

The Tower of Babel Crime Plan

There's probably a new crime prevention program just right for you. The odds are you'll never find it.

BY DAVID RAPP

Thirty billion dollars worth of anti-crime money is about to descend on state and local America, subsidizing virtually all the new prisons, additional police officers and demonstration projects that Democrats and Republicans spent the whole summer arguing about in the corridors of Congress.

It is enough to make anybody with a good program idea leap with enthusiasm. Or it should be. For some reason, though, many of those who stand to benefit from the Clinton crime bill still seem to have other things on their mind.

Nancy Eberle of York, Pennsylvania, is a good example. All summer, while Congress talked about how to rescue vulnerable young people from the temptations of the criminal life, Eberle was working, in her capacity as grant writer for the York YMCA, to find another thousand bucks or so to continue a very popular youth program called "Y's Kids."

Y's Kids, for children aged 6 to 12, is an exceedingly modest but apparently effective crime prevention program. It brings together boys and girls from all backgrounds, rural and urban, white and black, middle class and poor, who spend a couple of afternoons a week learning to deal with their cultural differences and fears.

By all accounts, Y's Kids was a big success in York. It has attracted 250 kids, won a Mayor's Award and as Nancy Eberle puts it, "showed us something we ought to be doing at the YMCA." There's only one problem: The initial \$1,000 federal grant for Y's Kids, funneled through the York-Adams Drug and Alcohol Program, expired on June 1, barely two months after the money had finally made its way to York. There was enough time to buy some supplies and curriculum materials, pay the gas mileage for a prevention specialist, and even print up some T-shirts for the participants. But then the program went into hiatus while Ms. Eberle began searching for a new donation or grant.

That kind of snafu is typical of the problems that confront state and local agencies (and public service organizations like the YMCA) as they enter the Byzantine world of federal grant hunting. Just finding the source of a grant can be an exercise in futility and/or serendipity—Ms. Eberle, for instance, happened upon the initial violence prevention grant in a newspaper advertisement. Figuring out how to apply for the money takes expertise and savvy, one reason the York Y has assigned the job full-time to Ms. Eberle, who in turn spends much of her time in the local library pouring through grant resource publications. Then, even if an application is approved, it can take months to get a check in the mail.

The Clinton crime bill, it turns out, will do very little to simplify this head-spinning routine. Rather, it will wrap a few more mysteries around the enigma, if only because this is the way crime bills usually get

fashioned during an election year. For all of Clinton's vaunted desire to give local officials more flexibility in fighting crime—presumably so they can display more initiative to solve real, local problems—the legislation he signed into law last month will only add to the

federal Babel of crime prevention programs.

Do you know about the Community Schools Program? National Youth School Sports Program? The Family Violence Grants Act? The 21st Century Community Schools Program? Any of them might have money waiting for you. But you have to track them down in order to find out.

Altogether, there are more than 260 federal crime prevention programs designed to serve delinquent and at-risk youth. As Representative Bill Goodling, a Republican from Pennsylvania, pointed out during the crime bill debate, all of them existed before the Clinton crime bill moved into the picture. They now receive about \$5 billion a year from 17 agencies within seven federal departments, from the Department of Justice to the Education, Agriculture and Interior departments. "Are they effective? Of course not," Goodling said. "They are not coordinated in any way."

The Clinton bill adds a few more names and dollars to the rolls: an Ounce of Prevention Council, Youth Employment and Skills Crime Prevention Grants, Family and Community Endeavor Schools Grants, Midnight Sports leagues, and many more. But the bill does nothing to deal with the problem that Goodling identified—and the one that mayors, county officials and YMCA grant writers face every day: With no coordination in Washington, there can be little flexibility for the people in York or New York or Chicago or L.A. who want to experiment with programs for at-risk youth.

Goodling's point, which zoomed over the heads of most members of Congress, is that most of the prevention programs in the Clinton crime bill—like the 260 programs already in place—are tailored to meet the needs of their sponsors, not their beneficiaries. "The new programs serve little purpose other than to give members of Congress a chance to attach their name to something in a press release," Goodling says.

Back in places like York, people like Nancy Eberle will have to decipher a whole new set of rules and restrictions—and roadblocks and delays, no doubt—before they can put a Y's Kids program or a Midnight Basketball league into place. "If you could access a couple of different programs, that sure would be helpful," she says. "Right now, though, I don't know if I'd even want to attempt it."

The new crime bill isn't going to change the distant and disconnected bureaucratic maze in Washington. What it does is put the president's stamp of approval on it. G

