Race and Crime Control

By Robert Coles*

The problems of crime control at this time in our country's history are not merely severe, they are directly involved—perhaps as never before—in the significant political, social, and economic issues of the day. The best way to insure that a statement such as that does not slip by as an indisputable cliché is to put it another and quite specific way: the racial question in America is challenging the strength (and that would include the flexibility) of our society as well as its values, and with that question comes the very hard-to-solve one of crime and its relationship to the Negro.

Crime committed by Negroes is not a new problem. Negroes in the North have consistently shown their capacity for a wide assortment of crimes, and in my experience Negroes in the South have done likewise, though they have often been treated with much more tolerance and even “humor” by white judges and prosecutors so long as no white person or property has been touched. What is new, therefore, is not the fact of crimes committed by Negroes, but the fact that the nation as a whole is specially concerned with the general condition of the Negro and his attempts to change it. With that concern comes new discussion on how to manage a variety of problems connected with the Negro: the non-violent protest activities and their legality; the racial riots which plague city after city and call attention—at a sensitive moment—to such derivative problems as widespread delinquency, gang formations, drug addiction, alcoholism, all of which affect our police forces and courts, our prisons and systems of probation; the heightened tensions in both South and North between white people and Negroes, with all the resultant litigation (in the North over de facto school segregation, in the South over initial desegregation of a variety of public institutions and private establishments) and increased frequency

* Research Psychiatrist at Harvard University Health Services. A.B., M.D.
of violent encounter, requiring police intervention and even jailing.

Indeed, we are now occupied with the very question of what is a “crime” as it regards racial strife. In the South it has become clear to many that going to jail for direct disobedience of a host of statutes is less “criminal” behaviour than an attempt by a hitherto rather exiled, defenseless, and “passive” minority to achieve increasing measures of civil and political equality—followed, of course, by economic improvement and social acceptance. I am no lawyer, but any interested layman reading the news today will know that serious and sometimes quite touchy legal and constitutional issues have been raised in the path of such developments. When one group defines as “criminal” what another group calls an absolutely essential effort to establish its human dignity and when the former enforces its definition while the latter defies that enforcement with a regularity and steadfastness that summons a good deal of national support, we are, at the very least, faced with a problem of “crime” and “control of crime” that is both philosophical and practical.

In the North there are similar dilemmas. Its cities are filled to a gasping, trembling brim with what we now call “social sickness”. For several decades criminal law has felt the heat of the new ways 20th century Western man has learned to look at himself and his actions. Just as the law has begun to recognize the relevance of modern psychiatrically based conclusions about the relationship between emotional development and personal responsibility, it finds itself faced with the larger matter of the relevance of those same conclusions to society in general. After all, when a court has jurisdiction over a slum neighborhood, exactly how does it deal with the overwhelming incidence of crime; how does it accommodate itself to the painful facts that in some sections of some our our cities what “we” call crime is for those people, living in those areas—“neighborhoods” hardly seems the appropriate word—almost a “way of life”? Indeed, it is fairly obvious that there are limits to the capacity that our police forces have in even concerning themselves with many of the “crimes” in certain sections of our cities—and not the least among them the Negro ghettos. I have talked with police and heard their accounts of crime in those ghettos, and their
willingness and determination to control it by containing it and dealing with its more open or excessive nature. To attempt to approach streets in the ghetto like streets in our suburbs, to attempt to control crime there as is tried in the suburbs—prevent it, seek to eradicate it, deal with it as vigorously and specifically as possible—is hard for many police to imagine as possible right now. Here are the words of one policeman I know describing his kind of work in the Negro slum of a large Northern city: “We do our best to keep the streets clear and tackle the major crimes like murder or armed burglary; but, you know and I know that there’s a lot going on in those blocks that we just can’t get to; it would take an army.”

I never felt him to be prejudiced, to speak out of racist distortion. He knew the grim facts of crime in Negro slums. Such facts must be faced and their origin understood if we are to deal with them.

