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POLICE AND DELINQUENT YOUTH

JAMES J. BRENNAN

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The "cold facts" of juvenile delinquency and adolescent crime are even more serious than current periodical attention would indicate. There is always a certain superficiality about public attention to social problems. All too frequently public interest is maintained only when the problems warrant bold headlines. A new problem arises, a new crisis fills the pages of newspapers, and public attention is diverted from the old and transferred to the new.

At the moment, youth and its delinquencies hold the spotlight. Tomorrow, youth will be forgotten. Then—another day—more teen-age crime and again public attention will focus on youth.

All across this nation conferences are being held, and remedial proposals are being advanced. There are advocates of stern measures and advocates of coddling. Solemn pronouncements are made, yet tomorrow American society will be attentive to some other problem. But the problem of youth will remain with us, and the degeneration of children will continue.

There is a confusion, partly understandable, surrounding society's efforts to improve the lot of its youth. One can sympathize with some of the lay public's lack of appreciation, inertia, and emotionalism. They are besieged by conflicting facts, conflicting theories of causation, conflicting theories of prevention and control.

CONFUSING CONCEPTS

Statistically, we are told that delinquency and adolescent crime are increasing seriously. There are some who hold that this increase is simply a reflection of our having more youth.

In terms of causation, we are presented with a multiplicity and variety of theories: world tensions, the aftermath of war, lack of educational facilities, lack of recreation. Some people accept these as causative factors. Others are confused. World tension exists for all youth—yet all are not delinquent. The same is true of war's aftermath. There is much "head-shaking" in regards to education. Some believe we are the most literate people in the world and yet have the most delinquency. Then, too, lack of recreation confuses some who see many delinquent youths in communities with extensive recreational facilities and yet find many non-delinquents in areas lacking such recreational aids.

Slums, large families, and poor economic conditions are offered as causes, yet many, many, non-delinquents are observed living in such social environment.

AREAS OF AGREEMENT

There are certain concepts accepted by thinking, concerned people. These people may not be "specialists," but using God-given senses to see and hear, and intellects to think, have arrived at certain conclusions.

First, there is a feeling that 3% or 2% or 1% of our youth becoming delinquent and potentially criminal is entirely too much of a national waste—socially, economically, and morally.

Secondly, these "unscientific" but thinking people observe a change in the character of delinquent acts that frightens them. They sense, in these youthful killings, rapes, robberies, and vandalisms, a moral depravity or a psychopathic quality that is difficult enough to accept in a few, but a tragedy of civilization to see spreading more and more amongst our young. These people sense a breakdown in morality, a breakdown in authority.

They are no longer impressed by conflicting statistics, conferences upon conferences, the seemingly studious avoidance of coming to grips with the real problem, as specialists continue to study the obscure. These people, intensely concerned with our youth, their value and worth to God and society, are seeking a means of articulating a deep conviction. When expressed, it will sound like a clarion call to those who can and will help. At the same time, it will be a tolling bell for the passing of the fadists and fashionists, for those who would be scientific but are not scientists, those who would sacrifice more youth while they try to discover more remedial programs that do not remedy.

THE PRESSING NEED

There are many sane, sensible people who want to act, want to fight this evil, want to protect the integrity of our youth. These people have been confused, they lack weapons, they lack guidance and direction. These people need leaders—leaders who will forge the weapons, form the lines, and continue the fight—not for a day, a week, a month, a year—but for always. The police of every community in this country can and must provide that leadership.

Policemen bind themselves by oath to protect the lives and property of the people they serve. Frequently, policemen offer their lives in performing that duty. No policeman is unmindful of the value of youth, our most priceless heritage. They deserve the best that police can give in time, talent, devotion, and sacrifice. Protect them, preserve them, and you protect and preserve our very way of life, our democratic society, our nation.

WHAT CAN POLICE DO?

There is a definite need to recognize the part police can and must play in meeting this challenge to law and order. While police cannot accept total responsibility, there is need for a realistic appraisal of the problem.

While many public and private agencies must join forces to help youth, close examination of agency responsibility indicates that no other single agency has the degree of responsibility that is incumbent on police. The charters of most police organizations, in spelling out the duties of that group, charge them with the prevention of crime. Intelligent crime prevention must begin with delinquency prevention.

Prevention of delinquency and crime is not to be confused with crime suppression. Prevention is of a different character. Here, concern is with causative factors, and contributing factors. Prevention is concerned with motivation for behavior. Having diagnosed a youth's behavior, we try to provide the treatment, the guidance, the interest, the help necessary to redirect his behavior along more morally and socially desirable lines.

