

## Crime Rates

It's a turf war. Liberal criminologists (almost all criminologists), fearing a hardening of the Canadian soul, are shrieking at the public in bold headlines: "Safe to free lifers;" and "Jails overcrowded;" and, "Crime rate reduced. Don't believe it. And forget the short term.

The news hasn't yet broken through our genteel national consciousness that based on the number of violent crimes per 100,000 population, the rate for Canada-the-good is up about 30% since the 1960s. According to the University of Ottawa's Professor Irvin Waller, Director General of the International Centre for the Prevention of Crime (ICPC), our rate is two or three times greater than most European countries, and nine times that of Japan.

As for the number of people in jail per 100,000 population, the figures are: USA 426; Canada 113; U.K. 97; Germany 85; Italy 60; Sweden 56; Netherlands 40; Japan 40. Yet even this is a strange comparison to an America which, in terms of crime, cannot be understood unless broken down into black and white sub-groups, or nations - which gets criminologists into a pickle. Take murder, for example.

The U.S. rate per 100,000 is 9.3, while Canada's is 2.5. But splitting produces a white U.S. rate of 5.1, and a black rate of 43.3! Against only white America we don't look quite as good. And Canada has a similar, hushed-up situation: our native murder rate is about 25 per 100,000 (but with insignificant effect on overall rates due to low Indian population.)

With a minority status of 12% of U.S. population, more than half of all U.S. prisoners are black, and native people in both countries are way over-represented in prisons. This is a time-bomb ticking louder by the year as even liberal policymakers begin to wonder aloud how such people could be hardy enough to survive slavery, war, oppression, depression, reserves, discrimination, and poverty, then fall apart before the altruistic ministrations of the welfare state.

But regardless, we can be certain that most Canadian stakeholders in the justice system will be looking for solutions in the wrong places, based on their support for a self-serving theory of crime. In their comprehensive book *Crime and Human Nature* (1985), Harvard Professors James Q. Wilson and Richard Herrnstein argued that for the last two centuries in the Western democracies there have been two conflicting - and irreconcilable - theories of crime causation.

The hard-headed view, as I call it, was made famous by Thomas Hobbes in the 17th. Century. He described the human species as most notable for its ability to calculate personal cost-benefit decisions, and thus to seek pleasure, or avoid pain. This view says the function of punishment, is "to outweigh the profit from crime." It is underpinned by the belief our good or evil actions are decided personally.

On this theory, swift and appropriate punishment prevents greater pain to the community, and

is intended, not for vengeance (as critics of punishment consistently, and quite wrongly say), but to incapacitate, to deter and, most of all, to right the moral imbalance of the community caused by crime. A debt is owed by the criminal to society.

The contrary, soft-headed view was widely promoted during the Romantic period surrounding the turn of the 18th. century, by William Godwin, and the poets Wordsworth, Blake, Shelley, and others in England - and of course by Rousseau in France - who felt that all human beings are born naturally good, but are quickly corrupted by society and its institutions. Modern Encounter-group therapies, seeking the goodness within, and fired by self-esteem, are based on the same beliefs. The cure for crime therefore, is not to punish criminals, but to improve society so that human potential can be unleashed. Because the cause is outside us, the emphasis falls on welfare. On this view, a debt is owed by society to the criminal.

One of the main arguments we hear from supporters of the soft-headed view is that jails are ineffective, and too expensive for society. Now it costs about \$25,000 a year to keep a U.S. prisoner in jail, and about \$48,000 for a Canadian prisoner (compared to about \$8,000 for one year of parole). But before we say the economic objection is a good one, we have to ask if we have posed the right question? I think not. The proper question would be, not 'What does jail cost?' But rather, 'What is the cost to society of not jailing criminals'; of having them on the loose? In short, what are the true net costs of crime?

To answer this, the Rand Corporation prepared a detailed study, "Making Confinement Decisions" (1989), for the U.S. Justice Department to analyze the net cost of crime to society. This study, based on the precise histories of 2,190 felons in four different states, discovered that the average felon, while out of prison, commits an average of 187 crimes per year, at an average per-crime cost of (U.S.) \$2,300 per felon, or \$430,000 per year. (Some committed 600 felonies per year!)

If you subtract the cost of a year in jail from this total, you end up with a net cost of crime per felon, per year, of about \$400,000 dollars. It costs society ten times more NOT to lock such prisoners up! We need as good a study on our own felons so that we can make the same reasonable calculation.

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