

Making cities safe again

by Stephanie L. Mann

Six people were dead in Memphis with three children seriously injured. The police went door to door but had little to go on. Have we lost our humanity and compassion? Have we forgotten that a democracy will fail without involved citizens? How many workplaces and school shootings will it take before Americans wake up and take charge of their own neighborhood safety?

Drug abuse, crime and violence create dangerous neighborhoods that are roadblocks to economic and community revitalization. When community leaders and neighbors work together and focus on community involvement, crime is reduced and citizens prevent new crimes from occurring. Involvement works and it is cost-effective.

The breakdown of the family and social isolation contribute to violence. Children are the largest group of crime victims and victimizers. Bullying starts at an early age and can be fueled by frustration and anger. For example, in Richmond, Calif., a 6-year-old was charged with burglary and attempted murder of a month-old baby. Neighbors knew he was a neglected child but failed to seek help. Without parental guidance or community support, children fend for themselves.

Unchecked bullying can escalate while victims of bullies join gangs for protection, and then vandalize, steal, destroy property and even commit murder. There are 300,000 gang members in California alone. Nationally, the peak age for burglary is 16 years old. The peak age for violent criminal behavior is 18.

Cities respond to crime by hiring more police. Of course we need adequate police protection, but police are trained to react to crime. The national average is 2.7 police officers for every 1,000 citizens, with an average cost of \$90,000 annually per officer, including a patrol car. Police promote neighborhood watch programs that encourage residents to be the eyes and ears for the police and report suspicious activities and lock their homes. Police efforts are important, but results can be spotty, fragmented and often temporary.

WHY ORGANIZE?

Organized neighbors can prevent crime from happening in the first place. When citizens take charge of neighborhood safety, children stay safe. Involved neighbors who know each other often set up a network of communication via computers or a phone tree to stay informed.

Organized neighborhoods reduce social isolation. Community isolation contributes to domestic abuse (one in four women is in an abusive relationship).

Together neighbors become aware of neglected children. They can reach out or ask child protective services for assistance. Local religious groups can offer families emotional support, including mentors and role models. Neighbors can spread the responsibility for children's welfare to the larger community.

In many cities, there are religious organizations on every other corner. Members of congregations can bring neighbors together by sponsoring block parties, cleaning up neighborhoods, creating a neighborhood newsletter or planting community gardens. Everyone benefits when people help each other.

To focus on community responsibility for children, each city district can establish a child safety committee. Committee members can network with city agencies and organize around local concerns:

- Find mentors for at-risk children.

- Sponsor youth-led projects.

- Promote mediation training.

- Offer team-building training.

- Offer parent and youth education.

- Encourage student safety committees.

Organized groups working with police have stopped burglaries, graffiti, drug dealers, thefts and gangs. Citizens have recorded illegal activities, set up patrols and shut down crack houses.

Getting communities organized should be top priority. Education and communication are critical to the safety and protection of children. Every juvenile delinquent, gang member, drug abuser, abused and neglected child is growing up in someone's neighborhood. When citizens stop tolerating drugs, crime and violence, our communities will become healthy, peaceful and safe environments for everyone.

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