Effects of Community Environment on Juvenile Crime Rates

Criminal youth tend to live in high-crime neighborhoods. Each reinforces the other in a destructive relationship, spiraling downward into violence and social chaos.

1. Single-Parent Neighborhoods

Single-parent neighborhoods tend to be high-crime neighborhoods. Researchers long ago observed that violent crime, among both teenagers and adults, is concentrated most heavily in urban neighborhoods characterized by a very high proportion of single- parent families,[1] and this remains true today.[2] Even homicide rates are higher in counties with more single-parent families.[3] On the contrary, neighborhoods with more fathers report fewer crimes.[4] More recent figures indicate the nonmarital birth rate in many urban neighborhoods is a staggering 80 percent. And today's researchers, like those before them, find that a neighborhood composed mainly of single-parent families invariably is a chaotic, crime-ridden community[5] in which assaults are high[6] and the gang – " the delinquent sub-community"– assumes control.[7] In these chaotic conditions, parental supervision of adolescent and pre-adolescent children is almost impossible.[8] In turn, children living in these neighborhoods are more likely to learn, accept, and use physical violence to satisfy their wants and needs.[9]

While serious crime is highest in these socially disorganized, largely urban neighborhoods, its frequency is not a function of race; rather, the determining factor is the absence of marriage. Among broken families, with their chaotic, "dysfunctional" relationships, whether white or black, the crime rate is very high. Among married two-parent families, whether white or black, the crime rate is very low. The capacity and determination to maintain stable married relationships, not race, is the pivotal factor.[10] The chaotic, broken community stems from these chaotic, broken families. The reason race appears to be an important factor in crime is the wide differences in marriage rates among ethnic groups.

While the crime rate among blacks has risen sharply, so has the disappearance of marriage. The same holds true for whites. A recent report from the state of Wisconsin further illustrates the same relationship. A high concentration of broken families without husbands and fathers is the danger signal for future crime.

2. Violent Families in Violent Neighborhoods

According to the National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence, in 2011 twenty-two percent of children had witnessed violence in their homes, schools, and communities in the past year, and one in twelve children saw one family member assault another in the past year.[11] Children exposed to family violence are also the most likely to commit serious violent crime and to become "versatile" criminals – those engaged in a variety of crimes, including, theft, fraud, and drugs.[12] Among these youths, victims of violent crime are more likely to be perpetrators of violent crimes.[13] Physically or sexually abused boys commit the most violent offenses.[14]

Internal family violence is only one major contributor to adolescent violence in these socially disorganized neighborhoods. The neighborhood itself (which includes the youth's violent peers, also rooted in their own broken families) is the other powerful contributor,[15] especially to violent delinquency.[16] This culture of aggression and violence is imported into the school. Consider these facts from the Centers for Disease Control:[17]

- In 2011, 5.9 percent of youth in grades 9-12 reported not going to school one or more days in the past month because they felt unsafe at school or on their way to/ from school.[18]
- In 2011, 16.6 percent of males in grades 9-12 reported carrying a weapon (gun, knife, or club) in the past thirty days.[19]
- In 2010, 784 juveniles (<18 years) were arrested for murder, 2,198 for forcible rape, and 35,001 for aggravated assault.[20]
- During the 2009-2010 school year, 17 homicides of school-age youths ages 5 to 18 years occurred at school.[21]

Children exposed to violence are much more likely to experience physical, mental, and emotional problems as a result.[22] Given the level of violence in their neighborhoods, for young people to carry guns for self-defense is perhaps understandable.[23] And the youth most likely to feel the need for defense is the member of a street gang in a violent neighborhood. After the adolescent has committed his first violent crime, the evidence shows that he is likely to commit further crimes and more than twice as likely as other criminal youths to commit more violence.[24]

3. Gang Involvement

Commenting on the work of all parents as their children enter adolescence, Travis Hirschi of the University of Arizona writes:

> Affection and monitoring had better have done the job already, because the "child-rearing" days are over. It is time to hope for the best.... [A] major feature of recent times is the increasing independence of adolescents from the family.... This independence from the family results in increasing dependence of the adolescent on other adolescents. But adolescents cannot take the place of parents as socializing agents because they have little or no investment in the outcome, and are less likely to recognize deviant behavior.[25]

All children, especially during their teenage years, gravitate toward the influence of their peers.[26] As the professional literature shows, delinquent peers move a boy in the direction of delinquency and crime.[27] The same is true for girls.

In the company of their peers, future criminals gradually learn to exploit the people of their own community, a community to which they feel no responsibility or obligation.[28] For these boys, increasingly involved with delinquent companions, their lives tend to become insulated from the weakening influence of their families. Continued weakness in parental supervision, monitoring, and control invariably escalates the conflict at home, and this increasing conflict and related family problems cause these children to deepen their affiliation with delinquent groups, the only class of people likely to welcome them "with a place to belong to." While the children continue their aggressive, hostile, and violent ways, their behavior also increasingly repels normal, non-aggressive people. They grow more familiar and at ease with their delinquent peers.[29] Thus, dropping out of

school is a natural development.[30] Gang membership also tends to attract youth from non-intact families.[31]

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This entry draws heavily from The Real Root Causes of Violent Crime: The Breakdown of Marriage, Family, and Community.