

ENDING THE CULTURE OF STREET CRIME

THE LIFERS PUBLIC SAFETY
STEERING COMMITTEE OF THE STATE
CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION
AT GRATERFORD, PENNSYLVANIA

This article explores the problem of crime and violence, offering a new way to look at what motivates certain individuals who habitually engage in criminal activity. Explaining the concept of the existence of a pervasive culture of crime is the primary focus of this article. It also seeks to provide a multidirectional strategy for ending that culture, which includes the utilization of former members of the culture as part of the solution.

Keywords: *culture of crime; street crime; transformative justice; life-sentenced prisoners; anticrime initiatives; prisoner-community partnerships*

Crime is a social disease that persistently plagues American society, an epidemic so widespread that almost every American citizen will either be personally touched by it or know someone who has been during the course of his or her lifetime.

Crime in all its varied forms is more deadly and prevalent than AIDS or any other form of disease currently known to afflict humans. It sabotages the safety and well-being of Americans of all races, classes, and educational lev-

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els. The ever-increasing resources required to identify, convict, subsequently house, clothe, and feed those convicted of criminal offenses siphons needed assets from vital social services and programs. Yet, despite the exponential growth of prison populations, harsher sentences, tough-on-crime policies, and rapid new prison construction, the problem of crime persists.

The Lifers Public Safety Initiative was launched as a movement designed to help the public recognize the culture of crime and engage citizens to work toward eliminating it. When it is understood that those responsible for the bulk of street crimes are part of a unique group with its own values, beliefs, and behaviors, a more effective strategy can be initiated to eliminate it. As a contribution to the overall ending of this culture, The Lifers Public Safety Initiative creates and fosters individual projects and approaches to advance this mission. These include moving beyond established sociological and criminological thinking on the subject of crime, and working with citizen and professional partners to pursue these goals.

The following details an analysis of the problem, the introduction of a transformation theory, and a description of an ideology of the culture of street crime and what it will take to end it.

FIGHTING CRIME

THE TRADITIONAL APPROACH

As a tradition, crime-fighting efforts have been, and remain, unidirectional, that is, proceeding from local, state, or federal law enforcement agencies who assume the responsibilities for solving crimes and creating laws and policies designed to safeguard average citizens. Oftentimes, communities in which most crimes occur are only nominally incorporated in crime-fighting efforts, and government agencies assume the bulk of these responsibilities in the name of the public. However, the persistence of fear-inducing crime is evidence of the fact that traditional unidirectional crime prevention efforts are not sufficient. If we can agree that crime is a social issue, then we can also assume a need for social solutions—those that most incorporate the various elements of the society in question and empower the people to take the reins in resolving their own problems with the support and assistance of the agencies they create as opposed to functioning as mere bystanders. That a change in penal policies is needed is beyond question. It is estimated that America, which declared a war on drugs and a war on crime to the tune of tens of billions of dollars annually for enforcement and housing convicted felons, has lost both conflicts while in the process causing huge collateral damage.

The costs in personal losses because of injuries, medical care, and social impact is astronomical, and no promise could be realistically held for their decline using current law enforcement methods. Because of the personal losses endured by the victims of crime and citizens afraid of being themselves victimized in the future, logical solutions that require objective reasoning are circumvented by the more immediate emotional responses that fail to proffer favorable long-term results. Pursuing today's ineffective policies with the hope that they will somehow be effective tomorrow is ludicrous. We have seen what the results of current methods have wrought. We believe that the reasons for America's stunning defeats in these wars on criminality lie in the top-down approach, which bypasses the people as opposed to empowering them for change.

A PRACTICAL APPROACH

As an alternative to the aforementioned unidirectional approach, the more practical, multidirectional approach assumes that those who are included, and made a part of their community by personal investment, will be better motivated to work to sustain that community's well-being and act more concertedly and consciously to defend and adhere to its norms, values, and principles as opposed to rejecting them altogether. This would inevitably lead to less crime. The multidirectional approach operates with the understanding that no structure, social or otherwise, is ever whole when any of its parts are omitted. The elevation of the whole will inevitably be threatened by the decline of any of its parts. Hence, all citizens must be incorporated in the advance of society or those excluded will, directly or indirectly, tend to work toward its decline.

Typically, it is those who are excluded, kept apart, or otherwise cast away from the majority who feel less compelled to abide by the norms of the society that rejects them. Moreover, these so-called outcasts are more likely to create a counter subculture—usually the antithesis of the larger, majority culture—wherein they feel accepted, embraced, and included. From this emerges a subsociety that breeds criminal activity. It stands to reason that those who are economically deprived, politically disenfranchised, and historically oppressed will typically show more resentment and detachment from the norms of those who exclude them because they are the most divested from them socially. For this reason, it is unrealistic to think that any serious efforts to address the problem of drug addiction could be successful while simultaneously excluding drug users, who consume illegal substances, and drug dealers, who market them, from such efforts. It is logically inconsistent, therefore, to expect a reduction in crime simply by galvanizing law

enforcement, legislators, and a few select community groups, while excluding those deemed to be criminal elements from the process.

