

Urban Crime: Issues and Policies

Ann Dryden Witte

*Florida International University, Wellesley College,
and National Bureau of Economic Research*

Abstract

Research suggests that some social and criminal justice policies can affect the crime rate. This article considers the major criminal justice and social policy issues related to urban crime, such as drugs, domestic violence, property values, and the underground economy.

Family disruption, drugs, limited economic opportunities, and unoccupied and unsupervised youth are all found to be associated with urban crime. The article concludes that major reductions in crime are likely to result only from increased economic and social opportunities for families and youth, particularly for young males. Intensive programs directed at families and at-risk youth are more likely to lower crime than are programs directed at people already heavily involved in illegal activities. It costs less to keep young people in education and training programs than to imprison them, and such programs are more likely to produce productive and well-adjusted adults.

Keywords: Policy; Crime; Education

Introduction

Urban crime is a major issue for Americans. This is true even though the most reliable evidence available, data from the National Crime Survey, indicates that the level of crime is lower today than it was in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The amount of crime is less for the most feared offenses, including rape, aggravated assault, burglary, and larceny, as well as for less serious offenses.¹

The composition of crime has changed. While the overall murder rate in the United States has declined since the late 1970s, the murder rate for young males, particularly young black males, has increased. Beginning in 1985, the murder victimization rate for blacks ages 15 to 24 began to increase substantially. In the late 1980s, the victimization rate for young blacks exceeded the previous record levels of the early 1970s, and it has continued to

¹ See Donohue and Siegelman (1994) for a compilation of crime statistics and a well-informed discussion of various types of data on crime.

increase during the 1990s. Murder victimization rates for white males ages 15 to 24 began increasing only in the late 1980s, and by the early 1990s they had returned to the rate of the late 1970s (Flanagan and Maguire 1994).

Between 1981 and 1990, arrests of those under 18 for murder and nonnegligent manslaughter rose by more than 60 percent. By 1990, 14 percent of all murders were committed by people under age 18. It appears that although we are not experiencing more violent crime, we are experiencing unusually high levels of violent crime committed by young males. In 1990, 70 percent of the people arrested in the United States were ages 16 to 34, and more than 80 percent were male (Flanagan and Maguire 1994).

The political response to the urban crime problem has been erratic and uncoordinated. During the 1980s, the federal government vigorously pursued a "war on drugs." Both states and the federal government passed laws that mandated long prison sentences without parole for many offenses. Three-strike laws (mandating severe penalties for offenders after three convictions) are the latest example of stringent sentencing policies. To house those sentenced under these tough new laws, state governments went on a prison-building spree, roughly tripling the number of jail cells between 1970 and 1990.

Getting tough on crime probably bought us a somewhat lower overall crime rate, but it did not secure an urban environment in which most citizens feel safer. The level of violent crime committed by urban youth increased substantially. The overall reduction in crime was bought at a high price. Many careful observers are now calling for a change in policy.²

Police are better educated and older; more diverse in gender, race, and ethnicity; and more unionized. They make increasing use of modern technology. Spending on police increased by approximately 50 percent in real terms between 1970 and 1990, but the number of police officers barely kept pace with the population (Flanagan and Maguire 1994). Police were increasingly assigned to communities rather than to patrol cars as "community policing" spread widely. Under community policing, police returned to walking a beat, but their range of activities was wider than that of the beat cops of the 1950s. The police in many

² The outline of one possible direction is reflected in the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. A quite different outline appears in the congressional Republicans' *Contract with America* (Gillespie and Schellhas 1994).

urban areas became spokespeople for the neighborhood through local government bodies and assumed some roles normally reserved for social workers. They helped to clean up neighborhoods. They intervened in potentially crime-producing situations (e.g., mediating family disputes, closing down crack houses for code violations). They encouraged citizens, local businesses, and neighborhood social and educational institutions to become involved in crime control.

