The Saturation Point in Crime

By Walter A. Lunden

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Whether statisticians, penologists, lawyers, judges, chiefs of police, or those in high place in and out of the temple of bureaucracy agree or not, there is a belief abroad in the country that crime has been and is on the increase in the nation. At the recent hearings on Crime in the District of Columbia, Senator Robert Kennedy stated, "We have been talking about the problem (crime) in the District of Columbia. This committee has been aroused by it. People living in the District of Columbia are aroused by it. . . . I think it is an emergency problem here. . . . I think we have to hold out some real major hope to our young people."

Abraham Lincoln once said that what people think is so, is more important than what actually is so. If facts agree with what people think, then plans and programs may be carried out without much difficulty. If, however, facts do not agree with the thinking of the people, it is too bad for the facts.

From the days of the Great Depression of the 1930's to date, the people

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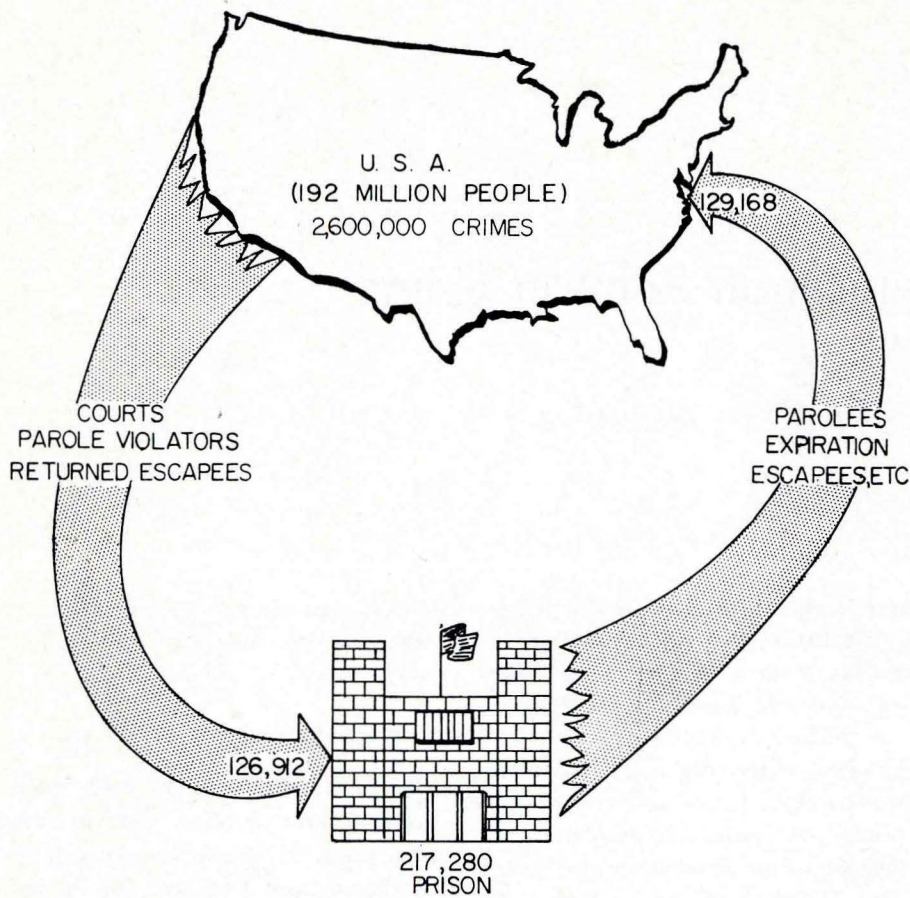
have been listening to many voices for a solution to mounting criminality. For a time there were the slum clearance and better housing advocates. Then came the psychological clinicians extracting and measuring the IQ scores. Close behind these followed the psychiatrists who attempted to piece together the "fractured chunks" of personality they found in their clients on the couches in their offices. With all this, there has been no abatement in crime. In the 1950's and the 1960's it appears that the Golden Age of Crime has arrived. Currently state and federal governments are building multimillion dollar prisons that almost out-do the Hanging Gardens of Babylon in the hope that better institutional treatment may solve the crime problem. Los Angeles County in California has just completed a $5,177,000 jail to house 800 women felons. The same county has opened a central jail for 3,323 men at a cost of $13,625,000, which is the world's largest jail. The new Florida State Prison at Raiford has just been completed at a cost of $7,594,455 for 3,381 inmates. The Lebanon Correctional Institution in Warren County, Ohio, is one of six institutions in the state to house more than 10,000 felons costing about $12,000,000.

