

Crime In New Zealand

February 2002

Eight homicides in less than a week. What's happening?

Politicians tell us what they believe we want to hear. Some say we can solve this problem by:

- Locking up the offenders and throwing away the key -

While this may satisfy our desire to punish those responsible, it does nothing to stop those likely to offend next week.

Others say:

- We can solve this problem by directing more money to those most likely to offend -

While well meaning, the treatment they are proposing is the very cause of the disease that afflicts these people in the first place.

What we need to understand is that the only moral or ethical policy is one that works, other policies are fallacies and in the case of welfare and crime, expensive, dangerous and deeply damaging lies as well.

Most problems of this nature require a solution that involves two elements:

- Policies to solve or dramatically reduce the problem over time.
- Policies to deal with the transitional problems that will continue to exist for some time because of past policies.

We need to understand the reasons why violent crime has increased so dramatically in New Zealand over the past 20 years before we can come up with a solution.

The family is the source of most of New Zealand's violent crime.

The challenge:

If we are serious about solving the crime problem, let us stop blaming race and poverty and start focusing on building the family and increasing personal responsibility.

When their parents neglect children they resort to aggressive behaviour to get attention. Then they find they only get along with other aggressive children.

The typical childhood of a criminal offender looks like this:

Stage 1

- When the child is born the father has already left the mother.
- The child never bonds with the mother and childcare changes frequently.

- The adults in the child's life frequently quarrel violently. The child is deprived of affection.
- The child is difficult to handle at school and is rejected by other children.
- The child and like-minded peers are slower at school, resulting in lower expectations of themselves.
- The child is likely to suffer from ailments such as glue ear, which seriously impede schooling.
- The social services the child encounters have very low expectations - and so does the family.

Stage 2

The typical youth of a criminal offender goes like this

- By ten or eleven the child is well established in a number of bad ways.
- By fifteen or sixteen the boy will engage in criminal behaviour.
- The earlier he committed his first criminal act the longer he will lead a life of crime.
- The girls he knows are on a similar course.
- Many of the girls have run away from home.
- Many in the group use drugs.
- Violence is the norm among his group of friends.
- The girls often get involved in prostitution while the boys join criminal gangs.
- Many join in to secure the comfort and protection in gangs.

Stage 3

The cycle continues. A new child, a new generation of potential criminals begins.

- His fifteen-year-old girlfriend gets pregnant.
- He shows no responsibility. He leaves her - often never seeing the baby.
- In his neighbourhood, dysfunctional families like the one this child has been born into are responsible for eighty per cent of major crime.

The fact is that the governments could have a positive effect on reducing crime - but not by relying on more and more policemen on the beat. That's not the answer. How many more policemen are we going to need to keep a lid on things as the problem really starts growing?

The welfare system is far more to blame. The system rewards dysfunctional families. It encourages people to become dependent on the DPB. This leads to a lack of personal responsibility, loss of dignity and self-worth and sets the foundation for increasing crime.

The fact is you can forget unemployment, poverty and ethnic background as causes of deep family problems like these - the popular tags are superficial symptoms rather than fundamental causes. The pivotal issue is the quality and nature of the family and its ability to bring up children well.

Studies show that when we look at multi-problem kids, kids from what we might call chaotic families, they are fifty times more likely to be severely disturbed and end up acting violently than those who suffer simply from poverty or simply from unemployment.

Chaotic families manifest themselves in five or six ways: substance abuse

- criminal behaviour
- psychiatric disorder
- multiple partners
- violence
- sexual abuse.

So what do we do for this group as a matter of social policy?

At the moment, what we are not doing is the more important question. We are not even admitting they exist and that seems to me to be a catastrophic lack of moral purpose. Perhaps because the group is largely Maori/Polynesian we haven't dared confront the issue.

The first point of action then is to stop and confront the problem.

