

# State of the City: The Roots of Crime

Crime erodes the viability and the vitality of the city. It affects all manner of decisions ranging from the way people educate their children to whether and at what time they will ride the subways or use the parks. It affects the way citizens regard their neighbors, the sections of the city they feel free to enjoy and inhabit, the movement of businesses—and people—out of town.

The fear of crime flows from scenes and reports of violence, and from a growing sense that the criminal justice system is so overwhelmed by the sheer volume of what it has to cope with that it has virtually lost the capacity to afford protection on the streets, subway platforms, in apartment-house hallways and every other place of daily passage.

One set of statistics tells a large part of the tale. In one decade, felony arrests almost tripled, from 40,000 in 1960 to 114,300 in 1970. The magnitude of these figures has resulted in the practice of plea bargaining, just to keep the flow moving; it has meant overcrowded detention facilities, harried prosecutorial judgments, uncertainty about punishment and a perpetual sense that the system is in imminent danger of collapse. The fact that felony convictions rose only from 5,000 in 1960 (12 per cent of arrests) to 10,835 in 1970 (9 per cent of arrests) indicates that while collapse was avoided, the effectiveness of the criminal justice system has declined.

If crime and the fear of it are to decrease in any substantial measure, the highest priority must be to forge the disparate aspects of the creaky criminal justice process into one that is unified and coherent. As it is, the entire system—courts, prosecutors, police, probations and corrections departments—is primarily not much more than a conduit transmitting breakdowns originating elsewhere in the social system. Ultimate relief from crime and the criminal justice overload will require long-range amelioration of some basic failures in our society.

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