

December 27, 1999

A Sobering View of Crime's Decline

Editorial

If you've been feeling good about the dramatic drop that crime rates have taken nationwide, perk down. The latest update by the commission President Lyndon B. Johnson established to investigate the causes of crime, violence and unrest wants you to know that crime rates still stand far above the level that Americans used to call a national crisis.

Despite a dramatic drop since 1991, the report found that violent crime remains fully 40 percent higher than it was in 1969. That means, the report notes, that current crime rates remain at a historic high and among the worst in the industrialized world.

Fortunately, a closer look at the report, produced by the liberal-leaning Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, shows gloom to be in the eyes of the beholder. After a long, bumpy trend upward from 1969 to 1991, for example, crime in cities of all sizes shows a steep and steady decline up to 1998, the latest year for which statistics are available. If that trend were to continue at the same rate, crime would return to its 1969 level much more quickly than it rose.

But what happens if the trend does not continue? What if the economy turns sour? What if some new drug scourge like crack cocaine runs the violent tally up again? One does not have to be a Chicken Little to be concerned about such possibilities. Too many Americans already feel unsafe despite the statistical crime drop.

In the world of crime and politics, perception can be as potent as reality. The most popular political responses to crime in the 1990s have been tougher sentences, more prison-building and "zero-tolerance" crackdowns on petty crimes to clean up neighborhoods.

The foundation decries such tactics, urging instead attention to long-range remedies for poverty, joblessness and moral aimlessness, the so-called root causes of crime. Its suggested list of reforms includes a variety of

programs to promote job training, after-school programs, community policing and reintegration of ex-offenders into society.

Such long-range attacks on root causes have merit. But credit also must be given where it is due to better policing and tougher sentencing. The strong, unexpected downward trend that crime took in the '90s shows that existing programs, including strong law enforcement coupled with a strong economy cannot be discounted.

A prosperous nation has even less reason to neglect the root causes of crime than a cash-strapped nation does. Efforts also must be made to reduce even the appearance of unfairness in the disproportionate numbers of blacks and Latinos who have been incarcerated in the drug crackdowns of the 1990s.

If crime were to decline no further, the Eisenhower Foundation's report would be reason for alarm. For now, it waves a yellow flag of caution, a judicious reminder of how much crime continues to distort American life. Much work remains to be done just to get the nation back to its pre-crisis state.