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CRIME IN NEW YORK CITY AS AFFECTED BY THE WAR

Harry Willbach¹

The state of war like any other rapid and marked disturbance from the previously accepted pattern produces vast changes in the economy of a nation and in the emotional outlet of the population. The spirit and the activities that predominate in times of peace undergo drastic changes with the conversion to war time living. Values and even philosophies that were previously considered normal are almost torn up by their roots and are replaced by other standards that are accepted with an alacrity that amazes and astounds almost all segments of the population and more especially those who in peace time are irked by the slowness with which new ideas are accepted and by their fragmentary execution.

In this transformation, this changing of values and philosophies, this directing of energy and purpose into new and comparatively strange channels, the social life of the community is in a state of imbalance due to the time lag between the discarding of the old and the utilization of the new.

During this period of adjustment the social forces and social values are in a turbulent state. The absence of standards by which to regulate and judge actions and living of the day produce difficulties and problems that are a serious concern to those who persist in making evaluations on the basis of the old standards. At the same time, because of the absence of new standards, analysis is impossible by those persons who have speedily accepted the new.

The conflict or disagreement exists essentially between those who view social conditions as a slowly changing (almost static) pattern and those who focus their attention on the events of the day and continually call for quick adjustments to all new situations which arise and give scant thought to antecedent conditions.

The concept of crime, or law infringement, has its roots in the life and folkways of a continuing society. It includes acts or omissions which are an accumulation of social opinion based on the standards of the many yesterdays of social living. The setting up of a penal code is one of the means by which society aims to preserve itself by regulating acts to conform with standards which have been felt to be necessary and vital for people to live in close proximity to each other and be protected in the safety of their persons and their property.

Qualified observers, official reports, and newspaper articles

¹Albany, N. Y.

have pointed to the present war as causing changes in the crime picture. Although these accounts and reports have come from widely separated places they can be seen better and analyzed more clearly by considering separate communities. The composite social changes of the world or a nation are composed of the changes found in all of the subdivisions. These changes may follow a general pattern but may evidence differences because of the differences in the nature and degree of the upheaval in each of these localities.

The new town, the boom town, the camp town, and the ghost town, all present different problems which result not only from changes in the composition of the population but also from changes in the economy. In these communities the changes in the social fabric are profound, and correspondingly drastic are the changes in social living, social values and social standards.

Although the complexion of a large number of communities has changed fundamentally as a result of the impact of war, the backbone of our nation is still composed of the far larger number of communities which have not seen such a metamorphosis.

This paper is an attempt to view war's effect on crime in New York City—one of the communities that has not undergone fundamental and almost complete change from its peace time state.

Juvenile Delinquency

The welfare of children has long been of major importance. This has arisen out of the two fold reasons that, in the main, children through no fault of their own, bear the suffering of the mistakes and shortcomings of their parents, and the fact that a community having its eye on the future, realizes that the fibre and tone of its future culture rest upon the children of today.

More than any other group, children are the product of the life, the pulse, and the spirit of the community. Their economic well-being, their physical condition, their scholastic progress, their recreational pursuits, and their training to conform to the existing social pattern, are given to them and set for them by the interests and activities which characterize the community. A rise or fall in juvenile delinquency mirrors the state of civilization of the setting in which they live and move. It has been on the up-grade during the war years.

This is borne out by a report of the Children's Court of New York City which shows for 1943 an increase of fifty per cent over 1941 in the numbers both of boys and girls who appeared because of the need of introducing an official agency to punish, warn, or guide, where parents, schools, or social agencies were unable to cope with the problem.

This increase in the number of children brought into the court buildings is alarming. Whether these children appeared before the justices or had their cases disposed of by other court officers, the fact remains that for each of them it was a court experience and for the community it spelled out the need of calling upon an official body to punish the children or help them find a better path.

To some of the children and their parents there was brought the glitter and to others the shame of an appearance and an official record. To society was brought the realization that the instrumentalities of the home, the school, and the church—the whole organized process for helping and directing the activities of children into normal, healthy constructive avenues—had failed.

At times much is made of the fact that many of these children, most of them even, had not committed serious offenses. This however is merely begging the question because, as a rule, children do not commit crimes of the same degree of severity as do their elders. The entire philosophy of the Children's Court Act and of society's attitude toward delinquent children is fundamentally different from that towards adults committing crimes. The basic concept as regards adults is that the act involved was a damage or the threat of a damage to a person or the group. As regards children the concept, while it may involve this element of damage, is that the act implied potentialities that might develop in the child a tendency to future misbehavior or crime.

If one of the causes of adult crime is to be found in the person's history of juvenile delinquency, any community that finds an increase in the lawlessness of children must meet the situation courageously, forcefully, and intelligently, or be willing to stand convicted by future generations of failure to plan for a future society of better adjusted and more socially controlled adult living.

Adult Offenders

The arrests of adults for four crimes—offenses against the person, robbery, burglary, and larceny—as shown in the annual reports of the New York City Police Department were studied for a series of years and more particularly for a comparison of 1940 and 1942. Other groups of crimes were not included because of the desire to focus attention on the more serious crimes and to prevent bias that might be introduced by fluctuations in the enforcement of minor crimes because of temporary drives and the passing concern of the public or the police.

The downward trend of crime in New York City described by the writer in a previous study² is continuing. This is indicated by the fact that the total arrests in 1942 for these four crimes was 15.3 per cent less than in 1940. Each of the four groups of crimes studied were marked by decreases during these two years.

Arrests for burglary declined 29.7 per cent; those for larceny 16.0 per cent; and for offenses against the person and robbery they were 11.4 and 9.9 per cent less than in 1940.

