

Why marriage matters in a violent society

Bob McCoskrie – National Director – Family First NZ

When 14-year-old Ngatai Rewiti was sent to prison for throwing rocks onto the motorway at Otahuhu and killing a motorist, it was really just a short-term solution. It was a possible deterrent to copycats, but it didn't deal with the root causes.

Sources close to Rewiti's family contacted Family First expressing concern about the family environment in which he was being raised. Drug and alcohol abuse, family breakdown and dysfunctional parenting were major reasons behind Rewiti's increasing bad behaviour – and contributing factors to this senseless crime.

There is little doubt society is becoming more violent. News bulletins are regularly full of horrific and brutal murders - eight in South Auckland in the last three months. Police officers are voicing their concern at the increase in violence on the streets; and, as revealed this week, the level of threats and violence in schools is worsening. But the response of government has been simply to throw money at the problem.

Under a new 26-point action plan, \$10 million will fund 22 youthworkers in South Auckland to fix gang problems and street violence. They will be charged with reducing boredom among young people, believed to be a leading factor behind child and youth crime and youth gang involvement.

The state will also provide temporary beds for youngsters as young as 10 picked up by the police during the night - 24-hour childcare provided by the police.

In Christchurch, \$12 million was spent on a project between CYF and the Corrections Department where recidivist offenders aged 14-17 worked with social workers to understand what motivated their crimes. The result? Only 28% of the participants remained 'offence-free' in the time-frame covered by the evaluation. Each offender cost \$45,000 – yet, despite these poor results, CYF is continuing with the programme and is extending it to include children as young as 10.

And the government is spending \$7m on early intervention services for teenage parents, including a programme called "Roots of Empathy" which involves a parent bringing a baby into the classroom so children can learn about a baby's development stages, needs, and communication.

There are clearly some benefits from some of these programmes. But all this funding, and all this work, is missing a key point: marriage matters. And families matter.

According to The Heritage Foundation, an influential US research institute, an analysis of social science literature over 30 years shows that the rise in violent crime parallels the rise in families abandoned by fathers. A state-by-state analysis indicated that a 10% increase in the percentage of children living in single-parent homes lead typically to a 17% increase in juvenile crime.

Are all children from solo parented homes criminals? No. Does marriage necessarily prevent crime – no again. Crime has always existed. But research has shown time after time that a mother's strong affectionate attachment to her child and the father's authority and involvement in raising his children are great buffers against a life of crime.

The Heritage Foundation research found that criminal behaviour has its roots in habitual deprivation of parental love and affection going back to early infancy. While the finger often gets pointed at certain racial groups, the data shows that the real variable is not race but family structure. It's just that the incidence of broken families is much higher in the racial groups often cited.

Despite the evidence, our government continues to undermine and weaken the defence of the traditional family structure through legislation. By decriminalising prostitution, equating non-marriage relationships with marriage, allowing teenagers to get an abortion without the parents being informed, teaching kids how to put on a condom but not exercise self-control, encouraging both parents to be in the workforce, funding childcare centres to raise your pre-schooler but not funding the parent themselves, and making out-of-wedlock parenting a better economic alternative to marriage, government contributes to the growth of violent crime.

Marriage is good for a nation. Scientific research is unanimous on a number of conclusions regarding marriage – that marriage increases the likelihood that fathers have good relationships with their children and lowers the risk of alcohol and substance abuse, domestic violence and child abuse.

Conversely, parental divorce or non-marriage appears to increase children's risk of school failure, the risk of suicide, psychological distress, and most significantly, delinquent and criminal behaviour.

So many young offenders are coming from families where there is family breakdown, the absence of a father and parenting difficulties, not to mention violence and unemployment issues. A logical start would be to extend the sentencing of young criminals to their families – to assist them and place requirements on them. A family approach. To deal with only the young offender without confronting the family issues is 'band-aid' treatment.

Ultimately, however, we need to promote and strengthen marriage as an institution. Violent crime starts at home, and it will continue to increase as long as we downplay the importance and significance of having two parents, a mum and a dad, committed to each other for life.

Bob McCoskrie has been a community worker for 12 years, and is founder and chairperson of a trust working with at-risk youth in South Auckland.

(800 words)

ENDS

For more information contact Family First NZ:

Bob McCoskrie, National Director
Tel. 09 261 2426 | Mob. 027 55 555 42
email. bob@familyfirst.org.nz | www.familyfirst.org.nz
P.O. Box 276-133, Manukau City, Auckland, New Zealand