

Certainty Beats Severity

Criminal Justice

The most replicated finding in deterrence research, and what follows.

Deterrence depends far more on the perceived certainty of being caught than on the severity of the penalty imposed.

Certainty > swiftness > severity

Longer sentences

Severity effects weak

Little deterrent gain

More visible patrol

Raises perceived risk

Deterrent effect found

Slow, uncertain case

Certainty is low

Weak deterrence

THE COMMON MISTAKE

✗ **Raise the maximum sentence to deter**

✓ **Raise the chance of detection**

Reviews consistently find severity has weak or no marginal deterrent effect, while perceived certainty of detection does deter.

Educational reference. This finding is heavily replicated, though effect sizes differ by offence, population and setting.