

Children are the fastest-growing segment of the criminal population; every four minutes a child is arrested for a violent crime. Thirty percent of all crime is now committed by juveniles. The violent crime rate(including homicide, suicide, and assault) among juveniles has quadrupled over the last twenty-five years, and increased sevenfold since World War II. The age that children commit these crimes is dropping as well. This epidemic of youth violence has been recognized for quite some time by many people who work with children, but the recent school killings has alerted the nation to it's seriousness. The bad news is that there are many factors working together to produce this epidemic. The good news is that almost all these factors are preventable.

Much youth violence has its roots in very early childhood(the nine months in utero and the first two years of life). Recent advances in understanding how the human brain develops, and how children react to stress, are illuminating the factors which can predispose them towards violence. Early on, the developing brain can be affected in such a way as to weaken a child's self-control, coping skills, concentration, judgment, or ability to empathize with others. Damaging conditions include prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol, exposure to lead or other toxins, premature birth and birth trauma, malnutrition during pregnancy and the first two years of life, head injuries, abuse, neglect, severe stress, head injuries, and rejection by the child's mother. Other things that can predispose towards violence later in life are attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity, ineffective discipline, parents who are criminal, substance abusing or mentally ill, and the lack of an involved adult who cares about the child and teaches values. No one factor by itself will cause violent behavior-usually there has to be a combination of them. Children show signs of being affected by these factors quite early in their lives. For example, almost all the adults in prison today were already in trouble with the law as teens, and were known as having problems at even younger ages.

Social factors which can also contribute to a child becoming violent are the use of drugs and alcohol to deal with problems, the modeling by key role models of violent solutions to problems, and the violence in our popular culture. In television, video games, movies, and music, violence is portrayed as heroic and glamorous, rather than a poor last resort for problems. Saturation with violent images has been described by psychologist James Garbarino as a "social poison." A review of the evidence by an expert panel of the American Psychological Association concluded that by itself televised violence is responsible for up to 15 percent of all aggressive behavior by children. David Grossman, a military psychologist and the author of On Killing ,believes that children who repeatedly play violent video games are being trained in both the motor skills and the psychological skills needed to kill people. He states that the American military even uses some of these games to train their soldiers for combat ! Poverty is a key social factor, too. A child growing up in poverty is more apt to experience many of the individual factors we have already discussed, including health problems, abuse, neglect, malnutrition, and substandard day care. Today the United States has an extremely high child poverty rate compared to all other developed nations.

If we look at which of these factors can be prevented, and how they can be prevented, we begin to get a handle on what can be done about youth violence. The most important thing that we as a nation can do, is to make care of our children-our future adults- an absolute priority. For example, emotional nurturing and early stimulation build self-esteem, self-control, relatedness, and the ability to communicate and co-operate with others. Effective discipline teaches children how to be good citizens. Protecting our children from the glut of violence and sexuality on the media requires lots of supervision. But in order for parents to take care of their children adequately, with the firm and loving involvement they require, they need the help of the government, their employers, and the wider culture. Most developed countries offer far more help to parents raising their children; they realize that well-adjusted people enrich and support their communities, and violent people traumatize and drain them. What is working against parents here in the United States?

****A lack of family support resulting from the fact that people are more mobile and divorce rates are high. This means less family members to provide childcare for working parents, and to supervise and teach the family's values to its children.**

**** A lack of financial support from government institutions. In many parts of Europe, for example, childbirth triggers a generous benefits package that includes prenatal care, obstetrical care, generous hospital stays, five months leave at full pay, and more. In Sweden, once parental leave is used up, parents are entitled to work a six hour day until their child's eighth birthday. Many countries give tax relief for working parents in the form of child tax credits, child allowances, and eliminating payroll taxes for working parents. This helps parents either care for their children at home or obtain high quality daycare. (It is estimated that only 8% of all childcare for infants and toddlers in the United States is of high quality. The line between poor childcare and outright neglect is not always an easy one to draw.)**

Families of children who are at high risk of having problems due to drug or alcohol addiction, poverty, mental illness or other stresses need even more help from the government, including special programs to deal with these problems. The children in such families also need programs like Early Head Start, which serves children from birth to three. This program has been shown to have measurable positive, long term impacts on children's development. Another very important program is home visitation of families with babies by trained nurses or paraprofessionals. If these visits begin during pregnancy they can help discourage prenatal drug use and malnutrition. After birth they can be a great source of support for parents-they can teach parents all kinds of parenting skills, give guidance in many areas, and help families find other resources that they need. Babies whose mothers receive home visiting are born with fewer health problems, and are abused less. These types of programs operate at a fraction of the cost of dealing with troubled older children later on; and prevent much suffering as well.

