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From Social Safety Net to Dragnet: African American Males in the Criminal Justice System

Jerome G. Miller*

During the 1980s and 1990s, in the midst of two decades of social neglect, America's white majority presented its inner cities with an expensive gift—a new and improved criminal justice system. This new and improved system would, the government promised, bring domestic tranquility—with particular relevance to African Americans. No expense was spared in crafting and delivering it inside the city gates. It was, in fact, a Trojan Horse.

While neo-conservative commentators like Charles Murray argued that Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) payments to the poor had undermined family stability and sabotaged work incentives, the real value of AFDC and food stamp payments to the poor had been steadily declining. Not so for the real value of criminal justice expenditures. In a society obsessed with single mothers on welfare, more money (an estimated \$31)

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^{1.} E.J. DIONNE, JR., WHY AMERICANS HATE POLITICS 95 (1992). According to Dionne:

If Murray's argument were right, the trends he rightly deplores should have reversed themselves 'when the relative advantage of work over welfare increased sharply 'They did not. In fact, the problems of youth unemployment and family breakdown grew worse in the 1970s and 1980s. That suggests that simply cutting welfare programs, though appealing from the point of view of conservative ideology, would do nothing to improve matters—and would very likely make things much worse.

Id. at 95-96. By the summer of 1994, the drop in welfare benefits was continuing a slide that began in 1972. The average monthly cash grant was \$380; this was not keeping pace with inflation. Jason DeParle, A New Target: Welfare as We've Known It, N.Y TIMES, June 19, 1994, § 4, at 4. Welfare benefits continue their decline, even when one takes food stamps into account. Id.

billion in 1990) was being spent annually at local, state, and federal levels on a failed drug war² than on the vaunted liberal largess of AFDC (an estimated \$22 billion in 1990).³

Federal, state, and local funding of the justice system literally exploded in the two decades leading up to the 1990s. Average direct federal, state, and local expenditures for police grew by 16%, courts by 58%, prosecution and legal services by 152%, public defense by 259%, and corrections by 154% ⁴ Federal spending for justice grew by 668%, county spending increased by 710.9%, state spending surged by 848% ⁵ By 1990, the country was spending \$74 billion annually to catch and lock up offenders.⁶

As governmental investment in social and employment programs in the inner city held stable or decreased, the criminal justice system was ratcheted up to fill the void. With it came a divisive philosophy, destructive strategies, and particularly vicious tactics that would exacerbate violence and social disorganization far beyond whatever negative effects might be attributed to single-parent homes, welfare dependency, or the putative loss of family values. For the white majority, however, it was a popular way to go, particularly as it became clear that the draconian measures being proposed would fall heaviest upon minorities in general and African American males in particular.

The rationale for all of this criminal justice activity lay with putative rising crime rates—particularly violent crime rates. As it turned out, this rationale was a highly questionable premise.⁷ Why, then, all the divisive

^{2.} PATRICK MURPHY, RAND DRUG POLICY RESEARCH CENTER, KEEPING SCORE: THE FRAILTIES OF THE FEDERAL DRUG BUDGET 5 (1994).

^{3.} DeParle, supra note 1, § 4, at 4.

^{4.} SUE A. LINDGREN, U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, JUSTICE EXPENDITURE AND EMPLOYMENT, 1990, at 5 (1992).

^{5.} Id. at 4.

^{6.} Id. at 1.

⁷ See SCOTT BOGGESS & JOHN BOUND, NATIONAL BUREAU OF ECONOMIC RESEARCH, DID CRIMINAL ACTIVITY INCREASE DURING THE 1980s? COMPARISONS ACROSS DATA SOURCES (forthcoming 1994) (manuscript at 12-13, available in Washington and Lee University Law Library). In reanalyzing the major sources of crime statistics, the authors concluded that the rate of index (serious) crime as measured by the Uniform Crime Reports data actually rose by 7% between 1979 and 1991, while the National Crime Survey registered a 27% drop in crimes against persons and a 31% drop in property crimes during the same

politics and frenetic activity at this time? Some insight might have been culled from a seminal paper by the late, respected American sociologist of the "symbolic interactionist" school, Herbert Blumer. Blumer observed that "social problems are fundamentally products of a process of collective definition instead of existing independently as a set of objective social arrangements with an intrinsic makeup."

