Chapter 1

Crime

Amidst Plenty: The Paradox of the Sixties

If in 1960 one had been asked what steps society might take to prevent a sharp increase in the crime rate, one might well have answered that crime could best be curtailed by reducing poverty, increasing educational attainment, eliminating dilapidated housing, encouraging community organization, and providing troubled or delinquent youth with counseling services.* Such suggestions would have had not only a surface plausibility, but some evidence to support them. After all, crime was more common in slum neighborhoods than in middle-class suburbs, and the latter could be distinguished from the former by the income, schooling, housing, and communal bonds of their residents. To improve the material conditions of inner-city life would, of course, require a high level of national prosperity combined with programs aimed specifically at inner-city conditions. There was a confident conviction at the highest levels of the administrations of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson that this prosperity would be achieved and these programs devised.

*Original version of this chapter written with Robert L. DuPont
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ally had risen sharply but that many inner-city schools had virtually ceased to function, and that the work force was at an all-time high at the same time as were the welfare rolls.

It all began in about 1963. That was the year, to overdramatize a bit, that a decade began to fall apart.

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IN 1946 there were in this country 6.9 murders per one hundred thousand population, the highest murder rate since 1937.\footnote{In the} In the seventeen years that followed the end of World War II, the murder rate declined more or less steadily, so that by 1962 it was only 4.5 per one hundred thousand population—less than two-thirds of what it had been in 1946. In 1964 it showed a slight increase to 4.8, in 1965 another slight increase to 5.1, and in 1966 a larger increase to 5.6; by 1972 it stood at 9.4, higher than at any time since 1936.

Robbery is perhaps the most feared crime, inasmuch as it so often occurs among strangers, without warning, and involves the use or threat of force. It is not as accurately counted as murder, but, being serious and not involving friends, most of the serious cases are called to the attention of the police. In 1946 the robbery rate was 59.4 per one hundred thousand population, higher than it had been since 1935. Then robbery, like murder, began to show a long, slow decline in its incidence until, by 1959, the rate was only 51.2—a drop of 14 percent. The following year it went up suddenly to 59.9, the largest one-year increase during any of the preceding seventeen years. For the next two years it held steady at about this same level, and then in 1963 it went up again; in 1964, again; and in 1965, again. By 1968 it had more than doubled, to 131.0.

Auto theft is also a more or less accurately counted crime. Cars are insured, and victims must report the loss to collect their payments. This crime followed, until the 1960s, a pattern just the opposite of that of murder and robbery: the mid-1940s were a low point for auto theft, probably because the production of automobiles for civilian use had ended during World War II, so that by 1946 there were simply not many cars around that were worth stealing. In 1949, only 107.7 cars per one hundred thousand population were stolen. Then, as the country returned to a peacetime economy and new cars began rolling off the production lines, the auto theft rate began to drift upward. By 1960 it had risen to 181.6, an increase of almost 60 percent. For a year or two the rate paused at this

They were right. Early in the decade of the 1960s, this country began the longest sustained period of prosperity since World War II, much of it fueled, as we later realized, by a semiwar economy. A great array of programs aimed at the young, the poor, and the deprived were mounted. Though these efforts were not made primarily out of a desire to reduce crime, they were wholly consistent with—indeed, in their aggregate money levels, wildly exceeded—the policy prescription that a thoughtful citizen worried about crime would have offered at the beginning of the decade.

Crime soared. It did not just increase a little; it rose at a faster rate and to higher levels than at any time since the 1930s and, in some categories, to higher levels than any experienced in this century. The mood of contentment and confidence in which the decade began was shattered, not only by crime, but by riots and war. American democracy, which seemingly had endured in part because, as David Potter phrased it, we were a “people of plenty” relieved of the necessity of bitter economic conflict, had in the 1960s brought greater plenty to more people than ever before in its history, and the result was anger, frustration, unrest, and confusion.

Various explanations were offered for the apparent failure of the American promise. Liberals first denied that crime was rising. Then, when the facts became undeniable, they blamed it on social programs that, through lack of funds and will, had not yet produced enough gains and on police departments that, out of prejudice or ignorance, were brutal and unresponsive. It was not made clear, of course, just why more affluence would reduce crime when some affluence had seemingly increased it, or why criminals would be more fearful of gentle cops than of tough ones. Conservatives, exaggerating the crime increase, blamed it on a “soft” Supreme Court and a “permissive” attorney general on the apparent assumption—never defended, and in fact indefensible—that the Supreme Court and the attorney general could effectively manage the day-to-day behavior of the local police, and that the level of police effectiveness was directly related to the level of crime.

