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Violence Goes to School

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Abstract

The growing problem of juvenile violence has found its way into all of our institutions, including our schools. More and more school administrators report having to deal with violence on an everyday basis and having to suspend students for carrying weapons or being involved in violent confrontations. In response, many observers have suggested solutions that are politically expedient, but simply won't work. They fail to address the question of what makes violence so appealing to so many youngsters, in the first place. Without providing healthy alternatives to violence, all the training programs, counseling, and therapy will have little effect on our crime rate. We need a cultural revolution at the grass-roots level.

During the last few weeks alone, the headlines have been filled with reports of hideous crimes committed by teenagers. A 16-year-old boy in Pearl, Mississippi fatally stabs his mother and then goes on a shooting spree at school where he kills his former girlfriend and another student. A 15-year-old boy in a suburb of Boston leaves 98 stab wounds in his 43-year-old neighbor, the mother of his best friend. A 15-year-old boy in Southern New Jersey kills an 11-year-old child who was going door-to-door selling candy. And a 14-year-old Florida boy shoots his sister simply because she talked on the phone too long.

Twenty-five or thirty years ago, such crimes would have seemed extraordinary not only for their extreme brutality or senseless motivation, but also for their rare occurrence. In 1967, if a teenager had murdered his sister because she wouldn't let him use the phone, we would have been talking about it for six months. In 1997, the same offense is regarded as the crime of the week. We shake our heads in dismay and then move on to the next horrific offense. Sadly enough, the most brutal and hideous crimes involving our teenagers are now viewed as commonplace or expected.

And there is some reality behind this perception. In urban and not-so-urban areas around the country, anxieties concerning violent crime have been reinforced by a soaring crime rate and by the growing participation of juveniles in the most serious criminal offenses. From 1985 to 1994, for example, the rate of murder committed by teenagers, ages 14-17, actually increased more than 170 percent. For 15-year-old boys, the increase was an incredible 212 percent (Fox, 1996). Younger and younger children now have more dangerous weapons in their hands, more dangerous drugs in their bodies, and a cavalier attitude toward human suffering.

Actually, the problem of desensitization to violence is even worse than the dreadful statistics concerning juvenile crime might suggest. While relatively few of our youngsters are committing hideous murders—about 1 percent is responsible for more than 30 percent of all homicides—they are being tolerated—perhaps even honored—by their friends and classmates. Millions of teenagers may not be able to shoot or stab someone themselves, but they are fully capable of looking on as others do so.

Several years ago, a teenager in Milpitas, California murdered his 14-year-old girlfriend and then returned to the scene with a dozen classmates to show them the corpse. One student covered the body with leaves to keep it from being discovered; others threw rocks at it. None of them contacted the police. This episode became the basis for a film in the 1980s entitled *River's Edge*.

More recently, Attorney Marsha Kazarosian filed a suit against the Winnecunnet, New Hampshire school district on behalf of the families of the three youngsters convicted in the murder of Greg Smart in Derry, New Hampshire. Kazarosian claimed that Pam Smart's love affair with her 15 year old student was made possible because she was negligently unsupervised by the Winnecunnet High School administration—that somebody in charge should have been keeping a watchful eye on Smart.

Whether or not school officials should have known, it appears that they may have been the only ones at Winnecunnet High who didn't. Statements made during the course of the police investigation indicate clearly that at least one month before the Derry police finally broke the case, the corridors of Winnecunnet High were already abuzz with rumors implicating the three students and their teacher. Yet nobody bothered to inform an adult.

More incredibly, statements later made to law enforcement officials indicate that students at Winnecunnet High were talking about Greg Smart's murder for two months *before* it actually occurred. With a simple phone call, any one of them might have prevented a murder. But nobody wanted to "snitch" or "tattle" on a classmate. Everybody was concerned about being rejected by friends. So they all kept quiet and let the murder plot proceed according to plan (Levin, 1993).

