

## Intro Paragraph:

Is humanity making progress? Or does each new generation suffer the same level of violence, inequality, and disease as the last? Dr. Steven Pinker, Harvard psychologist and public intellectual, believes we have made progress—and has the research to back it up. Nevertheless, the timing of this conversation was inconvenient for Pinker's argument. Just days after the death of George Floyd in police custody in Minneapolis, cities all across American were burning. Not to mention the global pandemic infecting millions worldwide. Despite such sign chaos, Pinker made a strong case for progress. In this conversation we talk about how to reduce police shootings in the future. We talk about the coverage bias of police shootings in the media—that is, the phenomenon of the national media only reporting instances of cops shooting civilians when the victim is black. We talk about the apparent tension between Pinker's famous book on human nature, *The Blank Slate*, and his later books on progress, *The Better Angels of Our Nature* and *Enlightenment Now*. We talk about the enormous and largely unknown progress that's been made in reducing poverty, racism and other social ills. We talk about whether or not violence is necessary in order to foster progress. We discuss the causes of criminal behavior. We talk about the idea of prison abolitionism. We talk about the lead-crime hypothesis and the progress we've made in incarceration as well as the progress we still have to make. We even talk about the bizarre possibility of substituting corporal punishments for prison, which sounds strong, but makes sense in context. As you read, I came into this conversation in despair. I left left it with the realization that it is most important to make the case for progress precisely at the moments when things seem the most dire.

### Crime, Violence, and Progress With Steven Pinker (Ep.9)

**EPISODE TO CROSS REFERENCE <https://podlink.to/CWC009>**

Welcome to another episode of Conversations with Coleman. I'm your host Coleman Hughes. So needless to say these are grim times. I'm speaking now nine days after the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers and over a week into the massive protests as well as riots that have ensued as a result. I plan to do a long solo episode on everything that has occurred and what I think of the Black Lives Matter movement and the broader discourse surrounding race in this country. Please do consider supporting the podcast at colemanhughes.org. I'm delighted to see that many of you have switched over from Patreon. As I said last episode. I hope to get as many of you as possible to support me directly through my website rather than using Patreon as a middleman. And if you can't or don't want to support that's completely okay. You can also help me by subscribing to my YouTube page. So please do that if you're so inclined. My guest today is perfectly placed to talk about everything that's going on in this moment. He is a Harvard psychologist and a superstar intellectual. He's written books like *How the Mind Works*, *The Blank Slate*, *The Better Angels of Our Nature* and *Enlightenment Now*. The man I'm talking about is Doctor Steven Pinker. I've been a fan of Steve Pinker for a long time. So I'm happy to finally get him on the podcast Steve and I talk about how this moment compares to others in American history. Steve is cautiously optimistic about the COVID crisis and about the riots. I agree with him on the first one, but I'm much more pessimistic on the second one and we talk about that. We talk about ways of reducing police shootings in the future. We talk about the massive coverage bias of police shootings in the media. That is the phenomenon of the media only reporting instances of cops shooting civilians when the victim is black. We talk about the connection between Steven's famous book on human nature,

*The Blank Slate*, and his later books on progress, which on their face seem in tension. We talk about the enormous progress that's been made in reducing poverty, racism and other social ills. We talk about whether violence is necessary in order to *foster* progress, which is a popular idea right now. We talk about what the causes of crime are. We talk about the idea of prison abolitionism. We talk about barbaric punishments and the possibility of substituting corporal punishments for prison, which sounds bizarre, but makes sense in the context of the conversation. We talk about times when utilitarian reasoning goes too far. We talk about the lead-crime hypothesis and the progress we've made in incarceration as well as the progress we still have to make. So without further ado--Dr. Steven Pinker.

**CH:** Thank you so much for being on the podcast.

**SP:** Oh, thanks for having me Coleman.

**CH:** So we are speaking on June 1st, over two months into the coronavirus lockdown. We are speaking a week after George Floyd was killed by police in Minneapolis sparking protests in just about every major city across the nation. I can't lie I I I despair for the country right now. I feel I feel that this is a a moment where we've seen a lot of you know, we've seen a lot of ugliness and a lot of beauty. Um, and it's a moment where you know, it it feels very bizarre and heavy to to be an American. So it's, at the same time, I'm I'm grateful to be talking to you because all of the themes that are motivating this moment are themes that you've been dealing with more or less your entire career, or your entire career as a writer for a general audience namely violence and the motivation for violence, the the purpose of police forces, the facts and myths surrounding progress. So and I didn't I didn't schedule you with the intention of talking about this, but given current events, I think, you're the perfect person to talk to about these things.

