

Children and Crime in American Culture

It was hardly a century ago that social activists launched a crusade to save children from the exploitation of industry. Children, some as young as 9 years old, were often forced to work 10 and 12 hour shifts in America's factories and foundries. Even in rural areas many children were expected to work along side adults bringing in the harvest.

Since the 1920s, however, our view of children has changed. Reform movements, many of them championed by Christians, have asserted that children are not adults and should be protected. Child labor laws limit the age at which children are allowed to work. Laws determine when children may drive, legally drink alcohol and marry. We also do not allow children to vote until a certain age-this to keep them from being exploited for political purposes.

We also protect the physical well-being of children with laws prohibiting physical violence and sexual abuse. We also protect and nurture children's educational and spiritual lives. Most states have mandatory school requirements for children under the age of 16, and only God knows how much churches spend trying to fulfill Jesus' admonition to "let the children come to me."

Standing in stark contrast to these many efforts to protect and nurture children, however, is a growing trend in American culture to treat children who commit crimes as if they were adults. Motivated by political pressure to "get tough on crime," the last several decades have seen thousands of children under the age of 17 and some as young as 10 being convicted as adults of crimes they have committed as children.

This trend is most tragically seen in capital cases where children and youth commit murder. Since 1973 nearly 200 youth under 18 have been sentenced to death in the United States. The Supreme Court has ruled that the execution of children as young as 16 is not a violation of the Eighth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which prohibits "cruel and unusual punishment." Only five other countries-Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Iran-have executed people for crimes they committed as children, and the U.S. has executed more than any

other nation.

It is worth asking why? Why in a culture that claims to care for children are we willing to abandon children to the prison system or the death penalty when they commit crimes? How is it that we believe that at a certain age a child or youth is incapable of making responsible decision about marriage or voting, but if they commit a crime, they are responsible enough to die for their misdeed?

The answer is found in the deep commitment we have in our culture to punitive violence. We believe in violence, in the religious sense of the word "believe." We believe that punishing evil with pain will eventually stop the evil. Apparently this belief in punitive violence is so strong in our culture that it trumps our belief in the need to protect and nurture children.

Obviously there are no easy answers here. We certainly cannot ignore the crimes of children. We do not serve the wider community by allowing the violent behavior of anyone to go unchecked.

But given our desire to protect and nurture children, we might want to pause before pulling the plug on these young lives and ask what happened. Maybe if we could understand how children come to commit violent crimes we could find ways to prevent it from happening. In this case, an ounce of prevention could save many young lives.

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