Rising crime rates were not the only sign of social malaise during the 1960s. The prosperity of the decade was also accompanied by alarming rises in welfare rates, drug abuse, and youthful unemployment. During the 1960s we were becoming two societies—one affluent and worried, the other pathological and predatory. This development was first noticed by Andrew Brimmer and Daniel P. Moynihan, who separately but with equal dismay noted that, by the second half of the decade, blacks generally were improving their income positions but blacks in the inner slums were becoming worse off, that the educational attainments of the young gener-
new high—new, at least, for any period since 1935. Then, from 1963 to 1964, it went up by the largest amount of any year since records were kept: over thirty points. In the language of the stock market chart-makers, auto theft had “broken out,” and from that year on it showed sharp annual increases. Put another way, from 1949 to 1961 auto theft increased each year on the average by fewer than seven cars stolen per one hundred thousand population. From 1962 to 1963 it increased at a rate two and one-half times faster than in any preceding year, and from 1963 to 1964 at a rate over four times faster.

If the figures are to be believed, the increase in crime assumed epidemic proportions in the first few years of the 1960s. Interestingly, murder was somewhat slower to show this increase than robbery or auto theft. One reason for this difference may be the continued improvement in the delivery of emergency health care to people who have been assaulted: speedy ambulance drivers and skilled doctors and nurses may have kept the homicide rate down by saving the lives of growing proportions of persons who have been shot or stabbed. In 1933 six times as many crimes were listed as aggravated assaults as were listed as homicides. By 1960 the ratio had increased to seventeen to one, a crude measure, perhaps, of the improvements resulting from radio-dispatched ambulances and new medical and surgical techniques.

Drugs

DURING most of the 1950s, the number of narcotic-related deaths reported by the medical examiner in New York City hovered around one hundred a year. In 1960 it touched two hundred for the first time since at least 1918, and perhaps ever. In 1961 there was a sudden, sharp increase to over three hundred, but the following year it dropped back again. In 1963 the number increased sharply again, and by 1967 had passed seven hundred a year and was still climbing. By the end of the decade, over twelve hundred New Yorkers who died each year either had taken a lethal overdose of a narcotic or had died of some other cause while being habitual narcotic users. Furthermore, the proportion of all narcotic-related deaths due to an overdose had increased: less than half of such deaths before 1961, but more than 80 percent after 1971.

Before 1963, Atlanta probably had no more than about five hundred heroin users. By the end of the decade, the number of users had increased tenfold, to five thousand.

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In Boston, the estimated number of heroin users never exceeded six hundred in the period between 1960 and 1963. Between 1963 and 1964, there was a sudden estimated increase of more than four hundred users. During the following year the increase was eight hundred. By the end of the decade, the number of Boston users, like the number of those in Atlanta, had increased tenfold.

Welfare

IN MARCH 1965, Daniel P. Moynihan, then an assistant secretary of labor, published a document entitled The Negro Family. The study described the weakness of the family structure among a large minority of blacks and argued for a national policy to correct the causes of that weakness and to support processes that would strengthen such families. The conditions he described were not new: since at least 1950 (the earliest figures included in the report), about one-fifth of black married women, as compared to about one twenty-fifth of white married women, were separated from their husbands. A large and growing number of these women with children but without husbands were on welfare (that is, receiving Aid to Families of Dependent Children [AFDC]).

One fact appeared in the Moynihan report, however, that was utterly without precedent. Since 1948, the annual number of new AFDC cases paralleled almost precisely the unemployment rate for nonwhite males. Whenever the nonwhite unemployment rate went up, as it did in 1949, 1954, and 1957, the number of new welfare cases went up. All this was to be expected—indeed, it was exactly what most supporters of the AFDC plan desired. But in 1962–1963, a remarkable thing happened: the number of new persons admitted to AFDC started going up even though the unemployment rate was going down.

From 1961 to 1964, the unemployment rate for nonwhite males fell from 12.9 percent to 9.1 percent, but between 1962 and 1964 the number of new AFDC cases opened each year increased by almost sixty thousand. In short, entry onto the welfare rolls was for the first time being influenced by forces independent of general economic conditions and of unemployment in particular. For decades the line plotting unemployment and the line plotting new AFDC cases were parallel; beginning in about 1960, they moved in opposite directions. From its graphic appearance, the phenomenon might be referred to as the “welfare scissors.”

If a second edition of the study had been published in 1969, it would
have shown that the scissors continued to open. By then, the nonwhite unemployment rate had fallen to 6.5 percent, but the annual number of new AFDC cases had grown by 222 percent.

