

Michigan COMMENTARY

The Facts, Fears, and Politics of Crime

by Craig Ruff, President

Crime drops in four of state's largest cities, screamed the front page of the December 6 *Detroit Free Press*. For the first six months of 1993, the number of murders in Detroit dropped by 15.6 percent from 1992 levels. Serious crimes declined 9 percent in Flint, 7 percent in Grand Rapids, and nearly one percent in Lansing. Comparing the first half of 1993 to the same period in 1992, the same FBI statistics showed violent crimes and property crimes nationally declining by 3 and 5 percent, respectively.

These facts portray a country a little safer, a little less crime-ridden. As Americans weigh their relative risk of violence, we should feel less at risk today than a year ago. Yet, in response to a recent *Newsweek/Children's Defense Fund* poll, 73 percent of parents said they feared a violent crime against a family member. Violence is the greatest fear among a laundry list of threats to the family that included drug problems, job loss, affording shelter or medical care, and the family splitting up. A November 1993 *New York Times/CBS News* survey of American public opinion found crime and violence deadlocking with unemployment, jobs, the economy, and health care as the most important problem facing the country. Crime ranked first in an October Public Sector Consultants' survey of Michiganians' worries within their communities. Crime ranked as the first or second most important issues in this fall's elections in New York City, New Jersey, and Virginia.

How do we reconcile that we are statistically a little safer than we were a year ago *and* that we perceive crime to be a growing problem? Risk communications expert Professor Peter Sandman says that risk is an equation in which the true hazard (the facts) must be factored against the public outrage. Our risk of crime, therefore, must take into account not only statistics but also the public reaction to the sensational and heinous crimes reported in the media, the relative terror of violence compared to other social ills, and increasing direct and indirect personal

experience with crime (a friend got mugged, a sister-in-law raped, a neighbor's house was robbed, and so forth). Crime is not an invention of the media. Media coverage does not produce crime, although it feeds our outrage. The piling on of first- and secondhand victimizations also takes a toll on our perceptions.

American politics and politicians are confronting crime aggressively because the relative risk felt by the public is feverish. Reality is exaggerated by perception. Emotion legitimately affects the public's evaluation of the problem. Crime is not simply statistics but also fear. We are a more fearful people.

Violence is not unique to America, but it is worse here than in nearly any other nation in the world. America incarcerates more people than any other nation. Our murder rate is highest. About 14 million serious crimes were reported in 1992. *Business Week* places crime's cost at \$425 billion each year, about half of what America spends for all health care. We spend more on law enforcement and criminal deterrence than other nations, yet few Americans truly feel safe in their homes, neighborhoods, places of work, and even schools.

When did Americans lose their security and safety?

- Does American violence go hand in hand with our national origin, won through a bloody revolution and contempt for authority (namely, British tyranny—the downside of law).
- Did domestic peace break down during the 19th century's taming of the American West with its both heroic and despicable violence?
- Did immigration waves and racial conflicts unhinge social norms and mores?
- Do we lay violence at the world's doorstep: a chaotic twentieth century hallmarked by the

mayhem of dictators like Stalin and Hitler, two world wars, a Cold War, nuclear armaments, and genocide?

- Did it explode when violent programming on television invaded our living rooms?

The causes and effects of violence are not easy to untangle or explain. Motives, means, venues, victims, and perpetrators get jumbled up. They combine and combust. Out comes a randomness eerily as unpredictable as weather: a chaos theory of crime.

Since politics is concerned with things as they are, the current public fears roar in and through the rhetoric of politicians. Crime is a hot button. Of the various sins that should preoccupy government, none seems today to carry the imperative of violence. Campaigns in states and cities this fall bore that out. As always, candidates marked their differences, not similarities. On the issue of crime, the political parties raced to match one another, in E. J. Dionne Jr.'s phrase, "penalty for penalty." The different appraisals of and solutions to violence have never seemed so numerous or varied.