**SP:** It is a, it is certainly a bizarre and troubling moment in American history. We've had bizarre and troubling moments before. When I was a child, I lived through the urban riots of the late '60s and the assassinations occurring against the backdrop of an actual shooting war in Vietnam. So I've lived through the two gas shortages in '73 and '79, when tempers were fraying and people were lining up around the block for gas, and no one knew whether it be enough fuel for heating oil. Again there were wars going on including a war in the Middle East in 1973 between Israel and neighboring countries that resulted in the president of the United States putting nuclear forces on alert. There was, in 1979 there was the, after the Iranian Revolution, the hostage crisis, and a war between Iran and Iraq that began in the early '80s that where the talk then was that a Signal oil tanker sunk in the Straits of Hormuz would choke the flow of oil from the rest of the world at a time, which the world was completely dependent on Middle Eastern Oil. So we've, we've lived through bizarre and dangerous periods before, to say *nothing* of World War II, the events that that *my* parents lived through so. While not minimizing the bizarre and challenging and horrific events today, we, before we despair we should realize that we have gone gone gotten through far more dangerous periods in the past. Now, we are we are certainly living through a dangerous one now. It's hard for me even to believe that we've now endured almost three and a half years of the presidency of Donald Trump. But ah and too soon to predict what will happen, but simply I'm, I would think above and beyond the policies that I would that they've been deploying ,just having someone as the symbolic leader of the country who was less divisive, who was better able to bring people together, would do something to calm the national mood. And there are the two huge challenges we're facing as you and I speak today, maybe the once-in-a-century pandemic and re-eruption of urban violence following a police shooting. We should see these as as solvable problems, as not easily solvable, but there are more than 70 efforts now to develop a vaccine for the disease. There will be better antivirals almost certainly together with public health measures such as testing, tracing, and ah um supported isolation and sanitation and social distancing that we have every reason to believe that we'll bring it under control. We don't know yet whether, what life will be like when

vaccines are discovered. Much will depend on whether these are the kind of vaccines that give you lifetime immunity or they're more like flu vaccines that are partially effective. It has to be boosted and and redone every year. And in the case of police violence ah, it is, there it's shocking how little we've done since the issue came to people's attention starting in 2014 with Ferguson. Again, we, although there's little hope that the current federal administration is going to do something about it, there's reason to believe that there are measures that can reduce it. Oregon has reduced its police shootings from a dozen or more a year to zero. And we're we're as six years ago, we were in a state of almost complete ignorance about what does and doesn't reduce police shootings, we're starting to get some sense as to what works and what doesn't. Just the fact that we can compare our country against others, which have a fraction of the number of police shootings suggests that there's got to be a solution that's out there.

**CH:** So I I I take your point about coronavirus and the vaccines. And I've heard some optimistic noises from Dr. Fauci suggesting that best case we could see a vaccine by early, very early next year. Um unfortunately I feel, I don't feel as optimistic about the rioting problem for the following reason. And I hope you can perhaps talk me out of this pessimism, but... What I see is that there are broadly two conditions that combined create the circumstances for a riot to erupt. And the first condition is that there is a perception that the police are deeply racist and unfair to black Americans. Now we can talk about how true that perception is. I think there are true elements to it and false elements to it. But the condition here is the *perception*. And that perception is I think likely to stay stay with us for some time. And then the second the second condition to me seems to be the reality of policing in modern America. And the reality of policing I think there's a few elements that are relevant. One is the fact that that you know, we're an enormous country population-wise, which means that events that have very low probabilities of happening will happen, you know, 10 times more often in American than they will in Canada even even with the same probability. And because we register anything happening in America as happening *here* in the relevant sense, it can seem like something is happening much more often just simply by virtue of our our huge size. There's that, the fact that America has a has a unique gun culture, which means... Part of what that means is our police have a heightened fear of coming across a gun when they're apprehending a suspect, which which means they're they're much more likely to mistake the wallet *for a gun*. And I don't see how that, even in the best circumstances, goes away. And and then there's the fact that now everyone is a journalist. So anytime, in any city an altercation goes down between police and civilians, multiple people are going to immediately record it. And to be clear, I think that's a net good. Um. However, it means that any altercation will immediately go viral. Certainly between a white cop and a black suspect. And so so the reality of policing combined with the perception of racism., I'm not sure which of those is is... Well, to put to put it to put a just a final gloss on my point, last year there were nine unarmed black Americans, according to the Washington Post database, that were killed. My impression is because of the reality of policing, getting from nine to for example zero is going to be probably harder than getting from 20 to nine. And so long as there are any of these incidents in an in an American city during the hot summer months, I don't see how we can get around the the possibility that riots will be a recurring feature of American life for the next, for the fore- foreseeable near future so long as all of these conditions obtain.

**SP:** Well I I don't disagree with any any of the the facts and analysis that you've presented that um, the.. It is true that our perception of risk and prevalence is driven by stories, events, anecdotes, a lot of them in data. And with the combination of a big country and every citizen being a reporter, we can have the *impression* that things are much more common than they are. And indeed the since, since the, since ah Ferguson since Michael Brown, there has been uh ah perceptions of violence perpetrated by cops that you and I know are are inconsistent with the statistical reality. Among them, that major risk to the lives of African Americans is shooting by police. Whereas it's probably 15, at least 15 times more likely that a man will be killed by someone who's not a police officer than a police officer. So the the the fear that police are a major threat to life and limb is is out of whack with the reality. And there are at

