Crime in World Perspective

Elliott Currie

The problem of crime is far worse in the United States than it is in most other industrial societies. In this selection, Elliott Currie suggests that the reasons for this are deep in our society itself—and include the sharp contrast between rich and poor, the high unemployment, and the general lack of strong family and community ties. The strong emphasis on individualism in U.S. culture not only promotes crime but also directs us rather simplistically to blame crime on criminals, so that the war on crime is largely a matter of stiffer sentences and more prisons.

...No one living in a major American city needs much convincing that despite more than a decade of ever-"tougher" policies against crime, the United States remains wracked by violence and fear. Criminal violence is woven deeply into our social fabric—a brutal and appalling affront to any reasonable conception of civilized social life.

In recent months, these incidents took place in the United States: In Illinois, armed marauders attacked travelers on an interstate highway, robbing the occupants of two cars and killing a twelve-year-old boy. In Florida, a passing motorist's intervention barely saved a young woman from attack by a crowd of nearly a hundred men. In New York, gangs of youths robbed and beat participants in a charity walkathon in Central Park. In Fort Lauderdale, Florida, a bandit held up an entire church congregation during an evening service. Not far away, near Pompano Beach, two intrepid men broke into a prison and robbed two inmates. A United States senator and his companion, on their way to dinner with the mayor of New York, were mugged by two men just down the street from the mayor's mansion. In Los Angeles, eleven people died in a single weekend in episodes of youth-gang violence, while the home of the chief of the Los Angeles Police Department was burglarized—twice.

The public response to criminal violence has become correspondingly bitter and even desper-
ate. Three-fifths of the American public expressed their support for a self-styled vigilante who shot down four young black men after they asked him for five dollars in a New York subway; respected commentators urge people living in cities to “adopt the tough attitudes of an embattled population.”

To live in the urban United States in the 1980s is to feel that the elementary bonds of society are badly frayed. The sense of social disintegration is so pervasive that it is easy to forget that things are not the same elsewhere. Violence on the American level comes to seem like a fact of life, an inevitable feature of modern society. It is not. Most of us are aware that we are worse off, in this respect, than other advanced industrial countries. How much worse, however, is truly startling.

Criminal statistics are notoriously tricky, and comparisons of one country’s statistics with another’s even more so. But the differences in national crime rates—at least for serious crimes of violence, which we rightly fear the most—are large enough to transcend the limitations of the data. In recent years, Americans have faced roughly seven to ten times the risk of death by homicide as the residents of most European countries and Japan. Our closest European competitor in homicide rates is Finland, and we murder one another at more than three times the rate the Finns do.

These differences are sometimes explained as the result of America’s “frontier” ethos or its abundance of firearms. Both of these are important, but neither even begins to explain the dimensions of these international differences. With similar frontier traditions, Australia and Canada have murder rates that are, respectively, less than a fourth and less than a third of ours. Though their numbers are roughly the same, Californians are murdered almost six times as often as Canadians. Nor does this simply reflect the relative ease with which Americans can obtain handguns: More Californians are killed with knives alone than Canadians are by all means put together. And Canada ranks fairly high, internationally, in homicide rates.

What holds for homicide also holds for other serious crimes of violence. Here the comparisons are more chancy, because of greater problems of definition and measurement. But careful research reveals that Americans are more than three times as likely to be raped than West Germans, and six times as likely to be robbed. These rates were derived from police statistics, which are known to be subject to serious biases. But similar results come from “victimization” studies, which calculate crime rates by asking people whether, and how often, they have been the victims of crime.

In the first English study of this kind, the British Home Office (using a sample of eleven thousand respondents) estimated that the British robbery rate in 1981 was about twenty for every ten thousand people over age sixteen in 1981. In the same year, a comparable American survey by the Bureau of Justice Statistics estimated a robbery rate nearly four times higher. The British study turned up not one rape and only a single attempted rape: The American survey estimated an overall rape rate of about ten per ten thousand (three completed, seven attempted). And Britain is by no means one of the most tranquil of European countries: Rates of serious criminal violence in Denmark, Norway, Switzerland, and the Netherlands are lower still.