The multidirectional approach is one where the issue of crime is approached from all segments of society who are empowered to invest in such efforts for the mutual benefit of all. Therefore, the members of Long Incarcerated Fraternity Engaging Release Studies (LIFERS, Inc.) have adopted the mission of ending what we have identified as the culture of street crime, by starting with ourselves, within the institution, and expanding out into the community.

HISTORY OF LIFERS, INC.

LIFERS, Inc. is an organization comprising men serving life terms at the State Correctional Institution at Graterford (SCIG), a maximum-security prison in Pennsylvania, 30 miles outside of Philadelphia. LIFERS, Inc. traces its origins to 1978 with the formation of a therapy group, under the direction of staff psychologist Dr. Van Wye, to address the unique problems associated with the long-term incarceration of lifers. This group eventually decided to develop an organizational structure and, in 1980, sought official recognition from the SCIG administration and the Bureau of Corrections. Then, in 1981 the organization filed for and received nonprofit corporate status in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The primary focus of LIFERS, Inc. was limited to pursuing the possibility of parole for life-sentenced prisoners in Pennsylvania, through public education and legislative efforts. Since its inception, LIFERS, Inc. has been determined to change Pennsylvania's policy on life sentences from one of life without hope to one of hope for the deserving. However, although we are still committed to our legislative agenda, we expanded our activities to include charitable and social service work to reduce crime.

THE EVOLUTIONARY PATH OF LIFERS, INC.

In subsequent years, the reported incidence of crime increased significantly, resulting in a political movement to get tough on crime. Consequently, the prison population began to swell. As a result of this influx of new prisoners, the prisons were soon overcrowded and cells double occupied to meet the demand for additional space. Observing this process, we realized that the impact we were having on the problem of crime and violence was piecemeal and ineffective. This caused us to reflect on how we could make more of a difference within the prison and the community. In the early 1990s,

various members of the LIFERS Inc. partnered with the End Violence Project, an organization dedicated to the goal of ending violence without violence, to link our efforts to community service projects.¹ It was during this partnership that we received training in transformational leadership as taught by the international group, Landmark Education.² During the past 14 years, hundreds of prisoners have been trained in this educational technology. With this training and our subsequent search to add purposeful meaning to our lives, we began to look for ways in which we could make a significant difference in the lives of others. Consequently, we further expanded our activities as an organization to include a stronger emphasis on civic and personal responsibility, and crime prevention services.

WHY IS A GROUP OF LIFERS TACKLING THIS PROBLEM?

Accepting the possibility that we could very well be destined to die in prison, we looked at how a life of meaning could be created given our circumstances. Aware of the increase in violent crime and the loss of innocent lives as well as prison overcrowding and soaring recidivism rates, we began an analysis of the crime problem from the viewpoint of the perpetrators. As men of conscience, with nothing to lose or gain personally, we felt a human responsibility to do what we could to attack this problem. It appeared that many professionals and citizens had come to believe that it is impossible to make significant inroads in reducing street crime and violence. Most tactics seemed oriented only toward containing and repressing crime. LIFERS, Inc. reached the conclusion that we, from our unique position as former perpetrators, could offer the leadership necessary to prevent street crime and violence, saving lives in the process.

As people who are faced with what many would characterize as a hopeless situation, we have learned from the process of personal transformation that we can achieve dramatic results right where we are by using our personal experiences for change. We also have come to understand the devastation that crime and violence wreaks on individuals and families, and we have resolved to turn around those negative forces that we once helped to create. We believe that we have the understanding, experience, and credibility to achieve what many see as an impossible task, ending the culture of street crime. We see that solving the problem of street crime is very real and that we can spearhead a movement to realize that possibility. We also became more aware of the crime epidemic as it affected our families and loved ones, and it became apparent to us that something more needed to be done.

On reviewing a number of written studies analyzing this problem and a number of programs created to reduce it, we felt compelled to start looking at

these problems from a different perspective, especially because crime seemed to be expanding and not decreasing. This perspective focused on our own prior behavior, the thinking that led to the behavior, and how such thinking developed. What we discovered during our search, and in interviewing a number of prisoners, was that there is a specific system of beliefs, values, and practices that we all followed and adhered to.

Using the techniques of the End Violence Project, we began the process of transformational thinking, that is, challenging what we believe, heightening our awareness of the contradictions of our value system, and accepting that our beliefs and values created our present circumstances and negatively affected our families and others.

Furthermore, we saw new men coming into the institution with this identifiable mindset. We also realized that many men who had been released were returning as a result of this pattern of thinking. Even those who had jobs, families, and other support systems tended to recidivate. We realized that they had failed because the values from the street-crime culture were deeply ingrained and provided them with inappropriate strategies on how to respond to life's challenges. We also observed men who had made it successfully and saw in these individuals that their street values had been replaced with a new way of thinking, a new set of values, and a new understanding. This gave us a clearer perspective on how to look at the problem of crime and what we could do to address it. We began to see that overcoming the challenge of crime involves changing the way a person thinks. Therefore, there has to be a paradigm shift in the whole society wherein everyone is aligned for the single purpose of altering the values that make up the culture of crime.

