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Youth Crime in the Cities: An American Action Plan

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WASHINGTON After the loopiness of America's midterm campaign period, reality has come crashing down on the governing and the governed with stunning swiftness.

Two days after the voting, President George Bush announced a further troop buildup in the Gulf that sounds like a prelude to war. At the same time he called his economic advisers into session to confront the increasing likelihood that America is on the verge of recession if not already in it.

The big-city mayors of the country gathered in New York to examine the overwhelming evidence that the patterns of job loss, population decline, public service collapse, crime, drugs and poverty all so well publicized in the host city are endemic to many others across the land.

In the 1980s, America doubled the number of people behind bars, yet serious crime increased.

In the midst of all this, it was appropriate (but something of a surprise) that an echo of the 1960s was heard from another source. Until its report came across my desk, I was not aware of the existence of the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, which

bears the name of the late brother of the late president.

Beyond being his brother's trusted counselor, Milton Eisenhower had his own distinguished academic and public service career. Among the chores he carried out was the chairmanship of one of the two major national commissions created during the 1960s in response to that decade's wave of urban and racial violence. The private funded Eisenhower Foundation has for 10 years sponsored and evaluated pilot projects focused on the social problems of the cities.

Its newly issued report, "Youth Investment and Community Reconstruction: Street Lessons on Drugs and Crime for the Nineties," is at once a stark reminder of how tough these problems are, a blunt dismissal of some tempting easy answers and a call to action on approaches that have demonstrated their usefulness.

The authors say in plain terms that America cannot deal with the threat to community safety, the waste of human life and the loss of economic potential that crime and drug use represent, either by building more jail cells or asking for more volunteer "crime watchers" or youth counselors.

While acknowledging the need for punishment of serious crime, the Eisenhower commission points out that during the 1980s the United States doubled the number of people behind bars (from roughly 325,000 to 650,000), increased spending for criminal justice four times as fast as for education and yet the serious crime rate rose every year from 1984 onward.

As for volunteers, the Eisenhower report based on close-up scrutiny of scores of small-scale programs says flatly that in inner city neighborhoods "a reliance on volunteerism is no substitute" for adequately funded and professionally managed programs. The physical risks are too great to expect citizens to patrol their own neighborhoods or drive off drug dealers. The transience of population, the need for paying jobs and the shortage of skills limit the supply of volunteers for counseling and aiding families and young people.

Many of the best-intentioned street programs failed mainly because they had too few paid staff members and because those staffers spent too much of their time searching for volunteers, instead of devoting their energy and skills to working with the youths who came to them for help.

It is not all bad news. From Ponce, Puerto Rico, to Philadelphia, Washington and Boston, the Eisenhower Foundation identified (or helped sponsor) small-scale programs that reduced the number of school dropouts and arrests, reduced substance abuse among young people, and cut down

on teenage pregnancy and intra-family violence. In some cases the programs channeled that energy into projects that produced housing or other neighborhood benefits.

The projects are small, but the evaluations have been serious and the foundation has some confidence that it knows what works. Like the preschool Head Start program (which it rightly labels the most effective anti-crime and anti-drug program in the nation, and one which should be universally available), the programs targeted at teens and older youths "all provide multiple solutions to multiple problems."

These programs often tailor both social support and discipline to individual youths via mentors, counselors and peers. "To varying degrees, they link that support and discipline to the development of real opportunities for education, school-to-work transition, employment training and placement." The programs often operate out of clubhouse settings that provide both the nurturing and the discipline that are absent anywhere else in these young people's lives.

Some will look skeptically at the conclusion that programs shown to have "saved" a dozen people here or two dozen there should quickly be expanded, as the Eisenhower report suggests, through local sponsorship, by a federal fund that would reach \$10 billion a year in a few years. But another decade of prison-building is a bleak alternative. It would cost a lot more and achieve less.

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