

THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

July 31, 1998

DINNER AND DISCUSSION ON YOUTH VIOLENCE

DATE: August 3, 1998  
LOCATION: The White House Blue Room  
TIME: 7:30 pm  
FROM: Bruce Reed  
Melanne Verveer

I. PURPOSE

To discuss issues of youth violence and the factors placing children at risk with a diverse group of leading writers and thinkers.

II. BACKGROUND

You will hear from a broad group of authors, writers and experts on topics such as: (1) the root causes of violence among young people; (2) the recent incidents of extreme violence; and (3) next steps we can take as a nation to address these problems. The discussion is likely to focus on the broader social forces that may contribute to youth violence, such as access to guns, the pervasiveness of violence in the media, early childhood trauma, the weakening of communities, and new social and economic stresses on families.

III. PARTICIPANTS

Briefing Participants

Rahm Emanuel  
Bruce Reed  
Melanne Verveer

Dinner Guests

Sissela Bok, author of Mayhem: Violence as Public Entertainment.  
William Finnegan, author of Cold New World: Growing Up in a Harder Country, and writer for the New Yorker.  
James Fox, Dean of the College of Criminal Justice, Northeastern University of Boston Massachusetts and author of Mass Murder; Overkill; and, Killer on Campus.  
Sylvia Ann Hewlett, co-author of The War Against Parents (with Cornel West).  
Dr. Steven Hyman, Director of the National Institute of Mental Health.

Robin Karr-Morse, author of Ghosts from the Nursery: Tracing the Roots of Violence.  
David Kennedy, author of "Can We Keep Guns Away From Kids?" in *The American Prospect*  
and Director of the Boston Gun Project.  
Rev. Eugene Rivers, Director of the Ella J. Baker House in Dorchester, Massachusetts.  
Dr. Howard Snyder, Director of the National Center for Juvenile Justice in Pittsburgh,  
Pennsylvania.  
Ron Suskind, author of A Hope in the Unseen and *Wall Street Journal* reporter.  
Robert Sampson, Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago and Project Director for the  
Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods.  
John Tierney, former Attorney General of Maine.  
Cornel West, co-author of The War Against Parents (with Sylvia Ann Hewlett).

#### Administration

Attorney General Janet Reno  
Shay Bilchik, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Department of Justice  
Leslie Thornton, Chief of Staff, Department of Education  
Melanne Verveer  
Rahm Emanuel  
Bruce Reed

### **VI. PRESS PLAN**

Closed Press.

Note: Two guests are authors who are also print reporters (Finnegan and Suskind); they understand that the dinner is entirely off-the-record.

### **V. SEQUENCE OF EVENTS**

Informal dinner.  
Bruce Reed will serve as discussion facilitator, as necessary.

### **VI. ATTACHMENTS**

Background on dinner guests, including bios and excerpts of their writings.

## BACKGROUND ON PARTICIPANTS

***Dr. Sissela Bok, Ph.D.***, author of Mayhem: Violence as Public Entertainment

Professor Bok's work focuses on the deleterious impact on children of exposure to violence as entertainment, associated with glamor and thrill. Bok argues that viewers who become accustomed to seeing violence as an acceptable and attractive way of addressing problems find it easier to identify with aggressors and suppress a sense of pity or respect for victims of violence. She concludes that the growing exposure to violence has contributed to a tendency for increased aggression and absence of empathy, which she argues, has played a role in the most recent spate of school shootings. Although Bok concedes that child abuse, substance abuse, and access to firearms play a larger role in determining violent behavior than media violence, she asserts that we cannot ignore the impact of exposure to violence. She argues that there are opportunities for individuals and communities to guard against the impact of excessive media violence, without resorting to censorship.

*Professor Bok is likely to argue for a public discussion of media violence through the use of campaigns intended to create public norms against such portrayals. Such efforts would be similar to current campaigns to de-glamorize smoking and drugs.*

***William Finnegan***, author of Cold New World: Growing Up in a Harder Country

Mr. Finnegan's work depicts the lives of four American teenagers and young adults struggling to survive while confronting gangs and guns, drugs and violence, poverty and desolation. Finnegan focuses on way in which these young people are forced to raise themselves in the absence of parental or community support and structure. As a result, they create their own support system and sources of protection -- gangs. This, he argues, leads to a greater need for self-protection and increased youth violence. Finnegan asserts that the thriving economy has in fact increased the sense of hopelessness for those who have been left behind.

*Mr. Finnegan is likely to encourage efforts to achieve broader inclusion in economic prosperity for more of America's at-risk families and children.*

***James Fox***, Dean of the College of Criminal Justice at Northeastern University, Boston

Mr. Fox's professional efforts have been devoted to analyzing trends in juvenile crime and exploring the causes of increased crime rates. He notes that while we are facing a declining juvenile violent crime rate, it is still double the rate of the early 1980s. Nevertheless, Mr. Fox argues, investment in programs for youth that provide alternatives to violence, drugs, and gangs has declined over the past 20 years.

*Mr. Fox is likely to urge greater investments in programs for youth that provide community and structure and that protect America's young people from falling into a tragic cycle of violence and drugs.*

***Dr. Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Ph.D. & Professor Cornel West, co-authors of The War Against Parents***

Dr. Hewlett and Professor West argue in their new book that a large scale erosion of the role of parents is at the heart of the central problems facing America's children. They assert that business, government, and today's media-driven culture are undermining the effectiveness of parents, which in turn ensures that more and more children are left to raise themselves. Hewlett and West then identify steps that can be taken to revitalize the "art and practice of parenting." They argue for a "Parents Bill of Rights," fashioned after the G.I. Bill of Rights, to ameliorate the tight economic and social conditions facing today's parents. Hewlett and West propose such measures as paid parental leave, tax breaks for stay-at-home parents, flexible work places, a family allowance for families with children under age six, an extended school day and year, increased spending on early childhood education, and a removal of the sales tax on children's necessities.

*Dr. Hewlett and Professor West are likely to discuss the changing role of family in society and its impact on youth violence, and may urge specific measures by government, both at the federal and local level, to support and strengthen parents and the family structure.*

***Dr. Steven Hyman, M.D., Director of the National Institute of Mental Health***

Dr. Hyman brings the medical perspective of a mental health professional to bear on the issues of youth violence and at-risk youth. He argues that children's emotional development -- healthy or impaired -- can have enormous implications for their predisposition to violent behavior later in life.

*Dr. Hyman is likely to urge greater emphasis on preventive mental health services.*

***Robin Karr-Morse, co-author of Ghosts from the Nursery: Tracing the Roots of Violence***

Ms. Karr-Morse's work focuses on the connection between early brain development and later violent behavior. She argues that a predisposition to violent behavior can result from brain development that is impaired by abuse, neglect, and exposure to drugs and violence. Karr-Morse suggests a critical period of 33 months -- including nine months of prenatal development and the first two years of life -- during which the quality of physical, emotional, and cognitive care is of tremendous significance. Infancy, she asserts, is the crucial stage at which individuals form the core of conscience, develop the ability to trust and relate to others, and build the capacity for focused thinking and empathy. Karr-Morse's premise is that rage-filled adolescents are formed in the nursery, where infants develop a framework of expectations -- anticipating responsiveness or indifference, success or failure. When this is combined with early negative family circumstances, such as prenatal exposure to alcohol or early child abuse, there is an enormous risk for violent tendencies in later life.

*Ms. Karr-Morse is likely to discuss the importance of healthy, early brain development, and will urge greater investment in home visitation, quality child care and health care.*

**Professor David Kennedy**, author of "Can We Keep Guns Away from Kids?" in *The American Prospect*

Professor Kennedy's work focuses on youth access to guns and its impact on the rates of juvenile crime in America. He posits that fear is the central reason kids arm themselves, which often results in a cycle of increasing reliance on weapons and a localized arms race. Kennedy argues that if we work to remove guns from the streets, we can reduce this fear and reverse this trend. He advocates a strategy that would disrupt the black market in guns -- target sellers, buyers, and black marketers to raise the costs and lower the benefits of the youth gun trade. Kennedy's research serves as the theoretical underpinning of the Boston Gun Project, which traces crime guns and removes these illegal weapons from the streets. The President has expanded this approach to 27 other cities. In addition, Professor Kennedy has done much work analyzing urban juvenile crime, arguing that such crime is committed by a small number of offenders, and therefore, targeted strategies to deal with these specific offenders can reduce crime rates in general.

*Mr. Kennedy will likely discuss the differences between the recent shootings and general urban juvenile crime, arguing for specific approaches that separate these issues. In addition, he will argue to maintain the current level of support for and attention to gun strategies, such as the project in Boston.*

**Rev. Eugene Rivers**, Boston

Reverend Eugene Rivers, an ex-gang member who attended Harvard University and then went to work in Dorchester, the poorest section of Boston, has committed his life's work to reaching at-risk youth with a hands-on, faith-based approach. Based on conversations in 1991 with Boston heroin dealers as to why they were effective in luring local children, Rivers and his colleagues established a 10-point action plan. The underlying objective is to provide a substitute family, set of values, and support structure for at-risk youth through the church.

*Reverend Rivers will likely advocate for a national expansion of his Boston faith-based program and will urge broader inclusion of civic and faith-based organizations in crime prevention strategies.*

**Professor Robert Sampson**, Professor of Sociology from the University of Chicago

Professor Sampson's work has focused on studying Chicago neighborhoods across race, class, and ethnic lines. In the course of his studies, he has found that the level of "collective efficacy," defined as the willingness to monitor children's play groups, help neighbors and intervene in preventing acts such as juvenile truancy or street-corner loitering, is the key indicator for violence in a community. In addition, Professor Sampson has examined single-parent families from the vantage point of the community, finding that large clusters of single-parent families within a small community can lead to increase rates of delinquency, because of the lack of adult

supervision in the neighborhood.

*Professor Sampson is likely to address the role of community cohesion as a key indicator of juvenile crime and discuss steps to build such community.*

**Dr. Howard Snyder, Ph.D.**, Director of the National Center for Juvenile Justice, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Dr. Snyder is the director of a U.S. Department of Justice-funded project to collect and improve the quality and availability of data on juvenile crime, victimization and the justice system. Dr. Snyder brings a vast understanding of juvenile crime statistics. He emphasizes that statistics reveal that the increase in violent juvenile crimes is not the result, as some might suggest, of a “new breed of predators,” but rather, of greater numbers of juveniles committing violent crimes. *Dr. Snyder is likely to avoid commenting on the policy implications of juvenile crime trends, but will offer a research-based, factual perspective.*

**Ron Suskind**, author of A Hope in the Unseen and *Wall Street Journal* reporter

Mr. Suskind describes the journey of Cedric Jennings, a talented black teenager struggling to succeed in one of the harshest, lowest-performing public high schools in Washington, D.C. Mr. Suskind follows Jennings beyond his high school graduation to Brown University, and describes his story and the struggles of inner-city youth in modern America. The President sent a note to Cedric Jennings following Mr. Suskind’s first series of profile articles in the *Wall Street Journal*.

*Mr. Suskind will likely urge greater investment in intervention programs targeted at inner-city youth ages 11-13, when, he argues, peer pressure and expectation to reject education for crime is the most intense.*

**James Tierney**, former elected Democratic Attorney General of Maine

Mr. Tierney advises state Attorneys General throughout the country and approaches the issue of juvenile crime from the perspective of a prosecutor. He argues that efforts to confront juvenile crime must take into account the role of punishment -- specifically, how plays an important role in alleviating community anger, as well as promoting accountability in young offenders. He has promoted blended sentencing, which tries to find a middle ground between juvenile and adult sentences.

*Mr. Tierney is likely to discuss the need to balance prevention and early intervention strategies with efforts to prosecute youth and hold them accountable for their crimes.*

## **Suggested Discussion Questions**

What are some of the root causes of violence among youth? What are the policy implications of these causes?

How can we take advantage of public attention on this issue?

Why are extreme incidents of violence happening now?

How should we respond as a nation to these extreme outbreaks of violence? What do they say about us as a nation? Are they symptoms of larger problems?

Are changes in family structure connected to increased violence?

What are the connections and differences between these extreme incidents of violence and the crime that takes place at schools all the time?

Where are we heading in terms of youth crime? Is there anything we can learn from our most recent declines?

What do these recent incidents tell us about changing youth culture?

What can we as a nation do about the rising level of disconnection between young people and their communities? How does that disconnection bear on the community's role in stopping violence?

What is the connection between these incidents and increasing access to guns? Why do young people seek guns?

How can we address the implications of children's increased exposure to violence?

What is the connection between mental health problems and violence? How do we address the rising number of children with clinical depression?

How do we address the issue of media violence within the context of a strong commitment to the First Amendment?

How do we instill a sense of hope and possibility in those children whose families and communities have thus far not benefited from the improved economy?

What long-term steps can we take as a nation to address these problems?

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**A**

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## SISSELA BOK

Sissela Bok, a writer and philosopher, was born in Sweden and educated in Switzerland and France, before coming to the United States. She received her Ph. D. at Harvard University in 1970, and holds honorary doctorates from Mount Holyoke College, George Washington University, Clark University, the University of Massachusetts, and Georgetown University. She has received the Radcliffe Society Graduate Medal, the Barnard College Medal of Distinction, the Hastings Center Henry Knowles Beecher Award, and the Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Centennial Award.

Formerly a Professor of Philosophy at Brandeis University, Bok is currently a Distinguished Fellow at the Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies. She has written extensively on topics in the fields of bioethics, applied ethics, biography, and public affairs. A former member of the Pulitzer Prize Board and of the Board of the Hastings Center, she is on the editorial boards of a number of journals. She is a Fellow of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, and a member of the Executive Board of the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics.

With John Behnke, Bok has co-edited The Dilemmas of Euthanasia (1975), and with Daniel Callahan, Ethics Teaching in Higher Education (1980). She is co-author, with Gerald Dworkin and R. G. Frey, of the forthcoming Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide. Other books include: Lying: Moral Choice in Private and Public Life (1978), for which she received the George Orwell Award and the Melcher Book Award; Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation (1982); A Strategy for Peace: Human Values and the Threat of War (1989); Alva Myrdal: A Daughter's Memoir (1991), for which she received the Melcher Book Award; Common Values (1996); and Mayhem: Violence as Public Entertainment (1998).

## A CONVERSATION WITH SISSELA BOK

### author of **MAYHEM: Violence as Public Entertainment**

#### 1. How does your current focus on media violence relate to your earlier books *Lying* and *Secrets*?

In *Mayhem*, as in *Lying* and *Secrets*, I take up practical moral problems that arise in all our lives. Each of the three books focuses on a particular cluster of moral problems, but also on their links with the others. Lies are part of the arsenal used to guard and to invade secrets, which in turn may be used both to guard legitimate privacy and to conceal every form of deceit and violence. From earliest times, these themes have been treated in myths, epics, fables, and histories—and, in recent decades, more massively and graphically—on movie, television, and computer screens. It's the special allure of violence when offered as entertainment that attracts most immediate attention to moral conflict; and it's via the screen that modern publics are treated to entertainment violence on an unprecedented scale.

