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Essay by William Voegeli

CRIME AND THE DEMOCRATS, REVISITED

The root causes of the party's dilemma.



TWO YEARS AGO, WHEN I WROTE ABOUT crime for *CRB* (“Criminal Negligence,” Summer 2021), many observers were connecting the increase in U.S. crime rates to the COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020. The implication, and hope, was that the end of the pandemic would see crime recede at least to where it had been before 2020.

The pandemic is indeed over, but the crime wave continues. Earlier this year, the Council on Criminal Justice reported that homicides were 4% lower in 2022 than in 2021, but that this small decline still left them 34% higher than in 2019. Motor vehicle theft in 2022 was 21% higher than in 2021 and 59% higher than in 2019.

The National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), a division of the Centers for Disease Control, paints a similar picture. Deaths attributable to homicide fell from 10.5 per 100,000 Americans in 1991 to 5.0 per 100,000 in 2014, then began to increase. The most recent NCHS data, through the end of June 2022, show deaths by homicide varying in a narrow range established at the end of 2020, between 7.5 per 100,000 and 7.9. The

country is not—yet—as dangerous as it was 30 years ago. But over the past decade, and especially the past three years, we appear to have given back about half the gains made since the early 1990s.

It appears increasingly doubtful, then, that the crime problem will conveniently solve itself, sparing America’s citizens and public officials from having to respond to it. This problem is particularly acute for Democrats, since Republicans are not conflicted about fighting crime with more assertive policing and sentencing policies. In surveys conducted last year by Stanley Greenberg, a pollster affiliated with the Democratic Party (and husband of Democratic congresswoman Rosa DeLauro), 56% of voters said that their biggest fear about Democrats controlling government was “crime and homelessness out of control in cities and police coming under attack.”

Defending Defunding

CHICAGO’S 2023 MAYORAL ELECTION is the most recent, and telling, indication of the Democrats’ response to

crime. The election had two phases. In the first, nine candidates vied for an absolute majority, which would have settled the race and given the city its mayor for the next four years. In the likelier event that no candidate surpassed 50% of the vote, the first- and second-place finishers would face each other in a runoff election.

The big story from the initial round, held on February 28, was the repudiation of incumbent Lori Lightfoot. The surprise victor in 2019, she had grown so unpopular in office that voters made her the first Chicago mayor in 40 years to be defeated when seeking reelection. Lightfoot finished third, with 16.8% of the vote, behind Paul Vallas (32.9%), the appointed head of the city’s school system in the 1990s, and Brandon Johnson (21.6%), a former schoolteacher and Chicago Teachers Union organizer who had been elected to the Cook County Commission in 2018.

Why was Lightfoot rejected? The consensus explanation was that voters had judged her response to Chicago’s growing crime problem irresolute and ineffective. Lightfoot’s “stunning loss,” wrote political consultant Douglas Schoen in an opinion piece for *The Hill*,



A Vote Against Vigilance

should warn Democrats: “Even in the most liberal areas, a perceived failure by those in power to address surging crime will bring undesirable electoral consequences for the party.” In 2019 there were 500 murders in Chicago, a number that grew to 776 in 2020 and 804 in 2021. The 2022 figure, 695, represented an improvement but was still 39% higher than when Lightfoot took office. Motor vehicle theft, the city’s police department reported, was 139% higher in 2022 than it had been in 2019. According to a study by Wirepoints, an Illinois-based policy data research organization, Chicago had a murder rate of 25.8 per 100,000 residents last year. Of the 25 most populous American cities, only two—Philadelphia (32.7) and Washington, D.C. (30.3)—had higher rates. Thirteen of the 25 had a murder rate below 12.9 per 100,000, half of Chicago’s.

