

Interview: Lynn A. Curtis

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Lehrer: This is On The Line. I am Brian Lehrer. Statistics for 1999 show more of the same on crime in the New York City area. And that means with the exception of murder, which was up slightly for the first time in years, violent crime continued its nearly decade-long downward plunge, leaving us with the lowest crime rates in 25 years in many categories. But according to a major report released in December by the Eisenhower Foundation, the good news of recent years may be creating an illusion -- masking some serious underlying problems that will rear their violent heads again soon enough if they are not addressed. In fact, the report says in many ways, we've gone backwards since the original Eisenhower Commission Report on poverty and crime, commissioned by President Johnson some 30 years ago. Lynn Curtis, President of the Eisenhower Foundation, joins us now. Welcome to On The Line, hello.

Curtis: Good morning, Brian.

Lehrer: How can things be getting better and getting worse at the same time?

Curtis: Well, things indeed have gotten better since about 1993, when it comes to crime and fear -- because they have been going down. But the long-run picture is different. We asked what is the situation today, compared to 30 years ago. When you ask that question, the best you can say is that crime rates and rates of fear are roughly at the same levels as they were 30 years ago. We've had some ups and downs, just like the business cycle, but the overall trend and the underlying level of endemic violence in this country has stayed about the same. At the same time, we have had a sevenfold increase in our prison population.

Lehrer: When you say underlying level of endemic crime, what does that mean?

Curtis: I am just saying that the level of crime today is roughly the same as it was in the late 1960s when everyone was so worried that they formed a national commission on violence to examine what we could do about it.

Lehrer: So, if crime went way up after that and then different kinds of policies went into effect, including, some would argue, more aggressive law enforcement and more incarceration of people, and for longer times, and now rates have come down, why not recommend more of the same for the coming years?

Curtis: Well what correlates best in New York City, with the decline in crime is the decline in unemployment. And also what correlates best in New York City is the decline in the crack epidemic. Those declines started before zero tolerance policing, for example. I know there has been a lot of publicity in the media about zero tolerance. But, look at other cities. The City of Boston, the City of San Diego, the City of Columbia, South Carolina, to state just three -- have experienced declines in crime at least as great as in New York City, but at the same time, they have had minority community-friendly policing. For example, minority officers are trained to mentor minority youth in Columbia, South Carolina public housing. All the hype about zero tolerance being a national model doesn't really pan out, when you compare with other cities.

Lehrer: What do you think needs to be done?

Curtis: Understand the role of unemployment, but also look at programs that have been successful based on scientific evaluations over the last 30 years. A lot of those programs have not only reduced crime and fear, but have also improved employability and improved education. For example, Head Start preschool is one of the best crime and drug prevention programs. Yet, only 40% of the kids nationally get it. Safe havens after school was said to be a very important program by the Carnegie Corporation in the early 90s. Kids get social support and discipline; they get some help with their homework. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out that such adult mentoring programs work. A lot of public school reforms also work. For example, El Puente in Brooklyn, is a comprehensive, full service community school where a nonprofit organization partners with a middle school. They have had success -- not only with improving performance in school, but with reducing crime and fear. The Argus Learning for Living Center in the South Bronx, is a school for high school dropouts. Through tough love, remedial education and job training, Argus has gotten dropouts back on the right path. Argus has improved employability, at the same time that it has reduced crime by these youth. And a last example would be the conservative State of Arizona, where the good citizens, through a referendum, decided they were spending too much money on putting people in prison. They decided to divert nonviolent offenders out of prison into community-based programs. Recidivism and the cost to taxpayers have gone down. So there are a lot of proven programs that have reduced crime and drugs but have also kept kids in school and gotten them employment training. What we

are saying is these programs, which are win-win, rather than win-lose like zero tolerance, should be replicated, but at a scale equal to the dimensions of the problem.

Lehrer: This is On The Line. On NYC. My guest is Lynn Curtis, President of the Eisenhower Foundation which recently released a report on crime in the United States, which it says is not much different from 1968, when the original Eisenhower Commission, formed by President Johnson, released its report on poverty and crime in the United States. If you want to react to Lynn Curtis, our phone number is 212.267.9692. Mr. Curtis, it seems like there is a traditional sort of liberal-conservative divide on the crime issue and that what your report does is come down on the liberal side. Liberals say deal with the root causes, especially poverty and lack of equal opportunity and the proliferation of guns. Conservatives say swift and meaningful punishment deters crime. Intact families among the poor deter crime. Things like that. Is there a way to move beyond that? Is there a way to use your report to move beyond that?

