

Flipside Question

Are harsher punishments the answer to curbing crime?

For: Harsher punishments should be used to curb crime

1. [Economic] Harsher punishments should be implemented to curb crimes because of the huge economic costs associated with crime.

- a. Elaboration – Crime creates high economic costs due to victim costs and the need for greater security in response to crime. More resources must be spent on ensuring that one does not become the next victim of crime. Moreover, when crime is rampant across the country, it creates social unrest and instability in the economy, causing a fall in investor confidence. A higher crime rate also deters tourists from visiting the country. As such, crime-infested cities generally receive fewer investments and tourism and thus experience slower economic growth. Without harsh punishments, crime will remain unchecked and the country's economy will be restricted from achieving greater economic growth.
- b. Example – In the UK, serious and organised crime costs the UK a massive £37 billion annually and results in more deaths than terrorism, war and natural disasters combined.

2. [Social] Harsher punishments should be meted out as it acts as a more effective form of deterrence for potential offenders, which will bring positive impacts on society in the form of increased safety and security.

- a. Elaboration – Harsher punishments, especially those involving incarceration, serve as an effective deterrent and are the best way to safeguard the security and well-being of the nation. More severe punishments would discourage potential and recurring offenders from committing crimes due to the heavy consequences involved. Moreover, harsher punishments, help to express the public's outrage at certain crimes, further deterring people from committing them.
- b. Examples – In Singapore, amidst harsh international criticism of its draconian punishment of criminals, the government has always stood firm and argued that stricter punishment works as an effective deterrent and ensures the safety and security of the nation.

For example, in the Michael Fay case, an 18-year-old US citizen was sentenced to six strokes of the cane in Singapore for theft and vandalism. Fairness and impartiality were exercised by the Singapore government even amidst disagreement from the US president and officials who believed that the punishment was too harsh. However, the Singapore government responded by pointing out that Singaporeans who committed such crimes received the same punishment as Fay and that such a system enabled Singapore to be free of vandalism and violence as the kind seen in New York City.

3. [Ethics/Values] Harsh punishments help to stress the moral values of society and curb crime.

- a. Elaboration – There is a need to emphasise the criminal system’s role in reinforcing the moral values of society. A harsh criminal system would stress the need for one to be accountable for one’s actions and think before acting. This would set a good example for the public – particularly children and teenagers – so that one can realise the consequences of one’s action and act in a more responsible manner.
- b. Example – Singapore is known for having a strict stance on its death sentence penalty on drug offenders and murder convicts to uphold the moral standard in the city. Although there are human rights organisations which call on Singapore to abolish this law, the Singapore government deems it as still necessary. The Minister of Law, Mr Shanmugam, pointed out that the death penalty on Malaysian drug offenders helps to emphasize Singapore’s zero tolerance for drug trafficking. This helps to keep the city free from drug abuse that is seen in the US, where the abuse of drugs such as opioids is a serious problem.

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/shanmugam-pannir-selvan-death-penalty-drugs-trafficking-malaysia-11561192>

Against: Harsher punishment is not the answer to curbing crime

1. [Economic] Employing harsher punishment is impractical.

- a. Elaboration – There are prohibitive expenses of incarceration – building the prisons and maintaining them, which is unlikely to be economically viable and socially desirable in the long run. Moreover, the harsher the punishment, the more legal safeguards are required to ensure that it is not misapplied. Scarce resources of the current criminal justice system in many countries, matched against the volumes of crime, simply do not allow it to punish, even modestly, all offences or all offenders. Tougher punishments, on the route towards a tough-sounding “zero tolerance” approach, hence sometimes lead to sporadic or delayed punishments as the system overloads, which does not serve the function of deterrence that such punishments hope to attain, therefore not being the answer to curbing crimes.
- b. Example – The USA Guantanamo Bay Prison provides evidence of the massive amounts of resources associated with incarceration prisons. There are many controversies surrounding this prison as it costs more than \$11 million a year to imprison a detainee, and yet most prisoners have not been tried or convicted in court. This high cost of upkeep incurs large public expenses which can be saved and spent on other pressing areas in society.

2. [Social] Harsh punishments only tackle the symptoms and ignore the root causes of crime in general, which are usually the result of the twin evils of poverty and social deprivation, including the lack of education and other environmental factors such as being raised in dysfunctional families.

- a. Elaboration – The imposition of harsher punishment fails to consider the unfair reality of social inequity. To employ excessive punishment is to reject the idea that circumstances can often influence, if not compel someone to commit a crime. Moreover, the high correlation between deprivation and crime results in the disproportionate incarceration of the under-privileged, which in turn contributes to a vicious social cycle of prejudice and discrimination.
- b. Example – In Brazil, there is a huge disparity between the rich and the poor, where the richest 10% control around 44.5% of the country's overall income and shanty town slums are numerous in Brazil's major cities. Due to this social inequality and poverty, kidnapping is so common that millionaires and billionaires often have armed bodyguards and travel around in bullet-proof vehicles in order to protect themselves from abductors.

3. [Ethics/Values] Harsh punishments fail to consider the value of human life.

- a. Elaboration – Harsh punishments such as the death penalty fail to consider the value of human life and the importance of giving people a chance. Moreover, a harsh punishment system would lead to the criminalisation of minor offences which could in turn unnecessarily stigmatise a large group of people and brand them as convicted criminals and potentially criminal underclass. In this respect, it is very important not to tar all transgressors with the same brush as there are negative consequences of doing so. Ex-convicts face discrimination in society and fewer employment opportunities due to the negative bias that society has on these people even though they might have changed for the better.
- b. Example – There are instances of ex-convicts who turned over a new leaf after they were released. For example, Chef Benny Se Teo, the founder of Eighteen Chefs, was a former drug addict who spent most of his youth in prison. When he finally kicked his drug addiction, he was able to spearhead his business and achieve success. In addition, the restaurant is known to provide support to ex-offenders by hiring those who face problems in seeking employment.