

Unemployment and Crime

An Examination of Early Clichés about Causes of Criminality

By Walter A. Lunden

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Rising criminality in the midst of prosperity within the nation presents serious issues to the American way of life. Citizens everywhere are troubled about the increase in violent crime, the huge volume of criminal cases in courts, and the ever increasing commitments to the prisons in the respective states. In addition, recent large scale scandals in financial transactions have added to the general concern about illegal practices in and out of government.

CRIMES AND THE POPULATION

From 1957 to 1961 the total number of people in the nation increased 7 per cent (see Chart 1). In the same years, however, the number of serious crimes advanced 34 per cent or almost five times more than the number of people. From 1958 to 1963 crimes rose 40 per cent and the population 8 per cent. Some may think that the sharp rise in crime has been due to the "population explosion" but, when the figures are reduced to a rate per 100,000 inhabitants, the rate in 1961 was 25 per cent higher than in 1957. It is true there were more people in 1961, but crimes has been rising five times faster than the increase in population.

CRIMES AGAINST PERSONS AND PROPERTY

From 1958 to 1961, F.B.I. reports show that the number of violent crimes (murder, rape, robbery, and assault) increased 16 per cent. The 1963 reports show a 22 per cent rise above the initial year. When reduced to a rate per 100,000, the advance still amounted to 8 per cent. In the same years, crimes against property rose 29 per cent or 21 per cent on the basis of a rate (see Chart 2). In 1963, the same offenses were 43 per cent above the base year. In spite of inventive genius and the advanced technology, bank robberies increased from 450 in 1956 to 1,250 in 1962 or about three times in six years. Embezzlements not only increased in number, from 1,270 to 2,257 in the same years, but the amounts involved have reached astronomical sums by persons least likely to commit such crimes.

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THE NUMBER OF PRISONERS

Chart 3 shows the annual number of prisoners in all the federal and state correctional institutions in the nation. From 1939 to 1944, during World War II, the number of prisoners decreased from 179,818 to 132,456 inmates. After this 26.4 per cent drop the count increased rapidly in the postwar years reaching 226,001 in 1961, the highest number on record in the nation. On the basis of a rate, there were fewer prisoners in prisons in 1961 (12.7 per 100,000) than in 1939 (137.6 per 100,000), but the fact remains that prison population is higher than in any previous year.

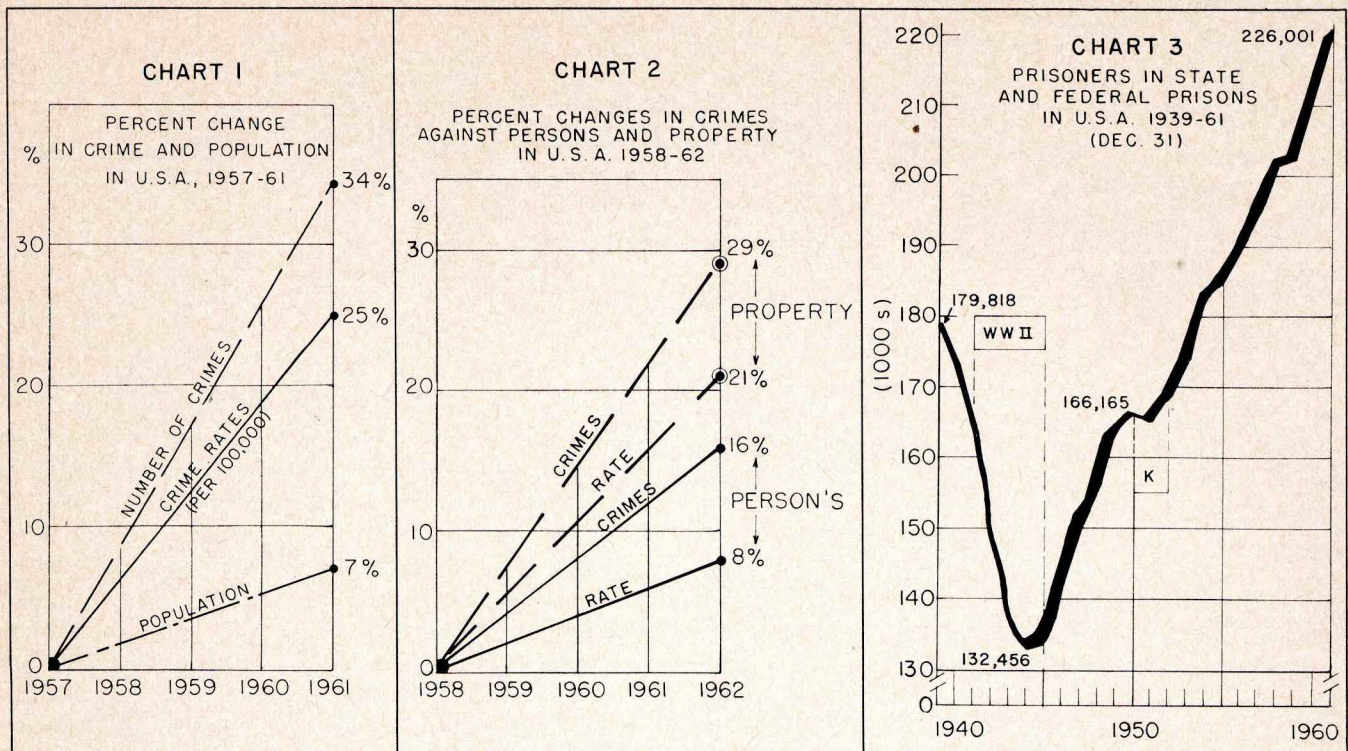
In the State of Iowa, the number of fatal highway accidents rose from 529 in 1946 to 633 in 1954, almost 20 per cent. In spite of this sharp rise, some officials find consolation in the fact that, although the number has increased, the rate has decreased when figured on the basis of a rate from 8 per million vehicle miles travelled in 1938 to 5.9 per million vehicle miles in 1954. This means that *travel is safer but more people were killed on the highways*. Likewise it can be said that the rate of prison population is down but there are more prisoners in prison.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED

