

Response to a letter on crime and criminals

Larry Roberts
14 May 2001

Below we are publishing a letter from a reader concerning the April 10 article "Another Detroit shopper killed in confrontation with security guard" and a reply by the author of the article, Larry Roberts.

"The brutality exemplified by the security guards involved in these attacks has been shaped by years of right-wing propaganda that says that criminals are responsible for crime, and that the solution is to lock up more and more people."

If this is propaganda, and the criminals are NOT responsible for crime, who IS responsible? This is the kind of rhetoric that makes law-abiding citizens turn a deaf ear to these stories of brutality and assume the criminal got what was coming to him.

Obviously, a shoplifter should not be killed for shoplifting, but they should be punished, and they should be locked up.

Sincerely,

MS

Dear MS,

Your disagreements with the article I wrote provide a welcome opportunity for a dialog with our readers which can help clarify ideological issues that cannot be extensively addressed in a brief news article.

You object to the following passage: "The brutality exemplified by the security guards involved in these attacks has been shaped by years of right-wing propaganda that says that criminals are responsible for crime, and that the solution is to lock up more and more people."

You ask: "If this is propaganda, and the criminals are NOT responsible for crime, who IS responsible? This is the kind of rhetoric that makes law-abiding citizens turn a deaf ear to these stories of brutality and assume the criminal got what was coming to him."

While we do not condone shoplifting or property theft, your objections to my article reflect an uncritical acceptance of the ideological campaign of the right

wing in America, which insists that crime is an individual phenomenon and has little or no relation to the social and economic conditions of American society.

I would pose to you the following question: what is your definition of crime? "Crime" has become a loaded term utilized by right-wing propagandists to mislead and stupefy the public and keep it from questioning the severe problems we face in our society.

The way the term is used by politicians and the media involves an unstated premise based on a class prejudice against the poor. It is not considered a crime for an employer, for example, a coal mining company, to play a shell game of renaming itself so as to cheat former employees out of their retirement and compensation benefits, provisions that for many mean life and death, but it is a crime for a miner victimized in this way to steal a piece of meat.

The miner may never have stolen in his entire life, but it would appear that in your book he is a "criminal" and that is all there is to it. However, life is more complex than the presentation of crime by our astute politicians. The loss of benefits to the worker is an act of fraud that is certainly criminal from any socially enlightened standpoint, but that is not the position of the courts, because the laws were written to protect property, not the livelihoods of workers.

Particularly over the past 25 years it has become fashionable for opportunistic politicians of both parties to call for a hard stand against crime and demand harsher prison sentences and the death penalty. Complex social problems produced by growing levels of economic inequality and poverty are now routinely treated as matters for the police, the courts and the prisons.

This is not to say that America does not have a crime problem. It does. However its source is economic and social, and it will never be solved as long as there exist

the extremes of wealth and poverty.

The political establishment and the media have done everything in their power to effect a dumbing-down of public consciousness, as they have pursued their anti-social and pro-corporate agenda. Are you aware that one in five children in this country live below the poverty line? Do you deny that such a level of social depravation—alongside staggering levels of wealth for the economic elite—is a significant factor in the prevalence of crime? What is your attitude to the fact that over 40 million Americans, a large percentage of whom are children, do not have health insurance—a basic necessity for a healthy and productive life? Health care is considered a basic right in most advanced industrial countries, where, incidentally, crime rates tend to be much lower than in the US.

The fact that crime is at root the product of social conditions has been known for decades, and was generally accepted as a self-evident proposition even within government circles some 30 years ago.

In a recently published book entitled *Crime and Punishment in America*, Elliott Currie, a leading criminologist, states without reservation that crime is the product of social and economic dispossession, a fact that is proven by data collected not only in America, but all over the world. Currie notes that America, of all the advanced industrial countries, has the distinction of having more people living in absolute poverty and more of its citizens—also overwhelmingly poor—in its prisons.

In the US, families and children are more likely to be poor than in most advanced countries, and the poverty is more likely to be deeper. Child poverty in the US during the 1990s was around 22 percent. The next closest levels were found in Australia and Canada, with 14 percent. In most European countries child poverty stands at 6 percent.

According to one recent study (the Luxembourg Income Study), while the rich and middle-income layers in America are better off than their counterparts in most other countries, America's poor are poorer in absolute terms than their counterparts in every other industrialized country. “Measured by the real income available to their families, Swiss and Swedish children in the bottom 20 percent of the income distribution have 72 percent more income than their American counterparts; German children, 40 percent more;

Canadian children, 25 percent more,” this study reported.

Is there any wonder that crime is lower in these countries than in the US? Is it a mere accident that the growth of the prison population during the 1980s and '90s took place at the same time the government was gutting social programs that assisted the poor?

Crime rates have fallen over the past few years primarily because people have been employed and the job market has been tight. While millions of workers are struggling to make ends meet, they are at least working. What will happen when unemployment shoots back up again?

In closing, my advice is to avoid being taken in. Take a critical look at what is happening around you and consider how society can be advanced in a way that takes mankind forward.

Sincerely,

Larry Roberts



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