**A lack of support from employers, who could help parents tremendously by having family-friendly work policies, such as flexible work hours and more time off to meet family needs.

**A lack of support from our mainstream values. Our culture values being consumers and “living for ourselves” more than sacrificing for others. Parents in general lose sexual freedom, gender equity, money, sleep, and time to “do your own thing” when they take on the job of being parents. They are not compensated for these sacrifices very much, especially compared to other affluent countries. And the tremendous amount of violence which we allow our nation’s children to be exposed to- on television, movies, and video games -seriously undermines parents’ attempts to teach children non-violent solutions to problems.

To remedy this situation, the most important change is for all adults to see that we must make care of our nation’s children a top priority, for our own self-interest as well as because its the right thing to do. Just being a good parent to our own kids may not be enough anymore; when our kids are grown there will be no way for us to protect them from tomorrow’s very troubled and violent adults.(As psychologist James Garbarino points out, “ today almost every teenager in America goes to school with a kid who is troubled enough to become the next killer-and chances are that kid has access to the weapons necessary to do so”.) The knowledge of what to do is already out there- policies that promote healthy children from birth to adulthood. The 5th Annual Violence Prevention Conference was held this July at Oregon State University. It was co-sponsored by many state agencies. Schoolteachers, counselors and others who work with children attended. Therapists, emergency room doctors, police officers, community organizers, educators, schoolteachers, and safety experts gave presentations on many aspects of working with young people and preventing violence. Although they had many diverse viewpoints, all the speakers agreed that we know much of what it takes to help children. Extensive research has shown us what will help them, and many innovative programs have been designed-we have only to decide to make violence prevention a priority. The problem of youth violence has not come out of nowhere. As journalist David Sarasohn says, “our teenagers didn’t come from a different planet; they come from the violent, unsupportive, and heavily armed society that adults built them.”

A national survey conducted in 1996 by the National Parenting Association found that parents were deeply concerned about crime and violence, their children’s safety, drugs, time with their children, and the quality and cost of education for their children. This was true regardless of the gender, race, or income of the parents. Here’s what parents felt would actually help them be more effective with their children, and give them the time with their children that they so desperately need :

- workplace policies that enhance their ability to spend more time with their children

-financial assistance for parents in the form of tax breaks to help pay for education, increased tax deductions for children, and raising of wages to pull all full-time working parents above the poverty line. The child poverty rate in the United States is the highest in the developed world, and parents realize the risk it presents.

-longer school days and years that are more in sync with the working day and year. Parents know that the more non-adult supervised time children have, the greater their chances of being delinquent.

78 percent of the parents polled strongly supported stricter gun laws, and 60 percent wanted more control over the sex and violence their children are exposed to in the media.

Reference: *The War Against Parents* by Sylvia Hewlett and Cornell West

FACTORS WHICH PREDISPOSE YOUTH VIOLENCE

Generally, no one of the following factors will necessarily predict violent behavior. Although each one can help put a child on a course towards violence, normally a combination of 2 or more internal factors and early negative family circumstances is considered a strong predictor.

PERSONAL FACTORS

These factors alter the brain “adversely and permanently” during the most rapid period of brain growth, the first 33 months of life:

1. Genetic factors

Studies have found no heritability in violent crime or juvenile delinquency.

2. Prenatal exposure to illegal drugs, alcohol, and prescription medications.

In general, illegal drugs can create imbalances in genes that control serotonin and noradrenalin levels. Babies of mothers who abuse illegal drugs or alcohol when they are pregnant have hospital stays 3 times longer than those of mothers who were drug-free. Some studies have shown an increased chance of being impulsive and hyperactive when exposed to marijuana in utero, while cocaine can damage areas of the brain responsible for arousal and attention. Heroin exposure is linked to prematurity, low birth weight, attentional problems, behavior problems and antisocial behavior. Amphetamines may have similar effects as cocaine and heroin. Alcohol abuse during pregnancy sets up physical and neurological conditions that may predispose kids to aggressive and violent behavior. It alters the development of the fetuses’ nervous system by interfering with cell migration, production of neurotransmitters, and brain growth. Cognitive deficits, including lower I.Q., learning disabilities, hyperactivity and high distractibility, low birth weight, score lower on language and other cognitive tasks, and impairments in both gross and fine motor skills can result from a pregnant mother’s abuse of alcohol. Many experts believe that fetal alcohol exposure is the single biggest factor for predisposing American babies to aggressive and violent behavior. Nicotine can result in low birth weight, prematurity, lung disorders, SIDS, and possibly poor reading skills, attention deficits, and hyperactivity. Some studies have shown long lasting effects from exposure to various

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prescription drugs in utero, such as lags in behavioral and motor development, delays in language development, and impairment of memory and judgment with certain medications given during labor and delivery.

