

implemented on a shoestring, and a rather short shoestring with a brief window of opportunity to show results. This is a recipe for failure and provides additional fodder for skeptics.

Smart crime fighting involves a balanced blend of enforcement (from community policing to identifying illegal gun markets), treatment modalities (from drug rehab on demand to community corrections and prisoner reentry services), as well as general and targeted crime prevention (from family support to summer jobs for high-risk youth). Regrettably, the prevention approach has at times been disparaged as "worthless" and as "soft on crime." Yet, this cynical perspective reflects gross misunderstanding of the process and goals of prevention, and a selective examination of outcomes. Simply put: Prevention programs can work; good prevention programs that are well implemented do work.²⁹

Besides the matter of funding adequacy, there are five fundamental principles of crime and violence prevention that are critical to a successful investment:

1. No program is successful all the time or for all individuals. No matter how exceptional the initiative is, there will be failures, that is, those who recidivate despite our best efforts to prevent it. Rather than focusing on the failures (as the media tend to do in their "good news is no news; bad news is big news" posture), the goal should be a reasonable reduction in offending rates. In light of the enormous social and administrative costs associated with each criminal act, even modest gains are worthwhile.
2. Prevention should have an emphasis on the prefix *pre-*. Although it is unwise and inappropriate to "give up" on even a seemingly hardened offender, the greatest opportunity for positive impact comes with a focus on children—those who are young and impressionable and will be impressed with what a teacher, preacher, or some other authority figure has to say. It is well known that early prevention—during grade school if not earlier—can carry the greatest and longest-lasting impact before a youngster is seduced by gangs, drugs, and crime. It is far easier and considerably less expensive to build the child than to rebuild the teenager. It is more effective to "prehabilitate" early than to rehabilitate later.
3. Patience is more than a virtue; it is a requirement. Prevention is not a short-term strategy. Rather, it involves a continued effort, undaunted by setbacks. Unfortunately, many prevention programs are given short windows in which to show progress and are often terminated before the final results are in.
4. Prevention should take a multifaceted approach. Understandably, there is much temptation to target gang activity as perhaps the most visible and immediate threat to public safety. Although that is laudable and should be strengthened, there are many other points of intervention for successful crime reduction programming. For example, several proven and promising strategies are directed at at-risk families with young children. Rather than criticizing struggling underage mothers for their lack of parenting effectiveness, many programs support them in raising children who are less likely to become juvenile offenders. In addition, many school-based initiatives effectively and efficiently enhance the well-being of large numbers of children. Behavioral skills training at the elementary school level, antibullying curricula for middle school

students that recognize the link between bullying and later offending, peer mediation and mentoring programs in high school, and after-school activities targeted at the "prime time for juvenile crime," all have payoffs far greater than the investment.

5. Prevention is significantly cost-effective.

Virtually all assessments of crime prevention confirm the adage that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of prison time. It is, however, a political reality that sound investments in crime prevention can take years to reap the benefits. It takes a bold leader to earmark funds today for tomorrow's improvement for which his or her successor may derive credit.

DIAL M FOR MEDIA

Despite the highly successful effort in Boston and elsewhere to reduce the level of teenage violence, especially that relating to street gangs and guns, the problem has hardly been resolved. Although crack- and gang-related violence may have taken a nosedive, the nation must still contend with long-term issues, from supervision and television (too little of one and too much of the other) to adolescent angst and alienation.

It is easy enough to implicate the mass media—especially movies, television, video games, and YouTube—for the occurrence of hideous violence on a national level. Certainly, there is at least some evidence collected over several decades that a steady diet of media-depicted violence can help to desensitize young people, distorting their perceptions of social reality, and even inspiring heinous, brutal crimes in copycat fashion. The average child now grows up observing thousands of murders and tens of thousands of violent acts on TV and other forms of entertainment. Cumulatively, this has an effect, although the exact size and nature of the effect have been debated for almost as long as television has existed.

