

Society's dilemma: educate or incarcerate

Research by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) indicates that the type of community in which potential perpetrators live influences their likelihood of becoming involved in crime and violence. And, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), crime has increased twice as rapidly among black households as among white households.

Thus, central city residents, in 1993, were victimized by motor vehicle theft at almost five times the rate experienced by rural households. And, they were robbed at more than three times the rural resident's rate.

Violent victimization rates, however, declined with increases in family income. Households with yearly incomes of under \$7,500 were more than twice as likely to fall victim of violence than households with incomes of \$75,000 or more. Blacks living in nondisadvantaged areas did not have higher rates of delinquency than whites living in nondisadvantaged areas. Hence, race does not appear to affect the propensity for violent behavior.

Additionally, the OJJDP reported that there are strong indications that child abuse and neglect affect subsequent delinquency. Adolescence growing up in violent environments engaged in higher rates of violence than those from nonviolent families. Many disadvantaged parents tend to reprimand

their children by imparting physical (violent) punishment. The child grows up with the belief that conflict resolution involves violence.

Apparently, an inverse correlation exists between crime (violence) and income. Thus, disadvantaged communities (households) experienced greater incidence of crime and violence than nondisadvantaged communities. However, this inverse relationship is not straightforward, since lump sum payment to the disadvantaged is unlikely to change behavior.

Income, in the long run, is directly related to individual skills and training. For example, on the average, a trained or skilled individual has greater life time earnings than an untrained or unskilled person. Therefore, the attainment of marketable skills, or education, is an important factor in the process of achieving higher income. Similarly, the affinity with crime and violence diminishes as the level of education increases. Thus, education is inversely related to crime and violence, and directly related to income.

In disadvantaged communities, however, some households are unstable and dysfunctional. Hence, learning and intellectual growth is often stifled. As a result a less literate community emerges.

Literacy Behind Prison Walls, a report from the U. S. Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics, indicates that

two-thirds of America's prisoners, over one million, is less literate than the general US population. And, most are young male minorities.

The findings are intriguing and tend to validate the inverse correlation between education and crime. The study also found that repeat offenders remained about as literate as those who are in prison for the first time. The study highlights the need to focus on education, in and out of prison, to reduce the rate of incarceration. Clearly, educational improvement in disadvantaged areas will curtail violence and recidivism.

Interestingly, the prison population is greatest between the ages of 20 and 39 (approximately 3,400 inmates per 100,000 adult US residents), reaching its peak between the ages of 15 and 29. Curiously, the ages at which incarceration begins to peak coincide with the college graduation age. Thus, if more disadvantaged youths were in the educational track, less would be incarcerated. And, their training and preparation would have a positive impact on the community and the nation.

Unfortunately, learning institutions in disadvantaged communities are often ill equipped. Hence, the trend of illiteracy and incarceration are likely to continue.

Ironically, the average cost for a good education per pupil is less than \$10,000 per year. However, the average yearly

maintenance cost per inmate is estimated to be approximately \$25,000 per year, or approximately \$15,000 more than the cost of a good education.

It appears that the smaller front-end investment in education is more cost-effective than the back-end prison maintenance cost. Thus, it may be in the nation's best interest to prevent the disadvantaged from becoming illiterate. Since, illiteracy leads to minimal comprehension and, hence disregard to the rule of law.

Quality education (or training), therefore, is an essential factor in reversing the incidence of crime and violence. However, the current educational system in central cities is not optimal. Meaning, that it does not work. Central cities must revamp their educational systems to fit the prevailing environment: dysfunctional and unstable households.

The fact that the educational system in central cities works poorly, does not necessarily mean that educators are inefficient. What appears to be inappropriate is the standard educational model being followed. The standard educational process is to acquire some knowledge at school and the remainder at home. However, in dysfunctional households, home learning seldom occurs. Thus, students are unable to develop the required study habits to overcome their dysfunctional environment.

Therefore, all learning in disadvantaged

communities should occur in the class room. This could be achieved by lengthening the amount of time students spend in classes: more hours, more days. Of course, longer periods will aggravate the truancy problem; but this can be dealt with by penalizing parents and confining truants to reform schools.

Teachers, like any other professionals, should have access to up-to-date learning tools. Additionally, they should be tested and rewarded for competency. Moreover, their continued employment should be based on their students overall performance as reflected on standardized test scores. Thus, the incentive to improve teaching techniques would be enhanced.

An attractive side effect of extended hours would be a reduction in the available student free time. Thus, the opportunity to commit mischief will be reduced. Moreover, police vigilance may be increased during non-school hours, further curtailing the opportunity for hazardous behaviors. Other positive side effects are a reduction in after school day care parental costs and an increase in teacher's employment.

If this strategy of education and containment is implemented, the rate of incarceration of the disadvantaged population and their prison related expenditures will decrease. Thus, everyone wins.