The Cultural Policy Studies Project

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THE REAL ROOT CAUSES OF VIOLENT CRIME: THE BREAKDOWN OF MARRIAGE, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY

INTRODUCTION

Policymakers at last are coming to recognize the connection between the breakdown of American families and various social problems. The unfolding debate over welfare reform, for instance, has been shaped by the wide acceptance in recent years that children born into single-parent families are much more likely than children of intact families to fall into poverty and welfare dependence themselves in later years. These children, in fact, face a daunting array of problems.[1]

While this link between illegitimacy and chronic welfare dependency now is better understood, policymakers also need to appreciate another strong and disturbing pattern evident in scholarly studies: the link between illegitimacy and violent crime and between the lack of parental attachment and violent crime. Without an understanding of the root causes of criminal behavior—how criminals are formed—Members of Congress and state legislators cannot understand why whole sectors of society, particularly in urban areas, are being torn apart by crime. And without that knowledge, sound policymaking is impossible.

A review of the empirical evidence in the professional literature of the social sciences gives policymakers an insight into the root causes of crime. Consider, for instance:

[1] See Patrick F. Fagan, "Rising Illegitimacy: America's Social Catastrophe," Heritage Foundation *F.Y.I.* No. 19, June 29, 1994.

☞ Over the past thirty years, the rise in violent crime parallels the rise in families abandoned by fathers.

☞ High-crime neighborhoods are characterized by high concentrations of families abandoned by fathers.

☞ State-by-state analysis by Heritage scholars indicates that a 10 percent increase in the percentage of children living in single-parent homes leads typically to a 17 percent increase in juvenile crime.

☞ The rate of violent teenage crime corresponds with the number of families abandoned by fathers.

☞ The type of aggression and hostility demonstrated by a future criminal often is foreshadowed in unusual aggressiveness as early as age five or six.

☞ The future criminal tends to be an individual rejected by other children as early as the first grade who goes on to form his own group of friends, often the future delinquent gang.

On the other hand:

☞ Neighborhoods with a high degree of religious practice are not high-crime neighborhoods.

☞ Even in high-crime inner-city neighborhoods, well over 90 percent of children from safe, stable homes do not become delinquents. By contrast only 10 percent of children from unsafe, unstable homes in these neighborhoods avoid crime.

☞ Criminals capable of sustaining marriage gradually move away from a life of crime after they get married.

☞ The mother's strong affectionate attachment to her child is the child's best buffer against a life of crime.

☞ The father's authority and involvement in raising his children are also a great buffer against a life of crime.

The scholarly evidence, in short, suggests that at the heart of the explosion of crime in America is the loss of the capacity of fathers and mothers to be responsible in caring for the children they bring into the world. This loss of love and guidance at the intimate levels of marriage and family has broad social consequences for children and for the wider community. The empirical evidence shows that too many young men and women from broken families tend to have a much weaker sense of connection with their neighborhood and are prone to exploit its members to satisfy their unmet needs or desires. This contributes to a loss of a sense of community and to the disintegration of neighborhoods into social chaos and violent crime. If policymakers are to deal with the root causes of crime, therefore, they must deal with the rapid rise of illegitimacy.

OFFICIAL WASHINGTON'S VIEW OF CRIME

The professional literature in criminology is quite at odds with orthodox thinking in official Washington. Many lawmakers in Congress and in the states assume that the high level of crime in America must have its roots in material conditions, such as poor employment opportunities and a shortage of adequately funded social programs. But Members of Congress and other policymakers cannot understand the root causes of crime if they insist on viewing it purely in material terms. This view blinds policymakers to the personal aspects of crime, including moral failure, the refusal to exercise personal responsibility, and the inability or refusal to enter into family and community relationships based on love, respect, and attachment both to the broader community and to a common code of conduct.

