

Local forum tackles roots of violence

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by Tara Roberts

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Moscow Assistant Police Chief David Duke and Moscow lawyer Charles Kavis said better gun control would be an effective way to reduce violent crime.

Duke and Kavis were among the panelists at a Thursday night forum in Moscow titled "Murder, Weapons and Violence on the Palouse: What Should We Do?" Forum panelists and community members discussed the roots of violent crime and possible solutions for a safer future.

Duke said the number of law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty nationwide is at its highest level in 30 years.

Officers need tools to protect themselves and the public, and do not want to be in "an arms race with criminals," he said.

Duke spoke in support of a resolution being reviewed by U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee that would reinstitute a ban on assault weapons.

"Take those weapons away that are high (capacity) and also take the bullets away that are armor-piercing," he said. "Those aren't needed in our community."

Kavis, who represented Jason Hamilton in a case prior to his May 19-20 shooting spree in Moscow that left four dead, including himself and Moscow Police Sgt. Lee Newbill, said gun control is necessary.

"We need to control assault weapons and we need to control handguns that are specifically designed to kill people," Kavis said.

Tim Gresback, a Moscow lawyer who served as the forum's moderator, said the goal of the evening was to "explore many things in the wake of the (seven) dead bodies that we've had in Latah County since March."

A key topic was mental illness and its relation to crime. Latah County began a mental health court last week.

Panelist Mark Anderson, a University of Idaho criminal law professor, opened the discussion by explaining how difficult it is to predict whether a person will commit a crime.

"It's very difficult to decide what's going to happen tomorrow or five minutes from now, much less several years from now when someone's mental illness is not addressed," Anderson said.

Civil commitment – when a judge requires a person to go through psychiatric treatment – is a particularly serious matter, he said. People often are fearful of the state "grabbing someone off the street" and claiming they're ill.

Panelist and District Court Judge John Bradbury said there should be a way outside the court system to require mentally ill people to take their medication.

Bradbury said the state should intervene when mentally ill people are likely to be a danger to themselves or others, not just when danger is imminent or a person commits a crime.

He said he's seen a dramatic difference in mental health court clients who are being treated for their illnesses.

"I really believe we can prevent a lot of this with the aggressive treatment of the mentally ill," he said.

Panelist Joan Fisher, who represents death row inmates in federal court, said the vast majority of people on death row have "significant mental illness." In her work, she sees situations arise when the opportunity to intervene was not taken.

Panelist Joyce Lyons, clinical supervisor of Idaho Region 2 Mental Health, stressed that mentally ill people should not be criminalized. She cited research stating that people raised in violent backgrounds are more likely to act violently, whether or not they are mentally ill.

Authorities in the region have taken a good step by teaming up to create mental health courts to provide treatment for people, she said.

Panelist and Latah County Prosecutor Bill Thompson said mental illness isn't a factor in the majority of cases, but it does play a role in crime.

"Are we doing a good job dealing with mental illness?" he said. "The answer is simply 'no.'"

Instead of expecting the criminal justice system to fix every situation, communities should have more resources for mentally ill people, Thompson said. Up-front work could reduce the number of people put in prison.

Panelist and Latah County Sheriff Wayne Rausch said he believes "an erosion of family values" is an underlying factor in violent crime.

Rausch said family values include loving parents who instill respect, demonstrate responsibility and know what their children are doing and watching.

Bradbury said he has seen many people come through his court who have only known destructive or abusive authority, and therefore have never learned to respect authority.

Moscow resident Paul Muneta suggested training teachers to help children cope with violence and problems they may face at home.

Alternatives to Violence on the Palouse Assistant Director Gretta Jarolimek addressed family issues as the root of violence.

"We're seeing more and more that (domestic) violence is trickling out from the walls of peoples' homes," Jarolimek said.

Jarolimek urged community members to pay attention to warning signs of domestic violence in their friends, family and coworkers. She listed seven indicators for domestic violence that ends in fatality, including threats to kill, substance abuse and mental illness, especially with threats of suicide.

Hamilton, whose wife was a victim of his shooting spree, fit five of the indicators, Jarolimek said.

Shropshire said 10 of the 35 homicides in Idaho in 2006 were related to domestic violence.

"Murder usually starts at home, so we need to pay attention to that," she said.