

Crime has been one of the top issues on the public agenda now for a quarter century. Over the course of that period, the public response has been to progressively increase the rate at which criminals are sent to prison and the length of time they stay there. The 1980s saw the largest growth in the U.S. prison population since the penitentiary was invented, as legislatures around the country passed a flurry of new bills establishing mandatory minimum sentences for various crimes. In most states, the number of prison inmates has more than tripled since 1980.

The public has ample reason to be genuinely concerned about crime. In recent years, homicide rates among juveniles have increased sharply, and homicide is now the leading cause of death among young African-American males (Reiss and Roth, 1993). And while crime rates have fallen recently, in 1996 there was still one violent crime reported for every 160 Americans.

Given the scope of the problem, it is surprising that incarceration is the only remedy evoking widespread endorsement. Incarceration's main goals are to incapacitate criminals so they can commit no further crimes for a period of time and to deter those who might contemplate criminal activity.¹ Available evidence, however, suggests that the increases in imprisonment of the past decade have not had

¹Apart from its crime-reduction objectives, incarceration also serves as a punishment expressing society's sense of justice or outrage. We do not consider this objective below, since we analyze alternatives whose purpose is to prevent crime, obviating the need for punishment.

large effects on crime (Zimring and Hawkins, 1995), and the alleged deterrent effects seem particularly speculative. Nonetheless, it must be conceded that because large numbers of crimes are committed by relatively few individuals, locking up greater numbers of repeat offenders for longer periods of time should eventually have an effect. It has been estimated, for example, that California's "three-strikes" law, containing the nation's harshest and most sweeping repeat-offender sanctions, will reduce serious crimes perpetrated by adults some 28 percent if it is fully implemented (Greenwood et al., 1994).

But would even 28 percent be enough? Would one violent crime for every 220 Americans be acceptable? Are there other implements in the public-policy toolbox that could add to the gains anticipated from increased imprisonment? In particular, are there less-expensive tools? The same analysis that predicts the big decrease in crime from "three strikes" also calculates the price tag—more than \$5.5 billion a year (in 1993 dollars), if the law is invoked in all eligible cases. That represents an increase in California's criminal-justice-system operating costs of more than 100 percent. The study goes on to predict, however, that the new law will not be fully implemented—and will thus not achieve the benefits projected—because it will cost so much at a time of intense funding competition from other state programs. Indeed, district attorneys are already exercising considerable discretion in applying the law.

There are, of course, alternatives to deterrence and incapacitation: Those alternatives take the form of preventive and rehabilitative approaches. In this report, we address the former.

Crime-prevention efforts can take many forms, from better security devices, gun control, and improved use of streetlights to antitruancy programs and efforts to decrease school dropout rates among high-risk youths. One of the problems with various target-hardening strategies, such as providing better locks and streetlights, is that a substantial portion of the crimes prevented at the hardened site may simply be displaced to less-protected sites; the offenders will adapt. The advantage of prevention programs that focus on the offenders themselves—at an age when they are still *potential* offenders—is that the crimes prevented are not displaced (with the notable exception of market-driven crimes like drug selling and prostitution).

Public discussions of violence-prevention programs have usually emphasized those targeting high-risk youths in the age ranges where violence is most prevalent, around 15 to 20 years of age. This was true, for example, of the debate on the 1994 federal crime bill. Many of these programs emphasize dispute-resolution skills, mentoring, after-school activities, and reducing the number of weapons on school campuses, all of which are hoped to reduce the immediate likelihood of violence among youth. Unfortunately, despite a number of recent programs designed to demonstrate the value of such activities, their value in reducing violence remains a matter of speculation or faith rather than an empirically demonstrated fact (Reiss and Roth, 1993; Tolan and Guerra, 1994).

Programs targeting the family or home situation and younger children have shown more promising results. Home-visit programs, targeting young, single, poor mothers, and enriched preschool programs that target the young children of such mothers have both been demonstrated to produce substantial benefits to participating families and society in general. Programs increasing the parenting skills of parents with troublesome children have also produced positive results (Farrington, 1994; Tolan and Guerra, 1994). So have programs designed to provide structure, supervision, and support for young delinquents (Davidson et al., 1990; Lipsey, 1992; Andrews et al., 1990).

While individual pilot programs have yielded promising results, no attempt has been made to compare the costs and effectiveness of various early-intervention approaches with each other and with incarceration. Without such a comparison, it is understandable that public officials have been reluctant to divert scarce crime-reduction resources from incarceration to less-proven alternatives. After all, money expended to keep a repeat offender in prison offers a fairly high likelihood of preventing felonies, at least until the offender passes his peak criminal years. But if the money is spent on incentives to graduate from high school, how much future crime will be prevented? We take a first step toward answering that question here. In so doing, we seek to determine whether more options may be available to citizens and policymakers concerned about maximizing the crime-fighting punch of each tax dollar.

We call this a first step because a definitive comparison is difficult to draw from the evaluations of early interventions completed to date. The studies have been small and scattered, and we have not been able to survey all of them. One purpose of our limited effort is to identify approaches with enough promise to merit further analysis of data in the literature and possibly further demonstration on a larger scale.

In the next chapter, we review what is currently known about the effectiveness of such interventions. In Chapter Three, we estimate the costs and benefits of programs tailored to the needs of California's youth.² The last chapter discusses the implications of our findings for public policy.

²By restricting the scope of the analysis to California, we gain leverage from our prior work on that state and satisfy the study's charter (see the Preface). We have no reason to believe that the gist of our findings should not apply as well to the United States as a whole.