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Criminal Identities: A Behavioral Economic Analysis of Terrorism

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Abstract

The narrow understanding of Becker's (1968) model of crime predicts a negative relationship between crime and punishment. We argue that this may be conceptually flawed in cases of expressive crime, where attitudes are communicated. Expressive crime is motivated independently from material interests and provides delinquents with identity, which is partly shared within social groups. Tackling expressive crime with higher penalties might trigger perverse effects because the group may retaliate against the legislator for what the group's members perceive as illegitimate policies. In this paper, we present a formalization of expressive crime taking account of identity and apply our findings to international terrorism. We find that higher penalties might sometimes increase social costs. This strongly suggests other measures than penalties with an educative and integrative character to address expressive criminal behavior.

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