3. Prenatal malnutrition

This can include a lack of calories, or simply a deficiency of a specific nutrient, such as iron or protein: cognitive, social, and behavioral deficits with long-term consequences., such as attention problems, more easily agitated under stress, distractibility and hyper-alertness may result.

4. High levels of stress during pregnancy

In combination with alcohol, chronic maternal stress produces monkeys who are extremely aggressive, highly destructible, delayed motor development. In monkey mothers exposed to stressors in mid-gestation, offspring were more likely to deal with stress poorly by being more upset and having a greater emotional responses to the same stress, less ability to relate to other monkeys, and much more violent behavior.

Laboratory experiments with mice have shown similar results.

5. Delivery complications

A infant struggling with the effects of a complicated breech birth, umbilical cord around the neck, ruptured uterus, eclampsia, very long lab, very short labor or a prolapsed cord has an exceptional need for reassurance and comfort to help deal with the stress: however, if the infant is rejected the by the mother, the stage may be set for rage and possibly, later anti-social behavior. Recent studies bear out this connection.

6. Prematurity and low birth weight

Both of these conditions start the child out with a stressful environment.

7. Accidents.

Head injuries may diminish coping skills, judgment, and self-control.

8. Nutritional deficiencies during the first 2 years of life

Iron deficiency, for example, can cause permanent damage to the brain.

9. Exposure to lead and other toxins

Lead exposure is associated with lowering of I.Q. and significant increases in impulsivity, distractibility, learning disabilities and disciplinary problems at school.

10. Low maternal I.Q.

This situation puts children at risk of retardation or borderline-normal intelligence.

11. Attention deficit disorder (ADD)/hyperactivity

This condition can be genetically linked or it can be caused by prenatal drug use or difficult labors or deliveries. ADD and hyperactivity are impulse-control problems, and children are at much greater risk of violence when their impulse control problem is exacerbated by negative environmental influences such as child abuse or being surrounded by violent behavior. They may need a combination of approaches including stimulant medication, parent training, family therapy, and social skill training for the child. This can cut their rates of later criminal behavior significantly, but must be done early-before age twelve, probably. In the first two years of life nurturing and teaching are especially important. Medication alone is not effective.

12. Post-traumatic stress.

Chronic stress increases activity and reactivity of the brainstem, possibly contributing to aggression, impulsivity and the capacity to display violence, due to a limited ability to control behavior. Hyperarousal, numbing or removing oneself emotionally may become a permanent trait in a child, and setting in motion both neurochemical and hormonal patterns, causing learning and behavioral problems. Children may become both aggressive and depressed.

13. Being abused or neglected (which could include many different caregivers, or a lack of a consistent caregiver)

The number of children seriously injured by abuse nearly quadrupled between 1986 and 1993. Neglect decreases the moderating activity of the cortical areas, increasing aggression, impulsivity, and capacity to display violence.

Statistically, being abused or neglected as a child increases the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile by 53 percent, as an adult by 38 percent.

14. Lack of mental stimulation

Babies who are given lots of stimulation score higher on cognitive and language tests in both preschool and grade school. Babies who are neglected are deprived of the experiences necessary for normal cognitive development, such as play.

15. Maternal depression or rejection of the child

16. Family problems

Parental mental illness or substance abuse or marital discord, criminal father or ineffective discipline can be substantial predisposers to violence.

17. Lack of an involved adult

No involved adult means there is no one to teach the child positive values or to express deep caring about the child.

SOCIAL FACTORS

1. Poverty, because it contributes to family stress and the erosion of the child's health and safety.
 2. Modeling of violent solutions to problems by key role models
 3. Modeling of weapon use in the community
 4. Access to weapons
 5. Modeling of alcohol and drug use to deal with problems
 6. Violence in television, video games, movies, music, toys
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As the discussion of risk factors above demonstrates, there are no "quick fixes" to the problem of youth violence. However, as a nation we can take steps to curb it. Most importantly, we need to make the care of our children a priority. We now know what kinds of early experience predisposes children to violence, and what it takes to help them. Extensive research has shown us what risk factors should be avoided and how to avoid them. In many cases, we also know what will work and many innovative programs have already been designed. We only have to decide to make violence prevention a national

priority. We can begin to change society today, grow healthy and well-functioning adults, and prevent tremendous suffering-if only we care enough.

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