Policy issues arising from urban crime

Drugs and crime

In urban areas, it often appears that drugs and crime, particularly violent crime, are inextricably linked. Drugs are typically expensive and often reduce the user's eligibility and motivation to hold a job. The combination results in an increased proclivity to commit crimes, which may turn violent. Because drugs are traded in an underground economy, those who feel cheated in transactions have no legal recourse and must take matters into their own hands, often through violence. Turf wars break out between drug providers operating in a regulatory and legal vacuum, so the distribution of even relatively benign drugs such as marijuana may precipitate violence.

Not all crime is associated with drug use. For example, although the rise of crack cocaine during the 1980s appears to have increased the level of urban violence, the major rise in youth crime occurred after the crack epidemic had largely run its course. Empirical explanations for this low correlation include a report by Reuter, MacCoun, and Murphy (1990), who found that only about a quarter of the dealers they studied were committing property crimes and only 3 percent engaged in violent crime. Reuter and his colleagues estimated that regular drug sellers have only a 1 percent chance of being killed and a 7 percent chance of being injured during a year, but a 22 percent chance of being imprisoned.

While the wave of imprisonments for drug use and possession that occurred during the 1980s has increased the riskiness of drug dealing and may have contributed to the decline in drug use that followed, this wave leveled off during the late 1980s (Flanagan and Maguire 1994). Imprisonment of drug users and drug dealers has bought us some decrease in crime, but at a high price. These expenditures have had no apparent effect on youth violence.

Drug-related crime remains primarily an urban problem. Even though many suburbanites use drugs at rates equivalent to those of urbanites, the distribution of drugs often remains concentrated in cities. Neighborhoods like New York's Washington Heights, with access to the George Washington Bridge and the suburbs of New Jersey beyond, are plagued by visitors in search of drugs. Satisfying this suburban demand creates a major marketing opportunity for local drug dealers. Competition to supply the drugs can at times turn deadly and at the least erode the civility of community life (Williams 1989).

Drug dealing, like most other criminal activity, is a young man's game. For young men with poor educational and job prospects, dealing illegal drugs is an attractive high-risk, high-return way of making money. However, recent research (e.g., Reuter, MacCoun, and Murphy 1990) suggests that many of the stereotypes of drug dealers are incorrect. For example, drug dealing is generally not a full-time activity. Selling is most common in the evenings and on weekends. Reuter, MacCoun, and Murphy estimate that three-quarters of drug dealers have legitimate employment and that less than 40 percent sell drugs daily.

The estimated median monthly earnings of drug dealers in Washington, DC, during the late 1980s were approximately \$700 per month, the same as their earnings from legitimate employment (Reuter, MacCoun, and Murphy 1990). The distribution of earnings from drug sales is highly skewed. Most drug dealers earn little, but a few earn a great deal. The illegal drug industry is, however, big business. Carlson (1993) estimates that the illegal market for cocaine in the United States yielded income of more than \$8 billion in 1991; the market for heroin, more than \$6 billion; and the market for marijuana, almost \$8 billion.

Although "solving" the drug problem may help to alleviate the crime problem, it will not end crime. Moreover, we must have realistic expectations regarding the extent to which public policy can solve the drug problem and the degree to which solving the drug problem will lower the crime rate in urban areas.

People will always use drugs. As long as we make some drugs illegal, illegal markets will arise to satisfy the demand. Public policy and social change decreased drug use during the 1980s, but substantial and lucrative markets for illegal drugs remain. Given current drug laws, public policy can hope only to control the size of the market and to mitigate the damage caused by the drug market and drug use.

