

SOLVING THE JUVENILE CRIME CRISIS: A PROSECUTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

James C. Backstrom has been the Dakota County Attorney in Minnesota since 1987. He previously served as an Assistant County Attorney for nine years and as President of the Minnesota County Attorneys Association. He currently is a member of the Board of Directors of the National District Attorneys Association and co-chairs that Association's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee.

I. EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM

During the last decade we have seen rapidly rising levels of juvenile crime throughout our nation. Statistics from a 25 year study on juvenile violence issued by the FBI in 1992 showed that, with the lone exception of robberies, all categories of youth-related violent crime rose significantly during the 1980's and early 1990's. Arrests of juveniles for serious violent offenses increased by 75% between 1985 and 1994. Arrests of juveniles for homicide and weapons offenses rose by 150% and 103%, respectively, during this same timeframe. In many areas of our county substantial growth has occurred in non-violent juvenile crime as well. The growth rates in juvenile crime during this period has far outpaced the rate for adults, which in many cases has shown decreases in recent years.

These alarming statistics cover youth in all races, social classes and lifestyles. Rising rates of juvenile crime have occurred not only in the urban areas of our country, but in suburban and rural areas as well. My jurisdiction, for example, which is a suburban county in the southeast Twin Cities metropolitan area, reflects this disturbing trend. Dakota County, Minnesota is the third largest county in our state with a population of approximately 310,000. It covers 571 square miles and has both suburban and rural features, including eleven cities ranging in population from 10,000 to 55,000; nine smaller rural cities; thirteen townships and thirteen independent school districts. Between 1990 and 1995, our overall number of juvenile prosecutions rose from 628 to 1539 - an increase of 145% in the last five years. In addition to this large increase in overall levels of juvenile crime in my jurisdiction, of significant alarm has been an 83% increase in the level of violent juvenile criminal offenses during the last three years.¹

Fortunately, our nationwide rates of violent juvenile crime fell slightly last year for the first time in almost a decade, and the rate of violent juvenile offenses in my jurisdiction rose by only 4% in 1995, compared to much larger increases in the previous two years. That's the good news. But

¹ In our analysis, violent juvenile criminal offenses include homicides, assaults, kidnapping, robbery, sex crimes, terroristic threats and offenses involving the use of a dangerous weapon.

the predictions for our future, given the large increase we will see in the numbers of juveniles in our country over the next 15 years, are ominous indeed.

Census estimates used in a 1995 Justice Department report reflect a growth in juvenile population of close to 20% between 1990 and 2010. In Dakota County, Minnesota even greater growth is projected. Between 1990 and 2004 the number of juveniles who are 14-17 years old will increase by 85% in Dakota County, a rate four times faster than our statewide average. Even if juvenile arrest rates do not continue to grow as they have for most of the past decade, the overall number of juvenile crimes committed will likely be dramatically higher in the next twenty years given these population trends. That is, unless we start large scale community-wide efforts to address this problem right now. We can ill afford to sit back and wait.

II. HOW CAN WE SOLVE THE JUVENILE CRIME CRISIS?

I set forth below fifteen issues that must be addressed if we are to solve the rising problems with juvenile crime in America. While there are certainly more issues than these which need to be addressed, these are some which my experiences as a prosecutor tell me we cannot ignore.

1. We need to re-establish the sense of neighborhood and community involvement that we once took pride in, but which no longer seems to exist in many areas of our country. There seems to have been a lessening of community involvement in ensuring the well-being of our children over the past thirty years.
2. We need to ensure that there are proper levels of supervision for young people in their homes, in their schools, and on the streets of our cities. Lack of adequate supervision is a source of problems for many youth today.
3. We need to ensure that young people develop a sense of morality. Crime in its most basic sense is a moral issue. People who are raised with proper moral values in the home and in our faith communities will be much less likely to be involved in criminal activity.
4. We need to ensure that every child, particularly those in single parent families, has access to a positive adult role model somewhere in the community. There has been a breakdown of the American family during the past 30 years and we must do all we can to fill the gap in those families where the father or mother is absent or is a poor role model.
5. We need to do all we can to discourage teenage and illegitimate pregnancies. The evidence from a variety of studies clearly shows (even if income and ethnic background are held constant) that children born and raised by a young single mother are more likely than those raised by two parents to have difficulty in school, get in trouble with the law, and experience emotional and physical problems.
6. We need to create positive role models and positive peer influence for our youth so they don't look to the gangs and the gang leaders for these purposes.