THE ANTICRIME SUMMIT: THE MULTIDIRECTIONAL MODEL AT WORK

OVERVIEW OF THE SUMMIT

With the cooperation of its cosponsors, Men United for a Better Philadelphia (MUBP),³ and the administration at SCIG, LIFERS, Inc. called for an Anticrime Summit to be held within the institution. The summit was held on April 17, 2003, where more than 150 individuals representing the public attended, along with more than 100 prisoners. The Anticrime Summit represented, perhaps, the first major prison-based, prisoner-organized gathering held to provide professionals and nonprofessionals with the views and insights of former perpetrators concerning how to prevent or significantly reduce the prevalence of crime and violence. The theme of the event, Build-

ing Partnerships, proceeded on the premise that a meaningful reduction of crime and violence would require the collective efforts of every segment of the society (multidirectional approach), including social service agencies, victim advocates, religious representatives, law makers, academia, youth, as well as criminal justice professionals and transformed ex-offenders residing inside and outside the prison. The Anticrime Summit was a monumental step in the way we, as a society, look at solving crime. It allowed those groups presently addressing the issue of crime the unique opportunity to hear the ideas and solutions outlined by former perpetrators.

SUMMIT FORMAT

The daylong program was divided into three segments. A morning plenary session included addresses by Philadelphia Police Commissioner Sylvester Johnson and State Representative Ronald Waters. Other speakers included members of the sponsoring organizations, the superintendent of SCIG, the cochairs of MUBP, and a LIFERS, Inc. representative. The afternoon consisted primarily of workshops, which were organized around the topics of community safety, community reintegration, youth crime and violence, drugs and the community, recovering victims, and economic empowerment. Finally, there was a plenary closing session in which workshop representatives reported back to the full group on the results of their discussions.

Some of the objectives of the 2003 Anticrime Summit included (a) the development of a working relationship between prisoners and the community to significantly reduce the nature and number of crimes and violence, (b) enhancing awareness of the circumstances by which violent crimes occur by identifying behaviors and attitudes that predispose individuals to commit criminal acts, (c) developing prevention and intervention strategies aimed at reducing youth crime and violence, and (d) exploring and developing meaningful ways in which conscientious prisoners can make meaningful contributions to the outside.

WORKSHOPS AND RESULTS

Each of the workshops focused on one or more of the Anticrime Summit's objectives, and each involved discussions of ways in which incarcerated persons can work with professional and nonprofessional individuals and organizations to help end street crime and violence. The afternoon session also provided general endorsement for a number of projects to be conducted by LIFERS, Inc. as part of the ongoing public safety initiative that grew out of the summit to help accomplish the overall mission.

Out of the workshop focused on community safety came a plan whereby the culture of street crime could be challenged and changed from within by transformed ex-offenders. A program called Lifers CORP (Community Offender Restoration Project) would train soon-to-be-released ex-offenders to play a role in restoration by working directly with local residents to enhance the quality of life in the neighborhoods.

The reintegration workshop focused on providing leadership training in an alternative educational setting to infuse a new consciousness in ex-offenders returning home. Called Proceed, this project is rooted in the concept that values, not circumstances, dictate behavior. This approach will be structured to promote first self-mastery and then leadership at the family and community levels.

A workshop on youth crime and violence was devoted to forming partnerships with lifers in the ongoing effort to reduce the level of crime, violence, and incarceration of delinquent and at-risk youth. Project Life-Line focuses on more effectively reaching at-risk youth to reduce their involvement in and their attraction to the culture of crime.

A session on drugs and the community highlighted the Deal-Me-Out initiative, an approach to ending drug dealing by using ex-dealers as initiators of change.

An economic empowerment workshop sought to develop a prison-to-community continuum that would provide a mechanism for employment and business development for ex-offenders. This project involves networking with public and private ventures to facilitate reentry.

The final workshop addressed the need for integrating ex-offenders returning home as fully functional members through a three-phase process of learning about the person, providing education, and accessing public resources appropriate to the person's needs and obligations. Recovering Victims/Community/Offenders focuses on the impact of crime on victims.

A significant number of those participating in the Anticrime Summit reported that the gathering gave them a deeper insight into the overall problem of crime. Others said the summit would help them be more effective in their work. More than 90% expressed an interest in actively participating in the development of each project. Moreover, the overwhelming majority expressed their desire to have ex-offenders assume an active role in their communities. There were many indications that the summit was effective overall in helping to build partnerships with a wide variety of individuals and representatives throughout the Delaware Valley. This represents a vital step in developing a systematic approach to fighting crime in the neighborhoods that promises to be more effective than preexisting efforts.

THE CULTURE OF CRIME CONCEPT

Although criminal behavior may be an inextricable element of the human condition, especially in competitive capitalistic societies, the culture of any society can be purposely altered or completely transformed. A national call to end the culture of crime is predicated on the proposition that in almost every sector of society there exists a group of individuals who possess beliefs and values that condone or tolerate various degrees of deviant behavior. Concomitant with sensationalized street crime and violence, news media coverage is replete with incidences of crime at all levels of society, including domestic violence, tax evasion, corporate crime, religious scandal, and political and judicial corruption.

