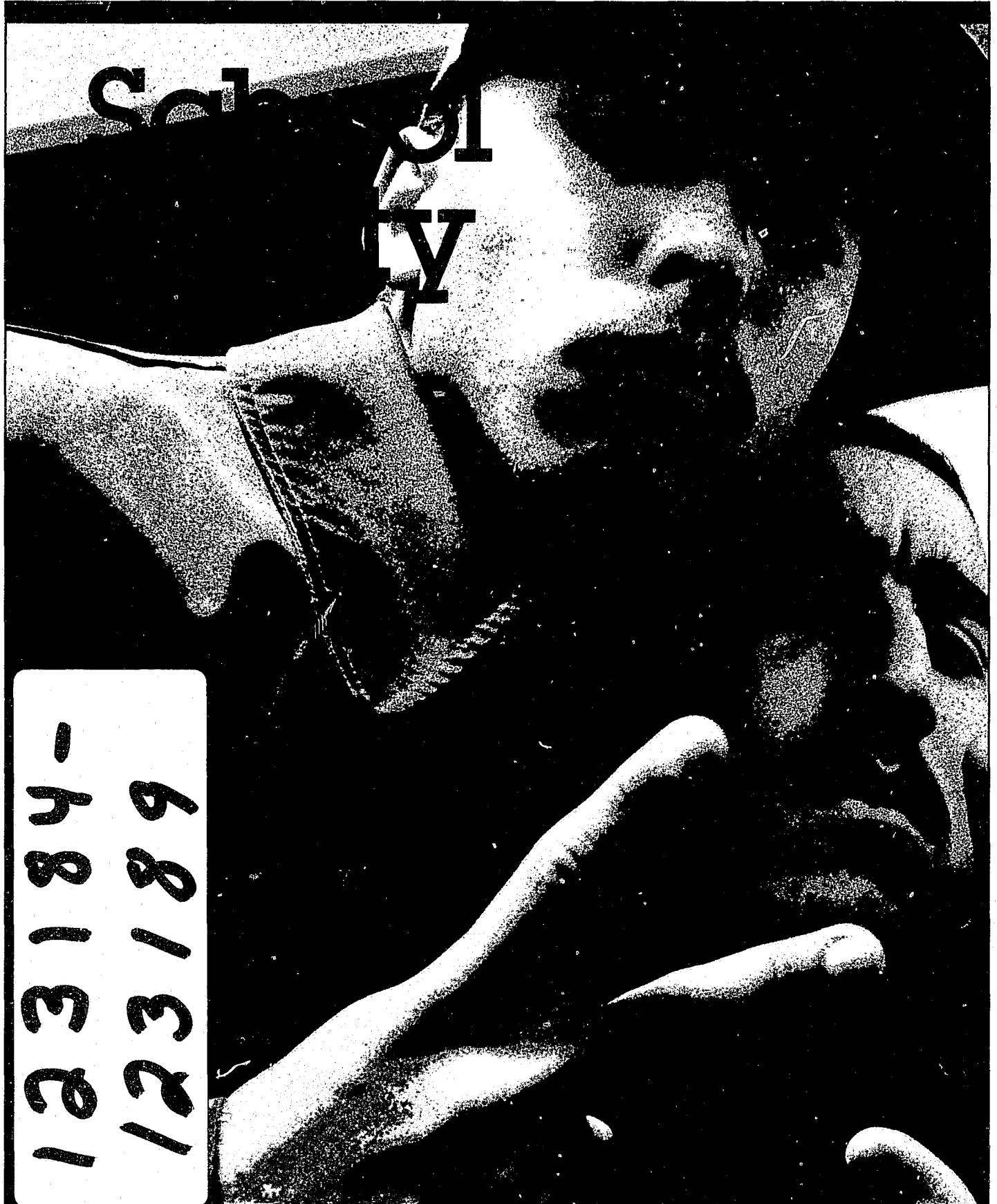


*Young gangsters distort Golden Rule:
Do unto others for what they did to you.*



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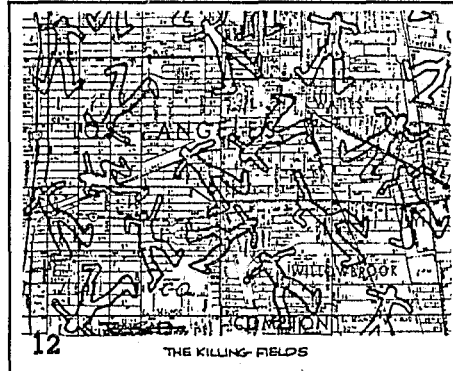
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About the cover:
 Gang "brothers" pose for this portrait, proudly flashing their gang hand sign. Photograph by Merrick Morton.

