

Juvenile Economic Sanctions

An Analysis of Their Imposition, Payment, and Effect on Recidivism

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Research Summary

Economic sanctions, particularly restitution, can help juvenile offenders both learn the extent of the harm they caused and assume responsibility for repairing that harm. If that assumption is true, then restitution should be imposed in every case for which it is appropriate, other factors should not affect imposition, and paying restitution should be negatively related to recidivism. This analysis of 921 juvenile cases in five Pennsylvania counties found that restitution was imposed in only 33% of cases for which it was appropriate, whereas fees were imposed in 66% of cases. Consistent with expectations, restitution was more likely to be imposed for property offenses, but contrary to expectations, restitution was more likely to be imposed for felonies and for males. Judges were less likely to revoke the sentences of juveniles who paid a greater percentage of their total economic sanctions and of juveniles whose violation of sentencing conditions was for nonpayment of economic sanctions.

Policy Implications

Given that support for both punitive and progressive policies exists, policy makers have a unique opportunity to pursue alternatives, like economic sanctions, that appeal to both perspectives. Economic sanctions are particularly important for juveniles because they are less likely to interfere with other financial obligations (in large part because juveniles have fewer financial obligations than do adults) and because they avoid the stigma associated with more punitive sentences, such as incarceration. The negative relationship between payment of economic sanctions and recidivism, found in this study and in other studies, also suggests that, in both the short and the long term, economic sanctions are more cost-effective. Furthermore, the restorative aspect of economic sanctions, particularly restitution, suggests that policy makers should consider how best to impose and collect economic sanctions, as they also are consistent with efforts to improve the treatment of crime victims.