

Report on indirect and specific deterrence

[Sociology](#), [Population](#)



Introduction

General and specific deterrence are the two basic categories of deterrence. Broadly, deterrence theory suggests that the actions of humans are rational. What this means is that the action of an individual results from careful consideration of the benefits and costs. As such, an individual only commits a crime if he or she believes that the expected benefits outweigh the likely punishments (Ritchie, 2011). Therefore, the basic premise of the theory is that an increase in the cost of crime leads to a decrease in the number of persons committing crime. It means that any individual will choose to either violate or obey the law after considering the consequences and gains of their actions. So what are the differences between the two categories of deterrence theory?

General Deterrence

General deterrence explores the impact of punishments on the offense rates of the overall population. It is designed with the aim of preventing crime. With general deterrence, the punishment of offenders by the state serves as an example to other people in the general population who are yet to participate in criminal activities (Williams, 2004). The aim is to bring to the attention of others in the society, the horrors that might await them if they commit crime. This tends to “scare” them from committing crime. Therefore, the basic premise is that punishing an offender will deter other people from committing crime (Nagin, 1998). Using random names, what this basically means is that punishing James will deter John. An example is use of corporal punishment or the application of the death penalty. Borrowing from

this example, capital punishment such as the execution of people, stoning and whipping was carried out in the public with the aim of deterring people from committing crimes. However, some disagree on this approach of preventing criminal activity. From the random names, James is being punished in such a manner in the hope of stopping John from engaging in criminal activity. There are two assumptions that are drawn here. First, the punisher just hopes that punishing one party will deter the other. Second, the other party is yet to participate in any criminal activity.

Specific Deterrence

This is designed to deter only the specific offender from engaging in criminal activity in future. The thinking behind specific deterrence is that if an offender is severely punished, then he or she will be unwilling to repeat the offense again in the future (Williams, 2004). Therefore, James is punished so that he will not recidivate. This means that the deterrent effect is specific to the individual subjected to punishment. An example is a drunk driver. If he or she suffers an unpleasant experience after being arrested, or is heavily fined, or has his or her car impounded or license withdrawn, then he or she will be deterred from drunk driving. Therefore, specific deterrence might hold that offenders who get prison sentences have a lesser likelihood of recidivism than those put on probation and that offenders with longer terms in prison have a lesser likelihood of recidivism than those with shorter terms (Ritchie, 2011).

Conclusion

Therefore, while the effects of general deterrence are potentially general, the effects of specific deterrence are specific to an individual. If general deterrence were to work, then it would be a very cost-effective and efficient way of crime control because by punishing a few offenders, many others would be deterred from breaking the law. However, the effectiveness of both general and specific deterrence remains a highly debated issue. For example, Nagin (1998) observes that past research does not indicate convincing evidence that harsh punishments have a deterrent effect. Therefore, despite decades of research, whether or not deterrence theory is effective in preventing crime remains an open question.

References

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