Deterrence and Punishment Effects of Criminal Sanctions: Evidence from Arrest-level Micro-data in Florida

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Abstract

According to the conventional economic model of criminal behavior, imprisoning offenders can potentially both (1) prevent crime by deterring others from committing crime, and (2) increase subsequent criminality on the part of punished offenders by reducing future legitimate labor market alternatives. Empirically assessing the relative magnitudes of these offsetting effects is difficult since harsh criminal sanctions may be themselves a response to high crime rates. In this paper, we isolate exogenous variability in the punitiveness of sanctions by exploiting a quasi-experiment generated by criminal law: offenders are tried in the adult criminal court if the crime is committed on or after the 18th birthday, but are treated in the more lenient juvenile court if the crime is committed strictly before the 18th birthday. Using longitudinal, individual-level data on the universe of felony arrests and state prison spells in Florida from 1998 to 2002, we find that treating the marginal juvenile as an adult leads to a long-run net reduction in crime. Crime reductions appear to reflect primarily incapacitation rather than deterrence and do not appear to be negated by perverse “punishment” effects.

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