7. We need to ensure that proper social skills necessary to get by in today's world exist in each and every one of our children. These include assertiveness skills, decision-making skills, friendship-making skills, planning skills, the development of self esteem and good judgment.
8. We need to ensure that our children develop a sense of educational commitment and motivation. We need to make sure that youth realize how difficult it is to get by in today's world without an education. Far too many children drop out of school before they graduate. We cannot ignore or tolerate truancy from school.
9. We need to recognize and deal with the increased levels of stress that young people have in their lives today. Youth need to have access to their parents or other adults they can trust to help them cope with the stress of being a teen today. We need to establish greater support mechanisms for children at home, with their friends, in the schools and in their community.
10. We need to develop opportunities for young people to be employed and to become involved in structured play and recreation activities. Lack of these opportunities will result in more criminal conduct and gang involvement.
11. We need to ensure that young people have a source of consistent discipline, starting in the home. We need to assist those parents who need help in establishing proper standards and boundaries for behavior and discipline for their children and insure that appropriate discipline exists in our schools as well. Curfew ordinances are a good example of efforts to address this issue.
12. We need to ensure that our young people grow up with respect for our laws, for their parents, for their elders, and for each other. This lack of respect is a major reason, in my opinion, why we have seen rapidly rising levels of juvenile crime in this country.
13. We need to ensure that juveniles are held accountable and responsible for their own actions. Without this accountability our system of justice will fall apart. This accountability and responsibility must start at an early age. The most critical years of a child's life (the years in which he/she will develop either positive or antisocial behaviors) are ages one to ten, with the earlier years being the most important.
14. We need to continue efforts to address the widespread portrayals of violence in the media. By the time a child reaches the age of 18 today, they will have witnessed over 200,000 acts of violence on television or in the movies. Parents must also assume responsibility in this area.
15. We cannot afford to ignore the role that the abuse of alcohol and other drugs in this country plays in the commission of crime. If we do not continue to make it a priority to ensure that our young people remain drug and chemical free, we will never solve our nation's crime problem.

I am also convinced that holding juveniles appropriately accountable for non-violent juvenile crime is essential in our efforts to reduce levels of violent offenses. As a prosecutor, I meet very few youth apprehended for acts of violence who have not had some prior contacts with police, schools, or social workers over non-violent activities, such as alcohol abuse or truancy. Anti-social behavior must be addressed and appropriately dealt with from its onset.

III. LAW ENFORCEMENT RESPONSES TO THE PROBLEM.

The law enforcement officers and prosecutors of this country are committed to doing all we can to enforce our laws and keep our streets safe by apprehending and convicting those offenders who choose to commit violent crimes. Violent and repeat juvenile offenders should be prosecuted as adults and dealt with severely by our criminal justice system. But more than just traditional law enforcement efforts are needed to solve our juvenile crime crisis.

I am convinced from my own experiences that prevention and education are the keys to a long-term successful solution to the crime problem in this country. I am not alone in this thought. Prosecutors from throughout our nation have recognized the need to get involved in juvenile crime prevention programs. For example:

- Sandra O'Connor's office in Baltimore County, Maryland and Jack O'Malley's office in Cook County, Illinois have pioneered annual anti-drug poster contests for young people to make their own positive statements about the dangers of drug and alcohol abuse. The winning posters are made into a calendar and distributed to thousands of young people each year. I have adopted a similar program in my jurisdiction and have been involving youth in this effort for eight years.
- Bill Ritter, the Denver District Attorney, has spearheaded the development of an innovative project entitled "Courtrooms to Classrooms." This is a project in which a prosecutor goes into schools to help elementary or middle school students understand how our criminal justice system works and provides them with a positive role model to relate to. I have also adopted this program for use in my jurisdiction.
- I have become involved this past year in a tri-county initiative in my region focusing on youth gang and violence prevention. Through this project we have trained hundreds of law enforcement officers, provided community forums, trained school administrators and other professionals and prepared informational brochures for citizens concerning youth gang and violence issues.