I have spent four years studying first the psychiatric problems arising out of desegregation in the South—in the schools, in the course of demonstrations,—and then those which occur in migrant farm workers. My interest is in how individuals respond to the external, we may call them social and economic, stresses of existence. (My profession, like the law and the judiciary, is beginning to confront itself with the logic of extending its insights about private individuals to include their world—family, friends, community—and its bearing upon their lives.)

My work has been heavily with white and Negro children, facing such stresses as mobs before schools, or the almost indescribable poverty which is the lot of some of our migrants—poverty with the social disorganization of constant movement from state to state of our country. I have constantly had to reckon with the significance of “chance” in the lives of these young people. By “chance” I mean the intersection of their lives with either supportive or destructive events, circumstances, happenings, call them what you will.

I recall family after family where I have seen psychological influences in childhood yield in influence to those of the beckoning forces which bring out hidden strengths, or the defeating forces which encourage all too obvious weaknesses or flaws. “Why,” many of these parents will ask, “does one of my children
become so responsible and others so impossible to control or prone to crime?” And, of course, there are families where even that kind of question is not asked, where there seems to be a relentless monotony of uninspired or delinquent youths becoming openly criminal adults.

Let me tell you about a family now very much on my mind because I am concluding my study of them and their lives. They are a Negro family whose various members, like many such families all over our country, tell a rather varied yet in turn comprehensive story. The family one generation back were tenant farmers in the Mississippi Delta, but now live either in large cities or move about in the Eastern Seaboard “stream” of migratory farm labor. Brothers and sisters left their parents’ farm, headed north for bread and freedom, only to find the city and themselves in it, but to remain as they were when they left—poor, uneducated, with their special sense of family, their special view of our society and its institutions.

I came upon them as they were trying to make their accommodation to life, and in so doing many of them had scarcely measured up to our standards of success. The painful telling of their several lives, these 3 brothers, 2 sisters, and their many children now all too early and frequently with their own children, would emphasize so very many of our problems in crime control. Vandalism, stealing, episodes of brutal violence toward one another, heavy and disorderly drinking and, in one case, addiction to narcotics are some of the crimes taken up by individuals in this large family. Several of its members are on relief, others draw its prelude, unemployment checks.

Yet they are not without their men and women of integrity and accomplishment. One of them led his race into a desegregated school in a large southern city, and is now in college. He has two other cousins in college, both fighting hard for education and an escape from a lot all too clear in its implications for them.

Why them? Why not others in that family? Is it special virtue in them finding its relentless and justifiable expression; or are they, rather, a good deal like most of mankind, only fortunate in coming upon circumstances which favored them? I think we do injustice to the continuing ambiguity in both life and our natures if we pose these questions, as I have done, as alternatives.
The boy I met going to a white high school is not—I feel sure—going to be a criminal, and yet I think he might well have been one, given his past, his family's and his race's. I know his brother and sisters, and he is not particularly gifted, not really different from them in genetic endowment. Nor has he been reared in the special halo of a favored child from whom greatness is expected.

What does separate him from others in his family is the time of his growing and the time of his city's and nation's history. Like many Negro youths, he decided to sign for the shift to white schools "on impulse." But the "impulse" was not without its rational, logical background. This young man had been watching reports on television, reading them in the papers, hearing them discussed at home and with his friends, all of them describing what was happening to youths of his age in other cities, youths pioneering desegregation. He was aware, without being particularly committed to the cause of civil rights, that his life-time would see the end of many customs which his parents had assumed were endless in duration, fixed in their harshness. His sudden, spontaneous "enlistment" in the cause of school desegregation was done against his own parents' wishes and for the very simple reason that he was living at a moment which made such a move seem entirely reasonable and possible. This, despite all his early years' lessons that such would never be the case. It was, for me, a sharp reminder that one's background, or early instruction and experience, can both yield to the significant persuasion of "the present", that is of a new reality.

