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Poverty and Crime Prevention

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The recent crime report from the Milton Eisenhower people spurred a lot of talk on the subject, but not enough on smothered questions.

The Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation did an update on a landmark study by the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. This study was fired up by President Johnson after the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968. What it asserted, essentially, is that the high crime rate in the United States is traceable to poverty, disparities in income, poor housing and joblessness.

So 30 years go by and a great deal has happened, most conspicuously a general elation over the reduced crime rate, especially in homicides.

Elliott Currie, most prominently associated with the new report, is a criminologist with the University of California's legal-studies program. He does a pretty neat job of sobering the exultation of those who feel that the fight against crime is substantially won. It is down, in the past seven years, buy to conclude that a new age has arrived is on the order of nothing, a year after Pompeii was destroyed, that casualties from volcanos had sharply declined. Today's crime rate "we would have said is a disaster when we went to work on that crime report 30 years ago."

A key question of the commission was: Would you feel safe walking at night one mile distant from your house? Back then, 31 percent said they'd be afraid to venture that far off. Now the figure is 41 percent.

The commission seeks to explain a lot of things. One of them is that we have put in jail a great many people who might commit crimes. This, they seem to be saying, distorts the true picture - though one wonders why. If John Jones is in jail rather than at liberty, he can't commit crimes as regularly as he otherwise might. What the commission is in effect arguing is that too many people are sent to jail rather than nurtured to stay away from jail, and education in the ways of avoiding jail. Yes, and should we spend more time on the Ten Commandments when children are young?

The commission goes on to remark another anomaly. In the 1980s there was a sharp rise in crime attributable, it transpired, to the wide use of crack cocaine. This drug fostered both an insatiable appetite for more of the same and a criminal determination to satisfy that appetite. The crack frenzy ebbed in one of those cyclical turns not easily accounted for. True, some crack users ended up in jail, but others either went off drugs or off that particular drug. The result was a downturn in crime, affecting statistics in ways not welcomed by the Pollyannas who thought that the reduction was a tribute to better law enforcement.

But we get quickly to the chief enthusiasm of the Milton Eisenhower commission, which is to deplore disparities in wealth.

In this, the authors have a problem. Thirty years ago, the commission was blaming poverty for the high crime rate. Poverty persists, but we are living, of course, in a historic boom, and one register of the commission's findings has to acknowledge that the reduction in crime has to have something to do with the flourishing economy. The joblessness of 30 years ago is not a feature of life when only 4 percent are unemployed. The commission remarks the increase in firearms (double what they then were, rising to 200 million today), but comes to rest on: inequality. Crime has been exacerbated by a "vast and shameful inequality in income, wealth and opportunity." The report notes that more than one-quarter of U.S. children live in poverty.

What is missing in the report is incisive attention to the causes of poverty. They are several, but one is pronounced, and it has very little to do with the kind of poverty one associates with "The Grapes of Wrath." The principal causes of poverty in the United States is the rise in the rate of illegitimate births. The commission might usefully have told how many of the children who live in poverty live with a single parent. Having discovered that that is the majority, the commission might have remarked that nearly 70 percent of black Americans are born to unmarried mothers, 18 percent of white Americans, and that the prospects not only of poverty, but also of crime and illiteracy, rise by a factor of 600 percent in single-parent households.

The new rich people, silicon millionaires, may be guilty of shameful behavior, but the commission doesn't tell us just what it is that they are doing to increase poverty or to incite crime. It is true that we have doubled the prison population, true also that one-third of young blacks go to jail, certainly true that this is both sad and deplorable, but unconnected with public policy of the type that permits entrepreneurs to profit from their work.

The Milton Eisenhower people have for two generations struggled to make the same old point, which is that the welfare state should expand. They leave out the question: How is it that since the welfare state began expanding, all the ends they sought - better education, better behavior - have been undermined?

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