

NOV 27, 1995 | By JOHN J. DILULIO JR.

Lynne Abraham doesn't scare easily. Abraham is the no-nonsense Democratic district attorney of Philadelphia. The city's late tough-cop mayor, Frank Rizzo, baptized her "one tough cookie." The label stuck, and rightly so. Abraham has sent more mafiosi to prison than Martin Scorsese, stood up (all 5'2" of her) to violent drug kingpins, won bipartisan support in this Congress for wresting control of the city's jail system from an ACLU-brand federal judge, and, most recently, publicly shamed the know-nothing literati who want to free convicted copkiller Mumia Abu-Jamal. Today various of her colleagues at the non-partisan National District Attorneys Association describe her as "suite smart and street smart," "a genuine law-and-order liberal," and "probably the best big-city D.A. in the country." All true. So pay attention, because Lynne Abraham is scared.

In a recent interview, Abraham used such phrases as "totally out of control" and "never seen anything like it" to describe the rash of youth crime and violence that has begun to sweep over the City of Brotherly Love and other big cities. We're not just talking about teenagers, she stressed. We're talking about boys whose voices have yet to change. We're talking about elementary school youngsters who pack guns instead of lunches. We're talking about kids who have absolutely no respect for human life and no sense of the future. In short, we're talking big trouble that hasn't yet begun to crest.

And make no mistake. While the trouble will be greatest in black inner-city neighborhoods, other places are also certain to have burgeoning youth-crime problems that will spill over into upscale central-city districts, inner-ring suburbs, and even the rural heartland. To under-score this point, Abraham recounted a recent townhall meeting in a white working-class section of the city that has fallen on hard times: "They're becoming afraid of their own children. There were some big beefy guys there, too. And they're asking me what am I going to do to control their children." I interviewed Abraham, just as I have interviewed other justice-system officials and

prison inmates, as a reality check on the incredibly frightening picture that emerges from recent academic research on youth crime and violence. All of the research indicates that Americans are sitting atop a demographic crime bomb. And all of those who are closest to the problem hear the bomb ticking.

To cite just a few examples, following my May 1995 address to the district attorneys association, big-city prosecutors inundated me with war stories about the ever-growing numbers of hardened, remorseless juveniles who were showing up in the system. "They kill or maim on impulse, without any intelligible motive," said one. Likewise, a veteran beat policeman confided: "I never used to be scared. Now I say a quick Hail Mary every time I get a call at night involving juveniles. I pray I go home in one piece to my own kids." On a recent visit to a New Jersey maximum-security prison, I spoke to a group of life-term inmates, many of them black males from inner-city Newark and Camden. In a typical remark, one prisoner fretted, "I was a bad-ass street gladiator, but these kids are stone-cold predators." Like-wise, in his just-published book, Mansfield B. Frazier, a five-time convicted felon, writes of what he calls "The Coming Menace": "As bad as conditions are in many of our nation's ravaged inner-city neighborhoods, in approximately five years they are going to get worse, a lot worse." Having done time side-by-side with today's young criminals in prisons and jails all across the country, he warns of a "sharp, cataclysmic" increase in youth crime and violence.

To add my own observations to this pile, since 1980 I've studied prisons and jails all across the country -- San Quentin, Leavenworth, Rikers Island. I've been on the scene at prison murders and riots (and once was almost killed inside a prison). Moreover, I grew up in a pretty tough neighborhood and am built like an aging linebacker. I will still waltz backwards, notebook in hand and alone, into any adult maximum-security cellblock full of killers, rapists, and muggers.

But a few years ago, I forswore research inside juvenile lock-ups. The buzz of impulsive violence, the vacant stares and smiles, and the remorseless eyes were at once too frightening and too depressing (my God, these are children!) for me to pretend to "study" them.

The numbers are as alarming as the anecdotes. At a time when overall crime rates have been dropping, youth crime rates, especially for crimes of violence, have been soaring. Between 1985 and 1992, the rate at which males ages 14 to 17 committed murder increased by about 50 percent for whites and over 300 percent for blacks.

While it remains true that most violent youth crime is committed by juveniles against juveniles, of late young offenders have been committing more homicides, robberies, and other crimes against adults. There is even some evidence that juveniles are doing homicidal violence in "wolf packs." Indeed, a 1993 study found that juveniles committed about a third of all homicides against strangers, often murdering their victim in groups of two or more.