Thus:

1. We acknowledge this group exists and that it is growing rapidly.
2. Recognise if we don't do something about it, it will cripple New Zealand. It is in a real sense the cancer within.
3. Recognise that doing something about it helps us all. We are even now paying the cost in terms of police, social welfare, special teachers, probation officers, jails, etc.
4. Recognise also that help can only be provided when people have decided to help themselves. So real help has to be in the form of a carrot and a stick. It cannot be all carrot as it is today for those who want to remain dependent.

The incentives are all wrong. And while exceptional individuals do rise above the system, people will generally behave as the incentives drive them.

Policies required to dramatically reduce crime over time

Thirty-five years ago the illegitimacy rate in New Zealand was negligible (Not so today. For Maori the comparable figures have risen from 6% to 75%).

At least 5% of New Zealand families can be described as dysfunctional. They generally find the State a far better provider than any alternative. So they don't get married.

Many of these girls having children are hardly more than children themselves. And the problem is compounding. Children born to a solo mother are three times more likely to be solo parents themselves.

And the results are - crime, unemployment, poverty, drug abuse, violence, and mental illness. Maori/Polynesian people are over-represented in all of these categories and children from solo parent families are extraordinarily vulnerable to suffer these effects.

If money solved these problems, New Zealand would be the safest and most successful country in the world.

We've spent \$200+ billion on social welfare in the last twenty-five years yet crime, violence, and poverty are all increasing.

I believe that the State has given up. Tired old parties and tired old politicians repeat themselves - and repeat their mistakes.

And the glaring fact about these dysfunctional families is not that they are likely to be Maori/Polynesian. It is how often they are solo parent families, with pathetically young mothers, hardly grown-up enough to look after themselves.

That is why the DPB for teenagers should be abolished. I am not saying we should do this retroactively. We can't leave young girls whom we have trapped in dependency in even worse circumstances. We should however, support them in a way that encourages them to move off dependency.

But what we have to do is stop enticing more young girls or ever-younger girls into the same hopeless predicament. In practical terms we should say that in one year's time, no young teenager getting pregnant would be eligible for the DPB.

That's phasing out this damaging, demoralising, dangerous policy that has been the cause of so many problems in Maori people in particular.

Now there may be parents out there who don't mind if their teenage daughter has a baby. In that case I totally support their right to arrange their family affairs, as they want - but it is a private matter. If they want early grandchildren then they can support their child and their grandchild.

It is not a matter for the State.

They should take their child and grandchild back into their family - support and cherish and nurture them both.

But don't let the State do it - because the State doesn't care.

Policies required to deal with the transitional issues that lead to increases in crime.

A positive solution for at-risk families: Mentors.

I don't think this solution fits in with any prevailing theory or ideology. But it is a practical approach that has a growing level of support among social workers who want to find positive solutions rather than perpetuate the problems.

It is a mixture of carrot and stick and the objective is to help the family off State dependency, to bring their children up in a positive, healthy way - and to take control of their lives.

- We should take the major part of the funds currently spent by a number of government departments in a fragmented way (Children and Young Persons Service Care and Protection, Youth Justice, Community Support Agencies, Drug and Alcohol Addiction programmes, Women's Refuge, Men's Anger Management, (to name but a few).
- We should put this money and other money spent on dysfunctional families (Education, Health, Housing & Welfare) in the hands of a family Mentor to be spent as they, and the family, think best with the objective of removing the family from welfare dependency.

Mentors would come from all walks of life. The recently retired, in particular, could make a huge contribution.

They would help with:

- Domestic guidance and budgeting.
- Schooling and health.
- Housing and employment.

Mentors would have a budget. Some families have \$100,000 spent on them in social services from a dozen different agencies.

The approach would be to give one person - the Mentor - the incentive and the resources to make a real difference.

I suggest a process along the following lines:

Appoint the mentor:

- To act as a guide, a coach, an advocate, a friend to the family. The Mentor would hold and control a budget consisting of a large proportion of what the State currently spends on the family through a wide variety of fragmented agencies - where one hand doesn't know what the other is doing.
- Analyse what is really happening in the family and then spend the money with the single objective of getting the family up and running - independent and self-supporting.

