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## In a Reasonable Culture, Unreasonable Violence

by Dwight Lewis

And we thought America was becoming a much better place to live.

But since the late 1960s:

- Violent crime is up 40% in big cities.
- The number of people possessing firearms is up 120%.

In the past 10 years:

- The incarceration of women is up fourfold.
- One of two urban African-American young men is in the criminal justice system.
- More mentally ill people are in prison than in hospitals.
- There's more money being spent on prisons than higher education.

These are the findings in a 30-year update to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, formed in the late 1960s after the assassinations of Senator Robert F. Kennedy and the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.

Frustrating, right?

"One of my mentors, Judge Leon Higginbotham, who served as the commission's vice chairman, used to tell me at some points in history some people just have to keep the flame burning, and that's as much as you can do," said Lynn A. Curtis, president of the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation.

"Personally, it's a challenge and it's always pushing the rock uphill."

The Eisenhower Foundation has carried on the work of the violence commission and recently released its 30-year update.

"Deep-rooted violence in a highly fragmented and unequal society cannot be reliably contained by criminal justice policies -- even extreme ones," it says, in part. "The experience of the past 30 years has proven the commission right, indeed more dramatically than anyone could have expected."

As you read the update, you find yourself asking why.

Why, for instance, does America's rate of violence remain much higher than most other industrialized nations, as in the 1960s?

Why is it nearly one quarter of all young American children live in poverty?

Why have prisons become our nation's substitute for effective public policies on crime, drugs, mental illness, housing, poverty, and employment of the hardest to employ?

"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 from their homes to hospital wards," the Eisenhower Foundation's 30-year update says. "And in a reasonable culture, we would not say we won the war against crime just because we moved a lot of criminals from the community into prison cells."

But the report offers "good news." We now have "both the knowledge and the materials resources" to fight back.

"Since the late 1960s and based on scientific evaluations, we have learned a great deal about what doesn't work and about what does work to ensure domestic tranquility at the same time we establish justice."

So how do we accomplish that?

"We've got to do a better job of communicating what works and what doesn't work, and we've got to get our political leaders to respond," Curtis told me. "That's why it's also important for better organizing at the grassroots level to get our politicians to change or for voters to get them out of office."

"Right now, we have a \$1-one vote democracy instead of a one-person-one-vote democracy, and we've got to change that."

"We haven't made as much progress as we should have during the last 30 years because the economic system runs the political system."

"Unless we get big money out of the political system and level the political playing field, it's really hard to imagine that we will get to replicate what works to scale."

Is it that hard to imagine, especially if we can get more people to keep the flame burning? As Curtis said, "Americans always think in terms of the big picture and fulfilling the dream."

The big picture here should be, as it was with the violence commission in 1969, that we join together to establish justice for every American and that we insure domestic tranquility for this nation.

Without doing that, the "City of the Future" will be as bleak as it is today.