In a city where non-Hispanic whites account for 31.4% of the population, Vallas was the only white candidate in the initial field. Nonetheless, his first-place finish and a campaign that constantly stressed public safety made him the favorite in the runoff election. In February, a consortium of media outlets released a poll showing that 44% of Chicagoans named crime and public safety as the most important issue in the mayoral election (no other issue was named by more than 13% of respondents), and 63% said that they personally felt unsafe in the city. “Crime is out of control,” Vallas said in one campaign ad. He made clear at every opportunity that, as his website stated, “ensuring our residents’ safety is my top priority.”

Moreover, Vallas was concentrating on an issue that was not only voters’ greatest concern but appeared to be his opponent’s biggest vulnerability. During the post-George Floyd unrest in 2020, Brandon Johnson had sponsored a Cook County board resolution, “Justice for Black Lives,” which called on the county to “redirect funds from policing and incarceration to public services not administered by law enforcement.” (Johnson, like Lori Lightfoot and 28.7% of Chicagoans, is black.) Later that year Johnson told an interviewer, “I don’t look at [Defund the Police] as a slogan. It’s an actual, real political goal.” During the 2023 mayoral campaign, Johnson tried to distance himself from that remark: “I said it was a political goal. I never said it was mine.” But no Chicagoan could doubt that Johnson understood crime reduction primarily in terms of social welfare and education, not policing and courts. “We can deal with the immediate challenge of public safety in the city of Chicago and get at the root causes,” he said during the campaign.

IT WAS, THEN, A SIGNIFICANT SURPRISE when Johnson defeated Vallas in the April 4 runoff election, 52.2% to 47.8%. No election turns entirely on a single factor. Vallas, it must be said, appears to have little talent for retail politics. He has now run for office four times in Illinois since the year 2000 without ever winning.

Still, the contest between Vallas and Johnson was about as close as we’ll get to laboratory conditions for testing the relative strength within the Democratic Party of two opposed views about crime. (Although the election was officially nonpartisan, all nine candidates were registered Democrats.) Vallas’s law-and-order message echoed not only the Republican Party of Richard Nixon but the Democratic Party of Bill Clinton and, in a previous iteration, Joe Biden, who as a senator had sponsored the Violent Crime Control and Law

Enforcement Act of 1994. (“It doesn’t matter whether or not [criminals are] the victims of society,” Biden said in 1993. “I don’t want to ask, ‘What made them do this?’ They must be taken off the street.”) Vallas called for increasing the size of the Chicago police department and enforcing public nuisance and retail theft laws with renewed vigor.

Johnson, by contrast, was the only one of the nine initial candidates who did not commit to increasing the number of cops on the street. The central element of his “Plan for a Safer Chicago” involved “reversing decades of under-investment in our youth, mental health services, and victim support.” The key to steering young people “away from gun violence and carjackings,” the campaign said, “is by treating their trauma and giving them hope.”

The journalist’s rule of thumb is that three similar events in close succession confirm the emergence of a trend. A Vallas victory in April would have established a narrative about how even the most Democratic cities had be-

come so fed up with crime that they were demanding robust law enforcement to contain it. First, Eric Adams, a former police officer who made public safety the centerpiece of his campaign, was elected mayor of New York City in 2021. The following year, San Francisco evicted District Attorney Chesa Boudin in a recall election, in which 55% of the votes were against him. Promising “radical change to how we envision justice,” Boudin had won the office in 2019 but quickly became controversial as crime rose in San Francisco while his office limited the use of bail and pursued alternatives to incarceration.

The closer parallel to Chicago turned out to be the election of Democratic congresswoman Karen Bass as mayor of Los Angeles in 2022. Bass defeated billionaire real estate developer Rick Caruso, whose lavishly self-financed campaign called for aggressive efforts to fight crime. Bass took a more modulated position, endorsing additional police patrols while also saying, “We’ve tried to arrest our way out of a crime crisis before. It didn’t work.”

New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles have more crime than they did a decade ago, but all three are far safer than Chicago. According to Wirepoints, the New York murder rate is 5.2 per 100,000 residents, only a fifth of Chicago’s. San Francisco’s is 6.9 per 100,000 and Los Angeles’s is 9.9. It is also true that all four are, like most big cities in the U.S., heavily Democratic. Joe Biden carried New York City with 76% of the vote in November 2020, while winning 83% in Chicago, 85% in San Francisco, and 77% in Los Angeles.

