

Losing a Generation: Probing the Myths and Realities of Youth and Violence

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YOUTH VIOLENCE IS PERHAPS ONE OF THE MOST HOTLY DEBATED — YET MOST deeply misunderstood — issues today. The “gangsta” has become the new red menace of the 1990s, the target of societal fears in a time of a widening gap between the rich and the poor. Poor youth of color are held particularly suspect of street crimes. As Conquergood (1992: 3) so aptly describes:

Urban youth are always already inscribed by stigmatizing images of gangs and the so-called inner city that produces this social pathology. Before they tattoo their bodies with gang insignia, they are branded by the official discourse of the media, legal system, social welfare, and public policy institutions as dangerous others, the menace from the margins.

In addressing youth violence, myth and reality become so intertwined that the true causes and effective solutions become obscured.

This issue of *Social Justice* appears at a time when myths about youth and crime are running rampant in the U.S. Moreover, these myths are driving policy development in the area of juvenile justice. A thoroughgoing attack is taking place not only on youth, but also on the juvenile justice system itself. This system was originally established in Illinois in 1899 to “prevent cruelty to children.” Although it also extended social control over poor, working class, and youth of color, it did provide some protection to minors who had been institutionalized in reformatories and other “houses of refuge.” The trend of the last 30 years to deinstitutionalize young people and to create community-based alternatives is now being reversed in favor of an intensified focus on incarceration and punishment. Senator Joseph Biden (D-Del.) is concerned that pending legislation “calls into question whether we are going to continue to have a separate juvenile justice system in this country” (Howard, 1997: 25).

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Particularly at the federal level, legislation is sidestepping prevention and rehabilitation in favor of more punitive policies. Proposed federal laws currently under debate would further lower the age at which a juvenile can be tried as an adult, largely expand automatic waivers for certain crimes, blur the line between the separation of youth and adults in prison facilities, allow juvenile proceedings to be made public, and legalize the use of juvenile offenses as strikes in determining adult sentences, among other measures.

Legislation pending in the Senate would make federal funds for juvenile justice programs contingent upon each state trying more children as adults. Various laws now allow the prosecution as adults of offenders as young as 13 and 14, despite studies that found that children transferred to the adult criminal justice system are more likely to reoffend than those tried in juvenile court (*Ibid.*: 55).

Underlying this assault on juvenile justice is the demonization of youth, particularly young people of color, who are stereotypically portrayed as roaming the streets and destroying the fabric of society. Last year, a federal crime bill ominously entitled the “Violent Youth Predator Act” was based on a predicted rise in crime and a “coming generation of ‘super predators.’” The media’s imagery reflects confused reporting of crime statistics, at best, and forsakes the reality of crime rates in favor of sensationalized accounts of youthful offenders, at worst.

One outspoken critic of the hypocrisy of blaming youth for every social problem is Michael Males, author of *The Scapegoat Generation: America’s War on Adolescents* (1996). Males asserts that teen behavior mirrors adult behavior and “usually reflects the adult-created conditions in their families, neighborhoods, and schools.” In exposing the myth that “children are killing children,” Males states that in 1994, for example, 70% of the children under 18 who were killed were victims of adults, often parents or caretakers. Violent children have also been the victims of violent or sexual assaults by adults they trusted. Indeed, the focus on youth violence deflects attention away from intimate crimes, such as child abuse and domestic violence, which contribute to young people becoming offenders.

Males believes that the recent rise in violent crime is clearly founded on social conditions, not age-group demographics, including poverty, racism, lack of affordable housing, unemployment, and inequality. The “superpredator” is a myth that serves to justify repressive control over youth and to ignore these underlying causes of crime.