Confronted with these facts, mayors, judges, attorneys, prison officials, and citizens are asking serious questions. *Why this rise in criminality? What has happened to society?*

In order to examine factors related or supposed to be related, to the problem of increased criminality the reader's attention is directed to Table 1 and to Chart 4 which display the amount of unemployment in the United States from 1930 to 1962 and the number of prisoners committed to twenty-four prisons in nine midwestern states for the same years. The data for these states have been used because figures for all prisons in the nation are not available for comparison prior to 1940. Commitments have been used here because such information is more significant than prison population figures. Also F.B.I. reports do not cover these years.

In the thirty-two years from 1930 to 1961, court commitments have passed through a complete cycle from high to low and then to high again. In the first decade of 1930 to 1939, the two lines of court commitments and unemployment move together very closely, indicating a



The number of crimes has increased five times faster than the increase in population from 1957 to 1961. F.B.I. Reports.

possible relationship. This decade included the Great Depression of 1930-38 when more than twelve million persons were unemployed in 1932. In the same year the courts committed more than ten thousand prisoners to the twenty-four prisons in the nine states. In these years, everybody had a "good explanation" for the increase in crime. Men were unemployed, poverty breeds crime, and "hunger is the mother of criminality." These were the current clichés heard in every court room and on the street

corners of the country. Leaders said, "Come the end of the depression, crimes will decrease." Others advocated better housing, slum clearance, more employment, public and private works, higher wages, unemployment insurances and other economic benefits.

The depression ended and with it came World War II. More than 22,000,000 men and women entered the military forces of the nation. By 1942, unemployment dropped to 2,660,000 and commitments fell to 4,149 pris-