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, crime as a social problem and political issue took on the character of a national game of "bait and switch" that fit the interests of an aggressive law enforcement establishment. The bait was "violent crime," usually seen as involving inner-city African American youths. The switch occurred when law enforcement armamentaria were brought to bear. Because relatively few violent offenders could be found among the millions of so-called "underclass" citizens of color who were being dragged into the justice system day by day, the labels and definitions regarding who was dangerous were widened to include as many as possible as often as possible.

Meanwhile, the FBI *Uniform Crime Reports (UCR)*, upon which the media routinely base their official estimates of crime, inflated both the numbers and the seriousness of the types of incidents reported. Whereas most European nations report their crime statistics on the basis of convictions, the *UCR* reports are based on complaints or arrests. However, about thirty-eight of every one hundred individuals arrested for a felony either were not prosecuted or had their cases dismissed outright at their first court appearances. This had nothing to do with plea bargains; usually there was not sufficient reason to proceed with the cases.

For example, of the 399,277 arrests for aggravated assault reported by the FBI in 1990 (a grossly disproportionate percentage of the arrestees were African Americans), only 53,861 (13.5%) resulted in a felony conviction. Though figures like these are usually taken by conservative commentators as evidence of the permissiveness of the justice system, in fact quite another

period. Id. (manuscript at 6).

^{8.} Herbert Blumer, Social Problems as Collective Behavior, 18 Soc. PROBS. 298, 298 (1971).

^{9.} BARBARA BOLAND ET AL., U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, THE PROSECUTION OF FELONY ARRESTS, 1987, at 3 (1990).

^{10.} Id. at 6-7

^{11.} PATRICK A. LANGAN & JOHN M. DAWSON, U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, FELONY SENTENCES IN STATE COURTS, 1990, at 5 (1993).

phenomenon is most often at work. Law enforcement increasingly exaggerates and hypes the realities of crime by overcharging arrestees—often with violent crimes they did not commit. The majority of arrests for "aggravated" assault, for example, are at most "simple" assaults that result in no physical injury of any kind to anyone.

This is precisely the pattern I found as jail "monitor" (1980-1994) for the United States District Court for the Middle District of Florida while overseeing implementation of the court's orders relative to jail overcrowding in Jacksonville, Florida. Among the largest single category of violent arrests (those for aggravated assault), only about 20% of the arrests remained "aggravated" for more than a few hours. In almost 80% of the arrests for this ostensibly serious crime, the charges were downgraded to simple assault or to a misdemeanor. The evidence did not warrant the more serious charge, and the prosecution wisely opted not to proceed. Moreover, this consistent downgrading of charges occurred in a southern jurisdiction that was among the more punitive and harsh in the state with respect to prosecuting violent offenders.

A national survey of the adjudication outcomes for felony defendants in the seventy-five largest counties in the country revealed similar patterns. In 50% of the cases of defendants charged with an assault, the charges were dismissed outright, and in 14%, the charges were reduced to misdemeanors. Statistics in the federal courts were similar. In 1991, federal prosecutors declined to proceed in almost one-third of the cases (29.5%) involving individuals suspected of being, or under interrogation as, likely perpetrators of crimes of violence, and in almost half of the cases (48.5%) involving property crimes. Of those cases of alleged assault that ended up in federal district courts, nearly one-third (32.8%) were dismissed outright. These patterns were entirely consistent with the thesis that police were routinely overcharging persons in racially biased ways and that little of this police activity had to do with serious or violent crime.

^{12.} Jerome Miller, The Duval County Jail Report, June 1, 1993 (submitted to the Honorable Howell W Melton, U.S. District Judge, Middle District of Florida, Jacksonville, Florida).

