

Ruben Rosario: A case for research-driven crime prevention

By Ruben Rosario

Ask folks how best to control crime while keeping costs down, and you may get a variety of answers from cops, judges, corrections and probation officers, police chiefs, mayors, legislators, and Joe Six Pack. All are likely to view it from their life experiences and professional careers.

Their views may be simplistic, right-on, short-sighted or heavily influenced by political ideology.

Now, ask an economist and you might get a heady, numbers-crunching macro take tied to research.

Which brings me to a recent thought-provoking essay by two economics professors under the auspices of the National Bureau of Economic Research's Economics of Crime working group.

The professors, Peter Cook of Duke University and Jens Ludwig of Chicago University, note the unprecedented surge in incarceration since the 1980s that has made the United States the country that puts more of its people behind bars than any other in the world.

But their findings, based on a review of numerous social-science studies, "suggest that the current U.S. approach to crime control is inefficient."

So, among other steps, they posit an intriguing theory: roll back average prison length sentencing to 1984 levels.

"What would we give up by reducing average sentence lengths back to 1984 levels?" the professors write in their essay, "Controlling Crime: How to do more with less."

"In terms of crime control, the answer may be: not all that much," they say.

Lower Prison Costs, More For Prevention

The professors estimate the rollback to 1984 sentence lengths would reduce the prison population by 400,000, thus freeing up \$12 billion from the \$70 billion in annual prison expenditures. Now, how best to use or reallocate that \$12 billion to better control crime? Cook and Ludwig came up with three possibilities:

- >> More cops on the streets.
- >> Better funding of Head Start or early-childhood education programs.
- >> Intervention with high-offending juveniles.

In terms of policing, the money diversion would increase the annual \$100 billion the nation spends on police protection by 12 percent and perhaps add 100,000 more cops. What will that do?

Cook and Ludwig estimate, based on their study review, that it would lead to a decline in "hundreds of thousands of violent and property-crime victimizations each year."

They theorize that "if the benefit-cost ratio for marginal spending on long prison sentences is no more than 1 to 1, then reducing average sentence lengths to 1984 levels in order to increase spending on police could generate net benefits to society on the order of \$36 billion to \$90 billion per year."

Now, what about Head Start? A Rand Corp. review last year of early-childhood program studies estimated that the cost benefits to society in terms of reduced future delinquency or criminal behavior, job productivity and other factors ranged from \$2 to \$17 for each public dollar



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invested in such funding.

The \$12 billion diversion would boost funding by 150 percent to the program's current annual \$8 billion budget, which now serves just half of the nation's poor 3- and 4-year-olds.

"A defensible guess is that reallocating resources from long prison sentences to early-childhood education might generate between \$12 billion and \$60 billion in net benefits to society," the professors note.

Change Won't Come Easy

A third funding reallocation possibility, they postulate, "lies in funding human capital investments in the highest-risk subset of the population — namely, trying to address social-cognitive skill deficits of young people already involved in the criminal justice system."

The professors estimate \$1 billion annually alone could provide "functional family therapy" (FFT) to roughly 300,000 youths on juvenile probation.

"FFT costs approximately \$2,500 per youth, with a benefit-cost ratio that may be as high as 25 to 1 from crime reductions alone," the professors state. "With the remaining \$11 billion, we could provide multisystemic

therapy (MST) to almost every person age 19 and under who is arrested each year."

Such a reallocation, they estimate, could generate net social benefits on the order of \$70 billion per year.

Of course, the professors are not that naïve about the probability of such a rollback or reallocation taking place.

As they point out in their essay, "a key challenge we face is that our government systems are not well suited to converting the fifth year of a convicted car thief's prison term into an extra year or two of Head Start for a poor child.

"Government agency heads have strong incentives to maximize the budgets of their agencies and pour any resources that are freed up from eliminating ineffective program activities back into their own agencies," they conclude.

"This is the intrinsic difficulty of rationalizing policies across domains, agencies and levels of government," they add. "If we could solve this problem — and orient the policy system to up-weight evidence from design-driven research — then, in our quest for effective crime control, it appears possible that we could have more for less."

Now that's food for thought.

