



HARLEM, NYC, MARCH 1977. © OLIVIER REBBOT/CONTACT PRESS IMAGES

## CHAPTER TWO

# Crack, Crime and a City in Crisis

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EW YORK WAS recovering from a near financial collapse and also coping with a so-called crack epidemic. Geoffrey Canada, an educator and youth worker who became head of the Harlem Children's Zone, recalls returning from Boston in the 1980s to a Harlem that "was just chaos and despair—abandoned buildings, trash, graffiti, filth." There was a sense "that this place was coming apart at the seams."

The July 1988 issue of *Life* magazine carried a cover line reading, "When Crack Hits the Neighborhood." Inside, a special report took the reader on a journey: "The Red Hook housing project in South Brooklyn has faced its share of problems common to the inner city—crime, unemployment, teenage pregnancy—but the community always pulled together to battle the difficulties. Then three years ago crack hit the Hook, and today every one of the project's 10,000 residents is either a dealer, a user or a hostage to the drug trade." The story quotes a resident saying, "There are only two kinds of people left in the project—them and us. They have guns and money and run the streets. They kill each other and anybody in the way."

Crack was a form of smokable cocaine whose use exploded in the 1980s. By the mid-1980s, crack had become commonplace in cities across America. New York City, as *Life* observed, was among the urban centers hit hard by the drug. And that was only one of its problems.

New York's financial crisis came to a head in 1975, when the city teetered on the edge of bankruptcy. The city's finances were in such dire shape that des-

For much of New York, the 1970s and 1980s was a time of devastation.

ignated squad cars stood by that October to deliver bankruptcy papers to banks. President Gerald Ford threatened to veto any bill providing for a federal bailout—an event famously captured by a headline in the *New York Daily News*: “Ford to City: Drop Dead.”

The city avoided bankruptcy with massive layoffs and other cutbacks. Over the next few years, roughly six thousand cops were fired, along with a nearly equal number of school teachers. A few years later, the *New York Times* reported that the city police force had shrunk to 22,170: “its smallest since 1954—when crime rates were less than half of today’s.”

New York was not alone in weathering a spike in crime, at least some of it fueled by drugs. The nation responded with so-called get tough crime policies—in-inaugurating an era of mass incarceration, the consequences of which America still grapples with today. Between 1980 and 2014, the numbers of people in prison and jail for drug offenses rose from 40,900 to 488,400, according to an analysis by The Sentencing Project; and the number of people under correctional supervision rose from under two million to over seven million.

Through the times of crisis, a nonprofit organization called Good Shepherd Services was trying to rescue young people one neighborhood at a time. The Sisters of the Good Shepherd originated in France in the 1600s with the mission of helping young women who had fallen on hard times. Two centuries later the order came to America and eventually spawned Good Shepherd Services, to which an energetic young nun, Sister Paulette LoMonaco, was assigned.

Good Shepherd Services provided family counseling in an area of South Brooklyn largely populated with recent immigrants. “As we listened to families, we realized we needed to begin to find pathways into the public schools,” recalled Sister Paulette. “So many who were coming to us were saying that their child was having trouble making it in school, or they were undocumented and fearful [that if they went to school] they could be deported.”

In 1980, shortly after becoming executive director of Good Shepherd, Sister Paulette perused the city’s long-term school absentee list and realized that a largely disproportionate number of the truants lived in Red Hook, a particularly distressed

and inaccessible area: “It’s 75 percent public housing and half of the people living there are below the poverty level. To get to Red Hook, you have to go under the Gowanus expressway. And it was one bus, and it wasn’t that easy.”

Good Shepherd joined forces with the Department of Education to create a model school. “We ran this alternative high school for about fifty kids in the basement of public housing,” recalled Sister Paulette. “The public housing building that we were in was so bad that even the housing department decided they had to do something. So they moved us [to John Jay High School] . . . where we did the social and emotional and family counseling and the DOE taught these kids.”

For Sister Paulette, that was far from enough. “I had this idea that we needed to do a capital campaign and build a [school] building in Red Hook. And I convinced my board that we should do it.” The Pinkerton Foundation, which had been a longtime Good Shepherd supporter, rose to the occasion and said, “If you do it, we will give you a million dollars.”

Michele Cahill, a young activist and educator, was also pondering how best to serve young people in distressed areas. A former professor at St. Peter’s University in Jersey City, Cahill co-founded a small think tank called the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research. She was frustrated with the narrow perspective that so many people and agencies brought to youth work. To her it seemed self-evident that children in severely damaged neighborhoods needed more than a temporary safe haven in school; they needed a fully transformative experience.

“We wanted to change the direction of money that was spent,” said Cahill. It was important that children have a shot at a decent education, but she felt it equally important to see that their other needs were met. To Cahill, who went on to found the Youth Development Institute, that meant creating “caring relationships . . . a sense of belonging, a sense of mastery.” It meant, at the very least, looking at schools not merely as a providers of education but as a source of extended support for young people.

Cahill’s ideas aligned with those of Sister Paulette, Geoffrey Canada and Canada’s mentor, Richard Murphy, who founded the Rheedlen Foundation—a Harlem based organization that worked with children having trouble completing school and later became the Harlem Children’s Zone. ♦

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MARIANNE BARTHELEMY



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