

ANTI-CRIME IDEAS PALE BEFORE CHILD-CRIME TALES - THERE'S NO ONE TO LEAD THE YOUNGSTERS, BOBB SAYS

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The youngest person on this week's crime summit panel was at least a generation removed from childhood.

But childhood issues and children dominated much of the discussion.

For instance, City Manager Robert C. Bobb talked about an 8-year-old sodomist. That got more attention than any of the items on Bobb's long list of anti-crime ideas rattled off at the two-day meeting.

Bobb told the summit members that his staff had tracked about 120 children who had committed more than three crimes -- the youngest being the 8-year-old, who spent time at the Juvenile Detention Center.

"The problem is, the kids are in the system at a very early age and there's no one there" to lead them down a different path, he said. "Someone should have detected something before they ever got caught up in the court system."

Other panel members pointed out that most children who get into trouble with the law lead troubled lives and lag other children their age in school.

The summit was called by Mayor Leonidas B. Young and Commonwealth's Attorney David M. Hicks. Members, including elected officials, judges, and business, community and church leaders, met for more than 16 hours. The panel is to meet again Aug. 24, and City Council is to vote on an anti-crime package Sept. 12.

The panel came up with a long list of possible ways to immediately cut the escalating crime rate. And at least half that list was aimed at children.

Some ideas involved a kinder, gentler approach to juvenile crime control. But most panelists took a harder line. They advocated harsh penalties for the children and their parents.

Among the kinder and gentler advocates was Melvin Law, Richmond's School Board chairman. He said he'd like to see the average class size for kindergarten through third grade dropped to 12 pupils per teacher.

Hicks offered a similar idea: Reduce the class size in all elementary grades from 25 to 18. The idea, Hicks said, is to improve education and to identify children likely to get into trouble while they're still young enough to be stopped.

Panelist Bernice Travers, a member of the Northside Business Association, offered a popular idea: Have school in session from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. all year

long. Other solutions to violence among juveniles were much more radical.

Travers said it was time to stop coddling teen-age criminals. "Teen-agers who commit adult crimes should be tried as adults," she said.

She also wanted to know what schools do with truants. The answer did not please her or other panelists.

The school system has only three truant officers for its 27,500 public school children. The police essentially serve as the city's truant officers.

When truants are picked up, they are either returned to their school or taken to one of 11 drop-off schools. Repeat offenders are suspended and eventually expelled. The school system has few programs to deal with expelled

students. Judge Richard D. Taylor Jr. of Richmond Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court called for the matter to be addressed. "Young folks are put out of these schools in alarming numbers. Whatever you call it, they're not in

school." Del. Dwight C. Jones, D-Richmond, suggested the establishment of "massive holding centers for kids" who had been kicked out of school. He also backed the idea of drop-out centers for juveniles who refuse to go to school.

That kind of talk was right up Bobb's alley.

He long has supported a curfew ordinance. Police, however, haven't been enforcing such an ordinance because they have no place to take children who violate it. Bobb's solution: One central drop-off location for all violators. Bobb's get-tough proposals also would come down hard on parents of delinquent children.

He said families in subsidized housing should be kicked out of their homes if their children are convicted of buying drugs. Parents should be punished if their guns fall into the hands of their children. And, parents should be held responsible for their children's children.

Some of the anti-crime ideas aimed at juveniles possibly would present Constitutional problems, and that worried some panel members.

Robert L. Harris, Richmond's Chief Circuit Court Judge, warned against taking anti-crime steps that are unconstitutional. He said, "I'm not sure the coffers in the city till could award all the (legal) damages that might result."

Councilman Timothy M. Kaine said the city wouldn't pass any unconstitutional laws. But, he added, "Let's not be constrained by the Constitution" in coming up with ideas.

And Travers added, "Let's not say what we can't do, because we need to do

something."

• Memo: (lko)

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