Public debate regarding drug laws has ossified. Rather than carefully considering a broad range of drug policies, discussions tend to focus on the extremes of legalization and criminalization (e.g., see articles in Krauss and Lazear 1991). Fortunately, our choices are broader. Possible drug policies are arrayed along two spectra:

1. *Tax treatment.* Some drugs (e.g., prescription drugs and over-the-counter drugs) are subject to no special tax treatment, while others (alcohol and tobacco) are subject to excise taxes. Illegal drugs are, of course, untaxed.
2. *Governmental restrictions.* At one end are over-the-counter drugs that are subject to no restrictions on purchase or use. Next come drugs such as cigarettes and alcohol that have age restrictions on purchase. Other pharmaceuticals require prescriptions for purchase. Some drugs, such as marijuana, have either de facto or de jure freedom of use, but sale is illegal. Finally, there are drugs such as cocaine and heroin for which both use and sale are illegal.

We would be well advised when considering policy options for particular drugs to consider a broad range of options for both taxation and regulation.

The family and crime

The O. J. Simpson case focused public attention on domestic violence. National victimization surveys indicate that more than 40 percent of violent crimes occur between related or romantically involved individuals (Flanagan and Maguire 1994). The link between domestic problems and crime has long been a concern of the police, but it has not figured prominently in discussions of urban crime.

Violence within the family (e.g., husbands' assaults on wives, parents' assaults on children, children's assaults on elderly parents) is a major contributor to the urban crime problem. Research suggests that higher levels of employment, particularly for men, lead to lower levels of domestic violence. There are no firm data on trends in the level of domestic violence (Tauchen and Witte 1995; Tauchen, Witte, and Long 1991). More incidents of domestic violence are now reported, but it is impossible to say whether the level of domestic violence or only the level of reporting is increasing. Since levels of violence tend to be lower in intact families, the increase in divorce and remarriage may have

led to an increase in domestic violence (Tauchen, Witte, and Long 1991).

Contrary to conventional wisdom, domestic violence does not appear to be more common in low-income households if the amount of employment is held constant. The Simpson case reflects two other important characteristics of domestic violence. First, domestic violence is common even in high-income households. Second, assaults by men on their romantic partners appear to be more frequent when the partner differs substantially in race, ethnicity, income, or education. Couples of mixed race or ethnicity appear more likely to experience violence than other couples. Also, women who earn more or who are better educated than their male partners seem more likely to be victims, other things being equal (Tauchen, Witte, and Long 1991).

Many police departments adopted a presumptive arrest policy for domestic violence during the 1980s because an experiment in Minneapolis showed that individuals arrested for domestic violence were less likely to repeat their offense. The experiment compared the effectiveness of arrest, counseling, and getting the perpetrator out of the house for a cooling-off period. Arrest was shown to be more effective than the other two responses to domestic violence (Sherman 1992).

More recent work suggests that although arrest lowers the level of violence in some settings, it raises it in others. Individuals with strong ties to the community and more conforming lifestyles seem to be deterred by arrest, but individuals who are more alienated may increase their level of violence after arrest (see Garner, Fagan, and Maxwell 1995 or Sherman 1992 for details).

Property values and crime

Crime is one of the major negative externalities that depress property values in urban areas. Neighborhoods that experience large increases in either violent or property crime generally have declining property values. Housing prices also tend to decline in neighborhoods where markets for illegal goods flourish. Neighborhoods with depressed housing prices and abandoned buildings also frequently become havens for criminals and centers for the illegal drug trade.

The flip side of this coin is that people are willing to pay for safe homes and neighborhoods. They do this by choosing to live in suburban areas and by paying high property taxes for good police

forces. They also increasingly do this by living in privately guarded compounds or “gated communities.” Expenditures on private security personnel have grown rapidly in the United States since the 1960s.³

Crime and the ghetto

An important feature of U.S. urban areas is the existence of ghettos (generally inhabited by people of similar racial, ethnic, or national origins), where an underground economy tends to flourish. Indeed, in some cases underground economic activity is far more important than the legal economy in both the social and economic life of the ghetto. The underground economy in the ghetto, with its tenuous ties to legal institutions and its need for secrecy, provides a congenial environment for criminal activity.