It is apparent that massive incarceration has failed to make crime-ravaged areas meaningfully safer. The imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of nonviolent offenders has served to exacerbate the problems faced by communities by effectively turning them into incubators for more poverty, crime, and violence. There has been an almost pathological resistance to meaningfully addressing the moral, cultural, socioeconomic, and political realities that operate to sustain and instigate criminal deviance.

Notwithstanding racism and economic factors, it can be reasonably argued that a high rate of crime in wealthy industrialized nations is symptomatic of a society suffering from moral malnutrition. Criminals on every level of society become addicted to the psychological sweets derived from engaging in antisocial behavior. Much of the crime and violence in society can be directly linked to the inculcation of sociopsychological behavioral responses to feelings of anger, fear, shame, deprivation, entitlement, and greed.

The practice of selective morality through a process of circumstantial rationalization has become commonplace, among criminals and those working to decrease or control crime levels. Habitual criminals become desensitized to the adverse effects their actions have on the lives of their victims and society, not to mention their own families and loved ones. Likewise, the public and policy makers become desensitized to the adverse effects of the overuse of imprisonment on ex-offenders and the neighborhoods to which they return. Massive incarceration suggests a state of paralysis in the field of criminal justice.

THE CULTURE OF STREET CRIME

As we began to analyze the problem from the perpetrators' perspective, it was first necessary to acknowledge and assume responsibility for our roles in

the destruction of the community. We began by reassessing our prior beliefs and how those beliefs and values were inculcated and subsequently passed to succeeding generations. Only then were we able to see that practical solutions could best be realized by going beyond conventional thinking and present research. In doing so, we had to look at this problem from an historical perspective to see how this present crime culture came into existence and how it is perpetuated.

Prior to the present level of street crime and violence being perpetrated by drug gangs, the streets of Philadelphia were menaced by a street gang culture that was organized and structured with its own beliefs, values, codes, and practices. Many of the destructive values and codes of the current street crime culture developed as a direct result of the gang system of the 1960s. To control the gangs' activities, there was a hierarchy or leadership structure in place. The gangs' leadership held complete control over all group members and their activities. However, during the height of gang activity, 400 young gang members were killed each year. In 1974, a successful broad-based campaign was waged to dismantle the gang system and stop the killings. As a result of this campaign, gang deaths decreased to near zero. However, an indirect effect of dismantling the gang system was the collapse of the gangs' leadership structure with the discipline and control that had characterized their activities. Unfortunately, the destructive, old street-crime values were passed on to a new generation and manifest themselves in today's street crimes, drug use and traffic, and violence. This is not to suggest that gangs or gang activities were socially beneficial. However, it is intended to simply offer an historical basis for current circumstances.

The present-day street crime culture consists of a group or groups of individuals who live outside societal norms. They have their own values, codes, practices, and principles that are oftentimes in direct opposition to the larger society, although many of the negative characteristics displayed by this culture, such as self-focus and greed, are also common to the mainstream culture. As was true with the gang system of the past, those who are a part of this street crime culture are loyal to the other members of the group and to their system of values, beliefs, and practices that are maintained in the streets, reinforced in prisons, and fueled by the antisocial lifestyle of each new generation lured into it either by circumstance or recruitment.

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE STREET CRIME CULTURE

Clearly, one cannot disregard the role that a society rife with poverty, unemployment, racism, and discrimination plays in pushing people toward

the criminal underclass. Yet, even under the most favorable circumstances, many young people in each new generation fall into this street crime culture. Two of the major factors that contribute most heavily to this street crime culture are economic and psychological.

THE ECONOMIC FACTOR

Unemployment, living costs, and an intense desire for material wealth drive the first major component of the street crime culture. These economic influences entice those within the culture into drug dealing and violence, which account for a large portion of street crime. Members of this culture are heavily influenced by the concept of the American dream. Like most citizens, they desire to live a life of extravagance. However, one insidious element in the street crime culture that separates it from society is instant gratification and a willingness to pursue what is desired at any cost. This manifests itself on the streets through drug dealing, drug wars, and disputes between drug dealers that end up involving possession and use of handguns. On the other side, it also causes those who purchase the dealers' products to commit crimes such as robberies and burglaries to get fast money to buy drugs. Moreover, most of those who are driven by this part of the culture have less than an adequate appreciation for wealth earned by labor or the traditional aspects of employment. Because members of this culture desire more than what traditional employment can provide, they turn to hustling, most often through illegal activities, and, more than likely, drug dealing. They also crave the power, influence, and respect hustlers in the street crime culture receive from having expensive cars, the latest fashions, and flashy jewelry.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTOR

The second major component of street crime culture consists of psychological forces, especially those that influence men's self-image based on distorted conceptions of manhood. The paramount need in the street crime culture for respect, proving one's manhood and being viewed as courageous, drive this second aspect. When a member of this culture feels disrespected or his manhood is challenged, he feels justified in exacting justice through the barrel of a gun. It is this psychology of the survival of the self that causes innocent victims to get caught in cross fires, and young men to lose their lives through death or incarceration. These individuals who are afflicted with this inordinate desire not to be shamed or have their manhood tested make up the larger segment of this factor. The lives of others are of less value than the

