

Violent Children and the Village

By Fred E. Foldvary

The shooting that killed two students in Springfield, Oregon, is the latest in a recent rash of murders by children. From October 1997 to May 21, 1998, the toll is 14 teachers and students slaughtered by child killers, along with three dozen wounded by the violence. In many of these cases, the suspects were known to be troubled youth, who often gave warnings shortly before perpetrating their deadly acts.

Several reasons have been put forth for this increasing violence. One is the greater availability of guns, and ever more powerful weapons. Another is the culture of violence, including brutality on television. Children's video games typically consist of zapping, smashing, and pulverizing some opponent. Lack of supervision is blamed. Schools are dealing with the problem by trying to prevent students from bringing in weapons and by trying to teach children to solve problems peacefully.

But I believe there is a more fundamental cause of what seems to be ever increasing violence by children. This is more a general impression and insight, rather than something I can warrant with facts and figures. I think the basic cause of violent children is the loss of the village. For thousands of years, up to the 20th Century, human beings have lived in small groups, in villages. In the village, folks know one another, and children grow up in a community of extended families. When the parents are hunting or in the fields farming or herding animals, the grandparents watch over the children, or maybe an uncle or aunt.

That old African saying made popular by Mrs. Clinton, "it takes a village to raise a child," is profoundly true. Unfortunately, when people invoke that saying today, they mean more government projects for children. But while some government programs can be helpful, government is often also a cold and cruel master. Bureaucracy is not a good substitute for family and community.

How did the village get destroyed? It was the centralization of government which deliberately demolished local governance and local cultures. One sad example was in the Village of Arden in Delaware, founded in 1900 by followers of the reformer Henry George as a model community. It had wonderful community spirit and its own local school in which the local heritage could be passed on. The school was racially integrated before the civil rights movement and law mandated it. But then in 1969, state law compelled Arden to give up local educational control. The village had to join the larger school district, a significant loss for community spirit.

School busing further destroyed neighborhood cohesion. Urban renewal wiped out whole communities and transferred the poor into huge housing projects, which deteriorated into drugs and violence and decay. As cities grew, functions such as police and street maintenance were shifted to governments, while power has shifted this century from towns to state governments and from states to the federal government. It now takes a country to raise a child.

How can we restore the village in this era of huge metropolises? By radically decentralizing. This would involve a restructuring of governance, voting, and taxation. Each local neighborhood of about 500 people would elect a neighborhood village council. There would be no more elections for city, state, and national governments. A group of about 20 village councils would elect the next higher level council, and that council would elect the next level, on up to the city, state, and federal governments. I described this bottom-up multi-level voting system in my October 1997 editorial, "Democracy Needs Reforming." (This item and others are available in the Progress Report archive.)

With all elections based on the village, power would devolve to the neighborhood council. The village would take control of services that can be done locally, such as parks, street maintenance, some schools, and security. There would be a village committee that would take responsibility for children. It would help provide child care, counselling, therapy, recreation and supervision. Children would grow up feeling sympathy with the community rather than the alienation many feel from society. Parents, teachers, and students would be able to refer troubled children to community groups. This care would be more flexible, more personal, more effective than governmental and bureaucratic agencies.

Effective village governance requires effective sources of local revenue, not trickle-down money from above with strings attached. The best source of village revenue is land rent. Income and sales taxes are not feasible at the local level, because people and capital will flee communities with higher taxes. But when land rent is collected instead, higher rates just lower the price of land; the land does not run away or hide. So to really devolve power to the village takes a radical tax reform that replaces all income, sales, and property taxes with user fees, pollution charges, and the public and community collection of land rent.

The idea of local neighborhood councils is an old one, and one which communists and socialists favored a hundred years ago! The Russian revolutionaries wanted this, which is why they called their country the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. "**Soviet**" in Russian means council. The communist revolutionaries had the slogan, "All power to the soviets!" They wanted political power to be based on the local village councils and flow up from there. Of course what actually happened after the revolutions of 1917 was instead the centralization of power by the Communist Party.

Another reform that would reduce violence by children is the freedom to work and assume adult responsibility. Let teenagers work and encourage apprentice programs where children can learn skills and good work habits. Eliminate minimum wage laws that keep teenagers out of the job market - and also eliminate the taxes that rob low-income workers of their earnings.

In my view, so long as we have mass democracy, commercialized culture, bureaucratic government schooling, and centralized political power, the culture of violence will only get worse, because all the gun control and lecturing about conflict resolution will not deal with the cause, the alienation of children from society. It really does take a village, otherwise we have nuclear families floating in mass society with no grounding in community, tradition, folk culture, and neighborhood relationships.

Bring back the village! All power to the "soviets"!!