Few people doubt that massive exposure to graphic violence has significant impact on those who experience it. But although social scientists and child advocates have been exploring the effects of such exposure for decades, it is only in recent years that a groundswell of concern at home and abroad has generated a wide-ranging public debate about how we might best respond. My book aims to contribute to this debate, with special focus on works produced, marketed, and consumed as entertainment violence, for pleasure, excitement, thrill. Do they contribute to callousness and violent crime, as large majorities of Americans tell pollsters, or merely provide harmless amusement? In either case, might such works also help viewers confront and deal with violence in real life, perhaps informing them better or satisfying some deep-seated need that might otherwise find more brutal expression? Is it alarmist or merely sensible to ask about what happens to the souls of children nurtured, as in no past society, on images of rape, torture, bombings, and massacre channeled into their homes from infancy?

#### 2. To what extent do you think violent programming contributes to violence in our society?

Most studies agree that children who are heavy viewers of screen violence are more likely to be more aggressive, and that habits of aggression formed early in life are the basis for later behavior. Besides, apart from actual aggression, violent programming has also been found to increase the fear of many viewers, adding needlessly to their distrust of others; to desensitize a proportion of viewers; and to increase the appetite for becoming involved with violence and for more violent programming.

#### 3. Do you feel media violence is affecting our national character?

Americans have special reasons to inquire into any factor that may be contributing to societal violence, given that our levels of violent crime are higher than in all other stable industrialized democracies. And we need to consider all possible influences on young people and children in this regard. Although America's homicide rate has declined in the nineties, the rates for suicide, rape, and murder involving children and adolescents in many regions have too rarely followed suit. The rates of injury suffered by small children are sky-rocketing, with the number of seriously injured children nearly quadrupling from 1986 to 1993; and a proportion of these injuries are inflicted by children upon one another. Even homicides by children, once next to unknown, have escalated in recent decades.

Another curious effect that I believe is related to the endless proliferation of violent acts on our screens is that Americans have acquired a totally unwarranted reputation, at home as abroad, as one of the world's most lawless and violent countries. In fact, though we do have the highest rates of violent crime among industrialized democracies such as Japan, England, and France, many developing societies have rates several times higher than ours. Surveys show Colombia, South Africa, and Russia to be the three countries in the lead in this regard. And yet, if you ask any group of people to name the three societies with the highest measured levels of homicide in the world, and chances are that America will top the list. During the years when I worked on this book, I posed this question to gatherings at home and abroad. Invariably, most took for granted that America is among the most violent countries on earth if not the most violent of them all. Foreign policy experts, military strategists and peace activists showed no greater hesitation in this respect

than others. Young and old, liberal and conservative, religious and agnostic—all were equally startled at being told that they were wrong.

**4. We can't burden entertainment violence as the root of all our societal ills. More violence is caused by poverty, family breakdown, substance abuse, and the availability of firearms. So why focus exclusively on the media?**

Whatever role the media play in legitimizing, sometimes glamorizing, violence is only part of the problem. Even if there were no media violence, this would obviously not wipe out the problem of violence in the U.S. or any other society. The same can be said for the proliferation and easy access to guns, or for poverty, drug addiction, and other risk factors. So we have every reason to look with care at each one and at how they interact. It would make no sense to leave any one of them out on grounds that it is not the only contributing factor or not the strongest one.

It is against the background of all of the causes that contribute to societal violence, taken together, that my book focuses on what we can know about the role played by media violence in interaction with the others. And in this regard, there is something special about media violence: it is on the screen that most Americans meet up with every form of killing, abuse, rape, and torture from childhood on, no matter how placid their own lives might otherwise be.

**5. Why are you concentrating on violence rather than pornography or hate speech?**

Pornography and hate speech are legitimate problems. But they present different issues from violent entertainment. To take up all the forms of programming to which different groups might take objection would dilute the debate about how best to respond. Instead, since I could not cover everything, I chose to concentrate on the problem that many people feel threatens to have the most direct and severe consequences.

**6. Will your book provide support to the Christian right and those who would like to censor films and the Internet?**

No. I do not advocate censorship. The principal purpose of my book is to get beyond the simple dichotomy of censorship vs. free speech and to show that there are other ways to address the prominence of media violence that do not get caught up in this not very helpful debate.

**7. What do you mean when you say that the debate over media violence poses a false dilemma?**

It is wrong, I believe, to imagine that there is an insuperable dilemma between opting for either censorship or free speech in responding to media violence. There are ways for individuals and societies to guard against the risks posed by unfettered media violence without either resorting to censorship or standing by helplessly, feeling immobilized. Such a feeling of immobilization is needless on two grounds: first because censorship of the media is less and less feasible in today's media environment; second, because there are many ways to exercise control, both by producers and consumers, that are quite unrelated to censorship. We have seen how it has been possible to cut back on the glamorization of smoking, drug-taking, and drunk driving on the screen without recourse to censorship. There is no reason for producers as well as consumer groups not to make similar efforts when it comes to media violence.

My book aims to challenge the helplessness that so many now experience with respect to media and entertainment violence: a helplessness that reflects a deeper unrest about families and cultures, about the kind of society ours is becoming, and about our responsibilities to one another, to our children, and to ourselves. I argue that there is no reason to feel impotent, no excuse to opt out. The factors entering into the sense of moral conflict and insuperable dilemma are, when we look at them more closely, far from immobilizing. Beyond these barriers, I want to suggest, opportunities for imaginative responses abound.

violence as public entertainment

# MAYHEM

SISSELA BOK

## DOUBLE TAKES

Imagine that Rip van Winkle had slept almost two centuries instead of twenty years, only to wake up in 1995 in the town of Hudson, New York, while *Frontline* reporter Al Austin and his associates were filming the documentary "Does TV Kill?" In Washington Irving's story, the indolent, henpecked Rip had been used to rambling about the little town where he lived and hearing children shout with joy when he approached, "knowing how he assisted at their sports, made their play things, taught them to fly kites and shoot marbles, and told them long stories of ghosts, witches and Indians," only to wake up twenty years older and find that

Strange names were over the doors—strange faces at the windows—every thing was strange. His mind now misgave him; he began to doubt whether both he and the world around him were bewitched.<sup>3</sup>

This time, Rip would discover an entirely new town where his village had been. He would see fewer children at play outdoors. Instead, he would find them sitting indoors, often in front of television sets, some of them in turn being observed and filmed by Austin and his

television crew, who had come to Hudson with psychologist Leonard Eron, for the purpose of "watching people watching television"

This is where the Headless Horseman rode and Rip van Winkle slept. Columbia County, in the Catskills, Hudson, New York. An old town with deep wrinkles. Uncomfortable with the changes it sees all around. . . . *Frontline* came to Hudson because this is where television was born. And it was among the people here, more than anywhere else in the world, that experts have worked to learn what television does to us, and here that they first found a connection between television and violence.<sup>4</sup>

Austin and Eron had received permission from several families to train cameras both on the children and others watching television and on the sets themselves, in order to study how viewing habits, home conditions, and child-rearing practices might relate to aggressive behavior in children.

When Eron had first interviewed 835 third graders in Columbia County in 1960, he had been surprised by the role he found television played in their lives. The more violent the programs they watched at home, the more aggressive they were in school. He came back in 1971, and again in 1980, to reinterview the same subjects and found that a higher proportion of those who had been heavy consumers of TV violence as children also turned out to have problems with violence in late adolescence and early adulthood. The more aggressive they had been at eight, moreover, the more aggressive they tended to be at thirty: they logged more arrests and more criminal convictions, were more aggressive in their homes, and had more aggressive children.<sup>5</sup> Now, in 1993, Eron wanted to meet with some of these individuals once again and to study, as well, the viewing habits of current third graders. The documentary shows him exploring the views of children and adults and confirming the earlier research findings about the links between television viewing and higher levels of aggression.

Unfortunately, the lurid title of the *Frontline* program—"Does TV Kill?"—made it harder for reporters and viewers to sort out the evi-

dence for such links. As a result, the greatest revelation turned out to be, for the reporters, not some new discovery about the role of television violence but rather, simply, "the stupefying amount that people watch."<sup>6</sup> It was only five decades ago that the first American families acquired their first television sets. By now, 98 percent of households have television, and a majority of children have sets in their bedrooms. The typical American household has the television set on for more than seven hours a day, and children ages two to eleven watch it on an average of three to four hours a day.<sup>7</sup>

Rip van Winkle might well find the children watching TV in their bedrooms and living rooms the most perplexing of all. If he watched *Frontline*, he would see a boy—one that psychologists would call an unusually heavy viewer—stretched on his bed in his own room, eyes trained on his TV set, day after day, sometimes taking time out only for brief meals, fidgeting, changing position, but absorbed in his viewing. Other children were filmed coming in and out of darkened living rooms, the screen flickering before their eyes, their faces mostly expressionless, at times half-excited or turned away in fear.

How to explain to anyone not familiar with the role of television today these children's passivity, their remaining indoors for hours on end, their absorbed silence? Or the American Heart Association's 1992 poster: CAUTION: CHILDREN NOT AT PLAY, warning of the health risks from too much passive viewing?<sup>8</sup>

Most troubling of all might be the chill realization that the children in the *Frontline* documentary were doing what they actually thought they preferred to do. At the close of the program, a young boy, standing with his father and mother, is asked what he would say to someone offering him one million dollars on the condition that he never watch the television screen again. His instant reply: "I wouldn't do it." "Not even for a million dollars?" his mother asks incredulously. "Not even for a million." "Why?" Again an instant retort, as if the answer were self-evident: "What [else] would you do?"

Anyone who had written on the subject of education and child-rearing before the advent of TV, from Aristotle and Rousseau to Dewey, Montessori, and Piaget would be hard put to explain what

would cause a child to give up so many activities and to refuse a fortune in order not to be deprived of television. However much these thinkers differed about what sort of child-rearing is needed for individuals and societies to thrive, such a preference would jar with each of their views. Likewise, those who fought to establish the United States of America or who endured hardship to come to this nation as immigrants, however varied their own educational ideals and their hopes for their descendants, would surely be taken aback to learn how so many among today's children have been led to envisage "the pursuit of Happiness."

To be sure, many children in previous societies were much more deprived of opportunities to develop their full potential than the American youngsters studied by Eron. But it is odd that we in the twentieth century should pride ourselves on having arrived at a more enlightened view of children than the previous perception of them as "miniature adults," even as we acquiesce in having our own children targeted, long before the age of consent, as "miniature consumers."<sup>9</sup>

When Aldous Huxley looked back in 1958 at his novel *Brave New World*, written in 1931, he noted that some of the nefarious changes he had projected for a distant future were manifesting themselves much sooner, especially with respect to children. He warned of the growing powers of the communications industry in catering to what previous thinkers had ignored—"man's almost infinite appetite for distractions"—and in seeing children, especially, as offering lucrative prospects if they could be enlisted at an early age as lifelong consumers:

They are ignorant of the world and its ways, and therefore completely unsuspecting. Their critical faculties are undeveloped. The youngest one of them have not yet reached the age of reason and the older ones lack the experience on which their newfound rationality can effectively work. In Europe, conscripts used to be playfully referred to as "cannon fodder." Their little brothers and sisters have now become radio fodder and television fodder.<sup>10</sup>

Huxley was referring to television and radio in general, not to violent programming in particular. His condemnation is too slashing to do justice to the extraordinary opportunities for creativity, learning, and enjoyment that modern media were already then capable of providing. It is important to go beyond such blanket indictments as we consider screen violence in the larger context of the media, and to keep in mind that in homes where television sets are on most of the time, whether or not anyone watches them, much programming may serve as background "wallpaper" with few measurable effects of any kind.

There is nevertheless widespread agreement that television habits can be harmful. But as many investigators point out, it is not easy to sort out how different causal factors interact. It is even harder to pinpoint the precise neurological pathway of any one factor as it influences the others. For this reason, while most studies of the relationship between viewing patterns and, say, health or school performance speak of the "effects" of television, they also make clear that they have in mind some form of correlation rather than some direct cause-effect relationship.

Does this mean that all talk of effects can be set aside as unreliable until the firmest scientific evidence is in hand? No—no more than talk of the effects of tobacco, say, or of malnutrition. An approach to causation that helps make sense of the language of effects even before absolute physiological proof is in hand is that of "probabilistic causation." According to this perspective, it is not necessary that a suspected risk—such as cigarette smoking—produce the designated effect—lung cancer—in all or even most cases, nor that it be the only or the greatest cause of that effect. Rather, it is thought to have an effect if it "increases the incidence of the effect for a population and increases the likelihood of the effect in an individual case."<sup>11</sup> It is from this perspective that I shall be considering the different studies of the effects of media exposure.

Sitting too long in front of a screen proves both physically and psychologically debilitating, no matter how innocuous or even beneficial the programs may be. The most basic physical needs of children,

such as those of developing healthy hearts and lungs, are directly endangered by too many hours spent in front of television or computer screens. The more time children spend in front of the TV set, the more likely they are to be overweight and in poor physical condition.<sup>12</sup> On these scores, the American Heart Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and many other groups concerned with children's well-being unite in cautioning parents.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to physical risks from prolonged exposure to television, evidence is growing that it has harmful influences in other areas of life. Not unexpectedly, television watching has been found to cut back on time spent outdoors and on sports. Increasingly, now that most homes have several sets and many children have sets in their own rooms, it also isolates viewers. The time spent by parents with their children has continued to dwindle; a 1992 study shows that children have lost ten to twelve hours per week of parental time compared with 1960.<sup>14</sup> For beleaguered parents, television has come to seem a ready-made replacement for family interaction, storytelling, and supervision.<sup>15</sup> Studies have also linked sexually suggestive television programs with adolescent sexual behavior and out-of-wedlock pregnancy, as well as ads for beer and wine with increased alcohol consumption and greater incidence of accidents, drunk driving, and violence.<sup>16</sup>

When it comes to the relationship between viewing habits and schoolwork, opinions diverge. Does television expose children to learning opportunities they might not otherwise have, or does it interfere with their creativity, schoolwork, and reading ability? While heavy viewing is correlated with poorer performance in school and lower reading ability, both may be linked in the first place to the lower intellectual ability that is also associated with heavy television viewing, rather than to the viewing itself.<sup>17</sup>

Once young people go to college, their viewing habits have been found to correlate with lesser participation in activities in which they might otherwise engage. According to educational researchers Linda Sax and Alexander Astin, "the only measure to produce strong and negative effects on 'citizen development' among students, including leadership skills, cultural awareness, and tutoring other students, is

more time spent watching television"; they have also found "uniformly negative effects of watching television [on] . . . college grades, self-reported growth in most areas of academic and personal development, and nearly all aspects of satisfaction with college."<sup>18</sup>

Given the variety of screen offerings now available from infancy on up and their impact, for better or worse, on health and well-being, much rides on the choices that parents make for children, and on those that older children and adolescents learn to make for themselves. The pediatrician and media consultant Milton Chen argues that it is as important to make informed choices about TV diet as to select balanced, nutritive foods.<sup>19</sup> And Elizabeth Thoman, director of the Center for Media Literacy, likewise stresses the importance of managing one's media diet, "that is, making choices and managing the amount of time spent with television, videos, electronic games, films, and various print media forms."<sup>20</sup>

While children and young people are more vulnerable in these respects, no age guarantees immunity to the different sorts of damage. And as with all consumption, viewing intake can be harmful in two ways. It may either simply displace activities needed for adequate growth and sustenance, or else be actively toxic, at times addictive. It is in this context that questions concerning media violence enter in. Too much of *any* passive "consuming" of entertainment, even of the finest programs, damages children's health by taking away opportunities for sports and play and creative activities and the give-and-take of reciprocal engagement with others; but what has increasingly concerned parents and researchers is whether the consumption and enjoyment of media *violence* has additional and uniquely damaging effects.