The underground economy can be divided into an *informal* sector and an *illegal* sector. In the informal sector, perfectly legal goods and services are bought and sold; however, the seller either is not properly registered or licensed or does not pay taxes. In the ghetto, such activity ranges from small factories producing clothing with the help of illegal Latin American or Asian immigrants to unlicensed barbers or beauticians cutting the hair of friends and neighbors. Such activity flourishes in distressed neighborhoods because the level of “unemployment” is high and because low incomes force ghetto residents to use low-cost providers. Inner-city markets are often wide open to informal suppliers because many firms in the formal sector do not wish to provide goods and services in low-income areas. The illegal sector of the underground economy consists of activities that are against the law, such as drug dealing, prostitution, or defrauding government benefit programs.

Studies indicate that the majority of economic activity in the Watts area of Los Angeles is either illegal or informal. Studies of New York City suggest that the informal economy grew rapidly during the 1980s.⁴

An important part of the illegal sector is the drug trade, often organized around urban gangs. Gangs maintain a complicated relationship with the neighborhoods where they deal drugs.

³ See Flanagan and Maguire (1994) for police statistics and Long and Witte (1980) for a survey of the effect of crime on property values.

⁴ Pozo (1993, 1996) and Sassen-Koob (1989) discuss the underground economy in urban areas.

After a multiyear, multicity ethnographic study, Jankowski (1991, 210) concludes that “in those neighborhoods where gangs operate, the gang and the community have established a working relationship.” He further notes that “this relationship is predicated on a number of exchange relationships in which the gang and the community provide each other with certain services.”

Gangs contribute countless dollars to local commerce and serve as local militias that attempt to control some of the spillover crimes associated with drug use, such as break-ins and muggings. Many inner-city communities, in turn, give gangs sanctuary from civil authority and often legitimize them by conferring status on their members. In short, the relationship between gangs and the ghetto may be more symbiotic than adversarial, and this relationship often hinders crime and drug prevention efforts.

Public policies affecting crime

Public policies that affect urban crime are of two distinct types. First, there is a whole set of social policies (e.g., drug treatment policies, child welfare policies, jobs policies) that affect crime either directly or indirectly. Second, there is criminal justice policy aimed at preventing crime when possible and apprehending and punishing criminals.

Research suggests that some social policies and some criminal justice policies can reduce the crime rate. Among social policies, efforts to provide meaningful activities (e.g., jobs, schools, education) to young males, particularly minority males, and preventive or supportive programs, particularly programs directed to young children and their families, can reduce crime. There is also evidence that structured, community-oriented, and value-centered schools can improve educational performance and lower levels of juvenile delinquency (Mandel 1995; Witte 1996).

Among criminal justice policies, both police resources and police policies can deter crime, but the effect is not large (Tauchen and Witte 1994). Prisons can incapacitate offenders, but they do not appear to deter them significantly. The effect of this incapacitation on the crime rate depends on the rate at which new offenders take the places of incarcerated offenders on the street.

While early intervention appears most successful, some intensive programs for at-risk youth have been shown to be effective, and research suggests that keeping young people busy with legal

activities can reduce crime (Witte and Tauchen 1994). The Job Corps, which places at-risk young people in residential, structured work and educational programs, has significantly reduced the level of crime of participants. Research suggests that good jobs, good education, and structured social (including religious) activities can lower the level of crime among the young. A strict, caring, value-centered learning environment such as that found in good parochial schools also seems to increase educational attainment and reduce juvenile delinquency.⁵

It is important to note that the term “criminal justice system” is a misnomer. No such system exists. Rather, there is a hodge-podge of criminal justice agencies at various levels of government. Crime prevention is largely a police function and the responsibility of local government. Punishment for crimes is meted out by the courts and correctional agencies, which are generally part of state government. The federal government has a limited role: It is responsible for interstate and international crimes, it supports research on the causes of crime and the operation of criminal justice agencies, and it provides funds and seeks to affect nationwide criminal justice policy.

