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John E. Cone

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DELINQUENCY AND YOUTH GANGS

JOHN E. CONE*

THE GREGARIOUS NATURE of man is an indisputable fact. The clannishness and strivings of adolescents towards group formations is a manifestation of this urge. This can be noted in the large number of societies such as scouts, hobby and athletic clubs, fraternities and sororities which attract adolescents. These phenomena are acceptable and quite "normal". However, of much concern to society today, is the appalling increase in deviant group behavior which is closely identifiable with anti-social gangs. The problem of modern day youth gangs presents a challenge to each and every one of us which cannot be ignored.

The street corner gang boasts of its highly organized structure, undying loyalty of its membership and ability to command "respect" from other gangs. The emphasis upon loyalty and united action in a brotherhood which implements the "one for all and all for one" motto is most attractive to youths who have need for identification with power, status, and security of belonging and oftentimes a desire for aggressive revenge against a society which has rejected (failed) them.

The gangs are controlled by leaders and their cliques. Most of these gangs have a basic pattern of organizational structure. There is a leader or president, a vice president, a war counsellor, a clique or board of strategy and the members at large. The duties of the president and vice president are conventional. However, the war counsellor, who arranges inter-gang fights and plans the warfare is the central figure around whom all the members rally during the time of conflict with the rival gang. He fixes the time and place of the warfare with the war counsellor of the rival gang. He likewise negotiates peace terms and the division of territories between the gangs. The gangs are subdivided between various groups known as the "seniors," "juniors," "midgets," "cubs," "kids," and "tiny tims." The ages of these boys range from the younger to older groups. Through this process there are always younger boys coming up to take the place of the older ones who retire from the activities of the gang.

A study of the gang problem reveals that their area of operation coincides with high delinquency and adult crime areas. The gang members are predominantly representatives of economically deprived groups.

* Justice of the Supreme Court, State of New York, Kings County.

It is admitted that economic deprivation per se is not the only reason for gang formations. The existence of unassimilated ethnic and racial groups in socially disorganized areas seems to engender gang formations. The gang members thus attain status and produce their own social unit to withstand the assaults of any non-conformer or "enemy." Their behavior is characteristic of rebellious groups who have been exposed over



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and over again to "now you be good" sermons but to no avail — because youth in rebellion has a "cause celebre" — to fight those in authority who they feel interfere with them. In this manner we note how the effect of a negative environment can be coupled with a youth's vulnerable personality and character traits to produce a delinquent gang member.

Youth in rebellion is thus inclined toward violence and almost all homicides, robberies and aggravated assaults — the bulk of violent felonies against the person — involve the use of a dangerous weapon. Under no existing or proposed state statute may any mitigated treatment be available to an offender, sixteen or older, when so serious a consequence as death results from the use of a dangerous weapon. And most violent crimes against the person are perpetrated by persons in the young-adult period of life.¹ The statutes in the various

¹ The use of weapons by young persons in committing crimes is on the increase. For possession of dangerous weapons the police arrested in New

states prohibiting possession of dangerous weapons are threshold legislation designed to prevent the commission of more serious felonies — murder, manslaughter, robbery, assault, mayhem, rape and many others. Concededly, no area of statutory criminal law is more bogged down in a logomachy of confusion than those sections dealing with dangerous weapons.

To combat this statutory deficiency the individual community must take the initiative. Legislative reform is the first step. As Chairman of the Citizens Committee to Combat Juvenile Delinquency, first in Brooklyn and then for the City of New York as a whole, I pressed this campaign in my own community along two lines: the outlawing of the manufacture, sale and possession of switchblade knives and control of the sale of ammunition. After several years of strenuous campaigning, a law was enacted banning the switchblade knife.² This measure has gone a long way toward cutting down the list of lethal weapons used in gang warfare among New York City teenagers.

However, there remains the struggle for control of the sale of ammunition to minors. This is a most important phase of any legislative pattern to cut down the homicide and mayhem on city streets. This is so because the home-made "zip" gun is easy to fabricate; the projectile that it fires is just as easily purchased by any youngster in numerous shops throughout a city. For several years legislative proposals in my

York City in 1955 a total of 685 minors under 21; in 1956 this figure was 1,128 or, 65 percent more. In 1955 there were 51 killings involving use of knives and guns by young persons under 21. In 1956 this number increased to 72 killings, an increase of 41 percent in the slaughter on our streets.

