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Local Government Spending: Policing Versus Social Services

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Abstract

US cities have recently increased the share of their budgets devoted to policing and decreased the share devoted to social services. However, a growing body of research demonstrates that social services can durably reduce crime, raising the question of whether spending more on police and less on social services reduces crime in the short term only to increase it in the long term. This review addresses this question by first recounting recent trends in municipal budgeting. Then, it summarizes the causal evidence for which local government functions best reduce crime, focusing on policing, education, employment, and housing. Research suggests that education spending efficiently and durably reduces crime with fewer negative externalities than policing but with longer delays. Evidence that housing and employment spending suppresses crime is promising but nascent. Finally, the review recommends turning renewed scholarly attention to government budgets and the root causes of crime trends.