Violent youth crime, like all serious crime, is pre-dominantly intra-racial, not interfacial. The surge in violent youth crime has been most acute among black inner-city males. In 1992, black males ages 16 to 19 experienced violent crime at nearly double the rate of white males and were about twice as likely to be violent crime victims as were black males in 1973. Moreover, the violent crimes experienced by young black males tended to be more serious than those experienced by young white males; for example, aggravated assaults rather than simple assaults, and attacks involving guns rather than weaponless violence.

The youth crime wave has reached horrific proportions from coast to coast. For example, in Philadelphia, more than half of the 433 people murdered in 1994 were males between the ages of 16 and 31. All but 5 of the 89 victims under 20 were non-white. In Los Angeles, there

are now some 400 youth street gangs organized mainly along racial and ethnic lines: 200 Latino, 150 black, the rest white or Asian. In 1994, their known members alone committed 370 murders and over 3,300 felony assaults.

But what is really frightening everyone from D.A.s to demographers, old cops to old convicts, is not what's happening now but what's just around the corner-namely, a sharp increase in the number of super crime-prone young males.

Nationally, there are now about 40 million children under the age of 10, the largest number in decades. By simple math, in a decade today's 4 to 7-year-olds will become 14 to 17-year-olds. By 2005, the number of males in this age group will have risen about 25 percent overall and 50 percent for blacks.

To some extent, it's just that simple: More boys begets more bad boys. But to really grasp why this spike in the young male population means big trouble ahead, you need to appreciate both the statistical evidence from a generation of birth-cohort studies and related findings from recent street-level studies and surveys.

The scientific kiddie-crime literature began with a study of all 10,000 boys born in 1945 who lived in Philadelphia between their tenth and eighteenth birthdays. Over one-third had at least one recorded arrest by the time they were 18. Most of the arrests occurred when the boys were ages 15 to 17. Half of the boys who were arrested were arrested more than once. Once a boy had been arrested three times, the chances that he would be arrested again were over 70 percent.

But the most famous finding of the study was that 6 percent of the boys committed five or more crimes before they were 18, accounting for over half of all the serious crimes, and about two-thirds of all the violent crimes, committed by the entire cohort.

This "6 percent do 50 percent" statistic has been replicated in a series of subsequent longitudinal studies of Philadelphia and many other cities. It is on this basis that James Q. Wilson and other leading crime doctors can predict with confidence that the additional 500,000 boys who will be 14 to 17 years old in the year 2000 will mean at least 30,000 more murderers, rapists, and muggers on the streets than we have today.

Likewise, it's what enables California officials to meaningfully predict that, as the state's population of 11 to 17-year-olds grows from 2.9 million in 1993 to 3.9 million in 2004, the number of juvenile arrests will increase nearly 30 percent.

But that's only half the story. The other half begins with the less well-known but equally important and well-replicated finding that since the studies began, each generation of crime-prone boys (the "6 percent") has been about three times as dangerous as the one before it. For example, crime-prone boys born in Philadelphia in 1958 went on to commit about three times as much serious crime per capita as their older cousins in the class of '45. Thus, the difference between the juvenile criminals of the 1950s and those of the 1970s and 80s was about the difference between the Sharks and Jets of West Side Story fame and the Bloods and Crips of Los Angeles County.

Still, demography is not fate and criminology is not pure science. How can one be certain that the demographic bulge of the next 10 years will unleash an army of young male predatory street criminals who will make even the leaders of the Bloods and Crips -- known as O.G.s, for "original gangsters" -- look tame by comparison?

The answer centers on a conservative theory of the root causes of crime, one that is strongly supported by all of the best science as well as the common sense of the subject. Call it the theory of moral poverty.

Most Americans of every race, religion, socio-economic status, and demographic description grow up in settings where they are taught right from wrong and rewarded emotionally or spiritually (if not also or always materially) for deferring immediate gratification and respecting others. Most of us were blessed to be born to loving and responsible parents or guardians. And most of us were lucky enough to have other adults in our lives (teachers, coaches, clergy) who reinforced the moral lessons that we learned at home -- don't be selfish, care about others, plan for the future, and so on.

But some Americans grow up in moral poverty. Moral poverty is the poverty of being without loving, capable, responsible adults who teach you right from wrong. It is the poverty of being without parents and other authorities who habituate you to feel joy at others' joy, pain at others' pain, happiness when you do right, remorse when you do wrong. It is the poverty of growing up in the virtual absence of people who teach morality by their own everyday example and who insist that you follow suit.

