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**"Kobans" and Safe Havens --
The Formula We've Been Waiting For?**

By Neal R. Peirce

WASHINGTON--Can we build on recent drops in violent crime to construct a safer society for the 21st century?

The Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, named for the brother of the late president, has a suggestion on how to do it.

Across the nation's poorest neighborhoods, the Washington-based foundation would open several thousand "safe havens" for neighborhood youth, combined with police mini-stations on the model of the Japanese "kobans."

Kobans are neighborhood-based police booths manned by officers on long-term assignment. One officer is called an omawarisan, literally Honorable Mr. Walk-About, who is expected to visit each local household and business once a year or more.

Kuniyasu Tsuchida, the Tokyo police chief in the late '70s, told me how shocked he'd been, visiting the USA, to see so few police officers walking through neighborhoods. "There were only patrol cars, and they had no way of knowing what was going on inside buildings except through emergency calls," he observed.

Building safer communities isn't exclusively police work, however. So when the Eisenhower Foundation, in the '80s, started dispatching teams of U.S. police leaders to examine the Japanese model, it wisely included leaders of nonprofit, youth development organizations based in low-income, high-crime neighborhoods. Often, 12,000 miles from home, the police and grass-roots leaders bonded and embraced the idea.

And now, from San Juan, P.R., to Philadelphia, Chicago, Boston, Memphis, Little Rock and Columbia, S.C., the Foundation can point to successful models in which the koban mini-station idea has been merged

with the concept of a safe haven--a place where a young person, age 6 to 16--can retreat after school, evenings, on weekends.

Often from disrupted homes, the youth find a safe anchor. Sports, drill teams, Cub Scouts, job training, help with homework, editing a community newspaper, neighborhood cleanups, safety and beautification projects (such as flower gardens planted in senior citizens' yards)--any or all may be offered.

What's more, police officers often become mentors for the youth. In some programs, police officers visit the young people's homes to establish direct contact with parents.

With a measure of order and caring discipline in their lives, the young people tend to flourish and mature. And in a world in which many of their older brothers and sisters have fallen into careers of crime, often serving long prison sentences, they learn to respect and stay on the right side of the law.

The formula, in many ways, is close to traditional settlement houses and boys' and girls' clubs. The inclusion of the police, often seen as the "enemy" of low-income communities, clearly adds special value.

The cost? About \$80,000 to \$100,000 of nonpolice costs for each safe haven each year, mainly for a civilian director and a couple of aides.

The Eisenhower Foundation claims demonstrable results in its just released report, "Youth Investment and Police Mentoring." In four cities' target neighborhoods where it used foundation and government money to test the program in the early '90s--San Juan, Philadelphia, Boston and Chicago--serious crime declined at least 22 percent and by as much as 27 percent over three years. Any crime declines in nearby neighborhoods, or the entire cities, was tiny in comparison.

But it's folly, argues Eisenhower Foundation president Lynn Curtis, to think enough quality volunteers can be recruited to get the same results that qualified paid staff, working collaboratively with the police, can produce.

Indeed, Justice Department funding was cut off in the third year of the four-city kaban safe haven experiment. Volunteers, where they could be found, had to be substituted for paid staff. The result, in each city: Crime stopped declining significantly.

A figure such as Colin Powell may champion volunteerism, notes Curtis, but few suburbanites will volunteer for serious inner-city duty, and local

residents' lives are already under too much pressure. It costs up to \$1,000 a year to train and supervise even a part-time volunteer. Like Desert Storm, Curtis suggests, a combination of strategic planning and decently paid professionals will be needed to turn around lost youth in ravaged communities.

In an era of lingering public hostility to federal social spending, some people may write off that argument as reconstructed liberalism. The very idea of directing multiple new billions of federal money toward a social goal seems strangely out of date. And most of us believe volunteerism can and should be expanded. It's tough to argue, however, that prevention is much smarter than a cure. We have before us clear proof that a partnership of koban-like community policing mini-stations and safe havens run by grass-roots organizations does work. The formula rings true for liberals and conservatives alike.

Compare this approach to pouring still more of our national and state fortunes into prisons, and the more you think the wiser it seems.

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