



Anthrozoös

A multidisciplinary journal of the interactions between people and other animals

ISSN: 0892-7936 (Print) 1753-0377 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rfan20

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To cite this article: Rochelle Morton, Michelle L. Hebart, Rachel A. Ankeny & Alexandra L. Whittaker (01 Jul 2025): The Drivers of Community Expectations Surrounding Punishment for Animal Welfare Offences: Findings From Online Focus Group Discussions, *Anthrozoös*, DOI: [10.1080/08927936.2025.2520055](https://doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2025.2520055)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2025.2520055>



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The Drivers of Community Expectations Surrounding Punishment for Animal Welfare Offences: Findings From Online Focus Group Discussions

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ABSTRACT

Animal welfare legislation reform has commonly been attributed to the need to increase alignment with the community's expectations, which supposes that the community has the power to drive legislative change. Despite this assertion, there has been minimal research on the content and drivers of these expectations in Australia. Whilst limited sociological research has identified *what* the public expects of animal welfare law, there have been no studies aimed at understanding *why* the public have those expectations, especially in relation to punitive expectations. Using online focus groups, this study investigated the influencers of participant opinions around animal welfare law enforcement to provide a greater understanding of the drivers of these supposed community expectations. Using thematic analysis, five drivers were generated: (1) the degree of animal suffering; (2) providing assistance over punishment; (3) the role of media reporting; (4) how to deter offenders; and (5) the intentions of the offender. Our findings indicate that the public instinctively takes highly punitive approaches to sentencing for animal cruelty, but their responses tend to be modified through conscious reasoning when provided with information around the facts and circumstances of particular cases. Such findings could suggest that the public are not as punitive as legislators perceive them to be when it comes to animal welfare law.

KEYWORDS

Animal cruelty; animal law; animal welfare; human–animal interaction; penalties; public opinion

The public is thought to have the power to influence the direction and scope of animal welfare legislation as a result of its influence on legislators (van der Meulen, 2009). Historically, many Western countries have reported “community expectations” or “public concern” as being major drivers for legislative change, whereby the intention of law

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2025.2520055>

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reform is to achieve closer alignment with public opinion. This phenomenon is evident in recent animal law reform efforts in Australia (Geysen et al., 2010; Morton et al., 2018), the United States (MacArthur Clark et al., 2019; Mayer, 2002), the United Kingdom (Nurse, 2016), and several countries in the European Union (Bennett et al., 2002; Vecchio et al., 2020; Veissier et al., 2008). Western governments tend to legislate matters of animal welfare in the public interest, implying that lawmakers are considering public attitudes and opinions when making domestic legislative decisions (Erikson et al., 2002; Stimson, 1999, 2004). However, as noted by Geysen et al. (2010), the nature of these “community expectations” or “public concerns” is often not explicitly articulated by governments, making it difficult to determine whether law reform accurately reflects community opinion.

Previous sociological research suggests that the public is largely supportive of harsher sentences for animal cruelty offenses (Allen et al., 2002; Bailey et al., 2016; Sims et al., 2007; Taylor & Signal, 2009; Vollum et al., 2004). Given that many of the recent reform efforts to animal welfare legislation in Australia have increased the maximum penalties for offenses (Morton et al., 2018), it appears that legislators believe that the community expects harsher penalties. However, the reality of public opinion is far more nuanced. Previous research surveying the Australian public (Morton et al., 2022a) identified that whilst there was support for harsher sentencing for animal welfare offenses, there was even greater support for increasing the rate of prosecution (i.e., having more cases enter the court system). Additionally, whilst that study hypothesized that respondents would have a preference toward punitive sentences in the form of custody time or monetary fines, a majority of participants were willing to trust the courts to decide on appropriate sentences. Based on that survey’s results, we hypothesized that the public is more supportive of a proactive, educative focus to deal with offenders than the literature currently suggests.

Further evidence in support of this proposal is the idea that public criticism of fines and imprisonment stems from a lack of understanding of the criminal justice system (Pickett et al., 2015). Due to the lack of accessibility to court records associated with animal cruelty cases (Cao, 2015), the major source of public information on this type of offending is delivered through various types of media (Marsh, 2014). Media reporting tends to stress the need for greater punitiveness (Arluke et al., 2002; Hampton et al., 2020; Hough, 2003; Morton et al., 2022b). Consequently, fines and imprisonment are the most familiar forms of the penalty and perhaps the simplest for the public to understand (Bernuz Beneitez & María, 2022) and criticize. Studies show that when provided with factual, non-biased information about criminal punishment (through fact sheets, videos, or seminars), public support toward harsher penalties reduces (Bohm & Vogel, 2004; Hough & Park, 2002; Indermaur et al., 2012; Roberts et al., 2012). Hence, in the absence of a comprehensive understanding of the criminal law system, it is likely that public opinion is precarious when it comes to punitiveness (Cullen et al., 2000; Drakulich & Kirk, 2016; Frost, 2010; Thielo et al., 2016).

