CRIME AND COMMUNITY ; A Q&A WITH ROBERT J. SAMPSON

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WORK IN PROGRESSKristin Eliasberg has written about legal issues for The Boston Globe and The New York Times.

WHY IS IT THAT some parts of the city - Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan - are crime-prone? And why do high crime rates recur in these areas even after interludes of calm? As the alarming recent spike in violent crime in these Boston neighborhoods reminds us, these questions aren't going away.

Robert J. Sampson, a professor of sociology at Harvard and one of the country's foremost criminologists, thinks that one reason we can't answer those questions, much less formulate effective anti- crime policy, is that we've been looking at the wrong things. In his research on urban neighborhoods over the past four decades in Chicago, and more recently in European and Asian cities - with a large-scale survey planned for Boston - Sampson focuses on isolating the factors, from housing quality to racial segregation to concentration of poverty, that influence not only high crime rates and social disorder but also community cohesion and well-being.

Ideas reached Sampson by telephone in his Harvard office.

IDEAS: How do you explain the "Boston Miracle" of the late `90s, when violent crime in Boston's poorer neighborhoods, some of the very same neighborhoods that have been hardest hit recently, declined steeply?

SAMPSON: The "Boston Miracle" was not so much divine intervention as old-fashioned community mobilization. The key to the Boston strategy was to marry formal controls - the police - with a community-based approach. Community church leaders agreed to monitor neighborhood youth, if in turn the police agreed to nonracist, non- abusive methods.

Prior to that integration, there was suspicion on both sides. Our research shows that low-income and segregated communities have a high degree of legal and moral cynicism. But, contrary to what a lot of people think, low-income residents do want police in their communities. They don't want racial profiling, they don't want brutality, but they want criminals off the streets. Boston communities mobilized to ask for a different kind of policing. And because of community church involvement, the police were perceived as legitimate.

IDEAS: What about the current resurgence of crime in some of the same Boston communities?

SAMPSON: You can't just rely on the fact that there was a Boston Miracle, it has to be continually implemented in the sense of police/ community interventions. The value of the Boston Miracle, or other types of community policing, isn't just having more officers on the street, it's the active engagement of residents, ensuring that there is community input in problem-solving.

IDEAS: In your research, how do you collect information about something like "community input"?

SAMPSON: We use innovative strategies like videotaping street blocks to observe both physical aspects of the neighborhood - such as housing - and patterns of social interaction as they unfold. We also conduct "network" surveys, asking about connections among people. We survey residents to get their perspective on what is going on in the community - the nature of social ties, the extent to which people are willing to intervene in the neighborhood. Whether residents feel that their neighbors share their values.

IDEAS: Can you give an example?

SAMPSON: One method I call the "other people's children" approach. We ask, would you intervene if kids were skipping school and loitering on your block? If your local school was threatened with funding cuts? We find there is tremendous variation across neighborhoods, even in poor neighborhoods. In some poor neighborhoods there is a sense of unity with regard to taking public action with respect to supervising kids, or confronting people who are being publicly disruptive. In other communities people don't want to get involved, they don't have a sense of the publicness

of neighborhoods.

IDEAS: How do you measure something like that?

SAMPSON: I write about communities' "collective efficacy," which involves the willingness of residents to take action, to do things to benefit the larger community. It's a measure of how well a neighborhood can mobilize to achieve common goals, like supervising children or maintaining public order. It involves informal social controls, however, not external actions, like a police crackdown.

IDEAS: Can you come to conclusions about what builds collective efficacy, and what doesn't?

SAMPSON: Well, that's the $64,000 question. There are some clues: Concentration of poverty, lack of resources, housing instability all weaken social control. Higher rates of home ownership and greater residential stability lead to higher levels of collective efficacy - regardless of income level.

There is also evidence that voluntary associations and community organizations help. But these networks have to be activated. . . . These are very different from close family or friendship ties. You can have communities with dense social ties but residents may not feel responsibility for taking action, for providing social goods that would benefit the larger community. The bottom line is you don't have to love your neighbor but you should trust him.

IDEAS: What implications does your work have for policy making?

SAMPSON: The default position of a lot of research is that crime is largely a problem of poverty. To some extent, of course, it is, but in fact most poor people don't commit crime. And even in the most high-crime neighborhoods, most places are safe most of the time. There may be the potential for crime, but its realization is something that is socially explained, and therefore, one can think about various strategies for intervention.

One innovation I support is the dissemination of information that has so far been limited to police use. We now have the technology to identify crime "hot spots." This data can be made available to local residents and community organizations. Residents could go online and see, in real time, or look back over the past month, the actual incidences of crime in their neighborhood and where it's occurring. . . . I think that's one mechanism to get community residents more involved. Innovative and effective mobilization might occur in ways that could go well beyond police power.

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