Since the turn of the century our police have been cognizant of the need to re-evaluate the concept of police crime prevention. As a result of this new thinking, formal organized police prevention programs have come into existence in many communities. While no one of these programs is as complete in function as one would desire to see—a study of police programs indicates several well defined areas of operation which police can establish in order to realistically meet the problem of delinquency and adolescent crime.

CONTROL ASPECTS

Much talk but relatively little sustained attention and action is directed to the persons, places, and conditions which contribute to delinquency and adolescent crime. Strangely enough, some of these situations exist in violation of law, seemingly immune to police activity.

We appreciate the fact that police are not prosecutors nor prison administrators and therefore cannot guarantee the conviction or imprisonment of persons who contribute to delinquency. However, we can offer no excuse for inaction on the part of police to secure evidence and arrest those who, by their activities, contribute in any way to delinquency or adolescent crime. The Fagin, the sex pervert, the promoter of prostitution, the drug pusher, the tavern owner who sells to minors—all who contaminate the youth of our communities should be dealt with promptly, adequately, and, if necessary, frequently. No policeman, except a moral degenerate, would, for any type of favor or good-will, tolerate for an hour the presence of such vermin in our communities.

All police work carries with it civil, social, and moral responsibility to do the job and do it well. None is more morally demanding than the protection of the minds, souls, and bodies of our young people. Those who would tamper with our youth should come to realize, and quickly, that they could pick no more dangerous business as far as police reaction to their doings is concerned.

By intelligently presenting our problems to prosecutors, judges, and through our press to the public we serve, we can expect, we can demand, that our police actions against these are not to be wasted through indifference, favoritism, or political conniving. In regard to these conditions, let us not be concerned with making bad friends—those who aid in any way to prevent the prosecution of the violators of youth are not fit to be friends with decent people.

THE INDIVIDUAL DELINQUENT

Throughout the past, and long before any police department ever established a "youth division," there were policemen who, avoiding the indiscriminate use of their power of arrest, gave advice and counsel to erring youth, and frequently were rewarded by seeing those youngsters become worthwhile citizens.

Policemen everywhere are witnesses to the fact that arrest, court action, and commitment to institutions do not always result in the individual becoming a law abiding person. It is this thinking that has led police to more formally apply the principle of understanding youth and attempting to secure adequate help for those in need of such attention. The reasoning is sound, the procedure most desirable.

If a youngster, guilty of a minor offense, is subject to intelligent and sympathetic understanding, we may discover the factors that are contributing to his behavior.

In proposing this approach to the individual delinquent, there is no intention of suggesting that we fall prey to the theorists who would have us believe that delinquents must be delinquents, that criminals have no choice, that people's actions are predetermined, and that they must act as they act because of many psychological and sociological influences. Social scientists who have stressed this theory to the exclusion of any area of choice of action have, wittingly or not, attempted to reduce man to the status of an animal.

Yet, while we refuse to deprive man of his free-will, we can and must recognize that there are many influences that affect the use of that will. The intellect can be undeveloped or can contain false principles, false objectives. The will can be influenced and weakened by desires. Conscience can be made false by wrong training.

Without trying to be confusing, the premise is asserted that we can recognize the intellect and free-will in man and at the same time recognize the need to discover the wrongful influences, the erroneous training, that motivates youth to undesirable behavior. Having discovered these liabilities in the development of character, we can hope to diminish them and at the same time increase the positive, good, and desirable influences.

Stripped of all its professional language, reduced to a simplicity of expression that allows the layman to understand—this is what social work is meant to accomplish. To discover, to remove the degrading influences. To recognize and develop those influences that make for good citizens. Police engaged in youth work are gradually coming to understand the importance of such 'diagnosis' for the purpose of putting the youngster into the hands of the agency that can best help him.

This type of work depends on training. There is need to know as much as is knowable about the development of personality and character in the individual. The normative and behavioral sciences have much to tell us. Police, through experience, have much to contribute.

The treatment of offenses will not help. We cannot cure burglary, auto theft, vandalism. Like doctors, we must go beneath the symptomatic act and put our hands on the things, or conditions, or thinking that prompt such action. Were a doctor to treat a symptom and not the cause of an illness, there is every likelihood that the patient might die.

Police programs, designed to help youth, can begin modestly. There can be limitation in terms of age, sex, and type of offenses for which this proposed procedure will be used. In cooperation with judges, probation, and other agencies concerned, police can establish the area in which they will begin this type of work. As they progress they can extend the area to include others in this new treatment approach.

