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Juvie crime wave could bring rising violent tide

BY RICHARD ABORN

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Earlier this week, during a dispute with other teenagers, 16-year-old Mario Young was shot to death in Queens. Blocks away, in an apparently unrelated incident, two men, one 19 and the other 20, were stabbed. The next day in the Bronx, a 13-year-old boy allegedly stabbed an 18-year-old.

Were these isolated incidents or indicative of a larger trend? The answer is not encouraging.

While crime is down 5% this year in New York City, juvenile arrests are on the rise, hitting their highest levels since 2002. And juvenile crime is spiking across the country. The last time that happened, it foreshadowed a much broader crime epidemic. We must act now to ensure that history does not repeat.

From 1988 to 1989 - just before the last major increase in crime - the juvenile murder arrest rate climbed 18%. Overall arrests followed, going up 5%. The next year, the juvenile rate jumped 26% and the overall rate again followed, climbing 11%. All told between 1986 and 1995, violent crime arrests rose 67% among juveniles - and the overall rate rose by 37%.

The exact same thing could be happening again. In 2004 and 2003, there was a sharp rise in youths carrying weapons. By 2005, juvenile murder arrests had risen 20%. Overall murder arrests followed, rising 7% that year. The same was true of robberies. Juvenile robbery rose 11% and overall robberies rose 4%.

We cannot wait until we are in the midst of another crime epidemic before taking decisive action.

First, that means making the fight against juvenile crime more than just a police function. Home- and community-based interventions are powerful deterrents to youths committing crimes. Governmental "silo-busting," that is breaking down barriers between agencies, is required so that coordinated and comprehensive strategies can root out potentially troubling behaviors. All of this requires money.

At the same time, we need to bolster federal anti-crime strategies, which have been gutted in recent years. The federal response to the last crime wave was thorough and comprehensive: 100,000 more police officers, controls on illegal guns and a proliferation of prevention programs combined at that time to help sharply reduce both juvenile and overall crime.

Unfortunately, that constellation of smart crime fighting measures is absent today. Federal funding to hire police officers has gradually fallen to zero, and police staffing levels in the nation's largest cities have dropped since 2000. Funding for prevention programs like drug courts has dropped, as have other smart substance-abuse treatment programs.

Stopping the proliferation of guns on our streets, critical to any success in fighting crime, has been all but ignored in Washington. It has fallen to our cities' mayors, like Mayor Bloomberg's tireless efforts, to take up the fight.

It won't be cheap to rebuild the depleted ranks of our police forces, bolster prevention programs and control illegal guns - while ramping up the fight against the spike in juvenile crime. But we should not wait until we are confronted with another crime crisis to act.

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