

Regional

Failures require new thoughts on crime

The United States has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, with approximately 707 people behind bars for every 100,000 residents. And the vast majority of people incarcerated are members of minority groups, which leads to the issue of just how equitably law enforcement is applied in this country. A local scholar who studies issues related to law enforcement and public policy is Morris Taylor, associate professor and chair of the department of public administration and policy analysis at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Among the areas he has researched are famous icons of law enforcement, particularly the life of New York City policeman Frank Serpico, made famous by the 1973 film "Serpico," which starred Al Pacino in the title role.

"Serpico was one of my heroes," said Taylor, who himself served as a St. Louis police officer. "He was a beacon of ethical behavior in the New York City police department by doing things as simple as not taking bribes, to uncovering massive corruption." Taylor said that the movie was accurate, but that the conditions at the NYPD were even worse than portrayed in the film. For him, the Serpico case was a wake up call for cleaning corruption out of police departments throughout the nation.

"It showed that to work in law enforcement you are serving a higher calling, you always need to keep the highest standards. That is something I emphasize with my students," said Taylor.

A native of St. Louis, Mo., Taylor obtained his bachelor's degree in liberal studies from St. Louis University, his master's in public administration from SIUE and his doctorate in public policy analysis and administration in the area of social jurisprudence from St. Louis University.

Someone once said that the quality of a country could be measured by the quality of its prisons. So, what can be said about the United States in that regard? "The question is whether having the highest rate of incarceration in the world has helped to reduce crime," explained Taylor. "And the answer is no. That sends a clear message that we need to do something else than just throwing people into jail."

He said that he thinks we need to ask ourselves more fundamental questions.



Dr. Morris Taylor

Photo courtesy of Dr. Morris Taylor

What factors lead to criminality? Poverty? Lack of education? "Our prison system is so overcapacity that judges routinely rule in favor of freeing non-violent criminals because our prison system sometimes violates the Eighth Amendment prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment." He gives as an example the case of low-level drug offenders, who crowd jails and prisons when they rarely represent a clear and present danger to society as a whole.

"That is why we hear even from con-

servative voices that we should legalize certain types of drugs," he said, "because they have created a serious problem in our penal system."

"We also execute a lot of people in the U.S., which is another matter," Taylor said, adding that there is no evidence that shows that the death penalty actually deters crime.

Taylor said that another issue impacting the justice system is that the people in the top 1 percent of the economic ladder are the ones who most greatly influence public pol-

icy. This amount of political power, he said, may explain why low-level drug users get stiff prison terms while many of the people behind the recent major financial crises not only are free, but oftentimes receive financial bonuses.

Race is another major influence on the system, said Taylor. "There was a judge in this area who actually took a look at the statistics of African-Americans having rates of incarceration higher than whites and he found out that sentencing for the same types of crime

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was also different according to race. This is not to say that everybody in the system is racist, but the pattern is there."

Even some political agendas, such as to be "tough on crime," can impact the justice system. Most state and federal courts have mandatory minimum sentences for certain crimes, which, according to Taylor, both clog up the penal system and violate ideals of fairness. "This is a huge issue in the U.S.," he explained. "There was a case of a person in California who committed a third felony of stealing a pizza and got a 20-year sentence."

But what can be done to change things? "You have to try to change how people think," Taylor said. "That is why it is important to move away from 'technology fixes' and focus on really understanding what is behind these issues."

In Europe, unlike in the United States, the emphasis is more on rehabilitation instead of punishment. Most of these countries have far lower per capita crime rates than we do. Is there anything we can learn from that?

"There are differences in culture and ethnicity, but still we can learn from that experience," said Taylor. "Rehabilitation works better in the juvenile system than when dealing with adults. The problem is that we lack the political will for changes, especially because of the lack of resources."

One wonders if with all the new technologies that law enforcement agencies have at their disposal, we have not only more police but also better police.

"Better technology does not equate with better policing," said Taylor. "Sometimes we find criminals better armed than law enforcement. And when it comes to terrorism it can be even worse. The bottom line lies not with technology, but how you think about crime."

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