In the severity of its crime rates, the United States more closely resembles some of the most volatile countries of the Third World than other developed Western societies; and we won’t begin to understand the problem of criminal violence in the United States without taking that stark difference as our point of departure. Its consequences are enormous. If we were blessed with the moderately low homicide rate of Sweden, we would suffer well under three thousand homicide deaths a year, thereby saving close to sixteen thousand American lives—nearly three times as many as were lost in battle annually, on average, during the height of the Vietnam War.
The magnitude of the contrast between the United States and most other developed societies is often ignored as we scrutinize the fluctuations in our own crime rates from year to year. We watch the state of the public safety, like that of the economy, with a kind of desperate hopefulness. Just as the economy has “recovered” several times in recent years, so we have periodically “turned the corner on crime.” And indeed, by the mid-1980s, the level of violent crime had fallen off from the disastrous peak it had reached at the start of the decade. That respite was certainly welcome; but it should not obscure the more troubling general upward trend since the sixties. From 1969 through 1983, the rate of violent crime—as measured by police reports—rose nationwide by 61 percent. Rape went up 82 percent, robbery 44 percent, and homicide 14 percent (the first two figures are almost certainly inflated because of changes in reporting, the third probably not). Measured this way, the more recent declines have only returned us to the already horrendous levels of the late 1970s, just before we suffered one of the sharpest increases in criminal violence in American history. Still more disturbingly, reported rapes and aggravated assaults rose again in 1984—at the fastest pace since 1980. Criminal victimization surveys offer a somewhat different but scarcely more encouraging picture, indicating virtually no change in crimes of violence for the past decade, with a slight decline in many violent crimes in 1983—but a slight rise in others in 1984.

The recent dip in crime, moreover, has been ominously uneven. Between 1982 and 1983, the murder rate in the economically depressed states of Illinois and Michigan rose by 10 percent; reported rapes shot up by 20 percent in Michigan and 27 percent in Wisconsin. Detroit’s murder rate jumped 17 percent from 1981 to 1983; that of East St. Louis, Illinois, by an astonishing 96 percent. Drug-related gang wars helped boost the homicide rate in Oakland, California, by 17 percent between 1983 and 1984. The national crime rate, in short, may have improved—but the situation in some of America’s inner cities was worsening.

What makes all this so troubling is that our high crime rates have resisted the most extraordinary efforts to reduce them. Since 1973, we have more than doubled the national incarceration rate—the proportion of the population locked up in state and federal prisons and in local jails. In 1983, the prison inmates alone would have filled a city the size of Atlanta, Georgia; including the inmates of local jails (a number that jumped by more than a third between 1978 and 1982 alone) would have swollen the “city” to the size of Washington, DC. And this number doesn’t include those confined in juvenile detention facilities, military prisons, and psychiatric facilities for the criminally insane...

How did we arrive at this impasse?

As with many other issues of social policy in the eighties, there is a pervasive sense that older ways of thinking about crime have lost their usefulness and credibility; but no convincing alternatives have come forward to take their place. It is painfully apparent that the decade-long conservative experiment in crime control has failed to live up to its promises. That experiment, launched with high hopes and much self-righteous certainty, was based on the alluringly simple premise that crime was pervasive in the United States because we were too lenient with criminals; in the economic jargon fashionable during the seventies, the “costs” of crime had fallen too low. The reverse side of the argument was that other ways of dealing with crime—through “rehabilitating” offenders or improving social conditions—at best didn’t work and at worst had made the streets more dangerous. But the policies that resulted from these premises have left us with both the world’s highest rate of incarceration for “street” crimes and the highest levels of criminal violence outside of some developing countries. We have created an overstaffed and volatile penal system of overwhelming barbarity, yet we endure levels of violence
significantly higher than in the more "permissive" sixties.

To be sure, it is likely that some part of the recent dip in the crime rate is a result of the huge increases in incarceration in the past several years; after all, it would be remarkable if they had had no effect on crime. But the hard fact is that violent crime is worse in America today than before the "prison boom" of the seventies and eighties began, and indeed was highest just when our rate of incarceration was increasing the fastest. At best, very little has been accomplished, at great social cost. To borrow a medical analogy, it's plausible to argue that a series of drastic and unpleasant treatments has relieved some of the symptoms of the disease; it is not plausible to argue that the patient is well, or even demonstrably recovering. And as we shall see, there is little ground for hope that the same strategies can accomplish much more in the future, short of draconian measures on a scale that would transform our criminal justice system—and American society as a whole—beyond recognition.