The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, supported by the Clinton Administration and enacted last year, perfectly embodies official Washington's thinking about crime.[2] It provides for billions of dollars in new spending, adding 15 new social programs on top of a welfare system that has cost taxpayers $5 trillion since the "War on Poverty" was declared in 1965.[3] There is no reason to suppose the programs will have any significant effect. Since 1965, welfare spending has increased 800 percent in real terms, while the number of major felonies per capita today is roughly three times the rate before 1960.[4] As Senator Phil Gramm (R-TX) says, "If social spending stopped crime we would be the safest country in the world."[5]

Senator Joseph Biden (D-DE), former chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee and a major sponsor of the recent crime bill, summed up the predominant view of crime prevention: "These [social services] are all good programs. They are all designed to do the same thing—give these kids something to say yes to." Likewise, the Department of Justice's report, "Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent and Chronic Juvenile Offenders," accurately diagnoses the roots of the problem (in terms of family, religion, and moral formation), but then recommends a long list of new federal social programs on top of the current programs.[6]

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2   For an analysis of this federal crime bill, see William J. Bennett, "It's Time to Throw the Switch on the Federal Crime Bill," Heritage Foundation *Issue Bulletin* No. 196, June 28, 1994. See also Paul J. McNulty, "Rhetoric vs. Reality: A Closer Look at the Congressional Crime Bill," Heritage Foundation *Issue Bulletin* No. 159, May 16, 1994.

3   Scott A. Hodge, "The Crime Bill: Few Cops, Many Social Workers," Heritage Foundation *Issue Bulletin* No. 201, August 2, 1994, p. 1.

4   Scott A. Hodge, "Crime Rates and Welfare Spending," Heritage Foundation *F.Y.I.* No. 24, August 10, 1994, p. 2.

5   "Crossfire," August 23, 1994.

6   The following admittedly is not very clear, but it is a fair and excellent example of politically correct thinking on crime at the top levels of the Clinton Administration. From the *Interdepartmental Working Group on Violence: Report to the President and the Domestic Policy Council*, January 1994: "The only way to make progress against America's epidemic of violence is to marshal and coordinate efforts of communities, the private sector, and federal, state and local governments.... [T]he federal government must be a model and move to construct interdepartmental approaches and coalitions to assist local communities in their efforts.... Violence results from a multitude of complex factors; only broad, holistic and multi-disciplinary solutions hold real promise."

But the conventional assumptions about the root causes of crime—and thus the solutions—are wide of the mark:

Poverty and Unemployment

The central proposition in official Washington's thinking about crime is that poverty is the primary cause of crime. In its simplest form, this contention is absurd; if it were true, there would have been more crime in the past, when more people were poorer. And in poorer nations, the crime rates would be higher than in the United States. More significantly, history defies the assumption that deteriorating economic circumstances breed crime (and improving conditions reduce it). Instead, America's crime rate gradually rose during the long period of real economic growth: 1905 to 1933. As the Great Depression set in and incomes dropped, the crime rate also dropped. It rose again between 1965 and 1974 when incomes rose steadily. Most recently, during the recession of 1982, there was a slight dip in crime, not an increase.

What is true of the general population is also true of black Americans. For example, between 1950 and 1974 black income in Philadelphia almost doubled, and homicides more than doubled. Even the Reverend Jesse Jackson, whose prescriptions for social reform mirror conventional liberal ideology, admits that black-on-black homicide is not an issue of poverty.[7] The crime rate in other communities also shows no link between low incomes and crime. The Chinese in San Francisco in the mid-1960s, for instance, had the lowest family income of any ethnic group (less than $4,000 per year) but next to no crime: only 5 Chinese in all of California were then in prison.[8]

Race and Crime

There is a widespread belief that race is a major explanatory cause of crime. This belief is anchored in the large disparity in crime rates between whites and blacks. However, a closer look at the data shows that the real variable is not race but family structure and all that it implies in commitment and love between adults. The incidence of broken families is much higher in the black community. Douglas Smith and G. Roger Jarjoura, in a major 1988 study of 11,000 individuals, found that "the percentage of single-parent households with children between the ages of 12 and 20 is significantly associated with rates of violent crime and burglary." The same study makes clear that the widespread popular assumption that there is an association between race and crime is false. Illegitimacy is the key factor. It is the absence of marriage, and the failure to form and maintain intact families, that explains the incidence of high crime in a neighborhood among whites as well as blacks.[9] This contradicts conventional wisdom.