In fact, all categories of crime have decreased over the last few years. Figures released by the FBI show that arrests for homicides of youth aged 10 to 17 fell 22.8% in 1995 and that the juvenile crime rate declined in 1994 and 1995 for the first time in a decade (Howard, 1996; 1997). Additionally, the FBI reported another drop of 9.2% in 1996 in the arrest rate for juveniles for violent crimes; arrests for murder dropped 10.7% (Jackson, 1997: A-1). The onslaught of crime by juveniles that has been predicted is not taking place. However, statistics on both adult and juvenile crime are used to make or break political careers. Along with

attacks on welfare recipients and immigrants, juvenile offenders have been portrayed as outside the “norms” of society, undeserving of protection or support.

Despite statistics showing a probable decline in juvenile crime, as well as the fact that adults are the primary perpetrators of violence against youth, too many young people, particularly youth of color, are experiencing violence as a way of life. Homicide by guns is the primary cause of death for black youth and the second leading cause for white youth. The homicide rate for black youth ages 15 to 24 is seven to eight times higher than that of white youth of comparable ages (Roper, 1991). Black men are more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system than to go to college. In 1995, one out of every three black men (versus one out of 10 white men) between the ages of 18 and 30 were either incarcerated or in some way caught up in the criminal justice system (Noguera, 1995; Butterfield, 1995: A-18). Girls are being arrested at a faster rate than ever before, and services are not available to respond to their specific needs. We are, in fact, losing a generation and unless we take a stand against the further decline of our cities and the scapegoating of the poor and people of color, the violence will continue to claim the lives of children deemed expendable.

On a more positive note, thousands upon thousands of people throughout this country are working with young people to turn their lives around. Dedicated men, women, and youth are setting up creative organizations and programs that focus on the arts, sports, community service, economic development, education, job training, and gang and violence prevention in every kind of community. In San Francisco, the Omega Boys Club has successfully sent more than 140 young men and women to college; some have gone directly “from the jail house to the school house” and are now serving as role models to others still enmeshed in a life of violence. Omega has become family for many of these youth. Its willingness to go the extra mile results in a trusting relationship and the courage young people need to change their lives. Moreover, groups like Omega deserve the credit for the decreasing rate of juvenile crime. Above all, the vitality, spirit, creativity, and courage of young people will lead to solutions for the problems they face.



The articles in this issue counter the myths of youth violence and probe the living realities — in school, the community, and the juvenile justice system. Most articles highlight the situation of urban youth of color, who have been identified as the “Other” and further marginalized. We present alternative perspectives: African American youth who are writing poetry and raps to critique violence, Latinos who are fighting against teachers’ expectations that they will join gangs, and young women of color who are struggling for survival and equity in the juvenile justice system. Some articles propose solutions that address youth violence and include the perspectives of youth themselves in shaping those solutions. Moreover, this issue is unique because of the inclusion of articles that

specifically focus on the lives of girls, who have been consistently neglected in the criminology literature.

In the opening essay, Luis Rodriguez maintains that we are *all* responsible for the conditions young people face today — and we are part of the solution as well. He calls for compassion for young men and women who are as likely to be victims of violence as perpetrators. He links the struggle to save young people's lives with the need to rebuild a sense of community. John Brown Childs sees youth who actively work for peace and against violence as the inspiration for strategic direction and community rebirth. Similarly, in an interview, Michael Zinzun situates the gang truce as part of a process of building a new social justice movement in this country. Youth at the forefront of these efforts offer hope to others engaged in similar struggles.

Several articles dispute established myths and stereotypes. Susan Roberta Katz challenges the idea that schools are successfully providing violence- and gang-prevention programs. In contrast, the school experience itself, both structurally and through interactions with individual teachers, can demean youth at school and push them into a marginalized lifestyle.

While young black men are the victims of the most vivid stereotype of dangerous criminals, Jabari Mahiri presents sensitive, angry writings by black young men and women that express the pain in their lives and serve as a tool to help them survive. Jeff Ferrell also discusses how youth who are shut out from public space respond by creating an alternative cultural space through forms such as graffiti writing and symbolic clothing.

Esther Madriz pushes the analysis of victimization and fear of crime by focusing on Latina girls and young women, whose voices have not been heard in discussions of violence and crime. She relates fear of crime among Latina teenagers to their feelings of identity as immigrants.