^{13.} PHENY Z. SMITH, U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, FELONY DEFENDANTS IN LARGE URBAN COUNTIES, 1990, at 13 (1993).

^{14.} BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, FEDERAL CRIMINAL CASE PROCESSING, 1982-1991 WITH PRELIMINARY DATA FOR 1992, at 5 (1993).

^{15.} Id. at 12.

More important was the fact that large percentages of the general population, and the absolute majority of young minority males, were being arrested—the majority for minor crimes and misdemeanors. This as well was consistent with the national trend. In an average year in the United States in the early 1990s, in addition to the approximately three million arrests for "index" (serious) crimes, there were an additional twelve million arrests for lesser crimes and misdemeanors (excluding traffic offenses). Grossly disproportionate percentages of these lesser arrests were of African American young men. The potentially negative effects of these massively targeted criminal justice practices upon the black community were largely ignored.

It is perhaps not so ironic, therefore, that the incident that would plunge Los Angeles into civil disorder involved the police beating of a convicted felon. Although a white suburban jury might buy the crisp difference between the "criminal" and the "law-abiding," such neat distinctions have limited force in communities where most have seen a father, son, brother, or close friend labeled "criminal."

How Many Enemies Are There?

When Los Angeles city prosecutors ran background checks on about 1,000 of the arrestees charged with misdemeanors (most involved looting or curfew violations) in the early stages of the rioting, they found that 40% had criminal records and nearly one-third were on probation or parole.¹⁷ From this important bit of information, a deputy city attorney drew the kind of flawed conclusion that has shaped justice policy in the inner city for most of the past two decades: "This was not an instantaneous 'good guy rage' kind of thing. This was the bad guy taking advantage of a situation out of control." The deputy city attorney's statement was, at best, misinformed.

Indeed, a 1991 study of the Los Angeles County Adult Detention Center revealed that nearly one-third of all the young black men (age twenty

^{16.} Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Dep't of Justice, Uniform Crime Reports for the United States 1991, at 213 (1992).

¹⁷ Paul Lieberman, 40% of Riot Suspects Have Criminal Records, L.A. TIMES, May 19, 1992, at B1 (statement of Deputy City Attorney John Wilson).

^{18.} Id. at B8. A later Los Angeles Times survey of 700 people convicted of riot-related felonies (more than 90% convicted of looting) found that 60% had previously been arrested. Paul Lieberman & Richard O'Reilly, Records Show Variety of Profiles of Looters Arrested in L.A. Riots, L.A. TIMES, May 2, 1993, at A1, A30.

to twenty-nine) living in Los Angeles County had already been jailed at least once in that same year ¹⁹ This study did not include juveniles or eighteen and nineteen year-olds. The figures suggested that the absolute majority of young black males in Los Angeles could expect to be dragged into one or another of the county's jails, detention centers, camps, or prisons as they traversed the years between adolescence and age thirty At this point, "good guy" versus "bad guy" analyses begin to falter.

What the deputy city attorney did not seem to realize was that had he stopped 1,000 inner-city African American young men at random in 1992, rioting or not, he would have found that at least 500 to 600 had criminal records.²⁰ In addition, the deputy city attorney also did not pursue the matter of what kinds of records. However, a Los Angeles County deputy public defender did cite the case of one client, a fifty year-old man picked up in the riots, whose criminal record consisted of a single drunk driving arrest twenty years earlier.²¹

The markers for the social disaster that is now overtaking black males in the United States have been there for a long time. As early as 1967, the socioeconometrician Alfred Blumstein noted that if then current patterns continued, the chance of a black male city resident's being arrested at some time in his life for a nontraffic offense was as high as 90%—with 51% charged with a felony ²²

[O]ne can approximate the probability of an American boy's being arrested. The *Uniform Crime Reports* reports 4,431,000 male arrests in its 1965 sample population, or an equivalent of 6,420,000 for the total United States; one-eighth of these, or about 800,000 would have been new arrestees. One can assume, for simplicity, that all first arrests occurred at a specific age, say, sixteen. Since there were about 1,710,000 sixteen-year-old boys in the United States in 1965, their arrest probability is thus calculated to be about 47 per cent, or conservatively, at least 40 per cent. More detailed calculations,

^{19.} James Austin & Donald Irie, National Council on Crime and Delinquency, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department Jail Population Analysis and Policy Simulations 13 (1992).

