

Prison sentence



Prisons should punish offenders in order to reduce the rate of crime.

Punishment refers to the methodology of presenting the consequence of a behavior with the aim of reducing the frequency with which a given behavior occurs. Punishment can provide undesirable stimulus or it can remove a desirable stimulus (Henslin, 2006, p. 89). In both cases, punishment discourages repetition of a behavior. I have been a law enforcement officer for many years, and I have learnt that criminals are likely to change their behaviors for the better if they are certain that they will incur high and immediate costs if they engage in unlawful acts. Thus, a prison sentence, as a form of punishment, can help to reduce the level of crime in the society.

Punishment transforms criminal or unlawful activity from a rewarding proposition to a non-rewarding proposition. As this transformation occurs, people respond accordingly. This implies that a rational person will not engage in a criminal act when such an act lacks any reward or benefits (Howard, 2006, p. 78). A punishment such as imprisonment is painful and is, thus, a cost which must be avoided. If the punishment is as a result of a criminal activity, the concerned individual will have to avoid engaging in the criminal act in order to avoid the pain or cost. Recent research on crime trends in USA indicates that cases of crime reduce when the sentence per crime increases and vice versa. The significant rise in the rate of imprisonment per reported crime accounts for the steady reduction in crime at a rate of 5% annually in the last ten years in USA (Crane, 2011). Some scholars argue that the reduction in crime over the last ten years was as a result of an improvement in economic growth and employment rather than an increase in the rate of imprisonment. This view is based on the fact that

unemployment and crime are highly correlated. The economic explanation is, however, disproved by the fact that criminals who were previously unemployed; continue to practice criminal activities at their workplaces when they get employed. This explains the increase in cases of non-violent crimes such as fraud.

A combination of low to moderate levels of severity of punishment, and moderate to high probability of apprehension is the best way to reduce crime. In the legal system, this combination leads to high levels of policing. Evidence reveals that high levels of policing translate into low crime rate over time, especially, if the police focus their efforts on crime prone areas (Crane, 2011). Victims of crime are, however, of the opinion that the severity of punishment should be very high in order to deter crime. However, past experience shows that criminals are likely to develop a negative attitude towards the legal system, society and life if the severity of punishment is very high. Consequently, they fail to change their behavior.

Using punishment alongside positive reinforcement of socially accepted behavior can help to reduce crime. Punishment such as a jail term enables criminals to realize their mistakes. As this happens, it is important to reinforce pro-social behavior in order to help prisoners to internalize norms that discourage crime (Henslin, 2006, p. 90). For instance, a burglar is likely to internalize the concept of working hard if he is taught vocational skills such as carpentry in prison. Interest groups that are opposed to prison sentence believe that learning of pro-social behavior can not be achieved in a prison due to the punishment involved. This perspective is, however, misguided because a criminal who fails to realize his mistakes through

punishment is likely to repeat criminal activities even if he gets access to better education or employment. Similarly, a criminal that realizes his mistakes but fails to find an alternative in life after imprisonment is likely to go back to crime (Crane, 2011). Thus, punishment must accompany reinforcement of pro-social behavior.

In conclusion, prisons can best achieve their mandate as correctional facilities if they focus on punishing criminals. As discussed above, punishment plays an integral role in reducing recurrence of a behavior. Thus, when punishment is used against unlawful behavior, crime rate is likely to reduce (Crane, 2011). However, the severity of the punishment should be low to moderate in order to encourage behavior change. Besides, punishment should be applied concurrently with reinforcement of socially accepted behavior in order to promote behavior change among criminals.