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The Boston Globe

Getting back to antiviolence

By Deborah Prothrow-Stith and Howard Spivak | May 19, 2006

THE RESPONSE to the dramatic rise in the number of murders in Boston, primarily involving teenagers and young adults, has been disappointing in that there has been a failure to apply the strategies that were so successful for the city in the past.

Instead the focus has been on police strategies. Some are calling for police officers to be stationed on every street corner in inner-city neighborhoods. However, police are only part of the solution.

The remarkable decline in violence that occurred in Boston in the 1990s, at a time when other cities were seeing rising numbers, was a result of more than a decade of building a broad-based violence prevention movement involving all stakeholders in the city. It did not occur because of a short-term focus on policing or a handful of programs involving just a few players. Everyone was involved.

The current upswing in violence will not be addressed by the police alone. Partnership with the clergy, while crucial, is not enough. Reactive, stop-gap strategies won't work any more than they did in the past. As a city, we have been through the summer of responsibility, BE-SMART, Community Sweeps, the targeting of the 100 most violent youth, and the anti-stop snitching campaign. It is time for the city to move beyond the media-driven, punishment-oriented, ineffective responses. There is no magic bullet to fix this. The press conference approach to violence prevention does not work.

In Philadelphia, state Representative Dwight Evans has organized officials and community and business to commit to a decade of violence prevention activities, called the Blueprint for a Safer Philadelphia. The irony is that these efforts have been modeled after Boston's prior successes. The Blueprint's 10-year goal is zero youth homicides, chosen because of Boston's success. Why is it that Philadelphia is able to do what Boston is failing to do -- learning from the very model Boston created?

Twenty-five years ago, Boston became the first city in the nation to declare violence a public health problem, and it galvanized the communities and those serving youth to engage in prevention. Creative strategies included Bruce Wall's youth ministry out of Chez Vous skating rink, Roxbury Comprehensive Health Center's Living After Murder Program, the Chery family's creation of the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute, school-based conflict resolution and violence prevention programs, inclusion of violence prevention in the DARE program, community policing, WEATOC theater group skits on violence prevention, and Boston Improv.

The growth in programs across the city directly lined up with the decline in the number of youth homicides. Moreover, there were spin-off activities from each program. That is the beauty and reality of a social movement -- there are spin-off activities. Many never get counted, but that does not lessen their contribution or importance.

The three programs incorrectly identified as the key elements of the "Boston Strategy" -- collaboration between police and clergy, the federal prosecutors, and more attentive juvenile probation -- were only a part of the solution in the past and should be only part of the solution now. Tough punishment strategies may also be a part of the solution, but they are not the primary one. A long-term community mobilizing strategy focused on prevention that fosters youth development and doesn't lead with punishment is what is required. It was the only thing that worked before; it is the only thing that will work again.

Is it time for Boston to use Philadelphia as a model? It doesn't need to start back at the beginning. However, it does not need to repeat the mistakes of the past by leaving out those community residents and programs that deserve the credit for our past successes and are essential to any future successes. We must reclaim the true Boston model as ours and begin an inclusive, long-term commitment to changing attitudes and social norms, and breaking the cycle of violence with early services to the most traumatized children. Our children are too

important.

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