Local government policies affecting crime

Many local governments have programs designed to keep young people busy, particularly during the summer. As far as I am aware, there has been no systematic evaluation of such programs. However, research suggests a number of reasons such programs might be successful and finds that young men who are busy working or going to school commit fewer offenses.

The British are using such programs explicitly for crime control. For example, the local council in Luton paid for youth clubs in its high-crime public housing and experienced a decline in crime while the rest of England experienced an increase. Bristol and Kirklees, West Yorkshire, set up summer programs for 11- to 16-year-olds in high-crime areas and found that crime declined about 30 percent from previous summers. A scheme in Bolton to encourage young street children to join sports, arts, or counseling groups greatly reduced nuisance calls to the police. In the United States, the Children at Risk (CAR) program keeps youth busy in after-school and summer programs that divert time and energy from delinquency. Preliminary results show significant

⁵ See Witte (1996) for a survey and Harrell (1995) for a preliminary report of a comprehensive program for at-risk youth.

decreases in juvenile arrests and convictions for the experimental group (Harrell 1995).

The effect of police departments on crime depends on both the level of police resources and the way resources are used. Apprehension is more likely when the police respond rapidly, and rapid apprehension is a stronger deterrent than apprehension long after the crime has been committed. Modern technology allows 911 calls to be handled far more expeditiously than in the past. Still, the proportion of crimes solved by the police (the clearance rate) remains low. For example, the police make an arrest for less than one-sixth of burglaries (Flanagan and Maguire 1994).

The 1980s saw a number of changes in policing:

1. As noted earlier, many police departments adopted community policing. Research shows that with community policing people feel safer and neighborhoods can improve. Yet community policing does not appear to decrease crime rates.
2. Computer analyses of police data identified “hot spots” from which there were frequent calls to the police. Police allocated more resources to those hot spots, and such calls declined. However, crime appears to have been displaced to other areas rather than suppressed.
3. As noted earlier, some police departments made arrest the presumptive response to domestic violence, but recent research has called this policy into question.

State policies affecting crime

The state generally provides substantial money for education, administers welfare programs, seeks to stimulate economic growth and development, regulates the provision of child care, decides what is illegal, and runs the courts and prisons. State social and development expenditures have not generally been aimed at reducing crime, and I am not aware of studies that assess their impact on crime.

State governments can most easily lower the crime rate by legalizing some things. For example, a number of states have effectively decriminalized the use of marijuana, but the current political atmosphere makes it unlikely that legalization will be pursued on any substantial scale.

Legalization is not a possibility for violent crimes or major property crimes such as burglary, robbery, and larceny. The state tries to deter such offenses by running a court system that determines who is guilty; setting punishments for convicted offenders; and running probation, prison, and parole departments to carry out sentences that restrict offenders' freedom.

During the past decade, we have moved from a system dominated by indeterminate sentences that allowed early release for prisoners who behaved well in prison to a system dominated by long, determinate sentences. This change has swelled our prison population with inmates who have longer sentences and no hope of parole. Between 1975 and 1990, the number of prison inmates with sentences of one year or more nearly tripled (Flanagan and Maguire 1994).

We have also radically changed the way we allocate the ever-growing number of prison spaces. In 1974, 52 percent of prisoners had been convicted for violent offenses, 31 percent for property offenses, and 10 percent for drug offenses. By 1988, 30 percent of new court commitments to prison were for violent offenses, 37 percent for property offenses, and 25 percent for drug offenses. We substantially increased the proportion of prison spaces allocated to drug offenders and decreased the proportion allocated to violent offenders. Although prison sentences do keep offenders off the streets, drug dealers, even at the wholesale level, are replaced quite quickly. Violent offenders are replaced more slowly. Allocating more prison resources to drug rather than violent offenders decreases the level of incapacitation obtained per dollar spent. Many states are now changing policy and reserving an increasing proportion of prison spaces for violent offenders (Flanagan and Maguire 1994).