## SIZING UP THE EFFECTS

A great deal of research has been conducted to sort out the kinds and amounts of violence in the media and to learn how exposure to media violence affects viewers, and especially children. There have also been many meta-analyses, or studies of existing studies.<sup>21</sup> Focusing primarily on television, they all confirm the commonsense observation that the screen is a powerful teaching medium, for good and for ill, when it comes to violent as to all other material.

There is general agreement that children ought neither to be insulated from gradual acquaintance with the treatment of violence in art and in the media nor assaulted by material they cannot handle. The "catharsis theory" put forth in the 1960s and 1970s, to the effect that violent material can help young people live out their aggressive impulses vicariously so that their day-to-day conduct becomes less aggressive, has been abandoned by almost all scholars in the field today.<sup>22</sup> The debate suffers, however, from the fact that different studies concern persons of different ages with different levels of understanding of the nature of violence and of distinctions between real and fictitious events. It seems reasonable to suppose that screen violence

offers some viewers a chance for strictly vicarious role-playing and an outlet for aggressive fantasies, just as others are more easily frightened or mesmerized or incited by what they view. But scholars increasingly dismiss as unfounded any categorical claims that the average heavy viewer of media violence is somehow less likely to be aggressive than someone without such exposure.

Instead, the vast majority of the studies now concur that media violence can have both short-term and long-term debilitating effects. In 1993, the American Psychological Association published a report by a commission appointed to survey and review existing studies. According to this report,

There is absolutely no doubt that higher levels of viewing violence on television are correlated with increased acceptance of aggressive attitudes and increased aggressive behavior. . . . Children's exposure to violence in the mass media, particularly at young ages, can have harmful lifelong consequences. Aggressive habits learned early in life are the foundation for later behavior. Aggressive children who have trouble in school and in relating to peers tend to watch more television; the violence they see there, in turn, reinforces their tendency toward aggression, compounding their academic and social failure. These effects are both short-term and long-lasting: A longitudinal study of boys found a significant relation between exposure to television violence at 8 years of life and anti-social acts—including serious violent criminal offenses and spouse abuse—22 years later. . . . In addition to increasing violent behaviors toward others, viewing violence on television changes attitudes and behaviors toward violence in significant ways. Even those who do not themselves increase their violent behaviors are significantly affected by their viewing of violence in three [further] ways:

- Viewing violence increases fear of becoming a victim of violence, with a resultant increase in self-protective behaviors and increased mistrust of others;

- Viewing violence increases desensitization to violence, resulting in calloused attitudes toward violence directed at others and a decreased likelihood to take action on behalf of the victim when violence occurs (behavioral apathy); and
- Viewing violence increases viewers' appetites for becoming involved with violence or exposing themselves to violence.<sup>23</sup>

The report, like most of the research it surveys, speaks of viewing violence as correlated with effects rather than as directly causing them. And it specifies a number of risk factors capable of contributing to the first of these effects—increasing aggression. Among these risk factors, some, such as access to firearms, substance abuse, and experience of abuse as a child, doubtless play a larger role than media violence.<sup>24</sup> But it is on the screen that, as in no earlier generation, today's children, including those not subject to the other risk factors, become familiar with them all and with graphic depictions of every form of mayhem.

Commentators have spoken of the four effects specified in the report as increased aggression, fear, desensitization, and appetite.<sup>25</sup> Psychologist Ronald Slaby, a member of the APA commission, has named them "the aggressor effect, the victim effect, the bystander effect, and the appetite effect."<sup>26</sup> Not all of these effects, he suggests, occur for all viewers; much depends on how they identify themselves in relation to the violence they see and on their ability to evaluate programs critically.

Without taking such variations into account, it is natural to ask, as does critic John Leonard, "How, anyway, does TV manage somehow to *desensitize* but also *exacerbate*, to *sedate* but also *incite*?"<sup>27</sup> As with other stimuli, individuals react to media violence in different ways. While many people experience the quite natural reactions of fear and numbing when exposed to repeated depictions of assault, homicide, or rape, fewer will ever come close to feeling incited by them, much less to engaging in such acts. But among those who do cross that line, the combination of a surge of aggression and numb pitilessness is surely not unusual. Psychiatrist James Gilligan, in a study of homicidally violent men, takes it as a precondition for their being able to engage in

violent behavior that ordinary human responses are absent: "What is most startling about the most violent people is how incapable they are, at least at the time they commit their violence, of feeling love, guilt, or fear."<sup>28</sup> In such a state, Macbeth's words are anything but incongruous:

I am in blood  
Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,  
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.<sup>29</sup>

As research evidence accumulates about the effects linked to media violence, it reinforces the commonsense view that violent programming influences viewers at least as much as the advertising directed at them for the express purpose of arousing their desire for candy and toys. Both types of exposure affect children most strongly to the degree that they are more suggestible and less critical of what is placed before them, and have more time to watch than most. The American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, and the National PTA are among the many organizations signaling such effects and calling for reduced levels of television violence and greater parental involvement with children's viewing.

In the early 1990s, researchers frequently mentioned the estimate that the average child leaving elementary school has watched 8,000 murders and more than 100,000 acts of violence.<sup>30</sup> Because network television was for decades the primary source for screen violence in most homes, its role has been especially carefully charted in this regard. In recent years, growing access to numerous cable channels has brought in considerably more violent fare and made it available at all hours. By now, the vast assortment of slasher and gore films on video contribute to a climate of media violence different from that studied over the past four decades. So does the proliferation of video games offering players the chance to engage in vicarious carnage of every sort. These sources bring into homes depictions of graphic violence, often sexual in nature, never available to children and young people in the past. Because videos and interactive games also provide opportunities to play sequences over and over, they add greatly to the amount of violence to which viewers

now have access. As a result, it may well be necessary to revise the earlier figures sharply upward.

Although most of the public's concern has been directed primarily toward the first of the four effects noted by researchers—increased levels of aggression—the other three may have a more widespread and debilitating impact on adults as well as children. After all, even in a high-crime society such as ours, the vast majority of citizens will never commit violent crimes, but many are still affected to the extent that the prominence of violence in news and entertainment programs brings an intensified fear of crime, greater callousness toward suffering, and a greater craving for ever more realistic entertainment violence.

In examining studies of the four types of effects, I shall therefore first take up those having to do with fear, desensitization, and appetite, before considering what we know about any links to aggression, and ask under what conditions each may inhibit the development of four basic moral characteristics—resilience, empathy, self-control, and respect for self and others—indispensable for human thriving.

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# THE NEW YORKER

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July, 1998

William Finnegan has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 1987. He has filed stories for the magazine from Bosnia, Somalia, South Africa, Mozambique, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Spain. His reporting on youth, race, and poverty in the United States has twice won the John Bartlow Martin Award for Public Interest Magazine Journalism. He was a National Magazine Award finalist in both 1990 and 1995. He is the author of *A Complicated War: The Harrowing of Mozambique*; *Dateline Soweto: Travels with Black South African Reporters*; and *Crossing the Line: A Year in the Land of Apartheid*, about a year he spent teaching in a black high school in South Africa, which was named one of the ten best nonfiction books of 1986 by *The New York Times Book Review*. Mr. Finnegan lives in New York City with his wife, Caroline Rule, who is a lawyer.

# THE NEW YORKER

20 WEST 43RD STREET  
NEW YORK, N. Y. 10036-7441



July 31, 1998

To: Hillary Clinton  
From: Bill Finnegan  
BY FAX

## Discussion Suggestions - Violence and At-Risk Youth

**\*Gangs:** the vicious cycle in which unsupervised kids (working parents, distracted parents, no after-school programs) basically raise themselves, making peer groups inordinately important and often predatory (gangs), which in turn makes collective self-protection (gangs, again) essential--a cycle that generates much youth violence

**\*Guns:** everyday conflicts among kids become lethally dangerous with the easy availability of firearms

**\*Alcohol and methamphetamine:** key ingredients in many assaults

**\*Jail:** increasingly, even for juveniles, as rehabilitation goes out of penal fashion, a finishing school for the anti-social; a place where kids from tough neighborhoods gain some juice, some experience, for dealing with the constant threat of violence on the outside; for some, a holiday from the chaos, deprivations, and uncertainties of life on the streets

**\*Poverty:** Why does the wealthiest nation in history have the highest child poverty rate in the developed world? How can the American class structure be opened up to keep the income gap from continuing to grow? Can the blows of poverty at least be softened for families, so that fewer kids have to come to the devastating realization that they are being prepared for second-class citizenship and will always be unable to compete in the mainstream? This realization seems to me the psycho-social basis for a great deal of crime and violence.

**\*Pop culture:** the glamorization of violence--by adults, for kids

WILLIAM FINNEGAN

C O L D

*Growing Up*

N E W

*in a Harder Country*

W O R L D



Random House · New York

4-15-1996 3:19AM

FROM WILLIAM FINNEGAN 212 663 8797

P. 5

When I first started going to New Haven, I was taken on a tour of the city's neighborhoods by two black residents. Their conversation reminded me of others I've heard—in countries suffering from chronic guerrilla war.

"Who was that waved hello to you?"

"He was the guy that was with that girl who got shot in the eye."

"The fourteen-year-old?"

"That's right."

"How's she doing?"

"She gettin' better."

"Who did the shooting?"

"The Ville got blamed for it, because some of their boys was following that guy around, because he's KSI, so it's another beef now. But the Ville say they didn't do it."

"That don't make no difference."

Virtually every black person in New Haven knew someone who had been shot. One of my guides, a college student home on vacation, told me about a friend of hers, a twenty-two-year-old man, who had just been shot to death on the street by a sixteen-year-old dealer. On Newhall Street, not far from his grandmother's house, Terry Jackson heard shots one afternoon, ran out, and found a seventeen-year-old friend lying on the sidewalk. "It was my boy Gary," he told me, with even more than his usual dissociation. "He wasn't moving, but he was still alive. If I had a car, I would've throwed him in it and drove him to the hospital. The ambulance came and took him, but he died anyway. He was shot right here." Terry indicated a spot just below his left eye and he kept his finger there, drilling abstractedly into his cheek, for a full minute.

An inordinate number of the people getting shot in New Haven were teenagers—a fact clearly connected to the number of teenagers selling drugs. This connection could be overdrawn, however. It was the booming underground economy—primarily cocaine money—that financed the proliferation of guns, but once guns are in circulation they take on a life of their own. Among teenage boys, especially, they become status items. They get endlessly traded around. They signify power, safety, glamour, excitement, manhood. And they end up settling petty disputes that previously were settled with fists. In several visits to New Haven public high schools, I heard little talk about drug abuse (the drug of choice among students remained, overwhelmingly, alcohol; cocaine abuse had, if anything, declined in recent years) but a great deal of talk about who was "packing," and who might have a "death wish," issued by some enemy, hanging over his head. In such an atmosphere, as a school counselor put it to me, "every young man is mainly concerned with survival, with being the biggest beast on his block, which means being down with the baddest posse."

I caught a glimpse of this type of natural selection at work one December afternoon at Wilbur Cross High in New Haven. I was sitting in a second-floor classroom talking to a social studies teacher. School was just letting out. A series of sharp pops erupted outside and we looked out and saw two cars parked

at odd angles in the street. The boys inside the cars—at least three of them turned out to be Wilbur Cross students—were firing pistols at each other. Students were running, diving behind hedges and snowbanks. One of the cars started backing up very fast, then roared off up a side street. The other car squealed away in another direction. The scene had a heavy, panic-edged quality as people began to pick themselves up and look around to see who, if anyone, had been hit. Nobody seemed to be hurt. But then the car that had left by the side street—a large, muddy, dark blue Buick—came barreling back out and slid to a halt in front of the school. People began to run again as the Buick lurched around, bumped over the curb, and then sped off in the direction the other car had taken. That was the end of the excitement. A white motorist who had been forced to a stop by the shoot-out sat banging on his steering wheel and shouting. The principal of Wilbur Cross High later reported that the motorist was yelling, "Drugs are killing this city!"

But the shoot-out was not about drugs. It seemed that a girl at Wilbur Cross had made fun of a disabled boy, calling him a cripple. He "illed" her in return. She telephoned her boyfriend, who was a member of the Ghetto, a small posse based in a housing project in east New Haven. He came to the school with some of his friends. The handicapped boy was a member of the Island Brothers, who were, along with the Ville, one of the dominant posses at Wilbur Cross, so this promised to be a serious confrontation. Many students knew it was coming. One even walked into a classroom, pointed to a girl whose boyfriend was down with the Island, and announced, "Your baby's father goin' be killed." I heard this from a self-possessed twelfth-grade girl who went on to explain, "This school's affiliated with the Island. The Ghetto, only their little piss boys go here. Also, the Island is *cute*. You know, the Ghetto, they're ugly, they're from the projects, they stink. So they want to show everybody they're on top." The Ghetto had put on a great performance on the street after school, she said. "They was *proflin*." She imitated them: boys walking around with arms akimbo, a little like gunfighters ready to quick-draw, but with exaggerated side-to-side steps that suggested extremely fat men waddling. I had seen the walk before; it was both frightening and very funny. The Island, she said, had matched this display and things had quickly escalated to gunfire.

The social studies teacher with whom I watched the shoot-out had her own theory. She thought that it might be the beginning of a race war. She said that a white boy at the school (Wilbur Cross was less than one third white; Hillhouse High, New Haven's other comprehensive public high school, was 94 percent black) had been threatened recently by one of the posses. This was a first, she said, and very ominous, particularly since a white man had been murdered in the projects the same week. (The white man in question—he was twenty years old and well known locally as a champion swimmer—had been, according to witnesses, trying to steal drugs. He had gone to Rockview Cir-

cle—possibly the most dangerous housing project in town—to score, and had there been accused of having fled, a few days earlier, without paying for the drugs he took. The dealer's "beatmaster," whose job it was to make sure such things didn't happen, shot the accused thief in the head as he and a companion drove their pickup truck out of Rockview Circle.)

While the social studies teacher was telling me her theory—this was immediately after the shoot-out—three boys ran into her classroom. It seemed that they all lived in the projects where the Ghetto was based, and they were afraid they might be the Island's next targets. We shut the door and made them sit on the floor while we watched the corridor and the street. We tried to find out more from the boys. Each wore a ski cap. All denied being involved with the posses. Other than that, we learned nothing. The boys were obviously not pleased to find themselves being interrogated by a couple of white adults. The word "niggers" occurred in every sentence fragment they muttered. Afterward, I tried to imagine what the world felt like to those boys, and what I would do if I were in their place—if I felt myself in mortal danger, with no help coming from adults—and had to go home to the projects that night. And I knew: I would get down with a posse; I would get myself a gun.