TABLE I

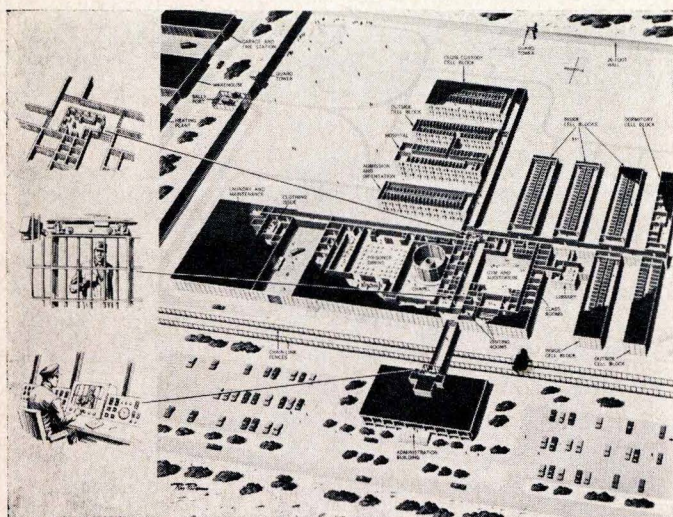
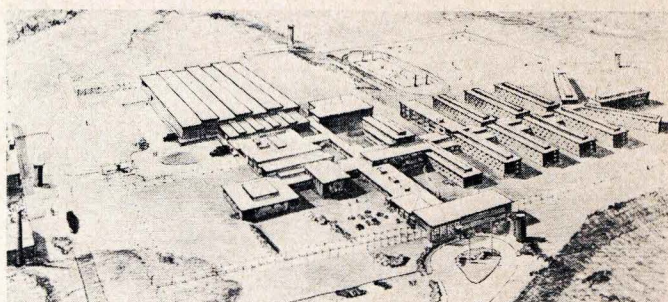
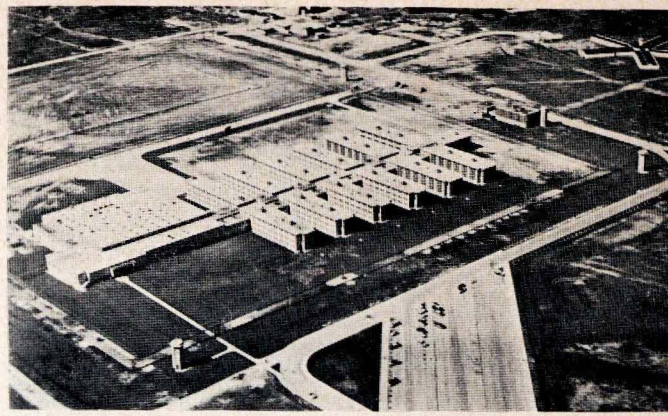
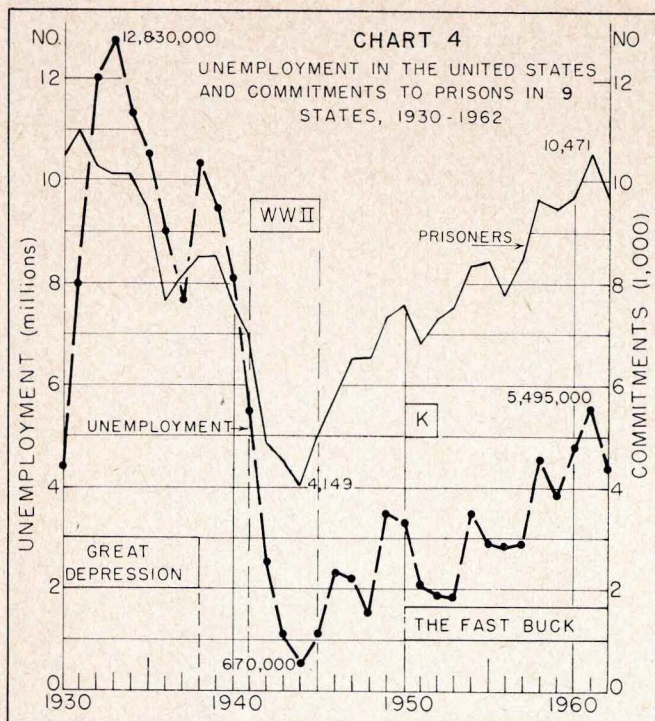
UNEMPLOYMENT IN THE UNITED STATES AND COURT COMMITMENTS TO PRISONS IN NINE STATES, 1930-1962

States include: Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas.