Chicago Democrats

GIVEN THE SEVERITY OF CHICAGO’S crime problem, Brandon Johnson’s victory argues that root-causes Democrats are, at the very least, able to hold their own in intraparty contests with law-and-order Democrats. This might not matter, politically, if the Democrats could count on getting three fourths of the vote in the entire country, the way they do in its biggest cities. In *that* America, the reluctance to arrest and prosecute would not jeopardize the party’s prospects.

In the America that now exists, however, Republicans and Democrats are almost evenly divided. This makes the progressive Democrats’ aversion to law enforcement, and faith in the power of social programs to promote public safety by treating prospective criminals’ trauma and giving them hope, a major difficulty for the party. The extent of this difficulty can be seen in two other recent political developments. First, in March, President Biden announced that he would not veto a congres-

Books mentioned in this essay:

Thinking About Crime,
by James Q. Wilson. Basic Books,
320 pages, \$18.99 (paper)

*The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration
in the Age of Colorblindness*,
by Michelle Alexander.
The New Press, 432 pages,
\$27.99 (cloth), \$18.99 (paper)



sional resolution that rescinded the Washington, D.C., city council's revised criminal code. Biden cited the code's reduction of the maximum penalty for carjacking as one feature he disliked. Progressive Democrats in Congress were incensed by the president's decision, but liberal journalist Jill Lawrence argued on *The Bulwark* that it was "not a hard call" for Biden to get Democrats on the right side of an issue that is "a clear and present danger both on the streets and to their party."

Second, the week after Johnson won Chicago's runoff election (but before he took office), the Democratic National Committee announced that Chicago had been chosen over New York and Atlanta as the site of the party's 2024 national convention. Such decisions are deliberated for many months, of course, so the outcome of Chicago's 2023 mayoral election was not as important a consideration as hotel capacity and the desire to strengthen the party in a region that saw Donald Trump carry Michigan and Wisconsin in 2016 but lose both states four years later. Still, a 2024 convention in Chicago means that the entire Democratic Party now has a lot riding on how Mayor Johnson deals with public safety. If crime remains the city's worst problem, Republicans will be more than happy to cut ads that feature police sirens and yellow crime-scene tape, warning voters that "Chicago Democrats" want to make the rest of America more like the Windy City.

Democrats, it would seem, are both helped and harmed by their political hegemony in urban America. Dominating big cities (along with college towns and gentry suburbs) puts Democrats at risk of inhabiting an echo chamber, where few people notice obvious vulnerabilities created by the party's words and deeds. David Axelrod, a Chicago journalist before he became an advisor to Barack Obama, pointed out in *The Atlantic* one difficulty with Brandon Johnson's root-causes approach: even if we make the most generous assumptions about social welfare programs' capacity to reduce crime, it's "a long-term strategy for an immediate crisis."

The Root Causes Rationalization

AND IF WE DO NOT MAKE THOSE GENEROUS assumptions, then the argument that addressing crime's root causes is the only plausible, decent way to achieve public safety is as insubstantial today as it was during the crime wave from the 1960s through the 1980s. James Q. Wilson, who died in 2012, became the most influential social scientist in America during those years, in part by demonstrating the root-causes argu-

ment's flaws. His collection of essays, *Thinking About Crime* (1975), showed that poverty could account for only a small part of criminal conduct. It is, he wrote, "far from clear that giving more opportunities or higher incomes to offenders will lead them to commit fewer crimes, and it is even less clear that programs designed to make society as a whole better off will lower the crime rate."

