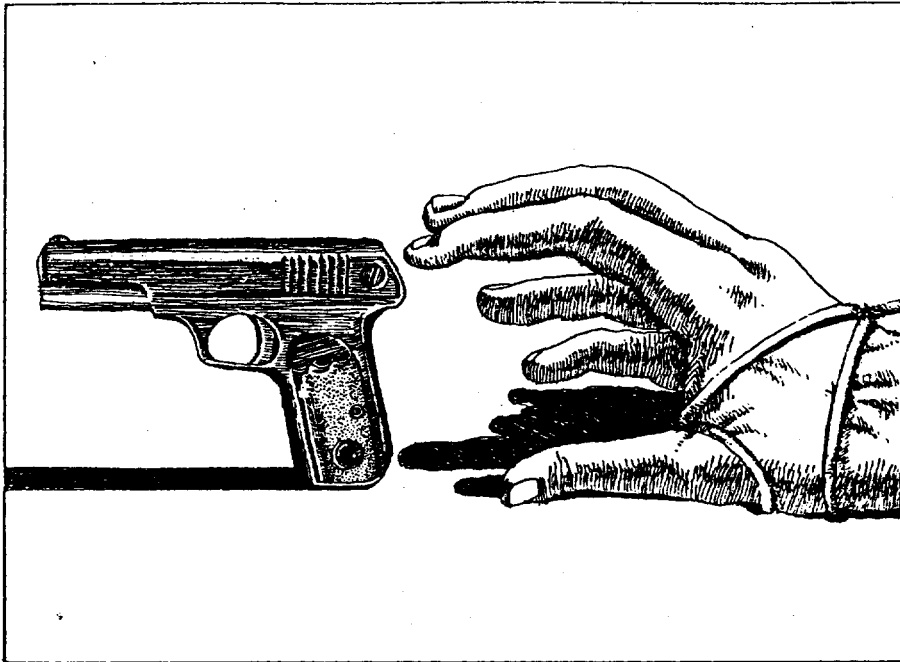


The City Politic/Amitai Etzioni

CRIME: PAY DIRT FOR POLITICOS



Politicos love crime. It provides them with what is considered among campaign engineers to be a "good" issue. It's emotional and personal—much better than worrying about Cubans in Angola, debt management, or reorganization of the health department. It is much less controversial than Westway, preventing cabs from cruising to reduce pollution, or practically anything else. No wonder Percy Sutton seeks to put "an end to the robbing, mugging, assaults, and various other crimes in our communities" and Abe Beame made personal appearances both at Times Square antismut raids and at Harlem antidrug raids. The others are not far behind.

According to a May, 1977, Harris poll, fear of crime is subsiding nationwide, but a five-borough-wide New York City poll shows New Yorkers still rank crime as the number-one issue which troubles them. Unemployment ranks second, and the city's finances rank third. More surprising is that large numbers of New Yorkers still believe that politicians can solve the problem: According to this poll, only one in four thinks that "the mayor can't do much about crime problems." The majority are convinced he can.

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At the same time, the majority of New Yorkers feel the city government is not doing what it could about crime. Only 15 percent think the "city council works hard to reduce crime"; 57 percent disagree. The highest blame for inaction is put on the court system (71 percent); second, on the corrections system (57 percent); and much less on the police (17 percent).

The reason this poll is surprising is that the public has seen law-and-order candidates win elections in Philadelphia (Frank Rizzo), California (Ronald Reagan), and nationwide (Richard Nixon), followed not only by no decrease but by a continued increase in crime. And the reforms of courts, corrections systems, jails, etc., have had little effect. Indeed, they have often backfired. Thus, the pressure on the courts to deal expeditiously with cases led to greater acceptance of plea bargaining, in which the defendant agrees to a guilty plea (and thus a relatively speedy trial is achieved), but the plea is for a lesser charge, often resulting in a criminal's quick return to the streets. Similarly, Rockefeller's tough life sentences for drug-pushers led to heavy reliance on children as drug-runners rather than to less drug traffic.