Given the complexity of public opinion, it is essential to not only understand what community expectations around punishment for animal welfare offenses are but also why these opinions are held and what influences can modify them. This study aimed to describe and understand these opinions and modifiers by conducting online focus

group discussions on animal welfare law with a sample of the Australian public. The findings of this research allow us to gauge the alignment between animal welfare law reform efforts and community expectations and can inform lawmakers in the future. Whilst grounded in animal welfare law, it is likely the findings from this study can be extrapolated to public opinion surrounding punishment for criminal law generally, given public support for greater punitiveness is common across criminal law (Pickett, 2019).

Methods

Ethics Statement

This research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Adelaide (H-2022-017) and conducted in accordance with the provisions of the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007, Updated July 2018). All participants provided informed consent prior to entering the online focus group platform.

Research Design

This study forms the secondary part of our investigation into community expectations relating to animal welfare law enforcement. Previously we conducted a national survey of the Australian public to understand *what* the public expect of the enforcement system (Morton et al., 2022a). We used the results of that survey to guide the design of this study. The current study was focused on understanding *why* the Australian public have those expectations, with a qualitative emphasis on the nature of people's beliefs rather than quantitative considerations such as how many people believe what. Hence we did not seek to establish any form of representativeness or statistical significance in this study (Bray & Ankeny, 2017; Hood, 2007).

The qualitative data used in this study were generated from an online asynchronous focus group. Whilst different from the traditional face-to-face focus group design, an online focus group draws on similar data collection methodologies using focused discussions and probing of participants' answers but utilizes computer-mediated technology to mimic face-to-face interactions (Lobe, 2017). Rather than providing a replacement for face-to-face methods, these online methods provide an alternative set of tools that come with their own advantages and limitations (Williams et al., 2012). Using an online platform allows recruitment to expand to locations that are geographically dispersed (Fox, 2017; Lobe, 2017). As a result, we were able to involve participants from all states and territories in Australia. Additionally, individuals are able to participate from the comfort of their own computers (Dodds & Hess, 2021; Gaiser, 2008; Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2015), which provides a level of anonymity that can encourage participants to be more forthright in their responses (Lobe, 2017; Stewart & Williams, 2005; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). However, these online methods do limit participation to only those individuals with access to a computer and the internet. This study specifically used asynchronous focus groups, which are conducted over a longer period, often several days, in

comparison with synchronous methods which are conducted in “real time” (Fox, 2017). This method allows participants to engage with the discussions on their own schedules, making them both more convenient and inclusive (Williams et al., 2012).

Researcher Positionality

Given the qualitative nature of the study, it is important to acknowledge the perspectives of the research team. This study was conducted by a multidisciplinary team comprising animal scientists, a legal scholar, and a researcher specializing in the philosophy of science. The animal scientists contributed expertise in animal welfare and ethical considerations surrounding the treatment of animals, which informed the development of the focus group materials and the interpretation of participant attitudes. The legal scholar provided an understanding of criminal law and sentencing frameworks, whilst the philosopher of science contributed a perspective on how societal values influence the construction and communication of knowledge, helping to critically examine assumptions about animal harm and justice. We acknowledge that our disciplinary backgrounds influence how we approach this research. To address this, we engaged in regular reflexive discussions to identify potential biases and prioritize participant’s perspectives throughout the analysis.