^{20.} Based on the results of the Blumstein-Graddy study, see infra notes 23-26 and accompanying text, and the Tillman study, see infra notes 28-31 and accompanying text, I would project that at least 50 to 60% of inner-city African American young men have criminal records.

^{21.} Lieberman, supra note 17, at B1.

^{22.} Alfred Blumstein, Systems Analysis and the Criminal Justice System, 374 Annals Am. Acad. Pol. & Soc. Sci. 92, 99 (1967). According to Blumstein:

The Blumstein-Graddy Study (1968-1977)

In 1983, Alfred Blumstein and Elizabeth Graddy examined 1968-1977 arrest statistics from the country's fifty-six largest cities.²³ Looking only at felony arrests, Blumstein and Graddy found that one out of every four males living in a large city could expect to be arrested for a felony at some time in his lifetime.²⁴ When broken down by race, however, a nonwhite male was three and a half times more likely to have a felony arrest on his record than was a white male.²⁵ Whereas only 14% of white males would be arrested, 51% of nonwhite males could anticipate being arrested for a felony at some time during their lifetimes.²⁶

Blumstein and Graddy did not include misdemeanors, which make up the largest share of arrests and bookings, in their calculations. Had they included misdemeanors, the percentage of nonwhite males who could expect to be arrested and at least briefly jailed would have reached Blumstein's original prediction of 90% As appalling as Blumstein's original numbers seemed, they were confirmed by others over the ensuing two decades.²⁷

correcting for race and residence (city, suburban, and rural), show that a city male's chances of being arrested for a nontraffic offense some time in his life are about 60 per cent, about 50 per cent for a United States male in general, and that they may be as high as 90 per cent for a Negro city male.

Id.

- 23. See generally Alfred Blumstein & Elizabeth Graddy, Prevalence and Recidivism in Index Arrests: A Feedback Model, 16 LAW & Soc'y Rev 265 (1981-82). The cities surveyed were: Birmingham, Phoenix, Tucson, Oakland, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco, San Jose, Denver, Washington, D.C., Miami, Jacksonville, Tampa, Atlanta, Chicago, Indianapolis, Wichita, Louisville, New Orleans, Baltimore, Boston, Detroit, Minneapolis, St. Paul, Kansas City, St. Louis, Omaha, Newark, Jersey City, Albuquerque, Buffalo, Rochester, New York, Charlotte, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Toledo, Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Portland, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Memphis, Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, El Paso, Ft. Worth, Austin, Norfolk, Seattle, Milwaukee, and Honolulu. Id. at 272 n.5.
 - 24. Id. at 279.
 - 25. Id. at 280.
 - 26. Id.
- 27 See infra notes 28-50 and accompanying text (discussing studies that confirm Blumstein's finding that 51% of nonwhite males could anticipate being arrested for felony during their lifetimes).

The Tillman Study (1974-1986)

In 1987, Robert Tillman, a criminologist assigned to the California Attorney General's Office, found a similar pattern in arrests of nonwhite males in California, not over a lifetime but in the short twelve year span between the ages of eighteen and thirty ²⁸ Drawing upon a 1974 cohort of eighteen year-old males of all races, Tillman traced their arrest records between 1974 and 1986, when they turned thirty He found that almost one out of four had been arrested. ²⁹ However, when he broke the percentages down by race, he discovered that two-thirds of the nonwhite adult males had been arrested and jailed before completing their twenty-ninth year (41% for felonies). ³⁰

