

Public Safety



Crime is a problem in most major metropolitan areas in our country. According to *The State of Literacy in America*, in large metropolitan areas where school dropout rates are the highest, there is a corresponding increase in the rate of crime. As a city with one of the highest crime rates in the nation, Memphis is no exception to this trend.

Following this trend, upwards of 80% of all juvenile crime committed in Memphis is by high-school dropouts. It is easy to see how public safety and education are linked. Therefore, public safety is a forefront issue on the minds of citizens and educators in all parts of the community.

In Memphis, newspaper headlines and local nightly news constantly repeat the sad stories of crime and its devastating impact here. Criminology experts warn us that city-to-city comparative crime statistics can be very misleading because of the absence of reporting uniformity across the nation, but crime data and statistics, whether moving up or down, mean little while the perception remains that Memphis is a dangerous place to live, work, and play.

The shalom of our city is affected by fears and worries about criminals outside our homes who create and sustain a scarcity of peace inside our homes and on the streets of our neighborhoods. Some elderly citizens live in crime-riddled neighborhoods and have become virtual prisoners incarcerated behind barred windows of their own homes. Children cannot play safely in the streets of their own neighborhoods. To be sure, gunshots ring out day and night in the streets of certain neighborhoods, but they seem to echo much farther by creating the sense that the city as a whole is far from safe. Yet it does remain true that in many neighborhoods, people have lost hope that anything can be done to stop crime. They feel a constant threat to their sense of safety and well-being.

Fred Smith, Chairman and CEO of FedEx Corporation, appeared before the Memphis City Council on April 21, 2009 and talked about the issues he thought needed to be addressed to make Memphis a better city. He told them, “If you are unable to provide a safe environment for people to live and raise their families, conduct their business, the rest is a distant second.”

Several years ago, through a robust public-private partnership, law enforcement agencies, business leadership, and local government leadership launched a program called Operation Safe Community, which is a 15-point strategy to reduce crime in the greater Memphis area through strategies and programs such as Cyberwatch, Operation Blue Crush, and the Real Time Crime Center.¹ Memphis Police Department Director, Larry Godwin, highlighted Memphis’s progress in dealing with crime, in *The Commercial Appeal* on April 26, 2009:² “There has been a 10% decrease in all reported crimes from 2008 to this year and a 15% drop since 2006.” Even more encouraging is that from January 2009 to January 2010 there was more than a 30% decline in crime in Memphis.

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Even with this encouraging reduction in crime and trends, crime remains a significant problem. Research has demonstrated that Memphis has a criminal population of an estimated 50,000 people. According to a March 11, 2009 report by WMC TV, most of the 50,000 criminals are repeat offenders and have been arrested six or more times. The Shelby County Sheriff reports that 84% of the jail population is comprised of repeat offenders. Repeat offenders who have become, for all practical purposes, professional criminals, commit many of the violent crimes. When one considers that approximately 1.3 million people live in the Memphis region and less than 4% of the population creates an “unsafe” environment for everyone else, it is somewhat frustrating that law enforcement and

government cannot solve the problem. Law enforcement professionals have recently demonstrated that smarter, data-driven policing methodology, inter-agency cooperation, and more officers in better-equipped squad cars can reduce crime. In addition, tougher state sentencing and gun laws to address the professional criminals' jail time, better jails, and better re-entry programs would be an additive to fighting crime and reducing recidivism. Anecdotally, law-enforcement professionals will immediately say their day-to-day work addresses crime and criminals way "downstream" and that unless serious and sustained efforts address the crime and its causes at its origins and mitigate the contributing factors, they are fighting a losing battle. Their consensus opinion is that there cannot be enough police cars on the streets or enough prison beds provided to accommodate the flow of criminals.

Law enforcement professionals believe that the faith community must be involved if crime is to be attacked effectively at its sources. In general, public safety is about maintaining citizens' sense of well-being in the face of harm, either natural or man-made. Homes and neighborhoods should be safe havens, and the underlying belief of citizens about the problem of crime is that any crime is too much and the threat of danger or prevalent fear jeopardizes "daily shalom."

We believe that crime has its source in the basic sin nature of man. Whether rich or poor, black or white, and no matter what ethnic or cultural background, all are potential criminals and can easily harm others out of hearts of selfish intent. Hearts must be changed from within in order for the destructive behaviors to change, whether in the urban core neighborhood or the most affluent suburb.

Public Safety Challenges

The broken nuclear family is a primary cause in the creation of a crime-producing environment. That is, a broken or weakened nuclear family suffers greatly from other contributing factors to high-crime rates, including lack of education, lack of job preparedness, the quality (or complete absence) of prenatal care, and poor health care during and immediately after childbirth.