The reasons for the increase in welfare applicants at a time when economic conditions were improving remains a matter of conjecture. Some saw the increase as the result of the rise in illegitimacy, especially among black children, but it is far from clear that this occurred (there have probably been important changes in the willingness to report a birth as illegitimate, but whether the actual number of such births has gone up is uncertain). If it occurred, the change took place in the first five years of the 1960s. From 1955 to 1960, the proportion of nonwhite births reported as illegitimate went from 20.2 percent to 21.6 percent, a trifling change; from 1960 to 1965, however, it rose from 21.6 to 26.3 percent, an increase of better than one-fifth.

Nor is it clear that the rise in welfare consumption in the early 1960s was the result of increasing proportions of women being deserted by their husbands. In 1960, 11 percent of married nonwhite women were separated from their husbands; by 1966 it was still 11 percent. (The proportion of divorced remained constant at 5 percent.) The percentage of nonwhite female-headed households increased only slightly between 1960 and 1966.

What is clear is that a growing percentage of women eligible for AFDC began to apply for it, and to receive it. Welfare became either socially more attractive or administratively more accessible, or both. While only a minority of illegitimate children receive welfare, and while many women deserted by their husbands never apply for welfare, it now seems clear that in the early 1960s more and more of those eligible for such aid sought it and, in many cities, more and more of those seeking it got it.

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The United States made enormous strides in providing jobs during the 1960s, but adults benefited more than young people. During a decade when the unemployment rate generally declined, the unemployment rate for persons sixteen to nineteen years of age actually increased, so that whereas the young made up only one-sixth of the unemployed in 1961, they accounted for more than one-quarter of it by 1971. In one year, 1963, the number of unemployed persons aged sixteen to nineteen increased by one-fourth to 17 percent. As the Bureau of Labor Statistics was later to write, "In 1963, the relative position of teenagers began to deteriorate markedly." Whereas before 1963 their unemployment was never more than two or three times greater than that of adults, after that it was at least four times greater, and by 1968 was more than five times greater.

The increase in teenage and young adult unemployment was particularly sharp among nonwhites. Not only were a higher proportion of young nonwhites than young whites unemployed, but the increase in youth unemployment was greater for the former than for the latter: between 1960 and 1963, which was the peak year for the decade, the unemployment rate among persons age sixteen to nineteen went up by 23 percent for whites but by 28 percent for nonwhites. In 1963 there were 176,000 unemployed young nonwhites, more than twice as many as had existed eight years earlier; they accounted for almost one-third of all the young nonwhites in the labor force.

**The Search for Causes**

The early years of the 1960s witnessed a sudden and marked deterioration in certain key social indicators that, taken together, was unprecedented during any of the previous twenty or thirty years. Some of these indicators, such as teenage unemployment, were noticed and believed; others, such as those about crime and families, were noticed but not believed; and still others, such as those pertaining to heroin addiction, were scarcely even noticed. Or, more precisely, "informed opinion" did not notice or believe many of these indicators.

The price that we paid for this oversight—in confusion, frustration, and social divisions—was substantial. At the very time when the United States was embarking on its greatest period of sustained prosperity, a period that was to produce major improvements in the incomes, educational levels, and housing and health conditions of almost every major segment of our population, the quality of life, especially of life in public places, was rapidly
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countless stories about popular fears of criminal attack and countless political speeches about the need to get tough. One would think that it is a city whose population deteriorated substantially during the 1960s. In fact, by most measures, quite the opposite was the case.

Consider the black population, which is about three-fourths of the total. Its median educational level increased from 8.8 years of schooling in 1950 to 11.4 years in 1970. In 1950 there were only ten thousand black adults in the city with a college education; in 1970 there were twenty-two thousand. Black median family income, adjusted for inflation, tripled during the two decades. In 1970, when there was substantial unemployment in the country as a whole, the unemployment for black men aged twenty to fifty-nine in Washington was only 4.5 percent, and for black women the same age it was even less—3.6 percent. Washington has manifold problems of poor housing, poverty, and inadequate schooling, but it is not by any conceivable measure a vast lower-class slum or a city that has lost ground economically or educationally. To a substantial degree, it is a black middle-class or lower-middle-class community.

Yet Washington during the 1960s and 1970s was in the grip of a massive crime, heroin, and welfare problem. A large part of the reason was the change in that city’s age structure. In 1960 there were about sixty-five thousand persons aged sixteen to twenty-one in the city. Ten years later, as the postwar baby boom left its mark, that number had risen to over eighty-six thousand—an increase of more than 30 percent. During the 1950s there had been only about eight thousand live births each year in the city; by the end of World War II that number had risen to about twenty thousand per year.

