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NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE

FIVE THINGS

ABOUT DETERRENCE



Deter would-be criminals by using scientific evidence about human behavior and perceptions about the costs, risks and rewards of crime.

1. The *certainty* of being caught is a vastly more powerful deterrent than the punishment.

Research shows clearly: If criminals think there's only a slim chance they will be caught, the severity of punishment — even draconian punishment — is an ineffective deterrent to crime.

2. Sending an offender to prison isn't a very effective way to deter crime.

Prisons are good for punishing criminals and keeping them off the street, but prison sentences are unlikely to deter future crime. Prisons actually may have the opposite effect: Inmates learn more effective crime strategies from each other, and time spent in prison may desensitize many to the threat of future imprisonment.

3. Police deter crime by increasing the perception that criminals will be caught and punished.

The police deter crime when they do things that strengthen a criminal's perception of the certainty of being caught. Strategies that use the police as "sentinels," such as hot spots policing, are particularly effective.

4. Increasing the severity of punishment does little to deter crime.

Laws and policies designed to deter crime are ineffective partly because criminals know little about the sanctions for specific crimes. Seeing a police officer with handcuffs and a radio is more likely to influence a criminal's behavior than passing a new law increasing penalties.

5. There is no proof that the death penalty deters criminals.

According to the National Academy of Sciences, "Research on the deterrent effect of capital punishment is uninformative about whether capital punishment increases, decreases, or has no effect on homicide rates."

Source: Daniel Nagin, "Deterrence in the 21st Century," in *Crime and Justice in America: 1975-2025* (ed. Michael Tonry, University of Chicago Press, 2013).

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