Year	Unemployed (1,000s)	Commitments
1930	4,340	10,428
31	8,020	11,004
32	12,060	10,326
33	12,830	10,161
34	11,340	10,147
1935	10,610	9,632
36	9,030	7,785
37	7,700	8,164
38	10,390	8,625
39	9,480	8,648
1940	8,120	7,740
41	5,560	7,086
42	2,660	4,958
43	1,070	4,667
44	670	4,149

1945	1,040	5,063
46	2,270	5,859
47	2,140	6,623
48	1,642	6,626
49	3,572	7,287
1950	3,351	7,662
51	2,099	6,814
52	1,931	7,205
53	1,870	7,566
54	3,578	8,395
1955	2,903	8,432
56	2,822	7,898
57	2,936	8,588
58	4,681	9,749
59	3,813	9,418
1960	4,806	9,709
61	5,495	10,471
62 (a)	4,382	9,674

Sources: Unemployment data from Statistical Abstract of the United States for the respective years. Commitments from 1930 to 1939 are from individual reports of each institution. From 1940 to date from *National Prisoner Statistics*, No. 30, August, 1963; and *Prisoners in State and Federal Institutions, 1961*, U. S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Prisons, Washington, D. C., March, 1962.



Left: Federal Maximum Security penitentiary, Marion, Illinois. Cost: \$10 million. This facility will house 700 to 1000 prisoners over twenty-five years of age. Inmates were transferred to this new compound from Atlanta, Leavenworth, Terre Haute, and Lewisburg Institutions.

Upper Right: Florida State Prison, Raiford, Florida East Unit. Cost: \$7,594,455.00. Functions as primary state penal facility and initial receiving point for all male inmates. Average inmate population: 3381.

Lower Right: Lebanon Correctional Institution, Warren County, Ohio. This is one of the six institutions in Ohio to house the more than ten-thousand prisoners. Cost: \$12 million. In 1961 there were 504 inmates in the facility with ages ranging from sixteen to thirty years. Total capacity is 1500 men.

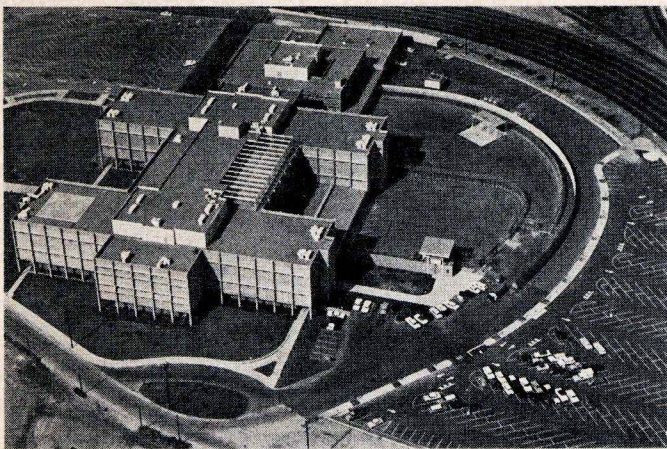
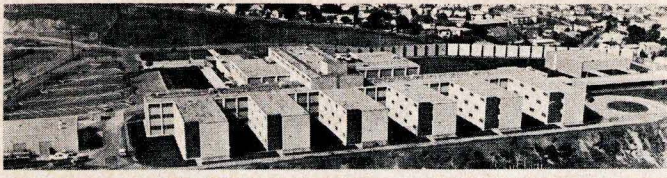
oners or half the number in the prewar year of 1939 (8,648 prisoners). Oddly enough, court commitments were lowest when battle casualties were highest.

During the first half of the period under examination (1930-45), unemployment and court commitments appear to show a direct relationship. In hard times with men out

of work, court commitments run high but with increased employment the courts sent fewer men to prison.

At this point, however, take another look at the chart to see what happened to the two lines in the second half of the three decades. After 1950, the two lines do not parallel each other closely and the distance between them is clearly evident. Between 1950 to 1962, unemployment remained between 3.5 and 4.5 million but court commitments increased sharply reaching 10,471 in the final year or almost equal to the highest figure during the years of the Great Depression. What had happened? What had become of the earlier depression clichés that unemployment caused criminality. In the recent decade of 1950-59, the Gross National Product (a method of measuring prosperity) ranked high, bank savings reached huge amounts, income tax collections were up, people spent vast sums on luxury items, vacations and travel at home and abroad. Las Vegas and other areas experienced bigger and better "business" than in previous years. It may seem strange, but as cities in Florida and other resort areas erected hotels that surpassed the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the court calendars became crowded and the prisons filled. The nation was prosperous and society was affluent while at the same time embezzlements exceeded all previous years from Texas to Iowa and from Pennsylvania to California. The experts could no longer advance the old clichés that poverty is the mother of crime.