Focus Group Protocol

The online focus group was developed on a platform provided by the research and recruitment company, McNair yellowSquares (Crows Nest, NSW). The platform structure was similar to an online discussion board or forum, where participants could post a new thread (i.e., a new initial comment on the board) that allowed for follow-up responses from other participants or facilitators, or alternatively post comments on existing threads. The focus groups were conducted over a three-day period (14–16 June 2022), with participants being informed that they needed to complete all tasks across the three days and participate in the discussion for a minimum of 15 min per day in order to earn their promised incentive (\$50 credit). Tasks were structured as pre-set activities, which involved participants either watching videos or reading scenarios and statistics relating to animal law enforcement in Australia (see online supplemental files for the scenarios). Participants were prompted to provide their opinions on each pre-set activity with pre-determined open-ended questions. All participant responses were followed up with questions from one or more of the three facilitators. The online focus group forum was monitored continuously from 7am to 7pm ACST each day to encourage additional responses and maximize the amount of engagement from participants while they were active on the forum. On average, each participant was actively engaged in the forum for a total of 115 min across the three days (approximately 38 min per day).

Participants

Participants were recruited from McNair yellowSquares’ research panels. Individuals were randomly contacted via e-mail to participate, with stratification based on age, gender,

cultural background, education, and income. E-mail invitations did not include specific details regarding the content of the online focus group to avoid any self-selection bias. Those who wished to participate were directed to the participant information sheet to provide their informed consent prior to entering the online forum. Participants were asked to complete 10 screener questions, which included details of their age, gender, state/territory location within Australia, ethnic origin, education, and occupation. Those who had experience working in the legal field or been charged with animal cruelty were not eligible to participate as their level of experience with the research topic likely exceeded the average person.

A total of 35 individuals participated in the study, with 54% identifying as female and 46% as male. Participant age ranges were 18–34 years old (34.3%), 35–44 years old (17.1%), 45–54 years old (20.0%) and 55+ years old (28.36%). The majority of participants described their residential location as urban (94.3%) and lived with or owned an animal (60.0%). This study collected data across seven Australian states and territories, with 31.4% of responses from New South Wales, 17.1% from Western Australia, 17.1% from Victoria, 14.4% from South Australia, 11.4% from Queensland, 5.7% from Tasmania, and 2.9% from Australian Capital Territory. No participants were from the Northern Territory.

Data Analysis

Whilst our approach was not strictly situated in traditional grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990); we used a generic inductive qualitative model (Hood, 2007; Maxwell, 2005; Thomas, 2006), which combined the data-gathering process with description, refinement, and interpretation of the research question. Hence, while our research design used scripts to help guide the focus group discussions, our approach also allowed for the elicitation of ideas through conversational exchange with participants, as emergent issues can often not be predicted. The thematic analysis was performed following the methods of Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcripts from the online focus groups were imported into NVivo 12 (QSR International Pty Ltd) for coding. Inductive coding was undertaken to allow codes to be found from the data (Kelle, 2007). We used the reflexive thematic analysis approach, which advocates against the use of measures of inter-rater reliability and other such coding practices as measures of quality (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Hence, coding was performed by one coder in the absence of a codebook. The emergence of themes was supported by the “constant comparative method,” where the already coded data were constantly compared with data yet to be coded to allow for the generation of themes (Kelle, 2007); this was performed by one researcher. The thematic structure was considered in relation to the entire dataset to ensure each theme captured the most salient features of the data. Any themes that were overly broad or overlapped were refined to ensure the underlying structure of participant responses was represented.

Results

Five themes relating to the drivers of community expectations surrounding punishment for animal welfare offenses were generated from the thematic analysis: (1) the degree of

suffering experienced by the animal, (2) providing assistance over punishment, (3) the role of media reporting, (4) the need for greater deterrence, and (5) the intentions of the offender. Most of the data could be included under these five themes.

Theme 1: Degree of Suffering Experienced by the Animal

The first of these themes captures the ways in which animal pain and suffering were used to emphasize the wrongfulness of animal cruelty and the need for a greater punitive response by the law. Animals were often viewed as sentient by our participants, as seen in their articulation of animals having the ability to experience pain and suffering, and interest in avoiding such experiences. Many participants made comments similar to the following:

All sentient beings feel pain and suffering and seek comfort and happiness. Why should humans be allowed to take that from any of them? (Male, 60–64)

Due to animals' sentient abilities, many participants believed that higher degrees of animal suffering required a greater response from the criminal justice system. However, throughout this theme, it was apparent that many participants attributed human characteristics and emotions to nonhuman animals when describing their sentience, a concept known as anthropomorphism (Taylor, 2011). Participants consistently used human characteristics to articulate what animal pain and suffering are, referring to behaviors such as crying or describing animals as their children, which suggests that our participants' idea of "animal sentience" is being driven by their individual experiences of human pain and suffering.

