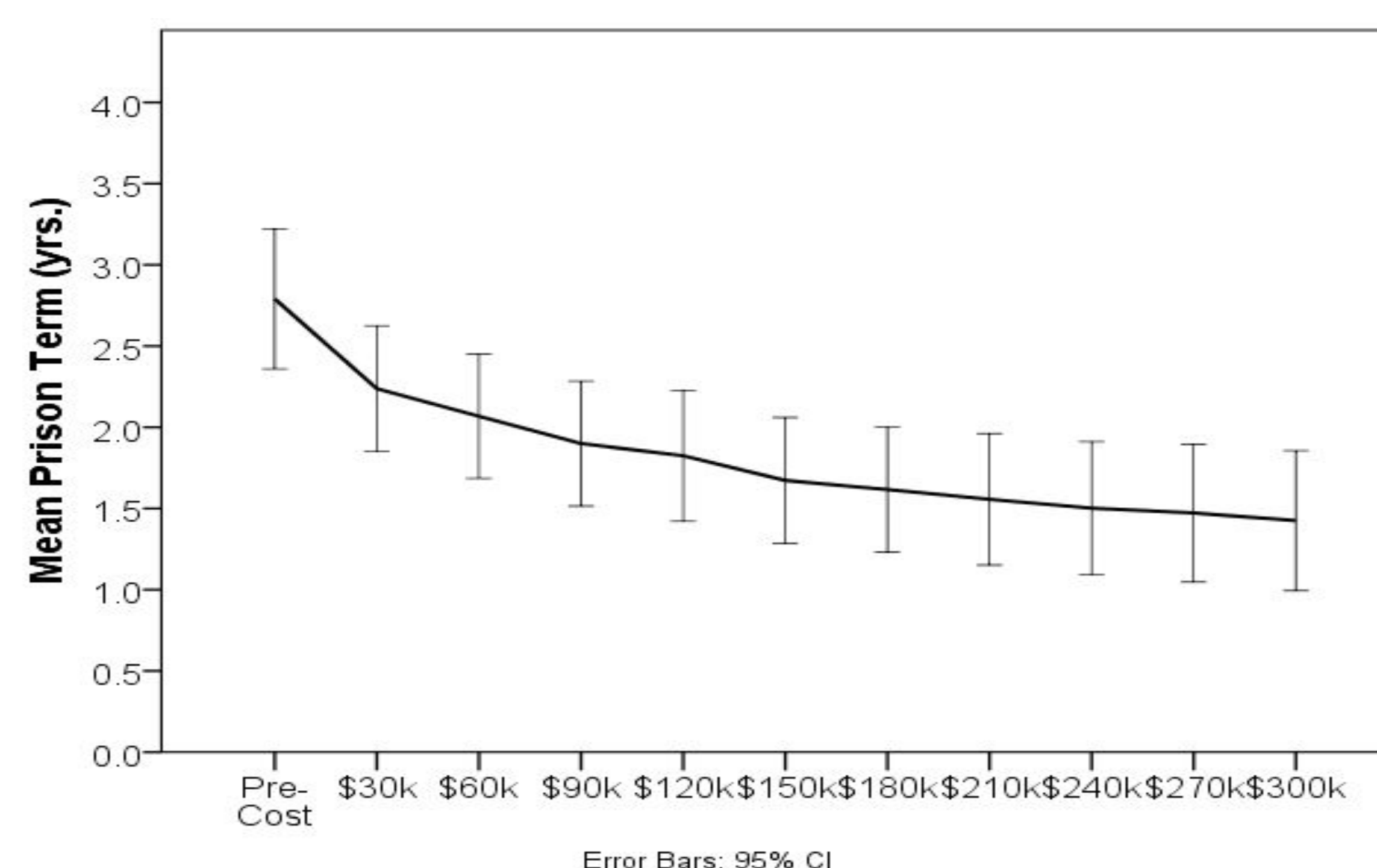


Figure 1. Mean sentence length as a function of cost. Error bars indicate standard errors.