Communication research conducted for decades suggests that people who watch many hours of television every day tend to overestimate the percentage of the world population that is white and male, underestimate the level of poverty in our country, and exaggerate the amount of violence they are likely to encounter. Heavy viewers also tend to overestimate the proportion of jury trials in our courts and the number of miracle cures performed by doctors. They are socialized to accept a false view of reality because this is precisely what they see on TV every evening.

According to George Gerbner, children who view TV excessively tend to develop what he has labeled a "mean world view."³⁰ Wherever they look—in their neighborhood after dark, on the streets on the way to school, on the playground with their peers—they see violence and the threat of violence. They grow up feeling intimidated and vulnerable. In line with the television version of life, they exaggerate their likelihood of becoming a victim of violent crime.

Everywhere you turn on TV, you find violence. Because violence is entertaining, it sells; it keeps the ratings high; it keeps programs on the air.³¹ The list of programs featuring violence seems endless—*Criminal Minds*, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, *Major Crimes*, *Chicago P.D.*, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, almost everything aired on the Investigation Discovery network, not to mention local and network newscasts. The Lifetime Channel produces so many movies about murder that it belies the very name of the network.

Actually, our entire popular culture has increasingly become a culture of murder and violence. Gangsta rap lyrics often extol the virtues of shooting women and attacking whites, gays, and the police. Some heavy metal music expresses themes in which blacks, immigrants, gays, and women are brutalized. The entire genre of death metal, death rap, and horrorcore focuses on violent topics including murder, rape, mutilation, cannibalism, necrophilia, and suicide. White Power music calls for a racial holy war, one which white Christians would ultimately win.

Even more troubling, perhaps, are the new forms of hero worship, which have always been an integral part of the process whereby young people—adults included—are socialized to internalize society's most cherished norms and values. Over the decades, we have celebrated members of society who have reached the pinnacle of success in their fields by honoring them in movies, documentaries, magazine profiles, and even on trading cards. More recently, we have extended our celebration to what some consider our new antiheroes, those who distinguished themselves in the worst possible ways by reaching the pinnacle of "success" as murderers.

Celebrating evil and murder in popular culture, as described in Chapter 1, may be having a particularly profound impact on teenagers who want to be important but often feel ignored by parents, peers, and teachers. The lesson youngsters may be this: Behave yourself and adults won't notice; go on a rampage at school, and you become a big-shot superstar.

Magnifying the problem of a toxic culture, millions of children and teenagers lack adequate parental supervision, living with a single working parent or in a household where both parents hold full-time jobs. Although many youngsters enjoy substitute forms of supervision provided by extended family, neighbors, or day care, far too many have no regular monitoring by adults. These children, when home from school to an empty house, grab a snack from the refrigerator and watch anything they want on television. If their television service lacks channels showing their choice of a grotesque movie, they can always stream some R-rated or unrated movie on a mobile device. Or they can play a violent video game in which they rehearse—in a virtually realistic manner—stabbing, shooting, bombing, or running down other people. Or, they can roam the internet, visit an array of pornographic, violent, and hate-filled websites.

In some respects, violence in television and film, which has been the focus of most of the debate over the decades, is relatively tame. It represents a passive form of entertainment, compared to the more active participation provided by video games. Rather than just lie on the living room couch and witness a massacre on television, children can cybernetically kill on demand—and learn to enjoy it through one of many violent action games available to them in computer stores or on the internet.

Critics often point to examples of mass killers to make the case that violent video game playing encourages violent behavior. It hardly went unnoticed that Adam Lanza, who killed his mother and then shot his way through the Hook Elementary School, killing 26 children and teachers, played violent video games incessantly while hiding in his basement away from the outside world. When he did venture outside, it was often to go to a nearby movie theater. When he spent hours playing a nonviolent video game, *Dance, Dance Revolution*, of course, there were many other psychological factors that would have contributed to his murderous actions. As such, his obsession with video games was likely a symptom of his infirmity and social anxiety than a cause of his behavior.³²

The Pew Research Center has estimated that as many as 90% of children in the United States play video games, and that figure rises to 97% for adolescents.

between the ages of 12 and 17.³³ This is especially worrisome to children's advocates because the majority of games on the market feature violence, and many to an extreme level.