least four studies that I know of that show no, no good evidence for racial bias in who gets shot by police or for that matter in which police shoot. But perception matters. You're absolutely right. And as long as, and we don't want that that there clearly is a racism in American police. But there's also trigger happiness in American police. America police just shoot too many people. And you combine that with theatrical (15:13; not sure if this word is correct) distribution of crime across regions of the United States, across ethnic groups and they--just like any other social science statistic--you break it down by region, you break it down by ethnicity, you break it down by age, you break it down by sex. The numbers are never same. So people... There will always be statistical discrepancies and they can inflame public reaction depending on how much they are covered. So the ingredients are there particularly when you've got a culture of policing in the United States that is far too quick to use deadly force. Now I remember when I was, in the in the 1980s, there was fantastic television program called *Hill Street Blues*, often credited as one one of the first like really artfully scripted ensemble shows about a police force in a a a crime-prone or an urban district. This took place before the great American crime decline when violent crime was more than twice, two to four times as high as it is today. So violent crime was just a *backdrop* to urban life, which made the series all the more poignant. But I was wondering when I was watching it--now they, whenever there was a suspect who fled on foot, they always had a one of the officers in the show chasing him down on foot and tackling him, including cases where the suspect was young and the police officer was not so young. I thought: "Wow, isn't that amazing that our police can can outrun any suspect and tackle them." And what I should have realized even back then, was that's just not the way the police operate. When there's a, all too often when there's a suspect, they shoot. Ah and now the um... So while not disputing the your, any of your your points including that the ingredients are all there, there there are ways of, that can bring down rates of police shooting and therefore depending on the coverage--and you're right that the number could go down, but the ones that do occur as long as it doesn't go to zero can still be highly publicized--but there are ways of of training police to forbear the use of deadly force until other alternatives are tried. Getting mental health professionals rather than police officers to deescalate confrontations with mentally ill people, which are a reasonable fraction of victims in deadly police violence. Getting better data reporting because one of the things that I discovered as a kind of a data walk on--including on violence--is how crummy our data are on police shootings. You cited the, one of the *best* sources, the *Washington Post's* journalistic database. But really we ought to have police departments themselves and the federal government compiling an accurate database. We don't have that. But but it is possible to to to reduce the rate substantially. Although you're right good that it will also depend on how that change is a covered given that it may not be visible in particular anecdotes. But a lot of things that seem...as they are occurring, they seem like they're going to always be with us and they'll just mark urban, our life indefinitely, do have a way of of uh petering out. The urban riots of the '60s, which looked like they were going to be just a permanent feature of American cities fizzled out. Although with with with ah outbursts such as after the Rodney King acquittal in 1992 and after Ferguson and what we've just seen in the last couple of days. But ah, the when you're living through the *worst* of something, it's easy to imagine that the it's is a new normal, but it isn't necessarily. Likewise, it's a it's difficult to believe that just like two years ago, the big concern was terrorist attacks by Islamist groups. And that looked like it was going to change life forever, at least for a while. Those have dropped off that the the radar screen. Again, we're talking about your, but you're right, we're talking about rare events. And here the frequency may not be as important in driving public reaction as the publicity and the narratives.

**CH:** Yeah, I I am um... I take your point. I think there are definitely ways of probably reducing the number of unarmed Americans killed by the police. And I'm interested in all of those potential reforms. But you know, I'm also I'm also interested in whether there is a way to to get the media in particular to cover, to to eliminate their coverage bias on these issues. So for example, there was a white man named Tony Timpa--I'm not sure if you've seen this video--who in 2016 was captured on the body cam I believe of a cop, who was killed in almost exactly the same way that George Floyd was, namely the cop was on on his back pinning him him down with his neck for 13 minutes and

suffocated him to death. All the while Tony Timpa was was begging for his life. And in fact, the the cops were making jokes throughout throughout the whole time. It's really, it's every bit as disturbing to watch as as the George Floyd video. And the video was kept secret for three years and released in 2019. I believe on the order of a federal judge. Of course that that didn't inspire riots. So far as I know, the video didn't didn't even go viral because it wasn't clearly racist, because it was a *white* cop doing it to a *white* suspect. And I I fear that you know, part of the reason that black Americans in particular, but Americans in general react this way to the video is is because we've been primed to think that this is *only* a race issue rather than a an issue with the police in general. Which is to say, there's an accountability, you know, there's an accountability issue. Often, it's police departments investigating *themselves* rather than you know having an independent body investigating examples of mis-, potential misconduct. And I don't I don't know *how* to get the media to cover, you know, all of these cases. But I think that would go a long way to persuading Americans that this is an issue you can get behind regardless of what your race is. And and I think that would go at least partway to preventing this kind of rioting.

**SP:** I I I couldn't agree with you more. I think that a ah journalism needs to be far more enumerant (22:14; not sure if this word is correct) and statistically savvy and ensure that its coverage is in more harmony with the the actual data. And I think indeed that others--I haven't seen polling results, but I wouldn't be surprised if people thought that that more African Americans were shot by police than whites, when it it's the other way around. Now, of course, the rate *per capita* is higher for African Americans than for for whites. But on your hand, the rate of violent crime is ah higher for African Americans than for whites as it is for ah Southerners versus Northern Northerners. That, those are the two great statistical disparities in crime statistics in the United States. So that the base rates have to be taken into account, but I think that you're right. From the coverage, the fact that the, more than half the police shootings that are of white suspects never gain coverage has distorted people's perception. As is the just the absolute risk of getting shot by a police officer as opposed to being shot by a gang member or someone that you get into a fight with in a bar, which is as I mentioned 15 times greater.

**CH:** So you've you've, I guess you're most known in the general public as someone who has written books about the fact of progress. And a...