Curtis: We are not looking at this as liberal versus conservative. What we have tried to do is ask what does work and what doesn't work. Let's take programs that we have worked, based on scientific evaluations, and do more of them. Let's take initiatives that have proven themselves not to work particularly well and stop doing them. Boot camps is another good example. The State of Maryland just stopped its boot camp program. Let's try to base progress on science, rather than on ideology. There's a lot of talk in terms of the new millennium about this last century being the year of science. Time Magazine made Einstein the person of the century. Let's use science as our basis.

Lehrer: Dan in Queens. Dan, you're On The Line.

Dan: Yes, Mr. Curtis seems to me to be using the same old clap trap statements that have aggravated the problem over all these years that causes that great conservative-liberal divide but it don't answer anything – including that crazy word, scientific. I'm rather disappointed with the way his answers don't really deal with the problems that we at ground level face. Which is that crime pays. People who go into crime are materially a lot better off than the people who don't, and the kids see that. One of the things that people who go into crime do is wear the wealth of their crime very ostentatiously. So, essentially, I think I would like to ask if Mr. Curtis is black and one of those blacks who has gotten his position on the basis of numbers because that's...

Lehrer: Wait, Dan, wait. First of all, you are going very far afield here. Now, if you want to ask whether Mr. Curtis believes that crime pays or that crime doesn't pay, or that there isn't enough deterrence, that's one

thing. To ask him whether he is qualified for his job, then I think you are just engaging in racial stereotyping. So, Mr. Curtis, do you want to deal with his question on the issues?

Curtis: Well, the programs that work are grassroots. The Argus Community on East 160th in the Bronx is as much front line as you get. They take tough high school dropouts, get them GED degrees and they get them good jobs, for example, as drug counselors. That's very practical. And it works. El Puente in Williamsburg in Brooklyn is run by people who have gotten big awards from the Heinz Foundation for their genius in taking inner-city kids, getting them through school and getting them into good positions in our society. Those are both front line, in the trenches, grassroots programs. And all of our recommendations are based on practical successes.

Lehrer: Dan, do you want to respond to him on the issue?

Dan: Yes, I certainly want to. You notice how he's saying, "these things work." It's almost like a papal encyclical. It's a self fulfilling prophecy. The fact is they don't work. The fact is that the thing that really works is that violent crime is violently reacted to and if that's the only level at which we can succeed....

Lehrer: What do you mean by violently reacted to? The police should break bones?

Dan: Exactly.

Lehrer: Okay, Dan. Now I see where you are coming from. Okay. Thank you anyway. My guest here is Lynn Curtis, President of the Eisenhower Foundation, talking about the report released recently on poverty and crime in America. Our phone number is 212.267.9692. Mr. Curtis, the original Eisenhower Commission in the 60s was headed by Milton Eisenhower, brother of the former President. Give us some of the historical background. What was the context of the creation of the Commission at that time?

Curtis: The context was that Reverend Martin Luther King was assassinated and Senator Robert Kennedy was assassinated. There was rising crime and there was just a lot of fear that we didn't know what was happening. So President Johnson chose to appoint as chairman Milton Eisenhower, who was advisor to his brother, President Eisenhower, and president of Johns Hopkins. The vice chairman of the Commission was former federal judge Leon Higginbotham. It was a very balanced commission in terms of left versus right, Republicans and Democrats. Most of the Commissioners were white men. They reached considerable

consensus on the heart of the issue -- identifying programs that work and replicating them to scale.

Lehrer: Even the Clinton Administration which believes in a root causes approach, has criticized your study as too dismissive of the gains of recent years. What do you say to them?

Curtis: We say to them that is natural. The gains have occurred during the watch of the Clinton Administration. The Administration should defend its success. We think it's been great that crime has been declining over recent years. But America is notoriously a short-run society. In this report, we are saying let's take a snapshot of how things were 30 years ago and how things are now -- and let's see what that suggests for the future. One of the predictions for the future that was made by the Commission in 1969 was that we'd have a City of the Future -- where people would escape further and further into the suburbs. They would drive cars on what the Commission called "sanitized corridors" -- to work in high rise glass buildings that were protected by hi-tech security. There was an editorial writer from the Detroit Free Press who called me after the report came out who said, "That's Detroit -- that's what we did." They had an editorial in the Detroit Free Press that talked about how the prediction came true.

Lehrer: Well inequality and continuing inequality is the major theme of the report, right?

Curtis: Yes, The Commission titled its report, To Establish Justice, to Ensure Domestic Tranquility. In other words, let's reduce crime and fear at the same time we improve justice. That hasn't happened -- thirty years later. Zero tolerance illustrates what has happened in terms of injustice and relations with the minority community in New York. We also have almost 23% of children five and under living in poverty today. We have 1 out of every 3 young African-American males in prison, on probation, or on parole -- right now, as we speak, nationally -- it is roughly 1 out of every 2 in New York City. That is, in part, because of the racial bias in our mandatory minimum sentences for drugs. At the same time, we have rural white communities getting big grants for prisons -- which is sort of an economic development plan to employ rural whites. But overall, the most prestigious study of prison building today, by a panel of the National Academy of Science, concluded that the criminal justice response to crime is at most running in place. So we haven't made much progress in terms of domestic tranquility and we have gone backward in terms of justice.

