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Recent Optimistic Reports Belie Figures About Continuing Alarming Crime Rates

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A person could be forgiven for supposing that America has solved its crime problem. Hardly a week has gone by of late without front-page newspaper articles marveling at dramatic declines in all forms of crime since the early 1990s.

Earlier this month, a liberal think tank offered a different perspective on the "new and misplaced triumphalism" about crime. Compared with levels of the late 1960s, reports the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, crime today is still a social crisis.

The Eisenhower Foundation included its crime analysis in a 30-year update of the report of the 1969 National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence.

Foundation President Lynn Curtis says "the most optimistic" view of current crime statistics "is that we are in roughly the same ballpark ...as we were in the late 1960s, when everyone said crime is so bad we need a national commission to study it."

The Eisenhower study reports that the FBI index of violent crimes in large cities was 860 per 100,000 residents in 1969. It was 1,218 in 1998, still 42 percent higher, after years of well-publicized reductions.

Even this sobering comparison understates how bad crime remains today, seen in historical terms. The FBI's nationwide violent-crime index had more than doubled between 1960 and 1969.

Between 1960 and its peak in 1991, the violent crime rate increased almost five-fold.

So the notion that today's crime rates represent cause for celebration may be exaggerated. Falling rates are far preferable to rising rates. But a focus on short-term trends (not just in crime but in any phenomenon) produces an optical illusion that inevitably exaggerates the importance of the most recent changes. It's like the way the distance between two nearby telephone poles seems large, while you can hardly perceive any gap between remote poles.

Our current perspectives on crime are out of focus partly because the issue is usually seen through an ideological filter. Law-and-order conservatives may have the fewest problems in this area. Often willing enough to believe modern society is going to pieces, many conservatives suppose the proper response to crime is the same no matter what its trend -- simply lock up the bad guys, however many there are.

Over the past 15 years or so criminal sentences have been lengthened and incarceration rates have soared, playing a part in the recent drops in crime. The ratio of criminals in prison to violent crimes committed plunged by 70 percent between 1960 and 1973, as crime exploded, according to FBI statistics. Since 1983, the ratio has gradually climbed back to mid-'60s levels.

All this discomforts liberal Americans who have doubts about throw-away-the-key strategies. They seem ready to concede that crime is a terrible plague so long as the discussion focuses on remedies they favor -- gun control, anti-poverty programs, drug treatment, etc. But they'd rather discourage the "are there no prisons?" response to crime -- which is popular with the general public.

Hence a sometimes bewildering inconsistency in much media discussion about crime. Violence is an epidemic when the subject is gun control or the need for anger-management programs in schools. But when the subject is tougher police or prison policies, the crime problem is overblown.

The Eisenhower Foundation deserves credit for delivering a candid assessment of the long-term reality of crime, all the while earnestly pushing its own progressive agenda for treating the problem's causes. Its report includes calls for fighting crime with programs for disadvantaged children, gun control, even the "reinvigoration of public television." It declares the incarceration strategy hopeless and inhumane.

In arguing for the last point, the report offers another refreshingly dry-eyed perspective on crime. In evaluating America's crime problem, it says, we should measure total "criminality," counting criminals in prison along with those still on the streets.

A society is in sorry shape, the report says, when, like ours today, it has "both very high rates of crime and very high incarceration rates ...In a reasonable culture we would not say we had won the war against disease just because we had moved a lot of sick people...into hospital wards."

No. But moving the "sick" someplace where they won't spread the "disease" of crime to everyone else remains a sensible quarantine measure until we discover a cure.

Some of us differ with the Eisenhower Foundation's diagnosis of the reasons crime has grown worse over the past 40 years. It seems more likely to some that what has deteriorated since 1960 is the stability of America's families and moral order, not its economic opportunities or the adequacy of its gun-control laws.

But the Foundation is correct and courageous when it says bulging prisons side by side with still mean streets do not make a pretty cultural picture.