7   Daniel Ruberstein, "Cut Cultural Root of Rising Crime," *Insight*, August 8, 1994.
8   *Ibid.*, quoting James Q. Wilson and Richard Herrnstein, *Crime and Human Nature* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985).
9   Douglas Smith and G. Roger Jarjoura, "Social Structure and Criminal Victimization," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (February 1988), pp. 27-52.

FIVE STEPS TO VIOLENT CRIME

The scholarly literature indicates a pronounced pattern of circumstances and social evolution that makes violent criminal behavior very likely.

STEP ONE: Parental neglect and abandonment in early home life.

✗ When the baby is born, his father has already abandoned the mother.

✗ If his parents are married, they are likely to divorce by the third year.

✗ He is raised in a neighborhood with a high concentration of single-parent families.

✗ He does not become securely attached to his mother during the critical early years of life.

✗ His child care frequently changes.

✗ The adults in his life frequently quarrel and vent their frustrations physically.

✗ There is much harshness in his home.

✗ He is deprived of affection.

✗ He becomes a hostile, anxious, and hyperactive child.

✗ He is difficult to manage at age three and is a behavior problem.

✗ He lacks his father's presence and attention and becomes increasingly aggressive.

STEP TWO: The embryonic gang becomes a place to belong.

✗ He is by now both hyperactive and difficult to endure.

✗ His parent's supervision is inconsistent and explosive.

✗ He satisfies his needs by exploiting others.

✗ At age five or six he hits his mother.

✗ In first grade his aggressive behavior causes problems for others.

✗ He is becoming more difficult for the school to handle.

✗ He is socially rejected at school by normal children.

✗ His life is now characterized by his own aggressive behavior, his aggressive peers, and his hostile home life.

✗ He searches for and finds acceptance among similarly aggressive and hostile children.

✗ He and his friends are slower at school: they fail at verbal tasks which demand abstract thinking, such as reading, and with social and moral concepts.

✗ His reading scores trail behind the rest of his class.

✗ He has lessening interest in school, in teachers, or in learning.

✗ By now he and his friends have low educational and life expectations of themselves.

✗ These low expectations are reinforced by teachers and family.

✗ Poor supervision at home continues.

✗ His father, or a father substitute, is still absent.

Step Three: The emergence of the gang.

✗ At age 11 he is well into his bad ways.

✗ By age 15 he will engage in criminal behavior.

✗ His companions are increasingly important to him for personal identity and a sense of belonging.

✗ Life with his delinquent friends is hidden from parents and other adults.

✗ The earlier he commits his first delinquent act, the longer he will lead a life of crime.

✗ The number of delinquent acts increases in the year before he and his friends drop out of school.

✗ The girls he knows are on the same track as himself and have much the same experiences at home and school.

✗ His delinquent girlfriends have always had very bad relations with their mothers, as well as with normal girls in elementary school.

✗ These girls are very, very close with the girls in their own delinquent peer group.

✗ Many, but not all, in the group use drugs.

✗ Many, especially the girls, will run away from home; many others just drift away.

Step Four: Serious crime begins.

✗ High violence grows in his community with the growth of single parents.

✗ He purchases a gun, at first mainly for defense.

✗ Increasingly his group uses violence for exploitation.

✗ The violent young men in the group get arrested more than the nonviolent criminals.

✗ Most of them do not get caught at all.

✗ Gradually, different friends specialize in different types of crime: violence or theft.

✗ Some are more versatile than others.

✗ For any particular crime there is little chance of arrest.

✗ The girls become involved in prostitution while he and his group join criminal gangs.

Step Five: A new child, and a new generation of criminals begins.

