

## New-Age Perspectives on an Age-Old Question

# Do Higher Incarceration Rates Mean Lower Crime Rates?

By Howard N. Snyder and Jeanne B. Stinchcomb

All public policies have an impact — even if it is not always the one that was anticipated or desired. That is because there is no simple cause-and-effect relationship between implementing public policy and achieving its objectives. Even the most apparently straightforward correlations often are more complex upon closer examination. The relationship between incarcerating more offenders and reducing crime rates is one such example.

Offenders are sentenced to prison for a wide variety of reasons, ranging from society's desire for retribution to its belief in rehabilitation.<sup>1</sup> But from a more pragmatic perspective, incarceration is fundamentally designed to make our communities safer — by deterring future violators, incarcerating offenders who may be deterred by a brief stint behind bars or incapacitating those who cannot be deterred. In either case, the ultimate purpose is to improve public safety. This concept suggests that as a society relies more on imprisonment as a response to crime, the amount of crime committed in that society should diminish. In other words, crime rates would be expected to decrease as incarceration rates increase. That is the theory. The question is whether it is also the reality.

Given the skyrocketing costs of imprisonment,<sup>2</sup> the answer has significant implications for both public policy and fiscal priorities. However, while research studies have for some time explored the relationship between prison and crime rates, their findings have not necessarily been consistent over the years. That does not mean that some studies are “wrong” and others are “right.” Nor does it diminish the validity of research or imply

that researchers are selectively interpreting data to fit their own predispositions. What it does mean is, first, that differing methods of inquiry can produce differing outcomes, and, second, even using the same methods, findings can change over time as the population being studied and society in general likewise change. Thus, before casting shadows of doubt on conflicting outcomes, it is essential to take a closer look.

That is precisely what the American Society of Criminology's journal, *Criminology and Public Policy*, did several months ago with the publication of a series of three articles, all addressing the question: “Do increases in the prison population reduce crime?” Two of the articles report on new research studies, while the third is an essay reacting to the results. Based on data from the 1970s and 1980s, prior research had generally found that prison growth reduces crime.<sup>3</sup> However, questions have been raised about the logical underpinnings of such findings.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the two new studies have uncovered a somewhat different outcome.

Using state-level prison and reported crime data from 1972 through 2000, Liedka et al. (2006) found that, surprisingly, the effect of prison growth on crime diminishes as the scale of imprisonment increases. In fact, they determined that when the incarceration rate reaches a certain point (the inflection point), a further increase in prison population actually produces an increase in crime. They placed this inflection point at 3.25 prisoners per 1,000 persons in the general population. Moreover, they conclude that the specific effect of an increasing prison population on crime depends on the level of the prison population when

the increase started its upward climb. In other words, did the area already have a high rate of incarceration, which was further intensified by additional prison growth? If so, the impact on crime would be expected to be less than might otherwise occur in an area that started its growth spurt from a lower level of incarceration. A prison population increase in one jurisdiction therefore could have a different effect on crime rates than a similar increase in another jurisdiction.

This also implies that even within the same jurisdiction, similar increases at different points in time may have different effects on crime rates, depending on the level of imprisonment at the time. That is, the prison population might be associated with a decrease in crime rates at one point, but with an increase in crime at another.

The second new research study, conducted by Kovandzic and Vieraitis (2006), is based on county-level data from Florida for the years 1980 through 2000. They argue that while state-level studies of the relationship between changing prison populations and crime are a vast improvement over national-level studies, an even closer analysis at the local level is needed to really understand the impact of incarceration rates on crime. Removing selected offenders from a community should maximize the influence on that community's crime rate, an effect that may be greatly diminished (or even lost) using a larger geographic perspective. Additionally, at the local level, research can better control changes in other factors that influence crime rates, such as trends in community demographics, unemployment, income, poverty and the proportion of female-headed households.

## As a result of transitions in the nature of the prison population, contemporary prison population growth not only has less influence on violent and property crime rates, it also has led to a series of dynamics that may have actually caused crime to increase in some communities.

On the basis of that logic, Kovandzic and Vieraitis used data from Florida to determine how changes in the number of county residents sentenced to prison affected the county's violent and property crime rates. They came to the somewhat startling conclusion that their study found "no support for the 'more prisoners, less crime' thesis." That is not to say that prison growth never reduces crime. They conceded that there may be some effect of prison population growth on crime, but "counties that relied most heavily on imprisonment as a tool of crime control did not as a result experience greater reductions in crime." In essence, there appears to be a point of diminishing returns on prison investments. The crime-control benefits of prison growth declined as a community relied more and more heavily on incarceration.

These results contradict earlier findings and even appear to be counterintuitive at first glance. Within prison walls, staff have known for many years that punishing inmates for an increasingly wide range of misbehavior becomes counterproductive at some point.<sup>5</sup> As this research indicates, a similar concept may be operating on a macro level in free society.

