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Juvenile Crime a Threat to Safety in the United States

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In law, the term “juvenile crime” is used to denote various offenses committed by children under the age of 18” (Roberts, 2000, p. 3). Just as with adult crimes, crimes committed by juveniles can include: murder, robbery, rape, aggravated assaults, burglary, theft, arson, and damage to property. As a result of limited life experiences, children are impressionable and more susceptible to negative influences which can encourage delinquency and eventually may result in the committing of crime(s).

Within the United States, some argue that one of the main contributors to juvenile crime is the steady deterioration of the family infrastructure and the casting aside of simple morals. Government officials continue to create legislation and assign punishments for the violation of the laws which they have created in hopes of lessening juvenile crimes. Apparently this “pound foolish” approach is easier than building a “penny wise” solution based on teaching and instilling fundamental values and basic morals into the consciousness of young people, which some believe is the only real solution.

Extent of Juvenile Crime

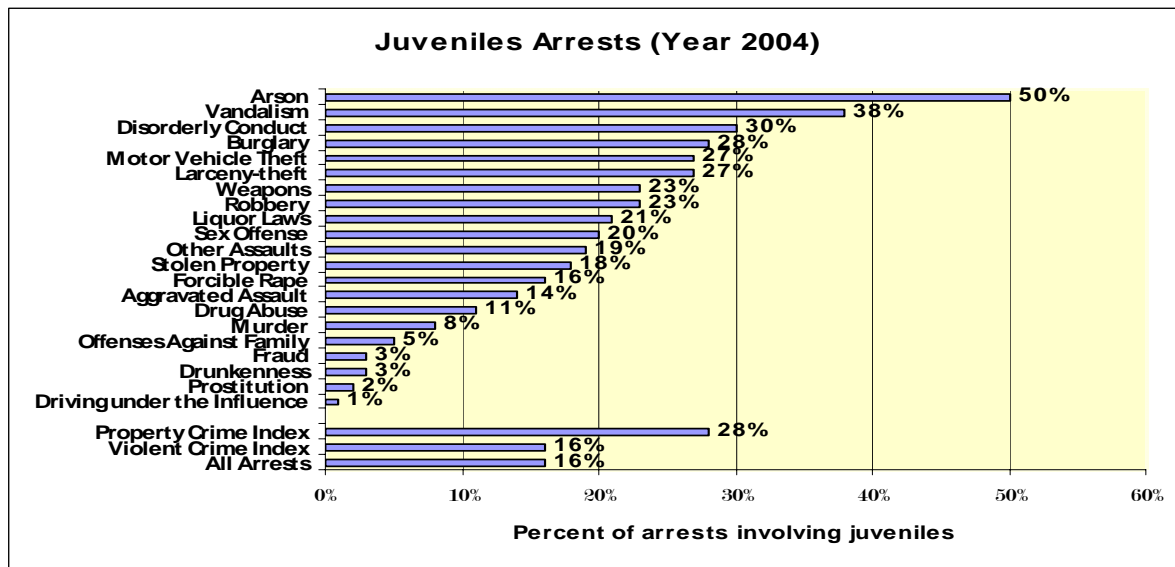
Table 1

Most Serious Offense	2004 Estimated Number of Juvenile Arrests	Percent of Total Juvenile Arrests		Percent Change		
		Female	Under Age 16	1995-2004	2000-2004	2003-2004
Total	2,202,000	30	32	-22%	-9%	-2%
Violent Crime Index	91,000	19	32	-31%	-5%	-1%
Murder and non-negligent manslaughter	1,110	9	12	-63%	-8%	0%
Forcible Rape	4,210	3	38	-22%	-10%	0%
Robbery	25,340	10	24	-44%	-5%	0%
Aggravated assault	60,450	24	35	-23%	-6%	-2%
Property Crime Index	4,523,000	34	36	-40%	-15%	-3%
Burglary	81,600	12	35	-39%	-15%	-4%
Larceny-theft	323,500	42	37	-38%	-14%	-2%
Motor vehicle theft	39,300	17	25	-53%	-21%	-9%
Arson	7,800	14	61	-34%	-10%	-3%

Source: Crime in the United States 2004 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2003). Retrieved October 12, 2007 from website <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/204608.pdf>

Although the media would suggest that juvenile crime is on the rise, data provided by the National Center for Juvenile Justice paints a different picture. According to Table 1, the number of juvenile arrests has declined by 22% since 1995. While the government finds this data encouraging, the extent of the problem is reflected in the fact that during 2004 there was an estimated 2.2 million juvenile arrests.

Table 2



Source: Crime in the United States 2004 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2003). Retrieved October 12, 2007 from website <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/204608.pdf>

The data provided in Table 2 shows that arson, vandalism, theft, burglary, and disorderly conduct account for the largest number of juvenile arrest. During that same year, the chart also shows 1 in 12 arrests were made for murder and 1 in 4 arrests for a weapons violation, robbery, motor vehicle theft, larceny-theft, and burglary.

Cause of Juvenile Crime

Single-parent households. Most people living within the United States consider juvenile crime as an imminent threat to their personal safety and well-being. While growing crime is an adequate cause for concern, it should also be noted that the rate of juvenile crime is closely associated with the rising number of single-parent homes. Amato (2005) states, “If the U.S.

family structure was as strong today as it was in 1970, there would be 453,000 fewer children involved in violence each year” (p. 89). The Heritage Foundation (1995) supports this statement by adding, “States with a lower percentage of single-parent families have a lower rate of juvenile crime. For every 10 percent increase in single-parent families there is a 17 percent increase in violent teen crime” (p. 3). This data indicates that the increase in single-parent households has a direct impact to a lack of discipline which might, in essence, contribute to the moral breakdown within families. Research shows that children within these single-family homes are more likely to be rebellious and experience negative influence at a higher rate from sources such as: inappropriate music, media images, and video games.