CONTENTS



4 When you're a Crip
 (or a Blood)
 123184

12 LA's gang busters —
 lessons learned
 By Suzanne Harper
 123185

16 Gangs, guns and drugs
 By Ronald D. Stephens
 123186

20 Gangsters: Back
 to the future
 By Ronald W. Garrison
 123187

23 Fighting crime
 for kids' sake
 By Karl Zinsmeister
 123188

27 Troubled Asian youth:
 The deafening silence
 By Jeffrey J. Munks
 123189

Updates

2 NSSC Update

31 National Update

32 Legislative Update

33 Legal Update

34 Resource Update

Resources

18 NSSC Resources

19 NSSC Resource Papers

35 "Principals of Leadership"

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 ACQUISITIONS

BY KARL ZINSMEISTER

How numbed have we become that news reports of youths' murder, drug overdoses and mayhem are considered routine consequences of urban life?

Fighting crime for kids' sake

On May 12, 1987, an almost unnoticed event took place in Washington, D.C., which perfectly foreshadowed the mayhem involving children that has racked the city since then. But this was before crime and youth became hot topics in Washington and around the country, so almost no one commented upon what was — to me at least — a numbing event.

On that day, as a gesture toward public education, D.C. Mayor Marion Barry was teaching an eighth grade science class for gifted and talented students at Fletcher Johnson Elementary School. The mayor, who holds two degrees in chemistry, was leading a discussion on the food chain.

As talk turned to predation, then cannibalism, the mayor posed a question. "We don't eat other people, we just kill other human beings. We shoot them, cut them. How many of you," Barry asked his pupils, "know somebody who's been killed?" There were 19 students in the class. Fourteen hands shot up. The teacher went around the room: How were they killed? "Shot." "Hit by a truck." "Stabbing." "Shot." "Shot." "Drugs." "Shot." The conversation

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quickly passed to another subject.

Remember, these were 13-year-old children. And, given that they were the gifted and talented class, you may assume they were from atypically privileged backgrounds.

But on a day when a major news story concerned Gary Hart's personal life, this revelation that murder, overdose and mayhem have become a *routine* part of urban life for our young was barely reported, and not commented upon at all.

The violence these children had been exposed to is representative of what other children, in other cities, have also experienced. Over a four-month period in Detroit at about the same time, 102 youngsters age 16 or under were shot, nearly all of them by other children. In October 1987 — well before the current media blitz on children and crime — the *Wall Street Journal* ran a stunning frontpage story that chronicled, diary-style, three months in the life of an 11-year-old Chicago boy named Lafayette Walton. That life included almost daily gun and submachine gun battles in his public housing project, beatings and maimings of relatives and friends, recurrent rapes, gang recruiting, cocaine running by a 9-year-old female cousin, and several murders.

A study completed recently by researchers at the University of Maryland School of Medicine in Baltimore helps quantify more precisely the extent of this

type of trauma. A sample of 167 teenagers who visited a city center clinic for routine medical care was questioned about their exposure to various violent incidents. The results: A stunning 23.5 percent had witnessed a murder; 71.5 percent knew someone who had been shot. These teenagers themselves had been victims of violence an average of 1.5 times each, had each witnessed more than five criminal episodes, and knew nearly 12 persons who had been crime victims. The lives of 22.9 percent had been threatened, and 8.6 percent had been raped. Because of the nature of the clinic population, nearly 80 percent of the respondents were females. Among a sample of adolescent males, it is likely many of these measures of exposure to violence would be even higher.

Stunning as these specific findings are, I think most Americans have realized for some time that a substantial minority of our nation's youngest citizens are exposed to criminal violence. But there is a reality conflict; acknowledging the extent of the carnage is too disturbing and combating it would be too difficult, so we often look the other way. However, such denial is becoming increasingly difficult in the face of one outrage after another.