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This brokenness contributes to what might be termed an underlying and insidious generational loss of hope. In our community there are many single mothers as head-of-household, raising children who then become mothers while still children themselves. These girls are most often ill-prepared to raise children from conception to birth to young adulthood. As young teenage mothers, they are especially ill-equipped to attempt to overcome multi-generational poverty. It is not hyperbole to consider these young women as orphans themselves, orphans who have become social widows raising another generation of orphans. Add the negative influences of gangs and related activities, and the formula is deadly for the children of our community. This confluence of negative factors has created a whole class of at-risk kids who are, for all practical purposes, orphaned by life circumstances rather than by the absence of parents.

Ultimately, the destruction and breakdown of the nuclear family has increased the attractiveness and viability of gangs as a surrogate family environment—especially for at-risk kids in the core city. Children, male and female, are drawn to gangs by a show of support they are not receiving from any other source, particularly from a male authority figure. Gang organizations intentionally seek to increase revenue by exploiting youth either as members or victims. Gangs offer a substitute form of family life with rules, boundaries, belonging, and identity. Ultimately, gang life leads to criminal activity and a lifestyle that is destructive, demeaning, and most difficult to escape.

In the July/August 2008 *Atlantic Monthly* article "American Murder Mystery," Hanna Rosin reports:

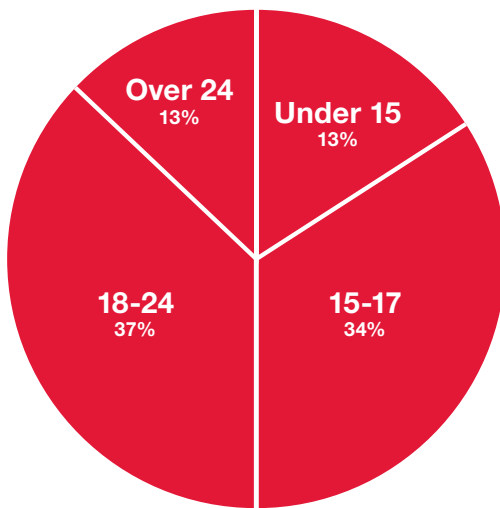
"Gang leaders, cut loose from the housing projects, have adapted their recruiting efforts and operations to their new setting. Lately, they've been going after "smart, intelligent, go-to-college-looking kid[s], without gold teeth and medallions," said Sergeant Lambert Ross, an investigator with the Memphis Police Department. Clean-cut kids serve the same function as American recruits for al-Qaeda: they become the respectable front men. If a gang member gets pulled over with guns or drugs, he can hand them to the college boy, who has no prior record. Also, national statistics show 50% of gang members are under the age of 18, and 87% are under the age of 24.³"

Other related factors contribute to higher violent crime rates among the poor and under-resourced people of any



community, including poor city planning and housing policies. In too many cases the victims of crimes are poor, under-resourced citizens who are easy targets for criminals in neighborhoods that are violent hotbeds for such activity. Victims can also be family members, friends, or relatives of the criminals. It is a known fact that in most homicides the victim could have just as easily been the perpetrator and it is highly likely that the victim and the perpetrator already knew one another.

Gang Membership by Age



Source: National Youth Gang Survey, 2004

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Community-housing policies authorized demolishing blighted housing in the core city areas where crime was concentrated and rampant. However, government-housing policies, which removed people from concentrated areas, dispersed those housing-project residents across large areas of the city. Housing policies did not address the impacts of the dispersion of these concentrated criminal elements into a much larger geographic area. Police and community agencies were not prepared for new challenges resulting from these public housing policies and thus have worked feverishly for the last several years in an attempt to catch up. Based on research by University of Memphis criminology professor Dr. Richard Janikowski

and University of Memphis sociologist Dr. Phyllis Betts, the crime in Memphis has migrated from a crescent once running from the city's northwest to southwest to more of a northeast to southeast crescent. Many of the city's poor previously living in public housing projects just north and south of downtown Memphis have migrated to other areas of the city. While the number of crimes may have declined, the number of people affected has increased. This migration has also affected the administration and distribution of city services to the poor, given the larger geographic areas services now must try to cover.⁴

Anecdotal information suggests that participation by core-city kids in one of the at-risk kids' programs or ministries creates an improved high-school graduation rate. Currently, the overall graduation rate in Memphis City Schools is approximately 60%. Kids involved in the afterschool programs for several consecutive years across the city demonstrate a high-school graduation rate of greater than 90%, with many cases of 100% graduation. Most of the organizations interviewed can show that very few, if any, of their participants end up involved in crime and the criminal justice system.