Moreover, the intrinsic incentives and rewards, such as accruing a top score from killing, advancing through game levels while developing homicidal mastery, and defeating an opponent in an internet-based competition, reinforce the will to kill, at least in the game setting. Although these games are fantasy, with surround sound and high-definition graphics, the line between virtual reality and stark reality can become rather thin. Moreover, role-playing games and virtual reality devices have taken gaming another step toward realism.

It has been a challenge for adolescent development scholars to keep their research agenda up to pace with the fast-changing world of gaming technology. Even so, some of the evidence, involving a range of methodological approaches, suggests that frequently playing violent video games tends to impact negatively on a youngster's attitudes and affect. The frequent gamer may become angry or desensitized, but not necessarily more violent. The extent to which violent games alter behavior is a wide-open question. After all, it would be unethical and hardly feasible to conduct a controlled randomized experiment that might definitively resolve the debate over whether playing violent games increases the propensity to commit serious acts of violence.

At the same time, an experimental study from the Indiana University School of Medicine has uncovered an impact of playing video games with violent themes on the gamer's brain activity. The researchers compared randomly formed groups of adolescents who played violent and nonviolent video games for a half-hour period. MRI scans of the area of the brain responsible for emotional arousal indicated significantly greater activity among subjects in the violent game-playing group than those in a comparison group.³⁴ Of course, it would be a leap to generalize these findings to actual behavior.

Reviewing the results of dozens of research studies on the effects of playing violent video games, psychologist Craig Anderson reported a statistically significant link between exposure to the games and increases in aggressive behavior, aggressive thinking, aggressive affect, and cardiovascular arousal, as well as decreases in helping behavior.³⁵ To whatever extent the evidence can implicate a causal connection, there are concerns, both in Congress and in living rooms across America, over the long-term impact of this thriving and relatively unregulated industry. However, most of the research that purports to find a link between violent video game playing and aggressive behavior is based on correlational evidence that cannot establish cause and effect.³⁶ It may just be that children predisposed to violent behavior are especially attracted to violent games (and other violence-filled forms of entertainment). The "chicken-and-egg" debate wages on and may never be settled conclusively.³⁷ In addition, some researchers have claimed that increased playing of video games, be they of violent or nonviolent content, keeps youngster safe in front of their screens, rather than hanging out where they can get into fights, or worse.³⁸ Still, even with some remaining ambiguity in interpreting the association between violent video games and aggression, both the American Psychological Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics have taken policy stands discouraging violent games for developing minds.

Of course, concern among pediatricians, parents, and politicians alike over the effects of violent entertainment of all forms on impressionable children is hardly new. As early as the 1960s, parents and child advocates were alarmed about exposing young viewers to unrealistic images of "cleaned-up violence." That is, because television programs and motion pictures of the day failed to depict the

destructive aspects of punching, stabbing, and shooting, youngsters were growing up believing that violence didn't have consequences. To placate anxious parents, moreover, a voluntary code of the motion picture industry—movie ratings—was established to give them an opportunity to censor their children's viewing choices.

Beginning in the 1970s, the problem of sanitized film violence was replaced by a much more troubling phenomenon. To lure young people to the box office, producers frequently gave them exactly what they wanted—more graphic sex and violence. The movie rating system soon became a media version of “forbidden fruit”—more a guide for children in determining what they really must see than a guide for parents on what their children must not see. Experimental studies and factors influencing viewer selection have found that teenaged boys, in particular, prefer programs and films with an R rating or a parental warning, regardless of their content.³⁹ From the perspective of a young viewer, if you're not part of a mature audience, then you must be part of the immature audience, and what's respecting, red-blooded American adolescent wants to be labeled that?

Parental warnings and violence ratings have been extended to television shows and video games under the assumption—or rather hope—that they assist parents in choosing age-appropriate entertainment options. But as with films, the more mature ratings tend to boost the desirability of proscribed material among immature youngsters who are eager for adulthood.

