

Crime Is Caused by the Young and the Restless

By JOHN MUELLER

New York's Mayor Ed Koch recently voiced a common criticism of the criminal justice system. The probability of being jailed for a crime, he argued, is hopelessly low—perhaps 2% or 3%. From this he concluded that a criminal is unlikely to be deterred by the fear of punishment: "Those are damned good odds," he observed. Actually, however, if one looks at street crime as a business matter, those odds aren't very good at all. Street crime, in fact, doesn't pay. It's quite irrational by sound business standards.

Any reasoning criminal must consider not only the probability and costs of arrest, but also the likely size of the take—the profit if the crime is successful. Indeed, interviews of lifelong felons, conducted for a Rand Corp. study, found the size of the take is of primary consideration to the criminal. Good statistics on the size of the average take are difficult to come by, but it is certainly common to read of a successful store robbery, holdup or purse-snatching that nets a ludicrously small amount of money—\$15, \$40, \$65—no more than one could make in a small amount of work at the minimum wage. The felons interviewed put their average take somewhat higher: perhaps \$100-\$300 per successful crime, figures that should probably be weighted downward to account for respondent braggadocio and for crime attempts that had to be aborted.

But even if one assumes the average take to be as high as \$200, some 50 crimes are required to rise above the poverty line. And, at a 3% incarceration rate per crime, the criminal stands a 78% chance of winding up in jail before attaining even this minimal goal. In fact, it appears few ever achieve even this low level of profit: The lifelong felons interviewed for the Rand study reported income of only a few thousand dollars a year from crime. For them, crime is an income supplement; in effect, they are all essentially amateurs.

Thus by any reasonable business standard, street crime simply isn't worth it—the take isn't worth even a small risk of imprisonment. This does not necessarily mean criminals are irrational in their own terms. One must take into consideration one of the best-known facts about crime: Judging from arrest statistics, street crime is largely the work of young people—some two-thirds is committed by people under 25, 80% by people under 30. (In his State of the Union address, President Reagan observed that crime rates are declining and seemed to tout this as part of America's renewal and rebirth; however, a more prosaic explanation is to credit much of the decline to the lowering proportion of young people in the population.)

Street crime, then, is mainly something children do. Adults, using the sobering business standards outlined earlier, largely are deterred. The comparative attraction of crime to the young seems to result from special values many children hold, whether criminals or not: a high utility for quick cash, a susceptibility to peer pressure and a thrill associated with daring, risky deeds. Although criminals tend, on the average, to be slow learners, they do eventually catch on as they age. They become better able to think for themselves, they find thrills losing some of the adrenal appeal and, above all, they finally learn the value of a dollar.

These considerations suggest two somewhat contradictory conclusions. On the one hand, crime can be reduced by manipulating the criminal's incentives: Much discussion has been bound up with identifying the imponderable "roots of crime" or has concentrated on efforts to reduce crime by increasing the cost and the probability of arrest and conviction.

At least as likely to be effective are efforts to further reduce the profitability of crime—the kinds of things potential victims do without thinking too systematically about it such as keeping little cash around, registering or licensing valuable objects, using credit cards. In 1968 an exact-bus-fare program was instituted in Washington, D.C., an innovation that in no way changed the probability or costs of incarceration, nor reduced poverty, hunger or any other of the supposed "underlying causes" of crime. Bus robberies dropped from 45 a month to zero, eloquently suggesting that there is much rationality among the criminal population and that the size of the take is a very important factor in its calculations.

On the other hand, to the degree that street crime is already largely irrational by any sound business standard, efforts to reduce its incidence are ultimately up against the peculiar psychological susceptibilities of youth—peer pressure, the thrill of risk, and naive, shortsighted, unsound concepts about money. One can try to separate would-be criminals from bad companions, or seek to decrease their acceptance of risk, or preach to them about cost accounting and probability theory—but that's very difficult sociology, with little guarantee of success. The chief "cure" for street crime—imperfect, but highly effective overall—seems to be to let the criminal grow up. It may well be sensible, then, to heed Mayor Koch's call for longer terms

of incarceration, a measure that keeps criminals off the streets while age, and adult rationality, catch up with them.

One other point: The fact that the take tends to be small may help to explain why street crime is comparatively common in urban areas. To make any money, one must commit a large number of crimes, and cities present many potential targets—a criminal need not often return to the scene of previous crimes as he goes about his business. In less populous areas, however, after making a bit of money, the criminal finds he must start returning to places where he has good reason to believe people have become accustomed to his face. That's likely to be pretty discouraging. Thus crime is not simply a matter of big-city immorality vs. small-town piety (a conclusion reinforced by the fact that homicide rates are much the same everywhere). More tangible considerations seem to play a major role.

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