

Keeping Safe in Oakland

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Safe Oakland Speaker Series

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April 24, 2013

Do Police Affect Crime?

- Old View (1970s, 1980s): Police don't affect crime much, if at all.
- New View (1990s, 2000s): Growing body of evidence indicating substantial effects of police on crime
- Latest paper in this literature: *"The Effect of Police on Crime: New Evidence from U.S. Cities, 1960-2010"* (joint work by myself and Aaron Chalfin)
- Reviews changes in police staffing and crime at over 200 cities over a 50 year period
- Evidence is clear: increased policing levels result in lower crime rates
- Larger effects for more recent era, as police departments have become more innovative

This Accords with Anecdotal Accounts

- We now have several examples of cities that are doing great things in terms of crime-fighting
- New York stands out as a prime example
 - Murder is lower than it has been since the 1950s and is just 17% of the number in 1990
 - Robbery is 18% of the number in 1990
 - Motor vehicle theft is 7% of the number in 1990
- Los Angeles is another success story
 - Murder, robbery, and motor vehicle theft are all about 25% of the 1990 level
- The cities with the biggest crime drops have done two primary things: invested in police numbers and in new techniques, primarily saturation policing and aggressive use of information technology

Can We Quantify The Effect of Police on Crime?

- To quantify relationships like the effect of police on crime, economists make use of the concept of *elasticity*
- Aaron Chalfin and I estimate that the police elasticity of crime is about minus one-half
- What does this mean?
 - A 10% *increase* in police is expected to result in a 5% *decrease* in crime
 - A 5% *increase* in police is expected to result in a 2.5% *decrease* in crime
 - A 10% *decrease* in police is expected to result in a 5% *increase* in crime
 - and so on
- These estimated effects are largest for crimes that are measured best in standard crime data sets: murder, robbery, and motor vehicle theft

How Much Should We Pay for Safety?

- Investments in police are investments in safety, akin to investments in workplace safety standards, pollution abatement measures, and highway safety
- Aaron Chalfin and I estimate that for every dollar Oakland invests in policing, residents will see approximately \$2.90 in improvements to safety
- This estimate comes from attaching a dollar cost to each crime and estimating the effectiveness of officers at reducing each of those crimes
- For example, if Oakland increased the size of the police force by 10%, this could increase costs by as much as \$12.9 million, but would deliver safety benefits valued at roughly \$38 million

But What if We Don't Have the Money?

- Oakland, like many cities, struggles to find the funding to pay for the safety that it wants and deserves
- One of the smarter investments in police is to invest in information technology—policing has always been about information, which is now cheaper to obtain than ever before
- The challenge is in implementation
- New programs can and should be evaluated in terms of effectiveness. As President Obama said in his inauguration:
 - *The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works... Where the answer is yes, we intend to move forward. Where the answer is no, programs will end.*
- This kind of hard-nosed approach would increase safety in Oakland and keep the bloat out of budgets