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Criminality: Evil or Environmental? By Joseph Dole

Once upon a time the majority of this country viewed people who commit crime as redeemable. Then we embarked on four decades of “tough-on-crime” rhetoric. Now anyone who commits a crime is automatically seen as unsalvageable and to have been born a criminal. But are people who commit a crime really inherently evil as our sentencing laws suggest or are they, in fact, more often just a product of our environment?

Rhetoric is a powerful tool. One need only to look at how effective Hitler was at using rhetoric to mobilize a nation to carry out genocide on a segment of its own population. Here in the United States we have been indoctrinated, many since birth, by the “tough-on-crime” rhetoric. It has been so effective that anyone appearing “soft on crime” has less of a chance of gaining public office, than a repentant criminal has a chance of receiving clemency. We’re at the point now that we label people criminals even if they’re found innocent. If a person is charged with a crime they’re supposed to be innocent until proven guilty, but that only somewhat applies in the court of law. In the court of public opinion he has become a “criminal” and that is now his or her sole defining characteristic.

Whereas we were once defenders of freedom and human rights in the eyes of the world, we are now seen as the world’s premier torturers and jailers. After Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay and the accompanying waterboarding and extraordinary renditions, we have become embarrassed by our treatment of foreigners. Yet there is almost no shame in our treatment of our own citizens. Where is the shame that should accompany being the world’s largest per capita incarcerator? Or the shame in being the only nation in the world that staunchly defends and increasingly practices sentencing juveniles to life in prison without the possibility of parole? There isn’t any. That is the power of rhetoric. It can make you ignore the obvious and champion the unthinkable.

Environmental?

Rhetoric has caused us to ignore the reality of the situation when it comes to the subject of crime and “criminals.” It has bred an indifference to anyone labeled a “criminal” or worse a hatred and demonization of anyone charged with a crime. We ignore studies that show the causes of crime and refuse to fund programs that clearly reduce crime and recidivism. If we are to truly take a look at how to reduce crime we first must disregard the rhetoric and genuinely try to understand the people we label “criminals”. A knee-jerk labeling of them as inherently evil does nothing to get at the root of crime. It only perpetuates the election of officials who will refuse to look at the issue objectively because they fear appearing “soft on crime”.

If we sincerely desire to prevent crime from occurring, we must stop ignoring the facts and statistics and start understanding the multitude of factors that contribute to a person committing a crime. Society will never be able to prevent crime altogether as there will always be some who choose to commit crimes of their own volition. But studies are increasingly finding environmental factors which increase criminality. Our children who grow up in these environments cannot control these factors themselves. Society on the other hand, and its deliberate indifference to these factors that contribute to a person’s likelihood of committing a crime, is exceedingly complicit.

If there is one overwhelming theme in the majority of studies concerning criminality, it is that almost every factor disproportionately affects the poor. Thus the poor are not inherently less moral or more evil than the rich or middle class, as many a snob or bigot would like to believe. Rather they are subjected to more environmental factors which increase one’s likelihood to commit crimes. Everything from one’s food, to one’s exposure to pollution, to one’s education, has been found to have an affect on one’s likelihood to commit a crime.

Environmental factors have long been known to increase criminality. Even a little thing like graffiti has now been shown to double criminal activity. George Kelling of Rutgers University posited what came to be known as the “broken windows theory.” The theory is basically this, that if people see

Environmental?

others behaving poorly they're more inclined to behave poorly themselves, and if they view others behaving in a positive manner their behavior tends to be more positive. In the late 1980's Kelling pushed the City of New York to clean its subway system and saw a reduction of petty crime. Though supportive of his theory it wasn't conclusive that the cleanup was the sole or major contributing factor in the reduction of crime, as other factors such as a strengthening economy could have been involved.

As recently reported in the Economist magazine and the journal Science, researchers in the Netherlands conducted much more controlled experiments to determine whether the "broken windows theory" had any validity. They found that in every instance of disorder or illegal act viewed by others increased the likelihood that people would behave poorly and even illegally. If people saw graffiti, littering doubled. If people saw signs being ignored, three times as many ignored other signs. If fireworks were set off illegally, this caused more people to litter. They even found that graffiti on a mailbox or litter around it could cause twice the number of people to steal from the mailbox.

