

Jamaican Observer

Cold comfort

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ONE of the most difficult undertakings in this life is that of being a parent. It is a responsibility for which there is little formal preparation, and most persons simply operate on the basis of intuition and what they internalised from their family of origin. Most people experiment with a whole repertoire of strategies and interventions in the hope of having some positive outcomes with their children.

There are, however, some parents who utilise threats and physical punishment as the primary way to achieve those ends. This usually works for a while with most children, but there often comes a time when threats do not evoke the desired result, and the dispensing of physical punishment is met by a defiant child, who stands and takes the punishment without wincing or shedding a tear, much to the annoyance of the parent, who then exerts even more force in the hope of breaking the child's defiance, but to no effect.





There comes a point in the life of some children when they actually begin showing their physical and emotional strength by relieving the parent of the instrument used to inflict the physical punishment. Fortunately, many parents in their perceptiveness do not wait until things get to this level but seek to change their strategies, or to get help from friends or some other source in learning alternative methods of parenting and punishment.

There are still large sections of the Jamaican population who seem to believe that physical punishment/corporal punishment is what is most needed as the form of discipline for this generation of children. They reject any notion of corporal punishment as violence and object to the position taken by the Ministry of Education that corporal punishment is not to be administered in schools.

Among the advocates of this position are those who speak of the glory days when they as children received corporal punishment, and how it has put them in good stead for facing life. Additionally, they associate with the experiences of those glory days the fact that adults could administer corporal punishment to any child they saw misbehaving on the road, and report the matter to their parents, who would then administer a second dose of the "medicine". Let those who entertain such nostalgic notions try these forms of community discipline and see what is in store for them today!

In the administration of corporal punishment there is the coming together of authority, force, and violence in a relationship between parties who are not equal and which leaves one party with physical and emotional pain and scars. It has long been recognised that in a civilised society no one should have such control over the life of another, without being subject to public scrutiny by the relevant authorities -- not even parents.

So, no longer is it possible for parents to assert, as they did in times past, that "it is my child and I can do what I want", neither can the agents of the state operate as if they have absolute control and are above accountability to the public they exist to serve. Today, there are universally recognised rights of the child, and institutions which have been established to enforce the same.

So, for, example, there is the Office of the Children's Advocate and the Centre for the Investigation of Sexual Offences and Child Abuse. In the case of the wider public, there is the Office of the Public Defender and the Independent Commission of Investigation to ensure that the rights of citizens are not denied or trampled upon by those responsible for governance, and by those charged with the matter of policing and the maintenance of law and order in the society.

During the past week, my heart sank when I learnt that within 48 hours 10 persons had been killed at the hands of the police. These are frightening statistics and in any society should be cause for alarm. These are statistics which place us high on an international list from which we can take no comfort. The immediate response of many is to see in this comment an attempt to blame the police and to see another "bleeding heart" trying to stifle the police in their attempt to bring crime and violence under control. It is about much more than that.

It is incontrovertible that crime and violence are at an intolerable level in Jamaica. The question becomes how do we respond as a society to that reality. The society, perhaps driven by a sense of impotence and fear, has tended to see the solution residing in the hands of the police and those in governance with direct responsibility for the portfolio of national security. The police are constituted as an institution to enforce the law, protect property, maintain civil order, and to exercise these duties through the use of appropriate force.

The question which arises from all of this is whether the current crisis in crime and violence is the result of the failure of policing. The society seems to be responding in the affirmative to this question, insisting that the police need to become more aggressive in addressing this situation. Each day it seems that there are more and more voices offering this solution.

The situation becomes more complicated when individuals and institutions of influence and who have access to the media and public platforms use these to call for stronger police action. That is bad enough, but when a representative of a foreign nation suggests that the high level of crime is a deterrent to foreign investment, we are prone to go crazy, as it is not that crime must be controlled for the well-being of us citizens who live here, but to ensure a positive perception of our reality by foreigners and the subsequent inflow of their investments. It may be just a matter of sheer coincidence that this significant spike in the incidence of police killings followed in the wake of those comments.

I believe that we need to consider whether there is some scapegoating of the police taking place in our current response to crime in our society. After the incursions in Western Kingston in 2010, the police recognised that in the aftermath of that situation they were being asked to be agents of social transformation, without being given the financial resources to do so, but also that this was not really their job. I recall that this was not the only occasion on which the police were recognising that the problem facing our society with crime is not just one of policing.

By insisting that the problem before is one of policing, the police force is being put in the position of coming up with the solution for what must, of necessity, be a much larger social problem. The police have told us, for example, that most of the crime and the murders taking place are gang-related. How have these gangs emerged and become so pervasive and so powerful? Who cares? The answer from the society is that they must be eliminated, and the expectation is that the police must do that by just about any means, while we turn a blind eye.

The pronouncements from the police as to the way to achieve this "unofficial" mandate seem ambiguous and are accommodating of the society's endorsement of the idea of "no holds barred" in bringing about this result. So the announcement of each alleged criminal or gang member killed in any and all circumstances of exchange with the police is a cause for celebration by many within the society.

I cannot help but recall the fact that there are now gangs in existence in many of our schools and wonder how the society views and wants to address this situation. Is this a matter for policing and for the use of any and all methods of enforcement to get rid of the gangs? There must be a dynamic

which is driving the emergence of gangs as an attractive way of life for many, and making it more attractive for students rather than the option of focused academic pursuits.

What the public has been seeing these days is an intentional engagement of the police in the confrontation of persons who are alleged to have connection to gangs and criminal activities, in a manner that is leading to an escalation in the statistics for persons killed at the hands of the police. At the same time, there is a serious escalation in the level of anger and animosity directed at the police by family members and members of communities in which these killings are taking place, with the official versions of the operations being at variance with those of the citizens.

It cannot go unnoticed that there is an explosive level of venom coming from these protesting citizens. It cannot go unnoticed also that it is our young black men who are the persons killed in these operations.

In a context in which among our young black men there is present a philosophy affirmed by some which says, "Mi dun dead aready", we must ask ourselves what this is saying about the experience of life and its possibilities for these young men in this society, and also, what it may mean for a young man faced with a police operation in which he believes he will be killed.

There is now no fear of force or of death. These are issues which we cannot escape and, I suggest, no amount of turning up the heat on these young men, using maximum force, or exterminating each one will solve them. To seek to find some measure of solace in the statistics of killing of alleged criminals at the hands of the police as a sign that we are bringing crime under control, and thereby creating an ordered society in which business can now flourish, is nothing but cold comfort for a desperate people.

We must ask ourselves if, as we mark 50 years of Independence, this is the best message we have for our young men, even as we seem to be creating in many of our communities some very angry and alienated citizens who believe that they are on the outside of the society's delivery of justice.

The current level of police killings calls for serious national attention, and to this end, the civilian oversight which the Independent Commission of Investigation offers must be evident, notwithstanding protest from within the fJCF, and as we bring our nation in line with international standards of policing and justice for all.

At the same time, the police must be careful not to be the scapegoats for the nation as it washes its hands of responsibility for the creation of its criminal elements, and sends a message that a free hand is being given to do any and everything to show that results are forthcoming.

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