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TITLE: A Skeptical But Sympathetic Appraisal of the Prospects for Nurturant Crime-Control Policies

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Bryan Vila's paper is a well-reasoned, even-handed analysis of crime control and prevention strategies. Vila highlights a range of different public policies that might reduce crime, running the gamut from nurturant early intervention programs for at-risk youths to increased incarceration. He rightfully notes that criminal justice approaches, such as increased expenditure on police and prisons, are the predominant means of reducing crime in the current policy regime, but argues that it would be socially beneficial and politically feasible to transfer resources from punitive to nurturant forms of crime control.

In the end, however, I am left with the feeling that Vila is describing the world not as it is, but rather as we wish it might be. A world in which public policies dramatically change children's lives for the better, and where positive benefits of well-constructed government programs cascade across generations, gaining strength over time. A world in which capitalism and consumer choice in the form of vouchers efficiently service public programs in a way that bulky bureaucracies cannot. In this comment, I address each of these three issues in turn, documenting my reasons for skepticism. In spite of this skepticism, I conclude by arguing that there is nonetheless a strong case for increased funding of nurturant programs, although not at the expense of reducing expenditures on more traditional criminal justice approaches.

CHANGING CHILDREN'S LIVES

Can large-scale public policy interventions materially affect children's lives in the ways required to be effective anticrime measures? While there is an abundance of evidence cited by Vila that small-scale, intensive interventions can affect childhood outcomes (Yoshikawa, 1994; Greenwood et al., 1996), there is little in our experience to suggest that the positive results of such programs can be maintained when rolled out as widely available government programs. There are at least four reasons for this.

First, most of the small-scale interventions such as the Perry and Syracuse Preschool Projects are extremely resource intensive, costing almost \$10,000 per student per year in current dollars. Consequently, it is likely that these programs are too expensive to be replicated at the national level. Programs that are actually implemented in large scale are typically watered-down versions of such programs (e.g., Head Start) that lack the intensity of treatment of the pilot projects. The long-term benefits of Head Start, compared to the smaller demonstration projects, have been extremely disappointing (Haskins, 1989).

Second, unlike many of the demonstration projects, public policies must be implemented on a large subset of the population that is potentially hostile to such policies, or at best, indifferent. Many of the most successful small-scale interventions are long-term and family-based, requiring on-going parental involvement and social worker home visits. The youths most in need of such programs are the ones who are least likely to receive this type of parental support.

Third, small demonstration projects are typically staffed by highly motivated, well-qualified, devoted staff. The quality of the people hired to administer such programs on a large scale, even if done in the private sector, will certainly be lower.

Fourth, and finally, political considerations make it difficult to target the groups most in need of the intervention. For instance, while the greatest crime reduction impacts are

likely to come from programs directed at inner-city black male youths, it is most likely impossible to target programs by either race or sex. As the 1994 Clinton crime bill demonstrated, it is even difficult to target resources to large cities. Because of political considerations, the 100,000 additional police officers in that bill are distributed relatively equally across areas, although social welfare undoubtedly would have been better served by concentrating these police in high-crime central cities.

All of the above arguments suggest that the quality and intensity of the interventions associated with large-scale nurturant programs are likely to fall well short of that observed in demonstration projects. Whether or not these watered-down programs will have long-term, material impacts on the lives of children is an open question.

CASCADING EFFECTS ACROSS GENERATIONS

Vila stresses an “evolutionary approach” in his arguments, the idea being that policy changes today affect not only the generation directly receiving the intervention, but also their children and their children’s children in an ever-increasing cascade. While such a view cannot be ruled out a priori, experience suggests it is unlikely. The public interventions being discussed are incremental changes to the lives of children. The effects of small stimuli generally tend to die out quickly. While chaos theory suggests that the flapping of a butterfly’s wings in California can trigger a tornado in Texas, in practice, the simple fact is that usually the flapping of the butterfly’s wings goes unnoticed. A pebble tossed into a pond starts with a splash, but the ripples quickly dissipate. The plight of most public policies, I would guess, is not much different. Those policies that are put into place and later eliminated, such as many of those associated with Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, leave little legacy of ongoing benefits. Given the difficulty of demonstrating that public spending on today’s children (e.g., Head Start [Haskins, 1989]) or school expenditures (Hanushek, 1986), affects the children themselves, it is difficult to accept the claim that such spending will somehow dramatically affect our children’s children without empirical evidence to support this claim.

PUBLIC SERVICES THROUGH THE FREE MARKET

Vila offers the hope that the free market will provide public services far more efficiently than the typical bureaucratic approach to public-service provision. While I am generally sympathetic to this view, I believe that the types of nurturant programs he envisions are particularly ill-suited to effective free-market competition for two reasons. First, the benefits of such programs do not appear until 10 to 20 years after the expenditures are made. Thus, oversight of such programs cannot be based on outputs (e.g., observed declines in criminal activity), but rather must be tied to inputs (number of home visits, safety codes, nutritional standards, etc.) The difficulty with privatizing such programs is that the particular set of inputs that will lead to successful outcomes is not easily specified ex ante in a contract. For instance, it is easy to measure the staff-student ratio, but difficult to measure the degree to which the staff actually care about a child’s welfare. The recent experience on prison privatization is perhaps relevant here. In spite of the dramatic growth in privately built and maintained prisons, the financial savings associated with such prisons have been small (perhaps 10%) and often associated with a decline in the quality (Hart, Shleifer, and Vishny, 1996). In contrast, for services where the output is readily measured (e.g., refuse collection), the gains from privatization have been substantial (Savas, 1987).

CONCLUSIONS

In spite of the skepticism expressed above, my own policy recommendations do not differ dramatically from those Vila puts forth. Funding of nurturant programs should be

increased. While the arguments I have made suggest that the astronomical cost-benefit ratios of some small-scale demonstration projects will shrink, without further evidence there is no way to know how large the fall-off will be. At least among the best programs, societal benefits may very well outweigh costs, even in a politically adulterated version. The long lags between investment and payoff in these programs make rigorous, randomized experimental analysis difficult and costly. Therefore, as Vila suggests, the best option appears to lie in providing states with the freedom (and perhaps with federal subsidies as encouragement) to explore a wide range of innovative nurturant programs, not unlike the current situation in state-led innovation in welfare/workfare policies.

Where I differ with Vila is on the issue of whether nurturant and punitive criminal justice programs necessarily need to be substitutes for one another. The best evidence we have suggests that resources spent on the criminal justice system are by and large cost-effective; reducing these expenditures to fund more speculative nurturant policies would be a mistake. Spending on the criminal justice system in 1990 represented just 4% of total government expenditure, and less than 10% of state and local government budgets (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993). The apocalyptic predictions of the budget impact of "three strikes laws" (Greenwood et al., 1994) have not come true, apparently because of the deterrent effect of such policies (Levitt, 1997). It should be possible to find sources of funding for nurturant programs other than money currently spent on criminal justice, especially since the potential benefits of early interventions extend well beyond crime reduction. Current spending on AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) and other children's programs represents a small fraction of government budgets (comparable to that of criminal justice). Thus, it would seem that large percentage increases in long-term nurturant programs could be accomplished without having to cannibalize the short-term benefits provided by more traditional criminal justice approaches.

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