

Family and Crime Reduction in The Bahamas

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*Presented at a Town Meeting on Crime, at Choices Restaurant, College of The Bahamas
Tuesday, September 4, 2007*

Dan Van Ness, executive director of the Center for Justice and Reconciliation at Prison Fellowship International, Washington, DC. Said:

"Crime is a wound, justice should be healing."

He wrote this statement in his recent article on Restorative Justice. More importantly, I like how succinctly he defines restorative justice because it propels me to the crucial reason for the serious crime problem:

"Restorative justice involves looking beyond retribution to find deeper solutions that heal broken relationships."

Restorative Justice certainly must be a subject for several town meetings. However, the phrase "broken relationships" is what I want to use as my spring board for this presentation. Is this what it is all about? "Broken relationships? Perhaps it is the simplest and most profound way we can truly explain why people become violent. **Yes, they become violent because of broken relationships.** But before you hasten too fast in thinking that this capsule definition is limited to how one relates to one another, I want to draw your attention to something deeper.

One predictor of crime prevention is the proper development of:

- **Intrapersonal Intelligence:** Understanding and managing yourself effectively.
- Then we have **Interpersonal Intelligence:** Understanding and relating effectively with people.

Intrapersonal intelligence also referred to as **emotional intelligence** is:

The ability to acknowledge, value and manage your feelings so that they are expressed appropriately and effectively, laying the groundwork for meaningful relationships and productive teamwork. It is also the ability to recognize and diagnose the emotion of others and the ability to respond appropriately to emotional cues.

I am presenting tonight that the crucible for crime prevention and reduction is the primary nurturing and training unit of growing children to provide the environment for the development of emotional intelligence. This includes self-control and self-discipline, pro-activity and persistence, and the ability to motivate oneself. It is having a healthy self concept. Most criminals do not have a healthy self-concept.

What is the primary nurturing and training unit I am talking about? It is the **family** managed by adult parents.

We need not be reminded that it is during the first three years of the child's life that the proper development of intrapersonal skills is realized. Hence, parenting skills are crucial. It is extremely difficult, although possible, to rebuild an adult person who has been wounded from early childhood experiences.

Remember, we have already established that broken relationships are the fundamental reasons for persons choosing a life of crime. I am suggesting that the relationship that is broken is the **INTRApersonal relationship**; and that is because of poor INTERpersonal relationships with significant others in the one's life at an early age.

What can we do about that?

It might be already evident to most, if not all of us, that the answer to the reduction and prevention of crime is **education**—educating parents to be parents. The sad truth is that too many of today's parents were not parented to parent others effectively. Many of the parents of yesteryear did not concentrate on parenting so that those they were parenting would be able to transmit critical life skills and positive values down through the generations. They did a marvelous job at bad parenting so that their offsprings and their offsprings' offsprings are now reproducing the same dysfunctional patterns of behavior and transmitting the same immoral principles. The type of family government was the authoritarian style. In fact, the school, the church, the government, and the society at large, by using the same authoritarian style have successfully reinforced parental education. This authoritarian style can be aptly described with these traditional expressions:

“Children are to be seen and not heard.”

“Do as I say and not as I do.”

In fact, one of the typical characteristics of the authoritarian style of leadership is that of **shaming and blaming**. Parents who often feel that their authority position is being threatened usually intentionally or unintentionally wound with their mouths and their hands. It was all about the misuse and abuse of power.

Shaming and blaming is one of the major predictors for the lack of empathy in children then adulthood. In an article, "Violence and Parenting Education," Paul Jay Fink states:

"Some children growing in today's society appear to have little or no empathy for others. They have no sense of social responsibility and no sense of the importance of such values as respect, courtesy, decency, and morality. The most notable thing that leads some kids to be violent, brutal and murderous is the lack of empathy."

Where do children first and best learn empathy? It is in the home from mom and dad and from the daily caretakers of little ones

The authoritarian style of leadership, which was the main stay decades ago, creates the worse environment for developing good conflict resolution skills. In fact, it produces conflict. It is not good for developing empathy. And now we are reaping the harvest of generations of wounded children because of poor parenting skills.

Would it be too harsh to say that we have created this monster of a violent society?

We claim to be a Christian nation, but our behaviors are not Christ-like. Too many of our spiritual leaders have been preaching a toxic faith that has crippled thousands of believers and more so ruined wholesome family relationships.

The Devil has been successful in seducing us to becoming a violent people. A French philosopher of the 19th century said this about Satan:

"Most people would not recognize Satan even if he had them by the throat."

He has us by our throats but we don't even know it. We are mesmerized into complacency by his subtle initial warmth and enticement that suddenly freezes us into a state of indifference, stupidity, and callous behavior. We are a nation that has been

frozen in the refrigerator of years of toxic faith and poor parenting skills.

