Economists, Crime and Law Enforcement, from the late 1950s to the early 1970s

This paper aims at reconstructing historically the emergence and development of a brand new subfield in economics, namely the economics of crime and law enforcement. My claim is that the increasing popularity of such a peculiar application of economics outside of its traditional boundaries suited the needs of the government and other public administrations from the mid-1960s on. The relative success of such an approach was related to economists' ability to position themselves as policy advisors, using tools and a general approach to crime and law enforcement that squared with the public demands of the time. But its rapid development was also related to internal debates within the disciplines of economics as well as law. The early contributions by economists on crime went beyond a simple analysis of optimal resource allocations in law enforcement, which obviously interested public policy officials. They were developed at a time when notions of compensation and deterrence were being discussed in much broader debates addressing, in economics, external effects, property rights, and within legal research, tort and accidents law. Thus, for different reasons, the academic success of the analysis of law enforcement came in part from its ability to redefine law as a general mechanism of compensation guided by the sole principle of efficiency, which appealed to scholars as well as policymakers at the time.