

Section: Perspective
Page: E1
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A handful

The few troublemakers in Family Court all lack male role models

By W. DENNIS DUGGAN

Caption: Jeff Boyer/Times Union

A 12-year-old kid penguin-walks into my courtroom. His feet are shackled and his wrists are handcuffed to a chain around his waist. He is as secure as any al-Qaida terrorist.

He takes his seat between his law guardian and his mother. I see the vacant look in his eyes and notice his feet do not reach the floor. He is in Family Court charged with armed robbery.

The boy explains to me that he saw a kid on a bike and wanted to ride it. He took out his box cutter and confronted the other youth. He is a modern-day version of the highway robber.

I wonder why, at age 12, this boy thought that robbing someone was an OK thing to do. But it is clear thinking never entered into the decision. Delaying his gratification was not an option. He just wanted to ride the bike and had no explanation for having a box cutter. What do you do with a 12-year-old robber?

The next youth emerges from the lockup with two deputies at his side. He is 15 and is charged with shooting a girl in the leg. As with most shootings, if the bullet had been fired just to the left or right, the charge might have been murder. Life and death on Albany's streets can be a matter of inches and luck good or bad.

I know what he is going to tell me before he opens his mouth because I hear it in every gun case he found it in the bushes. Every juvenile charged in Family Court with gun possession found the gun in the bushes. All over Albany, there are guns lost or left in bushes.

Everyone knows he is lying. I have reports he is a member of OGGK. Sometimes that stands for "Original Gangster Killers," sometimes for "Orange Gambino Killers." Not one of this gang's members has any idea who Carlo Gambino was.

I send this boy to the Capital District Secure Detention Facility. It is a place as secure as any prison in this state and run by a person who could make a Marine drill sergeant quake in his boots. This will be the first parental structure this young man ever had. Unfortunately, it won't be enough.

After sitting in Family Court for almost 14 years, hearing more than 40,000 cases, I must confess I am not sure what we can do to solve the problem of youth violence. I do have some observations:

First, the overwhelming majority of kids of all races, creeds and colors, in urban, suburban or rural schools, are not juvenile delinquents. But we read only about the ones who are and we start to think all kids are like that. It was the longshoreman/philosopher Eric Hoffer who noted that we tend to judge any group by its least worthy members.

Second, this is not a problem caused by race or bad schools. It is a problem about economics and family. The children in trouble in Family Court have a unifying theme. They are being raised by single mothers who are living off the bottom of their pocketbooks.

These are the kids who have no fathers. Kids were meant to be raised by two parents married to each other. If you combine poor housing, dangerous and drug-ridden neighborhoods, little adult supervision and no positive male role model in a child's environment, and then expect an overworked mother to keep it all together well, why should we be surprised kids are shooting each other?

A few weeks ago, a mother explained to me that her delinquent son had "issues" and needed anger-management training. I told her that when I was a kid, having "issues" meant being disobedient and anger management started when my father came home from work. She did not understand, as she had never lived with a father who came home from work and neither did her son.

As our grandmothers would have said, the proof is in the pudding. Statistics and experience show that kids who live with two parents are a very small percentage of those who become juvenile delinquents, drop out of school, get pregnant or end up in our prisons.

So what can we do? Until our society evolves back to a point where the large majority of fathers and mothers raise their kids together (and this is a problem government can't solve), we will continue to expect our schools to come to the rescue.

But we have asked our schools to do too much. Schools were never meant to replace parents. Schools can only work with the children we send them.

If we expect schools to replace parents, we must give them a fighting chance by funding them for that task. For everyone who has ever voted "no" on a school budget, I ask you this:

Where will you find the police or firefighters to save you or your family? Who will administer your first aid in the ambulance on the way to the hospital? Will there be enough nurses to care for you when you get there? Who will care for you at the nursing home in your old age? Who will you ask to go to war to defend our country?

For me the answer is simple: I would like to have young adults in these jobs who had the chance to graduate from high school in four years.

In the meantime, the troublemakers need to be removed from our children's schools and educated all day long in a highly structured setting. Kids, parents and teachers have a right to schools that can concentrate on education and not worry about riot control.

The troublemakers are a literal handful. Our grandmothers told us about this, too. They are the couple of apples spoiling the barrel. Remove those few and the rest will do just fine.

W. Dennis Duggan is an Albany County Family Court judge. He is a trustee of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, and a past president of the state Family Court Judges Association.