

Christian Social Action

A Crime Prevention Vision

The criminal justice system is simply a totally inadequate platform from which to view the problem of crime in the United States

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by Eric E. Sterling

Even though it is hard to admit, there is very little that the *criminal justice system* can do about the prevalence of crime *right now* — or even in the future. The "crime fighting" response is "lock 'em up." This is wrong-headed. The more people we lock up, the more serious our crime problem *will* become, for three reasons.

First, the prison culture extends respect to more serious offenders. The culture values the transmission of increasingly sophisticated and more remunerative criminal techniques.

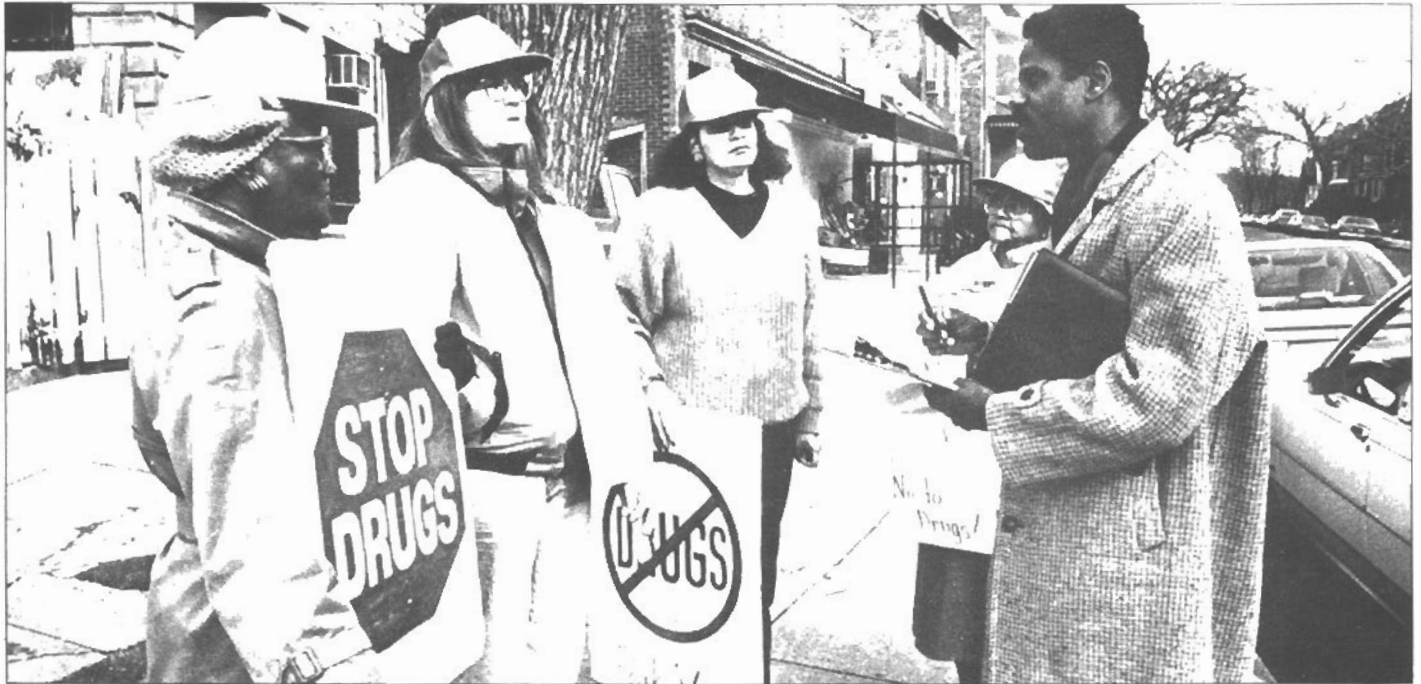
Second, prison teaches that any slight, any indignity, any threat to one's place in the pecking order, *must* be met with violence or else one will become subject to violence and degradation. Inmates learn that violence is *the means* for self-protection. No prisoner can survive being "dissed" ("disrespected") or the *perception* that they have been "dissed."