Crime can be greatly reduced if a strategy is developed to keep kids from entering into the pipeline for training in a criminal lifestyle.⁵ Currently, the general population of incarcerated inmates in the Shelby County Jail exceeds 2,500, most of which are African-American males.⁶ Further inquiry suggests that 95% of those inmates do not have a high school education and greater than 70% have some type of learning disability. The door cracks open for gang recruitment when the child begins to realize in elementary school that he cannot read and there is no one there to help and encourage him through the learning difficulties. The child becomes discouraged and defeated, and by middle school drops out and may land in a gang, where acceptance and identity are offered in exchange for a form of indentured servanthood.

Therefore, if the general population of core-city kids are suffering from poor high school graduation rates, which increases the likelihood of exposure and engagement into criminal lifestyles and activities, and at-risk kids' ministries and agencies enjoy a graduation rate among their participants of greater than 90%, it seems reasonable that an all-out effort to scale up the at-risk ministries—utilizing the expertise of the parachurch organizations and within the context of the neighborhood church—could possibly

eradicate the supply line for gang membership at the source and eliminate or at least substantially mitigate crime. As the fundamental problem is these children living in broken families, the clear call for the church is to step into the gaps and care for these “orphans” by providing a surrogate family based on the love of Jesus Christ, instead of allowing their lives to fall prey to the cheap counterfeit of being “valued” as gang members.

Public Safety Assets

Stepping into the gap can occur as early as conception to address prenatal issues focused on brain development. Programs already underway, such as One-by-One Ministries, train volunteers from local churches to minister to families through a unique outreach program designed to mentor expectant mothers and new parents.

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Another means of changing the course of entire lives exists in the many secular and faith-based organizations that offer kids a positive alternative to gang membership. Currently in Memphis there are more than 140,000 at-risk kids. There are approximately 20 different organizations offering these kids a positive alternative, and it is estimated those organizations are reaching approximately 40,000 to 50,000 kids each year.

Informed, connected, and involved citizens dramatically extend the effectiveness of crime-prevention services and law enforcement. The Memphis Police Department has more than 2,400 uniformed officers to enforce the law within the Memphis city limits. That is one patrolman for every 347 people in the city, or six per square mile. As Matthew J. Simeone, Jr., points out in *Homeland Security Affairs Journal* (Supplement No.2: 2008),⁷

“By engaging citizens and involving them in the issues that affect their communities, keeping them informed about what is happening where they live or work, and then allowing them to network between themselves, internet technology can be used to leverage the private sector as both a force multiplier and a vast potential source of information.”

Effective Programs

Several effective programs exist with a relatively low cost for delivery and implementation. However, there has not been concerted or concentrated effort to implement these programs, and often there has been a lack of even minimal resources, volunteers, advocacy, and persistence. Recently, for example, the State of Tennessee passed legislation to address blighted properties and absentee landlords. This legislation has real power and can force absentee landlords to either repair the property or potentially lose ownership to condemnation. These laws require a specific step-by-step process, which is not widely known yet does not require tremendous effort or cost. When a landlord is required to forfeit ownership, perhaps such a property could be demolished and along with other vacant lots in the area turned into vegetable or flower gardens for the neighbors. Study after study has demonstrated the effectiveness of a no-tolerance policy for “broken windows.” The “broken-windows” theory and research demonstrates that the presence of broken windows, untended yards, gang graffiti, broken-down cars and the like creates an environment upon which the criminal element will capitalize. Addressing minor property issues correlates to a reduction in crime in a neighborhood.

Another example of an effective program is Crime Stoppers. Crime Stoppers is an absolutely confidential crime-reporting system, whereby an informant reports criminal activity to the nonprofit organization, which then reports the information to law enforcement. Many times this vital information is about criminal activity within a given neighborhood or family. Many under-resourced citizens are reluctant to report crimes because they fear such reporting is not confidential and thus their lives could be at risk. Training could easily be done, perhaps in the neighborhood church, about the safety and security of reporting crimes to Crime Stoppers.

Neighborhood Watch programs require organizational efforts. The watch programs are very common in resourced neighborhoods. This program empowers people to think about how they can keep an eye out for each other and then report questionable activities through Crime Stoppers.

Many times young boys become involved in crime yet never comprehend the true implications of a life of crime. Rather than rehabilitating the offenders, encounters with the criminal justice system greatly increase the likelihood of these young boys being hardened by the system and made angrier. In most cases, the environment of incarceration does not change them for the better but makes them worse.



