



COMMENTARY

FLORIDA CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

Archdiocese of Miami † Diocese of St. Augustine

Diocese of St. Petersburg † Diocese of Orlando

Diocese of Pensacola/Tallahassee † Diocese of Palm Beach † Diocese of Venice

VOLUME 13, NUMBER 1

FEBRUARY 1994

JUVENILE CRIME -- OUR CHALLENGE

Problems with juvenile crime and the juvenile justice system challenge the people of Florida and especially the Legislature as its 1994 session begins. These problems are a large and growing part of our crisis in the criminal justice and corrections system.

The right of citizens to be secure in their person, their home, and their property; the increasing rate of juvenile crime; the lack of respect for law and lawful authority; and the historic neglect of children in Florida have placed us in this crisis situation.

"Government has a moral function: protecting human rights and securing basic justice for all members of the commonwealth."¹ Its authority "must always be exercised within the limits of morality and on behalf of the dynamically conceived common good."²

In 1985, the Florida Bishops spoke to the criminal justice system urging "the state to take every reasonable measure to prevent crime, to secure the safety of its citizens, to show effective concern for the victims of crime, and to punish criminals."³

A look at the way the state has dealt with adult crime can teach us about solutions to juvenile crime.

The Adult Criminal Justice System

Continuing demands in Florida to get tougher on crime, more minimum mandatory sentences, more death sentences, more prison construction, less rehabilitation, restrictions on parole and other punitive attitudes have resulted in more crime, more fear and more violence. Florida waives over to that adult system and imprisons more children than any other state in the nation;⁴ during the year ending June 30, 1993, the state of Florida admitted a staggering 1,135

children under the age of 18 into the adult prisons.⁵

We cannot afford to revisit these responses on the juvenile justice crisis. These juveniles are growing and will develop into the adults of tomorrow. They must not be abandoned to criminality. The safety and security of law abiding citizens demand that they be developed and formed into productive and lawful citizens.

Train a boy in the way he should go;
Even when he is old, he will not
swerve from it. (Proverbs 22:6)

Juveniles -- Children

The words "child" and "juvenile" are sometimes interchangeable. A fifteen-year-old is the same person as he or she was ten years earlier, but has been shaped by growth, family, neighborhood, friends, school and other forces. To deal with juvenile crime, all of these forces have to be dealt with and made to be positive influences on children.

As the twig is bent the tree will grow. St. Paul said, "Let everyone obey authorities that are over him... the man who opposes authority rebels against the ordinance of God." Thus, children must be corrected for their early disobedience and be held accountable later for their crimes in order to learn the importance of respect for themselves, for others and for the law. When children are disciplined, their siblings and friends also learn.

The Search for Answers

The problems in juvenile crime are complex, not susceptible to one single solution. Yet there is so much public concern

and outcry that there is a terrible temptation toward demagoguery, toward harsh and punitive reactions that cost as little as possible. But that chain of reactions is how we got into this situation. Real solutions will require thought, time and money.

Without a doubt there are juvenile criminals who are dangerous, not susceptible to counseling or social influences, and who must be separated from society in order to protect law abiding citizens. But these are a minute percentage of children who get into trouble. And even these juveniles should not simply be abandoned to the adult criminal justice system. They should be handled with firmness, yet as juveniles and with some hope of reform. The present establishment of boot camps can be a part of the answer for some juvenile offenders, although even for them, ongoing social, job-training and supervisory services are essential.

Commitment to a facility will be appropriate for some offenders, but it is not always the most effective means of dealing with juvenile crime. "Extraordinary efforts should be made to rehabilitate the juvenile offender. These efforts should begin before the juvenile is sent to the youth facility."⁶

Among these "extraordinary efforts" are attempts in our juvenile justice system to improve early-intervention programs. Our present system of simply excusing or ignoring minor crimes, as well as crimes that would be felonies if committed by an adult, has failed. Early intervention requires adequate funding, as well as the training of police, social service, educational and correctional personnel.

In early intervention it is essential that children be treated as children, errant or otherwise. Almost all of them live in families and must be dealt with as members of families. It should be remembered that many prominent, outstanding citizens today were once troublesome juveniles. Overreaction to first-time offenses or minor offenders can do far more harm than good to the child and to society.

The Florida Supreme Court has ruled that a juvenile court judge cannot punish for direct contempt of court. This ruling has led to absurd examples of abuse and

contemptuous behavior. Courts must have the power to require proper decorum and conduct in court. People who abide by the law and who are productive in society have learned to discipline themselves. Children who cannot discipline themselves, even when they are before a court, must learn discipline for their own good as well as that of society.

Roots of Juvenile Crime

Dealing with the symptoms of juvenile crime is one thing; it is quite different and more difficult to deal with the causes, the roots of crime.

Our society is judged by the way it treats its children and adolescents. And that judgement is harsh. The juvenile crime that we face today can be traced to our treatment of children in years gone by. Much of it can be traced to poverty, but not all -- much to family breakdown or the absence of families, but not all; much to housing deficiencies, but not all; the same can be said of inadequate education, lack of discipline, poor role models, racism, and on and on. Government can have an impact on all of these but it can only be a part of the solution.

In dealing with juvenile crime, one focus must be on the juveniles, both children and adolescents, for:

1. They are hurting -- the most vulnerable members of our society. Their lives, dignity, rights, and hopes are at risk.
2. They are our present, they are part of society just as adults are and, as such, deserve respect.
3. They are our future, they will be the leaders, the parents, the citizens of tomorrow.