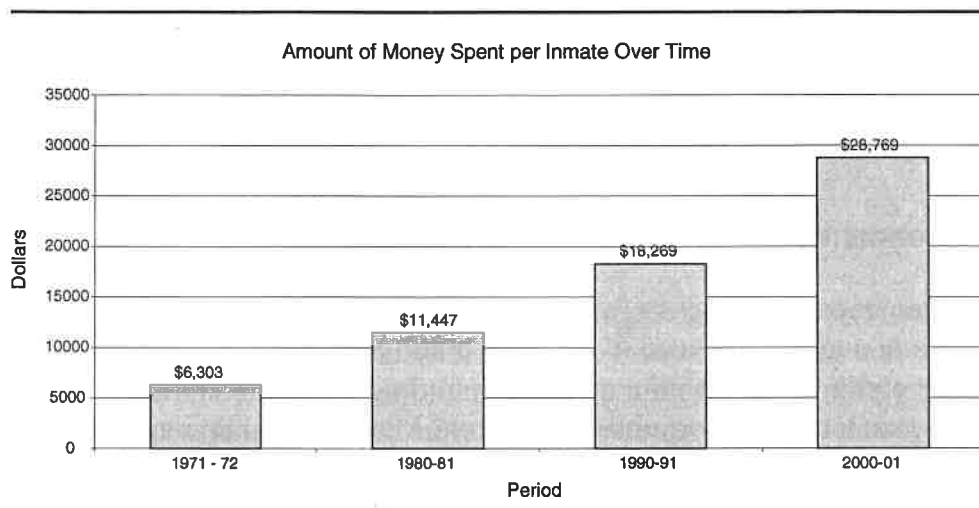


Figure 1: The Growing Costs of Confinement in Pennsylvania

image they have of themselves. When that image is challenged, confrontation is the consequence, and violence is more than likely the result.

THE CYCLE THAT KEEPS THIS STREET-CRIME CULTURE GOING

Most attempts to increase public safety have been directed mainly at the individual perpetrator through programs, punishment, or incarceration. However, little effort has been made to directly confront the very culture from which the problem emanates. To break the cycle, a comprehensive strategy must be developed that is directed simultaneously at the three main target populations perpetuating the cycle. This includes former perpetrators who are presently confined and are likely to return to the culture when released, unless they undergo a substantial philosophic change accompanied by economic or occupational alternatives. It also includes current perpetrators who are presently engaged in the illicit drug trade, violence, and crime. In addition, it includes future perpetrators, those youth who will be attracted to, and/or recruited by, current perpetrators of the culture of crime.

ENDING THE CULTURE OF STREET CRIME

Ending the culture of crime mandates a radical paradigm shift, one that incorporates a concerted, multidirectional approach in addressing the many

variables that influence criminal behavior. As the most affluent and technologically advanced superpower, the United States is in a unique position to become the forerunner in establishing a new definition of what a civilized society can be. New standards for social justice can be set through a national movement that elevates the moral and community consciousness of every member of society. A collective determination to ensure that the physical, social, and emotional needs of everyone are satisfied would bring about a dramatic reduction in the number of offenders.

Society has tried many things to eradicate this problem from torture to isolation and from rehabilitation to incapacitation. Although the overall crime rate is down, street-crime (gang membership, drug dealing, robbery, theft, gun use, and wanton violence) continues at alarming levels and erodes public confidence in the criminal justice system.

For years, we were told that there was a small group of habitual offenders responsible for committing 90% of the street crime, and if they were locked away long past the age when most criminal activity is committed, we could guarantee public safety. Unfortunately, although the prison population in Pennsylvania has quintupled since 1980, coupled with massive increases in spending on crime control, street crime persists and remains a significant problem. Pennsylvania alone spends more than \$1.2 billion on a prison population that has grown from 8,243 inmates in 1980, to more than 40,000 presently.

To end or significantly reduce this trend, those most acquainted with the street crime culture and who have gone through the transformational process should be empowered to use their unique experience and street knowledge to end it. It is not enough that offenders released from the Department of Corrections (DOC) go on their way to live a successful life (the expectation of the rehabilitation model); they should be expected to produce positive tangible results that improve life in the communities they earlier destroyed. This will entail moving from the ineffective rehabilitation model presently employed within prisons, to the more effective transformation model to introduce a true new way of thinking. In this context, transformation would be open to all prisoners to raise self-awareness and moral consciousness in a way that brings them in alignment with their innate human nature. This process, to be effective, must be peer led, directed, and facilitated. Those released will further internalize this knowledge through the perpetual practice of reforming others who exhibit criminal tendencies. In this way, one ensures personal change by assisting in the efforts to change others.

