

# 13 HIRING POLICE AND BUILDING PRISONS PAYS OFF

by Steven D. Levitt

*There are hot debates over whether the nation would benefit from more police and more prison beds. Studying some "natural experiments" over time gives clear answers: we should have more of both.*

Police and prisons represent the first line of defense in the fight against crime. In 1992 there were over 700,000 police officers in the United States (almost 50 percent more than two decades earlier), and over a million Americans in jails or prisons. The annual price tag for police and prisons is approaching \$100 billion per year. In spite of all this, violent crimes per capita have risen 80 percent over the last two decades.

Does that mean our spending on police and prisons is a waste of money? Some observers have jumped to that conclusion, even going so far as to propose a moratorium on new prison construction. Research I have been conducting on the connection between police and prison availability and crime rates, however, comes to very different conclusions. Both police and prisons appear to be cost-effective tools in controlling crime, and each has been increasing in number simply because the underlying crime trend has been sharply upward. High crime rates make additional police necessary; that is why Detroit has twice as many police officers per capita as Omaha. The link between the size of the prison population and crime rates is even more direct: unless a justice system is growing more lenient, prison populations will rise one for one with crime rates.

The best practical way to judge the effectiveness of police and imprisonment is to study "natural experiments" where the number of police or prisoners fluctuate for reasons completely unrelated to crime incidence. By examining the effect of these changes in police or prisons on victimization levels, it is possible to estimate causal impacts.

Mayoral and gubernatorial elections provide good ways to test the effectiveness of police reinforcements. In big cities, increases in police forces occur disproportionately during election years, presumably because incumbents want to look "tough on crime." Over the last two decades, police forces in cities with populations over 250,000 have grown an average of 2.8 percent in election years, but only 0.7 percent in non-election years.

After controlling election-induced changes in police staffing against other factors, one finds that police force expansions have large effects on crime rates. In the big cities I examined, an additional sworn officer eliminates 4.5 violent crimes and six property crimes each year. Based on the best estimates of costs of crime to victims, this reduction in crime is worth over \$100,000 per officer per year. Any reduction in drunk driving, drug-related activities, arson, or fraud due to additional police would need to be added on top of that number, as would any psychological benefits to citizens from feeling safer. Given that the full costs of hiring a police officer are approximately \$75,000 a year, it appears that hiring more police is a cost-effective approach to fighting crime in most cities.

Adding prisoners also appears to be a cost-beneficial strategy for reducing crime. The "natural experiment" I used in analyzing prisons grows out of prison overcrowding litigation brought by groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union. In many places, such suits have forced prison officials to release inmates. In states affected by such court orders, imprisonment levels lag the rest of the United States by an average of 15 percent over a three-year period. And during that time span, crime rates in those places rise 10 percent faster than the national average for violent offenses, and 5 percent faster for property crimes. I estimate that each additional prisoner taken off the streets eliminates between two and three violent crimes a year and over 10 property crimes. The economic benefits alone of preventing those crimes amount to approximately \$45,000—well above annual incarceration costs that average \$25,000 to \$35,000 per prisoner.

How much crime might we reasonably hope to eliminate through increases in police and prisons? Putting another 100,000 police officers on the streets and an additional 100,000 offenders behind bars would likely reduce violent crime rates by about 10 percent. Beyond that point, diminishing returns make further increases economically unattractive.

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# 14 THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE TO BUILDING MORE PRISONS

by Richard K. Willard

*Some claim we could open up ample prison space in which to put today's egregious repeat offenders just by letting out "low-level" offenders, particularly those charged with drug crimes. These people are wrong.*

Many violent criminals are turned loose today after serving amazingly lenient sentences. This has led to calls for building more prisons so that repeat violent offenders can be locked up for longer terms. Balancing this is a persistent question about whether our current prison capacity is being used properly. Some critics contend that our prisons contain substantial numbers of minor offenders, especially ones convicted of drug crimes, who can safely be released without endangering our communities. Before spending billions of dollars on new cells, they assert, we should make better use of existing space by reducing or eliminating sentences for these "non-threatening" felons.

Some of these critics cite a 1994 Justice Department study that indicated 21 percent of federal prisoners are "low-level drug offenders." The problems riddling this study start with its use of the euphemism "drug offender." In practice, virtually all of these federal prisoners were convicted of drug trafficking. These are

not otherwise law-abiding citizens who happened to get nabbed for casual drug use. They are dealers.

Drug dealing is a serious crime. Drug dealers destroy neighborhoods. They enmesh children in their illegal distribution networks, and peddle their poisons to all. Most drug dealers use violence as part of their trade. They often carry firearms, almost always illegally. A majority of all homicides today are drug-related.

Even if one believes that some drug dealers don't deserve prison terms, the Justice Department study seriously overstates the number of federal prisoners who could be considered non-threatening

to their communities. Its list of "low-level offenders" includes many with prior records of serious criminal misconduct. The study's screening protocol was supposed to eliminate offenders with a history of violent crime, but further analysis showed that a significant percentage of persons charged with crimes of violence got through. Moreover, many of those with "non-violent" records had been charged with such serious felonies as burglary, a crime that certainly is a serious

threat to community safety. In addition, 45 percent of the first-offender drug traffickers the study presents as candidates for release are non-U.S. citizens—and no consideration was given to whether these individuals might have prior criminal records abroad, and so not even be first offenders at all.

Another factor bedeviling the study's claim to have identified a large population of non-threatening prisoners is the fact that many records of juvenile arrests and convictions—even for the most serious violent crimes—are sealed or expunged and thus unavailable to researchers. Many a putative first offender actually has a lengthy record of prior criminal conduct as a juvenile. It is quite predictable that most of those convicts will commit violent and predatory crimes as soon as they are released.

A more fundamental problem with using this study to argue that our prisons contain significant numbers of harmless individuals is this: the Justice Department research covered only the federal prison system—which contains less than 7 percent of the country's total prison population. And, unlike their federal counterparts, only a small proportion of state prisoners are drug criminals. There are just 27,000 first-time drug offenders in state prisons today—less than 4 percent of the total state prison population.

It is thus hard to see how our states could free up much prison capacity by adopting more lenient sentencing policies for drug offenders. The vast proportion of first-time drug offenders already receive pretrial diversion, probation, or short sentences in local jails only. Among all drug offenders who go to state prison—including many repeat offenders—the median time actually served behind bars is only 12 months.

It is certainly true that we should optimize our use of limited and costly prison capacity. And it may be possible to release some small number of prisoners following drug treatment. In such cases, there should be frequent drug testing backed up by mandatory incarceration if drug use persists.

Reducing drug sentences, however, will not solve our shortage of prison capacity. In state and federal penitentiaries alike,