Challenge to Family, Church, Government and School

Social institutions increasingly share many of the family's responsibilities toward children but they can never take the place of families. Rather social institutions, government at all levels, employers, religious institutions, schools, media, community organizations, should enter into creative partnerships with families to enable them to fulfill their responsibilities toward their children.

Family. Children suffer the most when their parents lack support and help in meeting the challenges of raising them, in the face of cultural, economic, and moral pressures never before known. Parents are the primary educators of children. By work, example, and the priorities of their lives, families need to teach the values that help children grow to be responsible, faithful, caring and disciplined persons. Values are taught when parents spend time with their children, when they discipline and guide them, when they show affection, and when they play, study, and pray with them.

Church. In our churches, we must both proclaim the Word of God and help families in their responsibilities by offering both support and challenge. Good resources exist and should be made available including religious instruction, family programs, retreats, outreach to families in distress, support groups, youth programs, counseling, and the timeless spiritual resources of prayer, liturgy, scripture, theology and meditation.

Catholic Charities and other church ministries have a long history of successful work with juveniles and their families. All of the ministries of the Church must constantly re-examine their programs to ask the basic question, "Are we teaching responsibility and providing real opportunity?"

Government. The most important work to help juveniles is done quietly -- in our homes and neighborhoods, churches and community organizations. No government can love a child and no policy can substitute for a family's care. However, it plays an important role in the development of children, by either supporting or undermining families as they cope with the moral, social, and economic stresses of caring for children.

There is often an undesirable polarization in discussions of how to best help families. Some emphasize the primary role of moral values and personal responsibilities but ignore or de-emphasize the impact of economics, discrimination and state policies. Others emphasize social and

economic forces while neglecting the importance of basic values and personal responsibilities.

The fact is that juveniles are shaped both by the values of their parents and the policies of the state. Parental responsibilities and broader social responsibilities, changed behavior and changed policies are necessary to reform generations of neglect.

Governmental policies should meet certain criteria:

1. Put children, adolescents and families first. Every policy and program should be examined for its impact on them.

2. Help, don't hurt; insist on economic, welfare, education, and human service policies that support families rather than undermine them, that depend on and encourage self-help rather than promote dependency.

3. Because of the limited resources available, those with the greatest need require the greatest response. Families that are poor, face discrimination, have children in need of services, or in trouble with the law require the most help.

4. Empower families to make the choices that meet their children's diverse needs; in education, childcare, health, work and other areas. We should build on the strength of families and reward responsibility.

5. Reject violence and promote peaceful resolution of disputes at all levels of our society, especially in educational programs.

School. All schools, public, parochial, and private, have an urgent responsibility to integrate sound values -- including standards of conduct and motivations for behavior -- throughout their curricula. As a recent Catholic-Jewish Joint Statement points out, "it is all too easy for children to assume that information not taught in school cannot be very important."⁷ Floridians think nothing of teaching promptness, honesty, respect for teachers, and the avoidance of drugs, alcohol and smoking; but there are other ethical and moral values that help develop discipline, self-control and respect for

authority. Parents are responsible for instilling these values in their children; they should be assisted in this by the public, parochial or private school of their choice.

Moral Values

The state must recognize that traditional moral values are not relics of a bygone age. Rather they are the best guides to a productive future for our children and for the elimination of juvenile crime. Our moral convictions about expressing human sexuality within marriage now represent not only appropriate moral guidance but also wise health counseling. Responsibility, unselfishness, concern for others, protection of the weak and vulnerable, fidelity in marriage and commitment to children are the building blocks of a creative and satisfying life in a just and decent society. These values form the basis by which juvenile crime eventually can be eliminated.

References

1. Pope John Paul XXIII, *Pacem in Terris (On Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity, and Liberty)*, April 11, 1963, para. 60-62.
2. Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, para. 12.
3. *A Pastoral Statement on the Social Concerns of Florida, Statements of the Catholic Bishops of Florida*, Florida Catholic Conference, 1985, p.83.
4. "Our Opinion", *Tallahassee Democrat*, September 23, 1993.
5. Florida Department of Correction statistics, per October 26, 1993 letter to Ms. Maxine McConnell, senior analyst.
6. "A Community Response to Crime", United States Catholic Conference Statement, *Origins*, March 9, 1978, Vol. 7: No. 38, p.599.
7. "Moral Education in the Public Schools", a joint statement by the Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Interreligious Affairs Committee of the Synagogue Council of America, *Origins*, July 19, 1990, Vol. 20: No. 9, p.135.
8. *A Pastoral Statement on the Social Concerns of Florida*, p.84.

They ought to be recognized in our public policies, encouraged in our media and supported in our community institutions.

Conclusion

The Florida Bishops said in 1985: "the war against crime will not be won until there is widespread return to religious and moral values, until more medals are given to peacemakers than to generals, until ascetics are more honored than millionaires, and until there is a widespread sense of responsibility to God and to the common good."⁸

While steps have to be taken to restore domestic tranquility and remove fear from our citizenry, nothing of real worth will be accomplished until peace and justice are established along with law and order.

That is the challenge to families, churches, schools, society, and especially to government.

FLORIDA CATHOLIC CONFERENCE
P.O. BOX 1638
TALLAHASSEE, FL 32302
(904) 222-3803

NonProfit Organization
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Tallahassee, Florida
PERMIT NO. 264