

THE PROBLEM WORSE THAN CRIME

Notes On Juvenile Justice And Pyrrhic Victory

by Michael Owens 2009

The Race Question

(For one whose fame depends on
keeping the Problem a problem)

Would it please you if I strung my tears
In pearls for you to wear?
Would you like a gift of my hands' endless beating
Against old bars?

...I will not feed your hunger with my blood
Nor crown your nakedness
With jewels of my elegant pain.

--Naomi Long Madgett

The current approaches being used to try to decrease juvenile crime (JC), at least those approaches that I'm aware of, are mostly half-hearted exercise in futility. As I understand it, the problem is largely threefold: First, the public mistakenly believes that JC is a problem solely for the police to deal with; second, the juvenile justice system is either unable or unwilling to shake off its complacency; and third, no one in government, who is in a position to make any real policy change, seems able to make a correct diagnosis of either the JC crisis or what actions are necessary to effectively address it.

The correct diagnosis is this: Juvenile crime, like most crime, isn't the central problem in American society, it's a symptom of the central problem. And until we summon the courage to face that truth and all that it implies, we'll continue to suffer this and other symptoms. Simply put: what our society wants, it cannot have. We seem to want a significant decrease in JC, without having to deal with the underlying causes of crime-- poverty, substandard education, and inadequate health care. Maybe the main reason people don't want to tackle these root causes is because deep down we know that they're so embedded into the fabric of society that any sincere effort to solve them would require a fundamental shift in the allocation of U.S. resources. And as yet, America is unwilling to make that level of commitment.

1. RESULTS OVER PROCESS

If I had to identify one specific indicator able to predict the likely degree of success for any given program targeting JC, it would be emphasis of focus. Taxpayers need only to look at each of our publicly funded programs and ask a

critical question: Which holds greater sway in these operations, preference for a certain way of doing things; or getting results? Allegiance to a particular process leads to cronyism, fruitless debate, and bureaucracy. Allegiance to results however, is all about efficiency, increased accountability, and trimming the fat. That which does not produce, gets eliminated. This is not to say process is unimportant, just that process must always be guided by the ultimate goal: results.

We need oversight committees to organize our response to the JC crisis because rule-by-committee delegates responsibility for each phase of a program to those most qualified to handle it. Though bureaucracy may sometimes be found in rule-by-committee type organizations too, most often it's due more to a lack of diligence on the part of the chairman than to committee rule being a fatally flawed system. And this area is often the Achilles' heel of JC prevention work. The government sanctioned programs, the ones that enjoy plenty of funding and resources, are often being run by people whose backgrounds are so far removed from the environments they're trying to serve, their efforts are either mistrusted and ill-received, or just outright rejected. And conversely, the independent activist workers who actually come from those same troubled areas as most at risk youth are largely being ignored by our government grantors. What's needed is a merger of both groups of community workers. The well-connected, college educated professionals should focus on tutoring, mental health counseling, and the outreach program's administrative needs; leaving the hands-on community level work to those who can best navigate the unique challenges of operating in high risk neighborhoods. This isn't to say there should be absolutely no mixing of worker roles, there should be; but only on a trainee/observer basis, at least initially. Remember, being results orientated means increased responsibility for everyone. Those with the expertise must have the final say, because ultimately, it's their job that's on the line if their department doesn't produce.

2. WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

Considering the current JC crisis facing the nation, we must begin a two-prong approach of prevention and intervention. I think everyone concerned would acknowledge that that would be the most sensible plan of attack; but far too often, there ends the agreement. Let me say it plainly right now: if we want

to make some real changes, we'll need to make a conscious decision to stay open to some radically new ideas and tactics. Our prisons are bursting at the seams; so let's be honest, what we've been doing simply isn't working.

A. Prevention

Imagine that you accidentally left your kitchen sink running and it began to overflow. What would you do first, start mopping or turn off the faucet? Obviously, you'd turn the faucet off first. And so when considering which prong should receive the most urgent attention, prevention is the most logical choice.

Unfortunately, when most people think crime prevention, they think police. But that kind of thinking is fundamentally flawed because law enforcement's main focus on the crime question is after-the-fact. Taking people to jail doesn't qualify as crime prevention in any logical way because it creates just as many, if not more, problems as it claims to solve. Jailing offenders is, at best, crime management. The police have neither the tools, community ties, nor desire to invest themselves into meaningful youth crime prevention programs. And when you get right down to it, crime prevention shouldn't be thought of as a police responsibility anyway; it's a community responsibility.

Someone once correctly surmised, "We will not stop crime until we stop believing that we can hire people to stop it for us". Real prevention will only occur when community people get involved with community youth, and together face the community issues that are influencing our kids to participate in the criminal sub-culture. Most youth criminal behavior is rooted in the immature, antisocial attempt to meet common human needs and desires. They get involved in gang activity in order to fulfill their need for social acceptance and esteem from peers. They steal and sell drugs to fulfill their need to control their own economic futures, and so on. The problem isn't the need, the problem is that our youth perceive that they have few legitimate ways to meet their legitimate needs. Successful prevention must necessarily include cultural, educational, and economic programs in order to teach our kids how to address their needs in a more responsible way.