Further, even if one stipulates that "kindness, better housing, improved diets, or lessened child abuse will reduce crime," there are few reasons to believe, and many to doubt, that government in America is proficient at alleviating these social ills. Wilson did not take the categorical position that all social programs are doomed to be ineffectual wastes of money. But writing in 2009, more than 40 years after the Great Society and War on Poverty began, Wilson said we should be skeptical even about initiatives that seem promising. For one thing, "programs that work are typically small, intense efforts that may or may not work if they are scaled up to be state-wide or nation-wide efforts run, not by skilled therapists, but by ordinary folks." It is also the case that we know too much about the arc of government programs to doubt the existence of a kind of Gresham's Law, by which bad programs that "lack supportive evidence but have political muscle" flourish at the expense of good ones.

Consider: the number of murders in New York City was 2,245 in 1990, more than six per day, and 673 in 2000. Whatever else might explain this 70% decline, it cannot be ascribed to a surge of government spending—since there was none—that successfully addressed mental health services, trauma, improved diets, kindness, etc. Indeed, the correlation between crime and government "investments" in social problems is, by this metric, clearly negative. There was far less spending on federal, state, and city programs for these purposes in the 1950s, when New York averaged 322 murders per year, than in the 1980s, when it averaged 1,682, 5.2 times as many.

The claim that alleviating social ills is *necessary* to reduce crime is obviously untenable. The best that can be said for the root-causes approach is that successful social programs might be *sufficient* to effect a reduction in crime. And, if so, this alternative is preferable to the law-and-order strategy that calls for arresting, prosecuting, and incarcerating our way out of a crime crisis. The root-causes position is less an argument than a rationalization: progressives use the crime problem to demand more government spending to reduce poverty and social injustice, which happens to be what they want anyway.

At the same time, the commitment to fighting root causes allows progressives to say that crime does *not* require the government to act more forcefully against people who commit what social scientist Mark Kleiman called "blue-collar crime." Since these people are disproportionately likely to be poor and/or members of minority groups, government action that disadvantages them also happens to be what progressives want less of in any case. Kleiman, who died in 2019, described himself (in a 2014 working paper published by New York University) as a "card-carrying soft-hearted liberal." As such, by 1980 he had "reluctantly, rather than triumphantly," come around to the conclusion Wilson advanced in *Thinking About Crime*: we neither know nor need to know what causes crime to know that we can reduce it if we incapacitate criminals by putting them in prisons where they cannot murder, assault, or rob law-abiding civilians.

Incarceration, Calibrated

IN 1978, ACCORDING TO THE BUREAU OF Justice Statistics, a division of the U.S. Department of Justice, 131 out of every 100,000 Americans were incarcerated in a state or federal prison. This number increased every year for three decades until, by 2007, it had nearly quadrupled, to 506 prisoners for every 100,000 people in the country (in other words, one out of every 198 Americans, which works out to one out of every 149 Americans over the age of 18). The number then fell every year after 2008, and in 2020 stood at 358 per 100,000, slightly below where it had been in 1993.

In that working paper a chastened Kleiman lamented this "catastrophically bad choice to expand the prison population," and went so far as to characterize "mass incarceration as a social threat on a par with crime itself." At its peak, he said, our incarceration rate "grew to five times its historical American level and five times the level of any other economically and politically advanced society." Wilson, who lived long enough to see the incarceration rate's rise and the beginning of its decline, was more measured in his assessment. "Other things being equal," he wrote in 2009, "a higher risk of punishment reduces crime rates." That being the case, the "key moral and political question is whether our greater personal safety is worth our greater use of prison."

It is, then, a question of assessing the costs and benefits of any level of incarceration, and then deliberating the trade-offs between them. No society has ever been crime-free. At some point, the incremental



reduction in crime that corresponds to an increase in incarceration becomes so small that nearly everyone would agree that the benefit is not worth the cost. For instance, Wilson posted to *The Volokh Conspiracy* in 2008: “This country imprisons too many people on drug charges with little observable effect.” He thought treatment programs a better solution for people who had been convicted of violating drug laws but had not broken any others, yet also believed that the number of people in prison solely for drug offenses was much smaller than widely supposed.