Here are my own findings, having worked with many violent or abusive men and women. It reveals a deadly formula for violence. Here it is:

When rigid, inflexible religious beliefs are combined with rigid family practices the outcome is always violence—physical or non-physical.

Hence the church has a major part to play in re-examining its teachings and methods, especially about family life. First it is guilty of passive violence against the family--the turning of the head. Telling a woman, "that's your burden you have to bear," forcing her to stay in an abusive relationship.

Again I ask the question: What can we do about the problem. Our best antidote to crime is education. We have to educate our spiritual leaders, parents, politicians, and teachers.

Let us look at marriage and crime.

A research "Can Married Parents Prevent Crime?" by the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy, Washington DC, 2000-2005 provides insight into the relationship between crime and marriage.

Here is a summary:

"Does family fragmentation raise the risk of crime and delinquency? In a review of 23 recent US studies published in peer-reviewed journals between 2000 and 2005, all but three found some family structure effects on crime or delinquency. Married parents appear to reduce both the individual risk and the overall rates of crime. That is, recent research strongly suggest both that young adults and teens raised in single-parents homes are more likely to commit crimes, and that communities with high rates of family fragmentation (especially unwed child-bearing) suffer higher crime rates as a result."

Dr. Timothy McCartney's research he published in his book "Neuroses in the Sun" three decades ago also reveals the impact of family fragmentation and its impact on violence. Most importantly, his research spoke directly to the effect of the absentee father on family life and in particular, the boys of the family.

We are so slow to learn. Where are our fathers today? We have a higher percentage of unwed mothers and fathers. We have too many fragmented families in our society.

The 2000 census tells us that there were 87,742 households in The Bahamas. 42.5 % or 37,321 were where married parents lived. 57.5% or 50,421 were where no married parents lived together. Out of that figure, there were 7,342 common law households.

Let us do some inferences using world trends. Based on the way families are managed, out of the 37,321 married households, about 20,000 of them are with absentee parents--that is parents who live there but are not emotionally involved in the lives of their children. That would leave only 19.7% or 7,321 where there would be normal to okay married parents living with children, and almost 80% where there are actual or emotionally single parent families. Couple this with poor parenting styles, we do have a mess to deal with.

Let's look at other factors affecting crime and solutions.

The Role of Fathers. This subject of single-parent families brings us to the important **role of fathers**. We have too long devalued the role of men in the lives of their sons and family life. I am told that at the Prison where there are approximately 1500 inmates, 50 of whom are women, on visitation days those coming to visit the male inmates are the girl friends, mothers, grandmothers, aunties, sisters, not the fathers. The number of fathers visiting regularly can be counted on one hand. Why is this? If we could get fathers to be actively involved in family life and be more compassionate and caring, we could reduce crime in our nation. We need to teach our fathers how to love.

One area in which males and fathers need re-education is the conception of what it is to be a man. In The Bahamas manhood is defined based on virility not stability, sexual performance, the number of offsprings produced, and the number of women impregnated. This conception has become one of the sources of family fragmentation which leads to childhood delinquency then crime.

Economic and Social Stress. In the article, "Trends & Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice," Don Weatherburn and Bronwyn Lin state: "A growing body of research evidence drawn from studies of individual families suggests that economic and social stresses exert their effects on crime by disrupting the parenting process. The authors examine the role of parenting and delinquent peers as mediating factors in the

relationship between economic stress and delinquency. They point to the importance of increasing family supports and parenting skills as a means of reducing juvenile involvement in crime.”

The point is that we need greater support from the church, community, and other agencies for the economically stressed families as a means to reduce and prevent crime. The government alone can't do it.

Family Size. It still amazes me that Bahamians still want to have lots of children. And what is more startling, poor and uneducated parents want more children than they can handle. Research is indicating that the size of families also impact violence. In his study entitled “Peer Modeling of Classroom Violence and Family Structure: An Experimental Study” Bromley H. Kniveton concludes that children from large families were more willing aggressors than those of smaller families, especially in poor families where parents or the parent is always on the go. Thus we go back to my springboard point: “broken relationships” is a fundamental reason for crime increase.

Social Promotion in the Education System. Perhaps another precursor to children becoming violent is that of the debilitating practice of social promotion which, I am told should have been stopped. The truth is that social promotion would not have had a long life in the educational system if parents were not supporting it. Imagine 400 grade 12 students completing the school year and only 150 completing with a GPA of 2.0 and above. The others may have 1.9 to 0.9 averages. Yet they celebrate like grand achievers at proms. Many of these students do not have the social and comprehension skills to obtain a proper job. Some of them cannot read at all or read with comprehension. Many of them find other sources to uplift their egos: gangs, violence, alcohol, sex, and drugs.

