INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

535 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

August, 1973

FJM 47: REPORT FROM A CUBAN PRISON XVII
Crime in Cuba

Consider the criminal in Cuba. Occasionally, there are those who hurl a bowl of ice cream at someone, who take a tin of powdered milk from the local grocery store, who might even steal a radio or a watch once in a while. But after a year in Havana, I found the population (four million) lived together surprisingly free of violence.

That particular bowl of ice cream, I heard, was thrown at the Coppelia, an ice cream parlor the size of a square block. On a night when lines were unusually long and tempers short, a man who had stood for an hour imagining his favorite sundae, probably a Turquino, found on reaching the counter that the Coppelia had just run out of that particular flavor. Instead of ordering another kind, the man became enraged, picked up someone else's sundae and flung it into the face of the waitress.

I heard the story afterwards, from the same waitress who received the brunt of the Habanero's anger. "See that man over there," she said pointing to a man washing cups and saucers. "He was the one." She laughed.

"Him?" I said. "Is he working here now!"

"Yes, you see he was charged with disorderly behavior and sentenced to a month of washing dishes and serving ice cream here. He says he's learned how hard the work here is and he understands our problems better."

Apart from this I encountered little evidence of violent crime in Havana, though no doubt it exists. People are shot and murdered, get mad and fight. I saw no brawls, however, and most Cubans don't either. This struck me late one night as I was walking down a particularly dark street toward the hotel. I realized I wasn't worried about being mugged or beaten or robbed. Violence, so much a part of my consciousness in New York, seemed non-existent in Havana,

even given the widespread possession of firearms (everyone seems to have a pistol hanging off his hip). Speculating, I asked friends old enough to know Havana before the Revolution. They told me that before the Revolution, there was a special section in the newspaper devoted to the number of murders committed during the week because crime and corruption were so rampant. "We have our fair share of robbers now, I can tell you," a professor at the University said. "But compared to what it was like before, crime is almost non-existent."

At the Department of Public Order (Civil Police) I asked for statistics on crime in Cuba. With the scarcity of consumer goods like radios and TV's, and with most Cubans having access to a weapon of some kind, I wanted to know whether violent crime had increased. Lieutenant Pedro Perez, Deputy Minister of the D.O.P. assured me it hadn't.

> "Crime, specifically murder and homicide, has been drastically reduced since 1959," he said while handing me a sheaf of statistics. "For example, you'll see that homicide, that is cases involving malice aforethought--had dropped from a total of 2,650 in 1959 to 475 by 1970."

He also presented figures showing the overall criminal rate since 1959 had fallen drastically (from nearly 200,000 reported cases in 1960 to about 100,000 cases for the year 1968, the last year statistics were available). The crime rate had been cut in half.

Perez admitted though that while bureaucratic misappropriation has almost been entirely eliminated, robbery, petty larceny and theft have increased steadily since 1964. "I will explain these matters," Perez said, searching for more figures:

> "There is one type of crime in our country which has increased. Crimes against property. From a high in 1960 of 36,000 cases of robbery and theft, the rate dropped to a low of 10,000 in 1964. Then there was a rising trend, until now when we average about 28,000 cases of this type each year. The drop during the early years of the Revolution was mainly due to the enactment of Law 109A (1963). That law called for the application of the death penalty for certain kinds

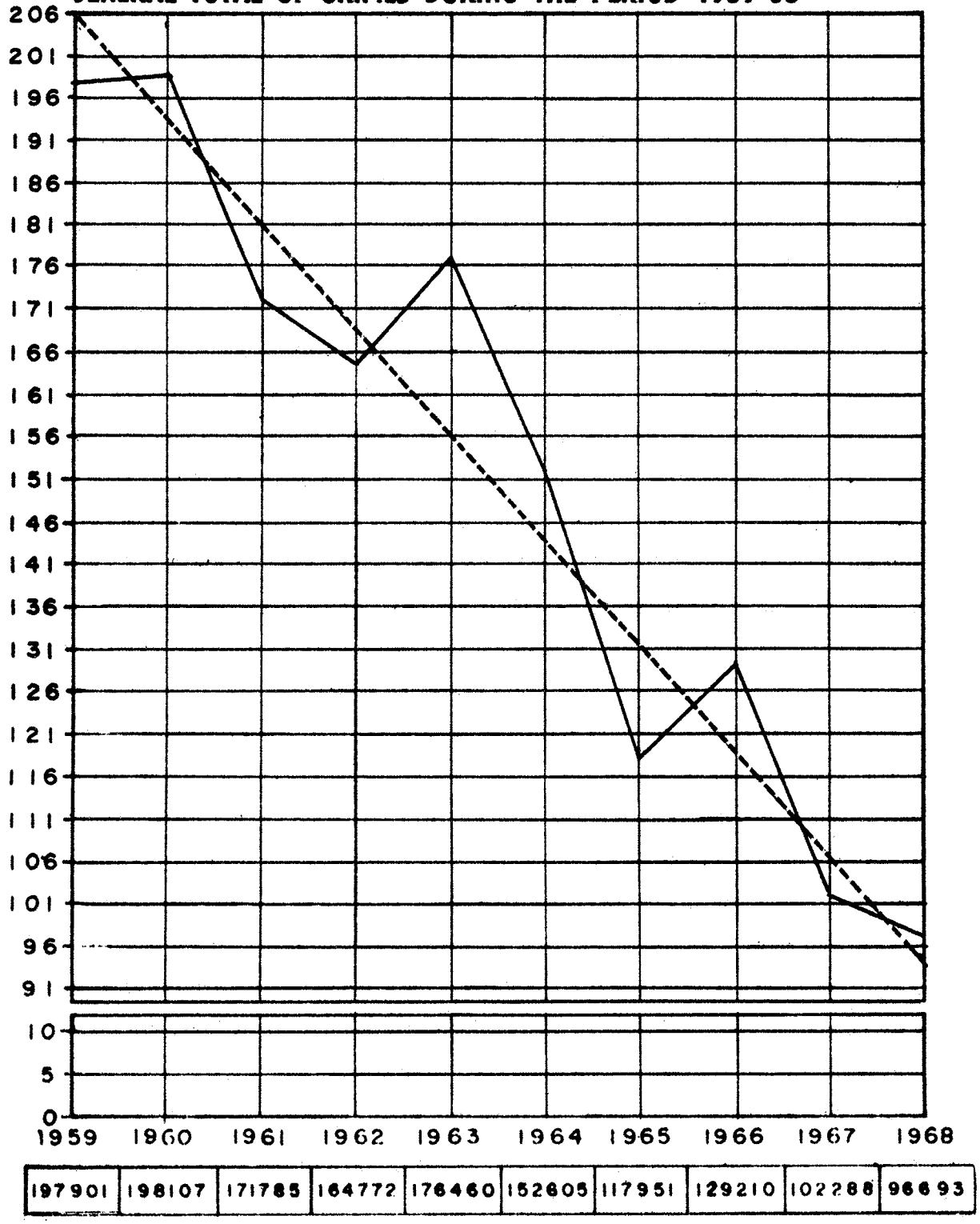
> of crimes such as robbery compounded with violence. The reason, I believe, for the rising trend after 1964 is the somewhat limited application of the law. It lost its effectiveness. That will change soon though, because with the codification of law, a harder line is going to be taken. The death penalty will be implemented in many more instances."