Tillman did not include juvenile arrests or arrests after age thirty ³¹ In my opinion, had he included these, the lifetime risk of arrest likely would have surpassed 85% Moreover, Tillman drew his cohort of eighteen year-olds from across the whole state of California. Tillman included both rural and urban youth, not exclusively city populations as in the Blumstein-Graddy study. In my opinion, had he confined his sample only to inner-city minority youth, the numbers arrested before completing their 29th year would have approached 80%

The RAND Corporation Study (1985-1987)

In 1990, a RAND Corporation study on the economics of the drug trade in the District of Columbia found that one-third of *all* the African American males between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one who lived in the District of Columbia in 1986 had been arrested and charged with a criminal offense.³² The RAND researchers did not include juvenile arrests.³³ Had they done so, they would have found that close to half of the

^{28.} See generally Robert Tillman, The Size of the "Criminal Population" The Prevalence and Incidence of Adult Arrest, 25 CRIMINOLOGY 561 (1987).

^{29.} Id. at 567

^{30.} Id. at 567-72.

^{31.} Id. at 566.

^{32.} PETER REUTER ET AL., MONEY FROM CRIME: A STUDY OF THE ECONOMICS OF DRUG DEALING IN WASHINGTON, D.C. 37 (1990).

^{33.} Id. at 7

District of Columbia's young men had been arrested and jailed or detained before reaching legal adulthood.³⁴ According to the RAND researchers:

The data also permit estimates of the risk that a black male of a particular age (18-29) resident in the District might be charged with a criminal offense, drug or otherwise, in the three-year period 1985-1987 That fraction is almost one-third for persons aged 19 in 1986. It does not decline noticeably over the age range 20-29, as other studies of crime rates in the general population have suggested

The Sentencing Project Survey (1989)

In 1990, the nonprofit Washington, D C.-based "Sentencing Project" released a survey revealing that on an average day in the United States, one of every four African American men age twenty to twenty-nine was either in prison or jail or on probation or parole. The study caused a brief flurry in the media, but evoked little follow-up. The implications were far more ominous than the "1 in 4" headlines suggested. The next logical question went unasked by the press. If one in four young African American males are under correctional supervision on any one day, what percentage have been or will be drawn into the justice system? As it turned out, the Sentencing Project's figures pointed to a criminal justice disaster.

The National Center on Institutions and Alternatives Studies (1991)

In 1992, the Washington, D.C.-based National Center on Institutions and Alternatives (NCIA), with which I am affiliated, conducted a survey of young African American males in Washington, D.C.'s justice system.³⁷ NCIA found that on an average day in 1991, more than four in ten (42%) of all the eighteen to thirty-five year-old African American males who lived

^{34.} See Blumstein & Graddy, supra note 23, at 276-77 (discovering that disproportionate percentage of arrests of African American males occur before age 18).

^{35.} REUTER ET AL., supra note 32, at 37-38.

^{36.} MARC MAUER, THE SENTENCING PROJECT, YOUNG BLACK MEN AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM: A GROWING NATIONAL PROBLEM 3 (1990).

³⁷ See generally Jerome G. Miller, National Center on Institutions and Alternatives, Hobbling a Generation: Young African American Males in Washington, D.C.'s Criminal Justice System (1992).

un the District of Columbia were in jail, in prison, on probation or parole, out on bond, or subjects of arrest warrants.³⁸ On the basis of this one day count, NCIA estimated that approximately 75% of all the eighteen year-old African American males in the city could look forward to being arrested and jailed at least once before reaching age thirty-five.³⁹ The lifetime risk probably hovered somewhere between 80% and 90% ⁴⁰

Three months later, NCIA completed a similar survey in Baltimore, Maryland.⁴¹ That survey proved even more disturbing. Of 60,715 African American males age eighteen to thirty-five living in Baltimore, 34,025 were under justice supervision of some sort. On an average day in Baltimore, 56% of Baltimore's young African American males were in prison, in jail, on probation or parole, on bail, or subjects of arrest warrants.⁴²

In Baltimore, the rationale that police and prosecutors gave for the high arrest rates among young black men was fear of violence arising from the so-called "war on drugs." Fewer than one in ten arrests in Baltimore were for violent crimes. Most young black men were arrested and jailed for lesser felonies and misdemeanors. Paradoxically, more murders occurred in Baltimore twenty years earlier in 1971 (323 murders) than in 1991 (304 murders), the year of this survey 44 The racial disparities were most alarming when drug arrests were isolated. African Americans of all ages in Baltimore were being arrested for drug offenses at six times the rate of whites, with over 90% of those arrests for "possession."

