

## **Opinion: Rapes in Irvine Shatter an Illusion**

By Robert Scheer

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This morning I had to tell my mother not to go out of the house.

It is not an easy thing to tell a spirited 83-year-old woman who has survived the Czar's Cossacks, the Bolshevik Revolution, the sweatshops of New York and the streets of the Bronx during that borough's degenerative decades that she is now in danger in the streets of Irvine, but that unfortunately does seem to be the case.

The Irvine rapists have descended on the city, whose Chamber of Commerce motto is Another Day in Paradise, and the thin veneer protecting the sanctity of suburban life has been rent. The fear and violence of the big city life that one had sought to escape are very much in our midst.

The five sexual assaults in Irvine in two days have shattered, at least for me, the illusion that the planned communities of Irvine had fostered, the illusion that the sickness of society could somehow be avoided by buying a high-priced house and surrounding oneself with people who could afford high-priced houses. The assumption being that upper middle-class people don't rob, rape or kill.

We don't know if these rapists are outsiders, and the common prejudice is that they are. But it doesn't matter, for criminals are mobile, and the hope that one could plan them out of existence has proven as absurd as the notion that one piece of American real estate could be declared Paradise while others went spinning off into Hell. But not even the Irvine Co. can build walls that high.

Planning has its limits, and suddenly all of the rules have changed. The winding lanes once so peaceful now seem ominously quiet. The walls around the houses no longer appear protective but rather potential hiding places for sinister men. And, most of all, one misses people.

The planned communities of Irvine were designed to keep the crowds out. That must have been the idea behind paucity of publicly accessible cultural and entertainment centers. Existing public facilities seem intended mostly for the convenience of those who live there and most of the streets are never unrolled.

Perhaps the underlying ideology of the planners equated empty green belts and other barely used social space with safety. You might have died from boredom, but that was better than the risks of the real world. The problem is that it doesn't work. Crowds may bring their problem types, but they also bring people who can hear a cry for help. Most of the women attacked in Woodbridge were alone in houses on empty streets. In any event, there is no simple technical planning solution to what ails society. And certainly flight to the suburbs, while defensible perhaps on other grounds such as love of cleaner air, trees, and backyards, does not insure personal safety.

None of this is intended to suggest that women, my mother included, are safer in The Bronx than in Irvine. They are not. Nor is it to suggest that Irvine is without considerable appeal as a very good place to live. It is a very attractive town, well laid out and with excellent schools and a civic-minded citizenry. The point is only that no

amount of social planning, guarded gates, economic (and with it some racial) segregation on the part of one American city will for long prove effective in avoiding the reality that permeates the country at large.

What it means is that stopping rapes and other crimes requires action on a broader social and governmental level and the old frontier dream of escaping to some protected space of one's own just doesn't work in the modern world.