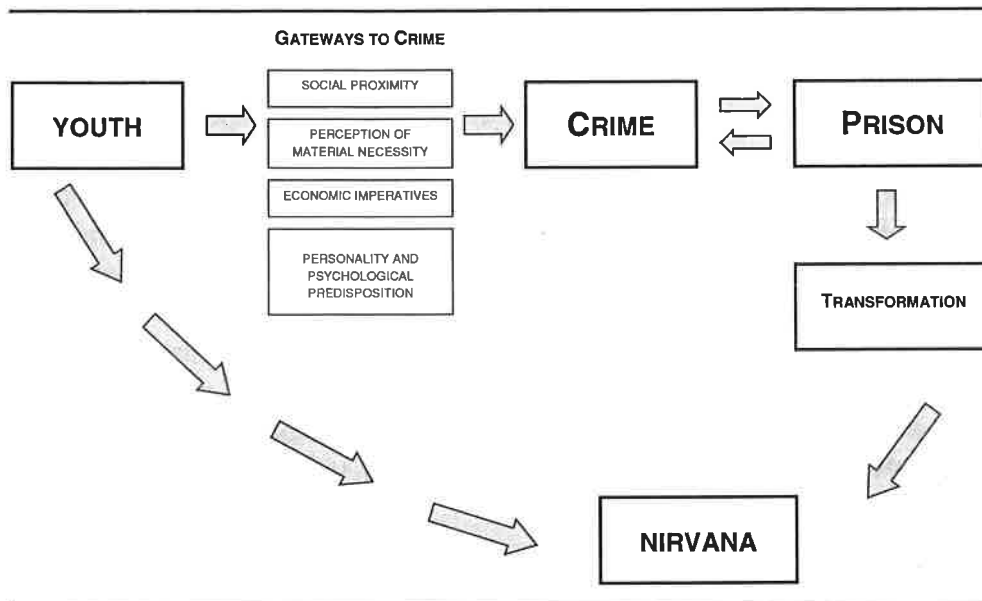


Figure 2: The Culture of Crime Cycle

PRISON REHABILITATION VERSUS THE TRANSFORMATION MODEL

THE REHABILITATION MODEL

Rehabilitation is based on the therapeutic model that suggests that those who commit crimes against society are somehow sick and in need of scientific treatment to correct them through psychiatric or psychological services, job training, education, and so on. Rehabilitation puts the onus on the individual offender, discounting all the sociological, political, economic, and cultural forces that went into his attraction to the street crime culture. Another fundamental setback to prison rehabilitation initiatives, which often following cognitive behavioral approaches, is that they are often attempted in environments wherein the positive changes sought are not reinforced, as is the case in most, if not all prisons. If prison inmates attend therapeutic programs intended to modify their behavior and teach respect for other human beings while residing in a hostile environment wherein they are disrespected, belittled, and perhaps forced to endure daily degradation rituals, then the unreinforced positive instructions may be canceled out entirely by the more powerful negative influences to which they are exposed on a regular basis. This is the dilemma, which sabotages the success of prison rehabilitation

measures. They are often contradictory in that one is instructed to evolve while yet rooted in an environment which almost guarantees, perhaps requires, their deevolution. Prison treatment programs and therapeutic discussion groups often provide new knowledge but produce little actual learning, if we define knowledge as the acquired facts and learning as a permanent change in behavior brought about as a result of reinforced practice. There is little opportunity to practice civility in an antagonistic prison environment and therefore very little long-term change in behavior. Therefore, it has proven to be very difficult to rehabilitate someone and punish him at the same time, which contributes to high levels of recidivism and the continuation of the culture of crime. Even when the treatment appears successful and the prisoner is inspired to change his life, when he begins reintegrating into the community and experiences the challenges of finding a job, making a living or being accepted, he suffers a moral breakdown and eventually reverts to what he knows and again takes on street crime values.

What we have discovered after years of personal experiences and objective observations is that the identity of an individual is essential to that individual's emotional and psychophysiological well-being. The ego, as is now well known, fortifies and protects itself vigorously, employing defense mechanisms designed to shield the identity from attack. For this reason, the sense of self, developed during one's formative years, is incredibly difficult to alter in one's later years.

Because one's concept of self is so essential to the mental and emotional health and well-being of the person, people will subconsciously resist efforts to try to change them if in the process their self-concept is challenged. For this reason, the rehabilitation model has often failed. In an attempt to circumvent the powerful defenses fortifying one's personality against change, penologists often use rewards and punishment as if the ego can be bribed or penalized into dropping its safeguards. It cannot, nor can one be expected to consciously alter deeply imbedded, subconsciously supported characteristics and behaviors for extended periods of time, simply because punishments or rewards are held out or alternative information is provided. The development of one's personality or character was a gradual process, and any alterations to it must likewise be the same.

Because the old model of personal reform through rewards and punishments tends to ignore the realities of the human personality and the development of the self, it has had many more failures than it has had successes. Current rehabilitation models are of this nature. The resistance to efforts to change a person's fundamental notions of self and the world around him or her are magnified exponentially when such efforts are made by those outside the individual's trusted peers, elders, and cultural group. Hence, forced

change produces little more than temporary modifications in behavior made to increase rewards and decrease punishment until such time as the individual can resume activities more in tune with his or her former internalized norms.

It is with this understanding that Einstein stated that the solution to a problem cannot come from the same consciousness as the one that created the problem. The consciousness of the person must be changed; however, the methods of such change must be made with an understanding of the defense mechanisms designed to prevent such change. Rehabilitation, as currently understood, does not often work for this reason. However, transformation is possible.