COMMUNITY RESOURCES FOR TREATMENT

Having made a "gross" diagnosis of a youngster's need, police should refer the case to an agency in their community capable of providing the treatment needed. Wherever possible, police should avoid the treatment process itself.

The social agencies, schools, churches, recreation facilities, mental and medical clinics can and should service the youth we refer for treatment. In some communities a lack of professional facilities will pose a problem. But we must use what we have, and if that be inadequate, do what we can ourselves. A generation of children cannot be lost while we wait for promised facilities.

Where no facilities exist, police are justified in doing what they can to give help to those in need of help. Any treatment programs by police should be conducted by the best people they have and at all times should be considered temporary in character. When other agencies develop the programs needed, police should cease to treat cases and revert to a policy of referral.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

Delinquency control and prevention cannot become the sole responsibility of the police department nor, for that matter, of any single agency. There are responsibilities incumbent upon parents, the church, the school, the local government, and other agencies of the community.

Police can and should be concerned with bringing together all of the moral and social influences of the community to stimulate them, coordinate their activities, and direct their attention to the problems that must be solved.

This area of police prevention work, community organization—community action—is one with the greatest potential for successful delinquency and crime prevention. Unfortunately, few police departments have been successful in this field. Their deficiency has been due to a lack of understanding of how to organize, how to guide without imposing the rigid controls of police procedure.

Police are in a unique position to initiate such a program. Police are neutral in terms of service but not in objective. Public sentiment will support, and those who want to help youth will rally around such a police program. Community resentment will be aroused against individuals or agencies who attempt to block such an effort.

Through community organization, better use of existing facilities will ensue. The need for new facilities will be exposed. The attention of agencies will be retained.

There is another objective for such a community activity. Situations that are dangerous to the morals of youth, but which do not exist in violation of law, can be dealt with most effectively by the power of public opinion. An aroused public can be most effective in dealing with conditions that cannot be removed by statutory law.

WHAT'S NEEDED TO DO THE JOB

First and foremost the will to do the job, a recognition by police that of all the services they can give to their community, none is more important than preserving youth. We need a recognition and firm belief in the dignity and worth of the human being. Let us recognize in him a creature composed of body and soul, one who is made

not for time, but for eternity. We need to realize the value, the tremendous value, to ourselves, our communities, our country in helping a boy or a girl grow up to become a socially, economically, and morally useful individual. If we believe in these values—honestly and sincerely—the rest will be relatively easy.

Within our departments, large or small, there should be an organized program for the prevention and control of delinquency and adolescent crime. The personnel should be carefully chosen in terms of personal integrity, interest in the work, interest in youth, personality, adaptability, and education. They should be selected in that order. Education can be supplied but not personal integrity or interest.

Everyone in the community should know what police have done, are doing, and are planning to do. All local newspaper, radio, and television facilities should be enlisted to be their mouthpiece—to sustain the interest of everyone. Do not for a moment underestimate the power of the press. Allied with the police it can be a most potent weapon in this continuing struggle.

CONCLUSION

Some years ago the writer spent an uncomfortable evening—a dreary, lonesome, fretful evening—watching a clock move ever so slowly to eleven. A twenty-two year old boy was to be electrocuted at Sing Sing. He came from a home that lacked everything a home should have. There was no love, no affection, no security. He had been arrested many times. There *were* several convictions and a few commitments. There *never* was an intelligent understanding of his needs and an attempt to help him.

This is no maudlin wail for a convicted murderer. It is a challenge to the effectiveness of punishing without first trying to understand—first trying to help.

Another incident comes to my mind. A young policeman graduated from the police academy of New York. He had made mistakes as a youth. But in his case, police understanding, police and community help, proved effective. He became a policeman and now has a serious concern. This young policeman is hopeful that in his twenty years of service he may help straighten out one 'kid.' What a thought, what an ambition, what a hope for the youth of America. Policeman straightening out kids— even one kid.

Here is a challenge for all police. They have the knowledge and the welfare of youth at heart. Let the police of every community highly resolve that they will not be frightened or confused by the problem of delinquency. That they will refuse to let this problem continue while more conferences are held.

The nation needs determined, steadfast, continued action. The youth of today, who do not want to rot in prison or die in electric chairs, need that help. The police of this nation can give it. May God grant that they will—all of one mind—have but one question: "What are we waiting for?"