In advance of the 2010 World Cup in the Soweto neighborhood of Johannesburg, South Africa they've taken to creating a number of public parks in run down areas. This simple act has dramatically reduced crime in the area by 38%. As the parks advocates say, "No grime, no crime." Obviously poor neighborhoods are more likely to be more polluted, litter-strewn, and unkempt, all of which has been shown to increase criminal activity.

So is it solely one's own choice to commit a crime, or is it that they are influenced by their surroundings? And if, as has been shown, their surroundings can influence them, does this make them less culpable? It is usually society's adolescent and young adults who commit the majority of crime in this country. The U. S. Supreme Court in Roper v. Simmons struck down as unconstitutional the death penalty for juvenile offenders partly because new studies have shown them to be less culpable than adults when committing crimes due to the fact that the region of their brains that control

long-term planning, risk/benefit analysis, and assessing the consequences of their actions doesn't fully develop until their mid-twenties. These same studies cited by the Court also found that this is also why they are

Environmental?

Joseph Dole K84446
Criminality: Evil or

Page 4

more easily influenced by peer pressure. It therefore goes to reason that they would likewise be more susceptible to environmental influences as well.

Education is another crucial environmental variable that can affect one's likelihood to commit a crime. It is well-known that the schools in the poorest neighborhoods are almost universally the poorest providers of education. Schools in the inner city and poor rural counties are often dilapidated, underfunded, and understaffed.

Poor parents are also less educated and thus less able to assist in their children's education. A 1995 study by Hart and Risley found that by age of three, children in poor families would have only heard 10 million words compared to 20 million in working class families, and 30 million in professional families. So even from an age as early as three the average vocabulary of a poor child is one-third to one-half that of a non-poor child. This will have a dramatic affect on that child's comprehension and performance in school.

Education levels are strongly correlated to criminality. Dozens of studies have shown that prisoners have a higher rate of illiteracy and learning disabilities, and lower levels of educational achievement than society in general. In America as a whole, 4% of the population is illiterate and 21% is considered functionally illiterate. America's prison population on the other hand has rates of 19% and 40% respectively. The rates of learning disabilities are equally telling, with prisoners having over three times the rate of learning disabilities like ADHD, dyslexia, and others than society as a whole. Likewise more than 70% of all people entering state correctional facilities have not completed high school compared to less than 30% for society in general.

Furthermore, studies have shown that the higher the level of education a prisoner achieves, the lower his or her rate of recidivism will be. These aren't minor difference either. Take an Associates Degree for instance. A study done in Illinois showed that inmates who obtained their Associates Degree had less than a 4% recidivism rate, compared to a recidivism rate of 67% for the country's

Environmental?

Joseph Dole K84446
Criminality: Evil or

Page 5

prisoners overall. Thus it is not hard to conclude that more education equates with lower likelihood of criminality.

Even more concerning are environmental factors that not only influence you through your senses, but that actually have physiological affects on one's body and mind that can contribute to criminality.

In 2003 Lauren Gravitz reported in Discover magazine about an experiment conducted by physiologist Bernard Gesch, who, working with prisoners, showed that a diet higher in nutrients caused improved behavior. Ms. Gravitz asked "might some violent acts be a symptom of malnutrition?" Gesch believes that just as better nutrition creates better behavior in prisoners, so too would it prevent violent behavior by children. It's not hard to see that people living at or below the poverty level would have a less healthy diet. One has only to look at the price of fruits, vegetables, fish, organics, and vitamin supplements to know that they are less affordable for the poor. The children that grow up in impoverished families can hardly be held responsible for what they are fed, but they are always held responsible for their crimes and often times even charged as adults.

Nor should they be held responsible for the neighborhood they grow up in, nor the toxins that seep into their bodies that make them more inclined to commit crimes. In August 2007, the Chicago Tribune reported that "two independent studies link the drop in crime to...the coordinated removal of lead from gasoline about 20 years earlier." As are many poor neighborhoods and housing

projects, the one studied was situated next to a freeway, exposing its residents to copious amounts of car exhaust. It has long been known that exposure to lead has caused people to behave uncharacteristically violent.

A professor of pediatrics and psychiatry, Dr. Herbert Needleman of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center studied the level of lead in the bones of juvenile delinquents and found that they had higher levels than that of their peers. The causes of lead exposure, car exhaust, lead paint, toxic waste, etc. almost all disproportionately affect the poor.