With all these plans and programs the many-headed Hydra of crime still appears in the subways, haunts the hallways of high-riser apartment houses, and stalks the streets after dusk, not to mention the public parks.

THE CURRENT PICTURE

The public is patient and long-suffering but there does come a saturation point in criminality as well as in other things. Facts are known but facts alone do not move a people, if they are to be moved. Is it enough to know that 192,000,000 people are responsible for 2,600,000 crimes in 1964, which was 13 per cent more than the previous year? Of all crimes known to the police in the nation, only 25 per cent were cleared by an arrest. Without becoming too involved in details, the reader may look at the meager facts shown in the Flow Chart. In 1963, 126,912 men and women entered the respective prisons in the country. This number is less than one-fifth of all the felons appearing in the criminal courts in the nation. From where did these felons come? Of the total 126,912 offenders, 87,824 came directly from the criminal courts and 18,909 entered as parole violators. The remaining 20,179 were returned "escapees" and others ordered into custody by courts. In passing, it should be noted that about half of the 18,909 parole violators broke their parole within less than nine months after release on parole. These 126,912 men and women constitute the "human crop" of felons

U. S. A.
(192 MILLION PEOPLE)
2,600,000 CRIMES

129,168

COURTS
PAROLE VIOLATORS
RETURNED, ESCAPEES

PAROLEES
EXPIRATION
ESCAPEES,ETC

126,912

217,280
PRISON

The Circular Route, 1963.

produced by the 192,000,000 people in the nation.

By the end of the year in 1963, the federal and state prisons in the nation contained 217,280 felons. This number does not include the thousand detained in the 3,000 county jails and certain of the county workhouses in the states.

At this point, the reader may return to the Flow Chart. In 1963, these same prisons mentioned above which had received 126,912 felons released a total of 129,168 offenders to be returned to the respective communities from which they had come. Who were these inmates? Of the total, 66,466 were released conditionally with 59,061 on parole and 38,584 unconditionally with 34,906 by expiration of sentence. The remaining number of 24,118 either escaped, died in prison (747), were executed (21), or released by some court order. Data are not available as to how much time these 129,168 felons had served when

released, but in 1960 the average time spent in prison was twenty-eight months or about two years and four months.

THE TRAFFIC OF FELONS

Now let the reader add together the number of felons entering the prisons (126,912) and the number leaving (129,168) the same institutions. The total makes up 256,080 felons who passed in and out of the correctional facilities in one year. Next let the reader take these 250,000 offenders and consider that in ten years a total of 2,500,000 offenders will have passed through the gates of the prisons in the nation. Here again it should be repeated that this number does not include the thousands of felons passing in and out of the county and city jails in the country.

Has the nation arrived at the saturation point in crime? How many felons can or will a nation stand before

the thinking stops and action begins? President Johnson asked for action when he called attention to the crime problem in the District of Columbia. "Crime will not wait while we pull it up by the roots."

THE PROBLEM OF CONTROLS

Basically the problem of crime prevention hinges on the control of a population. Or placed in another context, how does society control individuals? Fundamentally, people have been controlled in one of three ways: (1) ethical compulsion, (2) force or power domination, or (3) by legal imperatives. Different societies have used one or another of these methods to varying degrees depending on the country and social conditions.