Confronted with this paradox of affluence and high court commitments, a few men have come forward with a long forgotten European idea that, "Poverty degrades and wealth corrupts." J. K. Galbraith, in his *Affluent Society*, put it another way: "The greater the wealth, the thicker will be the dirt" (p. 212). In the United States,



Upper Left: Los Angeles County Sybil Brand Institute for Women. Capacity: 800. Cost: \$5,177,000. **Lower Left:** Los Angeles County Men's Central Jail. Capacity: 3,323. Cost: \$13,625,000. This compound is the world's largest county jail. (Courtesy of Sheriff P. J. Pitchess.) **Right:** Men's Detention Center, formerly City Prison and Remand Center, Brooklyn, New York. Capacity: 817. This building was completed in 1957 at a cost of \$11,000,000.



this theory has become known as the principle of "The Fast Buck," or "who cares, just so I get the cash while the getting is good." Others implied that if you know "the right people you can get it wholesale." A few voiced the notion that only the "dim wits work," whereas the really smart people know how to operate with the least effort. A book appeared on the market on how to make a million dollars without trying. Such ideas not only influenced the average citizens but others in high places. A number of investigations at various levels revealed how these dollars accumulated.

TIMES HAVE CHANGED

Social security became operative, unemployment insurance was available for men without jobs, there were various pensions for the aged, aid for dependent children, and many mental health clinics in every state. With all these advantages, the courts were still sending more men to prison. What had happened? It may be that the principle of "wealth corrupts" or the "fast buck" had begun to pay off in higher court commitments and more men in prison. Perhaps the time has come to examine the ideas and values men have in their heads and to spend less time in finding out how to produce more luxuries. It appears most likely, and not a few have suggested the idea, that our society has entered upon a new set of social standards in which the law may be violated for "good ethical reasons." In other words, "the end justifies the means." Stated another way, if the law disagrees with the individual's idea of justice, then disregard the law. Recently some have argued that, pending an appeal to the supreme court, a

law which has been affirmed by a lower court should be violated until the higher court has ruled. There are therefore, two kinds of laws, the "official" and the "unofficial" law. The official is the law of the courts and the legislature, whereas the unofficial law is the law of the individual, the group or the organization. Some men go so far as to say "I shall break the law because I think it is a bad law." The reasons may be numerous but the principle is the same. Robin Hood and his band of followers with a merry and clear conscience robbed the rich and gave to the "poor" because there was a "bad king" on the throne of England. Under these conditions, the unofficial law of the men of Sherwood Forest was above the law of England. Men who knew how to "beat the rap" in those days were "admired" much like men today who make financial gains by illegal methods.

THE SATURATION POINT

Just how long society will permit the followers of the "unofficial law" to defeat and subvert the "official law" depends on a number of conditions. Historically, when serious crimes have reached a certain "saturation point" beyond which society will not tolerate, men have risen up with violent methods to deal with the situation. Just how much crime the nation will stand before it reaches total "criminal saturation" cannot be said but men are becoming impatient with the evasion and the defeat of justice. When an offender commits a serious crime only to plead irresponsibility because of temporary insanity in order to escape "justice," the moral sentiments of the people are aroused. When this happens the people look upon psy-

chiatry as "white magic" much as they do "black magic."* The course of action which they follow, thereafter, may not be scientifically sound but when a society senses that it is being threatened, theories give way to direct action, for good or for bad. Society is patient and people long-suffering, but when the saturation point has been reached, violent methods arise.

* The well-known authority, Jerome Hall, in his lecture at Boston

University in 1962, revealed how psychiatrists — by advocating the principle of irresponsibility of acts due to mental disease — have undermined the moral foundations of criminal law. He pointed out that legal responsibility is not a medical question but a moral obligation. When psychiatrists attempt to disregard the social and moral basis of human conduct, they destroy the natural cohesive material which holds a society together and gives it stability. If no man is responsible for his acts, the door is wide open to anarchy. (Hall, J.: The scientific and human study of criminal law, *Boston University Law Review*, 42: No. 3, 1962, pp. 267-281. ★★★

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