In the extreme, moral poverty is the poverty of growing up surrounded by deviant, delinquent, and criminal adults in abusive, violence-ridden, fatherless, Godless, and jobless settings. In sum, whatever their material circumstances, kids of whatever race, creed, or color are most likely to become criminally depraved when they are morally deprived.

Most predatory street criminals -- black and white, adult and juvenile, past and present -- have grown up in abject moral poverty. But the Bloods and Crips were so much more violent, on average, than their 50s counterparts, and the next class of juvenile offenders will be even worse, because in recent decades each generation of youth criminals in this country has grown up in more extreme conditions of moral poverty than the one before it.

The abject moral poverty that creates super-predators begins very early in life in homes where unconditional love is nowhere but unmerciful abuse is common. One of the best ethnographic accounts of this reality is Mark S. Fleisher's 1995 book on the lives of 194 West Coast urban street criminals, including several dozen who were juveniles at the time he did his primary field research (1988 to 1990). Almost without exception, the boys' families "were a social fabric of fragile and undependable social ties that weakly bound children to their parents and other socializers." Nearly all parents abused alcohol or drugs or both. Most had no father in the home; many had fathers who were criminals. Parents "beat their sons and daughters -- whipped them with belts, punched them with fists, slapped them, and kicked them." Such ethnographic evidence is mirrored by national statistics on the morally impoverished beginnings of incarcerated populations. For example, 75 percent of highly violent juvenile criminals suffered serious abuse by a family member; nearly 80 percent witnessed extreme violence (beatings, killings); over half of prisoners come from single-parent families; over one-quarter have parents who abused drugs or alcohol; nearly a third have a brother with a prison or jail record.

Among other puzzles, the moral poverty theory explains why, despite living in desperate economic poverty, under the heavy weight of Jim Crow, and with plenty of free access to guns, the churchgoing, two-parent black families of the South never experienced anything remotely like the tragic levels of homicidal youth and gang violence that plague some of today's black inner-city neighborhoods.

It also explains why once relatively crime-free white working-class neighborhoods are evolving into white underclass neighborhoods. The out-migration of middle-class types, divorce, out-of-wedlock births, and graffiti-splattered churches have spawned totally unsocialized young white males who commit violent crimes and youth gangs that prefer murder to mischief. (Anyone who doubts it is welcome to tour my old Catholic blue-collar neighborhood in Philadelphia.) Moral poverty begets juvenile super-predators whose behavior is driven by two profound developmental defects. First, they are radically present-oriented. Not only do they

perceive no relationship between doing right (or wrong) now and being rewarded (or punished) for it later. They live entirely in and for the present moment; they quite literally have no concept of the future. As several researchers have found, ask a group of today's young big-city murderers for their thoughts about "the future," and many of them will ask you for an explanation of the question.

Second, the super-predators are radically self-regarding. They regret getting caught. For themselves, they prefer pleasure and freedom to incarceration and death. Under some conditions, they are affectionate and loyal to fellow gang members or relatives, but not even mothers or grandmothers are sacred to them; as one prisoner quipped, "crack killed everybody's "mama. " And they place zero value on the lives of their victims, whom they reflexively dehumanize as just so much worthless "white * trash" if white, or by the usual racial or ethnic epithets if black or Latino.

On the horizon, therefore, are tens of thousands of severely morally impoverished juvenile super-predators. They are perfectly capable of committing the most heinous acts of physical violence for the most trivial reasons (for example, a perception of slight disrespect or the accident of being in their path). They fear neither the stigma of arrest nor the pain of imprisonment. They live by the meanest code of the meanest streets, a code that reinforces rather than restrains their violent, hair-trigger mentality. In prison or out, the things that super-predators get by their criminal behavior -- sex, drugs, money -- are their own immediate rewards. Nothing else matters to them. So for as long as their youthful energies hold out, they will do what comes "naturally": murder, rape, rob, assault, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, and get high.

What is to be done? I will conclude with one big idea, but my best advice is not to look for serious answers from either crowd in Washington.

Earlier this year, I was among a dozen guests invited to a working White House dinner on juvenile crime. Over gourmet Szechwan wonton and lamb, the meeting dragged on for three-and-a-half hours. President Clinton took copious notes and asked lots of questions, but nothing was accomplished. One guest pleaded with him to declare a National Ceasefire Day. Wisely, he let that one pass. But another guest recommended that he form (you guessed it) a commission. In mid-July, the president named six members to a National Commission on Crime Control and Prevention. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Meanwhile, Republicans have made some real improvements on the 1994 crime bill. But it is hard to imagine that block-granting anti-crime dollars will work (it never has before). And it is easy to see how the passion for devolution is driving conservatives to contradict themselves. For years they've stressed that drugs, crime, and welfare dependency are cultural and moral problems. Now, however, they talk as if perverse monetary incentives explained everything.

