

A LOOK AT CRIME

By: Senator Rick Dantzler

The media attention to the recent murder of the British tourist in Monticello has had a significant effect on tourism and our tax revenue.

If we do not come to grips with this crime problem, nothing short of our economic survival is at stake. As you know, there have been nine tourists murdered in Florida in the last year. However, the more relevant statistic is that each year nearly 1,300 Floridians are murdered. There are groups within our society which have become some of the most violent in the history of the world.

There is a short-term crisis with which we must deal. The fact that inmates serve so little time in prison and that juveniles cannot be taken from the streets because there is no place to put them angers me and it scares me, too.

Your Legislature is dealing with this problem. Three months ago, meeting in special session, we committed to a five year prison construction program that, if realized, will result in convicted criminals serving 70% of their terms. Along with this commitment to prison construction, we changed the sentencing guidelines to insure that our more dangerous criminals are the ones who get the first pass to prison.

To the extent this keeps repeat offenders off the streets, it will deter crime. To the extent the message goes out that "if you do the crime, you will do the time," it will deter crime. However, it doesn't address the root causes of crime, especially juvenile crime. It doesn't address why people become criminally active in the first place and I am tired of fighting the problem from only the punitive front.

It is an act of utter futility to believe that we can build our way out of this problem. Unless we figure out a way to grow fewer criminals, we will never reverse the trend. More public money will be diverted from more productive areas to feed the Corrections machine and more tragedy will occur as more of us become victims of crime. There are many theories of why one becomes criminally active. Many believe it is because we do not spend enough money on education and there is some truth to that. Others believe that all these criminals need is a job; there is some truth to that,

too. Surely, there is a connection between crime and education and crime and economic development.

Nonetheless, there always has been an underclass. There always have been those who did poorly in school or who did not have a job, but never have there been so many violent people. Something has happened to cause more people, especially kids, to commit crimes which are more violent and cold than ever before. The crimes we hear about today could only have been committed by someone with no set of values, no appreciation for life and no sense of what life is all about.

Some believe people are born with a basic, innate sense of right and wrong and, if nurtured properly, most will develop into productive, law-abiding citizens. Others believe that people are born with strong wills which, without proper guidance, will cause most people to push the limits, rebel against authority and seek paths that are easier and which take less commitment and discipline.

Regardless of which of these two theories is correct, something very strong and very evil is overpowering our society. Something is causing more and more young people to believe that a watch or a pair of tennis shoes is worth more than a life -- that instant gratification is more important than commitment and purpose. Something is thwarting the development of proper values in too many of our people.

I do not know what it is. But I do believe I know what is allowing it in. I also know that talking about this will offend some people and certain constituencies, but I don't care; it is time to talk about it. I have spoken with and heard from too many victims of crime whose spirits and hearts have been broken to stay quiet any longer.

No Family Ties

What is causing so many people to become criminally active is the breakdown of the traditional family. I know that is not an original idea. It is the lack of fathers that is standing in the way of proper value and character development. This is a generalization, I admit, but in my opinion, this, more than anything else, is preventing many kids from becoming equipped with the proper set of values or having the discipline to adhere to proper values.

It is not race and it is not ethnicity. It is not a lack of education or the lack of a job -- it is single-parenthood. Many sociologists are now concluding that the strongest predictor of criminal behavior is single-parenthood. Many psychologists are now concluding that, while the mother is perhaps the most important person in a child's early life, it is the father who is the most influential in character development during the pre-adolescent and adolescent years.

Now, this may seem silly to you. It may seem prudish and old-fashioned, but the statistics tell a very compelling story. For the record, many of my statistics and statements in this article come from a Newsweek article entitled, "A World Without Fathers" and an article in The Atlantic Monthly called, "Dan Quayle Was Right."

My comments are focused mostly on out-of-wedlock births. Inevitably, though, in a discussion like this, the issue of divorce comes up. I am a lawyer and do some divorce work. There are marriages that should be dissolved, but some marriages are dissolved for what I believe to be marginally qualifying reasons, especially when children are involved. I don't mean to preach and am not being judgmental, but divorce has an effect on kids and most of it is negative. If you are in this situation, you need to be willing to work doubly-hard to properly equip your children for the challenges of life.

I realize there are many children who were born into the circumstances I am describing who have done well and who are making positive contributions to society. I do not intend to discourage anyone or imply that one is pre-destined to an outcome just because of birth circumstance.

I am only pointing out statistical facts and we know that children born out of wedlock are nearly four times as likely to commit crime or become welfare recipients or high school dropouts if raised in areas of high welfare dependency. If children are raised in two-parent homes, statistically, they perform much better educationally and are more likely to have jobs. They are less likely to have mental health problems or be the victims of child abuse or become child abusers themselves.

Children born out of wedlock or from disrupted families do worse than children from intact families on virtually every measure of well-being. They are six times as likely to be poor and they are likely to stay poor longer. Twenty-two percent of children in one-parent families will experience poverty during childhood for seven years or more, compared to only 2% of children in two-parent families. They are two to three times as likely as children in two-parent families to have emotional and behavioral problems.