I imagine animals being in pain and being powerless to do anything about it. These animals will be crying from the pain and suffering they are in. (Female, 18–24)

How could you beat an animal when it's looking at you asking why? (Male, 55–59)

Animals are just like humans but don't have a voice like we do. All animals should be treated the same as humans do. Some people can't have kids, so they have pets and treat them like their own kids instead. (Female, 45–49)

To further understand this idea that perceived animal suffering requires a greater legislative and punitive response, participants were asked to rank which species of animal they believed should be protected from suffering under animal welfare legislation. The responses were comparable to our previous findings from our survey (Morton et al., 2022a), where participants ranked companion animals, native animals, and farm animals amongst the most deserving, while reptiles, amphibians, fish, and cephalopods were intermediate, and invertebrates ranked as the least deserving. However, when asked to justify this ranking, many of our participants found themselves in a moral dilemma, where they referred to their emotive connection to some species and the absence of such connection to others (often invertebrates) to justify their rankings.

I mean the warm and fluffies certainly are more emotive than the scabies, slitheries and crawlies, but they're all creatures, so surely they all deserve fair treatment. (Female, 35–39)

I am really confronting with my belief and behaviour. I mean, if I considered animal cruelty for every single animal, why do I kill flies? Can I kill a fly and then go and report animal cruelty against a dog?

Moderator: What do you think the difference is between a fly and a dog for you?

I don't like flies. That is all. It's what concerns me from the beginning. It's subjective and complicated. The law should be law for all animals, but how do we measure what animals are 'important' enough to protect? (Female, 35–39)

Thus, this emotive connection to specific species of animals often drove our participants to display empathic responses toward these animals' suffering, which was driven by anthropomorphic tendencies. Participants tended to consider the worst examples of animal cruelty, such as acts of physical violence (and mainly toward species where there was an emotive connection), when providing their opinions. This factor was a major driver for the community expectation that a greater punitive response is required by the legal system, as evidenced for instance in this response:

These maximum penalties feel pretty weak. I believe they should bump the maximum penalty for deliberate cruelty up to 10 years at least. To think that someone could perpetrate the most wicked act of cruelty on an animal and only get 2 years imprisonment in some states is unthinkable to me. Deliberate cruelty is just that, deliberate. People found guilty of it shouldn't be given a slap on the wrist (which I find a 2-year maximum sentence to be), they should be locked up for a long time. (Male, 18–24)

Theme 2: Providing Assistance Over Punishment

Interestingly, many responses challenged the previous theme by suggesting that sentencing should help the offenders and the system should take a greater educative and less punitive approach to reduce the incidence of animal cruelty. The responses under this theme were often derived from scenario-based exercises, where participants were asked to provide their opinions about punishment after they read through two common examples of offenses: (1) a "basic" offense/duty of care breach, and (2) an "aggravated" offense/deliberate act (Morton et al., 2021). Scenario 1 involved a dog with a large tumorous mass on its ear, of which the owner was aware but had not sought treatment due to a lack of funds. Scenario 2 focused on the same species of animal (dog), but instead the dog was healthy and destroyed the owner's couch, which caused the owner to act out of rage and repeatedly kick the dog until it could no longer walk (see the online supplemental files for the specific scenarios used). A belief that sentencing should help the offender was consistently noted for both scenarios. It was apparent from participants' responses that they were considering the offender's perspective in these scenarios and balancing it against the degree of animal suffering that they perceived to have occurred.

The provision of scenarios was particularly useful as it limited the respondents' abilities to envision the worst-case scenario, providing some evidence that this desire for greater punitiveness can be challenged through the provision of further information about the circumstances of cases, and thus enabling consideration of the human element. Many participants expressed in response to scenario 1 a desire for the court to give the

offender a warning and educate them on appropriate animal care, followed by placing the owner on a prohibition order to prevent them from owning animals in the future. No participants suggested imprisonment as a viable penal option for this cruelty example. Statements such as the following captured the approach that most participants took when explaining their choices:

If they genuinely cannot afford the vet bill, a fine may cause more financial distress. Hopefully re-educating the owner will show them the appropriate way to care for their animals. (Male, 60–64)

In response to scenario 2, many participants expressed a desire for the court to sentence the offender to mandated counseling for anger management. Additionally, imprisonment was also a favorable option among participants. Most participants expressed opinions parallel to the following:

We hear a lot in the media now about people that are in court who committed a crime while suffering a mental health condition. It is not an excuse for the animal cruelty displayed by this owner but finding the root of the problem (anger issues) and addressing it, the owner will be able to contribute better to society and earn back the right to own a dog again in the future. If the owner was just to get a fine, no strategies will have been put in place to prevent the owner from displaying this behavior again in the future. (Female, 18–24)

Another common sentiment expressed during the scenario-based questions was the degree of compassion shown by our participants toward the offender. This type of response was often noted during the scenario 1 exercise, as many participants found the financial struggles relatable.

