

Education, Families, and Crime

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As a youngster, growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, if asked to place in hierarchical order which of the following three concerns people talked about most, I would have said families, education, and crime. Today, if asked, I would say crime, education, and families.

I say crime because this is what we hear, see, and read on a daily basis in and on the media. To some extent, educational issues are highlighted. Families are given the headlines only when there are elements of sensationalism. As a result of this practice, the question I now raise is: Which has greater influence on crime – families or education? My answer, without hesitation, is education. I say education because education is one of the main ways through which societies make their populations humane. Unlike animals, we must be taught how to behave. Sociologists tell us that all human behaviour is learnt. Crime, therefore, has its origin in the formal and informal systems of education that prevail in societies. Families in turn derive their values, norms, mores, and character from the types of formal and informal education (socialisation) to which they have been exposed.

Against all of the above, I caution that in Trinidad and Tobago we have to be careful with respect to whom we blame for the rising crime statistics. To my mind, the Government and the Minister of National Security have become scapegoats. While, to some extent, they can be accused of not bringing law breakers to justice, they certainly cannot be blamed for the rising trend of crime. Other factors must be cited as responsible for this sad and shocking state of affairs.

As I see it, any discussion on crime must include recognition of the following: the propensity for societies worldwide towards materialism, secularism, liberalism, greed, and the easy life. Discipline, ethical behaviour, patriotism, respect for authority figures, and consciousness of a divine presence seem to have all gone out of the window.

While in the past social solidarity was immersed in community customs and regulation, today it has been replaced by individualism. Even the extended family in many instances has given way to the nuclear or single family.

How did our Trinidad and Tobago arrive at this untenable state of affairs? Where have our solid households gone? I say households because in the past, as now, not all families were directed by married couples. Indeed, some of my best and upright friends did not even know their fathers. I recall one in particular. His mother was an alcoholic and prostitute but the community saw to it that he behaved in acceptable ways. In addition, my primary and secondary schools were critical in helping to form my character. Also of note must be the literature I read. My heroes were my role models. I wanted to be as wise, strong, and ethical as they.

Very few of my friends have gone astray. Instead they all rose to become productive contributors to society in different walks of life and in different parts of the world. We all had a sense of nationalism. We all were interested in politics and the direction in which the country was headed. We all were excited by the prospects of Independence, while working in the Teaching Service, the Public Service, or the professions—law, medicine, or the priesthood—or rising to become first-class tradesmen. Where has all this excitement gone today? Today, the focus has changed. Excitement is now all about material gain and the good life.

We have moved from indigenous community introspection to aping developed world values, lifestyles, and fashions. Our education system now has to rethink its roles and responsibilities. We can do this only if we understand the new configurations in society. Clearly, we must as a people demand competent and moral leadership at both the macro and micro levels in our education systems, as well as relevant programmes that embrace all in the system, and structures, policies, and resources conducive to the promotion and institutionalisation of a sound seamless education system.

We have to understand that education cannot be only about certification and scholarships. As a people we can no longer judge our schools by the number of successful candidates at the SEA, CXC, and CAPE levels. Instead, we must assess the impact of the graduates of our school system on the quality of social and ethical life that prevails in our society. Unless we develop the right approaches to education, crime will continue to escalate in our nation.

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