At present, diversion programs exist for felony offenders, which basically offer them “hard” jail time or alternatively suggest voluntary entry into a program intended to divert them from following a path of crime, and these programs can be faith-based. After many years on the street in criminal and gang activity, a young man, especially in his late 20’s, awakens and realizes there is no future and no hope and further realizes danger is ever-increasing on the streets.⁸

Clearly, it makes sense that the neighborhood church, in cooperation with parachurch ministries, could be a safe haven for those young men who are looking for a way to escape a criminal or gang lifestyle.

Either before entry into criminal lifestyle or as an attempt to exit such a lifestyle after incarceration, opportunities must exist to offer true rehabilitation. In one police precinct in Memphis there are more than 9,000 parolees living in that one geographic area.⁹ Scripture clearly mandates that followers of Jesus need to visit those in prison. It makes sense that the neighborhood church, in cooperation with parachurch ministries with expertise in the area of re-entry, could be a safe haven for those young men who are looking for a way to escape a criminal or gang lifestyle.

Recommendations:

The church should engage in the mentoring of pregnant teens.

Training could be provided to churches to mentor pregnant teens as well as young women with children up to the age of three for the purposes of educating young mothers and families about the growth and development of their babies, improving the parenting skills of this generation to affect the next, and preventing child abuse.

The church should elevate awareness and involvement in at-risk kids’ programs.

In one pilot neighborhood a partnership might be established among a resource church, a neighborhood church, and parachurch ministries to demonstrate an all-out effort to touch the lives of all kids in that geographic area in hopes of demonstrating what hope, love, and caring can do to change the course of a life. This is not a speculative pursuit without successful precedent in parachurch ministries and organizations. Placing the neighborhood church at the center of this type of initiative might offer the opportunity to ultimately scale this already proven approach to reach all kids in the core city. This is a worthy call to the church of Memphis.

The church should inform and empower citizens in under-resourced neighborhoods.

Perhaps the neighborhood church could hold seminars to train people on code enforcement, Crime Stoppers, and Neighborhood Watch. Resource churches could help facilitate and encourage training and provide consultancy and assistance to the neighborhood church on how to empower the local people to implement these simple approaches to “taking back the neighborhood.”

For information about Crime Stoppers, contact Buddy Chapman at (901) 525-5122. Contact your local MPD Precinct for information on Neighborhood Watch.

The church could review the feasibility of diversion and re-entry programs centered in the neighborhood church.

In cooperation with the court system, professionals with expertise in dealing with criminal diversion and re-entry programs, the parachurch ministries with similar expertise, and resource churches, a comprehensive pilot program centered in a neighborhood church could be developed to give young people and parolees hope for a real future as contributing members of the community.

Conclusions:

An army of church members throughout the city of Memphis await the call. Church members greatly exceed the population of habitual criminals. The Shalom Project should explore church-sponsored programs for repeat offenders, including re-entry skills training, mentoring and counseling, basic job training, and life skills. Existing parachurch ministries with a focus on the population of people involved in the criminal justice system should be engaged to discuss how site-based work in neighborhood churches could be developed and enhanced. A pilot project should be developed to match the resources of outside volunteers with a neighborhood church passionate for those with criminal backgrounds and an experienced parachurch organization in a neighborhood where a high concentration of repeat offenders resides.

Memphis's youth need daily programs, role models, and authority figures to step in where gang members are currently filling the gap. We should explore mentorship, accountability, and "foster-father" programs to address this need at the neighborhood church level.

Neighborhood churches are well positioned to be a hub for community engagement. As a first priority, knowledge of the existence of no-tolerance policies for lack of code enforcement and blighted properties needs to reach the poorest and worst neighborhood in Memphis. We should explore partnerships with law enforcement, law firms, crime-watch organizations, clean-the-streets organizations, and city services that would be beneficial for all, with the goal of improving the physical landscape and environment of each neighborhood in Memphis.

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- 1 www.operationsafecommunity.org
 - 2 Commercial Appeal, April 26, 2009
 - 3 Atlantic Monthly July/August 2008 article, "American Murder Mystery"
 - 4 Dr. Phyllis Betts, sociologist, University of Memphis
Center for Community Building and Neighborhood Action, It Takes a Village Report
 - 5 Dr. Richard Janikowski, criminologist, University of Memphis
 - 6 Shelby County Government Office of the Mayor
 - 7 Homeland Security Affairs Journal (Supplement No. 2: 2008)
 - 8 National Youth Gang Survey, 2004
 - 9 <http://www.state.tn.us/correction/newsreleases/pdf/prisonstrategicplan.pdf>