**SP:** It's a recent, recent kind of notoriety because most of my career, I've been a cognitive scientist in the cycle (23:53; not sure word is correct) of English. I've written books on language, written books on the human mind. I've written books on irregular verbs and on the meanings of words, swearing and euphemism and innuendo and all kinds of subjects. But I have written two books that were data-driven books on human progress--one concentrating on violence, the other on measures of human well-being. Both really growing out of one thing leads to another when you're, when you're in academics. One of the great things about being an academic is that you can follow your curiosity. In my case, there's an interest in human nature that came from my interest in language, the quintessentially human trait. Human nature brings up political and philosophical questions like: "Are we are we basically good? Are we basically selfishly? Are we cooperative? Are we rational? And I often had to deal with the hostility toward the *very idea of human nature* because people tend to think it's a kind of reactionary doctrine. "Ah, you can't change human nature. So what's the point of trying to improve the human condition? What... War is in our genes so we'll never have peace. People people can't cooperate because they're ruthless (25:12; indistinguishable word; sounds like 'fitness') maximizers." And and so just the, what I find fascinating and intriguing and important--mainly figuring out what makes people tick--faces this kind of resistance from on political and moral and emotional grounds. So: "Don't tell me that we have any any instincts towards vengeance or sex differences or poor or self-serving biases because that would just be too depressing to contemplate. That would mean there's no hope of it, making life better."



**CH:** Mmhm.

**SP:** And so part of my counter counter-argument was just the, first of all human nature is a complicated system. We don't just have *one* thing. So yeah. Well, I think we do, we are wired by evolution with a taste for revenge and among certain genders, a desire for dominance. But that's not all we have. We also have a sense of empathy. We also have faculty of self-control. We also have a sense of fairness. And what actually *happens* in any social milieu, it depends on an interplay between these different components of the mind. But *also* they can't really be a debate as to whether we can change our our lives, our social circumstances because just I mean history tells us that we can. Life now isn't the same as life a hundred years ago or five hundred years ago. Slavery was abolished. World wars have--contrary to a lot of pessimistic predictions--have have have not taken place. War in general is in decline. Rates of violence can go ah yo-yo up and down, and recently they've been way down. And other examples. So it was...And once I began this effort of showing a couple of graphs documenting that we really have worked with "the better angels of our nature" as Abraham Lincoln put it in the, the the title that I co-opted from my book on violence. It's possible to succeed. And then one thing led to another and I, to my own, I got to say to my own surprise, I came upon graph after graph showing how life really has improved over the ah decades and centuries. So it was a kind of a (27:24; indistinguishable word; sounds like "secudist") journey that took me from being interested in language and cognition to data on human progress.

**CH:** Absolutely. Yeah, ah. Um. So I saw a video yesterday that went viral of ah, it was it was a group of three black men--I forget what in what city--during the the protest and one was in his early 40s, one was in his mid-20s, and one was a teenager. And the older one was saying to the younger one that: "There's been no change. There's been no progress." And the one in his 20s gave a very inspiring and poignant sort of speech to the sixteen-year-old saying that: "You know, our generation has failed. The same problems, whether we're talking about police violence, or poverty, inequality and so forth are with us that existed 50 perhaps a hundred years ago. And so *your* generation has to has to come up with a way to sort of fix this." And the upshot of it was, you know, a call for for I suppose a kind of peaceful reform. So in that sense, I agree with it. But there is a... The reason it struck a chord with so many people is because there is a *widespread* perception that we have not made progress on the issues that most people of goodwill want to see solved or are at minimum made better, namely poverty, inequality, police violence and so forth. So to what degree is that perception accurate?

**SP:** It's wrong in this, to say there's no progress. It is right to say that problems were made and you can improve something without having solved. And I think that that's the way societies work. There's no such things as ah instantly solving a problem. You chip away at it and the gains can increasingly compound. And it can lead to real progress even if you never noticed it happening on a particular day. So all all the data on the ah ah the lives of American racial minorities, particularly African Americans, show there has been improvement, to be, the rate of poverty is down. Rate of illiteracy is down. Lifespan is up. Happiness is up. Happiness for African Americans has increased while happiness for white Americans has slightly decreased over the last 60 or 70 years. The the gaps have shrunk, but they are absolutely still there. So the work is by no means done to put it mildly. But it's *also* a mistake to say there's been no progress, that 70 years of efforts at or toward equality have been a waste of time. That would be... I think that's I think it's empirically false. And I think it's a um a dangerous message. Like why even bother at reducing inequality, at increasing racial justice if all of these efforts have been fruitless. And they haven't, they have not been fruitless. And by the way racism is way down. Again, that for something to decrease does not imply that it's disappeared and we know it hasn't disappeared. Um, and even with a shut, what has shocked me as someone who has looked at data on on racism, what shocked me is some of the taboos that have been breached toward

