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Focus on Crime

MIAMI Beach and Liberty City are separated by several miles and the expanse of Biscayne Bay, but the prosperity of each community is welded to the other.

Tourists — lifeblood of the Beach — forever will shun the Beach so long as the entire Biscayne Bay Area is perceived as crime-ridden. Liberty City — reliant on jobs outside the area — cannot thrive if the region, for lack of tourists, is depressed economically.

Crime, or the perceived prevalence of it, is the common denominator that ties communities' fates one to the other. It matters not to far-away visitors that a particular mugging occurred on the streets of an inner-city slum and not outside a luxury ocean-side hotel. The fear of personal assault does not yield to such boundaries.

For that reason, all residents of the Biscayne Bay Area have cause to be cheered by a new project to reduce street violence in crime-prone areas of Liberty City. Several factors argue persuasively that this project has strong potential for success.

The project is a two-year, privately funded program. It will study the causes of crime in some of Dade's toughest neighborhoods and offer suggestions to counteract the violence. Significantly, the project will rely heavily on local community participation.

The program is funded with \$120,000 in direct grants from 11 local law firms, the Storer Foundation, and the Eisenhower Foundation. Observers from Northwestern University will conduct before-and-after evaluations of the area's crime causes and prevention needs. That's a pragmatic and credible approach. If evaluators find that older residents are afraid to walk the streets, a nonvigilante citizen-escort patrol might be the recommended solution. If residences are being burglarized, then neighborhood-watch groups might be organized.

The participating neighborhoods typically have had high unemployment — an estimated 44 per cent among youths — as well as high crime. Determining causal links between unemployment and crime and fashioning solutions is a key element in the project.

Especially appealing is the self-help concept. A much-respected community group, the James E. Scott Community Association, will administer the program. Thus the match-up of private-business funding and local-resident organizing is complete.

May the project succeed, because its success would reflect favorably not just on Liberty City, but on the community at large.

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