

## **Crime and Rhetoric**

By Thomas Sowell

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Oakland, California, continues to suffer the high crime rate, and especially the high murder rate, which has long afflicted that city. Judging by a recent speech by its current mayor, long-time leftist Ron Dellums, it can look forward to a future all too much like its past.

Why is Oakland so crime-ridden? According to Mayor Dellums, "we have closed our eyes to the injustices and inequities, and now we are reaping the wild winds of that disregard for a whole range of people."

This is the "root causes of crime" rhetoric of the 1960s, still going strong on the left today, despite mountains of evidence to the contrary that have accumulated in the decades since then.

That is what makes Oakland's problem more than just Oakland's problem -- or even America's problem. The same kind of thinking prevails on the left in other countries, producing the same kinds of dire results.

As British writer Peter Hitchens put it: "England is rapidly becoming a place where the good are afraid of the bad and the bad are not afraid of anything."

He also said, "The sheer concrete-headed stupidity of most political statements about crime defies belief." Both statements would apply as much in Oakland as they do in London -- and in many other places in between.

A newspaper account of Oakland mayor Ron Dellums' speech said that he was "clearly comfortable with what he was conveying and speaking without notes."

Why should he be uncomfortable or need notes to be repeating the same politically correct notions that the entire left -- here and overseas -- has been repeating like a mantra for nearly half a century? Would you need notes to recite the alphabet?

The idea that "injustices and inequities" explain crime goes back more than two centuries. You can find it in William Godwin's 1793 book, "Enquiry Concerning Political Justice" in England and even earlier in a number of writers in France.

It is the hallmark of the left around the world.

While such ideas have been around for centuries, they did not become the dominant ideas among those making legal and political policy until the second half of the 20th century -- more specifically, the 1960s in the United States.

What was crime like in 1960, before these ideas took over in our courts and in the legislative and executive branches of government?

As of 1960, the murder rate had been going down for decades -- among blacks and whites alike -- and was just under half of what it had been back in 1934.

Were there no "injustices and inequities" in 1960 and in the prior decades? No one who is old enough to remember those times could believe that.

It was precisely the rise to power in the 1960s (in the courts as well as in politics) of those who believed that "injustices and inequities" were the causes of crime which marked a de-emphasis on law enforcement and imprisonment -- and marked one of the most dramatic increases in crime in our history.

Having declined for decades on end, the murder rate suddenly doubled between 1961 and 1974. The rate at which citizens became victims of violent crimes in general tripled.

Such trends began at different times in different countries but the patterns remained very similar. As the rates of imprisonment declined, crime rates soared -- whether in England, Australia, New Zealand or the United States.

After a whole generation of crime victims were sacrificed on the altar to the theories of the left, a political backlash produced higher rates of imprisonment -- and lower rates of crime - in all these countries in the late 20th century.

We are still not back to where we were in 1960, as regards either the level of crime or the downward trend in murder rates. The notions of the left are still going strong in the media, in academia, and in politics.

The left is still comfortable talking about "injustices and inequities" -- even without notes -- and certainly without confronting the vast amount of evidence that they are wrong.