The impact of juvenile violence has been felt in every one of our institutions, including our schools. Some 35,000 teenagers go to school each day carrying a handgun. Almost half of all high school students report that their classmates carry weapons; and about 40 percent report that gangs are present in their school (Blumstein, 1995).

More and more principals report having to deal with violence on an everyday basis and having to suspend or expel students for carrying weapons or being involved in violent confrontations. More and more school administrators are attempting to counteract violence with some combination of a law enforcement strategy including metal detectors and security personnel as well as a conflict resolution program. And more and more principals and teachers consider violence prevention a priority for their schools. According to a study I recently conducted of schools in five urban school systems, even the elementary schools are feeling the impact of student violence in a major way. They too are dealing with violence on an everyday basis; they too are offering conflict resolution programs in response to episodes of violence between students and are expelling students for carrying weapons (Noguera, 1995; Levin and Johnson, 1997).

At least some part of the violence problem in schools around the country is linked to racial tensions. Between August 31 and September 18, 1990, pollster Louis Harris set out to determine the views of a nation-wide sample of students regarding the state of racial and ethnic tensions in America. Harris's staff talked with a cross-section of 1865 high school students who were attending the 10th, 11th, and 12th grades in public, parochial, and private schools around the country (Levin and McDevitt, 1993).

The pollster's findings paint a rather bleak picture of race relations among American youth of the 1990s. Apparently, confrontations between individuals of different races and religions have become, to use Harris's words, "commonplace" in the nation's high schools. More than half of the students interviewed claimed that they had witnessed racial confrontations either "very often" or "once in awhile." One in four reported having personally been a target of such an incident. Yet, only 30 percent of all students said that they were prepared to intervene to stop or even to condemn a confrontation based on racial hatred. On the contrary, almost half admitted that they would either join in the attack or, at the very least, agreed that the group being attacked was getting what it deserved (Levin and McDevitt, 1993).

The findings of a recent survey of all 1,570 elementary, middle, and secondary public schools in Los Angeles County also support the view that youthful violence is connected with race relations. Thirty-seven percent of these schools had encountered incidents of hate-motivated violence over the period of a year. As expected, students in middle and high schools were particularly likely to have experienced hate violence, with a response rate of 47% and 42% respectively. Somewhat more surprising was the finding that 34% of the elementary schools had also had violent episodes based on hate (Levin and McDevitt, 1993).

Reducing Juvenile Violence

The American Psychological Association (APA), recently made a number of recommendations most of which focus on changing the psychological condition of our young-

sters. According to the APA Commission's report, the violent kids watch too much television, learn aggressive habits early in life, and handle frustration by lashing out at others. They have trouble learning social cues, are desensitized to violence, and lack self-esteem.

As a remedy, the psychologists suggested, among other things, that television networks carry fewer violent programs during the hours when children watch, that the schools teach their students to manage anger, and that family members stop fighting one another.

Although very much worth considering, I would argue that the suggestions proposed by the APA's Commission fall just a little short. Specifically, they fail to address the question of what makes violence so appealing to so many youngsters, in the first place. Why is it that, in many quarters around the country, semi-automatic rifles have replaced 35mm cameras, leather jackets, and CD players as status symbols of choice? And, why has serving a year behind bars become a rite of passage in some inner-city neighborhoods?

Without providing healthy alternatives to violence, all the training programs, counseling, and therapy we can muster won't have a profound effect on our crime rate. Whether we like it or not, many teenagers benefit—or at least believe that they benefit—from being deviant and destructive. In a single violent episode, they are able to impress their friends, make money, receive career training, feel powerful, protect themselves, and find acceptance among their peers. The most violent-prone teenagers aren't getting along at home, aren't making it at school, and can't find a decent job. In violence, they feel something they never felt before—they feel special, they feel important and wanted.