expressing it ,not least by our commander-in-chief. But even during the Trump years, polls on ah racism across the country have shown it has continued to decline. Certainly the percentage of Americans who agree with overtly racist statements like "African-Americans are are less hard-working" continues to go down. The percentage who say, "I would not want my child to marry a person of a different race" or "that black and white kids shouldn't go to school together," all of them in decline, in some cases down to level you know kinda crackpot levels. So you you you never get to zero no matter how absurd the question is. If it's, you know, "aliens are beating messages into my brain," then, you know, three percent of people who are aware will agree to that. And some of the old attitudes like "black and white kids should go to separate schools" have fallen to to that level. At the same time, it is shocking, dispiriting that statements that even I would have thought would be just beyond the pale can a have been made in public. Fortunately, those *don't* seem to be pushing the nationwide level back. I'll just add one thing because this is-- obviously you have to be wary of questionnaires that just ask people questions with an obviously socially desirable response. And a cynic would say: "Well people have gotten less racist. They just are more aware that racism is is considered to be bad. And so they hide their feelings when when someone on the phone calls and says: "I'm with the General Social Survey. What do you...how do you answer these questions?" But at least two measures that I've looked at of more *hidden* bias also show that it's in decline. One of them is by my colleague, Mahzarin Banaji, the famous pioneer of the Implicit Attitudes Test (it's actually the implicit association test- IAT) a way of looking at it implicit bias, who with a whatever students tested Charlesworth, they just looked at their own data over a period of 20 years at fairly subtle measures of ah bias coming out of reaction time studies of whether you associate black or white faces with positive or negative words. They found that there's been a decline in racial bias over the, just the 20 years they've been doing the test. And then they, the analysis that I did with the help of Seth Stephens-Davidowitz, a Google data scientist--just how often people search for racist jokes on Google, where there's no social desirability bias because you're doing in the privacy of your own keyboard. And for for most people, you know racist jokes or not--they're not like a guilty pleasure. They're just kind of icky or insulting (33:50; not sure of this word). You don't, you make an effort *not* to see them. And so it's a it's a good index of deep in the deep-in-the-marrow racism if you actually search for racist jokes. And the searches have gone down. So that's another kind of indirect indicator. Again, none of this means that racism disappeared or that it's not a problem. Just that there has been progress in marginalizing it.

**CH:** Mm. So there's a certain type there's a certain kind of person that would hear that and say: "Okay. Yes. I agree. There's been progress. I agree American society is not where it was in 1960 or even 1980 or even 2000. But hasn't that progress been fostered by, in some cases, violent demonstration? We had to fight a civil war to end slavery. The riots in the late '60s, you know, it shocked the American public into caring. So why why isn't it the case that violent demonstrations are warranted now, so as to foster more progress?"

**SP:** Yeah, and of course the problem is that history only runs once. We can't run alternative universes to see what would happen. But I don't think the chronology supports that. The of course the great protests that led to the Civil Rights Act and the the all of the changes in 1964 and 1965 occurred after peaceful protests led by the, by Martin Luther King and his collaborators. Be the the riots began later after the legislative accomplishments were im-, in place. And I think there's there's a good evidence that they were counter-productive in a number of ways. Number one is just in electing a a a president hostile to ah racial progress. In 1968, and again I lived through this as a child, but everyone thought that the big issue was the Vietnam War and that Richard Nixon would be vulnerable because he was a Vietnam hawk. But he changed the narrative to his, the kiss campaign slogan was "Law and Order." People were *appalled* by the urban violence. They thought they would think that we need a strong president to deal with it. And Nixon to the shock of many people got elected. In 1988 when George HW Bush, Bush senior was was elected, it came after a decade in which the crime rate had ah shot up. It shot up in the 60s. And came down a little bit at the

end of the '70s, but high again in the 80s. And when Bush was elected, it was on one of the high use for crime. And then even in 2016, although American crime rates had declined precipitously starting in 1992, there was a noticeable uptick in '15 and '16, which Trump capitalized on in his American carnage rhetoric. It felt like things are getting worse, even though relative to American history violence rates were still down. But it led to again to a reactionary movement. So and this is not even counting the immediate harm done in minority communities. When your grocery store and they're your local mom-and-pop shops are burned and ah you know...where are you going to shop for food? And who was going to open up a store in a neighborhood where it's likely to be vandalized and burned down. So rioting is I think, almost always a spectacularly stupid tactic. When it comes to more serious change like absolute actual regime change, there's a fascinating body of research by my colleague Erica Chenoweth, originally reported with Maria Stephan, that other actually tabulated the success rate of violent and nonviolent resistance movements and found that the success rate for the non-violent ones was twice to three times as high as for violent ones. So it's not that the non-violence always works. It's not that violence always fails. But in general, the track record goes with the non-violent protest movements.

**CH:** Mm. So I agree with all of that. Of course, I'm really trying to plumb the depths of the counter-arguments here to to, you know, the counter-arguments I'm talking about with my friends and seeing on Twitter. But I want to ask now a deep and basic question relating to human nature and a kind of fundamental disagreement on what human nature is and how that relates to violence. And and the question, which is deceptively simple, is: "What is the cause of crime? What causes people to commit crime? Does the question make sense? If so, why or why not?" And just how do you view that--because and the context is, most people I talk to about this issue take it for granted that crime is, you know, we know the causes of crime--poverty, inequality, systemic bias, hopelessness, despair. And I have no doubt that that is true in some cases, but I I've been persuaded by by many arguments that sort of hold that human nature can kind of just tend towards this to begin with. So, where do you stand on that? And how do you, how do you think of that?