Social promotion has become a generation mill for criminals. Policy makers, parents, and educators are to blame. If parents insisted on quality performance and considered proper education a must to moral and social development, our country would be different today. As you can see our challenge is the parents who themselves a decade ago left school with a school leaving certificate and who may be making a comfortable salary in the tourism industry. Why do we need education? Maybe this is the drawback of a tourism society that accepts workers with low-level academic and job-related skills. What is the solution? Get rid of social promotion completely, even if the cost is high. We must start somewhere. What we will save down the road in the next generation cannot be quantified in dollars and cents. What is the solution?

Educate our parents and teachers, and let policy makers think about the future strategic position of the nation instead of helping politicians win votes during election.

Post-Divorce Counseling. We know that too many children are being caught in the middle of nasty custody battles. Research indicates that it is not always the divorce itself that may result in delinquent or rebellious behavior in children, but the way the parents drag them through the battle of ownership and loyalty. I am suggesting that one way of making the judicial system family friendly is to create policy requiring **five hours of post-mandatory counseling for all couples legally separating or getting a divorce.** This can certainly help in reducing or preventing the risk of children becoming criminals.

The Hierarchical Family Structure. Perhaps what is most crippling to society is the traditional hierarchical family structure where someone (most always the male) reigns supreme, and the wife and children are the loyal, obedient subjects. I believe it contributes directly to the creation of violent children, especially our boys. In the book "Transforming Abuse-Nonviolent Resistance and Recovery" by K. Louise Schmidt, she quotes an outstanding author on peace and violence--Haki Madhubuti:

"There must be . . . a liberation of the male psyche from preoccupation with domination, power hunger, control of patriarchal culture. This requires commitment to deep study, combined with willingness for painful, uncomfortable, and often shocking change. "

How can we change this? It can be changed first of all through a reexamination and realignment of our personal beliefs about the family structure and then through the systematic education of our sons and daughters.

Gloria Steinem said:

"Changing the way we raise our children in the only long-term path to peace. . ."

I need not remind you that parents' behavior and interactions with their children have shown to be important predictors of whether or not those children exhibit violent behavior. There is a growing body of evidence that parental intervention can have substantial, long-lasting effects in reducing violence among children.

Let me share with you the basics that are needed to make the change. In fact the

urgent cry today is that we need to go back to basics, but I do not believe that all of us know what the basics are. Let me present them to you.

1. **Literacy.** The ability to read and write with full comprehension, to interpret, to transfer, and to apply knowledge to new situations.
2. **Community.** A spirit of togetherness. "No man is an island." We are lacking a "front porch" in our neighborhoods where friends and family sit and share.
3. **Equality.** Fairness, the equal treatment of people regardless of color, race, gender, religion, ethnicity, and physical ability.
4. **Faithfulness.** The quality of being steadfast, to be depended upon in all relationships through bad and good times.
5. **Friendliness.** Being warm, welcoming, and respectful to all with whom we come into contact.
6. **Industriousness.** Steady attention and effort to one's occupation. Seizing opportunities for growth and change. Creativity.
7. **Integrity and honesty.** Moral or ethical strength. The quality of being honest, transparent, and consistent. No sneaking around. Without this we can never have corrupt-free police force or political leaders. People of integrity do not accept bribes or cover up wrong, even it is their best friend.
8. **Loyalty.** Faithfulness or devotion to a person, a cause, obligations, or duties popular or unpopular.
9. **Justice.** The state of being just and unbiased. The principle of treating all persons equally. Dealing with problems in all spheres of life with equity.
10. **Mercy.** Kind, forgiving, or compassionate treatment of, or disposition towards others, even in unjust situations.
11. **Reliability.** Capable of being depended upon, no matter what.
12. **Selflessness.** Putting others above self.
13. **Sobriety.** Temperance. Abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs. Moderation in the amount of food one consumes.
14. **Righteousness.** Being morally sound and taking courses of action because one is connected to The Higher Power.

Here are the closing lines of a poem I wrote a few years ago entitled: "Why stop the Crime"

What profits would we gain by stopping the crime when we have gained so much from it all the time?

Why think of pain, loneliness, and fear?

Why think of the tragedy our children bear?
Why think of life loss if life isn't much?
Why think of dysfunctional families if family isn't much?

Could it be that we were poisoned through generation in time
By the greed and lust of power hungry minds?
What is the antidote to the poison of passivity and greed?
It must be a mental metamorphosis to take the lead.

If we continue to be poisoned by the greed for power,
Our nation will die and we would not even realize it's a goner;
Because a crime isn't a crime to the unchanged mind,
Unless there is a re-creation of our lives and minds.
Then, and only then, will we find the power to stop the crime.