## THREE

"We believe in Hitler's ways," Tim Malone, of the Nazi Low Riders, explained. "But that don't mean we worship him. He was smart, but he was a homosexual. I think what he did with the Jews was right, mainly. They was coming into Germany, buying up the businesses, treating the Germans like slaves. I think he killed more than six million. That was just all they could find."

Chris Runge, another NLR, told me that Hitler had actually been working for the Vatican. "That's why the Jews were put in the concentration camps. The Pope went to Hitler and said, 'These people aren't giving in. We'll give you weapons, we'll give you ammunition.'"

It took me some time to get past the NLRs' mistrust of strangers bearing notebooks, but once I did I found them garrulous, even fascinating, expounders of misinformation and sulfurous opinion. Chris Runge seemed to be the theorist of the Lancaster clique. He was nineteen, hairless, blue-eyed, pale-skinned, with an athlete's physique and an odd manner that, at least with me, alternated between an exaggerated serenity and a worried seriousness—an alternation occasionally interrupted by big, goofy smiles. "I'm basically what you call a political Nazi," he said. "A lot of these Nazis out here are unorganized. They're mostly street skins, like Storm Troopers, doing the dirty work. I want to start getting them organized. I'm not down for the government, but I'm interested in military service, because that's really getting inside the political system. I want to know how to use weapons, and get inside the government, so I can help bring it down and start my own. You saw what happened in North Carolina? We're already in there."

Chris was referring to the discovery, in late 1995, of a group of violent white-supremacist paratroopers at Fort Bragg.

"People don't really understand what Nazism is about," he went on. "They think it's all just Adolf Hitler. But Nazism is about a society with no upper class, no lower class. We'd have equality. We wouldn't have homelessness—because we keep the factories going and everybody has a place. It's like a ma-

chine, a robot. Democracy doesn't work. As you can see right now, it's falling apart. With a Nazi government, we'd just take out all the unwanted and start over again—even whites, if they're doing the same thing as the niggers are. . . . I'm here for the future. I'm for a lot of restrictions. You can't let too much freedom in." Chris gave me one of his big, blue-eyed smiles.

He grew serious again. "White supremacy just comes from growing up and seeing what's happening in society," he said. "We're going down. I mean, what's up with all this United Negro College Fund? Why is there no United White College Fund? We're just all sitting out here on the corner while they're getting all the scholarships." He frowned. "I haven't seen any of them yet show me they really deserve to be in this society. They deserve to be taken out—any way possible."

Chris was trying to change his own ways, he said. "Before, I was just like a street thug. 'Fuck you, nigger!' I see 'em in an alley, say, 'Hey, you're in the wrong neighborhood,' and beat 'em down. But our superiority is a superiority of the mind. You can't kill 'em all. You gotta be smarter. Whites are more civilized, so you should act more civilized—present yourself in a good manner, so people respect you."

Chris credited a recent eight-month stint in jail for his new insight. He had been convicted for participating in the same drive-by shooting that sent Jaxon Stines, who was his best friend, to jail. And he had "found the Lord" in his cell, he said, an experience that seemed to be the source of his beatific grins. It may have also softened some of his judgments. Of Mindy, for instance, Chris merely said, "She's confused. She's young." This was notably gentler than the pronouncements of other NLRs on the subject. Chris even showed some self-awareness when he talked about his life. He told me that his mother's ex-husband used to beat her so badly when he was drunk that she would come lie in bed with Chris in the hope that it would make him stop. It didn't. "And that's a lot of the hate I got inside me now," Chris said quietly.

Chris's mother was, by all accounts, a serious tweaker. (His grandfather was an executive with the Xerox Corporation. Chris said—a point of reference, perhaps, for his bitter assessment, "We're going down.") She and he had moved to the Antelope Valley when he was thirteen. He had dropped out of school in the ninth grade, and had largely been on his own since. For a while, he was a Deadhead, following the band around California, and he had lived for a patch in Oakland. When we met, he was working at a Burger King and living with the Malones.

The Malones' house was still the NLR hangout. Though I stopped by many times, day and night, I never saw Mrs. Malone there. She worked in a plastics factory in Pasadena, more than an hour's drive away, and, according to Tim, she left the house at dawn and got home only late in the evening. When I first met Tim, who was seventeen, he had just spent two months in jail; he had

been locked up as a suspect in the Todd Jordan stabbing, but had been released for lack of evidence. He was wiry and well built, with close-cropped dark hair and, tattooed on the back of his neck, an Iron Cross. He described himself as "more of the Gestapo Storm Trooper type than a political Nazi—the type that's ready to go to war over things. There's gonna be a race war around the year 2000."

I asked Tim how he had become a Nazi. He said that his father had been a Hell's Angel, "so it was kind of inherited." His dad drank, did speed, and abused his mother—that was why his parents broke up. The family had lived in a black neighborhood in Montclair, east of Los Angeles, where Tim, at the age of ten, joined a local Crips set for self-protection. He was the middle brother of three, and his joining a black gang did not please his brothers. "Both my brothers was punk rockers, into speed metal, and they used to beat me up, trying to teach me a lesson," he said. "I thank them for it now. I was on the wrong road. You gotta stick with your own race. Now ain't nothing I hate more than a wigger." (This charming term means "white nigger.") The news that Tim was an ex-Crip helped explain why he often sounded like a white thug doing a flawless imitation of a black thug. He even had a set of elaborate hand and arm gestures that I had never before seen a white kid use—the same moves gangsta rappers use in performance.

Tim and his brothers, Jeff and Steve, became skinheads after moving to the Antelope Valley, in 1992, and meeting the local neo-Nazis. They were, however, no longer calling themselves Nazi Low Riders, he said. I was surprised; that was what everyone, including the police and the press, called them. But it seemed that Willie Fisher, the leader of the Lancaster NLRs, had been beaten up when he arrived in prison claiming NLR. "It's a prison gang," Tim explained to me. This had obviously been news to the Lancaster set. "You gotta be in prison to be a member. That's why they jumped Willie, because he never been in prison before. See, NLRs are a clique off of Aryan Brotherhood, and Aryan Brotherhood ain't recruiting no more. Now it's just everybody white in prison. But Willie's been talking to the older homeboys, so now it's cool. But we're under his wing, so if we mess up, the older homeboys will take it out on him. So we gotta jump up and take the blame for any brothers in trouble, jump up if anybody disses NLR, back it up a hundred percent. See, you can be down for NLR but not claim it yet, because you're not eligible."

Stints in juvenile detention—Tim had twice done time for methamphetamine possession—evidently didn't count toward NLR eligibility. "But the real NLRs can always just call on us if they need something taken care of," Tim said. "They just say, 'Hey, brother,' and we take care of it." The once and future NLRs of Lancaster were, in any case, eagerly awaiting, as Mindy said, the release of their leader, Willie. "When he gets out, he might take us all to Idaho," Tim said wistfully. "That's a white-power state."

In the meantime, they were a warm little nest of vipers. "We're all family," Tim said. "Even the little kids. Trouble's son, who's only like, nine months old, already knows how to Sieg Heil." Tim imitated an infant giving a Nazi salute, and laughed. (Trouble was the street name of Robert Jones, one of the three NLRs, as I shall continue to call them, charged with firing into a parked car full of black people, including a baby, in Lancaster in 1995. Jones was convicted and sentenced to twelve years. One of his companions, Chris Parker, fondly known around the Malones' house as Evil, was the shooter; he got twenty-two years.)

There were certain limits that even Tim acknowledged, though. "Like my little sister, we don't want to get her into it too bad yet," he said. His sister, who was always parked in front of a TV playing video games when I came by the house, was, Tim estimated, approximately ten. (He really had no idea.) "She knows how to salute, and throw up a W"—that's a white-power gang sign, done with crossed fingers—"but one day she got down to it with some black kid at school, called him a nigger, and the school called my mom, and she got mad at us, because she knew where my sister picked it up."

The ranks of the boneheads were swelling, Tim said. Everywhere he went in the Antelope Valley, guys were throwing Nazi salutes at him. "Some of them I don't even know," he said. "We get hooked up that way." Standing in the Malones' front yard, talking with Tim and his friends, I did notice a startling number of passing cars honking in greeting, with white arms often jutting out the windows. The NLRs would respond with quick, stiff-armed salutes and the occasional deep shout, "White power!" Then they would grin. This, I thought, was why the local Sharps called their hometown Klancaster.

"When we first come up here, there was hardly any blacks," Tim told me. "So there wasn't much trouble. But then they started hearing about this place, wanting to come up here, starting stuff, thinking they're hard. So we're just trying to push 'em back."

The NLRs' main enemies, however, were the Sharps. "Most all Sharps are straight pussies," Tim said vehemently. "They're just a bunch of preppy white boys who want to run with the blacks because they're afraid to fight them."

The one Sharp who most infuriated Tim and his friends was, of course, Darius Houston. "There's no such thing as a black skinhead," Tim fumed. "Skinheads are white. Everybody knows that. Darius is bullshit."

I asked Tim if he knew where skinhead originated.

"Germany," he said. He wasn't sure when.

I asked if he had ever read anything about skinheads.

"There really ain't no book about skinheads," he said. (There are many.) He had heard about a magazine, though, a neo-Nazi "skinzine" called *Blood and Honor*, published in Long Beach, California. He asked if I could help him find some copies. "They'll hold some concerts out here for us, we heard."

On the whole, the neo-Nazi skinheads I met in the Antelope Valley seemed to have only vague, subpolitical connections to the white-supremacist world beyond their turf—through the methamphetamine trade, through prison gangs and outlaw motorcycle gangs, through racist music (white-power punk bands like Skrewdriver and Rahowa—for "Racial Holy War"—and country-and-western lynch-mob nostalgists like the Coon Hunters). They knew and admired groups like the Ku Klux Klan and White Aryan Resistance but, as far as I could tell, had little or no contact with such organizations.

I did meet one young man at the Malones' who was clearly not from the valley. He said his name was Scott Larson (I doubted that), that he was nineteen (he seemed older), and that he came from Ventura, a town on the coast north of Los Angeles, where he belonged to a gang called the Ventura Avenue Skinhead Dogs. Scott was wound extremely tight; he could not sit still while we talked. He was barechested and prison-yard fit, with a swastika tattooed on his chest and SWP (for Supreme White Power) on one shoulder. He told me that all his older male relatives were Klansmen, and that he had just served eight months in jail, "for stabbing a nigger." Before that, he said, "My girlfriend got killed by four niggers. They knew my truck—it had a big swazi on the back—and we were coming home from a movie, just sitting at a light, and they just started capping. They were aiming at me, but they got her, twice. Now all them niggers is six feet under. But I'll be with her soon!"

Scott didn't think too much of the Antelope Valley. "This is all petty here," he said. "But I'm trying to get these guys organized. That's why I'm here."

Scott reckoned the American race war would be with us "in about ten years. And after that it'll be all segregated. Each city will be, like—Lancaster will be white, L.A. will be Mexican, New York and San Francisco will be niggers." In the meantime, he said, "We're against everything about blacks. We're against black gangs, black kids, everything. Fuck niggers!"

There were always kids at the Malones' house, and I noticed a number of them gathered around now, listening to Scott. "We're just like the Nazis," he went on, grinning intently. "We're the Storm Troopers, trying to get everybody out."

Trying to get who out of where? I asked.

"Trying to get all the niggers and Mexicans out of *existence*."

Among the kids who were usually around the Malones' were some who could not have been more than ten. I wondered if their parents had any notion what kinds of things their children were seeing and hearing there. Not all the older kids were skinheads—one regular, Tom Forney, who was perhaps seventeen, and who always seemed to be fiddling with an electric guitar, had a long red ponytail—and not all the NLR skinheads were willing to talk to me. Tim's older half-brother, Jeff, whose gang name was Demon, was polite to me but kept his distance. Angela Jackson, one of Mindy's tormentors, was often

around but elusive. I sometimes heard her mention Mindy—loudly refusing to use a stick of lip balm, say, that she thought Mindy might have touched. She once sat in the kitchen and told me a few things about herself—that she lived with her grandmother, that her father had died of a heroin overdose, that the Antelope Valley had used to be all white people but was now full of "loads"—but mostly she stayed in front of the TV with the Malones' little sister.

Angela, who was seventeen, struck me as intelligent but eerily immature. She was chunky, wore boys' clothes, and, whenever I was around, seemed to be wearing a strange, sweet, dissociated smile. The NLRs called her La La, and Tim Malone told me that even he had to defer to her passion for taking revenge on the defector Mindy. "I'd really just like to work with Mindy, and get her back this way," he said. "But my brothers and sisters think she should be punished, so I keep quiet."

The attractions of the Malones' house as a hangout were not mysterious. The illicit atmosphere was exciting—all the in-your-face racism, the edge of violence, the skinhead outrageousness, the sex-and-drugs-and-rock-and-roll. The house was like a child's idea of a pirate's den: scruffy and run by tattooed brigands. I even got the feeling sometimes that a rough, retrograde, neo-communal sort of social experiment was being conducted. A boy would be opening a can of beans to heat up on the stove. Someone would bellow, "Only bitches cook in this house!" The boy would drop the can, while onlookers guffawed. Angela would tear herself away from the TV and finish opening the can, declaring herself "a skin bitch, a Featherwood." Someone at the window would shout, "Check out this Fender!" And the others would rush to the window to study two young Latinos walking past the house carrying a guitar. The questions in the air were charged and clear: Can they be robbed? Right here and now? In front of this reporter guy from New York? What can we *not* get away with?

Antelope Valley officials tended to say that white-supremacist skinheads were less of a problem than they seemed. Deputy Chris Haymond, head of the sheriff's gang detail in the Antelope Valley, told me that, while there were perhaps a hundred neo-Nazi skinheads in the valley, they were dwarfed in number by the thousands of black and Latino gang members who had moved up from Los Angeles in recent years. Whites accounted for less than 10 percent of the valley's gang membership, Haymond said, and white-power gangs for far less than 10 percent of the gang-related felony crimes. A local anticrime panel, ordered by the county's Commission on Human Relations to report on racist skinhead activity after a series of violent incidents, agreed that the problem was insignificant, and blamed the press for "over-reporting certain events."

Latino and African American activists disputed this view. George Salas, a retired civil engineer and president of a coalition called Latinos for Social Justice,

told me story after story of racist harassment and assaults in the valley that had led to arrests not of the perpetrators but of the Latino complainants. "The white racist problem has been growing tremendously here," Salas said. "The police are simply in denial about it." Linda Thompson Taylor, president of the local chapter of the NAACP and a nine-year valley resident, told me, "This has become a frightening community." Pete MacEachern, a juvenile probation officer for the county, said, "I see lots of white-power kids, and the problem has been steadily growing for the last five to seven years." When he first got to the valley, MacEachern said, "I thought the Palmdale Peckerwoods were ornithologists, kids with monocles looking at birds." He knew better now.