Lehrer: Let me ask you. If inequality and poverty are as widespread as that, then how can you conclude at the same time that crime is down as a result of prosperity? That would indicate there is prosperity among the poor communities that would be mostly affected by crime.

Curtis: No, we are saying that the crime rate went up a lot in the 80s, when we had hard economic times and it's been going down since roughly, which is roughly the start of the current economic expansion.

Lehrer: We are going to take a short break. Then, we will take a few more calls for Lynn Curtis, President of the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation -- talking about the report released recently, showing that some of the root causes of crime have not been addressed -- even 30 years after the original Eisenhower Commission report was released.

Lehrer: We continue now, for a few more minutes, with Lynn Curtis, President of the Eisenhower Foundation, talking about that group's study on poverty and crime in America. 212.267.NYC is our phone number and Mark, in Brooklyn, you're On The Line.

Mark: Yes, Mr. Curtis, how are you?

Curtis: Fine, how are you?

Mark: I actually am familiar with some of the programs you've mentioned, especially those in the South Bronx, and my biggest problem with Act 1 and Act II at Argus in my dealings with them is that, although they certainly took people that needed training and they did in fact train them as drug counselors, it is a very top down organization. It is run by a fairly small group of white people. They are not from the community. They have had amazing turnover in both trainees and in job placement within that system. So I question whether or not they are just churning the results to meet the statistics the State requires. But more important, I think, working with groups like YouthBuild, which is really interested in taking former convicts, in many cases young men who were gang leaders, who represented the cream of the crop of those neighborhoods -- they were entrepreneurial, they were bright, they were leaders. Training them in a skill, trying to get the unions to allow them to work, since unions are mostly white in this City, is something that actually leads to a life of productivity -- maybe even gets them out of those neighborhoods. I just wondered if a lot of these community-based organizations in the City go into these devastated communities which really haven't benefitted much in the last 8 years from this economic boom which has mostly been centered in Manhattan. And they seem to almost pick people they can help meet the standards of the State and then, you know, there is another 2 people for every 1 person who got off of drugs was trained as a drug counselor, wanting to get into the program. It never reaches any kind of point where there is actually help. There are no jobs being created in those neighborhoods. So I wonder if you could address the top down problem. I am much more interested in the bottom up nature of these communities rebuilding themselves.

Curtis: Well Argus is more a bottom up than you admit. A lot of the people who run the programs at Argus come from the community. I've known them personally for a number of years. YouthBuild is a great program and we mention it in our update. So is, for example, Delancey Street in San Francisco, which was created to employ ex-offenders self sufficiently in their own businesses. It is a real miracle. Mostly the groups that we focus on are bubble up. But they are in a difficult situation -- because they are always underfunded and there is not enough money to replicate to a scale equal to the dimension of the problem. That is why we recommend a national program of more funds raised by the federal government -- funding that is then directly transferred to the local level, not through the states. When it comes to bubble up, there presently is a lack of political will. That is why one of our major recommendations is campaign finance reform -- to level the political playing field. Then, for example, more people like our caller might be elected to Congress -- to argue for bubble up programs.

Lehrer: Mark, congratulations. You've been nominated.

Mark: That's the last place you will find me, sir.

Curtis: Whenever I say that, people always reply that's the last place they want to be. What I am saying is we need more grassroots political representation. We need to look at what happened in Seattle over the World Trade Organization meeting. That was a new start in terms of grassroots, community, frontline groups getting together and organizing. We need new political alliances.

Mark: I would disagree with what happened in Seattle. I would say that what happened in Seattle was a fighting of the last war. If you are interested in the next generation, what I trained my guys to do is to understand everything about the Net and how it works and how it makes what you do far more efficient and far more cost effective. And I would argue that many of the people who were out there protesting -- whether they were the unions or the environmentalists or whomever -- were actually the structured elite who now make a lot of the guys I work with completely unemployable. I can't get any industries in the South Bronx because the environmentalists won't let them build anything on these ground fills. And that's the kind of backwards thinking that left liberalism dead, I thought, in the last 10 or 20 years. What these neighborhoods need are good schools, good jobs and maybe a sense that their lives will lead to something besides drugs, adolescence or teenage births. Poverty creates these problems -- there's no question about it. But when you are growing up in this city and you see the amazing wealth in mid-town Manhattan and then you go home to your rat-infested house, all these stereotypical things are still very true. I question what values you think that this city or this

culture in general has placed on you and whether or not -- unless you are in the great middle class which Bill Clinton has talked about ad nauseam for the last 8 years -- you have a chance of doing anything.

