

NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO: MORNING EDITION

VIOLENCE IN THE SIXTIES -- AND NOW December 10, 1999

ALEX CHADWICK (Host): Today a 30-year-old study on the causes of violent crime in the U.S. gets an update. The original study was released on this day in 1969 by the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, called by President Lyndon Johnson a year and a half earlier. The nation was reeling with social unrest. Americans had just witnessed the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Senator Robert Kennedy. There were summer riots, the Vietnam War, racial anger and threats. The 1969 Commission blamed the increase in violence on an anger that grew out of inequality and was magnified by the American obsession with material success.

Now, despite the news in recent years of a decrease in crime, the updated study finds an overall increase in violent crime. Lynn Curtis is president of the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, which was created to carry on the work of the 1969 Commission. He contributed to that report and is the lead author of this one. Good morning, Lynn Curtis. Thank you for coming here to be with us.

DR. LYNN CURTIS (President, Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation):
Good morning. How are you?

CHADWICK: Is the rate of violent crime going up or down? Because there are these studies in recent years and reports from the FBI that say things are getting better.

CURTIS: In the short run, mainly since about 1993 when we began the economic boom, violent crime rates and fear of violence have gone down, and we applaud that. But our report is a look at the longer run, and if you compare the late 1960s with the late 1990s, violent crime, as defined by the FBI, has gone up by 40 percent. We've also had an increase in firearms ownership from 90 million in the late 60s to 200 million in the late 90s.

CHADWICK: I was interested to see one statistic that you talked about, and that is fear of crime. Do you know why people might be more fearful of crime now than they were then, or why your poll seems to indicate they're more fearful?

CURTIS: Well, its hard to say, but, for example, while the official statistics show a decline in the short run, you have the kind of violent events in Colorado and the shooting just earlier this week that make people think, "Gosh, you know, we escaped to the suburbs to make us more safe. Yet even living in the suburbs we have this violence." And so where can you run? I think there's an awareness that just escaping physically by distance is not enough because there's a culture of violence in this country that is connected with the media and firearms that you can't escape from.

CHADWICK: Back in 1969, as I recall, people thought there was a pretty high level of violent crime. Obviously there was enough concern to create a national commission about it. But looking back now to those days, how would you characterize the differences?

CURTIS: Well, even if you're at the most optimistic in terms of comparing then to now, what you have to say is we're roughly in the same ballpark. The overall level of endemic violence in America, in spite of ups and downs, remains about the same. So our question is: Where have we gone in these last 30 years?

CHADWICK: And the answer is?

CURTIS: Well, we haven't gone anywhere. We're sort of running in place.

CHADWICK: What are the solutions that you talk about in your new report? What are the things the country should be doing?

CURTIS: We have found, over the last 30 years, that we have learned a great deal about what doesn't work and about what does work, based on scientific studies. We found, for example, that boot camps don't work very well; prisons are limited and very expensive; zero-tolerance policing has never been proven, really, to work. What does work are programs that, at the same time, reduce drugs and crime, but also improve kid's performance in school and improve employability. For example, Head Start preschool is one of the most successful crime-prevention programs around. It reduces crime and drugs, but it also increases the chance that you'll complete school and you'll get a job. The Argus Community in New York City, which is a training-first program for high school dropouts, gets them back into good jobs and has been shown to reduce crime at the same time that employment is increasing. Those kinds of multiple solutions are what seem to work the best. We need to combine educational and employment reform with criminal justice reform that gets non-violent offenders out of the prisons and into treatment programs.

CHADWICK: Lynn Curtis thank you for coming in to speak with us.

CURTIS: My pleasure.

CHADWICK: Lynn Curtis is president of the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation and lead author of "A 30-Year Update of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence."

It's 19 minutes past the hour.