

As Ex-Theorist on Young 'Superpredators,' Bush Aide Has Regrets

By ELIZABETH BECKER
Published: February 9, 2001

PHILADELPHIA, Feb. 8— From his perch as the director of the new White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, which he believes will help uplift many needy people but particularly the most troubled teenagers, John J. DiIulio Jr. conceded today that he wished he had never become the 1990's intellectual pillar for putting violent juveniles in prison and condemning them as "superpredators."

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"If I knew then what I know now, I would have shouted for prevention of crimes," Mr. DiIulio said during an interview in the clubby University of Pennsylvania office that he is temporarily vacating to join the White House staff.

Instead, five years ago, Mr. DiIulio created a whole theory around the notion that "a new generation of street criminals is upon us -- the youngest, biggest and baddest generation any society has ever known."

"Based on all that we have witnessed, researched and heard from people who are close to the action," he wrote with two co-authors, "here is what we believe: America is now home to thickening ranks of juvenile 'superpredators' -- radically impulsive, brutally remorseless youngsters, including ever more preteenage boys, who murder, assault, rape, rob, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, join gun-toting gangs and create serious communal disorders."

"At core," the authors said, "the problem is that most inner-city children grow up surrounded by teenagers and adults who are themselves deviant, delinquent or criminal."

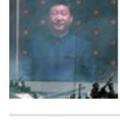
That alarm was sounded in "Body Count"(Simon & Schuster, 1996), written with William J. Bennett and John P. Walters, which advanced the theory, since disproved, that these superpredators would sharply increase the level of teenage violence by the turn of this century.

Then a professor at Princeton, married and the father of three young children, Mr. DiIulio became a prominent voice in the world of criminology with his superpredator theory. But although a respected academic, he was suddenly questioned by peers, who said he seemed to be providing cover for what they considered partisan politics.

"He became a sensationalist, a simplistic analyst who rather toadied to that point of view," said Norval Morris, professor of law at the University of Chicago and co-editor of the Oxford History of the Prison. "He should have known better than that."

It was shortly afterward, Mr. DiIulio said, while praying at Mass on Palm Sunday in 1996, that he had an "epiphany -- a conversion of heart, a conversion of mind," that changed him from a complacent Roman Catholic to one who "took his religion seriously."

He was sitting in a church in New Jersey that day, "and it just became crystal clear to me," the 42-year-old Mr. DiIulio said in the interview at Penn, where he is a professor of government policy. "God had given me a Rolodex, good will and a passion that was

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sometimes misdirected, and I knew that for the rest of my life I would work on prevention, on helping bring caring, responsible adults to wrap their arms around these kids."

He tried, he said, to put the brakes on the superpredator theory, which had all but taken on a life of its own.

"I couldn't write fast enough to curb the reaction," he said, detailing a sheath of articles he published emphasizing churches over prisons, or opposing Congress's welfare overhaul as legislation that undercut the most vulnerable families.

He also took to the streets of Philadelphia to do firsthand research there and engage in community service teaching. And he promoted the ministries of Northeastern clerics who worked with troubled youths.

Soon, what had been his chief theory was discredited: instead of rising, the rate of juvenile crime dropped by more than half.

"His prediction wasn't just wrong, it was exactly the opposite," said Franklin E. Zimring, professor of law at the University of California at Berkeley and director of the university's Earl Warren Legal Institute. "His theories on superpredators were utter madness."

Mr. DiIluio still defends the quality of his research, saying that "the data we used was correct" -- largely crime statistics and projections of growth in the teenage population. Of his conclusions, however, he said, "Thank God we were wrong."

When pressed now on the subject of prisons, he argues for more federal money for church programs instead, and for ex-felons as well as those programs to counsel children whose parents are behind bars. When he talks of offenders, he says that only "a certain fraction have to be incarcerated, which we do with a heavy heart."

Back in 1996, he complained that "some prisons are virtual resorts."

"There are, to be sure, good moral and cost-effectiveness arguments for scaling back prisoner amenities and services," he wrote.

And as recently as last year a report by Human Rights Watch blamed the theory of superpredators for state initiatives to move juvenile offenders into the adult criminal justice system.

"I'm sorry for any unintended consequences," Mr. DiIluio said today. "But I am not responsible for teenagers' going to prison."

As for the death penalty, he once favored it as "a substantive tool of crime control." But he opposes it now. "It's right here," he said, slapping his 1997 Catholic catechism on the desk. "Prevention is the only reasonable way to approach these problems."

Changeling or genuine convert?

Professor Zimring laughs at trying to answer that question.

"There are areas where John DiIulio has done great work," he said. "He's a very talented, enthusiastic person, and he has an important mission I fully support."

Others are more critical. "The superpredator thing led to horrific legislation," and "while he may have backed away from the idea, he has never really recanted it," said Jerry Miller, president of the nonpartisan National Center on Institutions and Alternatives. "And that makes me nervous."

But within the world of churches and other religious organizations trying to minister to the poor, there are many supporters of his, said Jim Wallis, founder of Call to Renewal, a national ecumenical group that engages in such ministry.

"John moved from crime control to crime prevention when he went into the streets and



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fell in love with those kids," Mr. Wallis said. "He encountered the poor, and he found his faith again in the face of our poor's children."

For his part, Mr. DiIulio said one advantage in his change of views was that it had brought attention to him that was now drawing a large audience for President Bush's effort to help religious groups provide social services. "At least I'm not one of those same-old same-olds," he said.

Photo: John J. DiIulio Jr., the director of the new White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, once warned of growing ranks of teenage "superpredators." Then, he says, he had an epiphany. (Laura Pedrick for The New York Times)

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