SOCIETY'S FAULT

Is crime the price paid by society for poverty, social injustice, and societally imposed despair? Unscientific, unpredictable, and irrational sentiments attribute behavior to genes or fate or a soul. Society must be somehow at fault. A holistic solution to violence must be found, said state Rep. David Hollister, campaigning for mayor of Lansing.

Out of inequalities of education, job opportunities, and comfort arise the origins of violence. Crime follows squalor. Incidence of crime correlates quite well with economic distress, particularly if adjusted for the relative youth of a population. Leveling playing fields through expanding educational and job opportunities eats away at poverty, the despair it causes, and the crimes it spawns. Search out and cut off the roots of violence.

But there are too many world nations in which poverty and the extremes of wealth and opportunity are far greater than in America, and yet whose people are less violent toward one another. Only a couple of nations rival our per capita income and relative wealth, so how do we explain poverty as a source of

crime in the United States? As America grew ever richer in the last century, we should have seen crime decline, but we have seen the reverse. The Purple Gang never excited the public fear so broadly and deeply as today's urban youth gangs.

Work, economic opportunities, and relative comfort may ease crime, as we generally see crime rates decline during economic expansions, but so what? Government creates only a small number of jobs and its fiscal policies, as opposed to monetary policies (regulating the supply of money), have only a marginal affect on the economy. Linking crime to government's economic policies is specious.

COMMUNITY'S FAULT

It is no myth that the incidence of crime is higher in urban than in suburban or rural communities. The bigger the city, the greater the stress of everyday life and polarization of economic opportunity. People flee the cities for the suburbs—for better schools, newer homes, more space, easier life-styles. They flee, too, because of crime.

The inner cities have crumbled as work has disappeared. City governments have to get back to basics, putting better lighting in neighborhoods and more cops on the street. The federal Brady bill appropriates \$8.9 billion to put 100,000 additional police officers on cities' streets over the next five years.

Tenements and huge public housing complexes, no longer viable living space for people, must be torn down. Pride in property must be restored through public subsidies that create home ownership rather than deliver rent allowances.

Big city mayors, traditionally the most liberal politicians, have to focus on a more conservative political agenda: expanding job opportunities by recruiting businesses through cutting taxes, reducing overblown city bureaucracies, privatizing city services, and partnering with rather than blistering private enterprise. Public safety and private investment are the cornerstones of urban redevelopment.

Urban revitalization, however, is a pipedream so long as people who left cities feel unsafe returning. You cannot repopulate, economically energize, and shore up basic public services in cities until they are safe, and they will not be safe until they attract

taxpaying residents and investment dollars. The rhetoric and reality of urban revitalization lie oceans apart.

FAMILY'S FAULT

The first building block of society, the family nurtures the offspring. The parents and grandparents instill values; they set acceptable behavior; they discipline. Shorn of role models and tutors in social norms, children without strong families frequently become social satellites, orbiting their world without knowledge about how the world works. Setting their own standards or adopting the ethos of other orphaned, valueless peers or television (by age 16, the average American child has seen 18,000 murders on television), the lost children invent acceptable behavior, frequently with disastrous results for a society following a different norm.

Two-thirds of African-American babies nationally are born to single mothers, as are 20 percent of white babies. White out-of-wedlock births have doubled since 1980. In Michigan, out-of-wedlock births number 40,000; 68 percent of black and 26 percent of white babies here are born to single mothers.

Government policy has stripped families of considerable power and responsibility. Welfare programs gave incentives to families to break up. Surely, policies that provide financial incentives to break apart or that fail to respect the critical functions of families are pernicious. Restoring greater independence and coherence to the family will pay off.

But government is not an appropriate agent for dictating how families should be structured, let alone for how members should behave within the unit. Parental responsibility and incentives to remain a family unit may be worth inculcating in public policy; however, government and its agencies and schools cannot mother and dad all the children of the land.

