

CONGRESSMAN HAWKINS' WEEKLY COLUMN

ECONOMIC JUSTICE AS A CRIME DETERRENT

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If you ask the average American what are the most serious crimes in the nation, the answer would probably single out street crimes such as robbery, mugging, murder, rape and assault.

If you were to ask a further question about who commits all these crimes, the answer would come back, and wrongly so, that minorities are probably the single-most important perpetrators of street crime.

These answers are very popular, unfounded assumptions which too easily explain away a crisis that exists in the whole criminal justice system, which America has yet to face.

And yet there is some light at the end of the tunnel, created by a small, distinguished group of minority Americans known as the National Minority Advisory Council on Criminal Justice.

Their job, funded by the U.S. Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) in 1976, is to provide guidance, direction and recommendations to federal, state and local law enforcement agencies. This charge is a formidable one, but using their own sense of fortitude, intelligence and sometimes a feeling of outrage, they have provided their very unique perspectives on the causes of crime and violence. They have also charted responsible paths to the realization of social justice.

And nowhere is this better accomplished than in their recently released study "The Inequality of Justice".

Essentially the study deals with crime and the administration of justice from a minority viewpoint. It is expressed in terms of a Black perspective, a Hispanic perspective, an Asian perspective and a Native American perspective, as articulated by those living in ghettos, barrios, and reservations.

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The study is harsh in its condemnation of the way in which criminal justice is enforced in minority communities - it notes:

"Throughout the history of the United States the white majority has felt compelled to use economic and political power, and particularly the criminal justice system, to maintain control and authority over the racial minorities in American society. The oppression of minorities in America is supported by a system of racial beliefs and ideologies that has pervaded the nation's major political and cultural institutions, especially the criminal justice system".

Interestingly enough, their view propounds the position that the greatest and most serious crime in the nation, causing criminality and social deviation, is the crime of depriving minorities of economic, political and social justice. The Advisory Committee describes this "crime", as one in which "there is an air of hypocrisy in the public pronouncement of a nation about freedom where the essential social levers of opportunity-- education, jobs, housing, and political, power --are kept out of the reach of the masses of minorities. Blacks, Hispanics, American Indians and Asian-Americans remain, with few exceptions, segregated, powerless, and at a marginal level of existence as a result of our nation's socioeconomic system and practices."

They go on to observe that "the periodic spasms of minority discontent across the nation relate in particular to the government's management of the economy and the use of government power in periods of crisis. Yet, for minorities all over the nation, the issues, above all others, are political and economic exploitation and racism, the basic causes of conflict and disorder in the American criminal justice system."

They hit hard at economic injustice, describing minorities as being the true victims "much more likely than whites to be in the lowest income group, unemployed, ill-housed, and subject to poorer health care."

Their most profound conclusion in my view is that "the demographic conditions which are superficially responsible for high rates of urban crime will not soon disappear. To grasp the implications of the situation, it should be noted that during the Great Depression of the thirties, mass unemployment never exceeded 25 percent, but the Vice President's Task Force on Youth Employment reported that the unemployment rate for Black and Hispanic inner-city teenagers in 1979 was 20.7 percent for Blacks and 37 percent for Hispanics, and this condition continues. What is also evident is that perhaps a third of the next generation of minority youth will never enter the labor force. This means a major part of the young, minority urban population will remain in a condition of hopelessness and despair given present rates of unemployment."

The link between crime and the economic health of this nation, is often-times fraught with ambiguity and incomplete definition. Still it is my view that gainful employment, productive factories, price stability and balanced economic growth are the only forces able to deal a death-blow to crime and all of its spin-offs. Although we shouldn't use their view as an excuse to simply accept flagrant violation of law.

The Advisory Council on Criminal Justice says that we haven't learned this lesson yet.

But its obvious to me that unless we do,,we will continue to wring our hands over urban riots, social unrest and all the other manifestations of economic and social deprivation.

We do have a way out of this enigma, but it essentially means ensuring that the economic health of this nation is protected by economic productivity - of the kind that encourages our industries to produce goods, and guarantees our workers the opportunity to work.

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