

Social Policies as Crime Control

SNS Report

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Economic Framework

Economic Model of Crime (Becker 1968):
Individuals commit crime if $E(\text{benefits}) > E(\text{costs})$

*Can decrease crime with policies that increase
the expected cost of crime*

Criminal Justice Policies impact
expected punishment:

- Police (probability arrest)
- Prison? (sanction severity)
- Sentence Length? (sanction severity)

Non-Criminal Justice Policies that increase
opportunity cost of crime (returns to participating
in legitimate labor markets)

- Education
- Labor market and welfare policies (wages, emp)
- Factors that affect cog/non-cog skills

Social Policies versus Criminal Justice Policies

Criminal justice policies:

- Target crime
- Timing: crime could be reduced immediately (deterred/incapacitated)
- Expensive

Social policies:

- Large benefits/returns (even if crime unaffected): Decreased crime as unintended benefit makes social policies even more cost-effective.
- Timing: may be less immediate, especially if targeting youth.
- But, if early enough, could shift entire crime trajectory (dynamics)

Which Social Policies ‘Causally’ Reduce Crime?

- Effective policy must be based on scientific evidence
 - **Causal evidence** that the policy does what it is supposed to, for who it is supposed to. And does not have negative unintended consequences.
- Causal evidence can be elusive: Many reasons for correlations in the real world when X does not causally impact crime.
 - Omitted variables: Many unobservables related to both X and Y. Criminals are different than non-criminals in many dimensions.
 - Simultaneity: Does X affect Y or Y affect X?
- Research surveyed : That using natural experiments and quasi-experimental designs to identify causal impacts of social policy on crime.

Negatively Selected Offender Populations



- Swedish Prison Registers: Adults with 0-48 month sentence 1992-2001
 - **23% employed** in Nov pre-prison, **58% welfare** in year pre-prison, **15% in psychiatric ward** in 3 years pre-prison.
 - 1953 Stockholm Birth Cohort: Unconvicted (N=5152) vs Convicted Males (N=2567)
 - Convicted sample **2-3x more likely** to have: sentenced father, single mother, **alcoholic** parent, parental **mental health** problems, foster care
 - National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (US): No arrest versus arrest before age 16
 - Smoke before 16: 48% vs 80%
 - **Alcohol** before 16: 65% vs 83%
 - Hard drugs before 16: 7% vs 23%
 - **Suspended** before 12: 13% vs 32%
 - Age adjusted math/word score: 33/68 vs -398/-216
- **Negatively selected in many “social policy-related” dimensions.**
- **But, many such characteristics, some of which will be unobservable or hard to measure.**
- **Offenders are similar over time and around the world: We can learn from international research.**

Report/Talk Outline

Social Policy Areas

- Education
- Alcohol
- Early Childhood Environment
- Healthcare
- (Youth) Employment
- Welfare
- Military Conscription

Highlights

- *Causal evidence* of relationship between X and crime
- *Potential policy discussions*

Highlights: Education Policy

*Offending populations worldwide have significantly less education than non-offenders.
Is this relationship – at least in part – causal?*

Causal Evidence

1. Schooling incapacitates crime.
2. More schooling decreases future crime (current and future generations).
3. Higher quality schooling – peers, operating expenditures, capital expenditures – reduces crime, especially for most disadvantaged high-risk populations.

Potential Policy Discussions

- Policies to further decrease truancy (while minimizing classroom disruption)?
- Other activities that incapacitate: summer programs and leisure activities?
- Quality of schools: Need to ↑ school spending to improve teacher quality, ↓ teacher turn-over, ↓ class size, improve student environment?
 - Especially a concern in segregated and disadvantaged neighborhoods?

Highlights: Alcohol Policy

>50% of Swedish serious violent offenders perceived using drugs/alcohol (Olesryd, 2015). Does alcohol causally impact crime? Via pharmacological and/or environmental channels.

