

## Crime Report

A FOUR-PART SERIES

# Crime: the pervasive American syndrome

By Elliot Currie

On a dark night not long ago, I found myself chasing a prowler down the street with a tire iron. There had been a rash of burglaries, muggings and robberies in the neighborhood for several weeks. The house on the corner had been held up at gunpoint; my house, along with half a dozen others on the block, had been broken into; and an elderly couple had been held up on the street around the corner in broad daylight. So when I discovered a man trying to snatch my bicycle off the front porch, I jumped in the car, grabbed the tire iron, and cruised the neighborhood for 15 minutes looking for him. I never found him, which was probably just as well for both of us. But I'm sure that if I had, I would have done my best to brain him with the iron. For someone trained in the verities of liberal criminology, it was an unsettling experience.

But the experience was far from unique. Across the country, and across all strata of the population, crime—always high on the list of personal concerns—is becoming a dominant factor in people's lives, profoundly influencing the way they organize their daily life. More and more people, fed up with the fear and loss crime brings, are moving in one way or another to take the issue into their own hands.

A recent Gallup poll found that nearly half of all Americans living in big cities—and over three-fourths of the women—are afraid to walk in their neighborhoods at night. Nearly 20 percent said they didn't feel safe even in their homes.

Not surprisingly, the fear of crime is greater among low-income people and minorities. A 1974 HUD survey of a high-crime, low-income housing project in Washington, D.C., found that more than half of the residents never went out at night alone; 40 percent had stopped visiting friends in the project because they were afraid to walk there at all. In response to the pervasive fear, HUD reported, the project had become "something close to an armed camp." Nearly all of the residents thought that project families should have weapons for self-protection, and nearly a fourth had recently acquired them, mainly handguns.

Gun dealers report that sales of handguns for protection are up throughout the country. In small towns like Watsonville, Calif., as well as high-crime urban areas like Chicago's Woodlawn or Pontiac, Mich., citizens have organized anti-crime patrols. In the modest San Francisco suburb of Daly City, over 150 homeowners in one neighborhood have installed cameras that automatically photograph anyone nearing the front door. Two years ago, the *New York Times* reported that dog bites in the city had increased by nearly half in the past few years, mainly due to increased usage of aggressive dogs for personal protection, including an upsurge in the illegal keeping of wolves as protective pets. In California this spring, a bill allowing private citizens to carry mace was narrowly defeated in the state legislature. In New York this fall, an elderly Bronx couple hanged themselves four days after having been beaten and robbed in their apartment, leaving a note saying that they "didn't want to live in fear."

These responses are rooted in the increasingly frightful reality of social and personal life in the 1970s. Until recently, concern over crime was generally regarded as an issue for right-wing politicians and law enforcement officials looking for federal handouts. Today the mood is

changing. People on the left are beginning to acknowledge that the crime problem is a real one, and one that, like other ills of advanced capitalism, is inflicted with special severity on working people and minorities.

### ►Crime rates still rising.

Like most official statistics, estimates of crime rates must be interpreted cautiously. The standard source is the FBI's annual Uniform Crime Reports, which, because they are based mainly on crimes actually reported to the police, notoriously underestimate the true amount of crime. But even so, figures on recent crime rates are striking. Between 1960 and 1975, the overall crime rate for the FBI's seven "index crimes"—murder, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny and motor vehicle theft—jumped 180 percent, up about a third since 1970. The increase has been especially high for robbery (263 percent), burglary (200 percent) and rape (174 percent). Bank robbery has jumped 79 percent in the last five years.

Crime rates have increased fastest in places and among groups that have traditionally low rates—small towns and suburbs—and among women. Between 1974 and 1975, the crime rate went up 7.5 percent in cities with over 250,000 people, but 11 percent in cities with less than 10,000. Arrests of women for the seven "index crimes" went up twice as fast between 1960 and 1975 as they did for men; the number of women arrested for robbery jumped 647 percent in the last 15 years. As the economic crisis has settled in, arrests for small-scale property crimes, particularly shoplifting, have risen sharply—especially among people not traditionally given to theft, like suburban housewives and the elderly. Juvenile crime, always high in the United States, has gone up faster than adult crime, especially for crimes of violence, where the rate for children under 18 rose 290 percent between 1960 and 1975.