More worrisome still is the fact that an increasing proportion of state expenditures is going to prisons and a declining proportion to higher education. During the 1970s and 1980s, total public expenditures on education grew by a factor of four and one-half, while expenditures on the criminal justice system grew by a factor of six (Flanagan and Maguire 1994). During the same period, public expenditure on public colleges and universities grew by 78 percent, while expenditures on corrections grew by almost 900 percent. In 1990, it cost an average of \$9,442 per year to send a young person to a higher educational institution and \$25,496 per year to keep a young person in prison. The states increasingly emphasize imprisoning rather than educating young people.

Federal policies affecting crime

The federal government provides substantial money for early childhood education and family interventions through its matching funds program and Head Start. Head Start has been expanded in recent years, but it still serves only 28 percent of eligible children, at a cost of \$2.2 billion per year. Further, and more important from a crime control perspective, Head Start has not been shown to reduce juvenile delinquency, possibly because it is only a one-year program for many participants and because the family-support part of the program has been weak (Zigler, Taussig, and Black 1992).

The federal government has also funded what might best be termed demonstration projects for juveniles, such as the Job Corps (discussed earlier).

The federal criminal justice system deals mainly with interstate and international offenses that have little relevance to the urban crime problem. Under the auspices of the war on drugs, the federal government has used the military and other resources to try to interdict international drug shipments (generally ineffectively) and has loaded the federal prisons with drug offenders. Today more than 50 percent of federal prisoners are in prison for drug offenses (Flanagan and Maguire 1994).

The federal government supports (at a declining level) research on crime, delinquency, and the criminal justice system. The results of such research may be important in determining state and local policies. For example, longitudinal studies have shown that a small number of high-rate offenders are responsible for a disproportionate number of offenses (Tauchen and Witte 1994), and experiments on police handling of domestic violence have altered the way police handle such incidents (Garner, Fagan, and Maxwell 1995).

Finally, the federal government provides funds to state and local criminal justice agencies. For example, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 proposes spending \$9 billion to help local police departments hire 100,000 new officers (although the actual number hired is far lower). Research suggests that these federal initiatives may be fruitful avenues for criminal justice policy (Donohue and Siegelman 1994; Tauchen and Witte 1994).

New directions for public policy toward urban crime

Criminal justice policies

During the past decade, we have greatly increased the proportion of criminal justice resources allocated to prisons. Between 1970 and 1990, while the number of prison cells roughly tripled, the number of police officers remained approximately constant (Flanagan and Maguire 1994).

Research suggests that building more prisons is not the most effective use of criminal justice dollars. Incarceration does not appear to significantly decrease either the postrelease criminal activities of those incarcerated (specific deterrence) or the level of crime in most urban communities (general deterrence).

The crime-reducing effect of increased expenditures on police has more research support. Such increases do seem to deter young men from committing crimes, but the effect on crime is not large (Tauchen and Witte 1994). Still, increased spending on police will likely have a larger effect on crime than increased spending on prison cells.⁶

Most citizens do not like to see drug dealing in urban streets. Random violence among dealers and the vacant stares and hyperactivity of drug users make the streets more threatening. However, most citizens fear violent crime aimed at the general public far more than they fear drug dealing or the negative externalities it produces. Both these public attitudes and research suggest that it may be time to reallocate criminal justice resources from drug dealing to violent crime. Some states are now beginning to reallocate prison resources to violent offenders. There may be a hidden crime-reduction benefit in using more of the new prison cells to house violent offenders, who are not as quickly or completely replaced with new offenders as drug dealers are.

What are we going to do with convicted drug dealers if we do not put them in prison? I would suggest that many drug dealers, and indeed many property offenders, can best be punished with fines and electronic surveillance. With new monitoring technology, the movements of convicted offenders can be followed carefully while they are on the street. They can be picked up if they are found to be at the scene of a burglary or at known centers of drug

⁶ Campbell (1994) discusses the effect of police on crime.

distribution. Fines collected from the offenders could be used to pay surveillance costs or restitution for victims.