Experiments have also shown that a steady diet of R-rated films in which violence and sex are fused together actually desensitizes youngsters to the plausibility of rape. For teenagers who are having trouble making the transition into adulthood, such films may also confuse them into believing that they cannot have sex without violence—that the one is inseparable from the other.⁴⁰

The impact of media violence can be aggravated or mitigated, depending on the circumstances in which children grow up. It isn't that the mass media are all that powerful; it is that our other institutions—our families, our schools, our churches and synagogues, our neighborhoods, our businesses, our political system—have become so weak with respect to raising children. Already-troubled kids with a host of biological, psychological, and social problems may be more susceptible to the messages in violent media, but the vast majority of consumers of violent media believe it will never harm anyone. Violent media becomes the scapegoat if policymakers are unwilling to deal with the more important causes of violence.

In Japan, by contrast, television programs are much more violent than their American counterparts. Yet the level of street violence in Japan remains comparatively low. Part of the reason involves the continuing power of Japanese traditional values on its youth. But another important difference is that Japanese parents hardly use television as a babysitter the way that it is more typically used in the United States. In Japan, children watch television with an adult—a parent, a grandparent, a family friend—who monitors, guides, interprets, and explains. Thus, the fundamental issue is not just what children are watching but who is watching the children.

In the United States, rather than provide creative alternatives to parental supervision, politicians and entertainment industry leaders sought to develop a method for allowing parents to continue working full-time while still having remote control over their children's access to violent television. Under pressure to do something to shield children from shows that may be too disturbing for them, Congress enacted legislation mandating that, effective January 2000, all televisions had to be equipped with a V-chip (V for violence), with which parents can theoretically filter out the most offensive programs from their children's school viewing options.

Although most parents are at least somewhat familiar with the television rating system, most don't make an effort to utilize any filtering tools. A 2016 survey found that only 36% of parents actually utilize either the television's V-chip or parental controls provided by their cable or satellite service.⁴¹

Even for parents who make use of the V-chip or similar device, it may be naïve to expect that unsupervised teenagers, left alone in front of their V-chip-controlled TV sets, will instead tune into National Geographic, read Shakespeare, or take up chess. More likely, they will bypass their parents' attempts at absentee censorship by streaming a grotesque film on their mobile device, playing a violent video game, or listening to the hate-filled lyrics of some rap and heavy metal. Or they might just go over to a friend's house whose parents didn't program their V-chip. The lesson is clear: Technology cannot adequately substitute for genuine attention and involvement from parents and other significant adults in the daily lives of children.

In the final analysis, even with enhanced rating systems and parental controls, it is important not to let the entertainment industry off the hook for its willingness to pander to and profit from the darker side of human behavior. At the same time, we should be careful not to place inordinate blame on the entertainment industry for violent acts perpetrated by children and teenagers. We should be similarly wary of single-issue critics who contend that the problem of kids today is the media, plain and simple. If anything is simple, it is the fallacy in such a simple-minded point of view.

It is true, of course, that experimental research has suggested a link between exposure to violent entertainment and attitudes tolerant of aggression. Yet we must also keep in mind that experiments are often limited in terms of real-world generalizability. Even if children are stimulated neurologically or appear somewhat desensitized in affect after viewing violent content or playing violent games, there are questions—and in the minds of some critics, lots of questions—whether this translates into lasting change in behavior. In addition, if violent entertainment were at the very root of the youth violence problem, as antimedia zealots claim, how can we account for the decline in rates of juvenile violence in the 1990s? Clearly, there was no reduction in the spread or popularity of violent entertainment. Perhaps if kids are spending their days and nights in front of video games, they aren't out committing crimes or being vulnerable to victimization by others?

The media have, at times, been used as a convenient scapegoat, and censorship has been proposed as an easy solution. Public concerns, political considerations, self-interests, and fear have often encouraged us to point fingers at a profitable industry, while ignoring some of the fundamental causes of violence that are much more difficult to resolve.