THE TRANSFORMATION MODEL

Rehabilitation differs from transformation in several important ways: Rehabilitation seeks to change the way a person behaves; transformation changes how a person thinks. Rehabilitation looks to the past; transformation is future oriented. Rehabilitation often occurs externally; transformation originates from within. To transform a person, one must first empower that person to see the world differently; to reconfigure one's way of not only relating to the world, but also fundamentally changing his or her way of perceiving that world as well. More information is not always a solution because lack of information is not always the problem. One can know the right way to perform yet still be incapable of performing in accord with one's acquired knowledge. Constructive change is not likely to occur if the required perceptual changes desired are introduced by members of out groups and/or not seen as viable to in-group members in whom the respective change is desired. All human characteristics are capable of being culturally transfused and/or modified. However, not all characteristics are viable to all cultures and, therefore, some may fail to take root when they do not take into account the idiosyncrasies of the individuals in question and the social context wherein they reside.

This is why it is so essential for one's peers, in this case offenders, to be utilized in the transformation process. Transformed offenders have legitimacy among their pretransformed peers that established social workers, prison officials, and law enforcement personnel do not have. In their attempts to rehabilitate, they may be momentarily obliged as long as rewards and punishments are proffered. However, this is not transformation. Their person is not changed, their perceptions remain the same, and their values and principles are left unaltered. Fundamental changes in personal philosophy, the aim of transformation, are not solely an individual intellectual phenomena and

are not complete until they are manifested by personal efforts to transform others ensnared in the street crime lifestyle. Hence, the transformation process that begins with the self ends with the transformation of others. This is not necessarily so with rehabilitation. A rehabilitated person need only show selected characteristics deemed desirable; a transformed person seeks to help reproduce these characteristics throughout his or her environment.

The need for returning to one's peers in an effort to transform them culturally is obvious. Only in the process of doing can one truly become. This is more than mere philosophic rhetoric but an essential truth in line with what is presently known about human conditioning. The more practice one has, the greater the likelihood that one perfect the desired changes in personality. Therefore, artists become great artists, not by attending discussion groups about great art but by practicing. Writers become accomplished writers not by talking to professional writers but by writing. Moreover, prisoners desiring to learn more socially productive behaviors do so not by sitting through endless hours of therapeutic group sessions but by returning to their communities and practicing the socially productive behaviors which they seek to make a part of their lives.

We advocate shifting the paradigm to a new transformation model for prisoners, so that after leaving the correctional facilities they will be empowered to add to the community as opposed to subtracting from it. Empowerment differs from inspiration, encouragement, rewards, and so on. These occur externally and are short lived, while empowerment is self-generating. The aim of rehabilitation is to restore the individual to some former state that may or may not have worked for the individual in the first place. Transformation, on the other hand, works to completely transform the person's way of thinking. The focus is not simply on the individual but instead on others and their responsibility to make a contribution to someone else's life.

ENDING THE CULTURE OF STREET CRIME WITHIN THE EXISTING PRISON CULTURE

Ending the culture of street crime that exists within the prison is a logical first step in challenging this culture. We have had some success in awakening a sense of moral and community responsibility in chronic offenders was previously achieved informally through daily interaction with parole-eligible prisoners. We are now committed to an organized effort to resurrect and activate the life-affirming value systems that lie dormant within the hearts and souls of many offenders.

Success can best be achieved in conjunction with a national movement that is interwoven throughout the fabric of our society. Under the mantra of “ending the culture of street crime,” every effort currently being made to make our world a healthy and safe place must be viewed within the context of eliminating this part of our culture. Consequently, it is our position that society should begin to use the experience, knowledge, insight, and expertise of transformed ex-offenders to do the work that members of the community and those in positions of authority are not equipped to do. Why? Because it is not only the behaviors of subgroups that are unique but also their distinct use of language and their values, principles, and norms. They often have distinct mannerisms, codes, and dress. Those outside these shared beliefs, who neither understand nor appreciate these differences, are unlikely to affect them. However, the chances of those who understand and who once themselves shared these differences increase significantly. The members of LIFERS, Inc. form the nucleus of such groups in which cognitive behavioral change is desired and can penetrate as accepted parts of the group, where foreign entities cannot.

With this in mind, when parole-eligible prisoners have completed the transformation process, they will readily accept the responsibility of intervening with those currently engaged in criminal activities to rescue them from aberrant lifestyles. Eventually, the work of these former prisoners will involve prevention, including speaking to and challenging youth at various locations where they congregate.

