

The Boston Globe

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 5, 1999

Boston can lead the nation in saving high-risk youths

EUGENE F. RIVERS III

Boston has much of which to be proud as we review recent history. Nowhere is this more dramatically illustrated than in violence prevention and public safety. The basic elements of the "Boston Miracle" provide a valuable perspective.

The drop in homicide rates among major US cities has been steepest in Boston. Our rates have dropped 61.2 percent, from 152 homicides in 1990 to 59 in 1996. By 1998, 35 murders took place. For a 29-month period ending in January 1998, Boston had no teenage homicides. Since then there have been 17.

Much of this success can be attributed to the racial climate created by Mayor Thomas M. Menino and Police Commissioner Paul F. Evans. When contrasted with the racial climate of the busing crisis of the mid-1970s, it is indeed a miracle.

In the black community during the 1980s, a number of anticrime initiatives were led by figures such as the Rev. Bruce H. Wall, then of the Twelfth Baptist Church, and Don Muhammad of the Nation of Islam. Their contributions fertilized the soil for what was to emerge. Ten years later, black churches began to mobilize in the aftermath of a stabbing incident at Morning Star Baptist Church in the spring of 1992. So what is the next chapter?

Boston has an opportunity to build on recent successes and lead the nation in saving a generation of black and

brown children who are now between the ages of 8 and 14.

Saving these children will require great imagination and political creativity. According to an analysis of census data by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, there will be more than 13 million teenagers between the ages of 15 and 17 by the year 2010 - a 31 percent increase from 1990. For children between the ages of 10 and 14 there will be a 21 percent increase during the same period. Moreover, there will be an 8 percent increase in the number of white juveniles and a 26 percent increase in the number of black juveniles. We have a significant challenge before us.

Boston has a unique opportunity to promote a model that intercepts these much younger high-risk children. Since our local context reflects the national demographic trends, programs developed here can serve as models for the country. Good work has already begun. Anticipating a statewide increase in the adolescent population, Secretary of Health and Human Services William D. O'Leary in October 1998 allocated funding to support a variety of after-school programs to serve this high-risk population. Such interventions are intended to prevent or at least reduce an expected 700 additional violent crimes and 1,000 more teenage pregnancies in the state between now and 2005.

In Boston in 1996 there were 22,918 teenagers between the ages 14 and 17. By the year 2006 there will be 29,418 teenagers in this age range. In January 1998 Mayor Menino launched his Boston 2-to-6 Initiative to "offer quality, affordable after-school activity in every neighborhood." In the same vein, the Boston Coalition is convening briefing

sessions to educate the business community on this issue.

How are these top-down strategies playing in the 'hood? Very unevenly. In fact, a dangerous trend is emerging that is not fully captured by the statistics. In neglected pockets of Roxbury and Dorchester, police and street workers are encountering a more violent group of younger males coming up between ages 8 and 13 in certain elementary and middle schools and police districts such as C-11.

What is to be done? First, there must be a recognition that no amount of federal, state, or municipal good will can serve as a substitute for effective parenting and leadership in the neighborhood. The black community in particular must confront and claim the moral crisis that overwhelms a rising generation of very young children who are the progeny of our weakest social classes. Black churches must redouble their efforts.

Focusing on high-risk children between the ages of 8 and 14, people in the inner city must minister, monitor, and mentor these children in collaboration with schools, the state Department of Youth Services, and probation and law enforcement agencies. Churches will need help from the private sector. As one young man told us recently as he pointed to an automatic handgun hidden beneath his shirt: "I have come to you for help. Either you will help me or this will."

The Rev. Eugene F. Rivers III is cofounder of the Boston Ten Point Coalition and cochair of the National Ten Point Leadership Foundation.