The California Commission on the Status of African Americans (1960-1993)

Preliminary results of a study released by the California State Assembly's Commission on the Status of African American Males revealed

^{38.} Id. at 1.

³⁹ Id. at 5.

^{40.} Id.

^{41.} See generally National Center on Institutions and Alternatives, Hobbling a Generation: Young African American Males in the Criminal Justice System of America's Cities: Baltimore, Maryland (1992).

^{42.} Id. at 1-2.

^{43.} Id. at 3.

^{44.} Id. at 4.

^{45.} Id. at 6.

that one-sixth (104,000) of California's 625,000 black men sixteen and older are arrested *each year*, thereby "creating police records which hinder later job prospects." The study also revealed that 64% of the drug arrests of whites and 81% of Latinos were not sustainable. However, 92% of the black men arrested by police on drug charges were subsequently released for lack of evidence or inadmissible evidence.⁴⁸

Black men, who made up only 3% of California's population, accounted for 40% of those entering state prisons.⁴⁹ Between 1960 and 1988, the relative proportion of new black felons jumped from 22% to 38%, while the proportion of white felons dropped from 58% to 31%

The Limits of "Them" versus "Us" Paradigms

Virtually all of these studies challenged what Robert Tillman referred to as the "[t]wo assumptions [that] underlie most popular discussions of crime: (1) The world is made up of two types of people, those who commit crimes and those who do not; [and] (2) Criminals form a very small portion of the total population."⁵¹

With reference to his study, Tillman concluded:

[T]he findings of this study reveal the dimensions of a serious problem. Regardless of the differences between arrest and involvement in crime, the fact that such large numbers of young men inevitably come into conflict with the law in situations serious enough to result in their arrest is evidence of the broad sources of the problem. In social science terminology, the problem appears to be rooted in "social-structural" conditions, i.e., political, economic, and social institutions, that adversely affect large numbers of young adult males, particularly those within certain strata of society. Unless these conditions are recognized and steps taken to alter them, little change

^{46.} Sonia Nazario, Odds Grim for Black Men in California, WASH. POST, Dec. 12, 1993, at A23.

⁴⁷ Id.

^{48.} Id.

^{49.} Id.

^{50.} Id.

^{51.} ROBERT TILLMAN, CAL. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, THE PREVALENCE AND INCIDENCE OF ARREST AMONG ADULT MALES IN CALIFORNIA 1 (1987).

can be expected in the frequency with which young men in California become the subjects of the criminal justice process.⁵²

In fact, the practice of assaulting social problems through our various wars on crime has succeeded in identifying an unusually large number of enemies. In 1984, there were thirty million individuals listed in official state criminal history files. By 1994, that number had approached fifty million—with nearly 60% of the increase occurring in the last years of the last decade. Over 90% of these cases involve males. With only about 130 million males residing in the country (including children and the aged), one could only conclude that a larger number of one's young and middle-aged male friends and relatives than most would care to acknowledge had a "criminal history" Among minority families, however, the percentages of young men with criminal records would prove to be devastating.

Most of the frenetic law enforcement in the black community has nothing to do with violent or serious crime. It, however, does have a destructive effect on the community Indeed, as the studies discussed earlier suggest, a major contributor to breakdown in the inner cities is the criminal justice system itself.

^{52.} Id. at 6.

^{53.} Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Dep't of Justice, Use and Management of Criminal History Record Information: A Comprehensive Report 25 (1993).