Third, the basic human need for intimacy and trust is almost never met. In most societies, sex between adults provides a connection of intimacy. Sex in prison is permeated with violence, almost never with intimacy or trust.

Remember, almost everyone in prison will be released — if only to create room for new prisoners. The overwhelming majority of all criminal offenses that were committed by prisoners were non-violent. Thus justice does not tolerate extremely long sentences for most offenders.

Our prison population (measured at the end of the year) has doubled since 1980, and the numbers of persons exposed to the prison environment has grown even faster. By one estimate, some eleven million people in the United States go to prison for some time every year. Today's inmate is tomorrow's neighbor. Given the behavior learned in prison, how could anyone be surprised that violent crime is on the rise.

In this sense, the *criminal justice system*, through its flawed strategies, is actually increasing the amount of violent crime. The basic, custody function of prison does not "correct" or "rehabilitate." Only programs considered frills address



Members of Concerned Citizens Coalition in Washington, D.C. patrol their neighborhood.

such goals, and these programs have been, and continue to be cut back throughout the nation.

Imprisonment Not a Deterrent

Contrary to political rhetoric, the threat of imprisonment is not much of a deterrent to crime. Most offenders are impulsive, short-term thinkers. They rarely calculate — especially the likelihood of something as remote and unpleasant as imprisonment. Imprisonment does not serve the function most often assigned to it. Imprisonment is not an instrument for crime prevention.

Not only is the major "output" of our criminal justice system — imprisonment (about one-third of our criminal justice system annual cost) — failing to prevent crime, but much of our current interventions that attempt to prevent crime are inadequate or ill conceived.

To prevent crime, we must respond to the fact that our most serious offenders have been subjected to patterns of abuse and neglect. That, of course, does not excuse a crime.

Experienced teachers can often spot the second grader who will become the serious sociopath. But our institutional responses to that second grader generally have been a fiasco. Imagine a typical example:

Johnny is acting up in the classroom. He is singled-out (stigmatized) as a trouble-maker, sent to the principal's office, given punishment work, and subjected to humiliation. More attention is spent on his failings and misbehavior than are ever lavished on his few successes.

Johnny acts up at home. Mom (and if he is in the home or neighborhood, Dad), are tired and frustrated with Johnny. Mom, Dad, Grandma, Sis, *et al*, repeatedly yell at him and physically punish him; this becomes the regular

pattern of interaction. Johnny is told (taught) he is bad, no good, "a little devil."

Often Johnny is acting up because home is actually dangerous and chaotic and the family is dysfunctional. Johnny, like all of us, craves attention. Generally Johnny is being neglected or abused. Perhaps there is an alcoholic, a drug addict, a batterer, or a child abuser in or close to the household and Johnny. At best, the family is under severe economic pressure, and Johnny's problems just seem to make it harder "to make ends meet."

Typically Johnny's troubles at school are never seen as related to his family problems — his trouble is handled by punishment. If Johnny's family troubles are serious enough for the attention of a family services agency, perhaps an overworked social worker is assigned to the family's "case." Johnny's troubles in school, at home, in the streets, with the police, and juvenile authorities are all subject to confidentiality rules that prevent the social worker from learning a complete, even official, story of Johnny's troubles.

This is Johnny's therapeutic experience: "Hello Johnny, I am Dr. Smith. We seem to be having a problem. I am your friend and I am here to help you. Please tell me about it." Dr. Smith is typically doing an "evaluation." Johnny sees Dr. Smith once or twice. Johnny learns that such institutional "help" is superficial, dishonest, insincere, and potentially hostile. It is basically unreliable. We must truly and effectively intervene, break the abusive patterns, and seek to heal the child.

As Johnny grows, almost inevitably, his trouble-making gets worse. When Johnny is 14 or 15, perhaps having now committed a serious offense, the District Attorney tells the court that Johnny's long record of misbehavior warrants treating him as an adult, and sending him to prison for a

long time. The District Attorney objects to any “therapeutic disposition” because it is a “slap on the wrist.”