They are more likely to drop out of school, get pregnant as teen-agers, abuse drugs and be in trouble with the law. They are at a much higher risk of being victims of physical or sexual abuse and, statistically, they are less successful as adults in the two domains of life -- love and work -- that are perhaps the most essential to happiness. Single mothers are much more likely to be on welfare, too. In addition, they will stay on welfare longer and the welfare is more likely to be passed from one generation to the next.

In the area of crime, 70% of all juveniles in state reform institutions grew up in single-parent homes and 70% of all the people in prison were born to teen-age parents. The statistics are too compelling to be ignored any longer. Stop teen-age pregnancy and out-of-wedlock birth and you will, over time, eliminate most of the crime.

In 1950, the out-of-wedlock birth rate was 3.5%. Today it is 25%. One out of every four children born in this country begins life without a father at home. The problem is the most acute in the black family. The institution of marriage has been devastated in the last generation. Today, 67% of all blacks are born out of wedlock and, if the trend continues, it will be 75% by the year 2000.

Last year, 1,200 babies were born at Polk General Hospital in Bartow to girls 18 years of age or younger. Look at the birth announcements in the newspaper and see the number of single mothers; it will astound you. The fastest growing program in the Polk County public school system is not mathematics, science or English; it is the program for pregnant students.

Taxpayers paid for the births of nearly one half of all the children born in this state. Nationwide, 54% of the children in AFDC families were born out of wedlock and 33% were children of divorced or separated parents. Only 13% of all children in AFDC families were those where a mother and father were both at home. That tells me something.

In 1982, 97,320 families in Florida were on AFDC at a cost of \$95.3 million in state money. By 1999, there will be 450,201 families on AFDC at a cost of \$883.5 million. During the same period, our state's Medicaid bill was \$298 million in 1982 but it will be \$5.8 billion by 1999. To a large extent, AFDC and Medicaid serve the same people, so I hope you are beginning to see how much all of this irresponsibility is costing us.

I understand that saying these things provokes angry responses from many, but I am not picking on single-mothers. I am not moralizing and I am not turning a cold and callous shoulder to these mothers, many of whom are trying very hard to raise their children properly and are doing a good job.

However, I believe it is time to begin speaking honestly about the consequences of out-of-wedlock birth. Most of the taxpayers I represent are tired of paying for what they consider to be irresponsible behavior. From subsidized day care, Medicaid, paying for child-birth, AFDC, prison construction to additional school expense -- they are tired of it.

My heart goes out to the public school teacher who is being forced to act as a surrogate parent as well as a teacher, trying to teach a growing number of unruly, disrespectful and dangerous students. An elementary school teacher told me that last year 25 of her 27 students did not have a father at home.

So, what do we do about it? First, we must admit that this is a problem and be willing to say it. This has been the toughest thing of all. For so long, in an attempt to be politically correct, we have been afraid to say these things out of fear of offending

certain constituencies. This has to change and our preachers, teachers, community leaders and elected officials must begin talking about these things.

Our whole culture must change, too. Hollywood should develop more of a conscience and begin molding good character based on traditional behavior instead of promoting and glorifying destructive stereotypes and behaviors. Television, a medium which could be the most constructive in the history of the world, has in many ways become the most destructive by appealing to the parts of our being and mental makeup which are inclined toward irresponsible and immoral behavior.

Next, from a governmental point of view, we can no longer afford to be values-neutral because if we do, many will pick up their values from the streets of Hollywood and these values are, by and large, bad values. Everything from our education curriculum to our social policy must be geared toward instilling into students a proper code of values. Some will ask, "Whose values do we seek to instill?" I say, "While we argue that esoteric question, Rome is burning." There is common ground which all civilized and decent people share. We must begin teaching it.

Next, welfare policy must change. In the Legislature, we made a stab at it last year but fell short. One should not receive more money for having another child out of wedlock. I am not so naive as to think there are many women who make a decision to have another child in order to receive another \$50 a month. Still, we have so de-stigmatized irresponsible behavior that we have, unintentionally, made it acceptable.

One thing you can do is get involved in the life of a disadvantaged young person. These kids are crying out for the friendship and guidance of an older male figure. Another thing you can do is help tutor. In 1983, I was talking to a legislative colleague. I asked him why so many in our society just didn't seem to be doing well. He asked me, "How many times did your parents help you with your homework?" I said, "Just about every night, especially in the early years." He said, "Neither of my parents could read. What's more, there was not a single person on the street where I grew up who could read. Where was I going to go to get help with my homework?"

That story has stuck with me. Why not call your school superintendent and see if you can help tutor a student? What about helping out a day-care center? Senator George Kirkpatrick told me of a visit he made to a day-care center in Gainesville. He watched a 4-year-old learn how to use a fork. How many of your children didn't know how to use a fork when they were 4? Today, students show up for the first grade and don't know that yellow is a color. Junior high students don't know the months of the year.

