

BLOODY STREETS OF OAKLAND

By Jordan Riak December 2002

With every new victim of street crime in Oakland, with every escalation of that city's shameful homicide rate, we see yet another round of hand wringing and clamoring for answers. Each time a child is killed by a stray bullet, the made-for-television shrine of teddy bears and candles that materializes on the victim's doorstep gives viewers of the evening news their daily dose of poignancy, but little else. Today's shocking news is much like yesterday's shocking news. It no longer shocks. And each new round of editorials, op-ed pieces and letters-to-editors leaves readers with the distinct feeling they've been there before. New citizens' committees spring into existence with regularity, announcing their intention to reclaim their neighborhoods from the gangs. But they sound exactly like their defunct predecessors. Reformers call for new and better social programs to address poverty, addiction, school dropout, teen pregnancy, joblessness and homelessness. But no one has a clue how those programs can be funded. Law-and-order advocates demand tougher penalties for lawbreakers—an approach that has been shown mainly to create tougher criminals and keep the prison industry thriving. Meanwhile, ironically, part of the answer—the part that is relatively free of charge—is ignored: reform the way parents raise their children. Provide them with information and assistance they need and crave so that they can do the best possible job at enabling their children to become happy, productive, law-abiding adults.

The familiar maxim associated with data analysis applies equally to the rearing of children: "Garbage in, garbage out." Until parents (in Oakland or anywhere) are weaned of the spanking habit, until they forego easy resort to switch, belt, fist and hand in the management of their babies, they will continue to reap the whirlwind. Every year we will see a new crop of insulted, abused and neglected children mature into angry adolescents, some of whom will take to the streets where they grasp with gusto the opportunity to dish out to others what was dished out to them. For those unattached youth, the war zone of the street is a logical next step from the war zone that was home. Garbage in, garbage out.

Some citizens have put their hopes in various schemes such as mandatory school uniforms, youth curfews, boot camps and military schools. But they are only fooling themselves. Parents and educators can rely on coercive, authoritarian methods for just so long. The young

grow up. They get too big (and too dangerous) to be spanked or otherwise forcibly managed. What does one do then? Shackles? Public flogging? Punitive solutions have never produced anything in the long run but fear of force and belief in force. This heavy reliance on force in dealing with the young has inevitable, though unintended, consequences. Those consequences are on display nightly in the neighborhoods where deadly force rules.

In 1999 Parents and Teachers Against Violence in Education proposed to the Oakland City Council that they embark on an anti-spanking campaign for the city. This organization offered to supply no-spanking posters for display in public areas. Our expectation was that this would stimulate discussion and self-examination, even though it did not have the force of law. For many it would have been their very first encounter with the notion that hitting children is wrong. We expected that various private and public groups and agencies would carry the program forward with guidance for parents. We hoped that a new understanding of parents' role in meeting needs of children—something spankers generally don't think about—would germinate in the public consciousness. We neither expected nor desired a one-size-fits-all parenting policy to emerge. We expected debate, reflection and experimentation to occur, while never losing sight of this fundamental truth: hitting a child is morally reprehensible, and its purported practical benefits aren't worth the risks. But our offer was rejected, and the media treated us and our proposal as comic relief to fill the gaps between the "serious" news items of the day. Oakland's homicide rate, for instance.

We fully realized that putting a few posters up at bus stops or in schools and libraries would not fix a problem that is so firmly rooted. We recognized that the cure would take generations, even with the requisite vision and perseverance. Accordingly, we remind readers of this article that our offer still stands. Samples of our new no-spanking posters in English and Spanish can be seen, downloaded and printed from our Web site at www.nospank.net. Other excellent materials are also available there for use by parents, educators, healthcare professionals and anyone else who needs them. Let's embark on a program that won't cost taxpayers a dime but will go a long way toward giving the next generation a better start, and finally, truly, eradicating the meanness of the streets.