

THE CRIME COMMISSION CONCEPT: SOME SOCIOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS

Alex S Freedman, Northeastern Oklahoma State University

THE PROBLEM

Despite the fact that crime commissions have been in vogue for several decades, there is no concise institutionalized meaning attributed to the concept. Those in law enforcement may well see it in terms of additional political pressure. Journalists may view such bodies as added options for obtaining news about crime via investigative reporting. Citizens, when they are acting out their prerogative of "law and order" and "civic responsibility" may feel that this is the area of public activity in which they may insure greater integrity in law enforcement social systems.

The dichotomy which is apparent here tends to support an interesting pattern: 1) professional law enforcement officials including police officers, lawyers, judges, mayors and others see the political side of the spectrum; 2) non-professionals including students, teachers, social workers, and engineers see the more humanitarian attributes of the crime commission.

An extension of the lay approach may well be shown in a form of outrage on the part of some citizens to demand that something be done, usually when there is a rising crime rate. It is the conviction of many citizens that one must take a stand on crime to protect one's home and family. Much of this emotional appeal is generated by the mass media, including the press, television, radio, and periodicals. By operating more on the emotional than on the objective level, the crime commission becomes a vehicle of socio-cultural change.

The crime commission may be viewed as an institutional agency with a mission to accomplish. From a positive point of view, it denotes citizens working with the law enforcement agencies, namely, the police and the court system. From a negative point of view, the implications are somewhat different, in that the autonomy and integrity of the police and the courts are questioned. They may even be suspect. In essence, the crime commission in our society can be a most useful means for gaining some control over the complexity of the crime problem. Or the crime commission

may serve as a bridge between the ideology of crime control and the reality experienced by many commissioners who have viewpoints completely foreign to the legalist syndrome of values and procedures of those in control. In this case, the crime commission becomes a specialized agency which allows for very little new input into the criminal justice system.

There is a whole folklore of opinions and values linked with the formation of a crime commission. Much of this centers on the selection of personnel as to background, training and interests. Many of these assumptions are made in anticipation of collusion between the commission on the one hand and the existing criminal justice system on the other. One assumption is that police officers should not serve on such bodies. This is the most obvious indicator of fear of collusion. It appears to make little difference whether or not the police officer is on active duty or retired. This same type of reasoning may apply to lawyers, judges and former members of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Nevertheless, such specialists do serve on crime commissions around the country. When they do serve, the rationale for having them is that they have experience in such matters. One could reason just as well that they perhaps know a great deal more about corruption in the criminal justice system, and that this may be more an asset than a liability to the objectives of a crime commission. By the same token, what is to prevent or to insure against ordinary citizens, including women and black persons and other members of minority groups who may serve on a crime commission from playing the role of corruptee in response to the inducements and pressures of a corrupter or a member of organized crime?

For those outsiders who become crime commission members, the expectations of role playing are somewhat obscure. One may be expected to probe into a multitude of community and bureaucratic practices. Such flexibility may approach the extraordinary. For example, a study of the financial structure of the city budget may be a case in point. This can be instituted in order to provide more money for police protection. Another more

specific form of activity may be an investigation of police bribery and police treatment of minorities. And the commission may begin a deep probe into recruitment policies adhered to by the local police department with some type of racial balance as the desideratum. Other activities of the commission may include organization of burglary prevention programs, police seminars, and sitting in as observers during criminal court cases.

In brief, the overall function of a local crime commission is to make recommendations to the local government regarding law enforcement and crime prevention. There may be some liaison between local and state commissions. In some instances, the federal government may be involved. Metropolitan crime commissions have a tendency to function as autonomous bodies. In some respects, they perform the same service with more legal muscle as investigative reporters. Their oldest allies may well be the daily newspaper and local television and radio stations. They may also serve as FBI informers.

How effective such influences may be in a community remains problematic. In some ways police are the only ones who can enforce the laws. The crime commission, by finding fault with the system or the establishment may find itself in a position of being labeled *extralegal* as well as *suspect*. It may serve little function in revamping operations in established jurisdictions. At the other extreme, the crime commission actually runs the town. In some communities all governmental agencies including the police await the actions and policies of the local crime commission.

THE PUBLIC VIEW

In what ways does the public view the crime commission? Responses to such a question are varied. When asked, whether they would mind serving as a member of a crime commission, some claim that they know absolutely nothing about it. Among college students, one or two wanted to know if they could be paid for such service. A housewife said that it was not a bad idea, but that she had no time for it. A college professor of history said that he would serve, and "try to feel his way along." A 25-year old female college student was completely negative to the idea because she lacked any knowledge of the law. A 40-year old woman in a special education college program

thought persons selected for service on a crime commission should be trained, and should not be selected at random. She thought that the crime commission was no place for amateurs or the uninitiated. Among some 30 open-end interviews drawn at random by students enrolled in a college course in criminology, such comments were drawn.

