

# village view

by Andrea Leonard

Taken all together, the people of these United States make up the weirdest group imaginable. We are positively and insanely ready and willing to accept a nationwide plan to inoculate upwards of 200,000,000 of us against a flu virus, but we yawn, roll over, and go back to sleep in face of a sweeping epidemic of crime.

The nation opens one eye, closes it again, and snores audibly when a Senate Subcommittee announces, "We are living in a period in which street crime has become a surrogate for employment, and vandalism a release for boredom."

What is the matter with us?

Do we think flu might make us sick? Do we think street crime and vandalism do us no harm?

Do we think there's nothing much we can do about street crime, but if we spend a few dollars apiece we can knock flu in the head, so we may as well spend a little to get rid of flu, then ignore crime and hope it will just go away, since taking concrete steps to prevent so serious a disease might be costly?

There are those among us who believe the appalling increase in juvenile crime in this country is the result of some gigantic plot, engineered and carried out by sinister forces bent on the overthrow of Democracy.

Maybe they're right. If they are, those forces are winning.

There's precious little resistance to the plot, if there is a plot. There're no signs of a nationwide mobilization to combat this dastardly plan threatening to destroy us.

You'd think there'd be a grand uprising, a great groundswell of action to protect our law-abiding citizens and their property, to protect our youngsters from being infected with the disease of juvenile criminality.

You'd think no possible stone would be left unturned.

Look around you. No one seems to be paying much real attention, except the police. While they do all they can, their hands are tied by the utter apathy of the general public and the permissive attitudes displayed in the courts.

On July 14, for example, a judge in Barnstable First District Court imposed a suspended six-months House of Correction sentence on a defendant who admitted evidence was available to convict him of breaking and entering, and larcenies from six different homes. Not one — six.

Property reported stolen include stereo equipment, a color television set, liquor, marine equipment, tools and household articles.

This is but one instance, one example; others appear in the media every single day.

How would you feel if you were the arresting officer?

The record reveals that although youngsters between ten and seventeen account for only 16% of the population, nearly 50% of all persons arrested for serious crime are members of this age-group.

Of FBI Crime Index offenses, 31% of all crimes solved last year were committed by persons under 18 years of age. Children!

"Hohum," sighs America, "Boys will be boys."

And the murder, rape, larceny, dope peddling, car thefts, assaults and battery, robbery, vandalism and malicious mischief continue.

Nudged to grumpy wakefulness, America responds with irritation and reluctance.

"What can I do about it? Kids today have no respect. They don't want to go to school. They don't want to work. They think everything's got to be handed to them. What do you want from me?"

And America prepares to turn its back and settle down again for some more snoozing.

Well, look-alive, there. You haven't earned more sacktime in this particular issue.

It's far from true that all kids have no respect. And there are a lot of kids who do want to go to school, are seeking an education at school, whether or not they're getting it. And there are plenty of kids who do want to work.

For those who want an education, the opportunity to learn should be available; it should be available without having to battle for it while the teacher struggles on one hand with a child who has "special needs" (meaning he has emotional problems and severely disrupts the class with anti-social behavior) and on the other with a child who has "learning disabilities" (meaning he's deaf or retarded or otherwise physically unable to contend with the classroom).

For those who want to work and can find jobs, the right to work should not be denied because of age.

If kids can't go to work and learn to do something useful, productive and worthwhile between the ages of ten and seventeen, we shouldn't be surprised to find they turn to crime since it's while at this stage of development and growth they're best able to learn.

By excluding them from honest occupations and condemning them to nothing but "play", they turn readily to crime. The crime schools — the street opportunities — aren't closed to adolescents!

Kids are welcomed and wooed, given recognition and respect; supplied with tools and taught their trades, they're apprenticed to older boys and girls already experienced; these raw recruits soon become expert criminals.

The costs are astronomical!

The changes necessary to effect a different pattern for young people to follow won't be easily made. Many must be made in the Legislature by amending or rescinding health, education and labor laws.

Resistance to the necessary changes will make the issue of busing pale into insignificance. Special interest groups have fought long years and hard battles for the passage of laws that now require amending.

Nevertheless, if this country's to survive as a nation, it's time we demonstrate we care as much about saving our kids from lives of crime as about whether they go to and from school on buses or attend classes with kids of another race or spiritual persuasion.

So, shake a leg, America!

You can get some more rest after you've earned the right; at this time in history, you need your wits about you, you need all your faculties, you want your eyes wide open.

A generation of vipers is nothing compared to a generation of criminals. If there's a venomous plot afoot to destroy us, let's counterattack. If it's just a stupid mistake that was made while we weren't paying attention, then let's do whatever's necessary to put things right again.

Whatever we do, let's stay awake and alert to what's happening under our noses. The good kids — and their name is LEGION — are entitled to our devoted dedication to these ends.