Curtis: We are on the same page, for the most part. To me Seattle represents a re-emergence of grassroots community organizing. There are certainly some groups I don't agree with in Seattle. But Mark and I agree that the right kind of grassroots organizations are important. And I am adding that they need to be funded to scale. I wish you Godspeed because your work with ex-offenders is directly on line. But our politicians are not listening -- so the question becomes how we can change political will. You mentioned organizing through electronic means. I think that is one of the most important venues. We need a lot of community websites that are on-going town meetings that bring people together -- so that they can start expanding the kind of programs you talk about. When he left CBS, Bill Moyers said that we needed to have more pamphleteering, like Tom Payne. Well, the Web can be a form of electronic pamphleteering. I think one of the key questions in the new Millennium is whether community activists can use this Web. Let's start organizing, but let's get sufficient funds so that we can give opportunities to all people in need.

Lehrer: Mark, before you go, I am curious to hear one other thing from you. You said that some of the social programs, including drug rehab, have not succeeded as well as they might have if they had reached out to the people who most need them. What do you think would turn that around? What do you think would make those programs more successful?

Mark: I think you have to stem the flow of needy people. I know that is a simple thing to say, but it really amounts to why people turn to drugs. You can say there are addictive personalities everywhere -- but there are far more people who act on those addictive personalities in the poorer areas of the city. One of the points I want to make is that it is really a matter of self esteem and how the culture, this city included, values you. You see hysteria when somebody gets clubbed over the head in Midtown. And when somebody gets raped and it's a Black male suspect. It is a trite stereotype. I certainly didn't think that this City has gotten over it -- because this city is stuck in the past. But I think that most neighborhoods in most areas in this city are interested in helping each other and helping their neighbors and helping themselves. I think that, for instance, drug treatment is clearly something this country has never a priority to -- accessible drug treatment and I don't mean methadone. I mean something that would give you an end gain at getting yourself clean -- a possibility that your life could be better. You know, the guy who called up and said that these drug dealers are showing that crime pays -- trust me, I know guys who drove those cars and shot each other up long before the cops ever got to shoot at them. And they are the most contrite and intellectual

people that I've met in this city in a long time. Far more of those than people on the upper Eastside.

Curtis: I agree. Seventy percent of our national war on drugs budget is for law enforcement and only thirty percent for prevention and treatment. In a lot of European countries, it is just the opposite -- seventy percent on prevention and treatment and thirty percent on enforcement. At least we need a better balance in this country.

Mark: And I would say, Mr. Curtis, one thing; I applaud your Boston model. I know the Mayor of Boston very well. He is a man with his heart in the right place, who I think has been brought around by parole officers' work with first time offenders. That is a city that has really restructured itself. Boston is a city that obviously has a very deep and long history of racism embedded in it and it still continues to this day. It has actually used the benefits of this latest economic boom and high tech and bio tech in financial services to really feed neighborhoods that have long been neglected.

Lehrer: Mark, I've got to run. Thank you very much for your call. Maybe Lynn Curtis, President of the Eisenhower Foundation, will also start Drug Rehab Counselors for Congress. More drug rehab counselors, fewer lawyers. Maybe that's what we need...

Curtis: You know what Shakespeare said about lawyers.

Lehrer: Yea, but we don't want do that. One more call. Rich in Manhattan. You are on the line .

Rich: Gentlemen. First of all, I admired that last caller, Mark. He really had it together on the issues. However, I am from the upper Eastside. Mr. Curtis, when you use the word "respond" in describing the way your institution deals with these problems, it can sometimes be misleading to the public. It takes years to get the statistics together and dissect them and really figure out what's happening. It poses a big problem to organizations like your own -- the public is demanding immediate response. I believe it was the ex-Lt. Governor Betsy McCoy Ross who came up with a 3-point plan -- intervention, education and rehabilitation. It takes a lot of money and it takes a lot of manpower to make something like that go.

Lehrer: And I will tell you that there are not a lot of people invoking the name of Betsy McCoy Ross these days. But Lynn Curtis, one reaction to him and then we are out of time.

Curtis: We already know what works. One of the things we've learned in the last 30 years is which programs work and which don't. What we need

to be is very practical. Let's stop doing what doesn't work very well and let's reinvest the money in what works, but on a scale equal to the dimensions of the problem.

Lehrer: Lynn Curtis, President of the Eisenhower Foundation and its recent report on the root causes of crime. He reminds us and the report reminds us that the recent drop in crime has only taken us back to the levels that the original Eisenhower Commission was so concerned about when it was put together by President Johnson 30 years ago. Mr. Curtis, thank you very much for joining us.

Curtis: Thank you for having me.