Environmental?

Joseph Dole K84446
Criminality: Evil or

Page 6

The Tribune also quoted the John Hopkins University professor of molecular neuro-toxicology, Tomas Guilarte as saying, "if a child has a lower I.Q. resulting from exposure to lead or other environmental agents, then the ability of the child to make correct decisions could potentially be altered." Furthermore, data compiled by economists Rick Nevin and Jessica Wolpaw Reyes shows a clear correlation between the higher the amount of lead exposure in an infant or toddler, the higher the likelihood they are to commit crimes when they're 20.

Coincidentally, as I sit here writing this, NBC is reporting that a new study conducted in New York found that a pregnant mother's exposure to air pollution causes her child to have a decreased I.Q. So not only were the people who were exposed to lead through car exhaust likely pushed to commit more crime but that pollution also lowered their unborn children's I.Q.'s which then compounded their likelihood to commit crime, as evidenced by the studies done correlating educational achievement and criminality.

In November of 2007 Science News reported "Youngsters who exhibited emotional ailments, such as depression and anxiety disorders, along with substance abuse or other behavior problems had the greatest chance of getting arrested for serious and violent crimes by age 21, says psychologist William E. Copeland of Duke University Medical Center in Durnham, N.C. and his colleagues." The

article goes on to suggest that increased mental health care could drastically reduce criminal behavior. If this is true, and it does seem logical, then this would be yet another factor beyond the control of the poor that accounts for the higher rates of criminality. After all, who has less access to mental health treatment than the poor? Not only can they not afford it, but they also have higher rates of being uninsured. According to a Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report, 56% of state prisoners have a mental health problem; 43% meet the criteria for mania; 23% for depression; and 15% have a psychotic disorder.

Our current attitude in this country towards criminals seems to come down solely on the nature side of the nature versus nurture argument. That is, that people are born “evil” or born “criminals” and

Environmental?

Joseph Dole K84446
Criminality: Evil or

Page 7

committing crime is just in their nature. Ironically there is not a shred of empirical evidence to support this belief. Instead there is a plethora of evidence to support the nurture argument. That is, that the environment that we are raised in and live in can often dramatically affect one’s likelihood to commit a crime.

Are we, through our ignorance or deliberate indifference unwittingly asking for more crime and creating more criminals? How many people turned to a life of crime or committed a crime due to lead poisoning, malnutrition, poor education, mental health problems, learning disabilities, or a trashy tagged-up neighborhood? (Not to mention physical or sexual abuse, peer pressure, drugs, alcohol, a dysfunctional family life, a poor economy, survival, or a lack of a positive role model?) Will we, in 100 years, look back and finally be ashamed that we incarcerated so many people for their entire adult lives for acts of violence when we finally recognize that people aren’t inherently evil but rather products of their environments? (Environments we failed to improve because of an indifference to the plight of the poor) Why do we ignore the facts in front of us? Is it that we are just consumed with being opinionated and sanctimonious or have we been indoctrinated to ignore facts and repeat rhetoric? Are we really interested in preventing crime or are we just sadistically addicted to punishing each other?

We convince ourselves that it's because they're inherently evil that people commit crimes and thus less than human, to justify spending outrageous amounts of money on prisons instead of schools, nutrition, and communities. We convince ourselves that prisoners don't deserve an education or better nutrition. We convince ourselves that criminals are subhuman so that we don't have to treat them humanely. We convince ourselves that the poor are just lazy or selfish and have a criminal nature. We convince ourselves that the above list of environmental factors are of the poor's own choosing, when clearly any kid growing up poor cannot control any of those things in his environment. We've even convinced ourselves that one of our bedrock beliefs, that everyone deserves a second chance, can be set aside so that we can tell a 13 year old child that he is now considered an adult in order to then sentence him to life in prison without the possibility of parole and gleefully watch him die in prison after

Environmental?

Joseph Dole K84446
Criminality: Evil or

Page 8

six or seven decades of incarceration. This is the power of the "tough-on-crime" rhetoric that our nation has been indoctrinated with by opportunistic politicians and our own selfish desires for either revenge or to possess power over another human being.

So now I ask you. Are "criminals" inherently evil, or just a product of their environment? Are they "criminals" because they chose to be or because we have allowed them to be? Do we really try to prevent crime or are we supporting crime by our inaction, inconsideration, or indifference?