Moral breakdown. Although the typical American family structure involves two parents, single parenting has become more prevalent in today’s society. The moral decay of the family structure has resulted in an alarming increase in teen pregnancies, divorce, and single-parent families. The Year 2000 Census states:

The “typical” family of married parents and their biological children accounts for fewer than a quarter of all U.S. households. Indeed, almost a third of all children in the U.S. today (20 million of them) are being raised by single parents, with more than 80 percent of those household being headed by single moms (Renkl, 2001, p. 68).

Studies have shown the children of single-parent households are more likely to experiment with drugs, have sexual intercourse, and experience a higher rate of teenage pregnancy. These teen pregnancies result in the vicious cycle of morally deficient children raising another generation of morally deficient children. Oftentimes, teen parents fail in their parental obligation to instill, much needed, guidance and moral values in their children because they lack simple parenting skills and old-fashioned know how.

Other data provided by Children's Trust Fund show that in more than 25,000 cases, children of single-parent homes had lower grade point averages, demonstrated lower aspirations to go to college, had poor attendance records, and higher drop out rates than children of two-parent homes (Children's Trust Fund, 2007). Studies also show most single-parent homes are struggling financially. Subsequently, children from these households are more likely to engage in criminal activity to generate income to help support their families.

Youthful rebellion. In this modern age of technology, children are encouraged to become more independent. American media promotes the idea of independent thinking and rebelling against the trap of societal thinking, policies, and morays. Additionally, advances in technology have given children the impression that they are better educated and more advanced than their parents. Subsequently, these children no longer recognize the need to obey authority figures such as parents, teachers, police, and religious leaders.

Negative influences. Children within single-family households are often placed in the position of assuming the adult responsibility of caring for themselves. As such, they are allowed to watch television programming that is inappropriate with little or no supervision. Unfiltered, daily exposure to the negative influences of television is counter productive and sends a message that glamorizes violence, applauds blatant disregard for authority figures, and glorifies sexual promiscuity. In order to off-set some of this negative influence, The United States has developed various committee and policy forums to address the social problem of juvenile crime.

United States Government's Solution to Juvenile Crime

The government's approach to addressing the problem is to use punishment as a deterrent to juvenile crime. As early as 1899, The United States' initial response to this problem was to develop a juvenile court system. In 1950, the White House hosted a conference aimed at

exploring methods to prevent juvenile delinquency via policies and laws within the juvenile court system. The conference led to the establishment of the Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime Committee in 1961. Subsequently, the following legislation was passed to address juvenile delinquency:

- Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Offenses Control Act
- Juvenile Delinquency Prevention and Control Act
- Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act
- Juvenile Justice and Prevention Act

According to Soering (2007), “The U.S. has moved towards an increasingly punitive approach. Forty of the 50 states (and the District of Columbia) will now allow minors to be prosecuted as an adult” (p. 2). Legislation seems more focused on strengthening the juvenile justice system by securing state and government funding rather than exploring methods to prevent the underlying cause of juvenile crime. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), partners with policymakers, states, and communities to strengthen the juvenile justice system’s efforts to protect public safety (OJJDP Website, 2007). Forty-one years later (in 2002), amendments were made to the Juvenile Justice and Prevention Act to establish preventive treatment plans for juvenile offenders.

Solutions

Society’s steady moral decline has encouraged pre-marital sex, “get-rich-quick” schemes, teen pregnancy, rebellion, and single-parent households. Sadly, these are realities that society must confront and changes in the near future seem very distant. Based on its record, society can not continue to depend on the government to correct this social issue. An on-going partnership must be established among parents, neighbors, religious leaders, and educators within the community to help strengthen the moral fiber that connects both our community and society and curtail the issue of juvenile crime. In order to further strengthen the partnership, the government

should focus on early prevention and intervention to keep juvenile offenders from becoming part of a perpetual crime system; rather than developing excessive punishment policies and building more prisons.

Moral values are the hinges of society that help determine acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Children must be exposed to these moral teachings early in life through the age of accountability. A large portion of today's youth lack respect due to the parent's failure to instill basic moral values and self-respect in their children. Parents owe it to their children to provide them with the necessary tools to be successful in life. When children do not receive the necessary love and guidance necessary to be socially successful they become more susceptible to the unwanted negative influences from a variety of sources.

Conclusion

I feel the first step is to help parents instill moral values in their children. Secondly, as children, we must recognize the need to practice these morals and assume responsibility for our actions. Since most of our time is spent in school, I think a class in morality should be included as part of the required curriculum within our public school system. In addition, all teen parents should be required to take a class in parenting before receiving state and federal financial aid. Early prevention/intervention is the key to reducing juvenile crimes.

Churches could play a pivotal role in helping to strengthen the foundation for ethics, values, behavior, and life within young people. My family has a strong spiritual and religious background. Early exposure to Bible teachings such as the "Golden Rule" and the "Ten Commandments" would be a great deterrent to juvenile crime.

A stable family environment directly impacts one's sense of moral values and conscience. Today's society has become too dependent on the government to dictate what is

right and wrong. However, each of us has a personal responsibility to make decisions that demonstrate respect for others and the law. The community and religious organizations can provide the necessary support to single-family households by quickly identifying issues and working together to develop a strategy to steer the child in the right direction. The school system can also provide support by creating an environment where students feel welcome and educate students about basic values such as honor, respect, and non-confrontational conflict resolution. Clearly, it takes a village to raise a child!

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