JUVENILES IN THE ADULT SYSTEM

Under the "infancy defense" from English common law, persons younger than age 7 could not be charged with crimes because of an irrefutable presumption that they lacked the ability to form criminal intent. For children between the ages of 7 and 14, the same presumption held, but it could be challenged or refuted based on evidence to the contrary. In common law, defendants older than 14 were considered no different than adults in terms of culpability or responsibility. By the end of the nineteenth century, children's advocates in the United States had become deeply disturbed about the treatment of minors by the criminal justice system, and understandably so. Children and adolescents were being prosecuted, convicted, and imprisoned in the same manner (and in the same institutions) as

adults. Wanting to provide an alternative approach not just for young criminals but for incorrigible children as well, the so-called "child saving movement" successfully pushed for the nation's first juvenile court.⁴² Established in Chicago in 1899, the new juvenile court was designed to take a therapeutic rather than punitive approach to handling youthful delinquents and status offenders. The process was to be paternalistic rather than adversarial.

The new approach to juvenile justice spread quickly, and through much of the twentieth century the juvenile court movement appeared to fare quite well. Over time, juveniles were afforded expanded rights (e.g., the right to an attorney), just like adults in criminal courts. By the 1980s, however, as rates of juvenile violence and murder, in particular, began to surge, politicians and the public alike questioned the role and appropriateness of juvenile court for these dangerous offenders of tender age.

A child found delinquent for committing a homicide or another serious crime would generally serve time within a juvenile detention facility until the age of majority (generally 18 years of age) or, in some states, a few additional years at the discretion of the judge. Under the assumption that wayward youths could be rehabilitated into law-abiding adults, juvenile sentences even for serious crimes were, for the most part, relatively short.

Even from the earliest years of the juvenile court system, the criminal courts were not completely willing to give up jurisdiction over all crimes committed by children. In part, the battle between the "kiddie courts" and the more prestigious and powerful adult courts was a political one over authority and turf.⁴³ More generally, in response to concerns that some youthful offenders were simply not amenable to treatment (as well as doubts about the efficacy of rehabilitation itself), waiver procedures allowed juvenile court judges to transfer particular defendants over to criminal adult court for prosecution and punishment. On a case-by-case basis, certain repeat, chronic, or violent youths were appropriately removed from the jurisdiction of juvenile court.

As the pressure on the juvenile court to take a harsher stance toward murder and other serious offenses mounted, however, judges began deciding the transfer question even for first-time offenders, less on the basis of treatment amenability and more to satisfy public opinion. In 1986, for example, 14-year-old Rod Matthews of Canton, Massachusetts, was arrested for the murder of his classmate, Shaun Ouillette; because of widespread outrage over the shocking and senseless crime, he became at that time one of the youngest children tried for murder in adult court.

Apparently, Matthews had made a hit list of possible victims, huddled with two buddies to determine the most deserving target, and then led his unsuspecting victim into the woods, where he bludgeoned the boy with a baseball bat. Afterward, Matthews brought his friends to view the body and to show off his courage. Despite his young age and lack of any criminal record, the juvenile court judge waived jurisdiction over to the adult court in the face of intense pressure from the victim's family and the local media.

In a closely watched Florida case, 12-year-old Lionel Tate was arrested in July 1999 for beating and stomping to death his 6-year-old neighbor, Tiffany Eunick. Tate claimed that her death was an accident, occurring during rough-house play in which he was imitating wrestling moves he had seen on television. Although old enough to be prosecuted as an adult, Tate was deemed too immature to have final say in whether to accept a plea bargain for a lesser penalty that had been offered by the prosecution. Instead, his mother insisted on a trial, a trial in which Tate was convicted and sentenced to life in prison.

