

Econ. BC.3063: Senior Seminar on
The Political Economy of Crime and Punishment

In this seminar we will analyze recent trends in crime and prison rates in the United States and their relationship. Violent crime rates, for example, increased sharply from the early 1960s to the early 1990s, and then dropped precipitously. Over the intervening period the number of prison inmates (per 100,000 of the population) jumped 3.5-fold and has continued to increase to nearly 500 (or 0.5% of the total population) by mid-2006.

While we should expect a strong correlation between these variables, our preliminary examination (in week 1) suggests that fundamental shifts in criminal justice policies – that is the greater use of prison as a criminal sanction and not simply higher crime rates – caused the “prison boom.” This evidence in turn raises a number of vexing questions which we will analyze over the semester:

- Why did state and federal governments adopt tougher criminal justice policies in the late 1970s that resulted in more arrests, convictions, and prison commitments?
- Did these policies successfully combat the recent epidemics of crack and lethal handgun violence and so contribute to the crime drop, and if so, how?
- Are there social costs of “mass incarceration” that obviate the public safety benefits from a vaster prison system?

Before we address these questions, we must first explore the fundamental problem of what causes variations in crime rates over time and across space. Our approach will be empirical and will draw on the various insights, evidence, and methods from virtually all social science disciplines.

Outline

1. Crime and Punishment in America : Dissecting the Crime-Prison Nexus

Crime

2. Demography and Family
3. Labor Markets
4. Poverty, Inequality, and Racial Segregation

Punishment

5. “Broken Windows” and other policing strategies
6. Incapacitation and deterrence
7. Social exclusion

Social Experiments

8. The war on drugs
9. The surge and drop in violent crime
10. Rehabilitation and recidivism: alternatives to prison
11. Social costs

- 12 & 13. Final presentations

2. Crime: Measurement and Trends

NRC study among others

U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Crime in the United States"

<http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm>.

U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Crime and Victims Statistics"

<http://www.ojp.gov/bjs/cvict.htm>.

Resident Perceptions of Crime: How Similar are They to Official Crime Rates? Hipp, John; 2007, pp. 38 pages, Center for Economic Studies, U.S. Census Bureau, Working Papers

1. Crime and Punishment in America : Dissecting the Prison Boom
Blumstein and Beck
Lynch
boggess and bound

Crime

2. Demography and Family
Sampson-Laub (2005)
Sampson-Laub (1993), chs. 4-5, 7.
"The Determinants of Juvenile Crime." in Risky Behavior by Youths, edited by Jonathan Gruber,
University of Chicago Press, 2000. (with Lance Lochner) Download (coming soon)

3. Labor Markets
Freeman, Economic Analysis of Crime; or 1998 article
Grogger
Raphael
Gould et al

4. Poverty, Inequality, and Racial Segregation
Sampson and Wilson
Inequality/race: Sampson and Laub
Western
Hagan 1993

5. The crack epidemic and violent crime
blumstein
Levitt Donohue
Cook and Laub

Punishment

6. "Broken Windows" and other policing strategies
7. Incapacitation and deterrence
8. Just deserts
9. Social exclusion: The war on drugs as a case study

The Prison Experiment

10. Beckett
Greenberg and West
Western

10. Punishment: Does Prison Work?

11. Punishment and Race: The War on Drugs

12. Presentations

13. Presentations

2. Crime: Measurement and Trends

NRC study among others

U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Crime in the United States"

<http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm>.

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