Watergate and the recent revelations of high-level bribery by major United States corporations have focused attention on the growing costs of "white-collar" crime. Accurate estimates of the extent of white-collar offenses are even harder to come by than they are for "street" crimes. But even the U.S. Chamber of Commerce has estimated the losses at \$40 billion a year, while Michigan Senator Philip Hart argued that \$200 billion is a more accurate figure. A study by the Library of Congress noted that American corporations publicly admitted spending more than \$300 million in questionable or illegal political payments during 1974 and '75. But much of the apparent rise in white-collar crime is accounted for by small-scale frauds, as more and more people develop schemes, often desperate, to bilk the big corporate and financial powers.

One town in Florida has become known to insurance investigators as "Nub City," because so many of its residents have cut off their own fingers and toes in order to collect on insurance claims. Though business people have increasingly complained about their own losses from white-collar crime, its most serious impact—like that of street crime—is on working people who pay for it in higher prices, higher insurance rates, corrupt and inefficient public services and, most tragically, in death, injury and disease resulting from corporate violation of health, safety and anti-pollution laws.

### ►Working people are hardest hit.

Official crime figures understate the extent of the victimization of working people, both because they generally ignore



the impact of white collar offenses and because they understate the extent of street crime. A more accurate estimate of the latter is provided by a series of sample surveys of crime victims recently undertaken by the federal government's Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA). The most recent survey, covering crimes committed in 1974, shows that the actual rates for rape and aggravated assault were about four times the FBI's estimate; for robbery, about three times. And it shows with striking clarity that victimization by street crimes is primarily an affliction of minorities and the poor.

- Black women are more than twice as likely to be raped as white women.

- Black men are 2½ times as likely to be robbed as white men.

- A woman whose annual family income is below \$3,000 is roughly seven times as likely to be raped as a woman whose family income is between \$15,000 and \$25,000.

- A man with an annual income above \$25,000 is only half as likely to be robbed as a man making less than \$3,000, and has less than one-third the chance of being injured in a robbery.

- A black family making below \$7,500 a year is about half again as likely to have its home burglarized as a white family making over \$15,000.

At present rates, close to one in five black women can expect to be raped during their lifetime; the probability is much higher if they are poor. Nearly a fourth of black men can expect to be robbed over the next ten years, and a black man born today can virtually count on being robbed at least once in his lifetime.

Murder, for obvious reasons, is not covered in surveys of crime victims. But a number of studies of homicide show that it follows the pattern of other serious crimes. An analysis by a group of MIT researchers has shown that at current levels of increase in the murder rate, one out of every 11 children born in Atlanta in 1974 who remain in that city will be murdered. One of every six males born in Harlem will be murdered by age 65. Overall, a male child born in the U.S. in the '70s is more likely to die by murder

than an American soldier in World War II was to die in combat. It's been estimated that murder is now the leading cause of death for young black men in urban areas.

Murder rates also illustrate how great the risk of serious crime is in the U.S. in contrast to other countries. Crime rates have generally increased throughout the capitalist world in recent years. But London, with a population of over seven million, had 142 murders in 1974—while a single Manhattan precinct (the 28th, in Harlem), with a population of 58,000, had 117 murders two years earlier. Swiss authorities were worried in 1974 when 101 robberies were reported in Zurich, up from 69 in 1973. The 28th precinct, with about one-seventh the population, had 3,576 robberies in 1972.

An increasing body of evidence shows that the extreme levels of violent crime in the United States—as well as those of property crimes—are deeply related to the extremes of economic inequality and insecurity in this country, and particularly to high unemployment rates. In a recent analysis for the Joint Economic Committee of Congress, Harvey Brenner of Johns Hopkins University found that murder rates and state prison admissions were closely correlated with unemployment rates for the three decades before 1970. Other forms of personal violence, less often reported and therefore harder to measure, are also generally attributed to the frustrations of joblessness and poverty—including physical violence by men against women and the estimated 250,000 to 500,000 annual cases of child abuse. Harlem's 28th precinct, which led the city in murder and placed second in robbery in 1972, had an unemployment rate of 65 percent among young men aged 16 to 21.

Like infant mortality, inferior housing, or industrial accidents, victimization by serious crime is one of the routine costs of living at the bottom of the class, racial, and sexual hierarchies of advanced capitalism in the United States. Elliot Currie has taught criminology at the University of California at Berkeley and at Yale University, and is a member of the East Bay chapter of the New American Movement.