I can empathize with a tough financial decision. It's a bad situation but from the details provided, I don't think the owner deserves to be jailed for something like this. (Male, 24–29)

I can understand this situation because vets are extremely expensive. (Female, 24–29)

I feel for [the owner] for not being able to afford the vet. (Female, 55–59)

Furthermore, when asked if their opinions would change if the animal had died from the tumorous growth, most participants said that they would not, as the owner's financial struggles did not mean that they intended to cause harm to the animal, suggesting the element of intent was important for our participants' decision-making processes (the relevance of the concept of intent is further discussed in theme five).

Finally, a sentiment that was expressed throughout the entirety of the focus group discussion was the need to educate people on appropriate animal care. Many participants suggested that education could improve many aspects of the animal welfare law enforcement process. Education was considered valuable for preventing owners from making mistakes that can cause animal cruelty:

I think that there is not enough education readily accessible on how to properly care for animals. For most people, it would be common sense, but not everyone has had experience in looking after animals. This would help prevent many animals from having to go through suffering and an inspector having to come out for something that could have been prevented with the right education in the first place. (Female, 18–24)

Additionally, education was noted as increasing public awareness about industries that can result in improvements to animal welfare laws:

I also think societally there are lots of things that could verge on animal cruelty that we just don't think about – I never considered cruelty in the racing industry until I owned a rescue greyhound, so I think that more education would lead to greater public interest and therefore better laws. (Female, 35–39)

Theme 3: The Role of Media Reporting

The third theme relates to participants' reliance on the media for information on animal welfare law enforcement in Australia. Many referred to forms of mass media (news reports) and social media as their sources of information:

I see some articles in the local paper which disturbs me and have a friend on Facebook that has a farm, and she complains about the treatment of some horses at the next-door property. (Male, 55–59)

However, some participants referred to a lack of information on animal welfare law in the media, which they interpreted as the laws working in the background and not being “newsworthy,” or alternatively that they are not being enforced at all, meaning there is no news to report. Participants also asserted that only the more serious cases of animal cruelty are likely to be reported by the media, suggesting that the public are only hearing about the most serious cases and using them to build their opinions:

We don't hear very much about it in the media so either the laws are working, or people are getting away with it. (Male, 40–44)

I feel like there's more that can be done around animal welfare, and I think we don't hear about it often enough probably because it's not a high priority or interest area to be reporting on by the media. (Female, 18–24)

When they are more serious cases, they are more likely to get a mention on the news. (Female, 18–24)

Participants suggested that the media should use their influence to educate the public on animal welfare laws and animal care, with one participant suggesting that “good stories” should be reported where owners were educated about their alleged misconduct and rectified the situation without requiring court intervention.

A social media saturation would really help educate. (Female, 55–59)

... instead of just the bad stories, can we get the good stories like when people have been made aware of things that might not be best and have complied and made changes or the companies that do practice good animal welfare. (Male, 40–44)

Theme 4: The Need for Greater Deterrence

Within this theme, participants indicated that they believed that the sentences handed down in court and the maximum penalties written into legislation would not deter people from committing offenses. Many participants stated that the current penalties

are too weak and need to be harsher to serve as deterrence. This deterrence factor is therefore a likely major driver for the public's desire for harsher penalties.

I think the laws could be harsher, I feel the penalty does not deter people from re-offending. How are these perpetrators going to learn they can't do these horrendous things if they are only getting a slap on the wrist or a measly fine. It's just not enough. (Female, 65+)

Participants repeatedly referred to the risk of reoffending when discussing the need for greater deterrence, making assertions that repeat offending is a reoccurring issue within animal welfare law enforcement.