And so earnest souls are now asking how this problem "snuck up" on us. Frankly, I don't understand the surprise. One does not have to examine the na-

tional trends very closely in areas such as public safety, family cohesion, educational quality and willingness of parents to rear their young children to see that children's position in our society has been eroding for some time. Diminished child welfare is particularly threatening in our inner cities, though by no means only there.

For three decades we have sown the seeds of social disorder. Now we are reaping the harvest:

- Nearly one out of every four children born this year will have parents who are not married. Among blacks, more than 60 percent of all births occur out of wedlock.
- Divorce and fathers' abandonment of children now take place at roughly twice the postwar level.
- Our society did not revolt against drug use until it became so entrenched that, today, 1.5 million children age 12 to 17 have tried cocaine or crack.
- The idea that every able-bodied adult should work and that families should aim for economic self-reliance was abandoned more than 20 years ago. Today, 40 percent of inner city men age 18 to 21 have not worked a single day in the last year.
- Antisocial individuals are rarely evicted from public housing anymore. Even when they are, an eviction takes 8 to 10 months in our major cities. Most public housing is now, quite simply, a hellish place to grow up. Twenty years ago, this was not the case.
- Effective discipline has disappeared in many public schools, so that, today, 1 in 20 teachers is physically assaulted each year and one-quarter of all school principals report that student possession of weapons is a problem.
- And in our courts, a revolving door is often the only thing standing between vicious predators and the weak they prey on.

Given the grossly disordered conditions that prevail in many of our cities, it would be surprising if recent years

had *not* witnessed an upsurge of crime and violence among the young.

Roots of crime in family breakdown

Unquestionably, family breakdown is the most important root of our present social problems. As a combined result of today's illegitimacy and divorce trends, more than 60 percent of all children born today will spend at least some time in a single-parent household before reaching age 18. The regression now taking place in the American family structure is, as one analyst has pointed out, "without precedent in urban history." Not only stable family life, but also marriage itself is now "almost a forgotten institution among black teens," to quote a 1985 report by the Children's Defense Fund.

A great debate exists over the cause of this decay. On one side is the argument that government incentives have been a primary cause of the collapse of personal responsibility. On the other side, we find the view that the primary cause is mysterious but probably cultural in nature, and that government intervention is our best hope for a solution. The significant aspect of this debate is not the disagreement over government's role, but rather the agreement that personal behavior is at the root of the problem. Specifically, today — unlike during the 1960s — both sides recognize that the collapse of traditional family structure is the prime source of contemporary social and economic problems.

This is not to deny that many children from intact families will have problems, nor that many offspring from single-parent families will grow up to be happy and successful citizens. But even some of the children growing up in Beirut today will turn out fine; nonetheless, such a childhood is not to be recommended. Having access to only one parent's time, energy and earning power creates serious obstacles for a child that he or she will overcome only with effort.

That conclusion is not personal prejudice, but the verdict of the sociological literature. According to a 1980 longitudi-

nal study of children of one-parent families conducted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals:

One-parent children, on the whole, show lower achievement in school than their two-parent peers.... Among all two-parent children, 30 percent were ranked as high achievers, compared to only 1 percent of one-parent children. At the other end of the scale... only 2 percent of two-parent children were low achievers — while fully 40 percent of the one-parent children fell in that category.

There are more clinic visits among one-parent students. And their absence rate runs far higher than for students with two parents, with one-parent students losing about eight days more over the course of the year.

One-parent students are consistently more likely to be late, truant and subject to disciplinary action by every criterion we examined, and at both the elementary and secondary levels ...one-parent children are more than twice as likely as two-parent children to give up on school altogether.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics reported in September 1988 that 70 percent of the juveniles in state reform institutions grew up in single-parent or no-parent families. Most street gang members, it has been shown, come from broken homes. And one recent study of 72 adolescent murderers found that 75 percent came from non-intact families.

One of the depressing lessons we have learned in the last two decades is how unamenable the problems of the broken family are to monetary solutions. We've certainly tried to make societywide compensations for the withering of the family unit. Two-thirds of all female-headed families with children under 13 now get benefits from a welfare program such as AFDC, General Assistance, SSI, Medicaid, food stamps and rent assistance, according to the Census Bureau. More than 80 percent of unmarried mothers receive a government check. Among minorities, the ratios are much

higher. In total, the federal government spends more than \$100 billion every year on means-tested payments to families. Yet this assistance has not even come close to providing those households with the kind of existential security that most intact families enjoy.

