An unchallenged crisis: the curious disappearance of crime as a public issue in the United States

Elliott Currie dissects the 'deep and continuing crisis' within the American criminal justice system.

Seen from the point of view of the criminologist, the United States would appear to be in a state of deep and continuing crisis when it comes to both crime and the state of our criminal justice system. We rank as far and away the greatest incarcerator in the world, with an imprisonment rate five times that of our nearest Western European competitor. 17 per cent of black American men now living have spent some time in a state or federal prison. Spending to maintain what are often swollen, volatile prisons with substandard health care and minimal re-entry services crowds out other public expenditure, at a time when budget cutbacks are crippling the most essential public services.

Meanwhile, we maintain a homicide rate several times higher than that of every other advanced industrial society – a rate that in many places has been increasing, or at best stagnating, for several years. Two major cities – Newark, New Jersey and Orlando, Florida – recently achieved, if that is the word, the highest rates of homicide *ever* in their history. In the last few years, the city of Philadelphia has suffered more homicides than the entire country of Australia. At last count, a young black man in the state of Louisiana was more likely to die by homicide than a young man in El Salvador.

We are mired, in short, in a crisis on two fronts. We continue to suffer a stunning level of serious violent crime, while simultaneously enduring a penal system that is now bursting at the seams and is, in many states, profoundly dysfunctional. But what's remarkable is that this twin crisis has not provoked the kind of public response that might be expected. Neither the fiscal and human costs of our swollen penal system, or the ongoing tragedy of violence among America's youth, rank as significant issues in national politics. Neither appeared more than marginally in our recent presidential election campaigns: and both have been simply 'off the table', at least on the national level, as subjects of urgent political concern. There is a remarkable 'disconnect' between the reality of our situation and the way it is perceived, and discussed, on the political and media level, when it is discussed at all – an odd sort of complacency in the face of what would seem to constitute a social disaster of massive proportions.

Pundits cheerfully declare that crime is 'no longer an issue'. There has even been a resurgence, in opinion pages, of the idea that 'prison works' – at a time when our prison population continues to rise while violent crime rages essentially out of control in many of our inner cities. In the sober pages of newspapers like the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* you could read confident paeans to the success of our national experiment in mass incarceration in reducing crime.

How do we account for this paradox? I think it has many sources, but I would like to focus on three of them – all of which are related.

One source of the disconnect involves a quintessentially American failure of comparative vision. In the United States we rarely compare our own social experience with that of other societies around the world – with respect to crime or anything else. And so we tend to regard our crime rate as part of the landscape – a taken-for-granted aspect of life. We think that since crime is lower in America than it was 15 years ago, we are surely doing things right. Leaving aside the fact that the much touted decline in crime since the early 1990s in the United States largely ended seven or eight years ago, we ignore that it has also left us with what are still the highest levels of serious violent crime in the advanced industrial world – levels more reminiscent of parts of the Third World or the former Soviet Union than those of the other advanced industrial countries.

That comparative myopia is abetted by the routine misuse of crime statistics. We see this most clearly in what I have come to call the 'dangerous Denmark' argument. For example, you could have read recently in the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper an opinion piece by the noted conservative thinker James Q Wilson insisting that rates of robbery and assault were far worse in countries like Denmark and Sweden, among others, than in the United States. Wilson was using this purported empirical fact to argue against calls for more stringent gun controls in the United States: Europeans who self-righteously criticised the United States for having minimal gun regulations, Wilson said, were on very shaky ground, since in fact their crime problem was considerably worse than ours.

This kind of claim has become common in American discussions of crime, and its implications are significant: for if you accept these figures, then there is no crisis to explain. American rates of serious violence, suddenly, are no longer an outlier within the advanced industrial societies.

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Leaving aside that the homicide rate in these countries is miniscule compared to ours, this sort of claim requires the uncritical acceptance of notoriously weak comparative data – notably from victimisation surveys, which systematically understate the problem of serious crime in countries where it is worst, including the United States. Victim surveys severely undercount the kinds of people who suffer violence the most – including poor people generally, the homeless, people who are themselves involved in criminal activity, street youth and others who are proportionately a much greater share of the population in the United States than in other advanced industrial societies.