It could, of course, be argued that this strategy would have worked, if it had only gone far enough—but that it was undermined by the leniency and obstinacy of officials and the public, especially the unwillingness of legislators to vote for more prisons. If the streets are still unsafe despite the swelling of the prisons, blame it on the failure to build enough new prison cells and the consequent vacillation of judges hesitant to pack still more criminals into the time-bombs that our prisons have mainly become. In 1984, for example, the Federation of New York Judges declared that the streets had become "lawless marches of robbers, rapists, and felons of every kind," and called for more prisons, on the ground that "swift and severe punishment is the only defense against predators." Appellate Justice Murphy even went so far as to argue that without a greater investment in punishment "we will live in the sickly twilight of a soulless people too weak to drive predators out of their own house." Justice Murphy and his colleagues were apparently unfazed by the fact that criminals had "taken the city" despite the doubling of New York's incarceration rate during the previous decade.

So proponents of this "get-even-tougher" approach are confronted with a formidable job of persuasion. It is difficult to think of any social experiment in recent years whose central ideas have been so thoroughly and consistently carried out. The number of people we have put behind bars, for ever-longer terms, is unprecedented in American history. And unlike most such experiments, which are usually undertaken with minimal funding and on a limited scale, this one has been both massively financed and carried out on a grand scale in nearly every state of the union. If it has failed to work in the way its promoters expected, they have fewer excuses than most applied social theorists.

We have become a country in which it is possible to be sentenced to a year behind bars for stealing six dollars' worth of meat from a supermarket, but we are still by far the most dangerous society in the developed world. That paradox has deeply undercut the credibility of the conservative strategy of crime control in the eighties. No one today seriously disagrees that we need a strong and effective criminal justice system; that is no longer a matter for real debate. But that is a far cry from believing that we can rely on the prisons to solve the crime problem. Clearly, we need more creative approaches to crime—and we need them urgently.

But I do not think that the earlier perspective, which for want of a more precise term I will call "liberal criminology," can, by itself, offer a sufficiently compelling alternative. It is risky to generalize about that perspective, because it included several diverse—and not always compatible—lines of thought and practice. But there were common themes. Most liberal criminology linked crime to the pressures of social and economic inequality and deprivation, and assumed that a combination of rehabilitation for offenders, bet-
fter opportunities for the disadvantaged, and a more humane, less intrusive criminal justice system would reduce crime, if not end it. By the end of the sixties, that vision was a shambles, undermined by the apparent "paradox" of rising crime rates in the face of the Great Society's social programs, the general improvement in the American standard of living, and the reduction of unemployment. Conservatives made much of the fact that American society seemed to be becoming more dangerous just when it was also becoming both more affluent and more committed to action against poverty, inequality, and racial subordination.

That "paradox"... was highly exaggerated. And indeed, the vision of the liberal criminology of the sixties has been unfairly maligned and often misunderstood. Much of what it had to say about the roots of crime and about the potentials of the criminal justice system remains both remarkably fresh and, more important, correct. It rested on several crucial perceptions that have stood up well under the test of time and experience. One was that crime could not be dealt with through the criminal justice system alone, and that the system is likely to crack if we load it with that burden. Another was that if we wanted to deal with crime in America in other than marginal ways, we would have to move beyond the level of merely patching up, punishing, or quarantining individuals who had gone wrong to confront a range of deep and long-standing social and economic problems. Both of these principles fell out of fashion during the seventies, but both were right—and both must be a part of any credible analysis of crime in the future.

But the liberalism of the sixties had important limitations as well. At times, it seemed to say that crime wasn't really as much of a problem as the public naively thought it was—a position that won few friends outside the relatively tranquil preserves of the academic world. Most other Americans were afraid of crime, or enraged by it, and they had good reason to be. It didn't help to imply, as some liberal and radical criminologists did, that worrying overmuch about being mugged or raped was a sign of incipient racism or an authoritarian character. Likewise, it didn't help when liberals, pressed for answers to the problem of violent street crime, responded by insisting that the crimes of white-collar people and corporate executives were also costly and vicious. That was certainly true, but it simply sidestepped the question at hand... .

If we are to build a society that is less dangerous, less fearful, and less torn by violence, we will have to move beyond both perspectives—liberal and conservative. Can we do so? I think we can... . Doing so, however, will require hard choices and a serious commitment of social and economic resources. In a society traditionally drawn to the quick fix, many people, at all points on the political spectrum, want to know what will stop crime next month, and are impatient with the idea that we are in for a long haul. But the hard truth is that there are no magic buttons to push, no program waiting just around the corner to reform the courts or strengthen the police or organize the neighborhood that will make criminal violence disappear tomorrow. There are, however, steps we can take now that can begin to make a difference in the safety of our streets and homes—and to reverse the tragic waste of lives that criminal violence involves.