Causal Evidence

1. Alcohol increases criminal offending and victimization risk.
2. Policies that increase (decrease) alcohol consumption increase (decrease) crime.
 - Expanded store opening hours
 - Alcohol treatment programs
 - Sanctions on alcohol related offenses

Potential Policy Discussions

- Education/marketing campaigns on risks of alcohol targeting youth
- Store hours?
- Treatment availability, especially in disadvantaged neighborhoods with high crime risk.
- Who gets treatment? Population at high-risk for crime?

Highlights: Early Childhood Environment



Critical period for development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills: Impacted by many aspects of environment.

Causal Evidence

1. Policies that reduce early childhood lead exposure (or offset this exposure with treatment) ↓ crime.
2. Policies that improve early childhood nutrition ↓ crime.
3. Early childhood education programs can ↓ future crime of participants and their children.

Potential Policy Discussions

- Sweden today: minimal lead pollution, universal daycare, and school lunch programs.
- But, not all in Sweden are exposed to = environments.
 - Micro-geographies of children with higher lead risk?
 - Sub-populations with inadequate nutrition?
 - Sufficient availability, take-up and quality of childcare in low SES, high crime areas?

Highlights: Healthcare



Majority of prisoners (worldwide) suffer from poor (mental) health and substance abuse disorders.

Causal Evidence

1. Mental healthcare treatment and substance abuse treatment (outside prison) decrease crime.
2. Policies that make healthcare more accessible/affordable decrease crime.

(Mostly US based research so far.)

Potential Policy Discussions

- No reason to believe conclusion is US specific: healthcare decreases crime.
- Swedish universal healthcare?
 - Is access and/or utilization equal across sub-populations?
 - Is quality of care sufficient in high-crime neighborhoods?
 - Are fees a constraint for low SES at highest risk of crime?
 - Do queues delay urgent (mental health) care?
 - Do high risk populations seek help?

Highlights: (Youth) Employment

*More than 18% of 15-24 year olds were unemployed in 2018 (<6.5% of those older than 25).
Unemployment rate of foreign born is > 30% in 2018.*

Causal Evidence

1. Summer jobs for youths reduce (violent) crime.
2. Employment reduces crime, especially property crime.
3. Youths entering labor market during recessions are scarred for life, and set on path of higher crime.

Potential Policy Discussions

- Focus on reducing unemployment rate for groups with high risks of crime.
- Swedish summer jobs programs?
 - Evaluations on crime?
 - Expand funding, targeting and outreach to high crime neighborhoods.
 - Emphasize non-work aspects of programs: mentorship, job training, therapy

Highlights: Welfare

58% of Swedish prisoners (73% of property offenders) received welfare payments in year before prison sentence.

Causal Evidence

1. Increasing frequency of welfare distribution days can decrease crime via consumption smoothing.
2. Stringent active labor market participation policies can decrease crime.
 - Norway and Denmark studies.

Potential Policy Discussions

- Already have high level of welfare. *Maybe relevant question is structure of welfare provision.*
 - Assess frequency of welfare provision?
 - Financial literacy and training courses?
 - Expand active labor market policies (especially for youths and young adults).

Highlights: Military Conscription

Not arguing it is a social policy: But important to keep in mind that many policies can 'unexpectedly' impact crime. Potentially through social channels.

Causal Evidence

1. Conscription *does not* reduce post-service crime (though may incapacitate it).
2. Some evidence that conscription *increases* post-service crime.

Potential Policy Discussions

- Crime effects are not motivation for military conscriptions.
- But should be kept in mind when deciding how such a system should work.
 - Who should serve? Bad apples?
 - Who should be grouped together? Peer effects?
 - What services should be provided to help re-integrate into post-service life?

Conclusions and Caveats

- Concern about crime is high in Sweden today.
- Immediate response is to focus on criminal justice levers: **Police and Sanctions.**
- Report highlights that crime can also be reduced via alternative (often overlooked) social policy channels.
 - Potentially more cost-effective since large additional benefits besides reduced crime.
 - Potentially important in the long-run. Next generation effects.
 - Also important to prevent entry to crime (before reaching prisons for instance)
- Much of this evidence is still US based. → Need even more Swedish research on causal impacts of social policies on crime.