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Some home truths behind youth crime

Ikim Views

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Studies show that rising youth crime parallels the rise in dysfunctional families, which has its roots in habitual deprivation of parental love and affection going back to early infancy.

THERE is a growing problem of Malaysian youths showing disrespect for the law. What is more worrying is the rise of violent crimes committed by them.

This fact was confirmed by newly-appointed Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Ismail Omar when he took office. Many community leaders have voiced concern as well.

Tan Sri Lee Lam Thye, vice-chairman of the Malaysian Crime Prevention Foundation, has raised pertinent questions which are waiting to be answered. Why are our youths behaving this way? Why are they putting their future in jeopardy?

A review of empirical evidence in the professional literature of the social sciences leads us to a common factor in answering these questions – the family.

The first home truth: the increase in violent crime parallels the rise in dysfunctional families. Families are considered dysfunctional when conflict, misbehaviour and often abuse on the part of individual members occur continually and regularly, leading other family members to accommodate such actions.

Dysfunctional families are primarily a result of co-dependent adults and may also be affected by addictions such as substance abuse (alcohol, drugs, etc). Others also include untreated mental illness and parents emulating or over-correcting their own dysfunctional parents.

A common misperception of dysfunctional families is the belief that the parents are on the threshold of separation and divorce. While this is true in a few cases, often the marriage bond is

very strong as the parents' faults actually complement each other. In short, they have no where else to go.

However, this does not necessarily mean the family situation is strong. Any major stressor, such as unemployment, illness, natural disaster or inflation, can cause existing conflicts affecting the children to become much worse.

The second home truth: youth criminal behaviour has its roots in habitual deprivation of parental love and affection going back to early infancy.

Most delinquents have a chaotic, disintegrating family life. This frequently leads to aggression and resentment towards others outside the family.

Engaging the help of kindergarten and primary school teachers in identifying children coming from severe dysfunctional families is high on the list because the type of aggression and hostility demonstrated by a future criminal often is foreshadowed in unusual aggressiveness as early as age five or six.

Enlisting the help of professionals to nip the problem in the bud is comparatively easier before these children become criminals. Their families should be helped professionally, not condemned.

It was only in recent decades that the concept of a dysfunctional family was taken seriously by professionals (therapists, social workers, teachers, counsellors and religious leaders).

Any interference would have been seen as violating the sanctity of marriage and increasing the probability of divorce. Children were expected to obey their parents (ultimately the father) and cope with the situation alone.

The most effective way to buffer these innocent children from crime is for mothers to bond with them through love. The mother's strong affectionate attachment to her child is the child's best safeguard against a life of crime.

Third home truth: most delinquents are children who have been abandoned by their fathers. They are often deprived of love and affection. The benefits a child receives from his relationship with his father are notably different from those derived from his relationship with his mother.

Albert Bandura, professor of psychology at Stanford University in the United States, observed that most criminals suffered from a lack of the father's affection.

The dominant role of fathers in preventing delinquency is well established and this phenomenon was highlighted in studies by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck of Harvard University, which sum up a father's dominance in what many children often hear their mothers say: "Wait till your father gets home!"

Many men abandon their families when the responsibilities of life and parenting become too much for them. Reasons of abandonment cited include their own abandonment issues from

childhood, problems with the children's mother, addictions and inability to handle parental responsibilities.

Besides education, laws should be made more stringent in ensuring that men are punished for leaving their family.

Fourth home truth: inconsistent parenting, family turmoil and multiple other stressors compound the rejection of these children by their parents, many of whom turned criminals during childhood.

Findings from research conducted by Kevin Wright confirm that children raised in supportive, affectionate and accepting homes are less likely to become deviant.

We should engage the help of religious leaders more because empirical evidence has shown that neighbourhoods with a high degree of religious practice are not high-crime neighbourhoods.

Religious leaders' roles in instilling good values in individuals, who in turn will be leaders of their own families, are urgently needed and these values can be inculcated, among others, through Friday sermons and many other awareness programmes.

Fifth home truth: marriage is an important institution. It needs to be propagated because researchers have found that criminals who are capable of sustaining a marriage normally would gradually move away from a life of crime after they get married.

However, it should be noted that both parties should be taught rights and responsibilities that a marriage entails before committing themselves to it.

This is because evidence has shown that the sudden increase of crime is the loss of the fathers and mothers' capability to be responsible in caring for their children. This loss of love and guidance which originates from dysfunctional families has broad social consequences for children and for society at large.

Empirical evidence also shows that too many youths from dysfunctional families tend to be shallow and individualistic. The absence of love has caused them to have a much weaker sense of connection with their society.

They are prone to abusing and exploiting society through crime to satisfy their unmet needs or desires.

If policymakers are to deal with the root causes of crime seriously, they must not only recognise the connection between the breakdown of families and various social problems but also the need to work harder in helping troubled teens from dysfunctional families.

Troubled teens need moral guidance and must be taught to exercise personal responsibility. Their families need professional help to work on personal relationships based on true love and respect and to adhere to a common code of conduct.

In this hurried world, this can only be done if one really makes time for it.

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