

Mugging is now the number one topic

by Amitai Etzioni

I have returned to New York City after five months in Palo Alto, California. The city seems to have seriously deteriorated in one major way—many people I know are no longer just worried about being mugged, they are semi-hysterical and quite desperate.

Most obviously, in my turf, an upper-middle-class stretch along Riverside Drive, about 10 blocks from Harlem, the muggers have changed their m. o. (police lingo, we are all learning, for modus operandi, or style of crime). They used to hold a knife or a gun to your tummy or your head and demand your valuables. (This, for instance, was the fate of my friend, Professor Jonathan Cole, who was mugged just in front of my house, shortly before I left for California.) Now they hold you up in your elevator or corridor and force you to take them into your apartment.

Joe, my 115th Street barber, welcomed my return with the story of a girl, just across the street, who was forced to take two muggers to her apartment. The muggers held a gun to the head of her child and demanded money.

Her boyfriend feared for her child, jumped one of the muggers, and was shot dead. This week, my student, Zeev, was home with his wife, who is pregnant and not feeling well, when the doorbell rang: at the door was their friend and neighbor, Rina—accompanied by two muggers and a pistol. She had led them to Zeev's apartment, afraid to wind up alone with them in hers. The muggers took all they could carry.

When I left, muggings occurred mainly—although far from exclusively—at night, usually in dark alleys. Zeev's visitors came at tea-time. And, on a bright mid-morning a few days ago, as I was driving to a Columbia University office building on 119th Street and Morningside Drive, I stopped, speechless, to see two young men calmly trying to break open the door of a parked Impala.

Burglary and mugging have been popular topics on the West Side at least as long as has the war in Vietnam. But in my building (the doorman's chair was carried off just before I left for Palo Alto), Vietnam somehow no longer seems to be the ever-present topic—the subjects of theft and assault take up most conversation now. (The new chair is chained to the floor.) My street is deserted at 9 p. m. and the tenants of my building are trying to organize a block patrol.

But something subtler, something harder to measure—but more consequential—seems to have changed. People discussing crime used to be concerned, worried, angry. They used to talk about double locks, types of alarms, and dogs. Now the tone is bitter and desperate. The police,

people seem to have concluded from stories circulating in the past few months, are corrupt and ineffectual. (The fact that two policemen were killed right next door and their assailant not caught has enforced this opinion.) Recent reports that crime is rising in the suburbs also seems to close even this expensive escape hatch.

More deeply, any hope that Nixon would do more for "law and order" than did his predecessors has, after four years, evaporated—for those who ever had it. The Mayor and his staff seem more keen on running for office in other cities than building their reputations here. And the Governor—my neighbors ask, what has Rockefeller done about crime?

Most important, people are undergoing what, to my sociological eyes, is an unmistakable transformation. The impact of the experience of having so many of those one knows come to harm is difficult to over-estimate. In comparison, all other experiences pale. The war in Vietnam reaches us mainly via the press, radio, and television. I, for example, know no one personally who has been killed in Vietnam or who has kin who have been. But I know quite well at least 20 people who have been killed, knifed, bashed, threatened, assaulted, or merely burglarized. When a social issue hits that often, that close, and that deeply, it is not the same as reading about an unduly high unemployment rate or even seeing the prices rise more rapidly than my paycheck; it is like losing someone to cancer every other week, and knowing a stop *could* be put to the dread.

The politicians act as if they understand the depth of fear, anxiety, and despair crime has generated, at least in city dwellers. But their repeated

cliches and declarations of programs do not do much to reassure my very troubled friends, their children, or me.

What the hell do the city's, the state's, and the nation's leaders expect will happen when the citizens conclude that there is no way one can safely drink a cup of coffee in one's own kitchen, not to mention sleep in one's bedroom? (Rapes alone have risen 12 percent in the last year.) People may abandon the streets and turn their homes into fortresses, but if each time the door is opened to a spouse, he or she might be accompanied by a mugger—who may or may not hurt one's child—who will stand for that?

And thus, in my judgment, this city is a festering sore, which, if not rapidly drained through *effective* means of curbing crime, will explode in an ugly wave of fenced-in neighborhoods, private police forces, vigilantes, and blind support for whoever waves a fist aimed at the real or alleged

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CENTER FOR POLICY RESEARCH
475 RIVERSIDE DRIVE
NEW YORK, N. Y. 10027