A couple of years ago, I appeared on a television talk show with three Nazi skinheads, young men who wanted to feel powerful and dominant, but who were totally unsophisticated with respect to understanding Nazi ideology. Angry and hate-filled, they wore Nazi uniforms and other symbols of power. It occurred to me that these three youngsters could just as easily have joined a gang or have become members of a cult. They were marginal youngsters who wanted to feel successful, wanted to feel important, but couldn't seem to make it in any middle class way. So they terrorized vulnerable people, just as other troubled teenagers find it entertaining to drop boulders through the windshields of oncoming cars, to spray bullets into crowds, or to break into apartments and automobiles in order to terrorize their occupants.

Jack McDevitt and I (1993) have found that the majority of hate crimes reported to the police—crimes against individuals because they are different in terms of race, religion, sexual orientation, or disability status—are committed by groups of teenaged boys for the thrill, the excitement—to feel something that they believe is lacking in their own lives—a sense of power and control. In the same way that some young men get together on a Saturday night to play a game of cards, groups of teenaged boys gather to destroy property or to bash minorities. They look merely to have

some fun and stir up a little excitement...but at someone else's expense. They enjoy the exhilaration and the thrill of making someone else suffer.

For a while, Americans were discussing whether we should try caning our kids, the way it is done in Singapore. Legislation to introduce caning as an official criminal justice response to teenage violence is pending in at least a few states. Well, American youngsters are already comparing the size of their bullet wounds; if we were to institute caning, I'm afraid our kids would be pulling down their pants to show off the welts on their buttocks—sort of a red badge of courage. What seems to be a severe punishment in Singapore may, in the cultural context of the United States, turn out to be a reward.

Or, take jurisdictions in which parents are held criminally responsible for their teenagers delinquency. In Flint, Michigan, for example, parents can be fined a thousand dollars if their seventeen-year old children are caught smoking cigarettes in public. Of course, mommy and daddy ought to be held accountable for the destructive behavior of their pre-adolescent youngsters. But Two things bother me about any policy that punishes the parents for their teenagers transgressions. First, it sends the wrong message to teenagers who are all too eager to avoid responsibility for what they do wrong. And second, it sets up the possibility of dramatically increased levels of domestic homicide. In many cases, when we speak of children, we are really talking about physically mature youngsters who are fully capable of having their way with their parents. Two skinhead brothers in Pennsylvania recently murdered their mother, father, and 11 year old brother, after their parents wouldn't let them drive the family car. One of the murdering youngsters was a 15 year old boy who also happened to be 6 foot 5 and weighed 245 pounds. Rather than make mommy and daddy the super cops of society—at the very time when the family is at risk of going the way of Jurassic Park—we should be giving support, assistance, and encouragement to parents everywhere. Let's get them involved once again in the lives of their teenagers—but not because they might otherwise be punished.

Uniforms seem to make a difference—at least in the opinions of principals who have tried them. They level social class differences in dress; they make it easier to spot intruders; and, at least for a short period of time, they eliminate gang distinctions. But these distinctions apparently soon reappear, just as soon as gang members discover that they can find other ways to communicate their membership. The research so far does not seem to support the effectiveness of uniforms as a method of fighting school violence.

Of course, conflict resolution programs, especially if they are started very early in elementary schools, make at least some difference—perhaps an important difference—in stemming the tide of violence. Even if the results of such programs cannot be generalized to non-school settings, they are as important as metal detectors and security personnel as an effort to control the school day for children and teachers who

deserve a safe environment in which to learn. By the way, recent evidence suggests that the positive effects of conflict resolution programs are very frequently generalized to interactions after classes and outside of the school environment.

But no matter how effective, such programs will not make the big difference. Conflict resolution programs, for example, aim at reducing the traditional forms of violence and conflict that develop between teenagers and children. The problem is that the most troublesome, most marginal students will not be persuaded by peer mediation or programs designed to teach them to manage their anger. Their problems are structural in origin and will require a structural change in response.

