

# Socio-economic status and race



**Abstract**

The defendant who was Latino was hypothesized to be sentenced to more years in prison by jurors than the defendant who was white. It was also hypothesized that the defendant would be sentenced to more years in prison if the victim was of higher socio-economic status (Businessman) than low socio-economic status (homeless man). There were 60 college aged participants chosen at random. Participants were given one of four scenarios that varied in race (white or Latino) of the defendant and socio-economic status (Business or Homeless) of the victim. The scenarios asked the participants to recommend jail sentences for the given scenario. As hypothesized the Latino defendants received longer jail sentences than the white defendants and defendants received longer sentences when the victim was a Business man than when the victim was a homeless man.

**Socio-Economic Status and Race as Influences on Jury Sentencing:****Does Socio-Economic Status and Race Influence a Jury Decision on Sentencing?**

As the world becomes more diverse we need to understand the bias factors that influence juror's decisions. It is hard to assess these factors in real cases as no two cases are truly similar and we can not simulate several scenarios. We used Jury simulations to test these unconscious bias people used when they recommended sentencing for the defendants. The bias factors can be seen in the news when high profile cases come up. There are times when we believed defendants to be guilty but they were found innocent. In most cases the defendants were either from high socio-economic status or race was a factor. We conducted the jury simulation with four different scenarios to try and understand this bias. Based on previous research we made two

hypotheses. The first was that the Latino man would be sentenced to more years in prison than the white man. According to demographic studies minorities are more likely to be convicted of a crime and more harshly sentenced than white Caucasian (Gleason, & Harris, 1975). The second hypothesis was that defendants would be sentenced to more years in prison when the victim was a Business man and less years when the victim was a homeless man. Based on previous studies cited in this report it was predicted that there would be a main effect for each variable and a significant interaction between these variables.

Defendants are sentenced to more years in prison when the victim is considered attractive to the jury than when the victim is considered unattractive (Landy, & Aronson, 1969).

Race and Socio-economic status do notably bias jurors views toward the defendant and victim in a court case. Those with higher socio-economic status were seen as less guilty than those with lower socio-economic status (Gleason, & Harris, 1975). Gleason and Harris's study was a 2x2 factorial design which varied the defendants race (white and black) and socio-economic status (middle class and lower class). Although in Gleason & Harris's study the socio-economic status variable is used for the defendant and in our study socio-economic status is used for the victim, you can still see how socio-economic status plays a rule in people's judgment regardless of if it's the victim or defendant with high or low status. If the defendant is of high socio-economic status they are less likely to be found guilty status (Gleason, & Harris, 1975). Also if the victim is of high status the defendant is

more likely to be found guilty and subject to a harsher sentence as this study shows.

A jury simulation carried out by Gordon, Bindrim, McNicholas, & Walden survey 56 University students. Their survey was a jury simulation that studied how perceptions of blue-collar and white-collar crimes were tied to the defendant's race. An equal number of black and white participants were given one of four scenarios where the descriptions of the defendant's race (black or white) and type of crime (burglary or embezzlement) committed varied. In the study the black defendant was sentenced to a longer jail term than the white defendant in crimes that were considered blue-collar crimes such as the burglary that was present in the study. In the case of the embezzlement the white defendant was sentenced to a longer jail term than the black defendant. This study concludes that people are more likely to be sentenced more harshly for crimes that people can associate them with on the basis of things like demographics and socio-economic status .

There are many other studies that have looked at the things that influence a juror's opinion of a defendant. One study "The Influence of the Character of the Criminal and His Victim on the Decisions of Simulated Jurors" carried out by Landy & Aronson looked at the character of the criminal and defendant and how it influences juror's decisions. They conducted two versions of the experiment and compared results. In both the first and second version of the experiment the victim was reported to half the participants as unattractive and to the other half as attractive. For the second version the character of the defendant also varied in character some attractive, unattractive, and neutral. Jurors are more likely to look at a defendant more negatively when they see

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the victim as attractive and less likely to view the defendant negatively when the victim is unattractive (Landy, & Aronson, 1969).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were 60 University students. Participants were approached randomly and asked to volunteer in this study. The Participants ranged in age approximately 18-24 years old and were University students from around the country.