For the last quarter century, American public policy has shied away from the idea that certain family forms are more socially desirable than others. An idiotic neutrality has worked its way into our tax code, property laws, marriage and family statutes, entitlement and welfare programs, and so forth, suggesting in the face of contrary evidence that, from the point of view of larger social functioning, any one family form is as good as another. (For just one example, since the end of World War II intact families with children have gone from being a group enjoying substantial income tax advantages to one experiencing a relative penalty.)

Perhaps most tragically, this lack of nerve in defending the nuclear family's integrity has misled and left badly exposed precisely those groups who had fewest other assets to fall back on. The rich can afford splintered families; though it may bring them heartache, it is not likely to incapacitate them. But the ill-educated, the poor, the historically discriminated against — once enticed out of the safe harbor of family solidarity — these groups often cannot recover.

The end result is that a significant minority of American children now grow up amid appalling disorder. That this hurts them is transparently clear. Childhood stress has increased, with more children seeing doctors and being admitted to psychiatric wards. The teen-age suicide rate has more than tripled in 30 years, a time when suicide rates for all other age groups were falling. Youth drug abuse has leveled off in recent years, but it remains very high compared to earlier decades, and among underclass youngsters serious drug abuse has become deeply rooted. And, of course, we are experiencing an unprecedented crime wave directed at and by juveniles.

In the most troubling cases, some observers have identified a pattern of crimes by children who do not seem to have a conscience. These analysts point out that most such individuals have been so-called "unattached children," who never formed a satisfactory relationship with a primary caregiver. When exposed to situations such as child neglect, early and impersonal day-care, and some divorces — and several of these factors are on the upswing — researchers believe that a child can grow up without learning to trust or love any one person. In some such unattached children, partial psychopathic symptoms result. Seemingly inexplicable brutality can follow.

When children become victimizers

This brings us to an important point: The origins and influences of childhood disturbances are of undeniable interest to public policy-makers. If we can identify those children who are threatened by the turmoil swirling around them, some of that turmoil can possibly be reduced. But I would suggest strongly that once a particular juvenile has committed a serious crime, *why* the crime occurred can no longer be a central issue. At that point, justice must be pursued — for the sake of the aggrieved and to maintain the essential proposition that crime leads to punishment. We often become paralyzed trying to decide whether the juvenile criminal is a victim or victimizer. That indecision leads to very dangerous territory.

Furthermore, this is a particularly risky moment for us to indulge juvenile lawlessness. In just the last few years, several American cities saw the number of juveniles arrested for drug *distribution* exceed the number arrested for drug *possession* for the first time. A lost generation has just graduated from victim to victimizer. If we hope to have any chance of preventing them from infecting a class of successors and from stalking an innocent public, then we must see with clear eyes what they have become: sad cases who are now part of

the problem. Unless we incapacitate this current crop of teenage marauders, we will institutionalize the vicious cycle of youths who were first preyed upon and are now preying on others.

That would create not only a host of personal tragedies, but would also exact a terrible social cost. Homicide is now the leading cause of death for children in American inner cities. From 1985 to 1986, homicides among blacks increased 15 percent nationwide. Given the national trends in the last two years, that figure will rise sharply again when the 1987 and 1988 figures become available. In fact, the loss of life among young blacks has already become dramatic enough to drag down overall life expectancy rates for all black Americans, an unprecedented event in a developed country. While white life expectancy was rising, the 1986 black rate fell — for the second consecutive year — to its 1982 level. This basically reflected the epidemic of young blacks killing other young blacks. Only unflinching legal intervention will break this tragic circle.

Solutions

I suggest that our response to the current upsurge of child crime must be multipart:

First, we need positive measures to strengthen family integrity and independence, including more rhetoric and more action reinforcing the two-parent family as the preferred locus of child-bearing. We also need to improve the general family atmosphere in this country through the tax code, through expanded support for childrearsers, and through a better public education system. We ought to help parents by giving them more choice, more independence, more responsibility.

Second, we need to consider some negative sanctions against parents and other adults who threaten and prey upon children. For instance, we are now experiencing an epidemic of children born physically damaged and addicted to drugs due to substance abuse by their mothers throughout pregnancy.

