Open Lecture

Crime And Crime Control Strategies in the United States

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First, let me offer my thanks to the International Christian University and its staff for inviting me here to be a Visiting Researcher. In particular, let me thank Professor Y. Okudaira for encouraging my application here and Professor T. Nishio for providing support and coordination of my visit.

Despite the title, this presentation is not designed to be a comprehensive statement on the topic of crime and crime control but rather my selected observations on the subject.

In recent years the United States has continued to build the largest prison system in the world and this continuing increase flies in the face of a downturn in the crime rate. As Professor Elliott Currie (1998) notes in his book, *Crime and Punishment in America*, the United States "remains far and away the most violent advanced industrial society on earth." To quote from Currie's (1998) provocative and incisive analysis:

> By the early 1990s, 29 percent of black men could expect to spend some time in a state or federal prison during their lifetime. Yet young black men in the United States were more than one hundred times as likely to die by violence as young men in Britain or France. In California, the prison population has jumped sevenfold in less than two decades, and a shoplifter with two previous convictions for burglary can be sent to prison for life. But in 1997, four out of ten residents of the city of Los Angeles

reported that they personally knew someone who had been killed or seriously injured in a violent attack. We imprison our citizens at roughly six times the English rate. But in 1995, there were more homicides in Los Angeles, a city of about 3.5 million people, than in all of England and Wales, with 50 million. (p.3)

In recent days here in Japan, *The Japan Times* (1999):

The number of U.S. adults behind bars or under police supervision last year reached a record 5.9 million offenders, almost 3 percent of the adult population, the Justice Department reported Sunday.

The figure, in a report issued by the department's Bureau of Justice Statistics, means that about one out of every 34 adults are in the nation's prisons and jails, or on probation or parole for various acts.

As some of us have come to realize, the United States is not "winning the war" on crime as the media has so loudly proclaimed. It is true, as Professor Currie and others have noted, there has been a welcomed downturn in crime over the past five years in the United States. But that decline comes off a very high rate of homicide, robberies, assaults and various property crimes. Nonetheless, these modest declines from very high rates have been trumpeted as though the United States has practically solved its crime problem. Criminologists and scholars have joined the hyped media in proclaiming that we are well on our way to getting a handle on the crime problem. These experts have continued to perpetuate a false picture of what is occurring. This distorted view states that crime continues to ravage the United States because of an ineffective justice system that is far too lenient on crime and that while imprisonization is costly, it is cheaper than allowing offenders to murder, rape and rob defenseless citizens. The response according to this misguided theory is to greatly increase imprisonization and "build our way out of

the crime problem." (Currie, 1998)

Other approaches, involving improving health care for children, crime prevention programs, and efforts to reduce poverty have all been discredited according to this line of reasoning. True enough, some efforts have not always yielded the desired or hoped for benefits. I noted this directly in the 1960's as a counselor in a half-way house for ex-offenders in Brooklyn, New York. The program was one of the first federal half-way houses set up by the Kennedy administration to assist non-violent youthful offenders returning from prison. It was a 90 day program, and although some of the "graduates" become repeat offenders, others went on to become productive. It was, I suppose, an example of the idealism of the 1960's—that we could make a difference in terms of helping offenders readjust to their communities. Today, we're reverting to chain gangs, backbreaking labor in prisons and the expansion of "three strikes and your out" laws. Those states that have drafted "three strikes and your out" laws incarcerate offenders for life upon being convicted on a third serious offense.

Again, my view of the role of prison is in stark contrast with American public opinion that wishes to make prison life harsher and more punitive. My own views, as a psychologist and criminal justice scholar, include the notion that once an individual has been incarcerated, it's in everyone's interest (regardless of political philosophy) that the offender emerge from prison a better person with more skills that provides the released person with a prospect of successful reintegration into the community. In the early 1990's I was hired by a New York state college to teach an introductory psychology class inside the Federal Correctional Institution in Danbury, Connecticut. It was part of an overall academic higher education program designed to allow inmates to work toward a college degree. As a major television news program discovered (CBS's "60 Minutes"), this was a controversial type of effort in which many citizens complained about prison inmates getting a "free" education. Many U.S. citizens have a provincial and unenlightened approach to such matters.

Increasingly, we use prisons to solve our problems—many states estimate it costs $35,000 per year to incarcerate an offender—as much or more than paying for a year at a top notch University like Harvard or Stanford University. We can shape our justice system but we won't get there if we accept the attitude that "we're solving this. We're getting a handle on this."

Again, Professor Currie (1998) stated it well in his text:

> As with incarceration, it is only when we look overseas that we can grasp the full meaning of the trends in youth violence in America. In 1987, the homicide death rate among American men aged fifteen to twenty-four, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), was 22 per 100,000. By 1994 it had risen by two-thirds—to 37 per 100,000. To put those quite abstract numbers into some perspective, consider that the comparable rate for British youth in 1994 was 1.0 per 100,000. By the mid-1990's, in other words, a young American male was 37 times as likely to die by deliberate violence as his English counterpart—and 12 times as likely as a Canadian youth, 20 times as likely as a Swede, 26 times as likely as a young Frenchman and over 60 times as likely as a Japanese. (p.24)

Incidentally, some of the fastest declines in crime are in the Northeast—where incarceration rates are somewhat lower, but in the South, imprisonization rates are higher, but they appear to have not significantly impacted crime rates—they are some of the highest in the nation.

Why Crime Has Gone Down Modestly

First, probably the most important factor in reducing crime is the eight years of economic boom in the U. S. Job gains have made a huge difference and improved short term the crime situation for Black teenagers. This is a fragile situation though and a

recession could mean that a "last hired first fired" approach might prevail in which the previously unemployed minorities and Blacks who were particularly vulnerable to crime would be out of jobs in the same impoverished inner city neighborhoods and once again become more disposed to crime.

Second, the decline of the crack cocaine epidemic has significantly reduced the violent tendencies of those addicts. Data from the National Institute of Justice supports this idea in terms of arrested offenders in various cities who test positive for cocaine and that those numbers are far lower than in the late 1980's. Therefore, these factors along with some little noticed crime prevention programs have resulted in a temporary reduction in crime. Once again though, it wouldn't be hard to imagine that some of these conditions could easily change and accelerated crime rates could return.

In closing, we can in the short term see a small reduction in crime rates by continuing to build prisons or we can use those same vast economic resources to provide programs that provide better health care, reduce poverty through employment, increase literacy, offer drug treatment to drug offenders (instead of incarceration), and enhance educational opportunities for inner-city impoverished youth.

References

Currie, Elliott (1998) *Crime and Punishment in America*, New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company.

The Japan Times (1999) "Record Number of Americans Behind Bars", from Reuters news agency, August 22, 1999, p.2.