The Sharps thought they knew why the police played down the racist skin-head problem—"because the cops are haters themselves." And the NLRs, while quick to complain of police harassment, also loved to tell stories about sympathetic officers. Tim Malone told me, "One deputy who arrested me for speed possession apologized to me later on. He said, 'I'm white-power, too, but there's a time to be racist and a time not to be racist. I need a job to support my family, and if I'm all racial I'll lose my job.'" Chris Runge said, "I've had police officers tell me they believe whites are superior. They say, 'I share your views, so stop running around out here on the street like these other people. I'm white and I'm doing my job: getting the unwanted off the streets.'" These tales may have been fantasies, of course, but the record of both active and passive sympathy for white supremacy in American law enforcement is long, and Southern California has contributed more than its share to this tradition.

Certainly some of the descriptions I heard of local white-power gangs from Antelope Valley officers were odd. One gang expert told me that the Peckerwoods were "kind of hippies revisited: free love and dope." Another sergeant at the sheriff's office told me that Sharps had been responsible for the stabbing of Todd Jordan, and when I asked about the NLRs—six of whom his office was then holding as suspects in the Jordan stabbing—he said, "I would say they have very strong beliefs as far as race is concerned." They also had strong screwdrivers. This sergeant, for what it was worth, more than doubled Deputy Haymond's estimate and said there were two hundred active Peckerwoods in the valley.

Billy Pricer, a former deputy and a preacher at a valley fundamentalist church, ran the only local gang prevention center. His clients were sent to him by the juvenile courts, and roughly half of them, he said, were white. "Our white-power counselees often have involvement with the occult," he told me. "They're the most frightening group we see. Virtually all were abused, sexually and otherwise, as kids, and they hate the world. They talk about 'the power.' They like the ability to intimidate, to control."

Beverly Louw, then the principal of Lancaster High School, reported similar experiences. "The most serious problems I ever have with kids are with

white supremacists. I'd take any black gang or Hispanic gang or Asian gang over white supremacists. They appear to have absolutely no conscience. Our strategies for working with gang kids just don't work with white-supremacist kids. They won't be part of a discussion group or counseling. It's almost like a religion. They're reading Nazi stuff. They have more material with which to pattern their hostility, their opinions, more references. They're into power. Some are very socialistic. They're not into possessions; they just want to control people's minds."

Whatever the felony crime figures for gangs of different hue, the white-supremacist aroma filled the valley with a special pungency. I found, and not only among kids, Christian Identity—an apocalyptic, racist, and virulently anti-Semitic doctrine that enjoys great sway among far-right militias today—was extensively promulgated in the Antelope Valley by a Klansman named Wesley Swift, who founded a still-influential sect called the Church of Jesus Christ Christian in Lancaster in the late 1940s. Crackpot populism and paranoia were still flourishing locally. At the time I started visiting, a group associated with the Freemen—the racist cult that came under FBI siege in Montana in 1996—was holding bimonthly seminars at the best hotel in Lancaster. The object of the seminars was, essentially, to teach people how to secede financially from the United States, and they were reportedly hugely popular, despite being quite expensive. Larry Grooms, the editor of the *Antelope Valley Press*, told me he thought the same desperation that drove adults to such seminars drove their children into white-power gangs.

The police might have been right—the Bloods and Crips might have been feuding, quietly, somewhere in the valley—but the gang tension you could not miss was between the Sharps and the boneheads. If you went to Brunswick Sands Bowl, a bowling alley on the Sierra Highway in Lancaster, the jacket that caught your eye, worn by a spike-haired teenage punk, was the one with a huge patch on the back snarling NAZI PUNKS FUCK OFF. Watching the boy in the jacket bowl with his friends, your major concern would be whether the boneheads might dare to attack him right there on Family Night. If you went to the only real teen hangout in Lancaster, a coffee shop called Hang 'n Java, which had a pool table, music, and an Internet connection, the tense conference taking place at the counter would be between the owner and a group of Sharps. When I went, I found her throwing them out. She supported them, she maintained, but she could not risk their business, because if the boneheads saw them in there, they'd come back at night and shoot out her windows. "And I can't pay the insurance," she said tightly.

Larry Grooms told me about a white boy who, in 1993, as a sophomore at Antelope Valley High, began hearing from racist skinheads that he had to break off his friendships with black and Latino kids. When he refused, they threatened him. Finally, a death threat was followed by a drive-by shooting

that missed. The boy's terrified parents went to the police about the shooting. The police did nothing. The parents reluctantly sent the boy to Texas to stay with an uncle. The boy finished the last two years of high school there, while his parents back in California cried themselves to sleep at night.

I seemed to run across variations of this grim tale wherever I went. Some of them made even less sense. After interviewing one school administrator, I asked in passing about his plans. He said that he was thinking of moving his family out of the Antelope Valley, that he was no longer comfortable there. I asked why, and he told me about a fearsome beating that one of his sons, a high school senior, had recently received as he was leaving a party. The attack had been totally unprovoked, he said. Then the administrator mentioned that his son had been a successful child actor on television, and that his assailants had been white supremacists. The attack suddenly didn't seem so inexplicable. The victim, I thought, had simply been too bright and shiny for the boneheads to let pass. But the part that had most disturbed his father was the police response. His son could identify several of his assailants, but the police were not interested. They didn't even want the names for future reference. I asked for the names. The administrator declined to give them to me. They had decided just to let the incident go. His son was graduating in a few weeks and would then go off to college. I mentioned the names of some of the white-power kids I knew. When I got to Jaxon Stines, the man's face colored. "That's one of them," he said quietly.

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## **JAMES ALAN FOX**

### **Biographical Sketch**

James Alan Fox is Dean of the College of Criminal Justice at Northeastern University in Boston. He has published twelve books, including *Mass Murder*, *Overkill*, and *Killer on Campus*. He has also published dozens of journal and magazine articles, and newspaper columns, primarily in the areas of juvenile crime, multiple murder, workplace violence, and capital punishment. As an authority on homicide, he appears regularly on television and radio programs around the country, and is frequently interviewed by the national press. He was also profiled in a two-part cover story in *USA Today*, entitled "The Dean of Death," and the June 1996 issue of *Scientific American*. Fox often gives lectures and expert testimony, including nine appearances before the United States Congress, White House meetings with President Clinton and Vice President Gore on youth violence, briefings to Attorney General Reno on trends in juvenile violence, and a presentation before Princess Anne of Great Britain on teen crime. He recently served on a Presidential advisory committee on school violence, and is currently a member of a U.S. Department of Education Panel on Safe, Disciplined, and Drug-Free Schools.

**Averting the Next Youth Crime Wave:  
A Briefing Paper for the Boys and Girls Clubs of America**

James Alan Fox  
Dean of the College of Criminal Justice  
Northeastern University

July 18, 1997

Based on countless media reports in newspapers from coast to coast, it would surely seem that we finally have a handle on the nation's crime problem. Just last month, the FBI released its preliminary crime statistics for 1996, revealing a continued five-year downturn in violent crime, including a double digit drop--fully 11 percent--in the number of homicides. Though recent trends are encouraging, at least superficially, there is little time to celebrate these successes. It is questionable that today's improving crime picture will persist. Rather, this may be the eye of the crime storm.

While many police officials can legitimately feel gratified about the arrested crime rate--which is partially a result of increased penetration of the community policing paradigm, there is more to the "Great Nineties Crime Drop" story. Hidden beneath the reduction drop in homicide and other violent crimes is a surging rate of mayhem among teenagers.

When releasing its annual tabulations of crime statistics last fall, the FBI noted that the U.S. homicide rate for 1995--slightly more than 8 murders per 100,000 population--was virtually identical to that for 1985. This hardly means, however, that nothing changed over the years between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s.

There are actually two crime trends ongoing in America--one for the young and one for the mature, which have been moving in opposite directions and balancing off in the aggregate. From 1985 to 1995, the rate of killing committed by adults, ages 25 and over, plummeted 22 percent, as the babyboomers matured into their middle-aged years. At the same time, however, the homicide rate by young adults, ages 18-24, jumped 71 percent. Even more tragic is that, like never before, murder and other serious crimes are reaching down to much younger groups. Between 1985 and 1995, the rate of bloodshed at the hands of teens, ages 14-17, increased a tragic 141 percent.

Over the past few years, of course, there has been considerable attention from journalists and criminologists alike given to the problem of alienated minority youth, especially black males. Indeed, black males, ages 14-24, constitute just 1.2

percent of the U.S. population, but represent 18 percent of the victims of homicide and just over 30 percent of the perpetrators. Although race and racism may be part of the problem, the concern is far more expansive. While the rate of murder by young black males has increased 164 percent over the past ten years, it has also risen 115 percent among their white counterparts.

Therefore, while the overall U.S. homicide rate has fallen in recent years, the rate of youth homicide continues to surge. In the overall crime mix, the sharp decline in crime among the large adult population has eclipsed the soaring crime rate among the relatively small population of teens. In addition, trends in age-specific violent arrest rates for homicide, rape, robbery and aggravated assault combined support the patterns found in homicide statistics. Teenagers now exceed young adults in their absolute rate of arrest for violent crime overall.

The causes of the rise in youth violence since the mid-1980s reach, of course, well-beyond demographics. There have been tremendous changes in the social context of crime over the past decade, which explain why this generation of youth is more violent than others before it. Our youngsters have more dangerous drugs in their bodies, more deadly weapons in their hands and a seemingly more casual attitude about violence.

The introduction of crack cocaine to the streets of American cities in the mid-1980s had a doubly deadly impact on the problem of youth crime. Not only has the pharmacological effects of crack cocaine wasted the lives of many of nation's youth, but the emerging crack market recruited large numbers of willing, money-hungry youngsters into this particularly competitive and violent drug trade.

A close examination of the most recent crime statistics does, of course, indicate an improved situation, even in terms of youth crime. The rate of violent crime arrests among teenagers actually dropped 4 percent in 1995 over 1994, and final 1996 statistics to be released in the fall may reflect continued improvement. Despite the encouraging turnaround, the recent dip in teen violence, which follows years of precipitous growth, is hardly reason to suggest the problem is resolved. If anything, it appears that the rate of youth violence has plateaued, but at a level that is much higher than a decade ago.

It remains clear that too many teenagers in this country, particularly those in urban areas, are plagued with idleness and even hopelessness. A growing number of teens and preteens see few feasible or attractive alternatives to violence, drug use and gang membership. For them, the American Dream is a nightmare: There may be little to live for and to strive for, but plenty to die for and even to kill for.

The problem of kids with guns cannot be overstated in view of recent trends in gun-related killings among youth. Since the mid-1980s, the number of gun-homicides--particularly with handguns--perpetrated by juveniles has quadrupled, while the number of juvenile homicides involving all other weapons combined--knives, clubs, fists, and so forth--has remained virtually constant. It has long been true that teenagers are impulsive, impatient, and imprudent. Adding guns to the mix--partly brought about by the crack wars of the 1980s, has created the volatile situation that we find today. Although teenagers may be untrained in using firearms, they are more willing to pull the trigger over seemingly trivial matters--a leather jacket, a pair of sneakers, a challenging glance, or no reason at all.

While the negative socializing forces of drugs, guns, gangs and even the media have become more threatening, the positive socializing forces of family, school, religion and neighborhood have grown relatively weak and ineffective. Increasingly, children are being raised in homes disrupted by divorce or economic stress; too many children emerge undersocialized and undersupervised.

At this juncture, as many as 57% of children in America do not have full-time parental supervision, either living with a single parent who works full-time or in a two-parent household with both parents working full-time. Among particularly young children, boys and girls under the age of seven, the lack of full-time parental supervision stands as high as 49 percent. While some children do enjoy suitable, substitute supervision provided by friends and relatives or in day-care, far too many do not.

It would be unfair to blame parents, and single mothers in particular, for the increased problem of unruly and unsupervised youth. While some parents are terribly ill-prepared for the task of raising children, most parents are well-meaning and would like to have a greater role in their children's lives. However, many families lack the support to control and guide their children. Indeed, the recent spread of parental responsibility laws will do little, if anything, to solve the problem. We should assist parents, not assail them.

The problem of unsupervised youth does not end with the breakdown of the traditional family. Because of deep funding cuts in support programs for youth--from after-school care to summertime recreation, from mentoring to education--as a society, we are missing the fleeting opportunity to compensate for the diminished role of the family. As a consequence, children spend too little time engaged in structured activity with positive role models, and too much time "hanging out" or watching a few savage killings on television. Bored and idle, our children have just

too much time on their hands, too much time to kill—perhaps literally. This concern is clearly reflected in the time-of-day patterns of juvenile violence. The prime-time for juvenile crime is during the after-school hours, from 3 PM to 7 PM, and not after midnight when curfew laws might be contemplated.

As if the situation with youth violence was not bad enough already, future demographics are expected to make matters worse. As a result of the so-called “baby boomerang,” there are now 39 million children in this country under the age of ten, more young children than at any time since the 1950s when the original baby-boomers were in grade school. This newest group of youngsters will soon reach their adolescence.

By the year 2005, the number of teens, ages 14-17, will swell by over 15%, with an even larger increase among Blacks and Latinos. Given the difficult conditions in which many of these youngsters grow up—with inferior schools and violence-torn neighborhoods, many more teenagers will be at-risk in the years ahead. Sadly, the number of teenage offenders has grown in recent years, even as the population of teenagers has contracted. But the teen population has bottomed out and is now on the upswing.

Much about the future remains in doubt. No one can exactly say just how many police officers will be patrolling our streets in the year 2005. No one can say how many new prison beds we'll have eight years from now. We don't even know which political party will control Congress then. But we do know very well how many 15- and 16-year-olds we'll have in 2005—just about the same number of seven- and eight-year olds we have today. Even if current rates of offending remain unchanged or even drop a bit more, the number of teens who commit murder and other violent crimes will increase because of the demographic turnaround in the population at-risk.

Responding to the worrisome projections on future levels of youth crime, Attorney General Janet Reno remarked last December that, “Demographics do not have to be destiny,” and she is absolutely correct. It is far from certain that the level of youth violence will once again rise. What is certain, however, is that we will have far more kids at-risk. Whether the next generation of teenagers is any more or less violent their predecessors largely rests on our shoulders and depends on our willingness to invest in kids.

The hopeful news is that there is still time to stem the tide—to prevent the next wave of youth crime. But we must act now—by reinvesting in schools, recreation, job training, support for families, and mentoring. We must act now while

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this baby-boomerang generation is still young and impressionable, and will be impressed with what a teacher, a preacher, or some other authority figure has to say. If we wait until these children reach their teenage years and the next crime wave is upon us, it may be too late to do much about it. Without a doubt, it is far easier and considerably less expensive to build the child than to rebuild the teen. It is better to "prehabilitate," than to need to rehabilitate.

The good news is that our leaders in Congress have responded aggressively to the growing crisis, holding special hearings in both the House and the Senate concerning the problem of youth violence and fashioning legislation in the form of new and expansive juvenile crime bills. The sad news is that Congress is responding in predictable but ineffective ways, overwhelmingly favoring punishment over prevention. The latest drafts of both the House and the Senate juvenile crime bills feature adult prosecutions for juvenile violent offenders.

