

NEW PAPERS ON CRIME AND INCARCERATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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Crime and high rates of incarceration impose tremendous costs on society. The fiscal costs of fighting crime—including the costs of incarceration, policing, and judicial and legal services—are substantial, burdening state and local governments in particular. In addition, there are tremendous social costs for the victims of crime, for the incarcerated, and for the families of the incarcerated. On May 1st, The Hamilton Project will release two new discussion papers by outside experts that offer innovative, evidence-driven ideas for addressing crime and incarceration policies, as well as a set of economic facts about crime and incarceration in the United States.

1. Ten Economic Facts about Crime and Incarceration in the United States

Authors: The Hamilton Project

The Hamilton Project presents a series of facts in three separate chapters highlighting recent trends in crime and incarceration, the characteristics of those who commit crimes and those who are incarcerated, and the social and economic costs of current policy. The first chapter, “The Landscape of Crime in the United States,” describes recent crime trends in the United States and the characteristics of criminal offenders and victims. The next chapter, “The Growth of Mass Incarceration in America,” focuses on the historically unprecedented level of incarceration rates in the United States. The final chapter, “The Economic and Social Costs of Crime and Incarceration,” presents evidence on both the fiscal and social implications of current policy on taxpayers and those imprisoned.

2. A New Approach to Reducing Incarceration While Maintaining Low Rates of Crime

Authors: Steven Raphael (UC Berkeley) and Michael Stoll (UCLA)

Raphael and Stoll propose three sets of reforms for reducing America’s high incarceration rates without increasing crime rates. Reducing imprisonment, they argue, does not necessarily lead to an increase in crime of equal magnitude; it is possible to filter out the offenders most likely to commit crimes again once released. First, they propose reforms to sentencing practices that would give greater discretion to those involved in sentencing. This indeterminacy in sentencing would help to ensure that only those who pose a legitimate threat to society remain behind bars, and create incentives for inmates to reform their behavior. Second, they propose reforms to “Truth-in-Sentencing” laws that tend to lengthen prison stays. Lastly, they propose the use of fiscal incentives to ensure that the incentives of local governments are aligned with the incentives of the larger governments that operate many of the prisons that house those they arrest. Raphael and Stoll argue that the economic and social benefits generated by these reforms would outweigh their costs.

3. Think Before You Act: A New Approach to Preventing Youth Violence and Dropout

Authors: Jens Ludwig (University of Chicago) and Anuj Shah (University of Chicago)

Previous strategies for reducing violent crime and improving outcomes like high school graduation for disadvantaged youth at least implicitly assume youth are forward-looking and think about the consequences of their actions. However, a growing body of research suggests that a great deal of everyone’s behavior happens intuitively and automatically. Relying on automatic responses to guide much of our daily behavior is usually helpful but can sometimes get us into trouble, with consequences that are particularly severe for young people growing up in distressed urban areas where gangs, drugs, and guns are prevalent. Ludwig and Shah propose providing each teenager living in poverty in America with one year of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) intended to help youth recognize high-stakes situations when their automatic responses may be maladaptive. Evidence from pilot programs, including “Becoming a Man,” is extremely promising, and suggests that this program will generate a benefit-to-cost ratio well in excess of what similar programs targeting youths yield. The authors propose the federal scaling up of CBT-based programs through a series of pilots over a five-year period, in combination with rigorous evaluation.