Widespread concern for the harshness of the outcome, an outcome that was prescribed by Florida law, may very well have been considered when an appellate court in 2004 overturned his conviction. Tate subsequently accepted a plea deal for second-degree murder, receiving a term of incarceration equal to time already served and 10 years of probation. While the resolution was hailed by legal scholars, within 9 months Tate violated the terms of his probation by staying out after curfew and was returned to jail. Released once again in late 2004 with an extra 5 years of probation, Tate was unable to keep his nose clean. In May 2005, having by then reached the age of maturity, he was arrested for robbery and reincarcerated. Ending the long legal saga surrounding the troubled youngster, Tate was sentenced to 30 years in prison for violating his probation by possessing a gun and breaking a glass door at the Broward County Jail.

Unlike the judicial waiver strategy that many states had employed, the New York state legislature, reeling from a brutal double murder committed by a 15-year-old, decided to take matters into its own hands. In 1978, after 15-year-old Willie Bosket was sentenced to a maximum term of 5 years in Family Court for killing two men on the subway, the legislature passed the New York Juvenile Offender Law (aka the "Willie Bosket Law") mandating that all juvenile defendants as young as 13 who are charged with murder shall be processed in adult court and receive adult sentences unless there was compelling reason to move the case down to juvenile court.

How young is too young to hold children accountable? In New York, at least, 9-year-old girls who kill are handled with a sensible measure of compassion. During Memorial Day weekend in 2005, K. Shanine (identity protected) of Brooklyn fatally stabbed her best friend, 11-year-old Queen Washington, during an argument over a rubber ball. Although charged with murder, Shanine pled guilty to second-degree manslaughter and as a juvenile would serve a maximum of 18 months in a youth facility.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, years after the Matthews and Bosket cases, juvenile murder rates rose sharply, and state legislatures responded with harsh measures. Rather than leave the waiver decision up to the judges, the wisdom of whose decisions was being questioned in the appellate court of public opinion, lawmakers generally proposed two alternative strategies: prosecutorial discretion and statutory exclusions. In the former, the determination as to whether to charge a youngster in juvenile or adult court is made by the prosecutor under the logic that this public official, elected by the citizenry, is more responsive to public mood than are judges, who in some states are appointed to the bench for extended terms. Alternatively, some state legislatures opted to write into the law exactly which offenses (e.g., homicides by offenders ages 14 and over) are excluded from juvenile court jurisdiction. Some states simply lowered the age of majority below the traditional 18 years old for all offenses. A few eliminated altogether the statutory lower limit on eligibility for criminal prosecution in adult court.

The 1990s saw rapid change in transfer laws across the country.⁴⁴ Between 1992 and 1997, amid the widespread panic over juvenile violence, 17 states expanded the range of offenses and lowered the eligibility age for judicial waiver. During these same years, 27 states expanded the list of crimes that were excluded from juvenile court jurisdiction, and 7 states reduced the age when these exclusions kicked in. Eleven states increased the range of crimes and reduced the age limits when prosecutors could opt to file charges in either juvenile or adult court.

These changes opened the floodgate wide for juvenile offenders to be charged and prosecuted in adult criminal courts. From 1985 to 1996, for example, the number of delinquency cases waived from juvenile to adult court, generally through

decisions of the juvenile court judges, rose 47%, from 6,800 to about 10,000 annually. For violent offenses specifically, including homicide, the number of waivers more than doubled from about 2,000 per year to over 4,000 per year.⁴⁵ In addition to these more traditional transfers, many times more youngsters were being tried as adults arising from decisions by prosecutors to file cases in adult court or from statutory exclusions of cases away from juvenile court jurisdiction. As a consequence of the movement to prosecute juveniles as adults, the number of offenders under age 18 sentenced to serve time in an adult correctional facility also climbed, from 3,400 in 1985 to 7,400 in 1997.⁴⁶ As the rate of youth violence diminished during the latter half of the 1990s, so did the number of juveniles prosecuted in adult court and subsequently sent to state prisons. After peaking in the mid-1990s, the number of juveniles admitted to prison fell 45% from 1996 to 2002.

