

Why So Violent?

Efforts to Reduce America's Terrible Level of Violent Crime Seem Few and Far Between . . . But the Eisenhower Foundation Is Trying to Reverse the Trend

By Kathleen M. Hallahan

The United States holds the unfortunate distinction of being the most violent of all the industrialized nations. The alarming statistics behind that claim are by now well known: one in 30 Americans committed a criminally violent act in 1981, up 76 percent since 1969; the combined violent crime index (criminal homicide, forcible rape, robbery and aggravated assault) rose 69 percent during the same period to 555.3 such crimes per 100,000 citizens.

There has been a slowing, and in some categories a reduction, of criminal activity in America since the peak years in the early 1980s, but by these still astronomical measures crime in Japan, Europe and much of the rest of the world is relatively insignificant. To find comparable rates, one must look among underdeveloped Third World nations.

Why is America such a violent society? What can be done to make our cities and towns safe? Definitive answers to these questions are hard to come by, especially since verities of the past have been upended by skyrocketing rates of serious crime during the very period in which the country moved to reduce poverty.

Thinking through the dimensions of crime and public policy responses to it is the business of the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, which in May hosted an all-day forum in the U.S. Senate Caucus Room on ending violent crime in America.

Experts on crime were assembled for the forum from an interdisciplinary group of lawyers, chiefs of police, criminologists, social workers, civil libertarians and elected officials. Together they considered the Eisenhower Foundation's assertion that community-based responses are the best antidotes to crime.

Crime prevention begins with strengthened families or so-called extended family systems, along with organized, caring neighborhoods and jobs, said Lynn Curtis, Eisenhower's president. His ideas, and those of his organization, have their antecedents in recommendations proposed in 1969 by the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence established by President Lyndon B. Johnson in the wake of the assassinations of Senator Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Milton Eisenhower, brother of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, chaired the commission and later organized the nonprofit organization bearing his name. The Eisenhower Foundation's recent release, *American Violence and Public Policy* traces the crime commission's recommendations and presents an agenda for how they could be implemented today at the local level.

Family Strength

Statistics indicate that the demographic group most likely to commit serious crimes and be victimized by acts of violence are young black males living in the inner city. The breakdown of traditional controls on adolescent behavior, and the rise in crime, said forum participant Elliott Currie, author of *Confronting Crime, An American Challenge*, can be traced to family structure.

"Families that are burdened by the stresses of poor income, lack of responsive social networks, internal conflict and parental violence are less able to ensure the kind of supervision and guidance that, in families of better resources, reduce the risks of youth criminality and violence," said Currie.

With the inner-city family in shambles, extended family systems that listen to, discipline and mediate between youths can help curb criminal behavior. Success stories were told at the forum of youngsters turned around with the "sweat, blood, tears and love" of dedicated individuals in extended family systems such as The Argus Community, a South Bronx school that teaches high-risk youth to respect themselves and their community, while giving them the basic skills and stern discipline absent at home.

At the Center for Orientation and Service in Ponce, Puerto Rico, Sister Isolina Ferre not only teaches high-risk kids respect, but gives them job opportunities as well. In the 10 years the Center has been operating, local delinquency rates have been cut in half.

In Washington, D.C., Jubilee Housing, a low-income housing project revitalized by developer James Rouse's Enterprise Foundation, vandalism

and crime was reduced by putting crime-prone youth to work in a renovation and weatherization business. A recent grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services will allow the business to expand and perhaps turn a profit next year.

Neighborhood Involvement

The Importance of both addressing the causes of crime and reducing opportunities for it in inner-city neighborhoods is crucial to ensuring that crime is eliminated and not simply displaced, said conferees. Local citizens groups need to take the lead and law enforcement officials must increase their visibility and form ties with these local groups and neighborhoods.

With a grant from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, the mayor of Portland, Oregon was able to gather the forces of both public and private service providers and focus their efforts on school children at risk of becoming drop outs. Called the Portland Investment, the program identifies the multifaceted situations from family violence to drug dependency occurring in the lives of children from kindergarten through high school and calls in the appropriate service provider to assist the students in resolving their problems. Mayor J.E. Bud Clark says this effort should significantly decrease crimes committed by young adolescents by keeping them off the streets and in school.

Santa Ana, California witnessed a 50-percent drop in crime after adopting a community-based police program that put officers on foot patrol and opened counseling centers for troubled youth.

The Houston chief of police is also turning his department around to work with, not simply in, the community. "We've redefined our beats to reflect real neighborhoods and have sent our officers door-to-door to help alleviate the growing fear of crime," Chief Lee Brown told the forum. But he cautioned, "the police and other agents of the criminal justice system will never, by themselves, do much to significantly reduce crime in our neighborhoods."

A private method for curbing crime used in communities throughout the country is the Community Boards Program. Created in San Francisco by Raymond Shonholtz, the program trains community volunteers in dispute resolution so they are able to quell disputes before they turn into conflicts. The program has proven successful in schools as well as neighborhoods.

Unemployment a Primary Cause

The relationship between unemployment and crime is very strong, said Elliot Currie. William Kolberg, president of the National Alliance of Business agreed, calling crime the most pressing domestic problem before us. He predicts the overall employment picture for young people will brighten considerably over the next decade, but that the cycle of minority unemployment will not change.

"Youths who have dropped out of school do not have adequate training for entry-level jobs in the new high-tech fields," said Kolberg. "Combine this with their inability to follow entry-level jobs out to the suburbs and you have the beginning of a structurally crated urban underclass."

Marilyn Steele, a program officer at C.S. Mott Foundation, underscored the importance of training youth for employment opportunities. She added that basic behavioral skills must also be refined to give young workers a chance to move up in their jobs. State spending of federal employment training dollars should be closely monitored, she added, and greater uniformity of state employment training efforts should be encouraged.

Through a grant from the Department of Health and Human Services, The Eisenhower Foundation will evaluate how community organizations successfully use employment and family programs to reduce crime.

Eisenhower also receives private support. The Ford Foundation has provided substantial aid in the past, including underwriting the publication of *American Violence and Public Policy* and grants for further crime forums around the country through 1987. IBM and Exxon have contributed to the foundation's national neighborhood anti-crime self help program.

While no firm public policy was formulated during the one-day forum, the policy message that emerged from the participants was clear, using a public-private approach, efforts should be made to combine employment, community involvement and family to prevent crime; move away from a federal policy of increased incarceration; reverse the "trickle down" policy of federal anti-crime programs affecting neighborhoods to a "bubble-up" process emanating from the local level; and formulate a new cooperative role for police as supporters, not strictly enforcers.

Kathleen M. Hallahan is Director of Marketing and Managing Editor of Foundation News