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U.S. Crime Study Sees a Society in Trouble

By Eric Lichtblau

Three decades after a landmark study found crime and poverty tearing away at the nation's fabric, a sobering update released Sunday concludes that America has moved backward in fighting these ills and remains "a society in deep trouble" because of misguided policies.

The widely publicized decline in crime rates during the 1990s has stemmed primarily from unusually high levels of prosperity, the report said, and masks what it called society's failure to come to grips with underlying causes of violence and illegal activity.

In particular, the report--issued by the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, a nonprofit research group that grew out of a well-known commission created by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1968--said violence is much more prevalent today than 30 years ago and the odds of dying in a violent crime remain much higher in the United States than in almost any other industrialized nation.

Firearms Among Suggested Causes

In part, the report suggested, this is because the number of firearms has doubled to nearly 200 million--many of them high-powered, easily concealed models "with no other logical function than to kill humans."

Worse yet, crime has been exacerbated by a "vast and shameful inequality in income, wealth and opportunity," the report said, noting that more than one quarter of U.S. children live in poverty.

Several Clinton administration officials and law enforcement experts questioned key findings in the report, saying it underestimates the importance of gains in recent years. The Eisenhower Foundation's contention that the drug war has not worked, for instance, flies in the face of data showing a recent decline in consumption among young people and other users, said Bob Weiner, spokesman for the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. "This is a widely respected group, and I hope they've done their homework. . . . But they obviously haven't looked at our strategy," Weiner said. "There is a reality to the fact that America is safer. It's not a myth when people in New York, in California, in Illinois, all feel safer."

When Johnson originally created the commission, he tapped Milton Eisenhower--diplomat and brother of former President Dwight D. Eisenhower--to head it and charged the panel with investigating the strife and violence that culminated in Robert F. Kennedy's assassination in 1968. The commission's 1969 report offered chilling predictions of urban residents trapped in "places of terror" and heavily armed suburbanites living in "fortified cells."

Although Eisenhower and most other commission members who delivered the landmark study in 1969 have died, a number of the original staff members contributed to the new report. Elliott Currie, now a criminologist with UC Berkeley's legal studies program, was one of them.

"I think most of us, back 30 years ago when we made these dire predictions, thought [policymakers] would do the right thing and make the right social investments," he said in an interview.

Contributor Sees Wrong Choices

"I would not really have dreamed in 1969 that violent crime would get so much worse in the '80s and early '90s and that I'd be helping write a report saying that we have made so few gains," Currie said. "By some measure, I'd have to say we've gone backwards. I think we made a lot of wrong choices."

Those wrong choices, foundation members said, have included a national preoccupation with hard-line policies--building prisons, waging the war on illegal drugs and creating "zero tolerance" policies toward criminals. These get-tough approaches have come at the expense of longer-term solutions such as early intervention programs for troubled youth, job training and drug rehabilitation programs, the report said.

"Prisons have become our nation's substitute for effective policies on crime, drugs, mental illness, housing, poverty and employment of the hardest to employ," the report said in one of its central findings.

"In a reasonable culture, we would not say we had won the war against disease just because we had moved a lot of sick people from their homes to hospital wards. And in a reasonable culture we would not say we have won the war against crime just because we have moved a lot of criminals from the community into prison cells."

Numbers on serious crime compiled by the FBI from around the country have actually gone down for an unprecedented seven straight years, declining to the lowest levels since the 1970s. But the Eisenhower Foundation maintained that the trend is largely the result of a booming

economy--not of get-tough policies--and that it masks longer-term problems.

From 1969 to 1998, the rate of violent crime in big cities in the United States--including murder, rape, robbery and assault--jumped from 860 incidents per 100,000 people to 1,218, the report found. Meanwhile, the percentage of people who said they would be afraid to walk alone at night within a mile of their homes rose from 31% to 41%.

"From this longer, and deeper, perspective, it is painfully clear that, when it comes to violence, we remain a society in deep trouble," the report concluded.

"Despite the declines in violent crime since the early 1990s, we remain a far more violent place than the rest of the advanced industrial world," with a young man in the United States 23 times more likely to be killed in a homicide than a young man in England, it found.

Carole Florman, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Justice Department, said that although she had not yet read the report's grim conclusions, many of its recommendations, such as expanding training, education and rehabilitation programs, appear consistent with what the Clinton administration has been trying to do.

"We've just reached the lowest level of crime since 1973, but we realize that we haven't been able to fully reverse the years of [increases]. We realize we can't become complacent," she said.

But Lynn A. Curtis, president of the Eisenhower Foundation and a principal author of the report, said the Clinton administration, hampered by a Republican-controlled Congress, is "still pretty far off" in tackling the root causes of crime.

"They understand what works, but it's not really going past policy bites," he said. "I don't think they're prepared to get up on the bully pulpit and stand up for what's right."