Dr. Richard Guy, who chairs Washington, D.C.'s Mayor's Advisory Board on Maternal and Infant Health, estimates that an astonishing 45 to 50 percent of the mothers delivering babies in Washington, D.C., use drugs. Cities ranging from Minneapolis to Oakland to Los Angeles are experiencing a similar upswing. If this continues, generational catastrophe could result. A trend toward prosecuting such mothers for child abuse when they refuse treatment during pregnancy has developed recently and ought to be encouraged. Similarly, we ought to consider stronger penalties for using drugs in the presence of children, and for recruiting children into criminal enterprises. As first century scholar Pliny the Elder said, "What is done to children they will do to society."

In addition, parents ought to be held more closely accountable for the actions of children involved in antisocial behavior. For instance, we already have limited laws that hold parents responsible for their children's truancy, for early school dropouts, and for support of a grandchild born to a minor in a welfare household. There is growing agreement that keeping control of one's children ought to be a condition of residence in public housing. Real sanctions should be meted out against parents when juveniles violate youth curfews in those cities where they exist. Making negligent parents exert some control over their charges must be the very first step in any effort to control juvenile delinquency.

Next, we must take strong steps to improve safety and order in our public schools. This will require strong support for teachers and principals who exert discipline at the campus level; it will require making suspensions and expulsions of miscreant students stick; in some places it will require institution of metal detectors, more guards, student ID cards, suspension of lunch time building-leaving privileges, occasional random searches, and so forth. Squeamishness about taking such measures often reflects administrators' public rela-

tions worries more than anything else. Violence has already entered our schools. To pretend otherwise for appearance's sake is unconscionable.

More generally, we need to proceed with a full-fledged, societywide crackdown on personal crime. Some people will tell you that we are currently in the midst of just such a cleanup. They are wrong. Figures from the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics show that only 18 percent of individuals arrested for violent felonies are presently convicted and sentenced to at least a year in prison. The figure is just 10 percent of those individuals arrested for drug felonies. Amazingly, even among persons arrested for homicide, only 49 percent are sentenced to a year or more behind bars. For rapists it's only 29 percent.

Overall, the average inmate getting out of jail these days has spent 17 months behind bars. That is just 45 percent of the original sentence. In other words, you have relatively little chance of going to jail even if you are arrested and, if you do go to jail, you'll probably spend less than a year and a half locked up. That's our war on crime?

The only long-run solution is to build adequate new prisons, then make sentences stick. If we're going to give young people an incentive to stay out of prison, they've got to know they're going to be there for a while if they commit serious crimes against their neighbors.

This will, of course, take some money. But the fact is that the federal government has been slighting criminal justice spending for some time. From 1979 to 1985, total federal spending rose by 92 percent (unadjusted for inflation). Federal spending for justice activities, however, rose at the much slower rate of 68 percent. Nationally, only 2.9 percent of all government spending in 1985 was for criminal and civil justice. That compares to 20.8 percent for social insurance payments, 13 percent for education, 8.8 percent for housing and the environment, 6 percent for public welfare, and 1 percent for hospitals and health. We are *not* overspending in our

battle against social disorder and personal violence.

Kids need order

Crime does not wash over all Americans equally. It particularly terrorizes the weakest and most vulnerable among us. America's 64 million children — half of them living in cities, one-quarter of them coming home after school to a house containing no parent, a fifth living in low-income households, all of them physically frail and incompletely formed in character — these are the individuals who suffer most when law and order decays. *Children need order.* Aside from love, there is *nothing* they need more than order.

Yet we have failed miserably to insulate our children from even the grossest criminal activity. It seems especially incongruous to me that none — not one — of the self-styled children's defense organizations have identified public order as an issue of pre-eminent importance to the young. Why no outcry for tougher laws, tougher sentencing, more police and prison space, safer schools, and fewer drugs from those who claim to speak on behalf of children?

Law and order is often presented as a "conservative" issue, but today a powerful "bleeding heart" justification exists for getting tough on crime — the interests of child welfare. Physical safety and psychological security form the essential foundations for a child's health, education and overall development. A good school, an accessible doctor, a rich library and a 15 percent increase in the Head Start budget offer little benefit to a child who shares an apartment with his mother's abusive, violent, drug-selling boyfriend. Millions of American children are now haunted by mean streets. It is time to compile a new list of "the children's issues," and to put crime reduction at the top. □

This article is an edited version of Karl Zinsmeister's testimony before the U.S. Congress' Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families.