Editorial

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Thanks to Helmut Kury and the contributors, this thematic issue on punitiveness fills a gap in this Journal's attention to the different effects of criminal sanctions. Although the concept has some ambiguities and cannot be easily operationalised, punitiveness in a neutral sense can be viewed as the attitude of the criminal justice system towards the use of criminal sanctions against crime and deviance. In a more evaluative perspective punitiveness can be understood as severe feelings and attitudes toward crime and criminals.

As Helmut Kury points out in the introduction, punitiveness is also the symbolic response made by an increasing number of countries to the demand for greater security. Forgetting that the quantity of the sanction is sometimes not the condition for its effectiveness in deterring crime and criminals, the competition for more punitiveness characterises an increasing number of countries. The explanations for this lie in the close connection among concern for crime, politics and criminal policies. The first raises the question and the second answers with symbolic policies that use punitiveness as the flag of greater severity against crime. In other cases, governments create the demand for security by offering punitiveness, thus establishing a circle where demand and supply fuel each other.

The contributions to this thematic issue cover all the aspects of the topic, ranging across criminal systems and cultures. The last two articles propose more rational solutions to the demand for greater security. Among the many available, one article looks for the answer to the always old and new questions regarding the deterrent effect of criminal sanctions. As researchers we should continue to provide further elements to this problem, in the hope that our contribution may give a more concrete and rational sense to those policies based on the liquidity of the symbolism.

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