Experts show advantage of ‘police over prisons’ in decreasing crime

During the last two decades, America has experienced both a massive increase in the prison population as well as a substantial drop in crime. The late professor William Stuntz referred to these as the “two great stories of contemporary crime and criminal justice. Are they really true?

Look at the numbers. In the early 1970s, America's imprisonment rate was much lower—100 per 100,000 population at the time. The rate has since quintupled to about 500 per 100,000. At the same pace, the rate of violent crime has shown a significant decrease. At one point during the last few years, there had actually been a 30 percent decrease in violent crime from the level of 1990.

According to Stuntz, the best work that examines the possible relationship between rising incarceration rates and plummeting crime rates has been done separately by economist Steven Levitt and sociologist Bruce Western. In his book, “The Collapse of American Criminal Justice” (Harvard, 2011), Levitt — the co-author of the bestseller “Freakonomics” (2006) — estimated that increased imprisonment was probably responsible for about one-third of the 35 percent drop in violent crime, i.e., about 12 percent of the total drop. Western, however, estimated that the increased imprisonment only accounted for about one-tenth of the drop in violent crime, i.e., between 2 percent and 5 percent of the total drop.

On the other hand, Levitt estimated that increased police hiring accounted for about 6 percent of the total drop in violent crime. That is only 2 percent of the 35 percent decrease caused by increased incarceration. But, here is the rub. According to Levitt, it cost about $800 million to pay for the extra policing to get a 1 percent drop in violent crime. And what did the increased imprisonment cost to get the same 1 percent drop? $16 billion — twice the amount. Western’s figures are more unreliable. He estimated that the cost of increased incarceration to get a 1 percent violent crime drop was somewhere between $3.9 billion and $9.6 billion.

The bottom line? It costs a lot less to reduce crime with more police than with more prisons. In addition, Stuntz says in his book the advantage of “police over prisons” is about more than money. “[Higher levels of policing led to a greater police presence on high-crime city streets before crimes happened, not afterward. That increased police ‘footprint’ in turn made possible the parallel increase in police interactions with the local population.”

Some combination of policing variables accounts for much of the New York difference is overwhelming” (101). One factor was simply the increase in the number of New York police. If New York City had not added 3,000 police in 1990. But there was also a change in deployment of police. Before 1990, for example, the Narcotics Division went off duty at 7 p.m. and returned to work on weekends. The new policy beginning in 1990 was “putting police in service where and when the bad guys were at work!” (118).

Zimring also examines a number of new tactics used by the NYPD since 1990 and concludes that two of them almost certainly reduced crime in New York City: (1) the emphasis on hot spots for enforcement, aggressive street intervention and sustained monitoring and (2) the priority targeting of public drug markets for arrest, surveillance and sustained attack.” (42) “Hot spots” are those very specific locations that are sites of repetitive patterns of violent crime. The goal was to be proactive, not reactive. Drug arrests were not ends in themselves, but rather a means to take weapons off the street and to prevent drug-related violence.

But obviously there is a potential dark side to this. Between 1990 and 2009, the number of stops performed on a yearly basis by the NYPD has increased 4-fold. In 2011, the NYPD performed almost 700,000 stops, a 14 percent increase over 2010. Civil libertarians have repeatedly alleged racial profiling in these stops. And over the last decade, only 1 in 650 stops resulted in an arrest for a firearms violation. Elected officials and the civil rights leaders recently protested at city hall and called on Mayor Michael Bloomberg to rectify the situation.

An overall decrease in Terry stops would mean fewer innocent people are publicly humiliated. Yet it would also probably mean an overall increase in neighborhood violence. We need to honestly confront the possible “zero-sum” aspects of this crucial public policy issue.