No one can debate, of course, the need to punish juvenile offenders adequately. Youth crime must carry appropriate sanctions. Yet the need to prevent juvenile crime and to invest in kids is equally real. Does it take a whole village or just a set of parents to raise a child? Who can say for sure? But if no one takes responsibility, then we all suffer.

The irony of the pending legislation is that it anticipates, but does not prevent, the juvenile crime storm that may lie ahead. Given the expected growth in the population of teenagers, given the worsening conditions in which children are being raised, given the breakdown of all of our institutions as well as of our cultural norms, given our wholesale disinvestment in youth, we face the prospect of a future wave of juvenile violence that could make the 1990s look like the good old days. Despite Congress's good intentions, adult penalties for juvenile offenders will fail to deter increasing numbers of young predators who don't think twice, or even once, about the consequences of their acts, for themselves, much less for their victims.

In the 1989 film *Batman*, the Joker, played by Jack Nicholson, repeatedly warned his rivals, "Think about the future." Well, if we don't think about the future and aggressively prepare for it now, then the joke will be on us.

**Lessons from the Schoolyard**  
James Alan Fox, Northeastern University

This past week, astonishingly, it happened twice. On Tuesday, a Fayetteville, Tennessee high school senior shot and killed a classmate over a romantic rivalry. Then on Thursday, a 15-year-old freshman from Springfield, Oregon, armed with a .22 caliber semiautomatic rifle, turned his high school cafeteria into a battlefield, after having been suspended a day earlier for bringing a gun to school.

The timing of this year's contagion of schoolyard homicide, which has claimed the lives of fourteen students and two teachers, may seem ironic, at least on the surface. Serious violence among teenagers has actually dropped nationally since 1993. Many American cities have boasted of significant declines in their murder rates—including juvenile killings, yet concern over armed and alienated adolescents understandably remains high. The rate of killings by teenagers in 1996, for example, was twice as high as in 1985 before the spread of crack and guns, particularly in major U.S. cities, created rampant disorder in the streets.

The lesson to recent events, therefore, is that we have a very long way to go before we can claim victory over youth violence. Two young boys from Jonesboro may have come out of the woods to ambush their middle school classmates, but as a society, we are hardly out of the woods in resolving the problem of murder and mayhem among children.

A closer examination of crime trends reveals that recent declines are predominantly among minority youth in large urban centers—cities such as New York, Boston and Chicago which have directed intensive enforcement efforts against street gangs and illegal guns. Even while rates of urban youth violence are on a downward trend, suburban and rural areas are seeing signs of increasing gang affiliation and identification in their communities.

The acute conditions associated with the fiercely competitive crack market of the late 1980s have proven to be short-term. Yet the more long-term and chronic problems associated with poorly supervised and alienated youth having access to deadly weapons and violent entertainment are still with us. The shootings in Jonesboro and Edinboro, among other places, may be unusual and extreme, but they are the tip of a much larger iceberg of anti-social behavior increasingly exhibited by children.

The latest outbreak of schoolyard violence has heightened concern over kids with firearms. In fact, the entire growth in teen murder has been with guns, rather than knives, clubs or fists. It has long been true that teenagers are often impulsive, impatient, and imprudent, but now they are better armed. A greater emphasis on firearm restrictions for juveniles, gun tracing and confiscation, as well as firearms safety should help to reduce youth access to deadly weapons.

Part of the seemingly casual attitude toward violence exhibited by many youngsters can be linked to a popular culture saturated with violent messages in which revenge is a dominant theme. While the issue of television and film violence has been widely discussed, these passive forms of entertainment are tame compared with the more active participation provided by video and computer games. Rather than just sit on the livingroom couch and witness a bloodbath on the tube, a child can cybernetically kill on demand--and learn to enjoy it--with a variety of killing games on the market. It is make believe, of course, but with multimedia and advanced graphics, the line between virtual reality and stark reality can become rather thin.

The fundamental problem, however, is not so much what our kids are watching, but who is watching our kids. Guns, gangs, and glorified violence have filled the void left by the withdrawal of adults from the lives and activities of children. Negative social and cultural forces have become more threatening precisely because the positive socializing forces of family, school, religion and neighborhood have grown weaker.

It would, of course, be terribly unfair to place full blame on parents for the increased problem of unruly and unsupervised youth. While some parents are terribly ill-prepared or unmotivated for the important task of raising children, most parents are well-meaning and would like to have a greater role in their children's lives. Many families lack the support to control and guide their children. In some neighborhoods, peer and gang influences can overpower the best efforts of dedicated parents. We should assist parents, not assail them.

Children spend too little time engaged in structured activities with positive role models, and too much time "hanging out" or watching a few savage killings on television. Bored and idle, they have just too much time on their hands--too much time to kill. This concern is clearly reflected in the time-of-day patterns of juvenile violence. The prime-time for juvenile crime begins after the school bell rings, from 2 PM to 8 PM, when nearly half of juvenile violent crime occurs. The push to restore after-school programs, expand or restructure the school day, and other strategies for engaging children in a positive way should reduce the problem of excessive idle time.

It is not an incidental fact that the recent shootings occurred at schools, rather than at some other location. Notwithstanding research findings suggesting that most schools do not experience serious forms of violence, schooltime itself can present certain issues and risks. Not only do children congregate in large numbers while at school, thereby creating occasions for conflict, but the school setting can sometimes breed feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, fear, hostility, rejection, and boredom. For some vengeful or alienated children, school can represent an ideal place, logistically and symbolically, for getting even or settling a score. School personnel, in turn, are in an ideal position to observe and respond to troubled children in ways far more creative than suspension.

Recent school shootings have also rekindled public debate over juvenile justice. Citizens everywhere are particularly outraged over the prospect that the alleged shooters in Jonesboro could be released from custody as early as their 18th birthdays.

No one can debate, of course, the need to punish juvenile offenders adequately. At the same time, we must fully consider the special nature of youthful offending--even murder. Teenagers may look like adults, dress like adults, act like adults, even shoot like adults, but they reason like children. Making the juvenile justice system more just is one thing, but diminishing it is quite another. Expanding juvenile penalties and blending juvenile and adult sanctions for the most serious offenders will go a long way to assuage public concern without entirely sacrificing young lives that could be salvaged.

It is also critical that legislative responses to juvenile crime maintain a balance between punishment and prevention. Without sufficient attention to prevention, future demographics--specifically, the projected increase in the teenage population--could make matters worse. But we must act now--by reinvesting in schools, recreation, and other programs for youth. It is far easier and considerably less expensive to build the child than to rebuild the teen. It is better to "prehabilitate," than to need to rehabilitate.

Even with our desire to "do something" programmatically or legislatively in response to recent schoolyard tragedies, some perspective on the level of risk is sorely needed. More children are killed or maimed each year in automobile and bicycle accidents while traveling between home and school than are murdered or shot by an armed classmate. Parents concerned about their youngsters' safety would be

most advised, therefore, to focus on seat belts and bicycle helmets than on metal detectors at the school door.

At the same time, we can learn much about more ordinary forms of juvenile violence by focusing on extraordinary cases such as those in Edinboro, Jonesboro, West Paducah and Pearl. We should use these rare though devastating episodes to inform and motivate public and private-sector responses to the needs of children. By doing so, we might not necessarily prevent another Jonesboro, but we would certainly improve the lives and well-being of lots of children in the process.

*James Alan Fox is dean of the College of Criminal Justice at Northeastern University and member of a Presidential advisory committee on school violence.*

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# Sylvia Ann Hewlett

## Biography

Sylvia Ann Hewlett was born in Pyle, a mining village in South Wales. She is the second of six daughters. Her father was a teacher, and her mother a homemaker. She remembers her childhood as rich in parental attention but threadbare in other respects. In her family home there were musical instruments and sheet music, but no telephone, television or refrigerator, and the children tripled-up, three to a bedroom. Despite straightened circumstances, she and her sisters were encouraged to think big, and, above all else, get themselves an education. Before it was fashionable, Hewlett's father had feminist instincts. As Nessa Rapoport described in a profile for *Publishers Weekly*, at age 13 he took Hewlett to visit Cambridge University—her first trip outside of Wales—and told her "You can go someplace like this if you work hard." For a teenager with the wrong accent from the wrong side of the tracks, this was heady—and inspiring—stuff.

Hewlett did indeed attend Cambridge University, setting a record: she was the first student from her secondary school ever to gain admission to that institution. After graduating from Cambridge, she won a Kennedy Scholarship to Harvard University and went on to complete her Ph.D. in Economics in 1973. Between 1974 and 1981 Hewlett was Assistant Professor of Economics at Barnard College, Columbia University, and for six years in the 1980s she was Executive Director of the **Economic Policy Council**, a New York based labor-management think tank chaired by Robert O. Anderson (CEO, Atlantic Richfield), and Doug Fraser (President, United Auto Workers).

Since 1987 Hewlett has devoted her time to writing and political advocacy. Her 1986 book, *A Lesser Life* (William Morrow/Warner Books), was reviewed and written about in 60-odd newspapers and journals including the *New York Times*, the *New York Review of Books*, *Family Circle* and *People* magazine. It was an alternate selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club, was translated into several languages, and film rights were bought by CBS. Her 1991 book, *When the Bough Breaks* (Basic Books/HarperCollins), was equally well-received, winning three national awards including a Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Book Prize. Her forthcoming book, *The War Against Parents*, co-written with Cornel West, is to be the lead title of Houghton Mifflin in the spring of 1998.

Hewlett has written or edited seven books and numerous articles including: "Inflation and Inequality," *Journal of Economic Issues*, (June 1977), "Coping with Illegal Immigrants," *Foreign Affairs*, (Winter 1981/82), "Next Challenge: Support for Motherhood?" (*New York Times*, Op-Ed, June 17, 1986), "Making Allowances," (*New Republic*, October 6, 1986), "How Our Laws Hurt Working Mothers and their Families," (*Family Circle*, October 21, 1986), "Family Support Policy? Consult the Bottom Line," (*Management Review*, January 1989), "Running Hard Just to Keep Up" (*Time*, October 29, 1990), "The Boundaries of Business" (*Harvard Business Review*, July-August 1991), "Price of Motherhood," (*Financial Times*, October 26, 1991), "How to Invest in Our Children," (*Parenting*, March 1992) and "It's Time We Put Children First," (*Parade*, July 17, 1994).

Over the last seven years, Hewlett has lectured in 42 states to groups as diverse as the National Governors Association, Corning Glass, the Unitarian Universalist Association and the Teamsters Union. She has appeared on numerous T.V. and radio shows including *Oprah Winfrey*, *Donohue*, *Face the Nation*, *the Today Show*, *Good Morning America* and *All Things Considered*. She has served as a consultant to several corporations and to UNICEF. Hewlett is a member of PEN, the Council on Foreign Relations and the Century Association.

In 1993 Hewlett founded the **National Parenting Association**, a non-profit membership organization dedicated to building a nationwide parents' movement across race and class, that will put the needs of America's 62 million mothers and fathers at the top of the national agenda. She is co-chair, along with Cornel West, of the NPA's **Task Force on Parent Empowerment**.

Sylvia Ann Hewlett is married to Richard Weinert and together they have five children: Shira (25), Lisa (19), David (17) and Adam (13) and Emma (6 months). She lives in New York City with her family and in her own life strives to put into practice the values that underlie her professional endeavors.

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Faculty Biography for: *Cornel West*

**Title:** Professor of Afro-American Studies (Faculty of Arts and Sciences) and Professor of the Philosophy of Religion (Harvard Divinity School)

**Interests:** Black critical thought; cultural criticism; social theory; modern and post-modern philosophy and literature, and the future of American youth.

Professor West's philosophy is not an abstract discipline, but rather a "polemical weapon that attempts to transform linguistic, social, cultural and political tradition to increase the scope of individual development and democratic actions." His work--influenced by traditions as diverse as the Baptist Church, American transcendentalism and literature, the Black Panthers, and European philosophy--seeks to revive the best of liberalism, populism and democratic socialism.

Professor West is the author of thirteen books including the two-volume *Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism* (Common Courage Press, 1993); *Breaking Bread* (South End Press, 1991); *Race Matters* (Beacon Press, 1993); *Keeping Faith* (Routledge, 1993); *Jews and Blacks: Let the Healing Begin* (Putnam Books, 1995), co-authored with Michael Lerner; and *Restoring Hope: Conversations on the Future of Black America* (Beacon Press, 1997). Besides his numerous publications, Professor West is a well-respected and highly popular lecturer; his speaking style, formed by his roots in the Baptist Church, provides a blend of drama, knowledge, and inspiration.

Professor West earned his M.A. and Ph.D. from Princeton University and his B.A. *magna cum laude* from Harvard University. He served as Professor of Religion and Director of the Afro-American Studies Department at Princeton before joining the Harvard faculty in 1994.



# The War Against Parents



What We Can Do for America's Beleaguered Moms and Dads

Sylvia Ann Hewlett  
and Cornel West

me on. The young man listened closely and then, in obvious pain, said, "Here's the score—I'm in this world by myself. My mother's strung out and tuned out. I have brothers, but I don't know them, and as for my father, where he is nobody knows. I sure have never seen him."

I remember feeling totally helpless. I had no recipe to heal these open wounds. The only thing I could think of doing was to bow before the enormity of his misery, kiss the young brother's hand, and mumble some words of empathy. "My God, I can't imagine—it's beyond my experience. You've got things you can teach me—you've been somewhere I've never been. I've read a ton of books on alienation, but I cannot grasp what you are living . . . I cannot understand what it must be like to have never been loved." I then simply told him to stay strong and don't forget to pray. ♡

This bleak and bitter encounter in Newark reflects the agony of a child who was born without a skin, without the tender love of an attentive parent. For this young man, the parent-child bond—the relationship that transmits self-love and the capacity to love others—had never developed, and the consequences were quite deadly.