With these figures [referring to the maximum penalties] it is no wonder repeat offenders continue with their cruel treatment of animals, surely a harsher deterrent would prevent some from reoffending. (Male, 60–64)

They performed an intentional bad act on a dog, so they would probably do it again. (Male, 25–29)

Some participants questioned the effectiveness of penalties as a general deterrent to offending based on perceptions that most people are likely unaware of what the penalties are:

I also think that people committing these crimes are not actively looking at what the punishment would be, so I don't feel like this is much of a deterrent for them. (Female, 25–29)

Considering none of the participants were previously aware of the current maximum penalties for animal welfare offenses, it is very likely that the majority of the community is similarly unaware; hence, as the statement above suggests, it is likely that the maximum penalties are having only very minor deterrent effects. Regardless of the effectiveness of deterrence in reducing offending, deterrence appears to be a significant influencer of public opinions around penalties for animal cruelty.

Theme 5: The Intentions of the Offender

The final theme captures the participants' views on offender intention when making judgements about the severity of the offense. In scenarios where the offender deliberately or intentionally inflicted pain or suffering on an animal, participants indicated that a harsher punishment was necessary for two reasons. One reason given related to the previously discussed association between intentional acts and the risk of reoffending; that is, participants thought that those who intend to cause harm will likely reoffend in the future. Secondly, acting with malice suggested to our participants that the offence was more severe and hence required a greater punitive response to ensure that the offender was held accountable for their actions:

They intentionally hurt and punished the dog multiple times and had no regards to the injuries that were caused. This to me seems liable for a proper sentencing, the owner needs to be held accountable and fully understand the repercussions for their actions. (Female, 25–29)

Furthermore, the absence of intent led the participants to infer that an offense was less serious, with the offender thought to be at a lower risk of reoffending and hence able to be resolved with less punitive action.

It wasn't malicious so it shouldn't happen again. (Male, 25–29)

This sentiment was observed even during discussions of animals dying due to non-intentional pain and suffering inflicted by an offender, suggesting that the perceived intent may have a stronger influence on community expectations than the perceived animal suffering discussed in theme 1.

Discussion

This study formed part of a broader research study aimed at gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the frequently discussed but poorly understood community expectations around animal welfare law objectives in Australia. Our previous research (Morton et al., 2022a) identified *what* the public expects of the animal law enforcement system, whilst this study was aimed at understanding *why* the public have those expectations through identifying the drivers or influencers of their expectations. By applying a thematic analysis to online focus group discussions, we have generated five drivers of public opinion relating to punishment for animal welfare offenses in Australia. These drivers as captured by the following themes: (1) the degree of animal suffering; (2) providing assistance over punishment; (3) the role of media reporting; (4) the role of deterrence; and (5) the intention of the offender. The remainder of this paper will discuss how the public decide what is an appropriate sentence for animal cruelty and how that opinion can be challenged by conscious reasoning when provided with information about the facts and circumstances of the case. We then discuss the role that the media play in influencing public opinion on this form of law enforcement and how it might be used to educate the public.

Public Expectations Surrounding Sentencing Severity

The focus group discussions revealed that participants commonly considered two main factors when making judgements around acceptable sentencing. These factors are the perceived degree of suffering to the animal (theme 1) and the perceived intention of the offender (theme 5). It was generally thought that offenders who intended to cause serious suffering to animals required increased punitive responses. This approach is similar to that embodied in current legislation: animal welfare offenses are often divided into “aggravated” or “basic” offenses (Morton et al., 2021), with higher maximum penalties being available to the courts for the aggravated offense where serious harm is caused to an animal and the offender’s conduct is intentional or reckless (Morton et al., 2018, 2021). This inclusion of aggravation in animal welfare offenses recognizes that some acts have a greater degree of culpability and the offender poses a greater danger to society, especially considering the established link between animal and human violence (DeGue & DiLillo, 2009; Febres et al., 2014; Flynn, 2011; Levitt et al., 2016; Macias-Mayo, 2018; Newberry, 2017; Volant et al., 2008; Walton-Moss et al., 2005; Wright & Hensley, 2003). As a result, a greater penalty is attached to these offenses (Roberts, 2011). From our findings, it seems that the public considers those who commit these aggravated offences to be more culpable and hence more likely to re-offend; thus, they require harsh sentences to deter them from reoffending (theme 4). However, this point in the logic is where the similarity between public opinion and criminal punishment begins to diverge.