The vast majority of these additional children entered the life of the city and its institutions just the way they had always done—they went to school, took jobs, got married, and had children of their own (though far fewer than the number of children their parents had). A small proportion of them did the rebellious things that some young people always do. But this time, it was a small proportion of a very large number.

The schools were among the first institutions to notice the change. The number of dropouts from Washington junior high schools began to increase beginning in 1962 and peaked in 1964.

Then, as the children got older, the number of dropouts from the senior high schools began to rise, peaking in 1968. When those in school or out of school started looking for jobs, they discovered that the number of new young applicants had increased far faster than the number of jobs. In Washington, the unemployment rate for blacks of ages sixteen to twenty-one had been around 8 percent during the 1950s, but during the 1960s
it rose steadily until it reached 16 percent for males and 20 percent for females by 1970.

The proportion of young males in Washington who became addicted to heroin before the 1960s had been, as best one can estimate it, less than 3 percent. One might have expected that rate to remain the same for the new, larger population of young people coming of age in the 1960s. If it had, the number of addicts would have gone up by at least a third—a serious problem, to be sure, but nothing like the epidemic that actually struck. In fact, the addiction rate for males born in the decade following 1945 who grew up in Washington was over ten times the “normal” level. As the epidemic mounted, certain age groups were devastated. Of the six thousand young Washington men born in 1953, over 13 percent became heroin addicts, and in some areas of the city about one-fourth of the males born in that year became heroin users. In the single year 1969, about 5 percent of all the sixteen-year-old males became addicted to heroin.

Some women were becoming addicts as well, but in absolute and relative terms their numbers were far smaller than those of the male addicts. For young women, or a fraction of them, welfare rather than heroin led to their identification as a significant group. For several decades AFDC had been utilized principally by older women who had lost their husbands. In the 1960s, as large numbers of young women entered child-bearing age, there was both an increase in AFDC utilization and a change in the kind of recipient. The women on AFDC in Washington tripled between 1961 and 1971, from five thousand to over sixteen thousand, and the largest growth occurred among young women. The number on AFDC who were under thirty increased by 140 percent, but the number who were under thirty increased by 300 percent, and the number who were under twenty increased by 800 percent. In ten years, the age of the typical woman on AFDC fell from thirty to twenty-three.

Crime increased rapidly in this same period. Here, of course, even crude estimates of the number of young persons involved is very difficult. We obviously do not know the age of those who commit crimes, only the age of those arrested for crimes. And we do not know how many crimes are committed by the same person. But we can make some guesses. Professor Marvin Wolfgang and his coworkers at the University of Pennsylvania examined the delinquency records of all the males born in 1945 who lived in Philadelphia between their tenth and eighteenth birthdays. They were able to find over ten thousand of them, and learned that more than one-third had at least one recorded contact with the police by the time they were eighteen, and half of these had more than one such contact. Of the delinquent acts recorded, perhaps a quarter could be regarded as relatively serious crimes. Most of the crimes were committed when the boys were fifteen, sixteen, or seventeen.

Suppose those proportions were true for Washington (they are not likely to be exactly the same, because the racial and economic composition of the cities differ). Since the number of persons aged sixteen to twenty-one increased by twenty-one thousand during the 1960s, and if one-third of these committed one or more delinquent acts, then by 1970 there were at least seven thousand more delinquents in the city than there had been when the decade started. Since each delinquent will have committed at least three offenses known to the police before he turns eighteen, twenty-one thousand more offenses resulting in an arrest were committed. There were no doubt many thousands more that did not produce a police contact.

Age Is Not the Whole Story

CHANGES in the age structure of the population cannot alone account for the social dislocations of the 1960s. While the number of persons between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one in the District of Columbia increased by 32 percent between 1960 and 1970, the social problems increased much more: the rate of serious crime went up by over 400 percent, welfare rates by over 200 percent, unemployment rates by at least 100 percent, and heroin addiction by (a best guess) over 1,000 percent. Detroit, to cite another example, had about one hundred murders in 1960 but over five hundred in 1971, yet the number of young persons did not quintuple.

