Citing recent declines in the rate of violent crime, some members of the press argue that the public's views on the subject are unreasonable, even hysterical. Other pundits, meanwhile, say the government should soothe the public's nerves about crime but focus its resources elsewhere, say on jobs.

The fact is that crime is all too real. Recent minor statistical variations (violent crime and drug use fell a tiny bit but are rising again) cannot obscure that the violent crime rate quadrupled between 1966 and 1990 and that our rate far exceeds those of other Western countries.

Above all, the pundits ignore that crime is an accumulative experience. Most of the victims of the crime waves of the past 20 years are still with us. Each year, the total number of Americans who are victims or who are close to victims continues to rise. More than 80 percent of us will be the target of at least one crime in our lifetime. It is an experience that few will ever forget.

The public's apparent embrace of extreme, even extra-legal measures to stem lawbreaking is another measure of the problem. Witness, for instance, the cheers that accompanied the caning of young American Michael Fay in Singapore for a minor act of vandalism. Others say they would readily support the suspension of the Constitution until the war on drugs is won.

Politicians should not take such expressions literally. If an American school caned a youngster the way the Singaporeans did Fay, the same Americans who applauded his punishment would lift the roof off the school in protest.

The public wants (and in my judgment, deserves) strong, reasonable measures to deter crime. In recent years, we have tended to concentrate on increasing penalties to achieve this end. The punishment line of deterrence, however, has more or less been exhausted. While some diehards call for throwing away the key on first-time offenders, "three strikes and you're out" may be as far as we can go down that road. The problem is that the overwhelming majority of criminal acts go unpunished. Under such circumstances, even the harshest penalties have relatively little deterrent effect.

Consider the following statistics, as recently summarized in an article in The New York Times Magazine:

- From the estimated 25 million serious crimes committed in the United States every year, only 15 million are reported;
From those reported, only 3.2 million arrests are made by the police; from those arrests, prosecutors convict merely 1.9 million—and only about 500,000 criminals are sent to jail. Due to plea-bargaining and early-release programs to stem prison overcrowding, many do not serve the full sentence prescribed by law or set by the courts.

In short, currently one out of 50 serious crimes committed results in a jail sentence. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist or a mathematician to realize that deterrence is a function of two factors: the severity of a punishment and the likelihood that it will be meted out. We have done about all we can to maximize the first half of the equation. The time has come for us to shift our focus from making penalties ever harsher to ensuring that most, if not all, criminals get the punishment due them.

I would like to be the first to admit that enhancing the certainty that crime will be punished is easier said than done. One reason is that policymakers (including those in the U.S. Justice Department) have not made a major commitment to study this subject and develop viable options.

Still, we have some preliminary indications of what needs to be done:

- We need not merely more jails and police, but also more district attorneys, judges, and courtrooms. These resources would help us overcome the judicial bottleneck that encourages plea-bargaining and the dismissal of cases that should be prosecuted. Many judges have complained bitterly that while this year’s federal crime bill increased the ranks of police, and hence presumably the flow of cases, it did little to increase the number of judges and their support staff. Furthermore, while the bill included funds for new prisons, it offered next to none for additional courtrooms.

- We should continue to limit the conditions under which parole is granted, ensure that those on parole are closely supervised, and ensure that those who violate the terms of their parole are returned to jail.

- We must streamline procedures and paperwork requirements to allow the police to process more criminals. There must be a way, without raising costs, to bring criminals to confinement without cops being taken off the beat for 24 hours or more, as is all too often the case.

- We need better systems to track outlaws and to improve communication among police departments across jurisdictions.

- We need to expand the practice of community policing—in which officers weave themselves into the fabric of a community in order to detect crime before it happens. This would both reduce alienation and foster cooperation between citizens and police. Community policing must not be allowed to become a sham, however, with cops walking the beat from nine to five and only on weekdays.

We should consider following the example of the Houston community that deputized citizens to track down parole violators and crime suspects, who were far too numerous to be handled by the existing police. We must encourage the law enforcement community to tap all potential crime-fighting resources.

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Above all, we should not go away with the notion that just because the federal crime bill was passed only with so much effort, we have done all we can for the foreseeable future. We must begin thinking about the basic concepts and strategies that will guide us from here. Certainty of punishment should lead the parade.

Those who correctly seek to attack the roots of crime should note that while jobs, economic growth, and social justice have a role to play in prevention, so does the reconstruction of our moral infrastructure. Young people must learn at home, in school, in places of worship, and in public places to tell right from wrong and acquire the inner capacity to withstand temptations that lead to criminal conduct. We need a society whose values are intact, one that is willing to promote and uphold these values, rather than a society that “validates” its young people with cash grants and warm words about victimology no matter what ill conduct it finds.