In many jurisdictions, there are simply no alternative programs designed for students who are expelled because they are violent at school. Instead, these violent-prone and alienated youngsters—the very children and teenagers who are responsible for committing the most heinous crimes of all—are left to walk the streets idle, bored, and unsupervised. They may no longer be an immediate threat in the context of the school environment, but, in the long run, they will become even more threatening to everyone, including themselves.

As for the Commission's recommendation that broadcasters provide programs that counter violence, I'm afraid that it simply won't work. True, children spend too much of their time watching television—on average, four or five hours daily. It is also true that much of what they view on the tube is violent and desensitizing. In fact, the average child grows up observing more than 30,000 murders on TV, more than 100,000 acts of violence, not to mention what he or she sees in R-rated slasher films and in violent video games.

The V-chip strategy for limiting children's access to violent television sounds good in theory. Parents will now be able to eliminate electronically the most offensive network programs from their children's after-school viewing options. Unfortunately, the V-chip will not work, and it sends the wrong message to adults. By installing this bit of high-tech wizardry in their TV sets, they can continue to ignore their unsupervised children after school.

In his State of the Union address, President Clinton voiced his support for V-chip technology and urged the television industry to adopt the measures taken years ago by motion picture producers. Yet, the motion picture business has been far more offensive than the networks when it comes to filling our youngsters' heads with tasteless images of human destructiveness. In fact, acts of violence are now routinely depicted as graphically as possible on the screen, without regard for how they may affect impressionable young viewers. In one motion picture after another, children are treated to disgusting scenes of decapitation and dismemberment. Victims are shown with their brains literally blown apart, their heads missing, their fingers sliced off, and their intestines exposed. What is more, many of these films are available as videotapes for rent, escaping the ability of a V-chip to eliminate them from children's viewing.

Some concerned parents and lobbying groups have praised the rating system employed by the motion picture industry (G, PG, PG-13, R, NC-17, and X), a voluntary code that was adopted in the 1960s in order to placate concerned parents. Yet, it is the rating system itself that has inspired the producers of motion pictures to introduce more and more gratuitous scenes of human destruction and suffering, not to enhance the plot, but just to attract teenagers who tend to spend freely on entertainment. Without such gory details, their films might get a PG or even a G rating and be shunned by most ten-year-old boys who refuse to go to “kids’ movies.”

Ironically, the films most likely to contain graphic scenes of violence are, under the voluntary code of the motion picture industry, ostensibly off limits to movie-goers under 17 years of age, unless they are accompanied by an adult. Because the code is rarely enforced, however, the majority of the audience for the most grotesque of these films is often comprised of unsupervised children who are thrilled by the prospect of seeing unlimited quantities of blood and guts. Thus, the industry’s rating system has provided a standard of consumer decision-making, not for parents, but for their under-age children who search the newspaper advertisements for a film that contains large doses of sex, violence, and gore.

Now we have done for television what has been so disastrous for motion pictures. Home-alone teenagers can turn to the *TV Guide* to find their favorite programs—those with the equivalent of an R rating. In the meantime, it will take years before their parents trade in their sets for one containing a V-chip. And, within six months, mommy and daddy will have forgotten how to program the V-chip on their set before leaving for work or will have given in to their complaining teenagers’ constant demands. Remember all the VCRs blinking in homes around the country? Well, they’re still blinking 12-12-12-12.

Once again, the question involves providing healthy alternatives. What will bored and alienated teenagers do when they are not watching TV? It is doubtful that they will instead read the classics or take up chess. Rather than worry so much about what our children are watching, we might be more concerned about who is watching our children.

It’s not that television is so powerful. It’s that our other institutions—our churches and synagogues, our neighborhoods, our schools, our universities, and our families—have become so weak on the issue of supervising youngsters.