### A World Upside Down

This young man is not alone. In modern America, across race, gender, and class, millions of children are in terrible trouble. Consider the following facts:

- The homicide rate for children aged fourteen to seventeen has risen 172 percent since 1985.
- One fifth (20.5 percent) of all children are growing up in poverty—a 36 percent increase since 1970.
- The number of homeless children has tripled since the late 1980s.
- The use of illicit drugs among high school seniors is up 44 percent since 1992.
- SAT scores have slipped 27 points since the early 1970s.
- The rate of suicide among black teenagers has more than tripled since 1980.
- Obesity among children aged twelve to seventeen has doubled since 1970.<sup>26</sup>

Some of these statistics (poverty, homelessness) describe the pain of disadvantaged kids; others (obesity, SAT scores) describe the anguish of middle-class kids. Problems triggered by divorce, teen pregnancy, school failure, and substance abuse are no longer confined to the ghetto. They reach deep into the middle class; they belong to "us" as well as to "them." Out-of-control children aren't always other people's kids. They come in all sizes, shapes, and colors, and from affluent neighborhoods as well as down-at-heel city 'hoods. Kids who do bad things have highly educated parents as well as barely literate ones. A recent Carnegie Corporation report describes the depth and reach of our child-related problems: "Nearly half of American adolescents are at high or moderate risk of seriously damaging their life chances. The damage may be near term and vivid, or it may be delayed, like a time bomb set in youth."<sup>27</sup>

The enormous surge in youth violence is perhaps the most cruel—and most costly—manifestation of our inability to nurture our young. Children are now responsible for a staggering 20 million crimes a year. Between 1985 and 1994, among those aged fourteen to seventeen, arrests for murder increased by 172 percent, and for other violent crimes (rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) by 46 percent. And while violent crime among teenagers has been escalating, comparable crime rates for adults have been falling quite rapidly: between 1990 and 1994, homicide rates among adults aged twenty-five and older declined 18 percent.<sup>28</sup> There are now two crime trends in America, one for adults and one for children, and they are moving in opposite directions. One poorly understood fact is the hefty price tag attached to juvenile crime, as society ends up paying for a lifetime spent in and out of jail. A recent study estimates the cost to taxpayers of one violent young person at \$1.5 million.<sup>29</sup>

In a day and age when we associate crime with young black men, it is important to stress that increases in juvenile crime apply across the board, in "all races, social classes, and lifestyles." Although young black males are four to five times more likely to be arrested for violent crime than white youths of the same age, the increase in the rate of arrests is far higher for white youths than for black: a 44 percent increase compared to a 19 percent increase between 1988 and 1993.<sup>30</sup>

Daphne Abdela, age fifteen, moved in a private school underworld in New York City where belonging means playing thug, getting wasted, and committing crimes. In her case, these crimes might well have included murder. In June 1997, she and her buddy Chris Vasquez, also fifteen, were arraigned in connection with the stabbing death of a forty-four-year-old real estate agent named Michael McMorrow. The killing occurred in the vicinity of the stately apartment building on Central Park West where Daphne lived. Daphne reportedly told the police that after the murder she and Chris mutilated the body, cutting off the dead man's nose and almost severing a hand in an attempt to hide his identity. Then they tried to sink McMorrow's 220-pound frame in the park's lake, gutting it first, Daphne told police, "because he was a fatty."

Daphne cannot claim to be black, brown, or disadvantaged. She is a highly privileged youngster, even by the standards of Manhattan. Before her arrest she lived in a \$3 million home and was driven to school by the family chauffeur.<sup>31</sup>

When we look into the future, the picture becomes bleaker still. Demographic trends indicate that when it comes to juvenile crime, the worst may be yet to come. A "baby boomlet" in the late 1980s and early 1990s means that there are now 40 million children under age ten in the United States. We can therefore expect the adolescent population to swell by a quarter over the next decade. Since so many of these children are growing up below the poverty line in fragmented families, there is every reason to expect a new surge in juvenile crime.

If thousands of American youngsters are being killed or injured at the hands of their peers, thousands more are lost in their own nightmares. These are the children who self-destruct, seeing suicide as their only way out. Their numbers too are soaring. Between 1960 and 1994, the suicide rate among teens nearly tripled, making suicide the third leading cause of death for young people. Black children and very young children seem to be at risk in new and dreadful ways: the suicide rate among black males aged ten to fourteen went up a staggering 240 percent between 1980 and 1995.<sup>32</sup>

A particularly shameful fact is that the United States has the highest percentage of children living in poverty of any rich nation: 20.5 percent, a figure that represents a 36 percent increase since

1970 and compares with 9 percent in Canada, 4 percent in Germany, and 2 percent in Japan.<sup>33</sup> Children quite simply have not shared in America's prosperity in recent years. Very young children are particularly badly off: for those under six years of age, the poverty rate is 23 percent, which means that over 5 million preschoolers now live below the poverty line.<sup>34</sup> Bad as these figures are, they are expected to get considerably worse as the effects of welfare reform kick in. The Urban Institute predicts that an additional 1.1 million children will have slithered into poverty in 1997 alone. Black and Hispanic children are disproportionately represented in the poor population—47 percent of black children and 34 percent of Latino children are poor—but in recent years the poverty rate has grown twice as fast among whites as among blacks. Significantly, in 1996, 69 percent of poor children lived in families where at least one adult was at work—up from 61 percent in 1993.<sup>35</sup> In the late 1990s, getting a job does not necessarily pull a family out of poverty.

Substance abuse is also on the increase among teens. The use of illegal drugs by adolescents increased significantly between 1992 and 1995. This represents a reversal of earlier downward trends. In 1996 the government reported troubling increases in drug use in all age groups. For example, between 1992 and 1995 the use of marijuana by high school seniors increased by 63 percent, while the use of inhalants such as glues, aerosols, and solvents by eighth-graders increased 28 percent.<sup>36</sup>

On the educational front the news is equally grim, since underachievement and failure continue to dog the steps of American youngsters. Across the nation, combined average Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores have fallen significantly since 1972, despite a recent recentering exercise, which had the effect of raising nominal scores. Data collected by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which has been testing national samples of students aged nine, thirteen, and seventeen each year since 1969, show "few indications of positive trends" in reading and writing.<sup>37</sup> American children are also at or near the bottom in most international surveys measuring educational achievement, coming in seventh out of ten countries in physics and tenth—dead last—in average mathematics proficiency.

Another disturbing fact is that only 69.7 percent of American

students who enter ninth grade earn a high school diploma four years later, a figure that has slipped seven percentage points since 1970.<sup>38</sup> Most policymakers see this as a national disgrace in an age where other advanced nations have near universal secondary school education. In Japan, for example, 90 percent of seventeen-year-olds graduate from high school.

Not only is a large proportion of American youth growing up badly educated and ill prepared for the world of work, but a significant number are further handicapped by increasingly serious emotional problems. According to the Carnegie Corporation, today's youngsters are having trouble coping with stresses in their lives: "Many are depressed, and about a third of adolescents report they have contemplated suicide."<sup>39</sup> Since 1971, the number of adolescents admitted to private psychiatric hospitals has increased fifteenfold. Experts in the field explain this alarming trend by pointing to a constellation of pressures ranging from long workdays to divorce to absent fathers, which have left many parents too thinly stretched to provide consistent support for their children. The pressures on single mothers are particularly severe. Indeed, in many instances the stress is so great that parenting breaks down and becomes inconsistent and erratically punitive.

One thing seems clear enough from this brief survey: not only are American children failing to thrive; in several critical respects, their condition and life circumstances are steadily deteriorating. Overall, they lead more dangerous and more poverty-stricken lives than children did thirty, twenty, or even five years ago. They are also less likely to succeed in school and more likely to experiment with drugs, and many are depressed and seriously self-destructive. It is particularly distressing to realize that children in America are at much greater risk than children elsewhere in the advanced industrial world. Although the United States ranks second worldwide in per capita income, this country does not even make it into the top ten on any significant indicator of child welfare.

### Link to Parents

Parental love and parental attention are enormously powerful in determining what happens to a child. Genetic endowment may

determine eye color and a third to a half of raw intelligence, but whether a child acquires discipline and self-esteem and becomes a well-adjusted, productive person is largely a function of parental input and how well both parent and child are supported by the wider community.<sup>40</sup>

Unfortunately, there is much less of this precious parenting energy than there used to be. The last three decades have seen a sharp decline in the amount of time parents spend caring for their children. Stanford University economist Victor Fuchs has shown that the amount of parental time available to children fell considerably in the 1970s and 1980s; white children lost ten hours a week of parental time, while black children lost twelve hours.<sup>41</sup> Using a more recent data set, economist Edward Wolff demonstrated that over a thirty-year time span, parental time has declined 13 percent.<sup>42</sup> The time parents have available for their children has been squeezed by the rapid shift of mothers into the paid labor force, by escalating divorce rates and the subsequent abandonment of children by their fathers, and by an increase in the number of hours required on the job. The average worker is now at work 163 hours a year more than in 1969, which adds up to an extra month of work annually.<sup>43</sup>

The increasing inability of adults to devote significant time to children has left millions of youngsters fending for themselves, coping more or less badly with the difficult business of growing up in the nineties. True, some children continue to be raised in supportive communities by thoughtful, attentive parents, but this is not the overall drift of society. Contemporary America is populated by overworked, stressed-out parents who are increasingly unable to be there for their children. There is now a ton of literature telling parents how to parent. Walk into any bookstore and you will encounter shelf upon shelf of advice manuals detailing the skills and techniques of parenting. However, despite the claims of the experts, there is no one recipe for raising children, no magic bullet that guarantees a well-developed child. In the wise words of the Harvard psychologist Jerome Kagan, precisely how a parent feeds an infant or disciplines a teenager is less important than "the melody those actions comprise."<sup>44</sup> The feelings that parents bring to the role—their pleasure in parenting, their respect for the child—are extremely important. But most important is ensuring adequate time for the role. Melodies cannot work their magic unless they are

given time and space. If a divorced father hasn't seen his son in six weeks or if a mother is working a sixteen-hour day, it's almost impossible to conjure up the sustained, steadfast attention that is the stuff of good parenting. Child-raising is not some mysterious process; adults have been engaged in it since the beginning of time, long before we had experts or manuals. At the heart of the matter is time, huge amounts of it, freely given. Whatever the child-raising technique, a child simply does better with loving, committed, long-term attention from both mom and dad.

A weight of evidence now demonstrates ominous links between absentee parents and an entire range of behavioral and emotional problems in children. A study that surveyed 5,000 eighth-grade students in the San Diego and Los Angeles areas found that the more hours children were left by themselves after school, the greater the risk of substance abuse was. In fact, home-alone children as a group were twice as likely to drink alcohol and take drugs as children who were supervised by a parent or another adult family member after school. The study found that this increased risk of substance abuse held true regardless of the child's sex, race, or economic status.<sup>45</sup>

In a similar vein, a recent survey of 90,000 teenagers—the largest and most comprehensive study ever conducted on adolescent behavior—found that youngsters are less likely to engage in suicidal behavior, become violent, or use drugs if they are closely connected to their parents.<sup>46</sup> This study found that the mere physical presence of a parent in the home after school, at dinner, and at bedtime significantly reduces the incidence of risky behavior among teenagers, a finding reinforced by recent research at the Harvard School of Public Health. Jody Heymann and Alison Earle show that parental evening work has extremely negative effects on the home environment and on children's cognitive and emotional development.

A 1997 report prepared for the Department of Justice demonstrates the scope of these negative effects. According to FBI data, the peak hours for violent juvenile crime are now 3 P.M. to 8 P.M.<sup>47</sup> This can be attributed to a huge drop-off in the number of parents available to supervise their children after school. In 1970, 57 percent of school-age children had at least one parent at home on a full-time basis; by 1995, this figure had fallen to 29 percent.<sup>48</sup> Experts estimate that somewhere between 5 and 7 million latchkey children go home to an empty house after school and that fully a

third of all twelve-year-olds are regularly left to fend for themselves while their parents are at work.<sup>49</sup> These children are at significantly greater risk of truancy, school failure, substance abuse, and violent behavior than children who have a parent at home. Children, especially adolescents, crave excitement, and if they are not supervised by parents or involved in some organized activity, they are likely to become involved in something dangerous to themselves or others.

Besides insulating a child from risk and warding off potential harm, parents make a large contribution to a child's success in school. Twenty years ago, Chicago sociologist James S. Coleman demonstrated that parental involvement mattered far more in determining student achievement than any attribute of the formal education system. Across a wide range of subject areas, in literature, science, and reading, Coleman estimated that the parent was almost twice as powerful as the school in determining achievement at age fourteen.<sup>50</sup> The importance of parent involvement in the educational process has been further confirmed by psychologist Lawrence Steinberg, who recently completed a six-year study of 20,000 teenagers and their families in nine different communities. Steinberg argues convincingly that in the 1990s, underachievement and failure in American schools "owes more to conditions in the home than to what takes place within school walls." One out of every three parents is "seriously disengaged" from his or her adolescent's education, and this is the primary reason why so many American students perform below their potential—and below students in other rich countries.<sup>51</sup>

In his research, Coleman revealed that good parenting not only improves academic performance, but is also essential to the development of human capital—that combination of attributes (skills, knowledge, work habits, and motivation) that make for a competent young person. For at least a generation economists and business leaders have wrung their hands over the sorry state of America's human capital, and they have good reason to be concerned. More than a quarter of all eighteen-year-olds fail to complete high school, and many of these youngsters lack the basic skills and discipline necessary to hold down the simplest job. According to one survey, fewer than half of all American youngsters can determine the correct change after purchasing a hamburger and a Coke at McDonald's. This distressing fact tells us something about the

inadequacy of our educational system, but it tells us even more about the inability of many parents to come through for their children.

In addition, a great deal of recent scholarly attention has been given to the depletion of our social capital—that store of trust, connectedness, and engagement in community life. Robert Putnam, Francis Fukuyama, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Michael Sandel, among others, have expressed great concern that “the moral fabric of community is unraveling around us. From families and neighborhoods to schools, congregations, and trade unions, the institutions that traditionally provided people with moral anchors and a sense of belonging are under siege.”<sup>52</sup> These scholars have advanced a variety of reasons to explain why so many Americans are newly isolated, distrustful, and depoliticized, newly “bowling alone” rather than in leagues.<sup>53</sup> All kinds of culprits have been put forward, including television-watching and political scandal. But despite a noisy, high-profile debate, no one has gone upstream to the source of the problem—the huge erosion of the parental role. When parenting breaks down, the mechanism that transmits self-love is shattered, and this seriously compromises society’s ability to pass from one generation to the next the values of compassion and commitment to others, which are the essential raw material of community-building and citizenship.

Therefore, the erosion of the parental function has immense implications in both the public and the private sphere: it jeopardizes our society as well as our souls. When parenting breaks down, it is an unmitigated disaster for the individual child. But it is much more than that, for the altruistic energy of moms and dads contributes enormously to our store of human and social capital and thus conditions the strength of our economy and the vitality of our democracy.

So how do we turn this thing around? How do we somehow give new and self-conscious value to the art and practice of parenting? It is not a simple matter, this task of creating a public morality and a political culture that will support the heroic work of mothers and fathers. The obstacles are enormous.

On the left, we rub up against a fierce attachment to untrammelled lives. Over the last thirty years we grownups have gotten used to being extraordinarily free. We have cut ourselves loose

from most moral and religious constraints and acquired a new set of emotional and sexual liberties. Many of us revel in an unprecedented range of choice. In the spirit of Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*, we have tasted our new freedoms and find them "quite glorious."<sup>54</sup>

On the right, we rub up against a blind faith in markets and a deep distrust of state intervention. In recent years conservatives have badmouthed government so thoroughly that it has become extraordinarily difficult for anyone on the right to acknowledge that government is capable of doing any good—that it can be instrumental in providing indispensable social support and in creating a public morality that supports the sacrificial energy of parents. Conservatives seem light-years away from acknowledging that contemporary parents need enormous amounts of help—not grudging help, not marginal help, but big-time heavy lifting—if they are to conjure up the altruistic energies that allow children to thrive. In the manner of the fifties, this help should be directed to strengthening rather than displacing moms and dads.