**SP:** Yeah, there are ah, there different kinds of crime and there are different people who commit them out of different motives. Generally, it's certainly true that a lot of crime occurs in poor neighborhoods. And poor people are more likely to commit violent crime. It's not true, necessarily true of violence in general, especially through history when it used to be the aristocrats that had their armed retinues and would engage in contests of honor and revenge, dueling men men of honor as in the opening scene of Romeo and Juliet when two aristocratic families have a street fight. So it's, that's not a given, but it tends to be true *now*. In general it's--although there are many causes of crime--they're not all racism and inequality, the ah especially not when it comes to changes over time. The great American crime decline, which began in 1992, which saw rates of violent crime plunge to *half* their levels in you know, in New York it plunged 75 percent. This was during a period of *rising* inequality. And even though there've been there was a slight deep systemic decrease in racism--not enough to have brought crime rates down that quickly, 50 percent in eight years--a lot of crime is *opportunistic*. People, there's a strong correlation between people who commit crime and lack of self-control. There's a opportunity to rob a cash register. There's a fight over a parking space, over a pool table, and there's road rage and then one person ends up, but ends up dead. Policing *matters*. If you--this was brought home to me as a teenager, when I lost an argument with my parents and what would happen if the police disappeared. And I was, at the time I had a kind of romantic anarchist sensibility from the Russian biologist Peter Kropotkin that it was the presence of law and property and police that cause violence. My parents said: "Yeah. Yeah. You know, just just you wait. If the police ever walked off the job, all hell would break loose." And it just so happened that in 1969, the Montreal police force did, they went on strike. So we had a day without police and all hell did break loose. There were two murders. There was widespread looting and vandalism and a shooting. And in general, effective policing is a--as opposed to anarchy and a culture of honor and vendetta and revenge--are



major factors in, with in reducing crime. One of the reasons why the the efficacy, the fairness, and the perception of fairness in policing is so important that they have to, the police have their effect not so much but by there being an armed officer on every corner, which no society can afford, but when people have confidence that their potential adversaries are also being deterred by the police so they don't have to defend their own interests by being a kind of macho badass and retaliating against any insult with violence to improve the credibility of their own deterrent when they can outsource revenge to a more disinterested third party and rates of violence tend to go down. That only works when people have at least enough faith in the fairness of the overall system that they don't have to take, "take the law into their own hands" as we say. A lot of violence is, there's some violence that is purely opportunistic and predatory. Someone robs a liquor store and and shoots the cashier so they won't identify them in the court. But an awful lot of violence is *moralistic*. People--there's an interesting analysis both of wars and of genocides and of street crime that in many cases, the perpetrator thinks that what they're doing is morally justifiable. That is, they are they are eking out justice to someone who deserves it. The ah the asshole who cut you off in traffic, who was flirting with your girlfriend, who humiliated you in public or more generally the ethnic minority that is a parasite on society, the country that is occupying territory that doesn't rightfully belong to them. Ah, pe- One of the things about human nature is that our most moralistic impulses are often the sources of our worst violence. There's a fabulous book by Alan Fisk and Tage (Shakti) Rai called *Virtuous Violence*, in which they, they're anthropologists and able to (cross 44:59; not sure of last 3 words here)cultures and find that there's an enormous amount of violence that people think is, in their in their view, it's justice.

**CH:** Yeah, um. So normally I don't like to spend too much time, you know, dealing with arguments that are only on the political fringes and unlikely to actually be instantiated. But I do think occasionally it's worth looking at the very fringe ideas, um you know, and and actually dealing with them. So I guess two of those, one of those ideas you've already dealt with, which is to completely defund and abolish the police, this has almost no likelihood of actually happening. Um, it's it's very *fringe*, even among Democrats. And your experience in Montreal and the experience of lawless places around the world I think testifies to the lack of wisdom of that idea, including you know, neighbor, you know, the most dangerous neighborhoods in for example, Chicago. According to a *Wall Street Journal* estimate, have a single-digit percentage likelihood that any given murder is solved. And that that should speak for itself in terms of you know, whether it's desirable to fully get rid of the police. But another fringe idea, which is not likely to be accepted but is I think worth thinking about, is the abolition of prisons. What do what do you make of the necessity or utility of prisons? Can we get rid of them altogether? Can we reserve incarceration for for you know only the the the most violent and horrific crimes while using other ways to sanction? What's your perception of this movement?

**SP:** Well, simply reducing prison would be, is a a a very worthy need (47:11; not sure of last word). I don't think any society, even progressive ones like Norway and Portugal have eliminated prisons all together. But prison is a means to an end that is of reducing violence. Traditionally, there have been five justifications for criminal punishment. One of them is sheer incapacitation. There's some people that are just so dangerous that we're just better off if they're off the street. And I think that's going to always be true. There are there are psychopaths. There are people who will who will rape and will kill people throughout them. Probably, not the majority of prisoners by any means, but not zero either. So there's incapacitation. There's a specific deterrence. You get thrown in jail, you're less likely to do it again. General deterrence--you hear that someone else has been punished for a crime and so you think twice before you do it yourself. There's rehabilitation. Of course, our prisons barely do that at all. Probably the other way around. They probably school people in the ways of criminality. But that's one of the classic justifications for criminal punishment. And the final one is some notion of "justice hurts." Whether it's you believe *normatively* that if you commit harm you ought to be punished or if there's just a general *perception* of the legitimacy of the rule of law. Should I take the law into my own hands and avenge a killing with a killing, which of course leads to cycles of

