The Story of American Crime

Criminology

By Marjorie Van de Water

Three and one-half billion dollars is the estimated annual cost of crime! A billion more than the annual whole-sale cost of our automobiles. A billion and a half more than is spent for public school education. More than three and a half times the value of our annual wheat crop. This is the tremendous toll of crime in the United States. And this is a very conserva-tive estimate. Others run as high as 13 billions.

By far the largest part of this esti-mate is the amount believed to be di-rectly taken over by the criminals through theft and fraud. And this may be considered as a double loss, for it not only impoverishes the law-abiding, tax-paying citizen, but adds stupendously to the power of the out-law. For this figure, we must depend on the estimate of insurance com-panies based on premiums paid. In the absence of accurate statistics it provides the best guess and probably is reasonably reliable. William F. Joyce, Chairman of the National Surety Company, gives these figures as his best estimate:

Burglars $225,000,000
Bandits 50,000,000
Common thieves................. 150,000,000
Embezzlers 125,000,000
Fraudulent bankrupts and
  credit swindlers............... 100,000,000
Forgers and check raisers 125,000,000
Stock and land frauds and
  confidence games........... 200,000,000

The total gives us the huge figure of two billion seven hundred and seventy-five million dollars handed over annually to criminals by the American people. Large as this loss is to the public, however, it does not mean that crime is a paying business to the criminal. If two per cent. of the total population is a correct esti-mate of the criminal element, then the average individual income derived from crime is only $1,156.25. The average income per person gainfully employed in the United States is $1,805.37.

Another seven hundred and thirty-five million dollars is spent annually for the administration of justice. This goes for the upkeep of jails and prisons, for the courts and police de-partments, for all the complex machin-ery necessary to catch the criminal and punish him.

To spend three and a half billion dollars in this way is like placing property of that value on a huge bon-fire which would completely destroy it. It is probably the greatest waste of our age.

The number of commitments to prison is high enough to alarm any community. Suppose, for the moment, we consider that the commitment of a person to prison means the cessa-tion of his usefulness to society. We may then compare the rate of those lost to society in this way with those lost through death from various causes. In 1923, 325.1 persons were committed to prison from every 100,-000 of population. This rate is greater than for any single cause of death. It is 1.85 times as high as the rate of death from heart disease, the most important cause of death. It is 3.63 times as high as the rate of death from cancer. More per-sons died in 1923 from homicide than from typhoid and paratyphoid fever or from scarlet fever. In 1925 more persons were murdered than died of any of the following diseases: typhoid fever, measles, scarlet fever, whoop-ing cough, diphtheria. Preventive medicine has reduced the deaths from many communicable diseases. It is now time to devise a preventive crimi-nology which will reduce the rate of deaths from homicide.

For how much crime are the men-tally defective or mentally diseased responsible?

A very recent expression on the subject from an authoritative source is that contained in a leading editorial in the Mental Hygiene Bulletin pub-lished by the National Committee for Mental Hygiene. The quotation fol-lows:

"It is estimated that about two per cent. of the general population are mentally defective. That is, about one-fiftieth are more or less lacking in brains. But this one-fiftieth pro-duces one-fourth or one-third of the prison population; so that, as a mat-ter of fact, there are many more criminals drawn from the mentally defective classes in proportion to their percentage of the general population than from the rest, even though they actually represent only a fraction of the prison group. . . . The mentally defective are potentially greater risks because of their mental handicaps than the more intellectual groups, and they need protection, training of a special sort, and supervision to steer them into blameless living."

Dr. William Healy, in a careful study of delinquent and problem children for the Judge Baker Foun-dation, discovered that 72.5 per cent. were of normal mentality, the others being feeble-minded, subnormal, in-sane, or psychopathic. In Chicago the proportion of the abnormal was higher. There it reached 37 per cent. He also found that the abnormal were more likely to remain criminalistic de-spite special training and care after the delinquency. He says:

"The causes for failure as well as for success are undoubtedly complex in every case, but it is striking to find that in 52 per cent. of the failures diagnoses had earlier been made of abnormal mentality or personality."

From the normal group he reports 180 successes to 65 failures, while from the others there were only 60 successes to 81 failures. The group showing psychoses or psychopathic personalities contained only 11 suc-cesses to 28 failures.

Dr. Bernard Glueck, when he was director of the Psychiatric Clinic at Sing Sing prison, made the following analysis of the prison population there. He found that 59 per cent. showed some form of nervous or mental ab-normality. Of the sexual offenders, considered as being the most serious menace to society, 70 per cent. were mentally pathological.

The proportion who were repeaters was particularly high among the ab-normal. Of the mentally defective 80 per cent. were repeaters, of the in-sane 63 per cent. were old offenders, and of the psychopathic 87 per cent. had been in prison before.

Dr. Glueck also found that the ex-tent of psychopathologically classifiable cases is in direct ratio to the serious-ness of the offense. Of the criminals guilty of acquisitive crimes, such as larceny and burglary, 57 per cent. were abnormal, those guilty of crimes of pugnacity were 59 per cent. ab-normal, and of those guilty of sex offenses 70 per cent. were not normal mentally.

As a result of these findings it has been suggested that proper care of the mentally abnormal will reduce crime and the number of criminals.

If the population of the state and federal prisons is representative of the criminal population as a whole, then the group contains fewer foreign-born than native Americans. Even if we take into account the difference between the total number of native and the total number of foreign born in the country (*Turn to next page*)

Crime—*Cont'd*

(of course, the foreign-born element represents only a relatively small proportion of the total), still the foreign-born do not contribute quite their quota to the prisons. The exact figure, as found by H. H. Laughlin of the Carnegie Institution of Washington for the Congressional Committee on Immigration is 98.5 per cent of what might be expected on a basis of pure chance.

This figure will surprise a great many who have been led to believe that the proportion is much higher. Nevertheless, it is not to be considered as low. Our immigration laws are designed to exclude undesirable aliens, and they cannot be considered as fulfilling their purpose while the rate of crime among the immigrants is practically equal to that among our own native born. Would a law designed to prevent the importation of certain manufactured products be considered effective if 13.8 per cent. of those products on sale in the stores of this country were of foreign manufacture?

It is assumed that those individuals who come to our shores will be willing to keep our laws. Criminals cannot be classed as other than undesirable. Yet 13.8 per cent. of our prisoners in 1923 were of foreign birth. And it has been estimated that more than three-fifths of them are either foreign or the children of foreign parents.

The second generation of aliens is no less criminalistic than those freshly landed. The children of one native and one foreign-born parent exceed their quota by 15.58 per cent. Those having two native parents, on the other hand, fall short of the number which might be expected by 18.16 per cent. If we had a record of the number whose grandparents were native born, we might find the rate still smaller.

Not all countries contribute in the same degree to our crime problem. For example, Switzerland, Ireland, and Germany contribute respectively only 27, 31, and 35 per cent. of their quotas to the criminal institutions. Contrasted with this moderate record are the figures for Mexico, Spain and Serbia. These countries contribute 549 per cent., 660 per cent., and 1400 per cent. of their quotas. Northwestern Europe contributes only 38 per cent. of its quota; Southern and Eastern Europe, 141 per cent.; Asia, 252 per cent., and the Balkan States, 276 per cent.

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