Respondents were asked if they knew what a crime commission was, and whether they would serve on such a body if asked. The hypothesis was that the concept of the crime commission was so vague that except for law enforcement personnel, members of the community would give naive responses. Generally, the hypothesis was supported. Students in the criminology class were quite limited in knowledge of the concept. Those from the metropolitan areas were much more knowledgeable. Small towns and rural areas are more characterized by authoritarian police service combined with intimate knowledge and friendship between residents and police.

Television, movies and paper-back books are responsible for what information some persons have about crime commissions. There is also much confusion between a grand jury, called a *police jury* in some states, and a crime commission. Other attitudes revealed a strong sense of loyalty, duty and civic pride: "I would be proud to serve." "It would be a good chance to help people." "It is every man's duty as a citizen to serve on a crime commission." These may be seen as idealistic reactions to a challenging question which serves to test the extent of one's democratic attitude and involvement posture. Many citizens who become members of crime commissions hold similar convictions.

Occupation does make a difference. A person's social status and class position may determine how s/he is willing to spend spare time. A middle-aged self-employed grocer stated that he wanted no involvement with such a commission. A practicing attorney experienced with citizens' groups called it a good idea. A middle-aged white male said that criminal action is not for amateurs to deliberate, and that the community should leave law enforcement to the duly elected and appointed officials.

THE POLICE VIEW

Law enforcement officers represent an

important source of information for the organization and implementation of crime commissions. A state police dispatcher indicated that such an agency could right many wrongs within the system. He contended that stiffness of penalty had little to do with deterring crime, but that the swiftness of the sentence was far more important. A state police trooper was positive in his thinking towards a crime commission. He said that a change was needed in police agencies such as all counties having competent juvenile officers assigned to them because most criminals make the turn to crime as juveniles. He also felt that law enforcement officers should work closely with the schools in prevention of crime. He was critical of courtroom procedures which worked against the ends of law enforcement. A lieutenant of state troopers appeared positive toward the crime commission concept. He was critical of justice administered by elected sheriffs who may not stay to deal with the mess they may originate while in office. And he noted the problem of small-town police departments which experience high turnover in personnel due to low pay. He thought that 10 of 12 votes should constitute a valid jury decision, without requiring a unanimous vote of the 12 jurors. His years of experience had demonstrated to him the necessity of streamlining court procedures to the extent where both defense attorney and prosecuting attorney should be under oath.

Most of the law enforcement officers were positive toward the crime commission concept, and are willing to discuss weak links in the system of criminal justice as they know it. As one moves away from lawyers, sheriffs and state troopers, other factors become important which may not support the law enforcement syndrome. Humanitarian values appear, and legal considerations sink into the background. Efficient crime commissions of the future may require crash training programs for maximum input and efficiency.

CONCLUSION

Simply to place individuals in positive and negative categories is not enough. Citizens have a genuine interest in exercising their prerogatives, but certain barriers which block the path to citizen involvement. Some would not serve on a crime commission simply

because they know nothing about it. There is a kind of ambivalence to be reckoned with between law enforcement and the criminal justice. For some the best policy is to have nothing to do with the law.

What some citizens see as a moral duty is seen by others as an activity which should not concern lay persons. And young adults may lack depth of experience or social perception, and may identify more with the contraculture. Young people may say that they know nothing about the crime commission concept when they mean that they do not wish to oppose anyone among their age peers

Another side of this issue revolves around something which may be called the *conspiracy theory of government*. This theory suggests that the important decisions behind law and order are predetermined by one's social class position, wealth, influence, and personal connections. The secondary issue is the *futility doctrine* that there is nothing anyone can do about the situation. This is a philosophy of doom. There is a tendency to suppose someone else should take care of the problem.

Crime commissions are hybrid organizations as regards social power. They have little power of their own. All that they can hope to do is to exercise some influence on future policy. Citizens may be much more prone to leave it all to the civil agencies rather than spend laborious hours studying critical community problems such as the crime problem. It is also likely that the poor image of crime commissions is generated by their inability to act during times of crisis. Where understanding of crime is most needed, in the crime commission, the drive to middle class values is unrealistic, and inconsequential in recommendations for policy and community action.

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