THE COLOR OF CRIME

Poverty and cities are connected with ethnicity, specifically with blacks. "I did not fight [a presidential campaign] for the right of black people to murder other black people with reckless abandonment," preached President Clinton before the national Church of God in Christ convocation. "The freedom

to die before you're a teenager is not what Martin Luther King lived and died for."

Twenty-two percent of white children worry about a family member becoming a victim of crime; 34 percent of black and Hispanic children fear it. Blacks account for 45 percent of those arrested for violent crimes, although they make up 12 percent of the population. Countering the stereotype of an entire race as violence prone, however, are statistics that show that blacks arrested for violent crimes make up less than one percent of the black population, just under 1.7 percent of the black male population. Less than one-tenth of one percent of the population is committing 45 percent of violent crimes, hardly grounds for indicting an entire race. The shocking prevalence of violence within the black population, however, is driving their civic, political, and religious leaders to take inward stock of the self-destructive and self-inflicted violence among urban blacks.

Well intentioned as it may be, the rhetoric about black leaders restoring peace in black communities can and is misinterpreted by whites as yet another reason to fear people of color. The facts of crimes committed by blacks become evidence to many non-blacks of a threat of color. Remember that perception is weighed against facts in determining risk.

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

A good share of the 99 percent of us who have not committed and never will commit a violent crime want to mete out tough justice. About 70 percent of Americans and the same percentage of Michiganians condone the ultimate in tough justice, the death penalty. More support mandatory sentences for repeat offenders. Law-abiders have thought through the drawbacks (executing an innocent person and shouldering explosively increasing costs of prisons and jails). Stiff punishment still satisfies a basic human urge for revenge, whether or not it deters other criminals. Little noticed in the Brady bill, signed into law by President Clinton, is the extension of the death penalty to 47 exotic crimes, such as fatal violence occurring on maritime platforms.

Some group will push Michigan's adoption of the death penalty. This state was the world's first democratic unit to abolish the death penalty. From

statehood to the present, constitutional convention delegates, legislatures, and voters have rejected it.

Facts make very little difference in opinion about capital punishment. One's opinion is largely driven by value judgment (just retribution or barbarism). Equally true, facts about incarceration take a back seat to values. Politicians may be concerned about tax burdens of, spending priorities warped by, and rehabilitation capabilities of prisons and jails, but the general public largely tunes out any argument or issue other than keeping villains off the streets.

GUNS

Someone is shot every 14 minutes in America. It is now more likely that an American will be injured by a violent crime than in an auto accident. The 37,000 people killed by guns every year is staggering, although their number pales in comparison to the 200,000 killed by alcohol and 500,000 by tobacco. The combination of guns and children particularly horrifies us. Twenty-four percent of American children between the ages of 10 and 17 report being threatened with a gun, and 25 percent of minority children know other students who have brought guns to school. Kids are killing, injuring, and threatening kids with the tools of modern war.

As is true of the death penalty, gun control has passed the threshold of political salability. The public, having weighed all sides, has resolved to slap controls on the purchase of guns. Public opinion and pressure drove passage of the Brady bill, requiring handgun purchasers to wait for a background check and forbidding the manufacture, sale, and possession of semiautomatic assault weapons.

Michigan's legislature will be considering state policy change on guns. There is one legally registered gun for every four people in Michigan. Some politicians want to create a statewide gun education program, lengthen jail terms for gun-related crimes on school grounds, set harsher penalties for any gun-related crime, pin responsibility on parents who let children take guns to school, and confiscate guns owned by people convicted of crimes involving guns.

Just because a majority of Americans support in theory restricting the availability of firearms does not mean that we have reached consensus on every specific regulation or penalty proposed. Many view

as pathetically weak the five-day wait and other provisions of the Brady bill. Civil libertarians worry about punishing parents vicariously for the acts of their children. Pragmatists are appalled by a short-term, side effect of federal restrictions, namely the run on guns. Of course, many Americans remain convinced that gun control laws only serve the interests of the intenders of evil; the law-abiding get slapped with pointless infringements on their rights to hunt and defend themselves.

