CRIME FILE

Jobs and Crime

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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.
4. Research: a summary

Any broad assertion about the relationship between economic distress and crime is likely to be criticized as oversimplified. Unfortunately, critical observers of which types of crime are at issue. What are the specific effects being proposed for informal programs that may work? What other uncontrolled factors might cause the same effect? 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 analysis claims that the economy has a consistent, measurable impact on crime, for every percentage point in unemployment, crime goes up by..."

Such broad claims are not well supported by the findings of empirical research. However, even Professor Cook, who has written extensively about crime and unemployment, has found evidence that a certain kind of crime, notably robbery and burglary, appear to be linked to economic conditions. His work suggests that while a decrease in economic distress may have no immediate effect on crime overall, it may have an influence on the number of burglaries and robberies. Although Cook's research is not definitive, his studies are based on research that specifies the type of crime in question and provides a soundly-examined 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 more specific in the types of crime being considered. For example, ex-cons released from prison, often after several years of incarceration, are faced with a unique set of problems. They may have little job experience, few skills, no money, and many other factors that make them susceptible to crime. This last factor is important because people find jobs through personal contacts, relatives or neighbors, focused attention might reduce the likelihood of fácil joblessness, and the chances of getting "demoned out of a job" are so much higher with their families. As many individuals and communities are facing a severely depressed economy, the need for more support services is becoming more evident. For example, the Sails for Boston program provides both training and employment opportunities for urban youth who are at risk of dropping out of school and often engage in crime. But if these programs are not designed to be successful, they may fail to meet the needs of the hard-core unemployed who are not "hardcore" but become discouraged and fail to participate. Other programs have been designed to help unemployed individuals find jobs, but many of these programs have been unsuccessful. A critical review of the evidence suggests that some programs may not be successful because they are not designed to address the specific needs of the unemployed.

A related problem has to do with the targeting of certain types of offenders. In particular, some programs have been designed to target specific groups of people, such as ex-offenders, single parents, and youth from inner-city neighborhoods. These programs have been successful in reducing crime and unemployment, but they may not be the most effective way to address the needs of the unemployed. For example, a program that targets unemployed individuals who are at risk of dropping out of school and often engage in crime. But if these programs are not designed to be successful, they may fail to meet the needs of the hard-core unemployed who are not "hardcore" but become discouraged and fail to participate. Other programs have been designed to help unemployed individuals find jobs, but many of these programs have been unsuccessful. A critical review of the evidence suggests that some programs may not be successful because they are not designed to address the specific needs of the unemployed.

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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?

References


