

**Knight Ridder Newspapers. (1998, November 15). "Religion seen as important tool in solving urban problems." *The Providence Sunday Journal*, A25.**

**OVERVIEW**

"Increasingly, social scientists believe that involvement in religion has a positive effect on behavior," is the subtitle's summary of this article.

This growing opinion began with Harvard economist Richard Freeman ("Who Escapes? The Relationship of Church-going and Other Background Factors to the Socio-Economic Performance of Black Male Youths from Inner City Poverty Tracts," 1983). But there seemed little interest in this finding that poor, inner-city youths who attended church were less likely than others to become involved in crime and drop out of school. Religion just wasn't taken seriously by most social scientists or urban activists. Social scientists even believed that religiosity was more an indicator of low intellect and low academic attainment. Such views are no longer tenable.

Criminologist Byron Johnson of Vanderbilt University and his colleagues have presented to strengthen Freeman's studies. They have found an even more "robust" connection between religion and reduction of delinquency.

Johnson, David B. Larson (Duke University), Spencer D. Li (University of Maryland), and Sung Joon Jang (Ohio State University) will announce the conclusions of their studies in the Spring of 1999. "Drawing from the theoretical framework of social disorganization, life course, and resiliency, the authors test the hypothesis that churchgoing is protective in helping at-risk youth escape criminal and delinquent activity frequently associated with living in inner-city poverty tracts."

Another key figure in the study of religion in urban settings is John DiIulio. This former South Philly street kid went to the University of Pennsylvania and became a professor at Princeton University and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institute. His early articles espoused a conservative's hard line on crime, and he coined the term "super-predators" for a new breed of ruthless and remorseless young street killers. Increasingly he found churches and religious institutions to "hold the key to solving urban problems." He explains how, in terms of social science, everything is pointing to religion as a powerful factor determining those urban youth who will escape crime and poverty.

DiIulio's research among prisoners was especially convincing:

You would see hardened felons, people who committed terrible violence without remorse, and who had never accepted any authority figure in their lives, doing whatever this little minister half their size told them to do.

A lifelong Catholic, DiIulio believes in the power of religion "as a matter of both science and passion." But he does not think faith-based organizations can replace the role of government in solving urban problems.

How much more can faith-based organizations accomplish? And how can they be most effectively helped in preventing urban crime and violence? DiIulio acknowledges he does not know the answer to these questions that await further study.

The opinions of Freeman, Johnson and DiIulio are not without critics. Herbert Gans, sociology professor at Columbia University says he has not seen or acknowledged any research indicating that religion "causes" people to reject anti-social behavior. In fact, he regards the ideas as "totally absurd." And Elijah Anderson, who has written important books on urban youth and street life, thinks faith-based solutions may underestimate the alienation of many urban youth. Anderson says he has seen some amazing "conversion experiences," but knows other urban youth who have formed an "oppositional culture" believing that the world is not only against them, but owes them. Many of these may be impervious to religious penetration.

Still, the research pointing to the effectiveness of faith-based strategies has impressed legislators and other leaders.

- Congress has instituted a charitable choice option allowing federal monies and tax exemptions to fund faith-based programs.
- Welfare reform legislation permits states to contract with faith-based agencies to help in the transition.
- Mayors John Norquist of Milwaukee and Stephen Godsmith of Indianapolis are making extensive use of faith-based social programs.
- The Pew Charitable Trust has developed an extensive program to aid faith-based urban programs in Philadelphia.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

1. Have you seen evidence that churches and religious organizations can reduce crime and poverty?
2. Do you think the government should ever fund religious programs?
3. If you were directing a religious urban program, would you accept money from the government?
4. How should such programs be held accountable for public funding?
5. What further study would you like to see done in this area and on this issue?

### **IMPLICATIONS**

1. The critics of this approach seem blind to two things.
2. First, the advocates of Charitable Choice and help to faith-based programs is making this an either-or matter or denying the importance of government and secular programs. Religion will definitely not reach all young people nor will the church solve all the problems of a neighborhood.
3. Secondly, those of us who have been involved in faith-based urban programs since the 1960s know they have been effective and have seen the difference between the behavior of faith committed and other urban youth.

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