

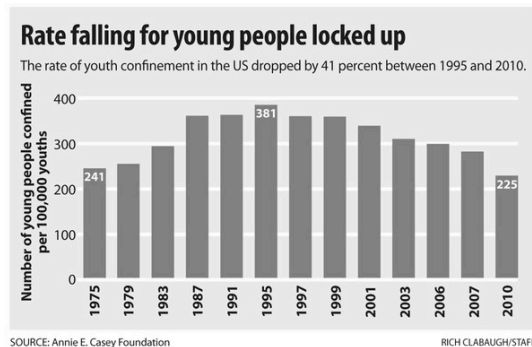


WHY IS CRIME DOWN?

Chaplain Rick Johnson

2015 Spring Newsletter

According to the latest statistics, juvenile crime is down across the nation but no one knows exactly why. The real question may not be why is crime down but why was it up in the first place? Some have said that juvenile crime rates are normal now but increased dramatically in the mid nineties for some unknown reason. California's youth population has grown by one million since 1990 that sent sociologists predicting a juvenile crime wave. Even with the growth though, the crime wave never hit. The latest murder rate for juveniles reached its lowest level in thirty-five years.



The number of youth in a correctional facility peaked in 1995 to 107,637 but has dropped to 70,792 in 2010. This deincarceration of youth has not been shown to generate more crime. In the last decade, 14 states saw declines in both incarceration and crime. New York reduced imprisonment by 26 percent, while seeing a 28 percent reduction in crime. Imprisonment and crime both decreased by more than 15 percent in California, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, and Texas. Eight states (Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Utah) lowered their imprisonment rates by 2 to 15 percent while seeing more than a 15 percent decrease in crime. Incarceration does protect the victims and the criminals who are harming themselves but it doesn't change them.

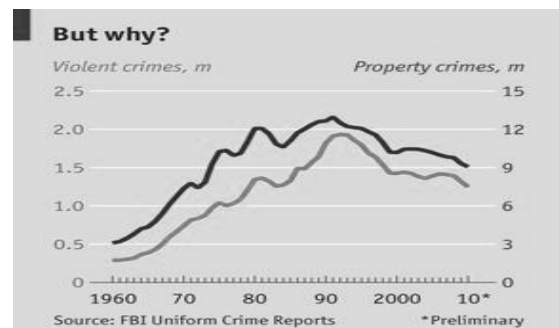
Back in the 1990's I remember hearing that the strategy of the juvenile court was to impose harsher sentences on the first time offenders to send them a message. But many 13-15 year old youth never got that message. Longer sentences or harsher consequences (boot camps) have not lowered the crime rate because neither has been proven to stop a youth from reoffending.

Crime is not down because youth are maturing faster or because drug use has decreased. It would be nice to say that families are healthier or the church is having a greater influence on culture but that cannot be proven either. So what is going on out there?

Some say crime has dropped because of technology. Today's youth are content to spend time on their phones creating acceptable identities using their social media accounts. Others believe that today's male adolescents are being adequately entertained with video games that serve as a suitable outlet for anti-social behavior.

Many years ago criminologists linked criminal behavior to the damaging effects of lead poisoning on the brain. With the introduction of unleaded gasoline in the 1980's, crime rates have dropped along with the decrease in lead exposure.

The biggest factor may be simply that security measures have improved and cameras are everywhere. Cell phones can capture a crime in process that increase the probability of a conviction. Alarms and DNA databases have increased the chance a burglar will be identified. Some crimes now look very risky and that matters because, as every survey of criminals shows, the main deterrent to crime is the fear of being caught.



A shift in thinking has occurred about the best ways to handle delinquent youth. State government budget concerns have sent politicians searching for less expensive alternatives to mass incarceration. So where does delinquency begin? A teacher friend of mine told me that she is almost never allowed to suspend a disruptive student. But why is that?



When schools became overcrowded, certain students became expendable. Low performing students became a burden by bringing down the school's test scores. Then when school violence became an issue, more students were expelled to make schools safe.

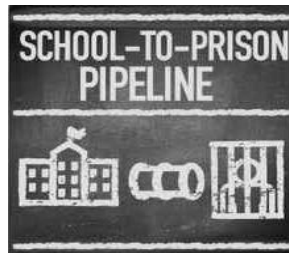
Many school districts enacted harsh disciplinary consequences (suspensions, expulsions, alternative schools and referrals to law enforcement) for a wide range of student actions. Zero tolerance policies were applied to behaviors like truancy, tardiness and signs of disrespect or insubordination. Teachers and administrators were required to call law enforcement for disciplinary matters instead of the parents as they did in the past. Instead of helping to resolve conflict, they watched school resource officers arrest their students as a form of discipline.

According to a 2006 study by Gary Sweeten of Arizona State University, a first-time arrest during high school nearly doubles the odds of a student dropping out and a court appearance nearly quadruples those odds. Alienation from school has been shown to accelerate the course toward juvenile delinquency. Expelled students returned to an unhealthy home life that was usually the main source of their unhappiness.

When troubled youth no longer believe they can become a normal student again, they look for a different identity from another segment of the community. School is viewed as a place of failure and associated with their arrest.

The result of what was just shared became known as the school to prison pipeline, a pipeline filled primarily with minority, disadvantaged youth. As criticism mounted, schools began to implement alternative strategies to deal with disorderly behavior. The alternatives resemble good parenting practices.

1. Behavior contracts that spell out expected behavior along with the consequences for non-compliance.
2. Incentives and rewards for demonstrating positive behavior.
3. Community service hours at the school to build appreciation for the campus.
4. In school detention or suspension that allows students to stay caught up on schoolwork and receive academic assistance.
5. A check and connect program that links the student with a teacher to meet with several times a week to receive support.



Juvenile crime decreases in communities that stop responding to delinquent behavior with fear and suppression. According to the report, *The Condition of Children in Orange County*, there were 1,624 known juvenile gang members in Orange County in 2010 but only 635 in 2013. What happened? Gang members

haven't been dropping out but the criteria that law enforcement uses to determine gang membership has changed. Once a youth gets that label, they are treated differently. Fewer youth are being labeled as gang members so they won't think to themselves, "I can never prove them wrong."

Delinquent behavior is definitely still around but the way it is being handled has improved. Thank you for your help in making my ministry possible.

MAILING ADDRESS:	SUPPORT ADDRESS:
Chaplain Rick Johnson 331 The City Drive South Orange, CA 92868 (714) 721-6688	PYCM #003 P.O. Box 8875 Redlands, CA 92375 (562) 596-5352
chaplainrj@sbcglobal.net	