

village view

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How many times have you read in the paper or heard on the radio of a shop or store broken into, a home burglarized, or public or private property vandalized? Too often, of course. Sometimes the culprit is nabbed by the police.

If a police officer succeeds in catching someone in the act of committing a crime, the wheels of justice begin to turn. There's an arraignment, bail is set, a trial date is fixed. Yet time and again, when such a case comes before a judge, even if the accused admits guilt, he or she is put on probation and released.

In some cases of first offense the case is continued without a finding with the stipulation that restitution must be made. A young person is given a second chance to begin adult life without a criminal record.

Law-abiding citizens feel angry when courts and judges are lenient. Faith in justice is eroded, suspicion grows between generations and between different levels of society. People grow fearful of one another, become distrustful of their fellowmen, and automatic emotional responses are engendered. Fear and anger are destructive.

We look for places to lay blame. We point fingers at families, schools, churches. At the same time society in general tends to ignore individual problems and situations. The almost universal- and short-sighted- view is that it's safer not to get involved.

To most of us it seems anti-social behavior, particularly among some members of the younger generation, is on the increase. Statistics bear out our belief. Juvenile crime rates are climbing.

Why? Alcohol? Drugs? Parental permissiveness? Lack of discipline? Failure of schools and churches to provide adequate leadership? Why does one youngster in a given family travel a road to crime while his siblings go straight?

How do parents deal with the sudden realization their son or daughter has been arrested for committing a crime? How would you deal with it?

There you are driving to work, as you've done five days a week for twenty years or more. Your car radio is playing, but your mind is occupied with traffic, a knotty problem at the office, your tax return. The morning news includes a report of a burglary, and the police have a suspect in custody. It's YOUR KID.

You stop and call your wife. She heard it too. She can hardly speak through sobs and tears. You call the office, say you'll be late, and go home again. You're angry, scared, shamed; most of all you can't understand why. What did you do wrong? Where did you fail?

Together you and your wife review the years since that child was born, remembering the lessons, lectures, punishments for minor transgressions, rewards for good behavior. Together you examine the examples you set for your kids.

Trying to be objective, you review your comfortable middle-class life-style and think of the years you struggled to achieve it. You compare the child with siblings. What is different about this one? What did you do that you shouldn't have, or didn't you do that you might have, to prevent this from happening?

Eventually you have a chance to talk with the kid. "Daddy, I don't know why I did it. It was just so easy. The gang said we couldn't possibly get caught. Then, when the police came, they all disappeared. There was no way I could run, no place to hide."

You find both alcohol and drugs were involved. The youngster doesn't seem to remember much; or maybe the memory is there but the willingness to admit is lacking. Together, you go to a lawyer. You go to court with the accused. Your son or your daughter stands before the judge and is found guilty.

At home, the phone rings and rings; family and friends call. You go over the story again and again. Each time you feel worse. Each time you think of it (and you think of little else) you ask yourself, "What did we do wrong?" And you can't think of any way you could have done differently, given the circumstances.

You've been honest and hardworking; the children went to Sunday School; you attended church regularly; you've been concerned parents, known where your kids were and what they were doing. You disciplined them fairly, helped them and encouraged them to do well in school, guided your children in the right directions. This child chose the wrong path. Now what can you do to help?

You counsel your child; advise staying away from undesirable companions and out of gathering places where troubles start. Young people, however, are more loyal to their peers than to parents. "They're my friends," they tell you.

"Friends?" you respond. "If they were your friends, you wouldn't be in this mess."

"Dad, you just don't understand, that's all." And you don't, but you do realize that a young person seldom has the stamina to isolate himself from his peer group. You feel frightened for your child.

Late one night, the telephone rings. "I just wanted you to let you know, if anything happens. There's been a fight. They beat me up. I just wanted you to know."

"Come home. Come home."

"No. It's my problem. I have to solve it. If I came home, they'd follow me and hurt you. I have to solve it myself. But I just wanted you to know."

How do you go back to sleep?

You read in the paper about another young person, the same age as your own, gunned down in his own driveway. He had turned state's evidence. Two of his peers are accused of his murder. Could it happen to you? To your youngster?

What can you do? What can any parent do? Do you let your child go to jail when you can prevent it? Can you, can the police, can anyone protect the first offender from being drawn back into the morass of criminality?

What can society do to help a young person who's taken one step in the wrong direction but who's not yet a hardened criminal and who is being pulled inexorably into a confirmed life of crime? Does our society offer any viable options?

We who are fortunate enough to escape this heartbreaking experience can't imagine it could happen to us; yet the possibility exists. No one with a youngster approaching maturity today can be certain he won't be in the same position. Once our beloved children move beyond the sphere of our control and influence and come under the pressures of their peer-group, if individuals in that group are mischief-bent, we cannot longer guide or protect our own.

And we who have no youngsters in that age-group don't escape either; we, too, are victims. We pay the costs to support the courts, to maintain those who go to jail. We pay the on-going and ever-increasing costs of insurance, police protection and loss of personal property. Sometimes we pay the price in personal injury.

The time has come to invest more than money, to invest more individual effort than we've ever given before, in programs and projects specifically designed to prevent crime. To accomplish their goals, families, schools and churches need more than criticism. They need our wholehearted dedicated involvement to help stem the tide and turn this situation around.