An entirely new slant to the gun debate is emerging that suggests that ownership of guns is not simply a right but an obligation. In a conservative journal, *The Public Interest*, Jeffrey Snyder writes

Crime is rampant because the law-abiding, each of us, condone it, excuse it, permit it, submit to it. We permit and encourage it because we do not fight back immediately, then and there, where it happens We are a nation of cowards and shirkers.

Rising from that powerful rhetoric about moral responsibility comes a call for personal armament. ("An armed society is a polite society" says Snyder) Some argue that more guns in the hands of the peaceful ward off the encroachments of the villainous. Snyder cites research findings that armed citizens defend their lives and property with firearms approximately one million times a year. In only 2 percent of those instances do citizens shoot their assailants, but in so doing, they kill 2,000 to 3,000 criminals annually, three times the number killed by police! The error rate (shooting an innocent person) among citizens pursuing self-defense is about one-fifth that of police pursuing criminals in the public's defense.

Not just powerful rhetoric, self-defense and citizen policing appeal to Americans. Making front-page news recently was the story of a New Yorker, several times the victim of muggings, who blew away two thieves who stole his wallet. They had not noticed the .44-caliber Magnum in his belt. Reminiscent of subway vigilante Bernhard Goetz, who shot threatening youths nearly a decade ago, Arthur Boone turned the tables on his assailants, was arraigned on charges of criminal possession of a weapon, and heartened if not emboldened fearful New Yorkers.

The prospect of universal armament against crime and citizens as vigilantes frightens a great many people. Troubling are nightmarish prospects of hot-headed, squabbling family members using convenient weapons against one another, shootings of innocent people mistaken for intruders or muggers, and of a citizen-run police state. Snyder's provocative and revisionist perspective strikes some as a portrait of hell.

The politics of guns are today championing control. Everyone hopes that control works. If it does not, tomorrow's politics of weaponry may turn toward Snyder's solution, arming the law-abiding with guns and courage.

CIVILITY

"Politics is about the search for remedy," says Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. Violence in America demands remedy, but can politics and public policy provide it? Improving economic opportunity, reducing urban blight, putting more police officers on streets, strengthening families, imposing the death penalty and other stiff penalties, controlling guns, or emboldening law-abiders to carry guns in self-defense may stem violence.

Perhaps these and other creative ways to tap into the public anger about crime are worth trying. But to most people, government and politics seem to offer fewer and fewer real remedies to real problems; an alienated and cynical public is skeptical about government solutions to problems. Soothing public anger and solving a society's disintegration, vulgarity, and belligerence are accomplishments of a considerably different order.

Violence is the antithesis of civility. A course of violence begins when peaceful resolution of problems, individual responsibility, and hope stop. No matter how credible or effective their governance, uncivil, disrespectful, and violent people will act out their nature and destroy domestic peace.

Tolerance of and respect for another's life and property should be within government's capacity to deliver. If nothing else, the one thing people always have expected of government, whether it is a representative democracy, monarchy, autocracy, dictatorship, or theocracy, is physical security, a national defense, and domestic peace. Government can penalize crime. It puts law enforcement on the streets. Its policies can mitigate against some causes of crime.

But governors cannot impose upon the public a civility that the public chooses to abandon. If the people themselves lose tolerance and respect for one another and if they choose to resolve disputes by punches, knives, and guns, they reject peaceful resolution of disputes through judicial systems. If people are inculcated from youth with disdain for human life or property rights, no judge nor politician can maintain perfect peace.

Violence in America speaks volumes less about the failings of politics or governance than about us—the people.

We believe that we live in fear, which is as important as the crime statistics we read in newspapers. What will government do to change that? Wrong question. What will we, as people, in homes, neighborhoods, and offices, do to change that? The choice of civility or violence is ours, not our government's.

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