The growth of troubled families in New Zealand makes it difficult to believe that we New Zealanders really care about our community.

By helping the disadvantaged to achieve independence and contribute more to society, we transform their future and improve everyone else's.

The alternative is a society with a permanent underclass of alienated people with no stake in prosperity or social harmony.

By moving to solve the problems faced by the five percent of families who are responsible for eighty percent of serious crime we will benefit all New Zealanders financial and socially.

We will be dealing with the root causes of the problems - not just dealing piecemeal with short term symptoms.

But they're elusive, at-risk families, they're not easy to help.

A lifetime of lying, manipulating and running away in order to survive comes to the rescue of at-risk families when the authorities intervene. They deny, avoid, defy, manipulate, and if they can, disappear from the grasp of the child protection agencies as soon as possible.

They have never had any reason to trust anyone, so appeals to let themselves be helped are viewed with total suspicion and mistrust.

The notion that these families can be helped by parenting classes, a bit of budgeting and then provision of occasional day care facilities is not tenable. Yet if they get anything at all, this is often the sum total of what society has to offer them in New Zealand.

With a Mentor alongside them, we should allow parents the responsibility to make choices for their own wellbeing - like having the power and the money to educate their families and keep them healthy.

We should also:

- Take down the barriers that make it so difficult for willing adults to adopt children.
- Promote voluntary community efforts.
- Urgently review all Social Welfare's programmes - do they work, or are they counter-productive?
- Gather more information on the early symptoms of children at risk.

The Challenge:

Let's get stuck into the government and insist they accept their responsibility to set up decent policies to stop this vicious cycle.

It is by this way that this country will rediscover the basic tenets of democracy, namely:

- equal opportunity
- freedom of expression
- the right to choose
- and the right to determine one's own destiny

The mentor system brings power down to a local level, to individuals.

People will achieve personal growth, and through a greater sense of responsibility will know how hard work increases their personal freedom, and how competence and technical skills give them independence, dignity and respect.

We need to understand that the process of choice sometimes leads to mistakes but they will be smaller than the mistakes giant bureaucracies make, and more easily corrected. And in so correcting them individuals will learn mastery, and enjoy a higher self-image.

Compare this to the present situation that for many creates all the bad things that flow out of a monopoly.

- dependency, low self esteem
- spoilt, demanding social behaviour
- a disabled population, violence, drugs and sex abuse
- lack of dignity

For people who fall into these categories, no amount of economic growth will lift their life chances.

Their lack of skills and purpose completely shuts them out of participation in the modern economy. In a way we recognise that by brushing over welfare dependency and making excuses for juvenile delinquency.

The only way to stop the problem growing is to deal with the welfare problem and put in place an education system that works for every kid - not just the average.

Everyone says that education is the key to individual and social advancement. They say it and then immediately proceed to support a system that leaves so many of our children totally out in the cold.

So here's a question for church leaders:

Why do you continue to demand increased welfare spending when you should be able to see that it is making things worse not better?

Government spending has increased and serious crimes have increased as well. Teenage violence, young mothers, welfare dependency, graffiti, disdain for authority - it's all around us.

We have created a system that actively encourages the weaker sides of our characters to take precedence over the better sides.

Many well-meaning Social Welfare organisations, church leaders and Government agencies buy into the victimisation routine that often surrounds this group and provide more and more, to try and fill the bottomless yearning these people have.

Whatever these people do get is never enough. Because the state can only give them money, not what they really need. Many young mothers, sixteen, seventeen and eighteen years old only want to be held - instead they become pregnant.

Others want a baby to love them - they bear a child for their own needs.

It is no wonder that some of these children later in life feel little remorse when confronted with unbelievable crimes they have committed.

The fact that they feel no guilt is why it is so important to attack the source of the problem not the symptoms. Church leaders in a cloak of piety demand more money to be poured into the symptoms.

Ultimately they may realise the part they have really played. That they have collaborated in a massive increase of violence, suffering and despair.

And all the time they believed they were on the side of the angels.