I have also established juvenile diversion programs for first time juvenile offenders using alcohol or small amounts of marijuana or committing low level property offenses. These programs provide for intensive counseling to juvenile offenders which is aimed at preventing future criminal behavior while at the same time holding these youthful offenders accountable for their actions. A parent is also required to participate in these programs and restitution is required to be made to the victims of property offenses. In most cases, these programs provided greater consequences than were occurring to youth processed through our juvenile court systems on

similar cases before these programs existed. I cannot overestimate the importance of the need to deal with low level criminal behavior appropriately and aggressively if we are to successfully prevent more serious behavior from occurring.

Prosecutors and other law enforcement officials need to step beyond their traditional roles and become involved with these types of crime prevention programs. Such efforts can pay many dividends in the long run by helping to reduce crime. These are the types of efforts we need more of, along with adequate laws to ensure that violent and repeat juvenile offenders will be prosecuted as adults and dealt with severely by our criminal justice system. Effective law enforcement and prevention efforts compliment one another.

IV. COMMUNITY RESPONSE

Law enforcement officials cannot solve the juvenile crime problem alone. It will take the united efforts of everyone in this country to solve this problem, including parents, teachers, concerned citizens, school administrators, faith communities, business and civic leaders, community-based organizations, law enforcement officials and our youth themselves.

While there will never be a complete consensus concerning all of the reasons for the growing juvenile crime problem in our society, few would disagree that the reasons are complex and varied, and that is precisely why the response to this problem needs to be multifaceted. One of the most important ways to formulate these type of multiple responses is the development of community coalitions and partnerships to address this widespread problem.

I am proud to be a part of a community that has shown leadership in addressing prevention issues and creating a healthier community. With the support of the Dakota County Board of Commissioners, we have established the Dakota Alliance for Prevention (DAP) and the Dakota Council For Healthy Communities (DCHC).

DAP's focus has been on prevention of alcohol, tobacco and other drug abuse. Funded by a federal grant, DAP has been able to serve as a clearing house for distributing prevention information countywide and has provided seed money to help get local coalitions and prevention programs started throughout our County. DAP has also coordinated several countywide prevention efforts on its own, including an awareness campaign of the dangers of alcohol use at prom and graduation parties and a project which provided every sixth grader in our County with a school folder filled with prevention messages and materials.

DCHC was originally organized to plan specific countywide conferences concerning youth and families in Dakota County. Three highly successful conferences were organized by this group. The first conference, "Growing Up in Dakota County Healthy and Whole", took place in September 1992 with over 350 participants. The second, "Dakota County Youth and Families Conference", took place in January of 1994 with about 10,000 youth and adults participating in an interactive cable broadcast at numerous locations throughout Dakota County. A third

conference entitled “Crossing Brides ... Connecting People” occurred in April of 1996, attracting 325 attendees.

These conferences helped generate an extensive amount of momentum for empowering local coalitions in the County and led directly to the creation of several such groups. DCHC has now broadened its scope and serves to address issues and concerns of citizens, schools, government agencies, local coalitions, youth groups, and other entities. This group has become involved in violence prevention activities and organizing and promoting prevention resources. DCHC and DAP are now in the process of combining their efforts and will be known in the future as the Dakota Partnership for Healthy Communities.

Another prevention effort in Dakota County is the Alcohol Decisions program operated by our County’s Extension Service. This is a peer education program which utilizes middle and high school students to teach grade school students about the dangers of using alcohol and drugs.

In addition to our countywide efforts, no fewer than 12 local community coalitions/groups have sprung up in Dakota County to address prevention, education, health and safety issues. These are the types of programs that can go a long way to solving the growing juvenile crime problem in our nation.

V. CONCLUSION

Solving the juvenile crime crisis will not be easy. Traditional law enforcement efforts must continue with new tools to deal with today’s violent juvenile criminals and to effectively deal with non-violent offenders before it is too late. The long term solution, however, requires that we step back and look at the underlying causes of juvenile crime. Everyone in the community needs to get involved in working together to address these underlying causes if we have any hope of staving off the dire predictions for juvenile crime in America in the 21st century.

For more information about any of the programs mentioned in this article, contact James C. Backstrom, Dakota County Attorney, Dakota County Judicial Center, 1560 West Highway 55, Hastings, MN 55033-2392, Telephone (612) 438-4438.

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