In response to the disparities across research studies, Shepherd (2006) has integrated their seemingly inconsistent findings, noting that, when the number of prisoners in the criminal justice system is small, adding additional inmates tends to decrease violent and property crime. However, as the prison population grows, the effect of this growth on crime is reduced, and can even reach a point where its benefit is reversed. Shepherd's argument is based on the

fact that different types of offenders enter into confinement when prison populations are small, in contrast to those entering when they are large — that is, the types of offenders entering America's prisons in the 1970s and 1980s were not the same as those entering in the 1990s.

As Shepherd argues, when prison populations were small, additional inmates being admitted tended to be primarily violent and property offenders. It makes sense that removing these offenders would have a direct impact on the rate of violent and property crime in their local communities. However, as prison populations grew in the 1990s, a substantial portion of that growth was a product of the incarceration of drug-related violators and such low-level offenders as probation violators. Confining these offenders may have some impact on local violent and property crime rates, but is destined to produce a smaller effect on these crime rates than the incarceration of violent and property offenders.<sup>6</sup>

As Shepherd speculates, there are a number of reasons why the incarceration of drug-related and low-level offenders would have less ability to reduce official crime rates than the incarceration of violent and property offenders, and, in fact, may even increase these crime rates. For example, disruption of drug markets reduces the supply and increases the cost of drugs, encouraging addicts to commit more crime to support their habit. As illegal drugs become more expensive, there is greater incentive for drug sellers to commit violent crimes to control their more-lucrative markets. Even when drug sellers are forced or frightened out of the drug

business, they may move to economic crime. Shepherd is likewise concerned that focusing on drug enforcement may divert scarce resources away from controlling other criminal activities. At the same time, early release programs in response to the pressure of prison crowding may be placing higher-risk offenders back on the street.

But it is not only the rate of imprisonment that has an impact, longer prison sentences play a role as well. While length of stay has increased for all offenders in recent years, due to truth-in-sentencing laws, the effect has been greatest on the prison terms of low-level offenders.<sup>7</sup> Lengthening prison terms for these offenders may have no effect on crime, or may even cause crime to increase. As Shepherd speculates, many criminal careers are relatively short, so incapacitating low-level offenders for longer periods may have little crime-reducing influence because they would have largely ended their criminal activities well before their release dates. Moreover, the longer an offender's sentence, the greater the "collateral consequences" of conviction — everything from future employment prospects to family relationships — thereby limiting the offender's noncriminal alternatives after release. Longer terms in prison also give these low-level offenders more opportunity to learn from other inmates. As ironic as it may seem, it may well be true that shorter sentences for low-level offenders would actually reduce crime more than longer sentences. In fact, it is quite possible that the crime-increasing effects of placing more and more drug and low-level offenders in prison may be offsetting the crime-reducing effect

of incarcerating more violent and property offenders.

In contrast to more recent studies, earlier research indicating a link between prison population growth and crime reduction was conducted in an era before the prison net had widened to embrace a larger number and proportion of drug and low-level offenders. As a result of transitions in the nature of the prison population, contemporary prison population growth not only has less influence on violent and property crime rates, it also has led to a series of dynamics that may have actually caused crime to increase in some communities.

Like all other public policies, the trend toward collective incapacitation has had an impact — although, perhaps, not one that was either anticipated or desired. At least in part, that is because “even the best intentions are doomed to failure in the absence of informed decisions based on projections of expected impact.”<sup>8</sup> Essentially, sophisticated problems are not solved by simplistic solutions.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Stinchcomb, Jeanne B. 2005. *Corrections: Past, present, and future*. Lanham, Md.: American Correctional Association.

<sup>2</sup>Camp, Camille Graham, ed. 2003. *The 2002 corrections yearbook: Adult corrections*. Middletown, Conn.: Criminal Justice Institute.

Stephan, James J. 2004. *State prison expenditures, 2001*. Washington, D.C.: US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

<sup>3</sup>Marvel, T. and C. Moody. 1994. Prison population growth and crime reduction. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*. 10:109-140.

Shepherd, J. 2006. The imprisonment puzzle: Understanding how prison growth affects crime. *Criminology and Public Policy*, 5(2):285-298.

<sup>4</sup>Petersilia, Joan. 1992. Building more prison cells won't make a safer society. *Corrections Today*, 54(8):168-170.

<sup>5</sup>Sykes, Gresham M. 1958. *The society of captives: A study of a maximum security prison*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

<sup>6</sup>Official crime rates throughout the country are based on an index of violent and property crimes compiled by local police departments in compliance with the FBI's uniform crime reporting system. If the index and resulting crime rates incorporated drug use or sales, findings on the effect of prison growth on crime rates might well differ.

<sup>7</sup>Mauer, Marc. 1999. *Race to incarcerate*. New York: The Free Press.

<sup>8</sup>Stinchcomb, 2005.

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