Despite the downturn in admissions, the youthfulness of certain offenders prosecuted as adults is still quite striking. In 2014, two 12-year-old girls in Waukesha, Wisconsin, were arrested for attempting to kill a classmate. The victim was stabbed nineteen times all across her body, yet managed to survive. The alleged assailants claimed that they planned and carried out the attack in order to appease Slender Man, a fearsome but fictional supernatural character. Despite their youth and the bizarre nature of the crime, the defendants were transferred to the jurisdiction of the adult court.

The two Wisconsin girls are far from the only preteens to experience the harsh realities of the adult criminal court. In 1999, Nathaniel Abraham of Pontiac, Michigan, was tried as an adult for murder surrounding an incident that occurred on October 29, 1997, when he was just 11 years old, making him one of the youngest children ever charged as an adult. Abraham reportedly shot a gun into some trees, hitting and killing 18-year-old Ronnie Greene Jr. Despite testimony from a defense witness that the defendant had the mental capacity of a 6-year-old at the time of the killing, Abraham was convicted of second-degree murder.

It is likely that the jurors had at least to some extent sympathized with the victim's family. To Ronnie Greene's relatives, in terms of their loss and anguish, it is largely irrelevant that the person who shot and killed him was a diminutive 11-year-old. To the families who lose a loved one, it matters not whether the perpetrator was 11 or 41; the victim is just as dead. In terms of this retributive notion of justice, juveniles and adults should arguably be treated no differently. Furthermore, there are indeed certain repeat, violent, chronic, ruthless juveniles who have proved through their recidivism that they are not amenable to treatment. They may have been through the juvenile justice system time after time but with little or no improvement in their character or behavior. As juvenile justice failures, these offenders can and perhaps should be sent to the adult system.

It could also be argued that not all juvenile offenders deserve adultlike punishment, even though they may commit an adultlike crime such as murder or rape. The inspiration for their vicious crimes often stems from their immaturity—for example, kids committing murder in order to impress their peers or even to fulfill a dare. We must fully consider the special nature of youthful offending—even murder. Teenagers may look like adults, dress like adults, act like adults, even shoot like adults, but they tend to reason like teenagers.

Some recent evidence from neurological studies supports the view that juveniles have a limited capacity for understanding consequences. According to Deborah Yurgelun-Todd, director of neuropsychology and cognitive neuroimaging at McLean Hospital, the frontal lobe portion of the brain, which controls the ability to think things through fully, does not tend to develop until late adolescence or young adulthood.⁴⁷ More recent research suggests that this portion of the brain

may not fully develop until as late as 25 years of age. Indeed, it has long been recognized that teenagers are often impulsive—in a sense, “temporary sociopaths.” Thus, leaving aside the purely retributive notion of justice, teenagers may not deserve the same punishment as adults given their limited capacity for considering consequences. Diminished capacity should mean diminished punishability, especially for nonhabitual offenders.

Making the juvenile justice system more just and punitive is one thing, but eliminating it, as some have proposed, is quite another. Expanding juvenile penalties and blending juvenile and adult sanctions for the most serious offenders will go a long way toward addressing public concern without entirely sacrificing young lives that could be salvaged. We need to be selective in how we prosecute juveniles, even juvenile murderers.

In a surprising and bold move, Judge Eugene Moore, on sentencing young Nathaniel Abraham following his adult conviction on a second-degree murder charge, chose not to follow through with an adult punishment. Rather than hand down a protracted term of incarceration, Moore sent the boy to a juvenile facility until the age of 21, at which time he would be released. With courtroom cameras rolling, the judge took time to articulate his concern for the snowballing trend in America toward trying juveniles as adults as well as his view that we should not forsake the rehabilitative goal, particularly when children are involved:

The legislature has responded to juvenile criminal activity not by helping to prevent and rehabilitate but rather by treating juveniles more like adults. Is this the good option? Is our adult system successfully rehabilitating people, do our jails release productive, reformed citizens? We all know the answers to these questions. The real solution is to prevent an adult criminal population ever coming into existence. This only can be accomplished by taking advantage of the hope and promise of our youth and nurturing healthy adults.⁴⁸