Many of those steps are based on evidence that has been available for years. It was often said during the seventies that we knew very little about the causes of crime. That was not true then, and it is even less true now, after several more years of research and experience. We do not know as much as we would like, but we are not groping in the dark, either. To agree that more research needs to be done is not the same as saying that we don't know enough to start... .

But there is another, still more important reason for our failure to come to grips with criminal violence. It is not lack of knowledge or technical prowess that keeps us from launching an honest and serious fight against crime; the obstacles are
much more often ideological and political. What seem on the surface to be technical arguments about what we can and cannot do about crime often turn out, on closer inspection, to be moral or political arguments about what we should or should not do; and these in turn are rooted in larger disagreements about what sort of society we want for ourselves and our children. If we are serious about rethinking the problem of crime, we need to engage the issues on that higher level of moral and political values. It is always easier, as R. H. Tawney once observed, to “set up a new department, and appoint new officials, and invent a new name to express their resolution” to do things differently. “But unless they will take the pains,” Tawney cautioned, “not only to act, but to reflect, they end by effecting nothing.”

A hard look at the comparative evidence allows us to dispose of several myths that have hindered our coming to grips with violent crime in America. It is not, for example, unusual leniency with criminals that distinguishes us from less violent nations. On the contrary, as we’ve seen, we are far more punitive in our response to crime (if often less efficient—two outcomes that are complementary, not contradictory): We rely far more on the formal apparatus of punishment and use it more severely than most other advanced societies. Likewise, the comparative evidence quickly dispenses with the myths that the growth of the welfare state or laxity in the punishment of children are to blame for our crime rate, since the welfare state is distinctly underdeveloped in the United States as compared with other industrial societies and our support for punitive discipline far greater.

On the other hand, we’ve seen that the United States differs from other industrial societies in several dimensions of social and economic life that are crucial in accounting for our high levels of criminal violence. These include a wider spread of inequality, greater extremes of poverty and insecurity, the relative absence of effective policies to deal with unemployment and subemployment, greater disruption of community and family ties through job destruction and migration, and fewer supports for families and individuals in the face of economic and technological change and material deprivation.

Some of the roots of these differences—particularly our heritage of racial subordination—reach deep into our history in ways that would create profound difficulties for even the most generous and active social policy. Others, however, represent more or less conscious and current choices, for which we pay a steep price in social disintegration and violence. The result has been an unusual degree of erosion of the institutions that bear much of the responsibility for achieving socialization and social cohesion. Like all serious tasks, these require sufficient and appropriate resources—in particular a supportive and nurturing human “ecology” that, among other things, provides for the attentive and undisturbed care of the young and ensures that individuals can contribute to the larger community and in turn be rewarded by it with esteem and respect. Such a supportive ecology does not simply flow automatically from the operation of the economic market. On the contrary, the natural tendency of the marketplace is to put considerable strain on the institutions of family, work, and community that are its chief components. The growth of urban-industrial consumer society has increased those strains throughout the world. In most developed nations, this process has been ameliorated to some extent by countervailing mechanisms of social obligation and support. In the United States, by contrast, this growth has been marked by the relatively unbuffered play of market forces and has been exceptionally disruptive of the institutions essential for the healthy development of character and community. In these differences we may begin to understand why we suffer the worst violent-crime rate among industrial societies—and why we are forced to resort to levels of punishment that
sharply distinguish us from all but the most notoriously repressive among them.

The general nature of the remedy is implicit in the diagnosis. If we are serious about attacking the roots of this American affliction, we must build a society that is less unequal, less depriv- ing, less insecure, less disruptive of family and community ties, less corrosive of cooperative values. In short, we must begin to take on the enormous task of creating the conditions of community life in which individuals can live together in compassionate and cooperative ways.

CRITICAL-THINKING QUESTIONS

1. How does the rate of serious street crimes in the United States compare with that of other industrial societies?
2. Why does Currie argue that reducing crime is hindered by ideological and political constraints?
3. In what ways does he suggest crime might be reduced? Do you think most members of our society would agree with his analysis?