The much greater decreases in the arrests for burglary and larceny are probably due to the improved economic condition resulting from the change from unemployment and underemployment to employment and overemployment.

In order to determine the changes in arrests among groups that might be affected differently by the impact of war and war activities, the discussion which follows will divide adults into three age groups—youths, those of draft age, and older persons.

Youth and Crime

The law has set up the fiction that a person who is sixteen years old, and commits a crime, suddenly emerges from the category of juvenile delinquent and becomes an adult offender to be treated by a different set of standards and punishments than his associate who is just under sixteen.

The group considered in this section are those who were over sixteen but under twenty-one years of age. For 1941 and most of 1942 they were not among those called into service by the operation of the Selective Service Law. While many between these ages left civilian life and entered the military service by voluntary enlistment, there was no wholesale exodus of this group from the normal city population.

In two groups of crime—offenses against the person and robbery—there were increases for persons of this age group. Comparing 1942 with 1940 it was found that offenses against the person increased 19.1 per cent; for robbery, 14.3 per cent. The seriousness of these increases can be appreciated when it is noted that arrests for the former showed a decrease from 1937 to 1940 and arrests for robbery an even more pronounced decrease.

Arrests for the crimes of larceny and burglary, both of which had been decreasing since at least 1939, showed that the 1942 figures declined from those of 1940 by 23.0 per cent and 19.0 per cent respectively. The decreases in the arrests for these two crimes was to be expected in the light of the short time trend since 1939 and the increase in employment and earnings that have resulted from industry's need of manpower.

The two crimes in which the number of arrests in 1942 exceeded those in 1940 can be classed as crimes of violence. These increases leave room for conjecture. In the face of a decrease since 1939 and perhaps earlier, it suggests that force is being

² This Journal, Vol. xxix, No. 1.

regarded as an instrumentality even off the battlefield.

Crime Among Those of Draft Age

The Selective Service Law while calling for the induction of those between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-eight, excluded for most of the period under study, those who were married. This meant that the real effect of that law was to remove from the population a larger number between twenty-one and thirty than of older years. The draft age group, here, refers to those between twenty-one and thirty years of age.

In 1942 arrests in his age group for the four crimes decreased 31.5 per cent from 1940. This was to be expected since the civilian population (those subject to arrest) in this age group was largely reduced by the armed forces.

That there has been an appreciable decrease in the number of persons of this age group who were arrested is indicated by the fact that from the years of 1936 to 1940 there was a steady rise from 40.5 per cent in the former year to 51.4 per cent in 1940 in the ratio which persons of this age group bore to persons of all ages who were arrested for these four crimes and that this decreased to 41.6 per cent in 1942.

While each of the four groups of crimes studied here show decreases when 1942 is compared with 1940, these have by no means been uniform or equal. Offenses against the person decreased 32.6 per cent, robbery decreased 23.5 per cent and burglary and larceny decreased 40.0 and 25.9 per cent respectively.

Crimes By Older Persons

The age group of thirty-one and over is considered here as being beyond military service. This does not mean that no persons of these ages from the civilian population of New York City entered the military service but rather that there was no appreciable withdrawal of them to the armed forces.

The number of arrests of persons of this age group in 1942 compared with 1940 showed an increase of 11 per cent. In contrast, those of draft age decreased over the same period. In 1940, persons of this group were 26.4 per cent of male arrests during that year, while in 1942 the ratio was 34.7 per cent.

Arrests for offenses against the person among this group increased 406 or 15.6 per cent from 1940 to 1942. This increase must be viewed with alarm because it is contrary to a continuous decrease every year since 1936.

Almost all studies of crime have stressed the youth of offenders. This conclusion has been based on the average age of those arrested and the almost continual increase in the ratio which persons of the younger ages bears to the total number of arrests. Crime

has therefore often been referred to as a problem of the young. The war seems to be changing this concept. The increase in the arrests of the youths' older brothers for offenses against the person indicates an instability which shows itself in lawlessness when there are sharp disturbances in the social and political order.

Conclusion

While the total number of persons arrested for the four groups of crimes of offenses against the person, robbery, burglary and larceny decreased from 1940 to 1942—the second year of the war—this decrease was accounted for by those who were thirty years old or younger. However since a large number of persons in these ages were withdrawn from the civilian population and entered the armed forces it is likely that the decrease—a decrease in actual numbers and not in ratio to the population—is due to the fact that there were fewer people of these ages. But juvenile delinquency increased as did arrests of persons over thirty.

It is significant that among this older group the increase was found to occur mainly in offenses against the person and that arrests for this crime also increased among those between the ages of sixteen and twenty.

The increase of crimes of violence among these groups must be viewed with concern. The safety of the person is one of the cardinal principles of communal living. In war as in peace, this safety must be assured. The increase must be watched carefully and if it continues methods must be found to halt it. It suggests that the stay at home population is transferring to civilian life procedures and methods which are valuable in meeting and punishing a massed enemy who is not amenable to the more orderly processes which permit people to live in safety.

Assuming that the increase in offenses against the person is due to increased nervous tension resulting from emotional strain and the changing tempo of the times the task before the community does not end with diagnosis but has its beginning there.

During a period of war the spirit of patriotism is active and vocal. Governmental policies, the financing of war and the production of equipment needed for the fighting forces are aided and speeded by appeals to the patriotism of the people at home. Patriotism can be drawn upon to halt the rise of delinquency. This can be done by pointing out that the commission of every crime interferes with the war effort. A people determined to win the war in as short a time as possible should realize the consequences that can result from compelling the police to use their time in maintaining order instead of giving attention to persons and forces that must be ferretted out if victory is to be won.