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Jobs and Crime

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**Moderator: James Q. Wilson, Professor of Government,
Harvard University**

**Guests: Philip Cook, Duke University
John McDonald, Impact Services
Michael Smith, Vera Institute**

Your discussion will be assisted by information on the relations between unemployment and crime and on insights about those relations drawn from evaluations of statistical research, results of unemployment experiments, and the direct experience of criminals and program operators.



Paradoxes About Crime and Economic Distress

Many people who are arrested for common street crimes are poor and unemployed, as are most prison inmates. Offenders and prisoners are much more likely to be poor and unemployed than the general population. Poor neighborhoods in American cities have much higher crime rates than wealthier neighborhoods. It may seem logical to conclude that unemployment and poverty are major causes of crime and that crime could be reduced substantially by employment programs.

Are ivory-tower academics debating an issue that everyone else understands? Isn't it obvious that crime is caused by poverty and unemployment? Research and innovative programs during the past 20 years have provided conflicting and disappointing evidence for those who believe in a simple, causal relationship between unemployment and crime.

Consider these paradoxes. During the 1970's, Sun Belt cities had faster rates of economic growth than older cities in the Northwest, but the Sun Belt cities also had higher crime rates. Extremely poor rural areas traditionally have low crime rates. Towns with rapid economic booms, like oil pipeline towns in Alaska or mining towns in Colorado, had rapid increases in crime as their economies grew.

Although unemployment and poverty do not automatically cause crime, it does not necessarily follow that there is no relationship between unemployment and crime. And there are complex reasons why job programs aimed at reducing crime have not had clear crime reduction effects. Much recent research and policy analysis has been devoted to untangling the complexities. Many of these issues are still unresolved, especially those concerning the use of antipov-erty and employment programs in a crime fighting strategy.

Reviewing the Evidence and Specifying Relationships

In discussing the relationships between crime and economic distress, it is important to be specific about the type of crime, the type of potential crime, and the specifics of any policy aimed at reducing crime. There has been a substantial amount of research on the relation between unemployment and crime. Some of it analyzes statistics on national crime rates and the business cycle. Some of it focuses on the effects of experiments in which employment opportunities are made available to offenders or ex-prisoners. All of this research provides important sources of information about the relationship between economic conditions and crime; none of it is definitive.

1. **Aggregate studies.** Many studies on crime and the economy have examined aggregate national crime rates and economic indicators such as the unemployment rate.

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Scholars looking for consistent and reliable connections or correlations between such rates use a variety of complex statistical techniques. Unfortunately, the results are ambiguous. Some researchers find consistent relations between economic distress and crime, but many others have been unable to confirm such findings. Studies vary in the type of data they use, the time periods and geographic areas studied, and the statistical techniques they employ, which makes it hard to compare their findings. But the lack of consistent confirmation of even general trends has caused many scholars to be skeptical about an automatic relationship between economic distress and criminality.

2. **Experimental programs.** A second source of information comes from evaluations of programs that have been organized primarily for the purpose of studying the relations between crime and unemployment. In such programs various target groups, such as ex-offenders, unemployed youth, single parents on welfare, and ex-addicts, are given job experience, training, and support services such as counseling. To make the findings of the studies more reliable, some people are assigned randomly to the program, while others continue their regular street life. The experiences of the two groups are then compared to see if the program has had any discernible effect.

One major Federal program, the "supported work" program of the Manpower Development Research Corporation, had disappointing results in terms of reducing crime for ex-offenders and unemployed youth, and some success with the ex-addict group. Other programs have had similar disappointing results, with the exception of the Job Corps, a program for disadvantaged youth that seems to have reduced crime among its participants. But, as with the aggregate studies, the overall research results have been inconsistent and hard to interpret.

3. **Studies of individuals.** These studies are another source of information and have been of two types: statistical studies of ex-offenders, arrestees, and inner city youth; and "ethnographic" field studies, conducted by urban anthropologists, of small groups of "high risk" youth.

The statistical studies do not point to any consistent relationship between unemployment and crime. For certain types of offenders, especially older ones, there may be a direct relationship between crime and unemployment. Inner city youth who have high expectations about potential income from crime report more criminality than those who do not. The ethnographic studies, while not statistical in nature, provide rich detail about the lives of young people in urban areas, and they show a variety of relationships between unemployment and crime.

Part of the problem in trying to link crime and unemployment is that each is a very complicated subject. Many factors besides the economy can influence crime. Crime patterns may be tied to deterrence from police, courts, and prisons; to differences in families and neighborhoods; and to other unobserved factors. Economic conditions, in turn, are influenced by relationships among international competition, government policy, and personal and structural factors. Sorting out the effects of these many factors is extremely difficult.

4. **Research: a summary.** Any broad assertion about the relationship between economic distress and crime is likely to be misleading. A critical observer asks which types of crime are at issue. What are the specific effects being proposed and how would they work? What other unobserved factors might cause the same effects? Does the alleged relationship make sense in light of other information that is available?

This may help clarify Philip Cook's answer in the Crime File program to the question, "Is there any connection between general economic conditions and the crime rate?" His response: "It depends." Some analysts claim that the economy has a consistent, measurable impact on crime; for every percentage point rise in unemployment, crime goes up by some stated percentage.

Such broad claims are not well supported by the findings of empirical research. However, even Professor Cook, who has criticized the broad claims, has found evidence that certain types of crime, notably robbery and burglary, appear to increase during recessions and economic slumps. Cook's work suggests that while economic downturns may have no impact on many crimes—murder, for instance—they may have an influence on the number of burglaries and robberies. Although these findings are tentative, they are based on research that specifies the type of crime in question and provides a focused explanation. Since robbery and burglary are income-oriented crimes, it is plausible that such crimes would be influenced by economic conditions.

