

BRIEF ANALYSIS

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The Crime Bill That Deserves to Stay Dead

President Clinton has blamed the defeat of the crime bill on obstructionist Republicans and the National Rifle Association, and the Democratic leadership in the House of Representatives is threatening to force another vote. If they do so, the bill deserves to be defeated a second time. The bill would direct taxpayer dollars to pork barrel projects and questionable social programs, it would do little to deter crime and, instead of making our streets safer, it might make them less safe.

The bill would increase the street presence of police by only 2,000 rather than 100,000. The White House has repeatedly stated that the crime bill would put an additional 100,000 police officers on the street. But *the actual number of fully funded new police officers would be only 20,000, and the number on the street at any one time would be closer to 2,000.*

The bill would authorize \$8.8 billion over six years for new officers, or an average of about \$1.475 billion per year. Even with local governments providing their required 25 percent share, and even with each new officer costing only \$40,000 per year, there would be enough money for only 36,875 new officers. But with salary and benefits and necessary equipment, the actual cost of putting a new officer on the street averages more than \$50,000. Many cities say the cost is over \$70,000. This means that fewer than 30,000 new officers could be hired.

Even that estimate almost certainly is far too high. The bill provides that almost 35 percent of the new funds could be used for equipment, computers and overtime for existing officers and for certain social or community activities.

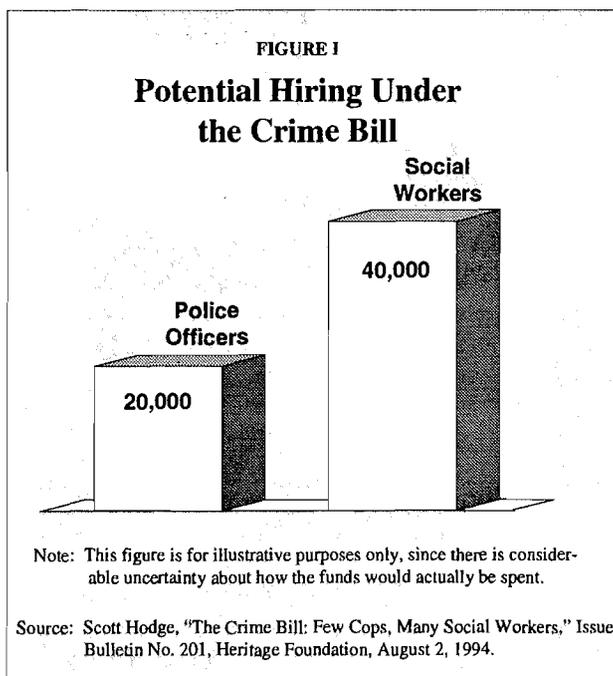
- Thus, the bill would actually fund only about 20,000 new police officers, a national increase of only 3 percent.
- Since according to Princeton University criminologist John DiIulio, it takes 10 police officers to keep one full-time officer on the street, the bill would actually fund only 2,000 round-the-clock cops.
- Assuming 200 jurisdictions, DiIulio calculates the bill would increase actual street strength by only 10 cops per city.

Moreover, the bill would give the attorney general discretion over distribution of 75 percent of the community policing funds. This means that a lot of the money would be spent in smaller cities because of politics rather than in larger cities with the most serious crime problems.

The bill would fund more social workers than police officers. The bill authorizes \$8.7 billion for new social programs under the guise of "crime prevention"—almost as much money as it provides to hire police. [See Figure II.] Moreover, unlike the police money, these funds would not have to be matched by state and local governments. Programs include:

- \$40 million for midnight basketball leagues;
- \$50 million for youth development; and
- \$630 million for such "child-centered activities" as arts, crafts and dance.

Scott Hodge of the Heritage Foundation calculates that it costs half as much to hire a social worker as a police officer. So if all this money went for social workers, the bill would fund twice as many social workers as police officers. [See Figure I.]



The bill might actually increase the amount of crime. The bill authorizes \$8.7 billion in grants to states to build prisons and boot camps. The White House says this will ensure that violent criminals will serve long sentences. But like much of the rest of the bill, the provision is riddled with loopholes. States could qualify for the money by establishing alternative programs for nonviolent offenders without building a single prison cell.

Even worse, the bill contains a so-called safety valve provision that would allow certain convicted drug offenders in federal prisons to go back to court and have their sentences reduced or be released. According to Professor DiIulio, this provision would immediately apply to 5,000 so-called low-level drug offenders and could extend to as many as 16,000. This well-intended provision sprang from a number of cases in which drug offenders were given federal sentences that seemed unduly harsh. From this arose the misconception that many, if not most, prisoners are petty first-time offenders with few previous arrests, no previous convictions and no history of violence. In fact:

- Of the 35,000 newly admitted federal prisoners in 1991, only 2 percent or about 700 were convicted of mere drug possession.
- Many prisoners who appear to be first-time nonviolent drug offenders are plea-bargained violent or repeat offenders or have long, undisclosed juvenile records.
- Over half of all federal prisoners have a history of violence, and only 6 percent of all state prisoners are nonviolent offenders without previous convictions.

By enabling the release of many of these prisoners, the crime bill may cause the number of dangerous criminals on the street to go up, not down.

The bill is laden with pork. To appease Rep. Jack Brooks (D-TX), chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, the bill includes \$10 million to establish a criminal justice research center in his congressional district. Other pork in the bill includes:

- \$900 million for youth employment, even though the federal government already spends \$25 billion on 154 job training programs.
- \$1.8 billion for local job, education and substance abuse control programs with no requirement that they be connected with fighting crime.
- \$895 million for "model intensive grants" that can be

used for almost any program that could be remotely linked to crime reduction.

The bill's gun ban would have little impact on crime. The 19 assault weapons that would be banned by the bill are rifles that look mean. They're almost never used in crimes. In fact, half again as many murders are committed with fists in any year as with rifles of all kinds.

Considering the crime bill on balance. Polls show that crime is the number one issue of public concern. There are indications that a majority believe

crime is a result of a breakdown of moral character and not a result of joblessness, poverty or lack of education. There are also indications that a majority believe the criminal justice system does not hold criminals accountable for their crimes. Currently, one of every three persons arrested for violent crimes is either on probation or parole or out on pretrial release — in other words, one-third of those who are arrested today should already have been off the streets.

The crime bill would do little or nothing to reduce the amount of crime. Besides proposing to waste most of its \$33 billion in taxpayer money, the bill would impose heavy costs on state and local governments. Reviving the bill for another vote will not change that fact.