Lieutenant Perez didn't attribute the drop in street violence, murder and assault to the death penalty, however. Perez says that social changes brought about by the Revolution, the elimination of the causes of crime--poverty, economic inequality, unemployment--was the single most important reason. "Our low national crime rate is due both to improved vigilance on the part of the people, especially the C.D.R.'s and of course to improved social conditions. The very development of the Revolution has brought about the elimination of the causes of crime. Thus, as a direct result of full employment, begging has disappeared; prostitution and procuring have also ended, basically because of Revolutionary development.

As for the wide-spread possession of firearms, Perez said that this has "some bearing" on the crime rate.

> "We all know the great number of weapons in the possession of persons who are not, strictly speaking, members of the armed forces. We can state that, considering the numbers involved, there are really few crimes committed with these weapons in proportion to the number of weapons owned by the people. It's quite possible that Cuba is one of the countries with the largest number of firearms in proportion to the number of inhabitants, not counting the armed forces. I must say, however, that nearly seventy percent of our crimes of passion are committed with these arms. Of course the fact that these firearms do not have the same significance as, for example, in the United States where measures have been taken concerning this problem, is due to a large extent to the fact that those who are authorized to possess weapons are Revolutionary companeros, militia men and women. However this does have a bearing on the problem from the standpoint of the number of crimes of passion and other types committed in which firearms are used."

GENERAL TOTAL OF CRIMES DURING THE PERIOD 1959-68



197901	198107	171785	164772	176460	152605	117951	129210	102288	96693

Chart published by GRANMA

Drug traffic has also been curtailed in Cuba, an achievement that the Revolution takes very seriously.[1] I learned all about this from Diaz, the second day of interrogation. "Do you smoke marijuana," he asked. I said I had, occasionally. "Yes, I know that. You know the box of books Valdez shipped for you from Jamaica? The one that came the first week of your stay here. Well, Customs found a little container of marijuana in it. What do you have to say about that?"

The subject was bound to come up. In Jamaica, friends had given me an ounce of Blue Mountain marijuana, the kind the Rastifarians (a religious cult in Jamaica) usually use. Inadvertently, the remaining portion was packed with books that my friend Andreas shipped to Cuba for me after my departure. When the books arrived at the Havana Libre, they were in complete disarray; and of course, I knew why. Nothing was ever said about it, however, until Diaz raised the issue in the interrogation.

"I knew that you found it months ago," I said. "But really I had no intention of smuggling marijuana into Cuba. In my haste to get to Mexico City I forgot I'd left marijuana in the carton of books."

Diaz was not impressed.

"Do you know the penalty for possession of marijuana?" No, I said. "Well, I'll tell you. It's eight years! Minimum!" Diaz said, running his fingers over an imaginary law book.

Diaz wasn't fooling. Drugs in Cuba are a serious matter. (According to the State Department, there are several Americans in Cuban jails today, caught in boats or small aircraft while trying to smuggle marijuana from Jamaica to the Florida mainland.) At the time, however, possession of marijuana was the least of my concerns, and Diaz thought the same. He never brought up the subject again.

Frank McDonald

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[1]The figures Lieutenant Perez had indicate that drug traffic and use had significantly declined in Cuba since 1959. In 1959 there were 1,464 convictions involving drugs while in 1971, that figure had been reduced to 156 cases.

Received in New York on September 6, 1973.