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# Experts show advantage of 'police over prisons' in decreasing crime

During the last two decades, America has experienced both a massive increase in the prison population as well as a substantial drop in crime. The late professor William Stuntz referred to these as the "two great stories" of contemporary crime and criminal justice.

Are they related?

Look at the numbers. In the early 1970s, America's imprisonment rate was fewer than 100 per 100,000 in population. The rate has quintupled to about 500 per 100,000. At the same pace, the rate of violent crime has shown a significant decrease. At one point during the last few years, there had actually been a one-third decrease from the level of 1990.

According to Stuntz, the best work that examines the possible relationship between rising incarceration rates and plummeting crime rates has been done separately by economist Steven Levitt and sociologist Bruce Western. William J. Stuntz, "The Collapse of American Criminal Justice" (Harvard, 2011), 278. Levitt — the co-author of the bestseller "Freakonomics" (2006) — estimated that increased imprisonment was probably responsible for about one-third of the 35 percent drop in violent crime, i.e., about 12 percent of the total drop. Western, however, estimated that the increased imprisonment only accounted for about one-tenth of the drop in violent crime, i.e., between 2 percent and 5 percent of the total drop.

On the other hand, Levitt estimated that increased police hiring accounted for about 6 percent of the total drop in violent crime. That is only half of the 12 percent caused by increased incarceration. But, here is the rub. According to Levitt, it cost about $800 million to pay for the extra policing to get a 1 percent drop in violent crime. And what did the increased imprisonment cost to get the same 1 percent drop? $1.6 billion — twice the amount. Western's figures are more stunning. He estimated that the cost of increased incarceration to get a 1 percent violent crime drop was somewhere between $3.9 billion and $9.6 billion.

The bottom line? It costs a lot less to reduce crime with more police than with more prisons.

In addition, Stuntz says in his book the advantage of "police over prisons" is about more than money. "[H]igher levels of policing led to a greater police presence on high-crime city streets before crimes happened, not afterward. That increased police 'footprint' in turn made possible the parallel increase in police interactions with the local population, the core idea behind community policing ... High crime neighborhoods could begin to see urban police forces as a means of keeping young men out of trouble, not tools used to put ever more of those young men behind bars." (279).

Recently another voice was added to this pro-police chorus. Noted criminologist Franklin E. Zimring became intrigued by what happened to crime rates in New York City. His findings are in his new book "The City That Became Safe: New York's Lessons for Urban Crime and Its Control" (Oxford, 2012).

Zimring notes that starting in 1990, the average American city experienced a 40 percent decline in crime that flattened out around 2000. New York City, however, is different; its decline has continued for the last 20 years. More importantly, the average drop in crime in New York has been twice that of other American cities. During this time, the rates of homicide, robbery and burglary have dropped 80 percent. Auto theft has dropped 94 percent. The homicide rate in New York City was 30 per 100,000 in 1990; in 2009, it was 6 per 100,000. This was even lower than the homicide rate in 1961. Zimring describes this as "the largest crime drop ever documented during periods of social and governmental continuity."

Zimring examines what local changes could possibly have accounted for this astonishing decrease in crime between 1990 and 2009. He looks at population, immigration, ethnic balance, economic indicators, unemployment and the number of children in single-parent households. His findings? "The New York City of 2010 is in most respects the same city as in 1990 and that is one reason that the big differences in common crime and violence rates are both astonishing and difficult to explain." (78).

CRIMINAL PROCEDURE

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So what was responsible for the drop in crime? Zimring concludes, "The circumstantial evidence that some combination of policing variables accounts for much of the New York difference is overwhelming." (101). One factor was simply the increase in the number of New York City police beginning in 1990. But there was also a change in deployment of police. Before 1990, for example, the Narcotics Division went off duty at 7 p.m. and the robbery squad had weekends off. The new policy beginning in 1990s was "putting police in service where and when 'the bad guys' were at work!" (118).

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Zimring also examines a number of new tactics used by the NYPD since 1990 and concludes that two of them almost certainly reduced crime in New York City: "1) the emphasis on hot spots for enforcement, aggressive street intervention and sustained monitoring and 2) the priority targeting of public drug markets for arrest, surveillance and sustained attack." (142) "Hot spots" are those very specific locations that are sites of repetitive patterns of violent crime. The goal was to be proactive, not reactive. Drug arrests were not ends in themselves, but rather a means to take weapons off the street and to prevent drug-related violence.

But obviously there is a potential dark side to this. Between 1990 and 2009, the number of stops performed on a yearly basis by the NYPD has increased 14-fold. In 2011, the NYPD performed almost 700,000 stops, a 14 percent increase over 2010. Civil libertarians have repeatedly alleged racial profiling in these stops. And over the last decade, only 1 in 650 stops resulted in an arrest for a firearms violation. Elected officials and civil rights leaders recently protested at city hall and called on Mayor Michael Bloomberg to rectify the situation.

An overall decrease in *Terry* stops would mean fewer innocent people are publicly humiliated. Yet it would also probably mean an overall increase in neighborhood violence. We need to honestly confront the possible "zero-sum" aspects of this crucial public policy issue.