Specifying the Questions

A consistent theme emerging from the recent research is the need to narrow the questions being asked and to be specific about the groups being examined. For example, ex-convicts released from prison, often after several years of incarceration, may face a unique set of problems. They may have little job experience, few skills, no money, and weak networks for finding new jobs. (This last factor is important, because most people find jobs through personal contacts, such as relatives or neighbors.) Focused attention might be given to school-age teenagers who are at risk of dropping out of school and often engage in crime.

Since these groups may have different needs, a single program may not work for both. For example, men in their early 20's generally try to establish careers and form families, while teenagers are less likely to be doing so. A full-time employment program that is appropriate for a man in his 20's is likely to have limited impact on a teenager. Since continued schooling may be more helpful for teenagers, some programs concentrate on keeping teenagers in school by linking part-time or vocational employment to continued school attendance.

Programs for teenagers face another problem. Many young people engage in some crime well before they are in the legitimate job market. In 1983, 30.4 percent of persons arrested for major street crimes were under 18 years of age, several years before they would likely enter the legitimate job market in any serious fashion. Economist Paul Osterman of Boston University, an expert on youth unemployment, calls the teenage years an "exploratory" period where labor market behavior is erratic. Youth from poor families, however, still need income, and many seem to get it from crime. Yet it is unlikely that a career-oriented, full-time

employment program would have much impact on teenagers under 18 years old.

Learning From Experience—Program Options

All this evidence is being considered by people responsible for public policy, both for the design of anticrime programs and for general debates over economic issues. The question posed in the Crime File program by Professor Wilson—why do employment programs produce such disappointing anticrime results—deserves some consideration. Thinking about the possible reasons can help us reach judgments about what new programs, if any, might help to reduce crime.

The rationale behind most anticrime employment programs is that the programs will improve job prospects for people who will then have less need to resort to crime for income. But if the first step does not occur—if the programs do not reduce unemployment—then we have not really tested the impact of improved jobs on crime. A variety of sometimes conflicting explanations are offered for why most public employment programs have not achieved permanent labor market improvements for many of the poor. Among the reasons: participants' lack of skills and education, scarcity of jobs in inner city neighborhoods, participants' poor work attitudes, racial discrimination, and weak job-finding networks among the poor.

Many analysts agree that previous employment programs may have misjudged the depth of the problems faced by the urban poor. Employment programs that concentrate on the hardest to employ are likely to be very expensive and not very successful. Conversely, those that concentrate on the unemployed who are not "hard core" may cost less and yield greater success but not employ those at greatest risk of crime. Ideally there should be programs for each category of unemployed, but sufficient funds are seldom available for everything that needs doing. Thus programs to combat crime and unemployment face a persistent policy problem—where to concentrate limited public resources.

A related problem has to do with "targeting"—aiming programs at specific groups of people, such as ex-convicts. Targeting can raise equity concerns: why should ex-offenders be given special opportunities that are not available to unemployed people who have not committed crimes? Some policy analysts think that employment programs should not concentrate explicitly on groups like ex-offenders, because the programs would stigmatize the very people they are trying to help. The question here is whether the labor market problems of ex-offenders (or any other target group) are specific enough to justify targeted programs, or whether they are largely due to the same factors that affect most of the urban poor.

Of course, there are more extreme positions. Some argue against all such employment programs, feeling that they undercut initiative. They believe that the work attitudes and values of some of the urban poor are so out of line with mainstream values that any special program is doomed to

failure. Such analysts sometimes refer to an urban "under-class" that has different norms and values from the rest of the population. In contrast, others argue that the government has a responsibility to ensure that jobs are available for all who want them. They believe the government should spend more on creating large-scale public jobs, either by diverting funds from other activities or by raising taxes. These positions clearly go well beyond the crime question to matters of basic social policy.

This discussion has not settled, and cannot settle, the broad questions about the relationships between crime and unemployment. Many researchers and policymakers are skeptical about finding any consistent or simple relationship that can guide policy. But we should not forget that many ex-offenders and program administrators believe that employment programs have made a difference.

Earlier efforts to reduce crime through employment programs have had disappointing and partial results. One of the consequences is that proposed policies now cover a wide range of options, including massive public employment, more carefully targeted programs for different groups, and elimination of most, if not all, employment programs with specific anticrime goals. As in many other areas of public debate, research and policy expertise on crime and unemployment can help us clarify the questions but are unlikely to provide the answers.

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Discussion Questions

1. Why should there be programs designed to help criminal offenders?
2. Do you think the government should withdraw from job programs and depend on private enterprise to meet the needs of the jobless?
3. Should we pay more attention to the research results which suggest that job programs make little or no difference in the lives of criminals or should we listen instead to people like social workers and former criminals who believe that job programs do make a difference?
4. What are the pros and cons for "targeting" job programs at specific groups of people such as ex-convicts or teenagers?
5. A number of different proposals have been made for reducing teenage unemployment—lowering the minimum wage, providing more part-time work, working through the Job Corps or through mandatory National Service. Do you believe any of these approaches would be likely to reduce crime?

This study guide and the videotape, *Jobs and Crime*, is one of 22 in the CRIME FILE series. For information on how to obtain programs on other criminal justice issues in the series, contact CRIME FILE, National Institute of Justice/NCJRS, Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20850 or call 800-851-3420 (301-251-5500 from Metropolitan Washington, D.C., and Maryland).

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