

JOURNAL FOR CRIME RESEARCH IN SOUTH AFRICA (CRISA)

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Introduction

We live at a time where social problems confront us everywhere. Most sociologists consider a social problem to be an alleged situation that is incompatible with the values of a significant number of people who agree that action or remedy is needed to alter the situation (Lauer 1992; Horton et al 1994; Mooney et al 2000). Jamrozik and Nocella (1998:1) capture the essence of social problem when they point out that, "the term 'social problem' applies to social conditions, processes, societal arrangements or attitudes that are commonly perceived to be undesirable, negative, and threatening certain values or interests such as social cohesion, maintenance of law and order, moral standards, stability of social institutions, economic prosperity or individual freedoms". A social problem comprises the following aspects: a social problem becomes a social problem only when it is publicly perceived as one; a social problem involves a gap between social ideals and social realities; a social problem must be perceived as a problem by a significant number of the population; and, for a social problem to be regarded as such, a social condition must be considered capable of solution, as Horton et al (1994:2) put it, "through collective social action".

Crime is one of our major social problems presently. For example, the recent spate of bombings in Cape Town has become one of the major source of concern in South Africa today. Escalating crime is the subject of the high-level cooperation between the Ministers of the Departments of Safety & Security, Justice and Correctional Services, who deplore the crime situation that causes thousands of people to fear for their lives both in and outside their homes. All South Africans recognise crime as an issue of national concern today. In fact, the general epidemic of crime sweeping South Africa goes so deep that all South Africans fear that crime has to be defeated in order for us to achieve peace, stability and development.

Crime manifests itself in a violent way where victims are either injured or murdered or psychologically tortured. Criminal acts of violence may arise within families (interpersonal), groups of people in communities or within the whole society (intergroup). Crime violates the rights and dignity of people. Crime has an impact on the quality of life of the people in society. Capturing the impact of violence on the quality of life is not an easy task. To borrow Lauer's terminology, I suggest that we should see this impact of crime on human quality of life as: human injury and destruction; psychological disruption and dehumanization; and, crime as seductive self-destruction (Lauer 1992).

Banishing criminals to closed, crowded and depriving institutions is a common response to crime in South

Africa. However, prisons have also become the breeding ground for further violence. This prison violence is part of both 'human injury and destruction' and 'psychological disruption and dehumanization' in Lauer's classification. In 1995 alone hundreds of inmates were murdered, while another contingent of prisoners were victims of severe assaults that required medical attention. Prison violence is not directed at other prisoners only, but the prison officials are also targeted. This could be accounted for by the Prison Warders' hostages which took place especially in most parts of 1994.

Much of the violence in prisons is thought to be expressive and used as a means to reduce the pains of imprisonment. Harsh prison conditions are also believed to produce collective violence by generating pressures that become so intense that prisoners break out in unexpected fury. Note also that heightened expectations can also contribute to prison violence - For example, here you can think of the violence which followed the call for better treatment of inmates made by SAPOR (South African Prisoners' Organisation) to the Prison Authorities in 1994. Remember that this call was made on the basis of the Bill of Rights entrenched in the new Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. The Bill of Rights protects the interests of all the people of South Africa equally. This means that even prisoners are protected under this Bill. The question that is often asked by people in this country is whether their rights are the ones that should be protected or those of prisoners.

The correctional services are also affected by the present conditions of incarceration where young offenders should not be imprisoned. Some should either be paroled, some should be sent to reformatory schools, and some should be released from prison. Here the problem facing us is a question of young offenders who have committed violent criminal acts such as armed robbery where some innocent victims had been killed or maimed during the process, murder, assault causing grievous bodily harm on the victims, rape etc. Most of these young offenders who have been released under these guidelines have already been rearrested having committed the same serious crimes.

Perhaps, the question which should be addressed now is whether these offenders who commit violent acts of crime should be treated as juvenile offenders or adults by the criminal-justice system. Answering this question may not be easy considering the sensitivity of the matter.

Families are also subjected to violent crime which is perpetrated within the family units themselves. This is paradoxical as it is expected, and rightly so, that it is family members - of all people - who should love and protect one another. Yet in most cases in our country violent murders are perpetrated by spouses: For example we have numerous cases where husbands murder their wives and children and thereafter commit suicide.

Criminal acts of violence in the family has for a long time been submerged or ignored by authorities. It was seen as simply a personal trouble between two individuals or more within that family set-up, rather than a

public issue of social structure. It was not until the feminists took up this issue with the authorities - that violence within the family is related to institutions such as the law and ideologies such as patriarchy - that violence within the family was taken as a social problem.

I think that this initiative of introducing an electronic journal of Crime Research in South Africa will assist Criminologists, Forensic Scientists, Law Enforcement Officers and the total Criminal Justice System to have access to scientific information that will help them to succeed in curbing crime. It should be noted that without this approach which brings together all individuals whose task is to bring about safety in South Africa, police persons will function only as incidence responders and never getting the opportunity to get to the roots of crime which is tearing this country apart.

The reality facing South Africa today is that there are thousands of 'predators' roaming the streets looking for 'prey'. Thus, policymakers and politicians have to keep this in mind when they respond to this social problem. Perhaps certain programmes and policies are needed to prevent and treat the causes of crime.

It is my pleasure to now introduce Volume 1, Number 1 of our new electronic journal for "Crime Research in South Africa" (4 October 2000) which, is a production of scientific research on crime that will benefit Criminologists, Forensic Scientists, Law Enforcement Officers and the total Criminal Justice System of South Africa. The value of this journal is attested to by the articles that are covered, viz.: The Crime Situation at National, Provincial, Area and Station Level; The Citizen and the law: Certain Rights and Limitations; The Web and rating Systems; The Victims of Attacks on Police Officials in South Africa; Profiling 'Cop Killers' in South Africa; Crime Prevention at Business Complexes: A Case Study at Centurion Centre; The Effect of Violent Internet Games on Children and Juveniles; The Bill of Rights in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and its Application within the Criminal Justice System.

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