# Bye-bye Bicentennial

Photos (except where noted) by Jane Melnick

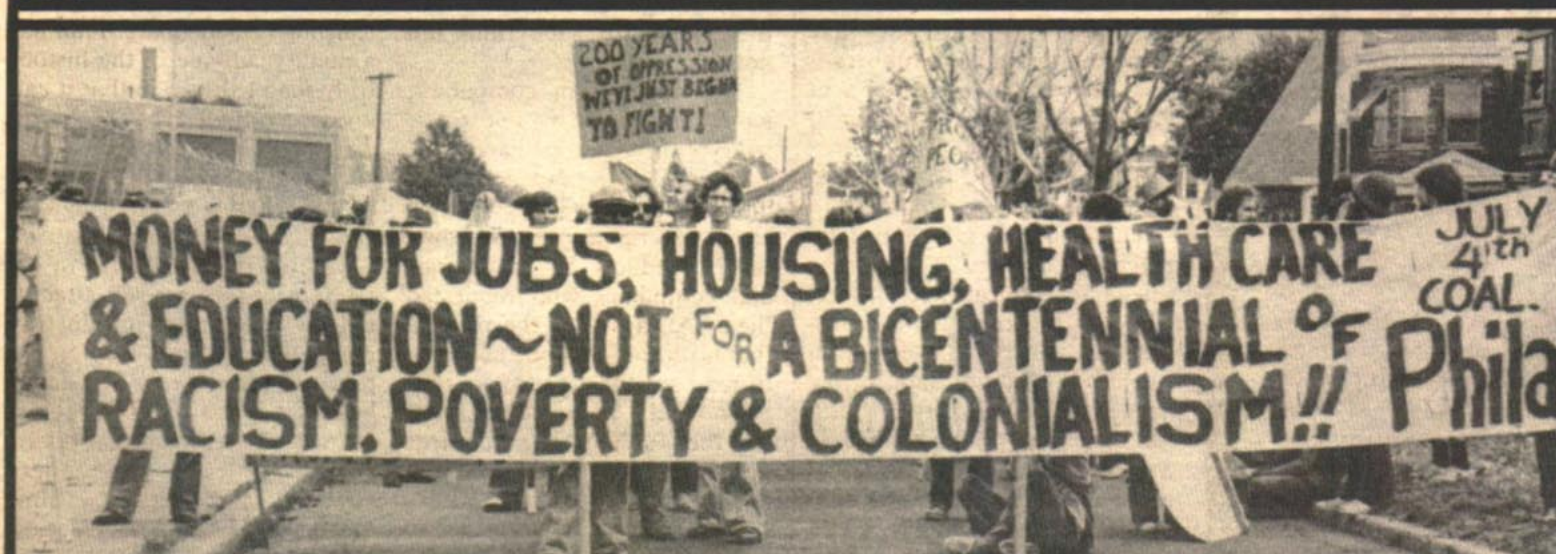


Photo by Ken Firestone

Celebration in a small town

Protest in a big city

Photo by Torie Osborn



Although the media didn't cover it, not everyone was celebrating the status quo. 40,000 people converged on Philadelphia to recapture the rebellious spirit of July 4th. They marched through North Philadelphia to a rally promoting 'a bicentennial without colonies;' full democracy and equality; and jobs and a decent standard of living for everyone.



# ART «» ENTERTAINMENT

## Independent feature film captures emotional violence of living in U.S.



Harvey Waldman: Star of *Off the Wall*.

**OFF THE WALL**  
Directed and written by Rick King  
Starring Harvey Waldman

*Off the Wall* is an impressive new feature film made by a first-rate crew of talented people interested in the independent production of politically-relevant motion pictures. Its violence is the emotional violence of living in America. (There is no blood

flowing freely to numb the audience.)

It all began in Boston where Rick King was working at the PBS station when the Ogalala occupation of Wounded Knee took place. King considered taking his camera and film crew to South Dakota and giving it/them to the Indians. The moment for that passed, but the idea remained. He set about writing a

screen play about the semi-righteous theft of a public television station camera.

The protagonist of *Off the Wall* is John Little, a 24-year-old, unemployed man about whom a PBS documentary is being made. A camera crew follows him to the offices where he applies for work, to supermarkets where he steals cheese, and finally to a local bank.

At this point, Little catches his chroniclers by surprise. He produces a pistol and robs both the bank and the camera crew.

The last half of the film is seen through his eyes as he crosses the country, a fugitive who—like 80 percent of all bank robbers—does not get caught. Alone, cut off from his former friends (who are all being questioned by the FBI) and prevented from making new ones. He is utterly alienated.

