

## **Bringing Peace to Boston's Streets**

by Stanley Pollack

The proposed allocation of \$3.7 million by Governor Mitt Romney to help Boston deal with youth violence represents an opportunity to re-engage youths in the city's poorest neighborhoods. However, to achieve this goal this money must be used in a way that is based on an understanding of what is happening in the neighborhoods as well as the needs of youths and the potentials they possess to be productive partners in bringing peace to Boston's streets.

In the early '90s when I began Teen Empowerment — a Boston-based program that employs teens to work to change the values, beliefs, and patterns of behavior of their peers — gun shootings among teens were at an all-time high. Then from 1996 to 2003, Boston experienced a drop of almost 90% in violent acts among youth, with shootings decreasing from a high of 550 in 1990 to a low of 133 in 1997. This was sustained through 2003, when a reversal began: 268 shootings in 2004 and 341 the next year. This year, the number will climb to 616 if the current rate continues. To deal with this problem, three questions must be answered.

### **1. What accounted for the drop in crime between 1996 and 2003?**

A significant reason for the drop in crime was the transformation of beliefs and values within the youth culture, which was the product of strategic support by private and governmental funders for an asset-based approach to youth development. Funders dedicated significant resources to many programs that hired teenagers and trained them to be agents of positive change. For example:

- ◆ Many health centers throughout Massachusetts used Tobacco Prevention funding to employ over 1,700 youths s leaders.
- ◆ Many nonprofits used state funding through the Teen Challenge Program to hire youth leaders. The city of Boston employed peer leaders at almost every community center.
- ◆ Many nonprofits throughout the state hired teens for youth leadership jobs.

### **2. Why is crime among youths now rising at such an alarming rate?**

Beginning in 2001, federal, state, and local governments implemented a series of major cuts to services for youths, including these:

- ◆ Tobacco Prevention funding decreased from \$63 million to \$2.7 million between 2000 and 2004.
- ◆ Since 2002, the state has cut the Teen Challenge Pregnancy Prevention program from \$5.5 million to \$1 million.
- ◆ In 2001 the Department of Education spent \$13 million on after-school programs. By 2003, these funds had been eliminated.
- ◆ Local aid from the state, used in part to fund education and police services, was cut from \$800 million in 2003 to \$625 million in 2004 and 2005. Boston lost \$75.6 million last year.
- ◆ The federal government has cut many sources of local funding, including community development block grants.

### **3. What can we do to reestablish the positive behavior patterns in youth?**

During the last session, the governor and the Legislature began to reverse the trend of the last five years by increasing aid to education. With the \$3.7 million proposed by Governor Romney, there is the opportunity to refinance the network of youth leadership programs that were so effective in the 1990s.

When Teen Empowerment recently launched a youth leadership project in the Bowdoin-Geneva area of Boston, more than 300 youths applied for the job. We selected 14, and they are now working to bring peace to the streets of the community. These kinds of efforts should be expanded by using some of the funds now available to support a 15-site youth leadership program running year-round in both city and nonprofit groups, employing 300 youth as peer leaders and 35 adults as professional youth-leadership specialists. Boston has a vibrant system of community-based youth leadership organizations with the capacity to implement this initiative quickly and effectively.

To save lives, it is critical that the actions taken be based on a rigorous analysis of what worked in the 1990s to turn back a youth culture of guns, gangs, and violence. Only through this careful process can we develop an effective strategy that can reinstate stable community life in Boston neighborhoods.

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