### **Materials**

Each Participant was given a short jury simulation scenario (See Figure 1). There were two independent variables that made up four different scenarios. The opening paragraph informed participants that the questionnaires were anonymous and that they may take as much time as they need to come to a decision. It also informed participants to give to give their personal judgment not bias of what others may think and sentence defendant without parole to a certain number of years in prison. The last paragraph restated what the opening paragraph had stated. All four scenarios were similar in location of incident, action leading up to incident, details of how accident occurred, and the fatal outcome resulting in the victim's death. The scenarios were all male drivers driving down a street at night distracted that hit and killed a pedestrian crossing the street that was not using a crosswalk. The two variables that were changed were the defendant's race (White Caucasian, Latino) and victim's status (Business, Homeless) man.

## **Design**

There were four groups of 15 participants assigned randomly based on their researcher. Each group was given separate scenarios to read and make a decision on.

## **Procedure**

There were three researchers who approached participants in the field. One researcher administered two scenarios while the other two researchers administered one scenario each. University students were approached at random by the researchers and asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire. For example some participants were asked before the start of a lecture to complete one of the researcher's scenarios from the scenarios of anonymous questionnaires. Participants were instructed to read through the scenario and make a personal judgment of the numbers of years in prison the defendant should be sentenced to. Once the participant was done writing down their sentence on the questionnaire they placed it in a large manila envelope to protect their anonymity and privacy.

## **Results**

A 2-way 2x2 analysis of variance was run to decide if the sentence length was influenced by socio-economic status or by race. There was a main effect present for the victim's socio-economic status. The prison sentence given to the defendant when the victim was a Business man ( $M = 8.73$ ,  $SE = .69$ ) was significantly longer than when the victim was a homeless man ( $M = 6.67$ ,  $SE = .69$ ) ( $F(1, 56) = 4.45$ ,  $p < .05$ ). A second main effect was present for the defendant's race. The prison sentence given to the Latino defendant ( $M = 9.2$ ,  $SE = .69$ ) was longer than the prison sentence given to the White

defendant ( $M = 6.2$ ,  $SE = .69$ ) ( $F(1, 56) = 9.37$ ,  $p < .05$ ). There was no significant interaction between race and status ( $F(1, 56) = .78$ ,  $p > .05$ ) (See Figure 2). In looking at figure 2 we can see the lines are nearly parallel which would be a visually indicator that there not significant interaction.

## Discussion

There were significant main effects for both variables (Race and Status). When the defendant's race was Latino their sentence was significantly longer than when the defendant's race was White. As for status the defendant's sentence was significantly longer when the victim was a business man than when the victim was a homeless man. There was no significant interaction between race and status.

Support for the two hypotheses can be explained by the results of previous research on jury simulation presented in this report. In this study it was predicted that there would be a main effect for each of the variables and a significant interaction between these variables. Although there was not a significant interaction in this study unlike some similar studies which resulted in significant interactions, there was a main effect for each variable. No two studies will ever be the same making it hard to undoubtedly predict the results and interactions. The variable of race showed that Latino men were sentenced to more years in prison than a white man. For the variable of status defendants were sentenced to more years in prison when the victim was a business man than when the victim was a homeless man. In this study race was the more significant variable. A black defendant was seen perceived as more likely to repeat a crime than a white defendant (Gordon,

Bindrim, McNicholas, & Walden, 1988). Thus to say the race of the defendant had a greater influence on the jurors to sentence more harshly than the influence of the victims social-economic status.

There were a couple of limitations in this study. The first limitation is the external validity due to the population size and selection. With the sample size (N = 60) University students it is hard to generalize the findings to all possible American jurors. This sample size would need to be bigger and cover a wider age group across America. In future research we could collaborate with Universities across the nation to conduct the study on a much larger scale. With this collaboration a much larger sample size that would be spread out across the Nation could create a more generalized picture of the bias that goes into juror's decisions. Also we could use a neutral study with a similar sample size to compare to the study. The neutral study would be the same incident but it would be a person driving killed another person and there would be not race, status, or any other demographics. Another suggestion for future studies would be to obtain certain demographics from the participants' (age, race, religion, political party, etc.). I would ask all participants two question regarding their experience with the US justice system. The first question would be if they have ever been convicted of a crime and if so have they ever served time in prison. Those two questions are important as they might play into the participant's decision when evaluating their opinions of the defendant and feelings toward the US justice system. With all this said the more demographics and questions we ask the better we can understand the specific bias that play into jurors decisions when making a judgment on a victim.



**References**

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