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## "The Real Root Cause of Violent Crime: The Breakdown of the Family"

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*Though overall crime rates have dropped slightly in America in recent years, the frightening news is that both the level and viciousness of teenage crime have been rising steadily. In this month's issue of Imprimis, Heritage Foundation analyst Patrick Fagan traces the stages in the life of the future violent criminal. His presentation was delivered during the February 1995 Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar, "Crime in America: Fighting Back with Moral and Market Virtues."*

**S**ocial scientists, criminologists, and many other observers at long last are coming to recognize the connection between the breakdown of families and various social problems that have plagued American society. In the debate over welfare reform, for instance, it is now a widely accepted premise that children born into single-parent families are much more likely than children born into intact families to fall into poverty and welfare dependency.

While the link between the family and chronic welfare dependency is much better understood these days, there is another link—between the family and crime—that deserves more attention. Why? Because whole communities, particularly in urban areas, are being torn apart by crime. We desperately need to uncover the real root cause of criminal behavior and learn how criminals are formed if we are to fight this growing threat.



## Official Washington's View of Crime

There is a wealth of evidence in the professional literature of criminology and sociology to suggest that the breakdown of family is the real root cause of crime in America. But the orthodox thinking in official Washington assumes that crime is caused by material conditions, such as poor employment opportunities and a shortage of adequately funded state and federal social programs.

The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, supported by the Clinton administration and enacted last year, perfectly embodies official Washington's view of crime. It provides for billions of dollars in new spending, adding 15 new social programs on top of a welfare system that has cost taxpayers \$5 trillion since the "War on Poverty" was declared in 1965. But there is no reason to suppose that increased spending and new programs will have any significant positive impact. Since 1965, welfare spending has increased 800 percent in real terms, while the number of major felonies per capita today is roughly three times the rate prior to 1960. As Republican Senator Phil Gramm rightly observes, "If social spending stopped crime, America would be the safest country in the world."

Still, federal bureaucrats and lawmakers persist in arguing that poverty is the primary cause of crime. In its simplest form, this contention is

absurd: if it were true, there would have been more crime in the past, when more people were poorer. And, in poorer nations, the crime rates would be higher than in the United States. History defies the assumption that deteriorating economic circumstances breed crime and that improving conditions reduce it. America's crime rate actually rose during the long period of real economic growth in the early 20th century. As the Great Depression set in and incomes dropped, the crime rate also dropped. It rose again between 1965 and 1974 when incomes rose. Most recently, during the recession of 1982,

there was a slight dip in crime, not an increase.

Official Washington also believes that race is the second most important cause of crime. The large disparity in crime rates between whites and blacks is often cited as proof. However, a closer look at the data shows that the real variable is not race but family structure and all that it implies in terms of commitment and love between adults and between adults and children. A major 1988 study of 11,000 individuals found that "the percentage of single-parent households with children between the ages of 12 and 20 is significantly associated with rates

of violent crime and burglary." The same study makes it clear that the popular assumption that there is an association between race and crime is false. Illegitimacy, not race, is the key factor. It is the absence of marriage and the failure to form and maintain intact families that explains the incidence of crime among whites as well as blacks.

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## The Life of the Future Violent Criminal

There is a strong, well-documented pattern of circumstances and social evolution in the life of a future violent criminal. The pattern may be summarized in five basic stages.

### STAGE ONE: Parental neglect and abandonment of the child in early home life

- When the future violent criminal is born his father has already abandoned the mother.
- If his parents are married, they are likely to divorce by the third year.
- He is raised in a neighborhood with a high concentration of single-parent families.
- He does not become securely attached to his mother during the critical early years of his life.
- His child care frequently changes.
- The adults in his life frequently quarrel and vent their frustrations physically.
- He, or a member of his family, may suffer one or more forms of abuse, including sexual abuse.
- There is much harshness in his home, and he is deprived of affection.
- He becomes hostile, anxious, and hyperactive. He is difficult to manage at age three and is frequently labeled as a "behavior problem."
- Lacking his father's presence and attention, he becomes increasingly aggressive.

### STAGE TWO: The embryonic gang becomes a place for him to belong

- His behavior continues to deteriorate at a rapid rate.
- He satisfies his needs by exploiting others.
- At age five or six, he hits his mother.
- In first grade, his aggressive behavior causes problems for other children.

- He is difficult for school officials to handle.
- He is socially rejected at school by "normal" children.
- He searches for and finds acceptance among similarly aggressive and hostile children.
- He and his friends are slower at school. They fail at verbal tasks that demand abstract thinking and at learning social and moral concepts.
- His reading scores trail behind the rest of his class.
- He has lessening interest in school, teachers, and in learning.
- By now, he and his friends have low educational and life expectations for themselves.
- These low expectations are reinforced by teachers and family members.
- Poor supervision at home continues.
- His father, or father substitute, is still absent.
- His life is now primarily characterized by his own aggressive behavior, his aggressive peers, and his hostile home life.