Ethical Compulsion

This is one of the oldest methods which has been used where individuals are bound together by strong ties of place, habits, and group solidarity. Some primitive peoples and others bound together by deep religious convictions have used this method. These societies established a built-in method of self-control in such a manner that a person does what he does without external coercion or force. Custom dictates what is right, people know what is right and do what is right without question because each is bound to the group by strong ties of sympathetic relationships and regard for the welfare of all, much as in a family.

Force or Power Domination

This is the method used in the police state under the authority of a dictator. People have no choice but to conform to standards not of their own making. Those who do not comply suffer serious consequences of imprisonment, banishment, or death. In face of the rising crime rates in Germany after World War I and in the earlier 1930's, Adolph Hitler and his Storm Troopers used this method of controlling the people in Germany.

In periods of extreme disorder, people may accept such programs for a time but not for too long. This type of control in many cases follows after a revolution.

Legal Imperatives

This method combines elements of ethical compulsion and the sanctions of the law enforced by a limited police power. Under this system, the people through their representatives make their own laws which have grown out of past experiences. In other words, sovereign power rests with the people and not with the dictator. Under the legal imperative, people know the law which they obey without force or threat, except for those few who willingly choose to violate the law.

Each of the above methods of controlling people may operate under given conditions. Where people have a strong ethical bond, ethical compulsion controls individuals. Moral persuasion supports the strong consensus within the group. In ancient India, a man paid his debts not because he feared the police but because his fellow citizens would turn their backs upon him if he did not.

Force or power domination controls a people as long as the dictator can maintain a strong loyal capital or bodyguard equipped with enough weapons to force compliance to his orders. Disobedience of any kind is dealt with quickly without question of what is right or wrong because the Man on Horseback decides what is "right." There have been a number of monarchs, sultans, kings, emperors, and dictators who have used this method of controlling the citizenry. Time, however, has a way of disposing of the Man on Horseback because power soon corrupts those who administer the program.

In general, republics or democracies have been controlled by the legal imperative method. In spite of this, these societies must operate on certain basic principles. If or when the people fail to accept the laws or if the laws made by the lawmakers do not conform to the basic beliefs of the people, disrespect arises and violations occur. If or when individuals refuse to accept responsibility for their acts, such individuals soon disregard the rights of others. Furthermore, if the lawmakers become too far removed from the people who have elected them, a breach soon arises. It is a wise lawmaker who "keeps in touch with the people back home" and the representative "must keep his fences in good repair."

THE QUESTION

What do the three above-described methods of social control have to do with crime? Much. As long as one or another of the three types of control maintains order and civil obedience, and crime remains within normal limits, society prevails. If, however, civil and criminal disorders go beyond what may be considered as normal or a reasonable amount, then the system of control breaks down and gives way to some other means. When ethical compulsion no longer controls a people and the accepted norms of conduct are no longer followed, the Strong Man on Horseback usually arises in order to "save the country." Similarly, if or when the legal imperatives of a democracy or a republic no longer maintain order and security, the people usually look for some other means of control, which is in most cases the dictator. The point in time when crimes increase beyond what the people think is proper is the saturation point. It is highly probable that under such conditions citizens may take the "law into their own hands" or organize local Vigilante Committees in an effort to stem the tide of criminality. If this does not occur, those in authority may assume extraordinary powers, declare martial law, and force the people into obedience. In general, it can be said that if or when the legal imperatives within a country weaken, the police powers of the government expand. If this is not or cannot be done, civil disorder leads to mob violence.

At what point in time and civic conditions have the American people arrived? Do recent expansions of the police power in the state by use of the national guard and in federal government by use of federal marshals reveal a breakdown in society, or is this a temporary attempt on the part of the officials to preserve the peace until such time as conditions can once more right themselves? Maybe it is time to ask: How much crime can a nation stand without serious consequences? Has the saturation point been reached?   ★★★