The strenuous denunciation of “mass incarceration” leaves no room for such deliberation about causes and consequences, costs and benefits. Take the contention that no other advanced democracy has an incarceration rate approaching America’s. It is rhetorically powerful but intellectually shoddy to make international comparisons of incarceration practices without also comparing countries’ crime situations. Doing so implies that a nation’s prison population depends simply and solely on how punitively it chooses to respond to a generic level of criminality. No serious person would contend that Anchorage spends an excessive amount on snow removal by pointing out how well Miami gets by without spending anything at all.

Data provided at World Population Review’s website allows for comparing nations’

incarceration rates to their murder rates. If we treat the latter as an imperfect but serviceable proxy for the severity of a nation’s crime problem, then the ratio between the two gives us an interpretation of incarceration rates that takes crime levels into account. Thus, for every person who is a murder victim in the United States, the number of people incarcerated is 127. Is that a little or a lot? It turns out to be near the middle of the distribution. Switzerland, widely considered a humane and well-governed nation, has a ratio of 124-to-1: America’s incarceration rate is 8.6 times as high as Switzerland’s—but our murder rate is 8.4 times as high. Other countries in which the prison population is less than 127 times as high as the number of murder victims include the United Kingdom (117), France (99), Germany (74), and Canada (59); while those with a higher prisoner-to-murder-victim ratio than the U.S. include Japan (142), Italy (160), Australia (188), and New Zealand (222).

Some nations have higher murder rates and lower incarceration rates than the U.S. But this combination is more plausibly ascribed to civic dysfunction than enlightened forbearance in the face of mayhem. Mexico, for example, imprisons just six people for every one that is murdered. While some Americans will be impressed that Mexico’s incarceration rate is only one fourth of ours, I submit that a

much larger number will be alarmed that its murder rate is nearly six times as high. Nigeria is an extreme case, with an incarceration rate of 32 per 100,000 and a murder rate of 34.5 per 100,000. In other words, you’re more likely to be murdered in Nigeria than you are to be sentenced to prison for any crime. The simplest explanation for this phenomenon is that Nigeria has so many murderers largely because it has so few prisoners.

#MeToo and Restorative Justice

IT WOULD BE EASIER TO TAKE SERIOUSLY the progressive response to crime—spending even more billions on education and social welfare programs, while sharply curtailing the arrest, prosecution, and imprisonment of criminals—if it were clear that progressives themselves took it seriously. It appears, however, that when the wrong sort of person commits the wrong sort of crime, progressives become difficult to distinguish from law-and-order Republicans.

In 2016, a Stanford University student, Brock Turner, was convicted of sexually assaulting a woman who had passed out in the vicinity of a fraternity party. The trial judge, Aaron Persky, sentenced Turner to six months in prison—the law allowed for a sentence up to 14 years—three years on probation, and lifetime status as a registered sex-offender.

