

The Virtues of Virtue

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According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the rate of family violence in this country has dropped by more than half since 1993. I've been trying to figure out why.

A lot of the credit has to go to the people who have been quietly working in this field: to social workers who provide victims with counseling and support; to women's crisis centers, which help women trapped in violent relationships find other places to live; to police forces and prosecutors, who are arresting more spouse-beaters and putting them away.

The Violence Against Women Act, which was passed in 1994, must have also played a role, focusing federal money and attention.

But all of these efforts are part of a larger story. The decline in family violence is part of a whole web of positive, mutually reinforcing social trends. To put it in old-fashioned terms, America is becoming more virtuous. Americans today hurt each other less than they did 13 years ago. They are more likely to resist selfish and shortsighted impulses. They are leading more responsible, more organized lives. A result is an improvement in social order across a range of behaviors.

The decline in domestic violence is of a piece with the decline in violent crime over all. Violent crime over all is down by 55 percent since 1993 and violence by teenagers has dropped an astonishing 71 percent, according to the Department of Justice.

The number of drunken driving fatalities has declined by 38 percent since 1982, according to the Department of Transportation, even though the number of vehicle miles traveled is up 81 percent. The total consumption of hard liquor by Americans over that time has declined by over 30 percent.

Teenage pregnancy has declined by 28 percent since its peak in 1990. Teenage births are down significantly and, according to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, the number of abortions performed in the country has also been declining since the early 1990's.

Fewer children are living in poverty, even allowing for an uptick during the last recession. There's even evidence that divorce rates are declining, albeit at a much

more gradual pace. People with college degrees are seeing a sharp decline in divorce, especially if they were born after 1955.

I could go on. Teenage suicide is down. Elementary school test scores are rising (a sign that more kids are living in homes conducive to learning). Teenagers are losing their virginity later in life and having fewer sex partners. In short, many of the indicators of social breakdown, which shot upward in the late 1960's and 1970's, and which plateaued at high levels in the 1980's, have been declining since the early 1990's.

I always thought it would be dramatic to live through a moral revival. Great leaders would emerge. There would be important books, speeches, marches and crusades. We're in the middle of a moral revival now, and there has been very little of that. This revival has been a bottom-up, prosaic, un-self-conscious one, led by normal parents, normal neighbors and normal community activists.

The first thing that has happened is that people have stopped believing in stupid ideas: that the traditional family is obsolete, that drugs are liberating, that it is every adolescent's social duty to be a rebel.

The second thing that has happened is that many Americans have become better parents. Time diary studies reveal that parents now spend more time actively engaged with kids, even though both parents are more likely to work outside the home.

Third, many people in the younger generation, under age 30 or so, are reacting against the culture of divorce. They are trying to lead lives that are more stable than the ones their parents led. Post-boomers behave better than the baby boomers did.

Fourth, over the past few decades, neighborhood and charitable groups have emerged to help people lead more organized lives, even in the absence of cohesive families.

Obviously, we're not living in a utopia, where all social problems have been solved. But these improvements across a whole range of behaviors are too significant to be dismissed. We in the media play up the negative, as we always do. The activist groups emphasize the work still to be done, because they want to keep people mobilized and financing their work.

But the good news is out there. You want to know what a society looks like when it is in the middle of moral self-repair? Look around.