The character is beautifully played by Harvey Waldman, a veteran of political street theater, who has incorporated his own awareness into the role. John Little is no flaming radical. He has, as Waldman says, "been through some politics, but in a post-revolutionary, defeated mode... There is need for a political change for a guy like John Little."

*Off the Wall* was shot in 16mm black and white, on Kodak Plus X film (the same stock that gave us those rich-looking 1930s Frank Capra features). Black and white because the budget had to be kept low and the quality high. The camera work was done by John Else, who recently won an Academy Award for a short, and by the team of Chris Beaver and Judy Irving, whose credits include a film about Alaska for the Sierra Club.

The saga of how the film was made would probably make the basis of another good film. It came together by hook or crook, but it came together neat and clean.

Distribution is currently being negotiated. Look for it. Or, even better, ask for it.

—Sam Silver

## Alternative films a boon to the arts

John Grierson, the man who coined the word "documentary" for non-fiction films, said many years ago that there would come a day when more people would see films outside of movie houses than in them. To many this seemed a foolhardy prediction, but it has now become a fact.

The development of what are called "alternative distribution systems" began at the end of World War II and can be traced to two disparate causes, one purely technical, the other socio-political. The former was the switch-over (under pressure of war-time film usage) from nitrate to fire-

tion that wants to rent a 16mm print may find it more, rather than less costly than the standard 35mm print.

Film has become the modern Gutenberg Press. All sorts of institutions—educational, professional, labor unions, management associations, fund-raising outfits, cultural and political organizations, and state, municipal and federal government agencies—all use films extensively.

In 1974 the outlay for audio-visual materials in educational establishments, libraries and film societies alone came to close to

**"Film has become the modern Gutenberg press. All sorts of institutions—educational, professional, labor unions...all use film extensively."**

proof acetate stock. The latter was the involvement of large numbers of people from the film industry—writers, actors, directors, cutters, even small, independent distributors—in the educational use of film, both in combat training and in civilian orientation.

When the war was over, these people returned to the U.S. much more sophisticated about the world in general, and in particular about the potential use of film to spread knowledge of that world.

Documentary and other forms of non-theatrical films had suddenly acquired a new, potentially enormous audience. But the outlets for such films did not as yet exist.

The major film companies, having resumed their pre-war concentration on the making of feature entertainment films, granted—rather diffidently—the 16mm film rights to some of their older products to individuals and companies who requested them. Always with the proviso that no entrance fee be charged, to reassure theater owners that there would be no competition for the public's entertainment dollars.

Film societies began to spring up in schools, museums, and libraries. They solved the vexing problem of meeting expenses without charging admission in one of two ways: either by establishing film "courses" and charging a fee for the course; or by selling "memberships" in a society and/or charging yearly dues from its members.

It was not long before the majors, beset by competition from TV, a shrinking audience in their motion picture "palaces" and the decree divorcing production companies from their distribution networks, woke up to the fact that the stepchild they had neglected was turning into a fair-haired boy. They abrogated the no-entrance-fee clause and began to demand minimum guarantees and a percentage of ticket sales. ticket sales.

Today a non-profit organiza-

\$2 billion. Even discounting a large percentage of that figure for hardware, the expenditure is staggering.

Grierson's prophecy is further validated by a look at what has happened to the theatrical film business. In the years before TV and the divorce decree the Hollywood product averaged between 300 and 400 films a year. Today if 70 features come out of West Coast studios it is considered a good year.

The real importance of the growth of non-theatrical film—in this writer's view—is the contribution films make to the understanding of a world so complex that linear, printed-word learning is inadequate. Film has a quality, unique in the history of human culture, in that it can appeal to all levels of educational background (though not, of course, with the same intensity).

The non-theatrical filmmakers—many of them students—have used the medium to investigate new forms never attempted by the major production companies: cinema verite, the personal films, dance films, animation, and so on. And the existence of non-theatrical distribution systems gives these younger, independent filmmakers access to an audience on almost any subject, in almost any degree of depth.

If the users and makers of non-theatrical films can be welded into some sort of working alliance, even the problem of financing may be resolved.

Meanwhile the non-theatrical, or alternative films are a boon to the audience, to the neophyte filmmakers (passionately anxious to create and frequently highly gifted) and to the art itself. Film is the most precious instrument we have for meeting the needs of communication in today's world, and the injection of new blood is essential to any art form that hopes to avoid dessication.

Jean Lenauer is a filmmaker and critic who has worked in Europe and the U.S. The above is taken from his work in progress on the subject of alternative distribution films.

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