vendetta and kind of like the world of the Corleones, or can I trust the criminal justice system to do it with me with, for do it *for* me. And that depends on a perception that that all wrongdoers are punished. So that's just the classic theory. That does not mean that you have to throw someone in jail for 10 years for a property crime, or for counterfeiting or to say nothing of drug possession. So I think we would be do well to figure out what is the amount of punishment that would be, that would serve the general and specific deterrence function without the enormous cost (coughs & says 'excuse me') of maintaining prisons and all the expanding damage that it does to families and communities. And there, we really ought to look at experiments in other countries, mindful of the fact that not only is the United States a big country, the United States does have a rate of, well it starts off with the rate of violent crime that is at least five times as high as other, as most other Western democracies. So we can't automatically say: Well it works in Norway. Let's try it here." Although we could try some of it and see how much it works. But we have to take into account the fact that we're a, we start off as a pretty violent country. Still we could absolutely do better and one of the oldest principles behind criminal justice going back to Cesare Beccaria during the Enlightenment, who was I think the first really to figure, to articulate the logic of why why we should have criminal punishment at all. He was the one who helped abolish sadistic, cruel forms of punishment, like *breaking on the wheel* and *burning at the stake* and being pulled apart by horses by noting that that's quite unnecessary for the actual purpose of a criminal punishment, namely to deter wrongdoers. But one of the things he pointed out is that *probability* of punishment is far more important than *severity* of punishment. And often our first impulse is is too much crime or wrongdoing in any kind, therefore, let's just ratchet up the, how awful the punishment is. The, one of the problems--aside from the fact that when someone is caught there can be a lot of gratuitous cruelty--the other problem is that people if there's a tiny probability of a horrific punishment, people can just think of it as kind of like the risk of an accident. "Yeah, it would be horrible if I was in a car accident or a burning building, but I'll, you know, have to take my chances." And that's the way people think of severe punishment that's very unlikely. A *higher probability of punishment* even if it's less severe can be more effective in doing what we want punishment to do in the first place.

**CH:** Right. If you knew you were going to break a finger every time you went for a drive, that would get people to, not to drive even though...

**SP:** Exactly.

**CH:** Yeah. I was I was astounded to come across--I've read a little bit of Cesare Beccaria. I've read more of of Alexis de Tocqueville writing in the 1830s who--you know it's possible he got it from just Cesare Beccaria but--states in very plain language the principle that you just described that that actually longer sentences *don't work*. He said it as if it were common knowledge in the 1830s. And you know as late as the 1990s and 2000s, I think many people still don't know this. I was also interested to--I came across a paper that sought to explain the origins of the phrase in the 13th Amendment that abolished slavery except in, abolished involuntary servitude except except in cases of of what when someone commits a crime and traced it to Thomas Jefferson's Northwest Ordinance where the that language is lifted from, and traced Jefferson's use of that concept to his admiration for Cesare Beccaria, who proposed involuntary servitude as an *alternative* to the death penalty. So that the hypothesis, which which I think makes sense, is that he inserted that phrase because--out of a relative-to-the-time sense of compassion for criminals--relegating them to a lifetime of labor rather than death. And that has...

**SP:** That's fascinating. I was not aware of that, but I knew that there was a connection between Beccaria and also the Eighth Amendment against cruel and unusual punishment, which used to, which used to mean strapping someone to a wagon wheel and bashing his limbs with a sledgehammer till he died of shock and bad hemorrhage.

**CH:** Yeah. I've heard, on the other hand I've heard two, I think two criminologists who I who I admire. I think one of them--or perhaps he's a sociologist--Peter Moskos have made the argument that *flogging* would actually be a more humane alternative than than the status quo. It would be not only cheaper, but you know public flogging rather than incarceration would *do* all the deterrence that you know, we want without all of the associated costs both to the criminal and society of incarceration. I'm not sure how much the argument is really serious or whether it's...

**SP:** Mhm.

**CH:** ...meant as a poignant way to drive home the insanity of the status quo. But I wonder if you've come across that argument and what you think of it?

**SP:** I haven't. Although I've thought about it because we certainly have a kind of a taboo against corporal punishment in virtually every modern western country. Partly because when flogging was practiced, it often would flay the skin off someone's back and just expose their half of their body as raw flesh with no skin. I mean it was truly a form of almost unspeakable torture. But it is true and I'd thought of this, I'd rather endure some awful electric shocks, for example, or get a couple of lashes or caning, then to give up several years of my life in prison. But nonetheless, we this there're times at which, when you do a utilitarian calculation you, that is what would be the...Let's say it had the same deterrent value and indeed some fewer costs like taking someone out of the workforce, schooling than in criminality, devastating their families. So, you know, why don't we bring back ah caning or flogging or maybe electric shocks unless (10:00; not sure of 1-2 words here) to permanent tissue damage. The thing is that often we like to draw red lines and say: "We're not going to allow our government to impose pain on on someone." But there's something that just strikes us as inherently barbaric about the practice and that *could* lead to a slipper slope toward toward much worse. So let's just draw a line around that and say governments are no longer allowed to do that, that entire category. And it's it is an interesting debate, whether these kinds of categorical taboos do result in less suffering in the long run as opposed to just sort of weighing up particular measures. You know by-and-large, I think I would *not* support a measure to allow governments to to to ah flog people. But but anyway, I mean I'd certainly be open to to a discussion as to whether say some degree of corporal punishment might be preferable to the *cruelty* of of long periods of incarceration. I doubt that I would end up supporting it, but ah it's something to think about.

**CH:** Yeah. I wonder even giving someone the *choice* between a prison sentence and some kind of corporal punishment...It would be interesting to see how many people chose one or the other as--if nothing else as a comment on you know, what the status quo, how we should really feel about the status quo.