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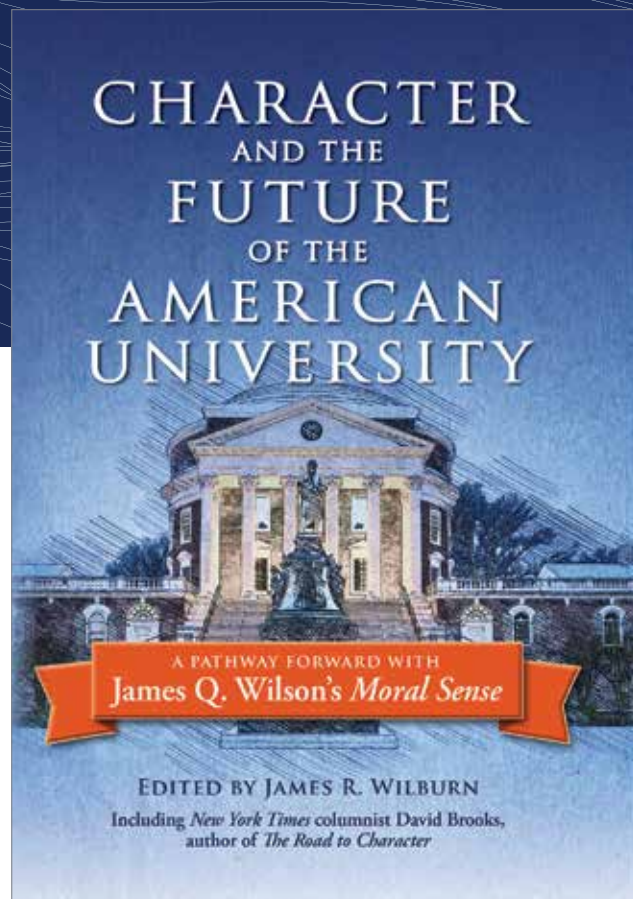
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The sentence triggered a controversy, which spread far beyond California. *Washington Post* columnist Petula Dvorak wrote that even though Turner had the “brilliant smile of a Stanford swimmer with Olympic dreams, the happy privileged face of a white college kid,” he is “what a campus sexual predator looks like.” Stanford Law professor Michele Dauber, also outraged at how little time Turner would spend locked up, launched a campaign to remove Persky from the bench through a recall election. After Persky lost that election in 2018 with 61.5% of the vote against him, becoming the first California judge recalled in 86 years, Dauber hailed his defeat as a “vote against impunity for high-status offenders of domestic violence and sexual violence.” The deposed judge later took a job as a high school tennis coach but, in response to a petition started by students, was fired shortly after he began work.

Other jurists appear to have been affected by the demise of Persky’s career and reputation. Two political scientists who examined a sample of 150 California judges found that after the recall-Persky campaign was launched, the judges issued sentences that were, on average, 30% longer than they had been before. This development, they concluded in *The Journal of Politics*, shows that “targeted political campaigns may have far-reaching, unintended consequences.” Specifically, longer sentences were applied in all kinds of criminal cases, not just for sexual assault. Harvard Law professor Jeanie Suk Gerson summarized their findings in *The New Yorker*: Although “the Persky-recall campaign aimed to raise consciousness about white privilege, the additional years in prison were disproportionately imposed on Black and Hispanic people.”

Earlier this year, documentary filmmaker Rebecca Richman Cohen released a film, *The Recall: Reframed*, showing that the Persky election was more complicated than many had assumed. Brock Turner’s prosecutors, for example, had asked for a longer sentence but did not appeal Persky’s ruling, which they felt was within his judicial discretion and consistent with probation department guidelines. The prosecutors went on to become prominent voices in the recall election, urging voters to retain Persky. The film also contends that it was entirely foreseeable that the recall’s consequences would not be confined to privileged white college kids who became high-status sexual violence offenders. Her larger purpose, Richman Cohen later explained, was to show that the #MeToo movement and the movement against mass incarceration were not antagonists, that “you

could care deeply about both of those things and frame them in a way where they didn’t work against one another.”

That sounds more hopeful than plausible. The animating spirit of #MeToo was anticipated by *Vox*’s Ezra Klein in 2014, when he hailed California’s “Yes Means Yes” law, which directed the state’s colleges to use the most encompassing standards for adjudicating sexual misconduct, and to resolve virtually every ambiguity in favor of the accuser and against the accused. Men “need to feel a cold spike of fear when they begin a sexual encounter,” Klein wrote, if campus rape culture is to be defeated. It’s unfortunate that the Yes Means Yes regime results in some dubious or completely baseless accusations causing expulsions and other penalties, Klein acknowledged, but such cases are “necessary for the law’s success,” a price that we, or at least a few unlucky ones among us, must pay.

But the new campus approach to sexual misconduct has also had far-reaching, unintended consequences, ones that track with those in California’s courts. Male black college students are, Emily Yoffe reported in

The claim that alleviating social ills is necessary to reduce crime is obviously untenable.

The Atlantic in 2017, “vastly overrepresented” among those accused of nonconsensual sex. Nobody wants to talk about this problem, one scholar told her, and government regulators appear determined to find out as little about it as they can. Still, lawsuits do pry out some information. One against Colgate University discovered that black students accounted for 4.2% of the student body, and 40% of those subjected to the sexual misconduct adjudicative process.

