Philip J. Cook, Jens Ludwig, and Justin McCrary, eds. *Controlling Crime: Strategies and Tradeoffs*

Controlling Crime: Strategies and Tradeoffs by Philip J. Cook; Jens Ludwig; Justin McCrary

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CC9, attempts to generalize certain findings are less compelling than others and require further study. For example, Fabricant contextualizes the work of CC9 as a form of resistance to the neoliberal policies that have come to dominate the public education agenda in the United States. This may be true for participants in CC9, but it should not be generalized as representative of education organizing writ large. Although education organizing has played a critical role in empowering historically marginalized populations to engage in educational policy discourse, the aims and objectives of these organizations are not always consistent with progressive education reforms. The recent parent-trigger legislation in California, the implementation of direct-instruction literacy practices in Miami, and support for the development of neighborhood charter schools are just a few examples of results from education organizing campaigns in the past decade. Perhaps more generalizable are findings related to the desire and need for community-based organizations that are independent of school systems. Fabricant might also generalize findings concerning the value of incremental victories as a part of the journey to broader systemic change in public education and the potential power of broad-based coalitions in education policy discourse.

_Organizing for Educational Justice_ could be used as the central text for a graduate-level seminar and a community-based organization’s strategy meeting. This is intended as high praise, since few existing books are able to effectively speak to both audiences. Although Fabricant’s book may reinforce many previous findings on parental empowerment, community leadership development, and the promise of education organizing as a reform strategy, the book makes its own unique contributions by tracing organizational growth and by revealing the relational and political dynamics that shape campaign work on education issues. Overall, it is a compelling case study that will be an asset for students, scholars, community organizers, education leaders, and anyone interested in how communities can contribute to transformative educational change.

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It has often been said that you can never be too rich or too thin. But one in three respondents in a 1994 survey who indicated crime to be the nation’s biggest problem might add that you can never be too safe. For several decades, federal, state, and local governments have pursued public safety through aggressive punishment and increased correctional supervision. By 2008, one in 100 Americans was incarcerated, and that rate is exponentially higher for certain groups. Unfortunately, as in the pursuit of wealth and weight loss, singularity of purpose has side effects; public safety costs money, and heavy spending on public safety necessitates important trade-offs. To keep pace with rising criminal justice costs, states reduced spending on other social services, such as education and public health, although these services arguably help reduce crime by promoting positive health, educational, and economic outcomes.

Economist Gary Becker wrote that the social costs of crime are the sum of the direct costs of crime and the costs to control crime (“Crime and Punishment: An Economic Approach,” *Journal of Political Economy* 76, no. 2 [1968]: 169–217). In their recently published volume, *Controlling Crime: Strategies and Tradeoffs*, Philip J.
Cook, Jens Ludwig, and Justin McCrary observe that with falling crime rates and increasing incarceration and correctional supervision, the United States faces a new “crime ‘problem’” (2): the costs of crime control, to the state and to people impacted by the criminal justice system, appear to far exceed the benefits of reduced crime. In the wake of the Great Recession and declining federal subsidies for prison construction, states face the challenging question of how they can maintain or improve public safety without relying on the present level of incarceration.

This volume, which consists of 12 papers and associated commentaries from a 2010 National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) conference, provides preliminary answers to this important problem. NBER conference volumes sometimes lack a uniform argument, presenting insufficient discussion of the policy implications beyond brief treatment within individual chapters. In this volume, however, the editors conceive their task as developing an integrated crime control portfolio to guide policy makers in selecting cost-effective alternatives to incarceration. They succeed in this endeavor, ensuring that, as strong as the individual chapters are, when taken as a whole, this volume is worth much more than the sum of its parts.

The book is a useful primer for practitioners and policy makers concerned not only with the size, cost, and sustainability of the criminal justice system but also with its ever-encroaching influence. Not being an economist myself, I particularly appreciate the thoughtful, transparent application of the economic perspective to crime control policies. The editors readily acknowledge that efficiency is neither the only nor the best criterion in determining the appropriate punishment. The policy challenge lies in whether cost-benefit analysis provides the path to an affordable, let alone just, criminal justice system. If policy makers are concerned only with reducing the cost of crime control relative to the amount the government currently spends, and they are confident in our assessment of which acts rise to the level of criminalization, then this book provides an excellent tool kit to achieve more cost-effective public safety. States already indicate a willingness to pay a given amount for crime control, and economists can use existing prison costs as a ceiling when comparing policy alternatives.