Paul Perrone and Meda Chesney-Lind look behind the media coverage of youth violence in Hawaii and expose the myth that coverage is linked to increased crime. In fact, even though the rate of youth violence declined, the authors found that coverage of crime rose to a feverous pitch.

Jeanette Covington exposes the racialized view of substance abuse. She critiques the use of two different models to study drug abuse among white and black youth. Though substance abuse among white youth is studied on an individual level, among black youth it is explained in the context of “dysfunctional” community characteristics.

While the national trend is to further punish youth, Edward Loughran provides a historical view of the Massachusetts juvenile system, long held as a model for a community-based system since large-scale detention facilities were summarily closed in 1972. He predicts an increase in secure facilities and the reallocation of funds in this direction, but he also sees hope in the fact that the system continues to rely primarily on community alternatives to address crime and violence among youth.

Joani Marinoff provides a critical view of how policy is usually developed without the input of those most affected. She analyzes the shortcomings of programs that do not give youth a central place at the policy-making table, while proposing criteria to evaluate how successfully policy-development efforts include new voices.

Laurie Schaffner, Shelley Shick, and Nancy Stein conducted interviews with girls held in the San Francisco juvenile facility to develop policy recommendations for the City's juvenile justice system, with surprising results. Girls are too often overlooked in discussions of juvenile justice both in terms of analyzing youth crime and in developing programs and policies to address it. New efforts to redesign San Francisco's system include recommendations from this study.

Karen Joe Laidler and Geoffrey Hunt highlight the circumstances of girls in gangs and the violence they face. Not surprisingly, much of the violence they identify comes from their links to male gangs and to domestic violence from their partners.

Dolores Jones-Brown and Zelma Henriquez study mentoring programs as a solution for youth violence. They look at some successful results, but also caution against the shortcomings and difficulties in developing programs that meet the culturally diverse needs of young people. They also summarize the disturbing changes taking place in juvenile law.

Throughout this issue, we include poems and drawings by incarcerated youth. Their voices most eloquently reflect their pain, despair, and hope for the future. It is their voices that matter the most.

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The creative writing that appears in this issue was pulled together by Victor Diaz, a graduate of New College School of Law in San Francisco who is jointly enrolled in the Masters in Writing and the Single Subject Teacher Credential Program at the University of San Francisco. He taught creative writing at the girls unit in the juvenile detention center in San Francisco. The poems and short stories throughout this issue were written by girls in his writing class.

The Hate I Feel Inside

The hate I feel inside, boy I wish I could forget. When I was 11 I got raped. After that happened I felt like a slut, but no one cares, not then, not now. I was just a kid; it was one of those hot summer nights and I wanted to get out of the house. I was walking down the block on Russia Street, going to walk around the park and back up Persia Street. As I was walking, there was this guy; he was at the park drinking a beer.

This guy had wanted to talk to me the day before, but he was white, ugly, old, and mean. I was so scared of him — I still am. He called me over to the park. Why I went, I don't know, but I did. I went and he started talking, kissing me, and sucking on my neck. I felt terrible, but I couldn't do anything. I told him I had to leave, it was late. He said, “fine, I'll walk you home!” I didn't want him to, but I said, “fine, let's go.” He wanted to walk to the bleachers, or at least toward that way. I said no; he started pulling me hard. He literally dragged me to the bench behind the dugout and threw me on the ground.

He ripped off my shorts and my panties; he pulled his shorts off. I said stop! But he didn't. I was so scared I couldn't cry. I think if I did, maybe he would have stopped, but I didn't and neither did he. He slapped me about 10 times, had sex with me, and after he was done, he asked me if I wanted him to stop. I said yes, so he got up, went to a tree, jacked off, pissed, then said “come on you little bitch, you wastin' my time.” I got up, pulled up my pants, and then he walked me home.

That was the first time I had sex. The second time I got raped was in 1993. The end, thanks.