Such evidence of flexibility in human nature is welcome indeed in view of the Negro's past history as a people. It would be hard to imagine a more fateful history: one of relentless racial kidnapping from one continent to another followed by generations of slavery with systematic denial of all rights as citizens or indeed human beings. I summon such facts not merely to repeat what we have heard again and again, but to insist that if we are to be rightfully confused and even appalled by the seemingly relentless quantity of Negro crime, we had best keep in mind that no other group of people in our history have been so systematically stripped of the chance to develop a cultural tradition, a family life, a sense of private or public responsibility beyond that of chattel.
Now, of course, we ask more of Negroes. If once we urged only their submission, now we demand that their civilization be apparent, their cultural development firm, their behavior steadily law-abiding. And all in our time. Even with emancipation Negroes were still largely kept apart, without many rights or much property or privilege. Our generation is witnessing a reversal of such conditions, yet it is our generation—peculiarly sensitive to the Negro and his problems now become ours—which finds itself as fearful and harried as it feels itself to be progressive and generous. "After all," we hear so often these days, "they have their rights just like any other group that came to this country. So why don't they behave, work hard, and stop their lawless, irresponsible actions?"

I am stressing here that Negro crime must be recognized for what it is and taken up as a major problem in our national life. In order to do this the charges and confusions implied in the foregoing remark must be clarified for the public—a job to be done by our political leaders, but also by us as lawyers and psychiatrists. But public education is only a beginning. We must clarify for ourselves how we are going to handle much of the racially-connected violence apparently confronting us as never before.

We ourselves must know that increasing freedom for people long-oppressed brings a raw time indeed for former victims and the descendants of those who were their oppressors. Negroes have been angry for generations, expressing it in appalling violence toward one another which we good-naturedly ignored, tolerated, sometimes even encouraged. Now they are "free", at least enough so to express their resentments openly and often quite hurtfully. Whites, meanwhile, are newly sensitive to their own past deeds—we might call them our uncontrolled crimes. When people feel accused (by history, by themselves, by their sudden awareness of what their ancestors have done, or not done) they may feel touchy, and guilty, but they also may be nervously defensive and soon thereafter belligerently eager to rationalize and angrily reject the very awareness which presses upon them.

Even if we avoid such impasses and recognize the longstanding causes of our present turmoil, even if we gird ourselves in similar understanding of the delicacy of the present time, we are still faced with imperative questions of practical policy. How do
we, in fact, arrest the high rate of crime in Negroes? How do we deal with their common apathy, frequent dependence upon relief checks, and their all too prevalent susceptibility to such precursors of crime as illegitimacy, promiscuity and alcoholism?

The answers have been widely spoken, and if they always bear repeating, they are often frustrating to judges, the police, or for that matter doctors, in their dependence on the coming results of large scale social and economic changes in our society. We, hopefully, advocate those changes, then must still face what is happening now, the grim problem at hand—of a chronic delinquent becoming increasingly vicious, of an addict simply uncontrolled by repeated convictions and imprisonments. Some would deny these problems, and concentrate the sum of their perfectly reasonable indignation upon the inadequacy of our attention to the larger social and economic changes. Realistic descriptions of Negro crime, for many of them, is suspect, even thought to be a kind of latent racism.

I think it is extremely important that we avoid this kind of well-intentioned trap. Negro crime is easily as burdensome as any other kind in the nation. Moreover, much of it is just that, crimes committed by Negroes as a result of their lot—in history and in their lives today—rather than crimes done by individuals who only happen to be Negro. Of course there are those crimes, too; but anyone who has worked with Negro delinquents or in Negro ghettos in any capacity knows that in much of the crime committed there is no matter of private passion or idiosyncratic lapse, but rather generalized turmoil only kept in bounds by the controls we already have.

Do we need more? I think so. We need effective policing, adequate courts, firmly supported probation officers and suitably constructed and staffed institutions to keep and control many of our criminals and that would certainly include our Negro ones.

