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An Assessment of Cross-National Variation in Rates of Incarceration

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An Assessment of Cross-National Variation in Rates of Incarceration

Ryan Spohn and Travis Linnemann

Abstract

Our theoretical approach compares the relative efficacy of multiple theories of law and social control. From a general social threat perspective, we find that variables reflecting the size of the unemployed youth population and general measures of income inequality have positive impacts on a nation's rates of incarceration. We also find partial support for one of Durkheim's laws of quantitative change and penal evolution, in that, all else equal, nations with a more authoritarian form of government utilize incarceration at a higher rate than their more democratic counterparts. We also find that the institutional anomie perspective, which has previously been applied only to rates of crime, might also have implications for sanctioning practices. Specifically, a measure of socialist and/or communist government, adopted as a proxy for the decommodification of citizens from the labor market, is marginally related to lower rates of incarceration. As a whole, this research project points to new directions for understanding variation of penal practices in a sample of over 150 nations.