Exp. 2: Main effect of cost salience on subjective punishment

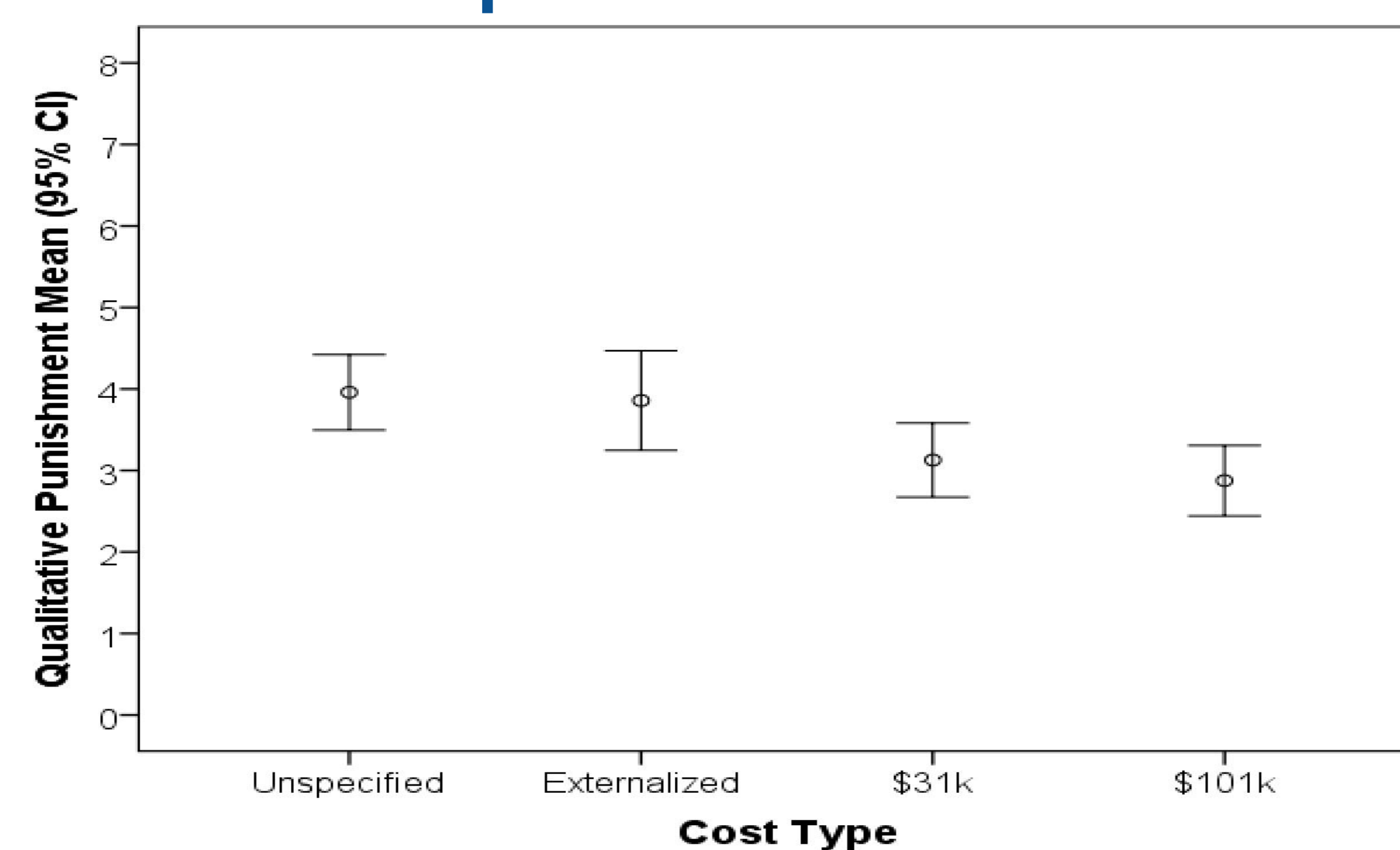


Figure 2. Mean subjective punishment as a function of cost and cost source. Error bars indicate standard errors.

Results (contd.)

Descriptive Analyses: Exp. 1

- The largest drop in sentencing length occurred within the first cost increment.
- On average, participants maintained a non-zero sentence across all cost sizes.
- 19.1% were wholly insensitive to cost increases.
- 23.8% chose to forgo all punishment at highest cost size.
- There were no differences in punitive motive, attributions of responsibility, or political ideology between the participants in these two groups.

Hypothesis Tests

H1: The presentation of cost information will decrease punishment.	SUPPORTED
H2: Punishment will decrease with increasing cost size.	SUPPORTED
H3a: Punishments will be smaller when cost is direct.	SUPPORTED
H3b: Punishments won't differ when cost is externalized vs unspecified.	SUPPORTED

Discussion

- Under default conditions, as predicted, laypeople discounted prison costs when formulating punishment judgments in the absence of any explicit cost information.
- These default punishments were at least as large as those made under conditions where the punishment was stipulated to be cost-free to taxpayers, indicating that, without explicit prompting, participants were not considering costs when making incarceration decisions.
- When cost information was made explicit, these punishments were substantially reduced relative to both no-cost and cost-free conditions, indicating that, under these conditions, people's punishment preferences were relatively elastic.
- Increased transparency about cost/benefit tradeoffs may inform sentencing policy by producing sentencing outcomes that more closely align with the considered preferences of public stakeholders.

References

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3. S. W. Becker, J. Ronen, G. H. Sorter, *J. Account. Res.* **12**, 317 (1974).
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5. S. Chakravarty, G. W. Harrison, E. E. Haruvy, E. E. Rutström, *South. Econ. J.* **77**, 901-913 (2010).