Michelle Alexander became famous after her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010) reset the debate over criminal justice. A *New York Times* columnist for the past five years, Alexander devoted a 2019 essay to extolling “restorative justice” as an alternative to incarceration. We will never return to the incarceration levels of 1980 just by decriminalizing narcotics, she argued, and so must devise ways for a great many people convicted of violent crimes to avoid prison sentences as well. The goal is for violent crime victims to “get answers from the person who harmed them, be heard in a restorative justice circle, help to devise an ac-

countability plan, and receive comprehensive victim services, rather than send the person who harmed them to prison.” As woolly as this sounds in the abstract, it is even more bizarre to picture the restorative justice circle in which Harvey Weinstein mends fences with the women who have accused him of rape... and feminists like Petula Dvorak and Michele Dauber endorse this approach as an alternative to his incarceration.

The Top-Bottom Coalition

CHIEF AMONG RESTORATIVE JUSTICE’S defects is that it erases the distinction between civil and criminal law: if there is a process whereby the criminal and his victim can come to terms, this resolution should satisfy the larger public’s interests in the matter. But the point of criminal law is the state’s contention that the robber or rapist harms not only his victim but the entire community. Few criminals are revolutionaries, but all crimes are political, declarations by people who wish to break the law that they neither respect other citizens nor fear the government. The purpose of having a criminal justice system is for the state, acting for the benefit and in the name of the citizenry, to repudiate and penalize these personal, sporadic declarations of war. If it fails to do so, people disposed to break the law see no reason why they shouldn’t, people disposed to obey the law see no reason why they should, and civil society becomes untenable.

Before she ran for office, Lori Lightfoot had been a federal prosecutor. “If somebody musters the courage to come forward and identify the person who just shot up their neighborhood and then sees Pookie walking boldly as day back on the street two days later, what does that say to them?” Lightfoot asked in a speech delivered after losing her bid for re-election. “You’re telling them that the criminal justice system doesn’t care about victims and witnesses, and if we don’t call that out every single day with these prosecutors and with these judges...then we are going to lose an opportunity to advocate for the victims and the witnesses and the residents who just want and deserve peace.”

Had Paul Vallas won the runoff election to succeed Lightfoot, as seemed likely for a few weeks, we could have concluded that Chicago’s swing voters had rejected Lightfoot in favor of a mayor whose actions would live up to her compelling words. Brandon Johnson’s victories over Lightfoot, then Vallas, argue instead that a significant number of Chicago voters regarded the prospect of more law-breaking less daunting than the prospect of



the city arresting and incarcerating its way out of a crime crisis. In liberal journalist Harold Meyerson's assessment for *The American Prospect*, Johnson found a way to address the crime issue that, if it did not win him the election, at least neutralized the issue so that it did not cost him the election. Because aggressive police conduct toward black Chicagoans has long been a source of controversy and resentment, Johnson "did well by emphasizing the quality of policing and crime prevention over the quantity," Meyerson observed.

A closer analysis showed that Johnson prevailed by winning about 80% of the black vote, splitting the Hispanic vote with Vallas, and doing well among both the "lakefront liberals" and hipsters who live in funkier neighborhoods further inland. Johnson, that is, won by putting together the "top-bottom" coalition of minorities, committed progressives, and affluent whites that has been the liberal template going back to Barack Obama and even George McGovern.

Vallas did particularly well only among white working-class voters, which—along with finishing first in February and then second in April—suggests that his candidacy had a high floor but a ceiling below 50%. Voters especially concerned about crime are, by definition, ones especially likely to leave a dangerous city for a safer one. In that sense, the Vallas majority coalition depended on voters now living in the suburbs or other states, ones no longer eligible to vote in Chicago elections.