Whilst deterrence is a factor of the theory that underpins criminal punishment (Bregant et al., 2016; Escamilla-Castillo, 2010; Sylvia, 2016; Zaibert, 2012), it is not the only factor that the courts use to justify an increased punitive response. Court determinations are balanced against numerous factors such as the weighting of evidence (which often includes considering the degree of suffering experienced by the animal), consideration of aggravating (such as intent) and mitigating factors, prior court determinations, guidelines set by sentencing legislation, and judiciary discretion. The sentence handed down should consider all aspects of punishment theory underpinning criminal punishment, with deterrence being only one factor, and the remainder being retribution, rehabilitation, restitution, and incapacitation (Bregant et al., 2016; Escamilla-Castillo, 2010; Sylvia, 2016; Zaibert, 2012).

Additionally, the theory of deterrence relies on certain assumptions. Deterrence is dependent on potential offenders having knowledge of the maximum penalties for offenses as written in legislation (Paternoster, 2010; Roberts, 2003), which is unlikely, given that the majority of our participants were not aware of the magnitude of penalties, nor did they have the means of finding such information prior to their participation in the study. Furthermore, deterrence theory requires a degree of reasonableness to be exercised by potential offenders; that is, they must conduct a cost–benefit analysis (Paternoster, 2010), where they weigh the cost of the punishment against the benefits (to them) of animal cruelty. Considering many animal cruelty offenders are those who suffer from mental illnesses (Lockwood, 2018) or who react acutely to emotional responses such as anger or revenge (Arluke & Irvine, 2017), it is unlikely that any reasonable cost–benefit analyses are being undertaken, thus undermining a key assumption in deterrence theory.

Even if these conditions are met, penalties must be certain, swift, and severe for deterrence to have any general effects (Paternoster, 2010; Roberts, 2003). As Roberts (2003) discusses regarding criminal law more generally, certainty and swiftness are difficult to achieve due to low rates of prosecution and the slow pace of criminal proceedings. However, severity could easily be achieved by a stroke of the legislative pen; that is, by implementing increases to the maximum penalties. Hence, public desire for greater deterrence could be driving legislators to increase the penalties for animal cruelty offences as a display of being “tough on crime” (Morgan, 2002; Sankoff, 2005) as legislators who fail to make such declarations regarding criminal law generally reduce their chances of re-election by public vote (Hough, 2003). This phenomenon is known as “penal populism,” which Roberts et al. (2002) define as “allowing the electoral advantage of a policy to take precedence over its penal effectiveness” (p. 5). Thus, the penal increases in animal welfare law could be viewed as largely “symbolic gestures,” rather than being aimed at causing practical effects leading to sentences being increased in court (Morton et al., 2021).

An alternative approach to reduce offending that has been identified is to capitalize on the fear of enforcement (Paternoster, 2010). This approach was mentioned in our previous survey, where participants suggested the rate of prosecution (i.e., increasing the probability of being caught and charged with animal cruelty) was more important than the severity of the punishment (Morton et al., 2022a). To address this, a legislative focus away from penalties toward resourcing of enforcement agencies would be needed, particularly because it has been argued that the current resourcing is not enough (Duffield, 2013; Ellison, 2009).

Challenging Public Expectations Through Provision of Circumstantial Information

Throughout the study, we observed a shift in opinion away from preferences for greater punitiveness when our participants were given information about the circumstances associated with the (hypothetical) case under discussion and the available alternative sentencing options. This shift was captured in the responses grouped under theme 2 (providing assistance over punishment): our participants consistently favored more rehabilitative approaches to sentencing (such as court-mandated counseling or education), rather than the common punitive options (e.g., custodial sentences or monetary fines). This shift in opinion has been observed previously in qualitative research into global criminal penalties (Roberts, 2002). Individuals who are provided with additional information about criminal punishment are more likely to favor less punitive alternatives than those who are provided with no information (Bohm & Vogel, 2004; Gainey & Payne, 2003; Hough & Park, 2002; Indermaur et al., 2012; Roberts et al., 2012; Sims & Johnston, 2004).

Our participants explained this shift in reasoning by indicating that they felt punishment should help the offender to reduce the risk of recidivism, which is a sentiment similar to that expressed in the literature (Ghasemi, 2015; Livingston, 2001; Morton et al., 2018; Sharman, 2002). Yet despite global public support for less punitive, more rehabilitative sentencing alternatives (Baker et al., 2015; Kury et al., 2003; Maruna & King, 2008; Roberts, 2002; Sims & Johnston, 2004), knowledge about these alternatives is poor (Roberts, 2002). As Freiberg (2002) notes, in order to achieve widespread public acceptance of rehabilitative penal options, public knowledge of their existence is required. Additionally, even if the public are not as punitive as legislators believe them to be (Sims & Johnston, 2004), it has been suggested that public officials find it difficult to choose between supporting rehabilitative alternatives and harsher penalties (Kury et al., 2003). This is likely linked to the political reason discussed above: that it is an electoral risk if politicians are not seen as being tough on crime (Hough, 2003).