Japanese television is much more violent than its American counterpart; yet the level of street violence in Japanese cities is extremely low. One reason is that Japanese traditional culture continues to be quite powerful even among young people. Another reason is that Japanese television is hardly ever used as a baby-sitter, the way that it is in the United States. In Japan, children who watch violent programs are viewing with adults—their parents and their grandparents. They have adults around to monitor, to guide, to interpret, to explain.

If we were really smart, we would begin now to invest as much in our young people as we invest in the stock market. We must intervene as early as possible in the lives of children who are troubled, not because we fear they will grow up to be Jeffrey Dahmers, but simply because it is the right thing to do and because it will be effective in the long run. If we were smart, we would repair our nation’s playgrounds, put lifeguards at neighborhood swimming pools, build decent community centers, and make sure that kids have summer and after-school jobs. For youngsters who are otherwise unsupervised and idle, we would provide quality day care and after school programs.

To an increasing extent, city high schools do offer an array of after school programs including intramural athletics, drama, art, music, and student government. Unfortunately, such programs and activities are virtually absent from grades K through 5, leaving many younger children without opportunities for wholesome experiences and activities in the afternoon. Moreover, after-school high school and middle school programs in large cities are usually restricted to students who are in academic good standing, haven’t been troublesome in the classroom, have economic resources, and can find their own transportation home (Levin and Johnson, 1997). In other words, they exclude the impoverished, alienated, and rebellious students—the very students who are in greatest need of supervision.

It took 20 or 30 years to get to the point where violence, in some cities, seems out of control. It will probably take at least a decade to get us going firmly in the opposite direction. Try telling that to our governors, senators, and representatives who come up for re-election every two, four, or six years. They look for politically expedient short term answers, even if they won’t work. They emphasize three strikes and you’re out; boot camps; uniforms, curfews; the death penalty; holding parents criminally responsible for their teenagers violations of the law, and dismantling the juvenile justice system. These are policies that might make Americans feel more secure, but they will do little more.

Take something as simple as curfews. They sound great—get the kids off the streets after eleven or twelve, so they won’t hurt one another. Well, cities like San Antonio have tried curfews, with almost no effect at all. The problem is that only 10 percent of all serious crimes committed by under-age teenagers are committed after 11 pm and before 6 am. Almost 50 percent of all juvenile crimes (not to mention premarital pregnancies) are committed between 2 and 7 in the afternoon—after school and before dinner—or should I say before mommy and daddy come home from work (Fox, 1996).

And many of our youngsters, lacking in support systems—and I’m talking about even those youngsters who grow up in middle-class areas—feel that they are on their own. Their parents may be divorced; both of their parents may hold full time jobs; or they may grow up in a single-parent household. And, when they come home from school, too

many of our youngsters are literally alone or with a group of friends who are unsupervised. Twenty years ago, at least some of the neighbors would have been home, peering through the blinds to keep an eye on the block. Not now; not in most neighborhoods—everybody is working, including the neighbors.

So fifty seven percent of all teenagers and children now grow up without full time parental supervision—Forty nine percent under the age of six. Of course, some of them do have a healthy alternative—quality daycare, after-school activities, summer jobs, community centers, athletic programs. But many others do not. So they end up raising themselves (Fox, 1996).

We used to hear about elderly residents in high crime areas who virtually become prisoners in their own homes. To avoid crime, they double lock their doors and stay inside their apartments after dark, afraid to venture out on the streets under any condition. Instead, they watch television. In fact, TV becomes, in some cases, the only friend they have.

Well, this same pattern is now occurring among teenagers in high crime neighborhoods. It's called street survival skills; but what it means is that more of our youngsters are staying off the streets in order to survive; they come home from school every day, double lock their doors, and watch television until their parents come home from work.

The Future of Juvenile Violence

Based on demographics alone, we are in trouble. The children of the baby boomers will shortly join the violence-prone age group—those who are in their late teens and early twenties and who commit a disproportionate share of violent crimes. Over the course of the next decade, the number of teenagers, 15-19, will increase by 15 percent. If we are not effective now in our efforts to reduce the scourge of teenage violence, we may look back at the 1990s as the lull before the crime storm.