Electoral contests for prominent elected offices are often described as protracted job interviews. But with our politics growing more tribal, they have also come to resemble fraternity rush week, where ballot decisions turn on which crowd a voter feels comfortable or uncomfortable with. Vallas was endorsed by the police union, but then had to disavow its political stances, such as inviting Florida Republican governor Ron DeSantis for an event held in the midst of the mayoral campaign. The swing voters who decided the election, according to one Chicago political professional, just didn't trust that Vallas was going to "govern as a real Democrat."

Basic City Life Experiences

IT SEEMS DOUBTFUL, HOWEVER, THAT THE Brandon Johnson crime policy will allow Democrats to expand or even maintain the Brandon Johnson coalition, especially in

jurisdictions that aren't as blue as Chicago. John Hamasaki, who ran to succeed Chesa Boudin as district attorney and lost despite being endorsed by the San Francisco Democratic Party, recently said—well, tweeted—an implication of progressivism rarely made explicit: being a big-city resident and a Democrat in good standing requires learning to take crime in stride. When a tech entrepreneur went on Twitter to lament that colleagues had lost passports and over \$10,000 worth of equipment when their car was robbed in downtown San Francisco, Hamasaki responded with derision:

Interesting. Would getting your car window broken and some stuff stolen leave you "scarred forever"? Is this what the suburbs do to you? Shelter you from basic city life experiences so that when they happen you are broken to the core?

I can't even imagine the world one must live in where this would be the most traumatizing incident in their life. Again, not to say it doesn't suck. But maybe city life just isn't for you. It's not the suburbs. There is crime.

On the very safe assumption that Brandon Johnson's programs will join the decades of failures to dig up crime by its root causes, being complacent about crime and contemptuous of yokels who fuss about it will become an increasingly important test of fealty to the Democratic cause. The top-bottom coalition is already under stress. In 2022, Starbucks closed six Los Angeles stores in response to drug use and menacing behavior on the premises. Whole Foods announced it was closing its flagship store in downtown San Francisco, barely a year after it opened, due to concerns about public and employee safety. And the L.A. city council recently approved an ordinance to combat the theft of catalytic converters from Toyota Priuses—but over the opposition of progressive council members who complained that enforcing the law would have a disparate impact on poor and minority Angelenos, and that the real villain was Toyota for making a car part that was too easy to steal.

John Hamasaki may say, and other Democrats may think, that suburbanites are too timorous and uptight for urban life, but affluent suburbs have shifted over the past 30

years from being predominantly Republican to predominantly Democratic. The Democratic Party is hard at work jeopardizing this advantage, however, by promoting policies that will make it possible for people to become tough and worldly about crime without ever leaving their green suburbs. Today's suburban Democrats get to have it both ways: they flaunt their Black Lives Matter lawn signs and take pride in being nothing like those odious MAGA Republicans, yet can also walk the dog at night without feeling a cold spike of fear when a group of young males approaches.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development's "Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing" policy (AFFH)—devised under the Obama Administration, scuttled by the Trump Administration, and revised under President Biden—will use federal power to rescue suburbs from the bleak existence of being socioeconomically different from big cities. The AFFH rules could, in Vox's summary, empower HUD to demand larger housing vouchers "so that low-income recipients could cash them out in more expensive neighborhoods," or steer "new subsidized housing development into wealthier (and whiter) locales." The more ambitious possibilities, covered extensively by Stanley Kurtz in *National Review*, include the effective end of single-family zoning laws and suburban governmental autonomy.

Should much of this come to pass, we will learn a good deal more about how committed the Democratic coalition's top parts are to its bottom parts. The AFFH regime will bring to Chicago's North Shore suburbs the unpredictable excitement that defines daily life on the city's West Side. Parents in Palos Verdes, worried that the difficulty of visiting Compton is sheltering their children from basic city life experiences, can relax in the knowledge that those possibilities for growth are now available, locally and daily, in neighborhood parks and school hallways. The question of how heavily the Democratic Party will invest in a root-causes strategy to fight crime, how patiently it will wait for it to work, will be posed not just in Chicago but in other places around the country that never anticipated taking part in a fraught social policy experiment.

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