² Laws of N. Y. 1954, c. 268.

community to control the sale of ammunition have been unsuccessful. Two such measures failed in the Legislature in 1953,³ and again in 1955,⁴ 1956,⁵ and 1957.⁶ The measures have been most reasonable. They prohibit the sale of ammunition only in the City of New York. Such measures exempt purchasers authorized by law to possess or carry firearms or those with hunting licenses issued by the state, or those who are authorized by the National Rifle Association of America for such purchases. The objection of the rod and gun enthusiasts is consequently without foundation in fact. Nevertheless, this remains an area of reform necessary if the tragedies of teenage gang warfare are to be averted.

But we must have still further reform. At the moment a United States Senate Committee is considering the feasibility of amending the Federal Firearm Act so that more federal control of the sale of knives, rifles, revolvers, spring and air guns may be exercised over interstate shipment. Well-considered proposals of this sort deserve whole hearted nationwide support if the menace of crime and delinquency is to be curbed.

In a world which has spawned the youth gang, where moral and spiritual influences are de-emphasized, religion unfortunately is no longer the primary concern of the whole community, and morality no longer its fundamental concept. Material success has often become far more important than spiritual values.

³ S. Int. No. 540, A. Int. No. 846; S. Int. No. 327, A. Int. No. 448.

⁴ S. Int. No. 668, A. Int. No. 951; S. Int. No. 1722, A. Int. No. 954.

⁵ S. Int. No. 750, A. Int. No. 1097; S. Int. No. 337, A. Int. No. 532.

⁶ S. Int. No. 2851, A. Int. No. 2780; A. Int. No. 3953.

Religion is a one-day-a-week affair at best, not a way of life. It is not surprising, then, to find that the norm of morality has changed and that our youth gangs have substituted "Will We Get Caught?" for "Is it Right or Wrong?" That is a necessary result of a materialistic philosophy that eliminates God as the Ultimate Judge, Who can and Who will punish the evil-doer. Children cannot be expected to be law-abiding when they have had no instructions in the commandments or their Divine Authority. *Fundamentally, the cause of juvenile delinquency is a lack of religious and moral training.*

Religion is the bulwark of society. Nothing of lasting or everlasting value can be achieved without it. A God-fearing society is a law-abiding society. Each child should be taught by his parents to abide by the dictates of conscience and to form his conscience upon the principles of religion. God must be put back in the minds and hearts of the children of America. Until this is done, we can talk about juvenile delinquency till we are blue in the face, and we won't change a thing.

The Church should be a major factor in the education of youth. However, an alarming number of young people do not have Church affiliation. With many more, the affiliation is merely formal and they do not use the educational opportunities afforded by the Church. This is a frightful indictment of their parents and our contemporary society. All young people need to know and appreciate the ancient truths of right, wrong and the concomitant doctrines of the punishment of sin and the reward of virtue.

If we are to overcome crime and delinquency, we must continue to emphasize and re-emphasize religion, because crime

and delinquency are abhorrent to those who have a deep sense of moral and religious values.

The facilities of the Church should be made available daily for the young people. The leisure time of the youngster is better spent in the wholesome atmosphere of the Church and its facilities, than on the street corner, in the cellar club, or in the ice-cream parlor.

In addition to the Church, the family plays an especially important role in combatting delinquency and the growth of youth gangs, not only because parents represent the legally recognized authority over their children but even more important because of the influence they bear upon the growing child. If one were to analyze the value judgments of gang members, it would be discovered that they do not basically differ from those of their parents who usually try not to show publicly those ideologies which do not seem to be socially acceptable. Parents must set good examples for their children. Providing youth with wholesome, satisfying experiences within the home can go a long way towards eradicating delinquency. This does not mean that authority need be negated. It does mean that parents must learn to use authority constructively. Guidance and correction does not preclude love and affection. Many youths would not need seek the satisfaction of gang membership if the home, Church, school and community worked as a team.