True, government policies helped wreck the two-parent family and disrupted other aspects of civil society. But how does the sudden withdrawal of government lead automatically to a rebirth of civil society, an end to moral poverty, and a check on youth crime? It doesn't, not any more than pulling a knife from the chest of a dead man brings him dancing back to life. Liberal social engineering was bad; conservative social re-engineering will prove worse.

My one big idea is borrowed from three well-known child-development experts -- Moses, Jesus Christ, and Mohammed. It's called religion. If we are to have a prayer of stopping any significant fraction of the super-predators short of the prison gates, then we had better say "Amen," and fast.

W*oY religion? Two reasons. First, a growing body of scientific evidence from a variety of academic disciplines indicates that churches can help cure or curtail many severe socioeconomic ills. For example, a 1986 study by Harvard economist Richard Freeman found

that among black urban youth, church attendance was a better predictor of who would escape drugs, crime, and poverty than any other single variable (income, family structure) and that churchgoing youth were more likely than otherwise comparable youth to behave in socially constructive ways. Likewise, a study by a panel of leading specialists just published by the journal *Criminology* concluded that, while much work remains to be done, there is substantial empirical evidence that religion serves "as an insulator against crime and delinquency." And we have long known that many of the most effective substance-abuse prevention and treatment programs, both in society and behind bars, are either explicitly religious or quasi-religious in their orientation.

Second, religion is the one answer offered time and again by the justice-system veterans, prisoners, and others I've consulted. With particular reference to black youth crime, for example, it is an answer proffered in recent books by everyone from liberal Cornel West to neoconservative Glenn Loury, Democrat Jesse Jackson to Republican Alan Keyes.

In a recent forum at Trenton's Mount Zion AME Church, Isaac "Ike" Ballard, executive director of education for the New Jersey prison system, spoke the big truth: "The church is the most potent establishment in every black community. It is the single entity that can take on the mission of economic development and give people, especially young people, an alternative to drugs and crime." To be sure, black churches are in decline in many needy neighborhoods. They are straining to stay open despite lost membership, near-empty coffers, and increasing community demands. Still, they remain the last best hope for rebuilding the social and spiritual capital of inner-city America.

We must, therefore, be willing to use public funds to empower local religious institutions to act as safe havens for at-risk children (church-run orphanages, boarding schools, call them what you please), provide adoption out-placement services, administer government-funded

"parenting skills" classes, handle the youngest non-violent juvenile offenders, provide substance-abuse treatment, run daycare and pre-school programs, and perform other vital social and economic development functions.

Although many government officials are reluctant to admit it -- and while data on how much of each government social-services dollar already goes through religious institutions are incredibly sparse -- in some places churches are already performing such tasks with direct or indirect public support. We should enable them to do even more.

Obviously, even with increased public support, churches could not come close to saving every child or solving every social problem. But I'd bet that the marginal return on public investments that strengthen the community- rebuilding and child-protection capacities of local churches would equal or exceed that of the marginal tax dollar spent on more cops, more public schools, and more prisons.

Such proposals raise all sorts of elite hackles. But most Americans believe in God (90 percent) and pray each day (80 percent). The trouble is that our faith in God and religion is not reflected in federal, state, and local social policies, courtesy of the anti-religious and non-religious liberal and conservative pseudo-sophisticates of both parties. Let them argue church- state issues (anyone remember the Northwest Ordinance or what the Founding Fathers really said about religion?) all the way to the next funeral of an innocent kid caught in the crossfire. Let these theoretic politicians, as Madison would disparagingly call them, trifle with non-issues concerning which level of government ought to take the lead in protecting lives and property. (Answer: all.) No one in academia is a bigger fan of incarceration than I am. Between 1985 and 1991 the number of juveniles in custody increased from 49,000 to nearly 58,000. By my estimate, we will probably need to incarcerate at least 150,000 juvenile criminals in the years just ahead. In deference to public safety, we will have little choice but to pursue genuine get-tough law-enforcement strategies against the super-predators.

But some of these children are now still in diapers, and they can be saved. So let our guiding principle be, "Build churches, not jails" -- or we will reap the whirlwind of our own moral bankruptcy. *

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