In the long run, we may want to rethink our laws regarding “victimless” crimes such as drug use. For example, we could consider decriminalizing the less virulent drugs, such as marijuana. There are precedents for this in the repeal of Prohibition during the 1930s and the more recent legalization, and state provision, of gambling.

Policies for at-risk youth

Growing up poor in U.S. urban areas has never been easy, but the situation facing young, urban Americans has deteriorated since the 1960s and early 1970s. Urban schools, particularly in distressed neighborhoods, are more often settings for violence and drug dealing than for education. Traditional education, even at its best, ill prepares young people for the high-tech, rapidly changing workplace of today. Respected authority, legitimate role models, supervision by adults, and close, caring relationships with adults are scarce in distressed neighborhoods. Structured, legal leisure activities are rare, but the streets provide a range of illegal and semilegal ways of killing time and even making money.

Few programs for at-risk youth have been shown to be effective, with the notable exception of the Job Corps (described earlier). Funds are unlikely to be available to remove a large proportion of at-risk youth from their neighborhoods. It is not even clear that this would be desirable on a large scale. What are we to do with the youth who remain in the difficult environment of the inner city? I think we have no choice but to make some changes in the environment, beginning with schools. Considerable research suggests that structured, value-oriented education and education that seeks close ties with families can improve the lives of at-risk youth. It may be time to invest in such education rather than traditional public high schools. New York City has experimented with alternative school settings, and the CAR program has shown preliminary success in diverse low-income settings (Harrell 1995).

Research also suggests that it is important to keep young people busy doing something legal that interests and engages them. Youth who spend more time working and at school have lower levels of criminal activity, even after controlling for a large number of other factors. Also, inner-city youth who are involved

in church activities or who attend parochial schools have lower levels of criminal activity and are more likely to escape poverty than youth who are not so involved. The British experience and preliminary CAR results cited above suggest that well-structured summer programs may be effective both in making the streets more pleasant and in lowering crime. (See Witte and Tauchen 1994 for evidence regarding the effect of work and schooling on crime.)

Even intensive interventions with preadolescent or adolescent youth who already have problems can be expected to produce only limited benefits. Larger benefits may come only if we begin interventions much earlier.

A better start

Small-scale studies have shown that intensive early interventions that combine early childhood education with family support and education in parenting can reduce juvenile delinquency. Successful programs work with at-risk parents and children for at least two years before children enter school; provide high-quality infant, day-care, or preschool programs for children; provide informational and emotional support on child-development and child-rearing issues for parents; provide prenatal and postnatal health care; and either provide vocational counseling or training or make sure that they are available for parents.

Such programs are expensive, but not as expensive as effective programs for juveniles or the criminal justice system's costs of dealing with crime after it has occurred. The lesson here, as in other areas of policy, is that prevention works and is generally cheaper than dealing with problems after their inception.⁷

Head Start is a step in the right direction, but it is too small, has too few services, and is too brief to change the lives of the children it enrolls. Current research suggests that the most effective long-term programs to combat crime within the context of the existing health and welfare policies, the child's family life, and the current economic situation will be intensive programs for at-risk children and their families that begin before or shortly after a child is born.

⁷ Zigler, Taussig, and Black (1992) discuss the effect of early childhood interventions.

Conclusions

Crime rates are now declining in U.S. urban areas. There is much debate as to why this is the case. Some claim that the decline is attributable mainly to the “get tough” crime policy of the 1980s, while others claim it is attributable mainly to a decline in the number of young people and to a calming of the drug turf wars. On balance, research suggests that most of the drop in crime stems from a decrease in the number of young people and from increased police effectiveness.