No child is born to be evil. A home can be the root of all good or all evil. Abnormal and unhealthy family life fosters the development of resentment, a conscious or unconscious desire to get even with society and the like. The broken home contributes more than any other factor as a cause of

juvenile delinquency. The value of a good home is impossible to estimate. The child's greatest educational experiences, affecting his entire life, are found within the home. Most young people who get into trouble with the law are the products of an inadequate home environment.

Children and adolescents who lack parental affection find an outlet for their resentment by becoming enemies of society. Many of these young people feel they have three strikes against them before they start. Thus, they are cynical. A home wherein the father rules with a firm but kindly hand and wherein the mother's love cements the family ties is not likely to breed juvenile delinquency.

One of the greatest needs in our life today is the respect for authority, for one another and for ourselves. A child's first experience with authority is with his parents. These parents should help their children by developing respect for authority in relation to parents, religion and society. Children and adolescents tend to band together when their parents cast them upon the city streets like stray animals. Juvenile delinquents who join teen-age gangs, in many instances, spring from homes where there is no respect for marriage and family life. They rarely come from families who take an interest and pride in their homes. Delinquency and hoodlumism are basically caused by a lack of discipline in the home. If the parents fulfilled their responsibility to their offspring, ninety percent of all juvenile delinquency would be eliminated.

Legislation in at least one state⁷ provides for the punishment of parents for contributing to the delinquency and offenses of children. Under that section a parent of a child under sixteen years of age who omits

⁷ N.Y. PEN. LAW § 494.

to exercise reasonable diligence in the control of such child to prevent him or her from becoming adjudged by a Children's Court in need of the care and protection of the state or who permits such child to associate with vicious, immoral or criminal persons or to grow up in idleness or to enter any place where gambling is carried on or to enter any place where the morals of such child may be endangered shall be guilty of a misdemeanor. This section is of limited force in that it applies only to the parents of children under sixteen years of age. A boy or girl who is sixteen years of age or over is considered in the eyes of the law an adult and, therefore, the parents are not considered responsible for the boy or girl's conduct. Legislation of this type should be more readily enforced against the parents of delinquent children, thus placing the responsibility for delinquency where it belongs. Short jail sentences and fines for delinquent parents would soon do much to cure juvenile delinquency. Parental educational programs should be encouraged and attendance thereto should be actively solicited.

The child of parents who provide affectionate and consistent care, correct instruction and example, who can offer support and protection and yet give sufficient freedom for growth and development, has little need or inclination to become seriously delinquent. He has found the world a friendly place. He has not built up abnormal hostilities. He has learned to trust others. He feels worthy of love and respect. He faces new situations with at least some security and confidence. A solid foundation has been laid down for the development of normal self-discipline and self-control.

Measures for the prevention of juvenile delinquency and youth gangs must begin

with the strengthening of community services which will provide for the basic needs of youth. Youth needs above all a sense of security, a sense of "belonging," together with health, education, entertainment, and a purpose in life. These needs are met not only by "youth" agencies, but by health centers, recreational facilities, provisions for mentally and physically handicapped children, and counseling and guidance centers to help young people find useful jobs and meet life's problems.

Whenever these agencies are not meeting the problem fully, it is probably because they tend to take too short a view. To a large extent they have tried to correct the maladjustments in youth rather than the weaknesses in our society that affect youth, and sometimes they have thought in negative terms — of eliminating delinquency rather than of providing opportunities for youth that will encourage normal, constructive growth and development.

A growing recognition that crime is crime whether on the avenue or in the gutter and that young people need assistance if they are to develop into useful citizens has highlighted the need for constructive programs. Such programs must embrace problems of housing, family living standards and social discrimination. Grass root neighborhood associations can do much towards meeting the challenge of juvenile delinquency. An active, interested, intelligently conducted program would serve to stimulate and support delinquency prevention activities. Public and private agencies must be encouraged to initiate and maintain programs for services to delinquents and their families in spite of the difficult nature of the contact. However, agencies cannot do this job alone. Delinquency prevention is everybody's job!