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Regional

SIUE sociologist studies government crime

In America, we are obsessed with crime. Its graphic consequences dominate the headlines of local news, oftentimes accompanied by statistics that are meant to explain it.

For example, it is widely reported that the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. Does this fact mean that we are doing a good job of controlling – and understanding – crime?

Many researchers have been looking at this issue for some time. One of them is Dave Kauzlarich, a professor and chair of the department of sociology and criminal justice at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. He has studied a type of crime that is very common despite the fact that we rarely hear it mentioned by its name: state crimes.

“State crimes are those committed by people in position of power either by action or by omission,” Kauzlarich explained. “Violations of human rights, lack of law enforcement, genocide, state-supported terrorism, violations of free speech, are some examples of those.” Related to this area of criminal activity, Kauzlarich carried out a study on the societal effects of Hurricane Katrina.

“A graduate student of mine and myself analyzed what the federal government did and didn’t do and it turns out that what the government didn’t do was what

Dr. Aldemaro Romero College Talk

really caused of all that misery, destruction and victimization,” said Kauzlarich. “The state’s main obligation is to protect the citizens and in that it failed.”

Kauzlarich was born and raised in Streator, Ill., a small town in the cornfields about an hour from Chicago. He received his master’s and doctoral degrees in sociology from Western Michigan University.

But what exactly does a sociologist do? “We study society and its interactions with culture, social processes ... just about everything,” Kauzlarich said. He said that he decided to follow that career because of inspiring professors and because the opportunities in the field are so broad.

“In the past we enforced laws that encourage people to be good Samaritans to help people who were in trouble,” said Kauzlarich, who added that in today’s litigious society, people tend to shy away from getting involved in those kinds of actions. “One thing you learn pretty early in the study of sociology is that the government has the power to solve issues such as poverty or homelessness but has failed to do so. We should make the government

more transparent,” he added.

Kauzlarich is a great advocate of using research results to inform government policies. He used the nation’s drug problems as an example.

“Drug consumption should be seen not as a crime but as a public health problem, as research suggests,” he said. “Putting those people in jail without any treatment is not going to work. We have been wasting lots of resources in the war on drugs.”

He is also a critic of the nation’s use of capital punishment as a deterrent to crime.

“Abundant research shows that capital punishment does not work. In the U.S. we have very aberrant views about punishment,” Kauzlarich said. “We are one of the few countries with the death penalty, something that is considered a violation of human rights in Europe. People believe what they are told in the media and by politicians instead of looking at the research that has been generated.”

Recently the Illinois General Assembly voted to abolish the death penalty, making The Land of Lincoln the 16th state in the country without capital punishment.

That seems counterintuitive given the mood in most of the country in support of the death penalty. “What happened was that there are just too many cases of people wrongfully convicted,” Kauzlarich explained.

He believes that politicians follow what they think is popular instead of what is rational when it comes to the death penalty. As an example, he recalled that when Al Gore was asked during his presidential campaign if he believed that capital punishment deters crime, he answered, “I know it does not deter crime, but I support it.”

Kauzlarich has been following the recent uprisings in the Arab world. He said that he believes that they have been a response to crimes committed by those states against their populations and that such uprisings are the result of youth movements against those crimes. “People want freedom,” he said.

Through his teaching at SIUE, he sees how education makes a difference. He is particularly keen to point out the role of public colleges in educating first generation college students.

“I have had many students that after learning about sociology start to base their opinions on data rather than emotions,” he said.

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, “Segue,” can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.