

Does punishment deter crime?



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Does punishment really deter crime? One could say no since the rate of crime is stable instead of declining. “ The interaction between crime and punishment is certainly a complex one. In simple terms, one might anticipate that, if crime rates increase, there should be a corresponding increase on prison population...On the other hand, if punishment levels increase, crime control theory suggests that deterrence and incapacitation should show themselves in a corresponding reduction in crime rates” (Blumstein, 1998). Over the past few decades, crime rates have fluctuated, but have been fairly stable numbers. We have not seen the decline in crime that one would expect to with the growth in prison or jail inmates.

What type of punishment deters crime most effectively? Retribution is the oldest form of punishment. Retribution is “ an act of moral vengeance by which society makes the offender suffer as much as the suffering caused by the crime” (Macionis, 2006). With retribution, we assume that society is morally balanced. When a crime is committed, it upsets that balance. Retribution is thought to restore the balance by granting a punishment that fits the crime; for example, “ an eye for an eye”.

Another thought is that if the punishment is severe enough, it would discourage anyone from committing the crime. This justification is known as deterrence. Deterrence is “ the attempt to discourage criminality through the use of punishment” (Macionis, 2006). Deterrence came about during the eighteenth century and was a renewed form of punishment from retribution. Retribution had become harsh punishment, such as mutilation and death. People began to believe that criminals could be punished effectively and accordingly through lesser punishment.

Along the lines of thinking that a person can be punished effectively through lesser punishment came the act of rehabilitation. Rehabilitation; however, didn't come around until the 19th century. Rehabilitation is “ a program for reforming the offender to prevent later offenses” (Macionis, 2006). Society came to believe that criminal deviance was learned and could be a result of one's upbringing, financial status, or even the lack of positive role models. The thought was that if one had learned these bad traits earlier in life, they could also be taught good traits if given the opportunity. In other words, they could be reformed or rehabilitated. Rehabilitation takes work on the part of the offender; however, it does not include suffering such as that involved with retribution and deterrence. Rehabilitation is also customized to fit the needs of the deviant.

The final justification for punishment is societal protection. Societal protection means “ rendering an offender incapable of further offenses temporarily through imprisonment or permanently by execution” (Macionis, 2006). Like deterrence, the primary focus of societal protection is protecting society. The intent is to render a punishment that leaves the deviant incapable of committing the crime again. Currently, there are 2 million people imprisoned in the United States. This population has tripled since 1990 and continues to rise. America imprisons more of its population than any other country (Macionis, 2006).

Everyone agrees that punishment deters crime, but which form of punishment is the most effective? Unfortunately, deterring crime through punishment is difficult to measure. It is difficult to say what form of punishment might work best for every crime and every criminal.

Generally speaking, one would think that the death penalty would be an excellent deterrent to crime; however, that is not exactly the case. It is questionable whether the death penalty actually deters others from committing the crime. Additionally, there have been individuals put to death who were later found innocent of committing the accused crime. Because the threat of punishment as a deterrent for crime has long been debated, many have attempted to measure the effectiveness. In most models, the optimal amount of deterrence does not mean eliminating the crime all together. Instead, the optimal amount of deterrence comes from balancing the costs, the benefit to society, and the deterrence to the deviant.

Every justification is controversial and debatable. Personally, I am not a proponent of the death penalty; however, I think the evidence may show that it is an effective deterrent to crime. My issues with capital punishment are moral. I do not feel that it is morally right to take the life of another human being, even if they have taken the life of another. I am also concerned about the fact that an innocent person may be put mistakenly put to death.

Although I have moral issues with the death penalty, this does not mean that it is not an effective deterrent to crime. Nothing says do not do it like the fear of death for doing it. In other words, I do not think there is a better way of getting the attention of a criminal than by letting them know that they will be put to death if they commit certain criminal acts. According to an article in USA Today, " In New York, the death penalty has turned the tables on fear and put it back where it belongs-in the hearts of criminals. Within just one year, the death penalty helped produce a dramatic drop in violent crime. Just <https://assignbuster.com/does-punishment-deter-crime/>

as important, it has restored New Yorkers' confidence in the justice system because they know their government genuinely is committed to their safety." (Pataki, 1997)

So although I may not be a proponent of the death penalty, I think the evidence speaks for itself. Capital punishment is a form of deterrence and it does seem to be a deterrent to crime. The benefits to society outweigh that of retribution, rehabilitation, and societal protection. I personally support rehabilitation, but I believe that it is very expensive and does not always work. When looking for the optimal justification for punishment, I lean more towards deterrence when looking for that balance between cost, benefit to society and deterring the deviant.

Deterrence seems to be the best overall solution for preventing crime. "Ultimately, our desire to alleviate crime is only as tough as the laws we enforce to punish deviants. By enforcing the death penalty as the law of the land, we demonstrate our determination and strengthened the idea that our children and future generations can grow up in a country that is free of violence" (Pataki, 1997).