That said, what does a psychiatrist mean when he speaks of “effective” police or “suitable” institutions? He does not mean the kind of police and institutions I have all too commonly seen in both North and South. He does not mean billy-clubbing attempts to keep people “in their place”—away from voting booths or public libraries or parks—or slightly less hostile attempts to keep them in their ghetto by assuming a cruelly suspicious or
provocatively surly attitude toward them. He does not mean assuming gilt in the fact of poverty, or crime in the face of social chaos. Nor does he mean, with regard to courts or jails, the suspension of that basic regard for the rights and integrity of any individual which presumably characterizes our civilized traditions of law and medicine.

What I so often hear from some of the better policemen or judges I know is their willingness to accept such observations from people like me, but their subsequent insistence that were I confronted with their tasks—crime all about them, even spilling over into public disorder and riots—I would cry with them in angry disapproval of any approach which neglects vigorous prosecution and punishment.

I agree that prosecution must be vigorous. I only ask that punishment be neglected in favor of control. I have been tricked and fooled enough by sly, criminally bent youths to know the folly of meek, naive trust which is for the criminal involved but an invitation for his contempt or manipulative zeal. Many of our criminals need every bit of watching, every bit of emphatic authority over them and their inclinations that our society can muster. Too often have psychiatrists been placed in the camp of those fatuous caricatures of the kindly whose recommendations for “clemency” or “understanding” become all too quickly invitations for more crime.

On the contrary, what I think my profession says about the problem of crime control is that criminals need the most careful of control, the closest attention, the most open-eyed watching. The real problem is obtaining that kind of control—for them, and through it, for all of us.

There have been very few wild and even vicious youths who are beyond all rehabilitation. Practically, yes: we have meagre facilities, a scarcity of properly trained people to work in them. Given more favorable conditions, however, these “incorrigibles” can learn new habits of thinking and behaving. The evidence is really quite abundant; if we choose to ignore or forget it we do so for our own anxious, fearful reasons. Take the work of Bettelheim in Chicago, Redl in Detroit and Washington. Take the experience of the Boston Juvenile Court or Justice Justine Polier’s Children’s
Court in New York City. Take the very hard-headed work being done by the Federal Bureau of Prisons: half-way houses, pre-release guidance programs, firm but sensitive parole policies.

And, ironically, I am forced to mention in this regard the astonishing success the Black Muslims have achieved with many of our toughest most impossible of criminals. How very odd that such should be the case. Yet how fitting in the sense that cast-aside men finally hear a summoning voice for their own separate worth, an encouraging one for their own deeply felt hates. We had best admit that when we say “hopeless” of a criminal, we may well be describing our own particular kind of helplessness.

I can only conclude with those very important—if sometimes wearily stated—pleas for the fullest utilization of what we already know about the mind, its development and its chances for going awry or leading us astray. “More research” one hears from some, “more research in the 'basic causes' of delinquency and crime.” Well, I think we need less research than application. Police need to be encouraged to learn about the people they come to meet. They need to learn that their work demands a pride from them best measured by the human sensibility which characterizes it. That is, they need teaching, call it what you will, institutes, courses, programs. They have to struggle—with all of us—to understand the distant, angry people who see them—even if unfairly—their enemy.

But not just the police or jailors. My own profession has only recently begun to realize its distance from the poor, the exiled, among us. We, too, know ourselves and our very similar patients, but not many others—be they Negroes in general or poor whites in particular. And, I suppose, that state of affairs holds for lawyers, too. Indeed, what the Negro problem, the problem of crime and its control in America both offer us is another opportunity to extend our own comprehension of the lives of others. And that seems to be the direction that many of our professions are taking today, looking where they never before did, doing what they never before attempted.

Crime in America today needs every bit of control we can arrange, control of our own passions and confusions as well as those of our criminals. Given both, given commitment of our
resources and real effort and will, I believe it will slowly cease to be the threatening problem it is today. Man’s nature assures us of some criminals always being with us. But then his nature—his capacity for firm, rational action—also allows us the hope that their number will be relatively few.