Quite apart from the question of rehabilitation, many proponents of the movement to try serious juvenile offenders as adults are hoping to send a strong deterrent message to other youngsters who might contemplate attacking a classmate or neighbor. Yet, we cannot deal effectively with teen violence through the threat of the criminal justice system. The threat of punishment, no matter how harsh, frequently fails to deter kids who face the threat of violence and death every day in their classrooms and their neighborhoods. As far as they are concerned, the criminal justice system can just take a number and wait in line with all the other enemies out to get them. Plus, tending toward impulsive action, adolescents do not fully weigh the costs and benefits.

Often these are juveniles who think little of and care even less about the future, who don't expect to live past their 21st birthday. The prospect of a long-term prison sentence will not dissuade them in the least. Criminologists Simon Singer and David McDowall, for example, conducted an assessment of whether the landmark and widely publicized New York Juvenile Offender Law of 1978 (the “Willie Bosket Law”) had any impact on deterring youthful offenders. By comparing trends over time in New York and, as a comparison, Philadelphia, they found that the threat promised by the tough New York law did not have any impact in lowering rates of serious juvenile offending.⁴⁹

Not only does the wholesale transfer of juveniles into the adult court make little sense theoretically, but also on a practical level it does little good in reforming offenders. Criminologists Bishop, Frazier, Lanza-Kaduce, and White compared a

sample of Florida juveniles who were tried and sentenced as adults. A group of juveniles retained in the juvenile system, matched on a variety of characteristics and risk factors. On follow-up, Bishop and her colleagues found that those who had passed through the adult system actually had a lower rate of recidivism than the control-group offenders.⁵⁰ Moreover, based on a host of empirical studies on the impact of transferring juveniles to the criminal justice system, a distinguished group of scholars recommends that the practice be curtailed because of its tendency to increase rates of recidivism.

As noted earlier, even the best criminal justice policies and programs can encounter failures. Despite Judge Moore's wisdom in sentencing Abraham so that he would be free at age 21 with a second chance at a productive life for himself, he hardly took advantage of the break. After his release, Abraham was arrested on drug charges and given a sentence of three years, which he later compounded by assaulting a guard. After the guard was released, a statement that he was "very disappointed and particularly disappointed in the hundreds of people who worked hard to rehabilitate [Abraham] for his release. He was in the state training school and the wonderful mentors and churches that stood by him."⁵²

LOOKING AHEAD

Citizen concerns over the impact of television, motion pictures, video, and the internet on children continue to be strong. Even so, some of the urgency has faded as the violent crime rate plummeted well below levels during the bad old days of the early 1990s. Unfortunately, however, because of rosy crime statistics, many Americans may have come to believe that we have won the war against youth violence.

Looking ahead, the population of at-risk youth, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, is expected to expand. Given the social and economic conditions that unevenly impact minority communities, growth in the population of at-risk youth signals the clear potential for recurring problems of homicide and other social ills associated with an expanding population of at-risk youngsters. Although many cities have been successful in responding to the youth violence problem in years gone by, there is a new group of teenagers coming of age in a few years. Today's teen will be tomorrow's young adult, and today's young adult will be tomorrow's adolescent, with each new cohort of teens looking to the previous generation for passion for rebellion and thirst for excitement. We must continue to make our efforts as the message of nonviolence is not passed from one generation to the next. The problem of youth violence is never solved unless it is controlled. Once we ease up on crime prevention and crime control, the trouble can rebound.

Even if youth and gang homicide were to increase in the years ahead, the overall murder rate may continue to decline or at least remain fairly level because the fastest-growing segment of the population consists of seniors. The 65 million baby boomers, hardly babies anymore, are fast becoming the carrying members of AARP, doing their part to bring down the crime rate with aging. It is important, however, that we not be fooled by the graying of the population and be blind to the problems of youth. The future of U.S. society may depend on our collective ability to reach unsupervised youngsters, to make them someone besides a drug dealer cares about them.