According to a close study of murder rates in various cities, carried out by Arnold Barnett and his associates at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the increase in the murder rate during the 1960s was more than ten times greater than what one would have expected from the changing age structure of the population alone. Apparently much more complex forces are at work in almost all large cities. Though Detroit became known, erroneously, as the “murder capital of the world” (actually, Atlanta enjoyed that dubious distinction), the increase in the murder rate was roughly the same in the fifty largest cities—it about doubled between 1963 and 1971. Clearly, some broad national forces were involved, but exactly what they were, no one knows. The results, however, were chilling: if the murder rate held constant at that level, then a child born in 1974 in Detroit and living there all his life had a one in thirty-five
chance of being murdered. And if the murder rate continued to increase at its 1970s pace, his chances of meeting a felonious end increased to one in fourteen. At 1970 levels, Barnett pointed out, a typical baby born and remaining in a large American city was more likely to die of murder than an American soldier in World War II was to die in combat.9

Other analyses confirmed that the rise in crime rates in the 1960s was not wholly the simple result of an increase in the number of young persons in the population. Theodore Ferdinand calculated from published arrest figures that only 13.4 percent of the increase in arrests for robbery between 1950 and 1965 could be accounted for by the increase in the number of persons between the ages of ten and twenty-four.9

One possibility is that the sudden increase in the number of persons at risk has an exponential effect on the rate of certain social problems. There is, perhaps, a “critical mass” of young persons such that, when that number is reached, or when an increase in that mass is sudden and large, a self-sustaining chain reaction is set off that creates an explosive increase in the amount of crime, addiction, and welfare dependency.10 What had once been relatively isolated and futile acts (copping a fix, stealing a TV) became widespread and group-supported activities.

Heroin addiction is an example. We have had addicts since at least 1900, and we have always had young people who were potential addicts. We also know, as will be explained in chapter 11, that addiction spreads like a contagion, with one friend turning on another. Yet ordinarily this contagion is rather contained and results in no epidemic of the sort that broke out in the 1960s. The sudden, dramatic increase in the number of potential addicts seems to have created a self-sustaining contagion that rapidly produced a more-than-proportional number of actual addicts.

At the same time, our society did a number of things that nurtured this reaction. The media spread the message that a “youth culture” was being born and celebrated the cult of personal liberation that seemed to be central to that culture, a matter on which I will have more to say in chapter 12. Enhanced personal mobility made it easier to carry a contagion from one group to another. Social programs designed to combat poverty brought together groups that once would have been isolated from each other, and thus spread the contagion as surely as bringing men together in the Army during World War I spread influenza. The contacts of upper-middle-class suburban youths with ghetto blacks as a result of civil rights programs increased access to the drug culture, or perhaps created in the eyes of the whites the mistaken view that such a “culture” existed, and was desirable, when in fact only deviant and episodic drug taking existed.

The institutional mechanisms which could handle problems in ordinary numbers were suddenly swamped, and may, in some cases, have broken down so fully as barely to function at all. The deterrent force of the police and the courts may not be great in normal times, but it may have declined absolutely, and not just relatively, in those exceptional times. The increase in crime produced a less-than-proportionate increase in arrests and, of those arrested, a less-than-proportionate increase in penalties. If the supply and value of legitimate opportunities (jobs) was declining at the very time that the cost of illegitimate activities (fines and jail terms) was also declining, a rational teenager might well have concluded that it made more sense to steal cars than to wash them.

One is tempted to ask, “What might have been?” If the age structure of the decade had been normal, if crime and addiction and welfare dependency had not increased so dramatically, could we have come to grips with our problems any more successfully than we did? Indeed, what would we have considered our problems to be? The war and its divisiveness would have occurred in any event. The demand by blacks for equality of opportunity would still have arisen, though the number of young blacks available for militant protest would have been smaller. The ghetto riots might still have occurred—just as it was hard beforehand to predict that they would occur, it is hard after the fact to predict the circumstances under which they would not have erupted.

But perhaps some problems would have been easier to address had not the social structure appeared to collapse. We might have had a more sensible discussion of riots and what to do about them if it had not been so easy for some to link (incorrectly, I think) the existence of rioting with the rise of ordinary criminality. Programs designed to solve teenage unemployment would clearly have been more successful if so large a fraction of the teenagers to be employed were not deeply involved in heroin addiction and remunerative crime. In retrospect, we might not have described certain “Great Society” programs as failures if the problems they sought to remedy—unemployment, school dropouts, low educational achievement—had not been suddenly enlarged in scope and altered in character. Rebuilding or rehabilitating our inner-city neighborhoods might well have been much easier under public auspices—indeed, might have occurred under private auspices—were not so many of these areas destroyed as communities by crime and addiction.

But we are not yet sure we can even explain what did happen; we shall never be able to explain what might have happened.