Six approaches were presented at the 2003 Anticrime Summit, and LIFERS, Inc. has continued to work on refining them. The aim is to transform, organize, train, and equip prisoners with the skills necessary to empower current perpetrators to leave the culture to assist at-risk youth in avoiding entry into the culture, and to assist people of the community in addressing the destructive quality-of-life issues that sap the vitality of the area. A series of goals have been established for advancing the following projects that are under development: Life-Line; Deal-Me-Out; Economic Empowerment; Recovering Victims/Community/Offenders; Lifers CORP; and Proceed. Recognizing that the Public Safety Initiative is not simply projects, programs, or workshops, the larger goal of eliminating the culture of crime is being advanced through weekly discussions about the effects of the crime culture with individuals who will be returning home from SCIG prison. Changing their way of thinking about committing crime is achieved through personal empowerment and personal responsibility and by creating opportunities for personal growth and development. Through our community partnership meetings, prisoners get to hear firsthand from citizens on the

damage done to people as a result of criminal activities. This aids in instilling the necessary level of empowerment for men to stand up against the negative forces that will oppose them in their efforts to change their value system. Overall, our methods include three specific areas: challenging the culture of the crime value system; awakening the human spirit that is alive but buried in each individual; and instilling a sense of community responsibility in each prisoner. This will be accomplished by using the three principles of enrollment, inclusion, and empowerment.

CHALLENGES TO BE OVERCOME

We feel empowered to play a central role in the movement to end the culture of crime. Yet we face important challenges in this work. Perhaps most significant, we recognize that what we are proposing is not a panacea for all of the problems in America. We are limited in what we can do about the socioeconomic and other larger forces that, in many ways, not only support but also generate the crime culture. Our focus is primarily on factors on the individual level and the street and prison values that justify and condone resorting to violence to achieve goals.

We believe that we can have a real impact on those currently active in this culture of crime and violence and that we can make a dramatic impact on many youth who now appear to be headed in the same direction. We also know that the impact can be greater if we work in partnership with a variety of community stakeholders. We will inevitably face the challenge of dealing with individual and institutional resistance to change because what we are proposing would not serve to perpetuate the status quo. It calls for a change in attitudes, thinking and values of our whole society. This will require the assistance of academics, penologists, social workers, law enforcement, legislators, and concerned citizens to participate in our efforts to create a crime-free society. It also requires policy makers and community service providers to go beyond their limitations to craft a new model and strategy to directly confront the street crime cultural values that are at the heart of the crime epidemic. Only then will we experience real success in ending it. In this regard, for us to do our part, to play our role in effecting tangible results, we need the assistance and technical experience of researchers, program developers, curriculum writers, and most of all, the willingness of those who adhere to traditional methods of fighting crime to be open to the possibility that this culture of crime exists and is one of the major factors why old approaches have and will, indeed, continue to fail.

CONCLUSION

This article summarizes the results of the efforts of LIFERS, Inc. to determine how we can play an active role in restoring communities ravaged by crime and violence into safe, healthy environments where children can grow up safely and families can prosper. We have worked to ascertain how we might reverse the trend of focusing primarily on changing the behavior of the individual in efforts to achieve public safety and to move in a more constructive and hopeful direction. We believe that by adding the input of transformed prisoners, we can become a part of the solution heavily invested in solving our mutual problem.

LIFERS, Inc. at SCIG has evolved dramatically from an organization formed to educate the public and advocate for the possibility of parole for life-sentenced prisoners to a group committed to nothing less than creating an understanding that solving crime is a possibility. There has been a shift in our thinking as individuals, and as an organization, to a growing awareness of what it could mean if prisoners ever decided that they wanted to change the value system that underlies and supports the culture of crime and violence.

We have come to realize that what is going on out in the streets is related to what we did and how we thought. As our awareness shifted, our thinking has become clearer, and our emphasis is no longer simply on a series of projects. The changes we are describing have resulted in a new way of being for us. We recognize, as Viktor Frankl (2000) expressed so clearly, that we all need meaning in our lives. As we became agents of change, we became more dissatisfied with our present circumstances as passive bystanders and with our past participation in the culture. Therefore, we became active in reversing the negative forces that are slowly destroying our communities. In addition, many of us have family members who have been victims of crime or are afraid of being victimized.

Transformed men of SCIG complete the circle in the search for public safety. We know we cannot achieve our aims alone, and we do not think criminal justice or other professionals and citizens groups can do it without our help. We are among the few who can truly reach current offenders where they are, if only because we once occupied that place. We can achieve true restoration, as well as more effective intervention and prevention, by working in partnership with all elements of the community seeking to create a better and safer future.

Our initiatives have been tailored to repair the harm we and others, caught up in the cycle of crime and violence, have wrought. We are working actively to replace the culture of crime and violence behind prison walls and within

the larger community by instilling new values and ways of thinking in prisoners. We are also engaged in work designed to help implement better means of preventing future generations of youth from moving into this culture of street crime. We look forward to a true community partnership that will inspire a large-scale movement to eliminate the culture of crime and violence wherever it exists and in whatever way any group can make a contribution to that end.

NOTES

1. The End Violence Project was created in 1988 as a non-profit organization committed to ending violence without violence. Founder/Director Mahin Bina partnered with LIFERS Inc. because she recognized that life-term prisoners can be a powerful force for ending the cycle of violence.
2. Landmark Education is a global education enterprise recognized for a unique educational technology. It is an employee-owned company with 750 professionally trained course leaders worldwide.
3. Men United for a Better Philadelphia is a grass roots coalition of concerned citizens and community services groups who are committed to making the streets of Philadelphia safe, and significantly reducing incidents of crime and violence.

REFERENCES

- Frankl, V. (2000). *Man's search for meaning: An introduction to logotherapy*. Boston: Beacon Press.