✗ His 16-year-old girlfriend is pregnant. He has no thought of marrying her: it is not done. They will stay together for a while until the shouting and hitting start. He leaves her and does not see the baby.

✗ One or two of his criminal friends are real experts in their fields.

✗ In his neighborhood 4 percent of the delinquent families commit 50 percent of the crime.

✗ In any three-year period only 14 percent of the expert career criminals get caught. They commit hundreds of serious crimes per year.

✗ Most of the crime he and his friends commit is in his own neighborhood, which grows less and less viable as a community.

As Kevin N. Wright, professor of criminal justice at the State University of New York at Binghamton, states toward the end of his survey of the professional literature for the Department of Justice: *"The presence of any one of these family [and community] circumstances increases the chances of raising a delinquent child. The addition of more than one factor further enhances the odds of misbehavior. This notion of cumulative effect has been supported by reviews of several authors."* It is this distillation, from a wide base of neglected children, that gradually produces a more intense concentration of criminals: the 5 percent who commit 50 percent of the crime.

Bolstering the Smith-Jarjoura study, University of Illinois sociologist Robert J. Sampson, in a study on the differential effects of poverty and family disruption on crime, states:

> Overall the analysis shows that rates of black violent offending, especially by juveniles, are strongly influenced by variations in family structure. Independent of the major candidates supplied by prior criminological theory (e.g. income, region, size, density, age and race composition) black family disruption has the largest effects on black juvenile robbery and homicide.... The effects of family structure are strong and cannot be easily dismissed by reference to other structural and cultural features of urban environments.... The effect of family disruption on black violence is not due to the effect of black violence on family structure.

Sampson adds: "the predictors of white robbery are in large part identical in sign and magnitude to those for blacks."[10]

10   Robert J. Sampson, "Urban Black Violence: The Effect of Male Joblessness and Family Disruption," *American Journal of*

How Criminal Behavior Develops

Propensity to crime develops in stages associated with major psychological and sociological factors. The factors are not caused by race or poverty, and the stages are the normal tasks of growing up that every child confronts as he gets older. In the case of future violent criminals these tasks, in the absence of the love, affection, and dedication of both his parents, become perverse exercises, frustrating his needs and stunting his ability to belong.

The stages are:

Early infancy and the development of the capacity for empathy.

Early family life and the development of relationships based on agreements being kept and a sense of an intimate place where he belongs.

Early school life and the development of peer relationships based on cooperation and agreements conveying a sense of a community to which he belongs.

Mid-childhood and the experience of a growing capacity to learn and cooperate within his community.

Adolescence and the need to belong as an adult and to perform.

Generativity, or the begetting of the next generation through intimate sexual union and bringing others into the family and the community.

In all of these stages the lack of dedication and the atmosphere of rejection or conflict within the family diminish the child's experience of his personal life as one of love, dedication, and a place to belong. Instead, it is characterized increasingly by rejection, abandonment, conflict, isolation, and even abuse. He is compelled to seek a place to belong outside of such a home and, most frequently not finding it in the ordinary community, finds it among others who have experienced similar rejection. He becomes attached to those who are alienated, for, like him, they have been rejected. Not finding acceptance and nurturance from caring adults, they begin conveying their own form of acceptance.

STAGE ONE: THE BROKEN FAMILY

The evidence of the professional literature is overwhelming: teenage criminal behavior has its roots in habitual deprivation of parental love and affection going back to early infancy. Future delinquents invariably have a chaotic, disintegrating family life. This frequently leads to aggression and hostility toward others outside the family. Most delinquents are not withdrawn or depressed. Quite the opposite: they are actively involved in their neighborhood, but often in a violent fashion. This hostility is established in the first few years of life. By age six, habits of aggression and free-floating anger typically are already formed.[11] By way of contrast, normal children enjoy a sense of personal security

Sociology, Vol. 93 (1987), pp. 348-382.

11 Jennifer L. White *et al.*, "How Nearly Can We Tell?: Predictors of Childhood Conduct Disorder and Adolescent