At the same time, allow me in closing to give you at least a little bit of good news. Believe it or not, the murder rate has been coming down in many of our major cities. Now, let's not kid ourselves into believing that we've conquered the crime problem. Things are by no means great in the crime department, but, in many places, they are getting better. A drop in the murder arrest rate over the last two or three years is, at the very least, a good sign. We may not be totally out of the woods yet, but we can at least see sunlight through the branches.

Part of the explanation for the decrease in serious crime is probably demographic. The 76 million baby boomers have matured into middle age and out of the crime-prone age group. Rather than commit murder and aggravated assault, they have graduated into such lower-risk white collar offenses as fraud and embezzlement.

Another factor involves a beefed up criminal justice system, putting more and more police officers between citizens

and criminals. In New York City and Houston, Texas, for example, zero-tolerance policing has taken more and more offenders off the streets and out of the reach of innocent victims. William Bratton, when he was still New York's Police Commissioner attributed the success of his crime-fighting efforts to a get-tough policy that locks away street criminals long **before** they have had the opportunity to commit serious offenses. Of course, his policies are now also being blamed for the rise in excessive force complaints against New York's Finest. Many principals have adopted the same zero-tolerance policy regarding students who carry weapons to school.

But the most important factor in declining murder rates in our major cities may have nothing to do with policies, population or prisons. Americans everywhere, at the grassroots level and up, are just beginning to recognize that they can make the difference in the crime rate. At the grass roots level, they are working to repair the moral, social, and economic damage done to our youngsters and to take the glamour out of destructive behavior.

Fed up with crime, ordinary citizens are enthusiastically addressing the issue of violent crime and, in the process, are re-defining it. Everywhere you look, you find groups and organizations not unlike this one focusing on violence in conferences, lectures, keynote speeches, and workshops. Moreover, taking their cue from growing popular sentiment, local institutions have sponsored a number of interesting programs aimed at local youngsters—churches running athletic programs and gun-buyback programs, companies providing more after-school jobs with a future, college students going into inner-city schools to do tutoring, mentoring, and peer-mediation, universities providing scholarships to youngsters in the local community, and teachers and parent groups volunteering to supervise after-school activities.

Parallels can be found in our changing attitudes toward cigarette smoking. Prior to the Sergeant General's Report in 1968, smoking was widely regarded as fashionable and stylish. But more than twenty five years later, the campaign has discredited smoking and stigmatized smokers. Hopefully, the same may soon happen to individuals who have a propensity for violence.

Of course, although the anti-smoking campaign reduced the consumption of cigarettes among adults, it essentially failed to convert young people. In 1997, an additional 4000 teenagers continue to take up the smoking habit everyday.

In the same way, teenagers aren't likely to be touched by a cultural revolution that asks that they become less violent and destructive. Many youngsters don't think about long-term consequences—whether about contracting lung cancer or going to prison. Indeed, teenagers are likely to feel invincible and therefore immune from the impact of their own violent behavior.

But unlike smoking campaigns, the cultural revolution in attitudes toward violence is being aimed not at teenagers at all, but directly at their parents, their teachers, their clergy,

their neighbors, their government representatives—at adult members of society who are (or should be) responsible for dealing with teenagers. This is important because our youngsters will change only to the extent that society’s response to them changes first.

Teenagers who have been routinely ignored, unsupervised, and left to fend for themselves must discover that their parents and teachers care. Youngsters who join gangs and carry weapons to school must be guided and counseled more and more by clergy, social workers, and probation officers. For the first time in their young lives, our teenagers will feel important, they will feel special, because somebody cares what happens to them. And that will make all the difference, for all Americans everywhere who want to feel secure in their own schools, homes and neighborhoods.

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