



Time to Reinvest in Prevention

By James Alan Fox

The news appears encouraging, at least on the surface. The FBI, in its recent release of national crime figures, reports that violent crime in America during 2007 was down across the board compared to 2006, including a 2.1% decline in murder.

Although welcome, the news contrasts sharply with the experience of Americans living – and some dying – in violence-infested neighborhoods, those for whom the frightening sound of gunfire is a far too frequent occurrence.

It is not that the FBI figures tell an inaccurate story about the state of crime trends in America. Rather, they obscure the divergent tale of two communities – one prosperous and safe, the other poor and crime-ridden.

The fact that this trend has emerged and persisted for several years now suggests that it is hardly an aberration or statistical blip. This emerging trend could worsen as the population of at-risk youth, many from minority backgrounds, grows as a result of both demographic patterns and immigration.

Guns and Gangs

Looking at longer-term trends, the overall rate of violence (and homicide in particular) has been relatively stable over the past few years. But the picture for young black males, especially teenagers, is radically different.

From 2002 to 2006, for example, the number of homicides involving black male juveniles as victims rose 38%, and as perpetrators jumped 60%. In terms of gun killings involving this same population, the increases are even more pronounced: 54% for victims and 68% for perpetrators.

Notwithstanding official crime statistics, it hardly takes a rocket scientist – or a research criminologist – to recognize that increasing numbers of wayward, poorly-supervised youngsters have guns in their hands and gangs in their plans.

Even while targeting gangs, we need to understand their appeal. Gangs offer our youth many advantages – status, excitement, power, praise, profit, protection, mentoring and opportunity for advancement – healthy goals fulfilled in unhealthy ways. Youngsters now being drawn to gang membership are too young to have witnessed the gang wars of the early 1990s, when joining a gang could mean an early grave.

Our challenge, therefore, is to identify and promote healthier means for youngsters to achieve the same need-fulfillment, constructive ways to feel good about themselves and their future, while also having fun. This is where Boys & Girls Clubs play a significant role, a role that, given ongoing trends, needs to be expanded.

Recipe for Failure

While many Americans rail about underage, underprepared and under-motivated parents “who just need to do a better job of raising and supervising their children,” we must recognize that these families cannot do it on their own.

We must assist families, not assail them, when they become overwhelmed with the day-to-day struggles of raising children, particularly in a downturn economy.

At such a time, the alternative forms of supervision and mentoring provided by Boys & Girls Clubs are extraordinarily critical.

Unfortunately, not all Americans are convinced about the value of prevention – especially early enrichment efforts that emphasize the “pre” in prevention. As a result, prevention initiatives are too often funded and implemented on a shoestring, with only a brief window of opportunity to show results. This is a recipe for failure and provides additional fodder for skeptics.

A Wake-up Call

During the 1990s, rates of violent crime fell dramatically all across the country, owing to effective crime control strategies and an emphasis on prevention. With such success, however, we grew complacent and let up on our efforts.

Unfortunately, the crime problem and the gang problem did not disappear, and rebounded once we shifted priorities elsewhere. Unless we restore a sense of urgency, we may look back and call these the “good old days.”

It must be said that the current surge in youth violence was anticipated. Even as crime rates fell during the 1990s, criminologists warned about the potential for another wave of youth and gang violence, combining an upward trend in the at-risk youth population with a downward trend in spending on programs to support youth and families.

Furthermore, we should not be surprised if the increase in at-risk youth with inadequate supervision, combined with budget cuts for youth programs, translates into increases in gang and gun violence.

The good news is that the crime problem is not out of control, at least compared to the early 1990s when the nation’s murder rate was almost twice what it is today. But it is a wake-up call that crime prevention needs again to be a priority.

We must seek immediate solutions for controlling the high level of gang activity and easy access to illegal firearms – approaches that depend heavily on law enforcement. At the same time, we must maintain a more comprehensive long-range view.

The choice is ours: pay for programs now – effective programs such as those provided by Boys & Girls Clubs – or pay for the victims later.

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