



# Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

MISCELLANEOUS

## Gov. Patrick gets it right

When it comes to criminal justice matters, some politicians get it--and Governor Deval Patrick is one of them. . Unlike the "get tough at all costs" blowhards who pander to the three R's--Retribution, Revenge and Retaliation--for the sake of the ultimate R of Re-election, some leaders recognize the critical importance of crime prevention, treatment and rehabilitation.

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-implement do work.

Too often, prevention initiatives are funded and 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. 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 what the initiative, there will be failures--those who commit crimes or recidivate despite our best efforts to prevent it. Rather than focusing on the failures (as the media tends to do in its "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." While 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 most lasting impact before a youngster is seduced by gangs, drugs and crime. For that matter, we must recognize that children are often drawn to gangs for many positive reasons--camaraderie, respect, status, excitement, and protection. Our challenge is to identify and provide alternative means for youngsters to derive the same types of personal fulfillment in programs that foster positive youth development.
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. What is needed is foundational support that extends well beyond election cycles.

4. Prevention should take a multi-faceted approach, as there are many 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 assail struggling underage single mothers for their lack of parenting effectiveness, many programs assist 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, anti-bullying 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 programs 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 success that his/her successor will derive.

We need more of our lawmakers on Beacon Hill to tackle criminal justice reforms without fearing the ?Massachusetts liberal? label. We need more of our lawmakers to think progressively without concern for political fallout.