A political leader running for office on the assumption that you cannot fool most of the people all the time would strike a rather different, Churchillian

note. "Crime," he or she would state, "must be fought in the homes and on the streets. It must take us a decade of our best persons, resources, and prayers. To turn back the tidal wave of crime is a ridiculous promise: Who ever turned back a tidal wave? But if we work at it long and hard, together, we *shall* make slow inroads."

What is to be done? The liberals' anticrime agenda is far removed from the daily grit of the problem; it seeks to deal with the roots of crime while letting the criminals roam free. Eliminate poverty, build decent housing, advance social justice: These cost billions and take decades. They *may* prevent tomorrow's youngsters from growing up alienated, but they will not turn around those already embarked on careers of crime, which they find rich in payment, low in risks.

Conservatives wish to deal *only* with the criminals: Get them off the street; lock them up and throw away the key; severe and certain punishment deters. While their approach attempts to cope with criminals, it leaves in place the forces which generate even more criminals. This way, we could end up with hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers in jail, housed at \$10,000 or so a year, probably to exit more hardened than when they entered.

What we need is a combined approach which works on the societal causes of crime, on the criminals themselves, and on the availability of the tools of crime. We especially need jobs because they reduce poverty and alienation and keep youth productively busy. More than half of all those arrested are 24 years old or younger; almost half of those are eighteen years old or younger. Violent crime is a youth specialty: Three out of four such crimes are committed by young persons. Unemployed persons are more likely to engage in crime than employed persons, and unemployment is particularly high among the young. But provision of jobs alone will not reduce crime much. We need *meaningful* jobs, starting people on careers, giving them hope for the future and for reasonable pay.

We need to distribute home—and apartment—ownership more widely; owning a residence tends to make a person more responsible toward it and toward society. It also helps build communities whose social fiber curbs

crime. Such distribution can be advanced through helping tenants buy and rehabilitate abandoned buildings.

We must also decriminalize acts whose only victims are those consenting adults who choose to participate: prostitution, playing the numbers, and the use of drugs. This would free police and courts to deal with crimes of violence and to kill the opportunities to make a fortune in illicit activities.

Truth to be told, every part of our city life contributes to crime and hence will sooner or later have to be involved in reforms seeking to reduce criminality. More people have to be persuaded not to look the other way when the very young first show disrespect for the law and morality: jumping a turnstile in a subway station; emptying a phone box, meter, or Coke machine. Schools must teach more than the three R's; they must help instill a capacity to tell right from wrong and reject a world in which each individual tries to maximize his or her gain by whatever means. Police must hold fewer desk jobs and hit the streets. Courts must mete out more even-handed, less arbitrary but sufficiently stringent punishment. Stronger enforcement of gun control, especially if also supported by neighboring communities, will help curb the tools of crime.

Over and above these and other specifics is the need to take a systems approach (i.e., we must realize that each factor will contribute less by itself than if effected in conjunction with the others). Better schooling is of limited use if there are no jobs. Jobs will accomplish less if the prevailing attitude is of a moral free-for-all. More police will add little if the courts continue to practice revolving-door justice.

The list of things which need to be done is depressingly long and the requirement to use the levers simultaneously to achieve a systems effect is a tough one. But there are no easy answers. Even if all the above is done and the economy picks up and provides more jobs and income and the slow increase in the average age improves the sociology of the city (to reiterate, violent crimes are largely a youthful pursuit), we still will cut crime by only a few notches—hardly putting an "end" to mugging, robbing, killing, and raping. The merit of the efforts lies in the individuals whose lives are spared, whose tragedies are avoided—an ebbing of the semihysterical fear of crime which engulfs the city and its good name, not a cure-all. Anybody who argues otherwise is more concerned with votes than with New York's future, and can probably not be trusted with either. ■