

Defining Deviancy Down

Contributed by Josh Dirkse

"Defining deviancy down" is a commonly known phrase coined by the late New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. In 1993, Moynihan wrote a report entitled, "How We've Become Accustomed to Alarming Levels of Crime and Destructive Behavior," in response to the sharp increase of violent deaths apart of the so-called "culture of crime" in the early 1990s. The report's subtitle stated above explains the result of the concept of "defining deviancy down." Moynihan argues that American culture and politics, with an increase in deviant behavior, redefines deviance and lowers the "normal" level of deviancy warranted by the increase in such behavior. In layman's terms, with an increase in violent behavior, some crimes become normal and only extraordinary crimes are of interest to us.

Moynihan's idea was relevant in 1993, and I feel it is now re-emerging in relevancy in our present time. With the recent rash of violence that has plagued Milwaukee, our state and our country, we are again at risk of applying Moynihan's argument to our present situation. As of October 10th, Milwaukee's homicide count is at 90. Last year at this time, the number of homicides was at 99. Homicides may be at a smaller rate than last year, but there is no factor of aggravated assaults, shooting injuries or armed robberies. The count included a bloody day in Milwaukee on October 10th, as a mother and two sons were killed execution style. Furthermore, a robbery that turned deadly hit close to home for UWM students. Joseph Munz, a UWM junior and Jimmy John's delivery man, was robbed, assaulted and shot by a 24-year-old man under "extended supervision" for a hit-and-run death of a 3-year-old child. That Tuesday was a dark day for Milwaukee, but was the first outside of one of Milwaukee's most violent summers on record. Memorial Day was not highlighted by the events honoring those who served in our armed forces, but by the astonishing number of shootings that occurred that weekend. Milwaukee gained national attention as twenty-eight shootings were recorded, four of them fatal. Later on in the summer, a Special Olympics competitor was shot after handing over his wallet to robbers while waiting for his bus to work. Nineteen men raped an 11-year-old girl, and outlandishly taped the ordeal. For me, it wasn't the sheer amount of violent crimes, but the relative frequency and the magnitude of violence that was committed. The news coverage and my personal interest were soon subject to "defining deviancy down"; I wasn't as concerned with "unimportant" shootings as I was with atrocious acts of violence. It became known midway through the summer that Milwaukee's crime rate had grown more than any city in the nation with a population of 250,000 or more since last year. This prompted many local officials to react to the increase in violence, and with a wide variety of solutions. Milwaukee Police Chief Nan Hegerty called our current situation a "societal crisis," while Mayor Tom Barrett downplayed her comments as simple demagoguery. Dollar figures were tossed around, but many looked in different directions. A short time after Chief Hegerty made her comments, I attended a fundraiser for gubernatorial candidate Congressman Mark Green. Former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani spoke at the event and touched widely on his reduction of violence in New York, and how it is a suitable model for how Milwaukee should work to reduce crime.

Giuliani used the brilliant "Broken Windows" theory, derived by two professors nearly twenty-five years ago, in his focus on crime. The theory states that to deter violent crime, a city must focus on small crimes and misdemeanors, like breaking windows. Giuliani decided to focus on things like drug dealing, graffiti, prostitution and aggressive panhandling. By focusing on these crimes, the city kept crimes from getting progressively worse in the long run, as people were seeing more people being arrested for more crimes. This, of course, was done with an increased force and an increase in spending. Regardless, Giuliani and the NYPD took New York from the "crime capital" of America to America's safest large city. Recently, after the October 10th shootings, many local officials again offered their solutions to the problem. Primarily, two drastically different solutions came to the forefront. Chief Hegerty has praised Mayor Barrett for adding forty new officers to the city's force in his annual budget, but says that it's not enough. She offered Giuliani's situation as an example as to how beefing up forces can deter crime. She says that the department is now dealing with violent crime, while less violent crimes or non-violent misdemeanors are now taking a back seat. In effect, the department is "defining deviance down." East Side Alderman Michael D'Amato believes we need to take a different path. His plans would include taking money that is spent on a more bulked police force and putting it into social programs like job creation and public health initiatives. D'Amato called these programs a cure for the root of crime. I feel that both plans are very respectable and both are envisioned at the root of the problem. But, I also feel that Milwaukee first needs to establish more of a police presence on the streets. The Mayor's budget calls for an increase in police officers, but I don't feel that forty is enough. We need to cure this emerging crime culture in Milwaukee before it grows exponentially out of control. Then, we can implement Alderman D'Amato's plan for battling the root causes of violence with increased social programs. We need a quick solution, just as New York City did. We need to cure this plague of violence in this city and save it from sinking further. Once this problem is cured, we need to focus on children and educate them about deterrence from violence and create a social stability in the city through public initiatives. We also need to be careful to concentrate on the small crimes and misdemeanors inherent in the "Broken Windows" theory. This allows us to root out small crimes, before the bar is set low in crime. In essence, the police department, as well the public, need to save itself from "defining deviance down."