A crime prevention approach begins much earlier than Johnny’s first appearance in court, juvenile court, or even the principal’s office. Crime prevention begins at conception, and even earlier.

Preventing teenage pregnancy is an important crime prevention program. Pregnant women need care and nutrition to minimize birth defects that often lead to behavior problems. Many pregnant women need to learn how to be mothers.

Young men are even less familiar with child rearing than mothers. Fathers need to be trained to be fathers. Our society leaves these critical matters to a haphazard, informal education. More care is given to teaching teenagers geometry or trigonometry than how to parent. Licensed barbers and plumbers get more training than parents.

Indeed, one life-long situation in our society that is nearly universal, extremely important, and can profoundly impact other lives — driving a car — is subject to extensive training. Comparing driver training and parental training illustrates the inadequacy of parental training in our culture of highly stressed or “broken” families.

New mothers need extensive support — besides from *their* mothers. Some 67 percent of mothers under 18 are working; for their own sanity they must have safe, well organized, genuinely nurturing day care for their babies. For the babies’ growth, the babies must have safe, well organized, genuinely nurturing day care.

Whether working or not, new mothers need much more support from the community than simply monetary assistance. Mothers need companionship, mentors, and time off. Poor, young mothers need to be able to feel good about themselves. They need to be able to leave their babies safely so they can get their hair done, for example, or to go shopping.

All mothers — working or not, married or not — need space and time to “charge their batteries.” And, of course, they need to learn how to feed and clothe their baby, play with him or her, shop economically, and cook.

Teaching These Skills Fights Crime

When these skills are not learned in the families, the communities, neighborhoods, and churches, must intervene. It is hard to imagine government departments or bureaus directly teaching these skills. These interventions are appropriate for churches, block associations, etc., and *teaching these skills fights crime*. But how many churches, block associations, tenant associations, or volunteer fire departments, teach parenting to *unwed* mothers and fathers without stigmatization?

There is, of course, the rest of our culture shaping young people — our communications media, our economy, class and generational isolation, racism and sexism, etc. — that do more to lead to crime and violence than to lead away from crime and violence. For these conditions too, many specific changes are needed, but they are not outlined in this vision.

A crime prevention strategy recognizes that “the crime problem” is not caused by the criminal justice system, at least initially, and it can’t be “solved” by it. The children who are most at risk for committing crime get the least in preventive support.

One dimension recognized in true crime prevention strategies is that the community best polices itself by caring for itself — caring for its children, for its mothers, for its disadvantaged, for its abused, for its addicted, for its troubled and hurting. A crime prevention strategy recognizes that compassion is transmitted from one heart to the next.

To Build a “Recovering Society”

Former drug addicts and alcoholics often say they are “recovering.” *Our society is addicted to the stimulant of violence, and to the depressant of indifference*. Our challenge is to build “a recovering society” — recovering from drugs, from violence, from racism, and, ultimately, from indifference. Much violence and theft are rationalized with false categories of indifference — he, she, or it “don’t matter to me.”

Our religious institutions — to pick on the oldest, most important, and best financed volunteer organizations that are concerned about the correctness of behavior, the binding together of community, and the raising of children — are now largely hidebound, lost in sterile ritual, and patriarchal. By and large they fail to bring to life the interconnectedness of people and of life on the planet; they even fail in many cases to give a home to a life of the spirit. Religious institutions must recognize that they have a major role in energizing genuine crime prevention programs — not only for the society, but for the achievement of their own missions.

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As a vision, some may call it prevention, social justice, wellness, wholeness, peace, or love. Call it what you will, but the challenge for crime prevention is to live it, for that is what will make it real.

The criminal justice system is simply a totally inadequate platform from which to view the problem of crime in the United States. Those of us in criminal justice must not accept a responsibility for US crime independent from the shared responsibility of all this country’s institutions. Our collective inadequacy in meeting our responsibility to our children has led to our nation’s failure to prevent crime. ■