

### WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM RESEARCH ON CRIME CONTROL?

By James P. Lynch

Crime and crime control are once again in the news. The FBI is announcing increases in crimes reported to the police, and the Congress is debating a new crime legislation package. The ideological nature of the debate and the almost exclusive focus on punishment are unfortunate. The data suggest that, although there may be nothing radically wrong with our punishment policies, they have little effect on crime and public safety. The debate should be broadened to include greater consideration of crime prevention. There is good evidence that prevention efforts can in fact reduce crime.

#### Punishment in the US and Abroad

Cross-national comparisons of imprisonment have been used repeatedly to suggest that the US has the most punitive punishment policies of all industrial democracies. These comparisons are misleading, however, in that they use the ratio of the imprisoned population on a given day to the population of the country as the imprisonment rate. This measure confounds the level of punishment with the level of crime in a society. Nations with high levels of crime, like the US, can incarcerate relatively few convicted offenders and have the same rate as a country that has few offenders but incarcerates them all. When adjustments are made so as to use arrested persons as the base of the rate and the number of persons admitted to prison in a given year as the numerator, the imprisonment rates for the US and other industrialized nations are essentially the same.<sup>1</sup>

Similar results are obtained when length of custodial sentences are compared using actual time served rather than sentences imposed by the court. While imposed sentences are considerably higher in the US than other industrialized nations, the actual time served for violent crimes is comparable.<sup>2</sup>

The data do not clearly support the liberal or the conservative assumptions about crime control. Courts in the US do not respond that differently to serious crime than other nations with much lower crime rates. In this sense, we may not punish too much. On the other hand, there is no good evidence that the substantial increases in imprisonment that have occurred since 1973 have made us much safer. The implications of the policy research in support of the various sides of the punishment debate seems to be that punishment may be of limited relevance for crime control.

#### Why Not Prevention?

Part of our preoccupation with punishment occurs because our responses to crime serve many purposes. One of those purposes is symbolic—it defines the limits of appropriate behavior in our society. It affirms the right that we as citizens have to safety. Another valid purpose, however—to reduce the injury and harm resulting from crimes—points us in somewhat different directions. Punishment clearly serves the former goal, while prevention is often better designed to achieve the latter. Many prevention policies are actually antithetical to the symbolic goals of crime control policy. Law-abiding citizens do not feel vindication when steering wheel locks are placed on motor vehicles. Moreover, prevention policies often impose a cost on the just rather than the wicked. Designing wheels without hubcaps may reduce theft rates, but what about people who want hubcaps?

Still, there are a number of factors that recommend renewed attention to crime prevention. If we are to have a noticeable impact on the high volume of crime in this country, our response to crime must be as massive as the problem. For a variety of reasons, punishment cannot be massively applied in this country. In contrast, prevention policies emphasizing modest individual (as opposed to governmental) efforts can (unlike punishment) be applied efficiently on a massive scale. Second, there is empirical evidence that prevention efforts can substantially reduce victimization. Eliminating the opportunity, i.e., access to the situations and instrumentation required, to commit criminal acts can have substantial effects on the incidence of specific types of crime. Steering wheel locks, for example, considerably reduced the number of auto thefts. Efforts to reduce criminal opportunity and to increase incentives for lawful behavior should receive more attention.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>James P. Lynch, "A Comparison of Prison Use in England, Canada, West Germany and the United States: A Limited Test of the Punitiveness Hypothesis, *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 1988, 79 (1): 180-217; and "A Cross-National Comparison of the Length of Custodial Sentences for Serious Crimes," paper presented at the meetings of the American Society of Criminology, Reno, November 7, 1989.

<sup>2</sup>However, actual time served for minor property crimes is longer in the US than other industrialized nations.

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*James P. Lynch is professor of Justice, Law, & Society, American University.*