It is abundantly clear that there are a substantial number of misperceptions on both sides: the public and the legislators. As Roberts (1992) discussed in his review over 30 years ago, it is equally important to dispel not only the misperceptions that the public holds about crime but also to dispel the misperceptions that legislators have about public opinion. It appears that legislators are mostly driven by political reasons when making legislative changes to animal welfare laws by deferring to “community expectations” but not canvassing them (Maruna & King, 2008). Likewise, it is unlikely that legislators will consider public opinion regarding alternative penalties without widespread public acceptance, which requires public knowledge (Freiberg, 2002).

Harnessing the Influence of the Media

Many of our participants indicated that they relied on the media as their primary source of information on animal welfare law (theme 3). Consequently, those interested in how to inform the public about animal welfare law should consider the influence of the media. As a New South Wales Magistrate once stated regarding sentencing for animal cruelty matters, “public confidence in the system of justice administered by the courts is vital to society and is enhanced by informed public debate. This requires responsible

media" (Schreiner, 2005). The media has a substantial influence on public knowledge toward crimes as people often see crime and its development through the eyes of the media rather than based on their own (often limited) experiences (Kury et al., 2003). Considering the majority of the public have little experience with crimes of animal cruelty (Grugan, 2019), they will rely heavily on what is disseminated through the media to build their opinions. This process can be problematic due to the selective reporting of the news media: it has been shown that they tend to focus on heinous crimes, painting a picture that is grossly distorted (Arluke et al., 2002; Beckett & Sasson, 2004). Similarly, campaigns run by animal protection organizations have also been shown to influence public expectations of animal protection laws (Marceau, 2019).

A relationship between the news media and public opinion toward penalties for animal cruelty offenses described as the "penal reform cycle" has been proposed (Morton et al., 2022b). The cycle posits that the media report on increases to maximum penalties set in law whilst also reporting instances of supposed "lenient" sentencing, which causes public opinion to cycle between believing that the laws are improving and believing that the penalties are failing (Morton et al., 2022b). If true, this cycle serves only to encourage public confusion around animal cruelty sentencing and fails to provide education about either the principles of criminal punishment or the range of available alternative sentencing strategies.

If the influencing power of the media can be harnessed, the potential for using it as a way of informing and educating the public on animal law penalties is substantial. Whilst a call for more balanced news reporting has been made (Kury et al., 2003), achieving "balance" is challenging as the news media is driven by a focus on capturing public interest (McCombs, 2014), which is most easily done through reporting of compelling and oftentimes heinous cases. Conversely, various types of media could be used to disseminate widespread education campaigns; for instance, from governmental agencies or non-governmental animal welfare organizations. Such education campaigns should surround penalties, particularly focusing on how the sentencing court considers and hands down penalties for individual offenders as well as the typical distribution of both types of offenses: "aggravated" cruelty and "basic" duty of care breaches.

Limitations

As noted above, being online meant that participation was only limited to those who had access to a computer and internet over the three-day focus group. However, the online method also allowed for a greater level of anonymity in comparison with traditional face-to-face focus groups (Lobe, 2017; Stewart & Williams, 2005; Tidwell & Walther, 2002), which in turn reduced the risk of social desirability bias as participants are likely to have felt that they could be more forthright in their responses rather than providing "favorable" or "expected" responses (Lai et al., 2021). Finally, our methodological approach was focused on understanding participant opinions, rather than their knowledge of animal welfare law. Whilst the participants were provided with some basic information to help form their opinions, the information was limited in scope and depth. This design choice was intentional as legislators refer to public opinion and perceptions, rather than knowledge, in the context of their discussions on animal welfare law reform.

Conclusions

This paper discusses public expectations regarding what should be an appropriate sentence for animal welfare offenses. It is proposed that the public instinctively take a highly punitive approach to sentencing for animal cruelty; however, opinions become less punitive when provided with information about the facts and circumstances of the case. This suggests that the Australian public are not as punitive as legislators believe when it comes to animal welfare law. Thus, there clearly is a need for more public engagement about these topics, including a broader discussion of less punitive and more rehabilitative alternatives to sentencing for animal cruelty.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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