When we look at measures that are less distorted by this problem, like the homicide rate or the level of admission to hospitals for serious injuries resulting from violence, the picture of a fearsome Denmark crumbles. But many people – even many criminologists – continue to grant these arguments a level of credibility that their evidence base does not warrant. And this means that highly distorted views of America's violence problem continue to influence how we think about crime and criminal justice policy in the United States.

A second reason for the remarkable political invisibility of America's twin crisis is the eclipse of alternative visions of policy on the political level. One reason that crime has ceased to be a pressing issue in the national discussion or in national electoral campaigns is that both of our major parties now essentially operate on the same fundamental assumptions about what is possible and desirable when it comes to crime policy – a relatively recent development that accelerated during the 1990s, as part of the larger rightward shift of the Democratic Party, which encompassed not just its approach to crime but also to welfare, international trade and other issues.

So when commentators say that crime is 'no longer an issue' in America, they do not, of course, really mean that it is no longer an issue for, say, the citizens of Philadelphia or Detroit. What they mean is that crime – as well as the dreadful state of the prisons – has been taken off the table as a subject of partisan controversy, that it no longer has a political home in one party or the other. That success in taking the crime issue off the table, indeed, has been considered by many people in the Democratic Party as a political *triumph*. It means that the issue of 'crime in the streets' – as it was called back in the late 1960s when we elected a Republican president, Richard Nixon, in part because of public fears of crime – is no longer the property of the Republican Party and doesn't gain them any particular electoral advantage anymore. But it also means that any systematic alternative to the failed policies of the past generation has disappeared from the political process, because it has *also* lost any effective political home.

And that reflects the third, and perhaps the most important, reason why we are seeing that paradoxical complacency about the state of crime and justice. It is that crime in its most serious forms, as well as the adverse impact of mass incarceration, has become increasingly concentrated among people – and in places – that tend to be relatively invisible to most better-off Americans and almost wholly lacking in significant political influence or even voice. Last year, 67 per cent of people who lived in Philadelphia thought that crime was the number one problem facing the city. In national opinion polls the proportion of the general population who feel that way is generally in the single digits. Violent crime is increasingly an urgent issue, mainly for some cities with large minority populations and high levels of poverty and endemic joblessness. But that does not make it national news.

This compartmentalisation of concern is compounded because so many of the people in these communities – whether victims or simply frightened local residents – do not even vote, much less represent a potent political constituency. Increasingly, indeed, the victims and offenders are often the *same* people, since a high proportion of the victims of serious violence are themselves people with a criminal record or who are now involved in the drugs, guns and crime nexus. Again, that is one reason why they tend not to show up in some of our standard *measures* of violent crime, which makes matters look better than they are. But it is also a reason why we tend, as a society, to *care* less about the stubbornness of violent crime. To put it bluntly, violence is increasingly seen as 'their' problem, not 'ours' – and it accordingly falls far down on our scale of national priorities.

These three factors help to explain why, despite the failure of a generation's worth of crime policy, the need for an alternative vision has as yet gained little public visibility and has minimal traction in the political process. Putting that vision firmly on the national agenda will require a new political leadership that is willing to name the crisis, to confront it openly and honestly in a way that it has not been confronted in the last 30 and more years, to acknowledge the bipartisan failure of current policy, and to be bold enough to envision solutions on a scale and of a type that have not been subjects of serious political discussion for decades. Could this be possible under a new administration? President Obama has said very little so far about this twin crisis of stubborn violence and a dysfunctional and morally troubling justice system. But he has come into office with such an extraordinary mandate for change, and with such an unprecedented army of aroused and committed supporters – including great numbers of black Americans who had never voted before and were thoroughly alienated from the formal political system altogether – that there may now be a genuine window of opportunity for a new direction, in this realm as in others. What we will make of it, only time will tell. ■

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Reference

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