### STAGE THREE: He joins a delinquent gang

- At age 11, his bad habits and attitudes are well established.
- By age 15, he engages in criminal behavior. (And the earlier he commits his first delinquent act, the longer he will be likely to lead a life of crime.)
- His companions are the main source of his personal identity and his sense of belonging.
- Life with his delinquent friends is hidden from adults.
- The number of delinquent acts increases in the year before he and his friends drop out of school.

- His delinquent girlfriends have poor relationships with their mothers, as well as with “normal” girls in school.
- Many of his peers use drugs.
- Many, especially the girls, run away from home or just drift away.

**STAGE FOUR: He commits violent crime and the full-fledged criminal gang emerges**

- High violence grows in his community with the increase in the number of single-parent families.
- He purchases a gun, at first mainly for self-defense.
- He and his peers begin to use violence for exploitation.
- The violent young men in his delinquent peer group are arrested more than the non-violent criminals. But most of them do not get caught at all.
- Gradually, different friends specialize in different types of crime: violence or theft. Some are more versatile than others.
- The girls are involved in prostitution while he and the other boys are members of criminal gangs.

**STAGE FIVE: A new child—and a new generation of criminals—is born**

- His 16-year-old girlfriend is pregnant. He has no thought of marrying her; among his peers this simply isn’t done. They stay together for awhile until the shouting and hitting start. He leaves her and does not see the baby anymore.
- One or two of his criminal friends are real experts in their field.
- Only a few members of the group to which he now belongs—career criminals—are caught. They commit hundreds of crimes per year.
- Most of the crimes he and his friends commit are in their own neighborhood.

For the future violent criminal, each of these five stages is characterized by the absence of the love, affection, and dedication of his parents. The ordinary tasks of growing up are a series of perverse exercises, frustrating his needs, stunting his capacity for empathy as well as his ability to belong, and increasing the risk of his becoming a twisted young adult. This experience is in stark contrast to the investment of love and dedication by two parents normally needed to make compassionate, competent adults out of their children.

## The Impact of Violent Crime

**W**hen you consider some of the alarming statistics that make headlines today, the future of our society appears bleak. In the mid-1980s, the chancellor of the New York City school system warned: “We are in a situation now where 12,000 of our 60,000 kindergartners have mothers who are still in their teenage years and where 40 percent of our students come from single-parent households.” But today this crisis is not confined to New York City; it afflicts even small, rural communities. And, worse yet, the national illegitimacy rate is predicted to reach 50 percent within the next twelve to twenty years. As a result, violence in school is becoming worse. The Centers for Disease Control recently reported in one study that more than 4 percent of high school students surveyed had carried a firearm at least once to school. Many of them were, in fact, regular gun carriers.

The old injunction is clearly true: Violence begets violence. Violent families are producing violent youths, and violent youths are producing violent communities. The future violent criminal is likely to have witnessed numerous conflicts between his parents. He may have been physically or sexually abused. His parents, brothers, and sisters may also be criminals, and thus his family may have a disproportionate negative impact on the community. Moreover, British and American studies show that fewer than 5 percent of all criminals account for 50 percent of all criminal convictions.

Overall, there has been an extraordinary increase in community violence in most major American cities. Between 1989 and 1990, for example, the homicide rate in Boston increased by over 40 percent; in Denver, it rose by 29 percent; in Chicago, Dallas, and New Orleans, by more than 20 percent; in Los Angeles, by 16 percent; in New York, by 11 percent.

## Rebuilding Stable Families and Communities

**G**overnment agencies are powerless to make men and women marry or stay married. They are powerless to guarantee parents will love and care for their children. They are powerless to persuade anyone to make and keep promises. In fact, government agencies often do more harm than good by enforcing policies that undermine stable families and by misdiagnosing the real root cause of such social problems as violent crime.

But ordinary Americans are not powerless. They know full well how to fight crime effectively. They do not need to survey the current social science literature to know that a family life of affection, cohesion, and parental involvement prevents delinquency. They instinctively realize that paternal and maternal affection and the father's presence in the home are among

the critical elements in raising well-balanced children. And they further acknowledge that parents should encourage the moral development of their children—moral development that is best accomplished within the context of religious belief and practice.

None of this is to say that fighting crime or rebuilding stable families and communities will be easy. But what *is* easy is deciding what we must do at the outset. We begin by affirming four simple principles: First, marriage is vital. Second, parents must love and nurture their children in spiritual as well as physical ways. Third, children must be taught how to relate to and empathize with others. And, finally, the backbone of strong neighborhoods and communities is friendship and cooperation among families.

These principles constitute the real root solution to the real root problem of violent crime. We should do everything in our power to apply them in our own lives and the life of the nation, not just for our sake, but for the sake of our children. 🕯

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