The rate of violent crime among young males has risen substantially in recent years. We do not know the reason for this increase, but it seems likely to have arisen from a number of sources: disorganized communities, dysfunctional families, and decreased economic and educational opportunities. An effective attack on the youth crime problem may involve the criminal justice system only as a backup. Intensive work with at-risk families, organized community activities, and better educational and economic opportunities may provide a more effective front-line attack. The relative costs of education and imprisonment certainly suggest that reallocation of resources from imprisonment to education and training is worthwhile.

Author

Ann Dryden Witte is Professor of Economics at Florida International University and Wellesley College. She is a member of the National Bureau of Economic Research’s Program in Public Economics and Program in Labor Studies.

References

- Campbell, John. 1994. Policing Crime. *Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Regional Review* 4:6–11.
- Carlson, Kenneth. 1993. Income from Illegal Activities. Unpublished tables. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates.
- Donohue, John, and Peter Siegelman. 1994. Is the United States at the Optimal Rate of Crime? Working paper. Chicago: Northwestern School of Law.
- Flanagan, Timothy J., and Kathleen Maguire. 1994. *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.
- Garner, Joel, Jeffrey Fagan, and Christopher Maxwell. 1995. Published Findings from the Spouse Assault Replication Program: A Critical Review. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 11:3–28.

Gillespie, Ed, and Bob Schellhas, eds. 1994. *Contract with America: The Bold Plan by Rep. Newt Gingrich, Rep. Dick Arme, and the House Republicans to Change the Nation*. New York: Times Books.

Harrell, Adele. 1995. *Impact of the Children at Risk Program*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

Jankowski, Martín Sánchez. 1991. *Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Krauss, Murray, and Edward Lazear. 1991. *Searching for Alternatives: Drug-Control Policy in the United States*. Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press.

Long, Sharon, and Ann Witte. 1980. Evaluating the Effect of Public Policies on Land Prices in Metropolitan Areas: Some Suggested Approaches. In *Urban Land Markets: Price Indices, Supply Measures, and Public Policy Effects*, ed. J. Thomas Black and James Hoben, 133–59. Washington, DC: Urban Land Institute.

Mandel, Richard. 1995. *Prevention or Pork? A Hard-Headed Look at Youth-Oriented Anti-Crime Programs*. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum.

Pozo, Susan. 1993. *Price Behavior in Illegal Markets*. Unpublished manuscript. Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University, Department of Economics.

Pozo, Susan. 1996. *The Underground Economy*. Kalamazoo, MI: Upjohn Institute.

Reuter, Peter, Robert MacCoun, and Patrick Murphy. 1990. *Money from Crime: A Study of the Economics of Drug Dealing in Washington, DC*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation.

Sassen-Koob, Saskia. 1989. New York City's Informal Economy. In *The Informal Economy: Studies in Advanced and Less Developed Countries*, ed. Alejandro Portes, Manuel Castels, and Lauren Benton, 60–77. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Sherman, Lawrence. 1992. *Policing Domestic Violence*. New York: Free Press.

Tauchen, Helen, and Ann Witte. 1994. Criminal Deterrence: Revisiting the Issues with a Birth Cohort. *Review of Economics and Statistics* 76:399–412.

Tauchen, Helen, and Ann Witte. 1995. The Dynamics of Domestic Violence. *American Economic Review* 85:414–18.

Tauchen, Helen, Ann Witte, and Sharon Long. 1991. Domestic Violence: A Non-Random Affair. *International Economic Review* 32:1–21.

Williams, Terry. 1989. *The Cocaine Kids: The Inside Story of a Teenage Drug Ring*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

Witte, Ann. 1996. The Social Benefits of Education: Crime. In *The Social Benefits of Education*, ed. Jere Behrman and Nevzer Stacey. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, forthcoming.

Witte, Ann, and Helen Tauchen. 1994. Work and Crime: An Exploration Using Panel Data. *Public Finance* 49:155–67.

Zigler, Edward, Cara Taussig, and Kathryn Black. 1992. Early Childhood Intervention: A Promising Preventative for Juvenile Delinquency. *American Psychologist* 47:997–1006.