How does a seventh grade teacher handle that? Is it surprising that our SAT scores are lower than in the states of Mississippi, Georgia and Arkansas or that our dropout rate is more than 25%?

Human nature probably inclines us not to get involved. Fewer of the "haves" are wishing to assimilate with the "have-nots." Part of this is fear. Many "haves" believe their safety is imperiled by the "have-nots." Many "haves" are trying to build islands unto themselves where they can insulate themselves from the world, but it won't work. There is no place you can go to get away from the reality of the world. We live in a dangerous place. Some places are safer than others but you cannot get totally away from the problems. Ironically, if the "haves" commit themselves to bettering the circumstances of the "have-nots," the "haves" will be enhancing their own safety.

If you talk to leaders in disadvantaged areas, they will tell you that the greatest need in these areas is jobs. There is a lot of truth to that, but it is intellectually dishonest to encourage kids to do as they should, telling them that they will be successful if they do, knowing all the while that without venture capital and economic expansion there won't be any jobs. Real progress can be made in the war against crime if there are more jobs for those who play by the rules.

Hindering job growth is a kind of environmental elitism where things like "quality of life" are controlling, and not just influencing, growth decisions. Environmental positions should be arrived at by directing and controlling growth in ways which are consistent with beneficial long-term growth strategies. I mean strategies that balance economic as well as environmental concerns. There are many areas of this state I do not believe should be developed, but no one has figured out how to re-tool this economic machine which sustains us all without putting us all out of work. As Sen. Kirkpatrick has said: "What does 'quality of life' mean to the person who does not have a job?"

In many ways, unreasonable opposition to reasonable and well-directed growth is pitting the "haves" against the "have-nots," and that hinders improvement in the crime situation.

We also are hindering economic growth when we spend such exorbitant sums on things that constitute extremely slight environmental or health risk. Panic is usually followed by law and regulation. Hundreds of billions of dollars have been spent in the last two decades to do things like make sure contaminated dirt is cleaned to the extent that children could, if they want, eat six teaspoonfuls of it a year for 70 years and not get sick, or clean a rail yard to the point that we could safely drink the standing water. What about asbestos removal or our own underground gasoline storage tank program? Is this where we should spend our money?

Nationwide, we are spending \$140 billion this year to remove trace amounts of chemicals, but only \$3 billion on new sewage treatment plants. Are we getting the best bang for the buck? We must have the discipline to perform cost/benefit analyses on all of our programs and the political will to act on these analyses.

We tend to overreact so badly to unfortunate incidents that resources aren't spent wisely and regulatory programs are created which would fail any cost/benefit analysis. We are thousands of times more likely to be the victim of violent crime than to be injured or killed from asbestos or hazardous waste contamination. Perhaps a portion of our resources can be re-directed.

We have to have balance. If we are going to significantly improve the crime problem, everyone -- the "haves," the "have-nots," the environmentalists, everyone -- will have to be willing to give a little. Government certainly has its charge, but you do, too. It is your personal responsibility to get involved, and not just your government's responsibility.

The Bible speaks of three kinds of love. There is eros -- the Greek word for erotic. It means romantic, physical love. There is philla -- the Greek word for friendship. Philadelphia -- the City of Brotherly Love -- derives its name from this word. Both of these kinds of love occur naturally. We have no control over them. There is a third kind of love, though, from the Greek word, agape. It is an act of the will -- a conscious decision to love even when we are inclined not to. This kind of love takes commitment and work.

In a much more communal and general sense, it is this kind of love -- agape love -- that each of us needs for each other and for those who are less fortunate. Each kid who does not know how to read, who does not have a father at home, or who is simply passing time in a day-care center needs your agape love. You better be willing to give it, or I fear for the future of our state and our nation.



About the Author

Sen. Rick Dantzler is a third generation Floridian whose grandfather moved to Winter Haven in 1923. After graduating from Winter Haven High School in 1974, Sen. Dantzler completed his undergraduate studies at the University of Florida in 1978 and graduated from law school there in 1981.

Sen. Dantzler was elected to the Florida House of Representatives in 1982 and served there for eight years. He was elected to the Florida Senate in 1990 and serves as chairman of the Natural Resources Committee. In 1986, then Rep. Dantzler was elected legislator of the Year by the Florida Alcohol and Drug Abuse Association. In both 1987 and 1991, he earned the same distinction from the Florida Farm Bureau. In 1989, 1990 and 1991, Sen. Dantzler received the Legislative Conservation Award from the Florida Conservation Association. In addition to these distinctions, he has served on the university of South Florida's Criminology Advisory Council and in 1992 was appointed to the Sentencing Commission.

Senator Dantzler is an associate with the law firm of Frost and O'Toole and lives in Winter Haven with his wife Julie and their two children.

Editors: Bob Stiff, Gable Abblett
Dr. Neil S. Crispo, Senior Vice President, Research and Operations
L. Charles Hilton, Jr., Chairman
Dominic M. Calabro, President and Publisher
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Tallahassee, FL 32302
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Fax: (904) 222-7476