

AMERICA'S CRIMINAL RECORD

The afflicted society



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IT WAS DIVULGED the other day, as if it were just any other curio statistic, that one in every hundred Americans is now domiciled in a penitentiary. This is not just another statistic. It says something serious about our nation's health.

Just as a patient's white blood cell count tells a doctor something significant about that patient's health, a country's penitentiary population, or convict count, says something significant about that country's cultural health. When either count is too high, the question is not whether there is illness, but rather how bad the illness is. Judging by the prisoner populations of other countries, our society is extremely ill.

We don't walk around thinking of America as being sick at all. We take as gospel the mantra: America is the greatest country in the world. It turns out, though, that no other country in the world, including even Russia, imprisons one in 100. The British imprison one in 666; the Australians, one in 1,000; the French, one in 1,500; the Scandinavians, one in 2,000; and so it goes. America's cultural primacy is hard to square with numbers like these. It's enough to make us stop and wonder what our definition of "greatest" is.

We think of America as happy and healthy. Certainly Madison Avenue and politicians tell us so. We seem to have the physical evidence to prove it. After all, most of us live in decent homes in decent suburbs, have a vehicle or two, two or three color TVs,



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cable, functioning HVAC, and obviously more than enough to eat and drink. But few of us have occasion to notice the physical evidence of our enormous prison population, which lurks beyond the boundaries of our suburbs.

Out of sight, out of mind, the sheer number of our prisons is not apparent in our daily comings and goings. However, flying a small plane at low

altitude reveals just how commonplace prisons actually are in the land of the free. It wasn't that way 30 years ago, back when we were still building colleges faster than prisons. Across our countryside, hidden from the daily view, dozens of prisons per state stand as undeniable evidence that something serious ails America.

You don't have to go up in a plane to verify this. Type "Virginia Department of Corrections" into Google, then click on "facilities." There you will see a list of some 44 prisons and "correctional" facilities in Virginia alone.

When it comes to what's wrong with the world, we Americans have a distinctly outward orientation. For good historical reasons, we have long been accustomed to looking overseas to identify the world's trouble spots. But the times are changing. Truth is, so is America. Our national criminal record cries out for a little more national introspection.

The wealthiest county in the world simply should not have the worst criminal record in the world. That is a point we need not debate. Nor is it one we can afford to ignore.

Yes, we should defend our clear and present, and even future, interests overseas. But that mission should not become an obsessive preoccupation that blinds and distracts us to threats to our interests right here at home.

Step one is to recognize this symptom for what it is. Only then can we begin to think clearly about etiology, treatment plan, prognosis and such.

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