As important as cost-effective public safety is, of course, it is not the only aim of a criminal justice system. And though the editors are careful to state that their goal is limited to identifying the most cost-effective crime control alternatives, there are places in the text where they allude to a larger goal. For instance, they suggest that “one way to reduce the demand for retribution is to reduce the amount of crime” (2). On the face of it, this is entirely reasonable: if everyone could be prevented from committing robberies, then there would be no need for retribution. But since no cost-effective crime control policy can eradicate all criminal activity, at least some people will be subject to punishment.

Thus I am skeptical that economic calculations alone will lead to the right decisions in cases where the alternatives entail changes either in the legal status of an act or in the punitive response. Focusing research entirely on calculating the economic costs of various alternatives may detach punishments and sanctions from considerations of, for instance, retribution and just deserts. So if the criminal justice system is on the cusp of wholesale changes, especially in the legal status of certain offenses or the mode of punishment for various offenses, policy makers should be mindful of relevant considerations beyond cost-effective crime control.

It is also worth noting the importance of comparison in thinking about cost effectiveness. David Alan Sklansky’s insightful essay cautions against incarceration as a comparison case: “Incarceration is our default form of punishment, and it is scandalously expensive. The problem is that the comparison is almost too easy. Compared to imprisonment, almost everything looks good” (123). Sklansky shows how this can be a dangerous attitude by describing two general mechanisms by
which the pursuit of affordable alternatives to incarceration can inadvertently expand the scope of the criminal justice system.

First, less costly alternatives can widen the net, drawing in people who would not otherwise have entered the criminal justice system. Harold Pollack, Peter Reuter, and Eric Sevigny provide a compelling explanation of why drug courts as presently designed will have little real effect on prison populations. They observe that first-time defendants charged with drug possession who are eligible for diversion to drug court would not likely have gone to prison otherwise. Most drug-involved defendants are holdovers from past drug epidemics, so their extensive criminal histories preclude them from diversion, even though they are less likely to commit violent crimes than younger drug-involved defendants. Drug courts are designed to reduce reliance on incarceration for drug-involved offenders, but they have the perverse effect of expanding the reach of the criminal justice system. Sklansky suggests that the same risk applies when states expand the use of fines as replacements for correctional supervision. If states begin to view monetary sanctions as sources of revenue, rather than as cost-effective alternatives to incarceration for violations that merit punishment, they may paradoxically increase the range of behaviors that can trigger monetary sanctions. These fines may appear quite reasonable when compared to incarceration as the hypothetical alternative punishment, but incarceration is not the appropriate counterfactual for first-time drug offenders or most potential fine recipients.

Second, in practice, less costly alternatives to incarceration might supplement rather than replace incarceration. Piehl and Morrison predict that a substantial minority of offenders will fail to respond to fines, so the system will need to use incarceration as a threat for noncompliance. If people simply cannot or will not pay their fines, the combined use of fines and incarceration might be more costly than the system it replaces. The unintended consequences of such criminal justice reforms could be minimized if policy makers considered not just the cost effectiveness but also the appropriateness of a given approach to punishment.

Space permits me to highlight and discuss only a few of the outstanding contributions to this volume, which covers a wide array of topics relevant to readers interested in social welfare policy. Other chapters express healthy reservations about the merit of further investments in or expansion of the approaches they review, noting that other interventions, such as education and early childhood programs, may have broader and more cost-beneficial effects on criminal activity. In their chapter, Sara B. Heller, Brian A. Jacob, and Jens Ludwig conclude that even though income transfer and mobility programs appear to reduce criminal activity, the benefits might not persist if implemented on a larger scale. More importantly, they note that income transfer and mobility programs may have fewer crime-reducing benefits than investments that increase human capital development. Other chapters evaluate alcohol regulation, the role of private actors in crime, social-cognitive skill interventions, and education programming.

Scholars in a variety of disciplines should read this volume. The authors’ conceptual framing of the issues and their empirical analyses are consistently impressive, and they present nuanced recommendations derived from careful evaluation of the best empirical data available. This collection contributes much to discussions about how to reform the criminal justice system and how to improve the lives of those who are impacted by the criminal justice system. By focusing on cost effectiveness, it does not tell the whole story about how we should respond to crime, nor does it aim to. But the part of the story it tells, it tells quite well. My only proviso is that policy makers invite theorists as well as economists to the table.

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