

## Minorities buck the system

# Social factors, not race, tied to actual crime

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By ALPHONSO PINKNEY  
We cannot expect an impartial system of criminal justice to exist in a society that practices various forms of oppression, one of the most blatant being the persecution of racial minorities. For social institutions and practices reflect the structure of the society within which they exist.

Nor can we expect that persecuted minorities would unhesitatingly support a system of law that has frequently been used to oppress them.

In the United States today, the laws aimed at regulating criminal behavior often interact with the racism of the society to maintain the oppression of racial minorities. Yet we expect members of minority groups to conform to those very laws and social practices designed to maintain their subjugation.

REAL OR imagined violation of these laws and customs brings forth police reactions, and people of color frequently find themselves entangled in a judicial system which many distrust because of its racism.

Such catch-phrases as "crime in the streets," "law and order" and "war on crime" are most often used, however subtly, to refer to the behavior of racial minorities, especially black Americans, and to many of the policies designed to maintain their subordination.

Both the public and those enforcing the law assume that blacks and other racial minorities are responsible for

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disproportionately high rates of criminal behavior.

YET SUCH assumptions have long been challenged.

As early as 1930, Thorstein Sellin, one of the nation's leading criminologists, questioned whether the real crime rate for blacks was higher than for whites. Although blacks appeared to be arrested, convicted and committed to penal institutions more frequently than whites, Sellin maintained that social factors distorted the rates.

Most contemporary studies, based on more rigorous data, show that blacks are more likely to be arrested, indicted convicted and committed to institutions than whites who commit similar offenses.

For example, the Federal Bureau of Prisons' records show that in 1972, the average prison sentence for members of racial minorities was 59 months, compared to 45 months for whites.

More specifically, minorities convicted for income tax evasion received average sentences of 31 months, while whites convicted of the same offense received average sentences of 14 months.

The FBI's Uniform Crime reports indicate that in 1975 blacks and other racial minorities accounted for nearly one-fourth of all arrests while comprising only about 12 per cent of the population. It should be emphasized that these arrests do not necessarily result in convictions.

WITH THE exception of certain crimes against "morals" and public order, data shows that black Ameri-

cans are arrested between three and four times more frequently than whites.

For native Americans, the rate is three times that of blacks and 10 times that of whites.

Chinese and Japanese-Americans have lower rates, with the latter group being the only racial minority with a lower arrest rate than whites.

These criminal statistics—no matter their validity—influence law enforcement policy and practice in such a way as to discriminate against persons of color. "High crime areas"—usually the inner city where most minority persons live—generally receive the heaviest police deployment.

But the "speed trap" phenomenon applies to race as well as to traffic. If police are stationed in a given area, they will make more arrests, thus fulfilling the expectation that more crime will be committed in that area.

Age is another important factor in criminal statistics. Persons under 25 years of age accounted for nearly three-fifths of all criminal arrests in 1975, and the minority population is younger than the white. The median age of blacks, for example, is seven years younger than for whites.

Having noted the limitations of criminal statistics, it should be further emphasized that the arrest rates among racial minorities do not mean that these groups have inherently stronger criminal tendencies, for crime is a function of social factors, not race. The vast majority of members of racial minorities are law-abiding citizens.

IT WOULD BE nothing short of astounding if a group of people whose history in the United States includes centuries of slavery, calculated attempts at extermination, and other gross brutalities somehow managed to be more law-abiding than their oppressors.

No group of people is content to be relegated to a life of oppression, and in America the law historically served to maintain the oppression of people of color.

It was the law that institutionalized chattel slavery; that deprived native Americans not only of their land but also of thousands of their lives, and that caused thousands of citizens of Japanese ancestry to be incarcerated in concentration camps without due process.

The litany of legally initiated or endorsed outrages against racial minorities is vast.

ONE MAJOR FORM of racial oppression in the United States is economic discrimination, which is most readily manifest in unemployment statistics.

For decades black Americans have experienced an unemployment rate of at least twice that of whites. The official unemployment rate for blacks in 1975 was 14 per cent, compared with slightly more than seven per cent for whites.

For black teenagers (16-19 years of age), the situation is especially grim: At least 40 per cent are unemployed, compared to only 18 per cent of white teenagers. It is in this age category that arrests for criminal offenses are greatest.

While there are few conclusive studies showing a direct correlation between unemployment and crime, law enforcement officials and criminologists are making the connection, especially for crimes against property—burglary, larceny-theft and motor vehicle theft.

On Feb. 25, 1976, for example, a Wall Street Journal article based on inter-

views throughout the country concluded that "the consensus (among criminologists and law enforcement personnel) is that the link between crime and economics is far more than theory."

Both the executive director of the International Association of Chiefs of Police and an official of the Federal Bureau of Prisons support such a conclusion.

Unemployment is but one form of oppression contributing to the arrest rates of people of color.

Many other social factors must be taken into account. The mere fact of being racially visible increases the risk of becoming entangled in the criminal justice system. This stigma often leads to frustrations that are expressed in acts of aggression, often aimed at those of similar racial background.

FURTHERMORE, the oppression faced by members of racial minorities may prevent them from identifying with the society and the law.

Nationwide surveys conducted for the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders found that two of the top 10 grievances among black Americans were "police practices" and "discriminatory administration of justice."

The criminal justice system itself, characterized by discretion at all levels from the arresting officer to the parole officer, is frequently manipulated to discriminate against them.

The high arrest rates among racial minorities also reflect the fact that legitimate means to achieve societal goals are often blocked by discrimination. Crime may therefore be seen by some as the only means available for achieving the symbols of success.

Also, people of color are generally forced to live in areas of cities characterized by poverty, poor housing and limited outlets for recreation. These conditions give rise to criminality and other forms of non-conforming behavior.

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to understand crime in America without a knowledge of the social conditions that often nurture and reward it.

For racial minorities, social institutions and practices operate to maintain their oppression, thereby leading some of them to commit acts that are considered to be criminal.

Since the connection between race and crime is caused by social factors, some of which have been enumerated, there is every reason to believe the conclusion of the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice in 1967:

"The commission is of the view that if conditions of equal opportunity prevailed, the large differences now found between the Negro and white arrest rates would disappear."

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## Film talk

What's been happening to movies since "Midnight Cowboy"? James L. Lambacher, audio-visual librarian of the Dearborn Department of Libraries, will answer that question at a program at 8 p.m., Feb. 22, at the Bloomfield Township Library.

Lambacher, an authority on motion pictures and host of the television series "Shadows on the Wall," will discuss "Trends in Films in the '70s." His talk will touch on such topics as new styles, mature themes and movie censorship.

Dot Weissman is chairwoman of the lecture series, which is open to the public without charge. Bloomfield Township Library is located at Lane Pine and Telegraph roads.

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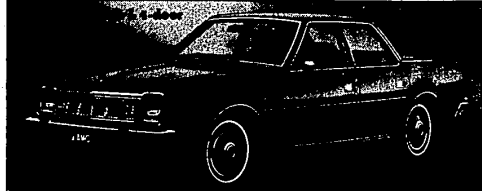
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