B. Intervention

Prevention was mainly about giving youth the tools they'll need to avoid becoming juvenile offenders. Intervention however, is for those kids already involved in street life, the ones who've already become tangled up in the criminal sub-culture. And this intervention work must be appreciated for what

it is: dangerous, emotionally expensive, life-threatening, life-saving work. It's serious business for serious people.

The first and largest hurdle we face in our intervention work is gaining the trust of those who most need our help. Kids, and especially street-wise kids, are very good at sensing phoniness or false posturing. Therefore, those who would undertake this work must be genuine. And the only way to win their trust is to be consistent in all dealings with them. Become a regular presence in their lives. If you really want to be part of a child's life, weekly visits just won't cut it. If your circumstances will only allow for part-time work, that's still a beautiful contribution; just don't try to tackle a full-timer's level of responsibility. There are other, more effective ways for busy people to be of service. The most important job a part-timer can do is support a full-timer. Real change is most possible with full-time intervention, and any assistance that facilitates that, is valuable beyond measure.

So what should full-time work look like? That's the least important question. Remember, results over process. Every program is, and should be, different. The only constant should be the question that we must continually ask and use as our guide: What does this child need in order to be successful? When we begin to view each of our program youth with this in mind, we will turn a corner and start to see real results, even in our most desperate communities. But let's not be naive, progress is expensive. So if you're not prepared to go and get involved in a struggling community, regardless of whatever dangers that decision may imply; then you've chosen the wrong service field. What these kids need is for someone stable, informed, and committed to make a selfless decision to get involved, guided by one simple principle: whatever it takes.

3. WISDOM AND EXPERIENCE

There's basically only two ways that people learn anything. We either learn by wisdom or experience; wisdom being the body of collected human knowledge available to us, and experience being our own individual process of theory testing. In reaching out to kids, whether for prevention or intervention, we'll need workers with backgrounds in both of those types of learning. Kids not only need mentors with wisdom in the social sciences; they need mentors who have personally experienced poverty, dysfunctional home life, and criminal activity. They need the wisdom and experience of people who know first-hand

what it is to fall into the street-life, those who know the solution from the inside out. Nothing is more clownish to troubled youth, and more ineffective in a program, than the outsider who comes along claiming to relate and operate on a level that they've clearly never experienced.

People who have once lived the criminal lifestyle, and later emerged with a desire to get involved in juvenile crime reduction work, are a too often neglected resource. Ex-offender activists are generally self-educated and highly motivated workers; and more importantly, it's right that they shoulder the bulk of the responsibility of fighting to redeem the community. They aren't scared to stand on and work in the same streets that even most police are afraid of. Ex-offender activists understand that the price for reclaiming even one corner could be one of their lives; and they're willing to pay that, and then return the next day to resume the work of their fallen comrade. Workers like these need to be embraced and enabled because in some communities, that is the only mentality that will prevail.

In this paper, we've discussed some fresh views and suggestions, but there's nothing here that hasn't been offered before. What we're now left to consider is why these approaches haven't been utilized more, if at all? And when they are, why isn't it more widely reported in the mainstream media? Why aren't there more social workers, police departments, community leaders, and local government officials advocating support for these fresher approaches? Why does the politically powerful upper class of the city seem so satisfied with today's minimally effective programs? Could it possibly be this way because winning real victories in America's lower economic, high crime areas would lead to something worse than crime, something that the power elite of this country simply cannot afford to let happen? It's my belief that our government considers the transformation of our neighborhoods to be a pyrrhic victory. A pyrrhic victory is a victory that comes at too high a cost, and I'll attempt to show this in the final section.

4. IMPERIALISM 101

Let's say we were magically able to wipe out all the criminal, psychological, and educational woes from our neighborhoods. What would happen next? What would be going on in those communities full of focused and educated, but yet impoverished youth? If not busy being exploited as pawns in the Prison Industrial Complex, what would unemployed, dissatisfied, and undistracted

youth be doing? the history of mass uprisings the world over teaches us that they would be politicizing, agitating, and demanding redress from their government!

The national unemployment rate is double for Hispanics and more than triple for blacks in this country. And those were the rates before the current recession hit. In 2008 the California state unemployment average rose from 6.2% in April to 6.8% in May. That represented the largest jump in 30 years. Providing jobs for every able worker at U.S. scale pay-rates is unsustainable under the mandates of Capitalism. This is why we see so many corporations going international in search of cheaper labor and ever-increasing profit margins. And keep in mind, we're witnessing this phenomenon at the current levels of citizen job demand. Just think of how those numbers would skyrocket with the influx of all those potential workers who are currently incarcerated or distracted by the criminal sub-culture.

Let me be as clear as I can: I'm not saying that the juvenile crime problem is being created by our government. I'm suggesting that the juvenile crime problem is being ignored by our government. And further, I'm saying it's being intentionally ignored in order to protect the interests of empire. The system simply can't afford to allow the awakening of the sleeping giant in its midst. Given the choice between continuing elitist dominance at the expense of people seemingly bent on self-destruction, or complete social and economic re-organization for the common good of its suffering citizens; an oppressive, imperialist nation chooses the former every time.

endnote:

•The U.S. currently has more people behind bars than China, despite a population less than a quarter of its size. And on June 30, 2006 the U.S. passed the ominous milestone of having the highest per capita incarceration rate in history, overtaking Nazi Germany and Stalinist U.S.S.R.