**SP:** How many shocks would you endure to avoid a year in prison? I ah,it's I I kind of beyond the realm of conventional polite discourse, but ah it might be worth thinking about. And again, I agree with you. What you said is is just right. And if if nothing else, to just calibrate how *callous* we might be in *accepting* incarceration. Maybe it's more cruel to send someone to prison. And by being reminded of what people would choose, we could kind of ramp up our empathy, our mercy or our sense of horror to incarceration.

**CH:** So there's also--speaking of incarceration and progress, which is a big theme in your last two books--I I came across data of, I actually came across this data in a book by the economist Rick Nevin, who was hired by the government in the '90s to study the effect of lead on crime and came to the conclusion that the increase in childhood lead-poisoning in among children, you know in the let's say '40s, '50s, '60s and '70s accounted for the majority of the, both the rise in cline, in crime in the decades of the '60s through early '90s and the decline. And I

wonder if you're--I know you're aware of that hypothesis--I wonder how much you attribute crime to to lead. And and as well as the as well as the decline.

**SP:** Yeah, it's an interesting hypothesis. It was made famous by ah Kevin Drum in a Mother Jones article. It came out after *Better Angels of Human Nature* was published so I didn't really have a chance to evaluate it. I haven't seen follow-up studies. I think it'd be interesting to examine--I am somewhat skeptical because the effect of lead on crime would have to be via of course impaired brain functioning and less self-control, lower intelligence. And if it were true, you'd expect coinciding and in fact slightly preceding the crime statistics, changes say in intelligence or in self-control that the the generation is that that caused the American crime boom in the '60s through the early '90s would also have a much lower IQ. And conversely the generation since then, the IQ should have shot up. And so since the IQ is quite closely related to lead exposure in a way that crime is several causal links removed. And as far as I know, that that that is not the case. Likewise for other measures of self-control. So I'm a bit skeptical. I think *most* criminologists are skeptical, for whatever that's worth. But I I I do agree that it's worth investigating and in any case it certainly was a good idea to get lead out of gasoline because of effects on on kids' brains.

**CH:** Uh, I was also made aware in the course of reading this book that that the incarceration rate for for black Americans has been declining every year since 2001. And if you disaggregate by age, you find black men aged eighteen through twenty-nine, that cohort the population has more than cut in half since since 2001. Um. That's that's not widely known, um but but it's an interesting feature of progress that that is not often talked about.

**SP:** I was *not* aware of that. That is interesting. And it is, I think it falls into two trends. One of them is that the overall rate of violent crime has gone down since 1992, kind of leveled off in the first few years of the current century, and then against all expectations, it fell significantly again after the great recession of 2008 just when a kind of poverty causes crime theory would predict that violent crime would shoot up. When in fact it it went down even further. So and anything that affects violent crime will of course affect incarceration rates for for all races. But you're right that in addition to the fact that just fewer people committing crimes of all races, there has been a de-incarceration movement--too slow and too late. But even conservative politicians have realized that this is imposing a big cost on the a, on the country. So there has been some movement to reducing incarceration although there's still a lot of work to be done.

**CH:** Okay my final final question for you Dr. Pinker. You know, I think many people are despairing right now. I try to always keep my pessimism in proportion, largely because I've been, I've read and been persuaded by by your books on, you know, the fact that we tend to be more pessimistic than is warranted by the facts. What what is your, you know, sound-bite summary of the reasons to not completely despair at this moment, during this pandemic and you know the nation on fire?

**SP:** Yes. We've been through worse. We've been through *much* worse. Uh and as you and I have discussed, you can, the the newsfeed gives you a biased sample of the *worst* things happening anywhere in the world on a given day. So that's the sample that we're getting. *It's not a random sample*. When things go right, they're generally not news. When things improve, it's usually incremental. It's a few percentage points a year, which then had operating compound. But there's never a Thursday in October in which they, it happens all at once. And so it's just an, in any informed person, if they are informed by the news is bound to have a biased sample of what's going on in the world. But the other thing to keep in mind is that our baseline of what we should expect is, should be calibrated pessimistically if ... Paradoxically, I think a lot of people have a mindset that the natural state of affairs is affluence, equality and knowledge, understanding and peace, and that if our world falls short, we must be doing something

terribly wrong and things must be spiraling out of control. Whereas a better way of thinking about it is that our natural state of the natural state of life is that we are ignorant. We are ah prone to to competition including violent competition. That's ah, natural selection tilts us in that direction. We are vulnerable to disease. We are big yummy honks of protein and fat and cellular reproductive machinery. That's just irresistible to little bitty organisms that evolved much faster than than ah than we do. The natural state of affairs is not wealth, but poverty. And wealth has to be created. When you understand the human condition as beginning with a baseline of ah deprivation, of competition, of ignorance, then you realize that the, our current shortcomings aren't kind of a scandal or crisis compared to what's natural, but rather just shows how much work is left to be done. And that it reminds us that human ingenuity and human sympathy, although finite and quirky, *can* be enhanced. And it ,I would say it emboldens us to enhance these faculties, "the better angels of our nature" if you if you want that have eked out improvements in the past and that are what we have to work with to solve the problems facing us now.

**CH:** All right. Thank you very much Dr. Pinker.

**SP:** It's been a pleasure Coleman. Thanks for having me.

**CH:** Absolutely.