

In many countries, sentencing ranges represent a common remedy to increase the overall justice of the legal system and fight against unjustified disparities in sentencing. However, the actual impacts of sentencing ranges on sentences still remain to be an open question. This thesis investigates the relation between sentencing ranges design and sentencing decisions in the Czech environment. First, I build a behavioral model of the sentencing decision process. This model incorporates three different objectives of the judge - to follow some general rule mapping severity to punishment, to fit the sentence well with sentences imposed for similar offenses, and to compare the case to other cases in the same sentencing range. Then, I test the predictions of the model using a dataset of Czech theft cases. I take advantage of a recent reform of the sentencing ranges design that shifted the sentencing ranges system for theft and many other offenses against property. In the empirical analysis, I use standard econometric methods (including ordinary least squares, difference in differences, matching, regression discontinuity design, and difference in discontinuities) to identify the causal effect of sentencing range design change and perform several robustness checks. The results confirm the main predictions of the model. I find that judges respond to sentencing range shifts, as well as to the addition of more severe cases into a particular sentencing range by decreasing the sentence. Moreover, in line with the existing scholarly literature, I find that sentencing ranges thresholds could be associated with a significant upward jump in sentences. These findings could be interpreted as a piece of empirical evidence that when choosing the optimal punishment, the judges compare the case with other cases with identical legal classification and adjust their decision accordingly. This empirical result obtained using court data represents the main novelty of the thesis. Moreover, the results could deepen the current scope of understanding of the motivations and mechanisms behind the sentencing process and could represent an important first step in the debate about optimal sentencing range design.