We must also remember that the nuances of this project are critical. No progressive person wants family if "family" translates into oppressive husbands and abused wives. And no progressive person wants community if "community" translates into "black jelly beans" sticking "to the bottom of the bag."<sup>55</sup> Texaco, after all, developed an extremely strong and vital corporate culture, but this culture was also irredeemably ugly, contaminated by systematic discrimination against people of color. However, rejecting racism, patriarchy, and homophobia need not mean retreating to a version of the liberal project in which freedom is boiled down to the ability to function as a lone individual within a heavily competitive market society. Most grownups fail to flourish in such a thin universe, and children are seriously damaged. Unless a child is protected and cherished by the selfless energies of at least one loving adult who is uniquely committed to him or her, that young person will grow up without a skin, buffeted, bleeding, and scared.

This daunting and complex set of challenges boils down to one pivotal question: can we find the political will? Can we find the key that will unlock a new and potent source of activist energy? We are, after all, talking about radical change.

We think we have found the answer. As we explain in the final

section of this book, our solution involves putting mothers and fathers front and center on the national stage. By tapping into the latent strength of our democratic processes, we craft a parents' movement that will send America's 62 million parents to the polls. This will have the magical effect of tilting our entire political culture in a direction that supports and values adults raising children. By mobilizing behind a single agenda, which we call "A Parents' Bill of Rights," and by speaking with a single voice, moms and dads can transform both our public morality and our political culture to give new and massive support to the work they do. It is important to stress that parent power can be a powerful healing force in American society. The deep and desperate concerns of parents cross the usual divides of gender, race, and class and thus feed a common vision and seed a common ground in ways that are rare and precious in our centrifugal society.

As we embark on this extraordinary journey, let us appreciate the enormous weight of the task at hand. The project of giving new status and support to mothers and fathers has extraordinary potential because of the ways in which the parent-child bond is the most fundamental building block in human society. When this is hollowed out, the wellspring of care and commitment dries up, and this has a huge impact beyond the home: community life shrivels up, and so does our democracy. America's stock of social and human capital becomes dangerously depleted. If we can produce this magical parent power, we can go to the very heart of our darkness and make the center hold.

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## STEVEN E. HYMAN, M.D.

Steven E. Hyman, M.D., is Director of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), part of the National Institutes of Health. The NIMH conducts and supports research in diverse scientific disciplines and at multiple levels of analysis in pursuit of its mission: To generate knowledge needed to understand, treat, and prevent mental disorders and promote mental health.

Under Dr. Hyman's leadership, the NIMH assigns high priority to research in molecular biology and genetics of brain function; in cellular, behavioral, and cognitive neuroscience; and in behavioral research. Dr. Hyman has reorganized NIMH to reorient basic science research around the Institute's clinical and public health mission. Thus, an emphasis on translational research encourages scientific collaborations and the effective use of technologies, such as neuroimaging, to move new knowledge quickly into clinical applications. Research on childhood mental disorders has assumed new prominence, and NIMH is aggressively promoting large clinical trials focused, for example, on new treatments for bipolar disorder and on the most appropriate uses of new antipsychotic medications in treating schizophrenia. Also receiving heightened attention are research on the outcomes of mental health treatments in actual practice settings and mental health service system needs in a changing health care environment.

Dr. Hyman continues to direct an active research program located on the NIH campus in Bethesda, Maryland. His laboratory focuses on how the neurotransmitters dopamine and glutamate produce long-term changes in brain function by altering the expression of genes in the striatum and nucleus accumbens, brain regions that are involved in the control of motivated behavior and implicated in the action of both antipsychotic medications and drugs of abuse.

Dr. Hyman received his BA from Yale in 1974 (summa cum laude); his MA from the University of Cambridge in 1976, where, as a Mellon Fellow, he studied the history and philosophy of science; and his MD from Harvard Medical School (cum laude) in 1980. He was a medical intern at Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH), a psychiatric resident at McLean Hospital, and a clinical fellow in neurology at MGH. His postdoctoral training in molecular biology was in the Laboratory of Howard M. Goodman, also at MGH. At Harvard Medical School, Dr. Hyman was Professor of Psychiatry and was also Director of Psychiatry Research at MGH. He served as first Director of Harvard University's Interfaculty Initiative in Mind, Brain, and Behavior, a program that brought together faculty from Harvard's diverse schools to focus on clinical and policy issues in the light of modern brain research. In addition to his scientific writings, Dr. Hyman has authored and edited several basic and clinical textbooks.

/ School Violence Discussion  
August 3, 1998

Steven E. Hyman, M.D.  
Director  
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Introduction

Violence in our schools is not a simple problem with a single cause. There are many influences or events that can set a child onto a negative trajectory that for some children, ends tragically. Over the last year, with the leadership of the First Lady, Hillary Rodham Clinton, we have been able to highlight research on early childhood and brain development for the nation. An understanding of the timing of brain development, and the types of environments in which it can proceed on a healthy trajectory have important policy implications. This awareness is a very important beginning on which we should build. For example, we know that brain development continues throughout childhood and adolescence, but for success in school and in life, we need to pay attention not only to cognitive development, but also to emotional development. The negative effects of neglect and abuse, poor adult supervision, the influence of deviant peers and of exposure to violence, are important, but have been well documented, less well understood are the emotional disorders of childhood that may lead to the violence that seems to "come out of nowhere." The causes of this violence; indeed the reasons for the frequency of depression and other emotional disturbances in our society are complex and not fully understood.

So today, I would like to focus on brain development in the context of the emotional development of children. Hopefully, this broader view of emotion can inform a discussion of violence. It is striking that as I read the popular press and the education literature, the fundamental emphasis with regard to brain development is on the cognitive aspects. This is important to be sure, but the emotional side of development often goes unattended. Surely, however, a child with difficulties in the arenas of emotion and motivation cannot benefit cognitively to the fullest degree from even the best educational programs. Indeed, when we worry about emotional development, it is most often for the subset of children with disruptive behavior, not the "quiet child" who may be suffering.

Over the course of recent history there have been many approaches recommended to the "moral education" of children. I would argue, and many might agree, that these approaches have represented more a succession of schools of thought, often on the subject of discipline, than a cumulative scientific enterprise. Perhaps it comes as a surprise, however, that we have a dearth of really good science in the identification and treatment even of conditions of childhood that deserve to be called mental disorders. We still have an inadequate ability to distinguish the early symptoms of disorders that portend serious life-long difficulties from still serious, but transient dysfunction. The problems of appropriate recognition and intervention are particularly acute in pediatric primary care settings, where for example perhaps only 25% of children with clinical depression are recognized. Even when such conditions are recognized there is often insufficient information available about treatment. We have few well validated psychosocial approaches to children with depression or anxiety disorders, for example. We know more about diagnosis and treatment of attention deficit disorder, but not enough. As in other areas of child health, we have little specific knowledge about the safety and efficacy of psychotherapeutic drugs in childhood, a lack that denies rational treatment to our children. Thus

some children disabled by disorders of mood or anxiety are left untreated; at the same time we continue to have deep concerns for those who are treated, about the long-term effects of psychotropic drugs on the developing brain. The point has been made many times, but remains critical: children are not simply small adults. In the case of both psychotherapeutic drugs and psychotherapies different stages of brain development and changing handling of drugs by the body means that specific developmentally appropriate information is needed about infants, toddlers, school age children, and both early and late adolescents. Fortunately, the research community is beginning to establish pediatric testing of drugs.

What does this mean? Children with unrecognized or untreated emotional disorders, even those that might be transitory, are put at high risk for being unable to live up to their potential in both family life and work life. Children with these disorders, regardless of their intellectual ability, cannot learn adequately at school or readily form the kinds of healthy peer and family relationships that undergird the emergence into adulthood of healthy and productive citizens. Children thus derailed from a healthy emotional trajectory are at heightened risk for school failure and dropout, drug use, risky behaviors, including the risk of HIV transmission, and violence.

#### Brain development

The process of brain development borders on the miraculous. More than 100 billion cells must migrate to the right position in the developing brain and must, in aggregate, make a quadrillion connections with each other, some over remarkably long distances. These nerve cells must also establish the right biochemical identity in order to produce the right repertoire of the hundred or more chemicals that nerve cells in the brain release in order to signal to each other and the many hundreds of receptors that permit them to respond to the chemical messages sent by other cells.

While it is true that a single defective gene may cause certain devastating brain disorders such as Huntington's disease or in some cases, Parkinson's disease, normal emotional and cognitive development and vulnerability to emotional disorders is the work of a large number of genes, most likely acting in different parts of the brain at different stages of development. Perhaps two thirds of the genes in the human genome are involved either in building the brain or in its adult functioning.

A profound truth that we have learned about brain development and vulnerability to mental disorders is that as complex as the gene-gene interactions are proving to be, they do not explain everything: equally complex gene-environment interactions are also involved. The interaction of genes and environment permit the limited information in the genome to be read out in such a way as to produce the human brain. Our brains have been described as the most complex structure in the known universe, and complex they must be to confer on humanity its wonderful richness and diversity, and above all, to permit us to adapt to the many different environments and conditions in which human beings live. How might the environment cause our brains to develop in one possible way rather than another? Insofar as we experience it or interact with it, the environment produces biochemical changes in the nerve cells within our brains. When such biochemical changes are of large enough magnitude, they turn genes on and off inside those cells as part of normal processes that go by the name of brain plasticity. These physical changes caused by experience within the brain are the basis of all long-term memory. During development, as these little tweaks

add up, our brains get wired up one way or another. This has sometimes been described as "sculpting" the brain. This sculpting occurs, of course, by the regulation of genes by the environment, which not only builds new connections but also may eliminate connections that go unused.

The area in which we know most about plasticity in development is the visual system. Genes are largely responsible for the initial wiring up of the brain. Nerve fibers from the retina, the membrane at the back of the eye which is the receiving surface for the visual world, make the long journey to a way station in the middle of the brain, and from there another set of fibers make the journey to the very back of the brain, the primary visual cortex. There preliminary connections are set up, but the fine tuning is dependent not simply on genes, but on use. As light excites nerve cells in the retina and they signal to the brain, those connections or synapses that are used effectively are strengthened and maintained. Those that are not used are pruned away. Now a condition that occasionally arises in children is a congenital cataract, an opacity that blocks light from entering the eye. It has been found that if such a cataract is removed, an optically perfect eye can be restored-- but if the surgery does not occur early enough in childhood, before age four, the child will not regain vision in that now normal eye. In the case of the developing visual system, there is a critical period during which the appropriate parts of the brain remain plastic. When that period comes to an end, the visual system is essentially fixed: incoming visual stimulation can no longer act to alter synaptic connections.

The information we have on brain development is no longer limited to sensory systems or cognition. In a series of experiments in a variety of labs it has been shown that if a rat pup is gently handled by an investigator, the mother licks the pup repeatedly when it is returned to her. Those handled pups have been found to have a less reactive stress hormone system throughout life than their littermates. Based on those results, rat mothers were observed for spontaneous licking of their pups. The pups from the dams that licked them most also proved to have less reactive stress hormone systems throughout life, even without the intervention of the investigator. This is evidence of the importance of nurturing on the development of physiological systems as the brain matures.

As we move to the somewhat more speculative arena, we can ask how abuse or neglect might alter emotional development by changing the brain. A structure in the brain called the amygdala, which is about the size of an almond, found deep within the temporal lobes, is required for the processing of fear and for laying down emotional aspects of memory. It appears that the amygdala matures earlier than the hippocampus, a structure required for explicit conscious memories. Thus the emotional, physiologic, aspects of abuse, neglect, or even less dramatic, but nonetheless, negative situations, may be recorded indelibly in a child's brain before the child has any narrative memories of life.

We must also recognize that some emotional conditions may occur without any apparently negative experiences. When, for example, there is strong genetic loading, a child may begin to exhibit depressive symptoms even without salient negative experiences. These cases are more subtle than those in which we can identify environment factors such as abuse. They are also more problematic. Parents may feel inappropriately ashamed when their children have emotional symptoms. They may find themselves blamed by other family members or by their pediatrician. However, untreated depression or attention deficit disorder creates its own malign plasticity. A congenital cataract that is neglected and leaves a child blind is now an avoidable tragedy. Less well understood than

cataracts, but far more common, are the unrecognized or still untreated or untreatable mental disorders of childhood, or situations of abuse and neglect. These situations also impact the developing brains of our children with devastating consequences.

We need more research certainly, for as I stated at the beginning, we are far from possessing satisfactory knowledge about how to proceed, but we already have enough knowledge to do a far better job than we are doing. We could do more to educate parents, teachers, guidance counselors, pediatricians and school psychologists to take notice of the early warning signs. We could teach them to look for the quiet child as well as the one who is more obviously in trouble. We must correct the sense of stigma and shame that inappropriately causes so many families to suffer in silence with potentially devastating consequences. When we think of the developing brain we should think not only of cognitive, but also of emotional development.

America needs to have a discussion about the needs of children. We should take the opportunities that arise from these tragedies to make a difference. We need to test proposed interventions, whether psychosocial or pharmacologic, for efficacy and lack of side effects--for anything that is powerful enough to make a difference is powerful enough to cause untoward effects. We must work arm-in-arm with research and put together a group of the best scientists to help pediatricians, families, communities and schools to recognize emotional disturbance and to evaluate treatment strategies. We need to acknowledge the special rapidly changing nature of childhood and learn to time psychosocial and medication therapies in line with the perspective that these are critical periods in brain development.

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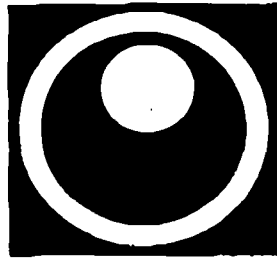
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THE PARENTING INSTITUTE



Robin is the co-author of a new book, Ghosts from the Nursery: Tracing the Roots of Violence (Atlantic Monthly Press, January, 1998) which links the growth in juvenile violence in our culture with maltreatment of the developing brain in earliest childhood. She is a family therapist in private practice and is a speaker with the Brazelton Seminar series. Robin was formerly the creator of Oregon's statewide parent training system for child welfare clients and was the first executive director of Oregon's Children's Trust Fund. She has been a consultant to the Oregon legislature on children and family issues and is an outspoken advocate for creating social and educational policies that support the adequate nurturing and stimulation of children in the first 33 months of life.

"The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world" (Proverb)

# Ghosts from the Nursery



"This is an  
eye-opening  
book."

MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

## Tracing the Roots of Violence

Robin Karr-Morse and Meredith S. Wiley

Introduction by Dr. T. Berry Brazelton

*In the middle of the night, on May 11, 1993, in the rural Northwest, an eighty-four-year-old man was bludgeoned to death. Three teenagers, high on drugs, had been on a joyride, which by morning included stealing a car, robbing a convenience store, and murder. The youths first knocked on the old man's door and then broke inside to use the bathroom. Jeffrey later confessed to striking the victim on the head with a flashlight that the man had given them to find their way in the dark. The man was then kicked by the youths as he lay on the floor. He was found unconscious the next afternoon by a neighbor, lying near the front door of the farmhouse where he had lived all of his life and where he had seen the raising of his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. He died several months after the attack without ever regaining consciousness.*

*The youths were identified by several witnesses as Jeffrey, age sixteen; Roger, age seventeen; and Roger's girlfriend Crystal, age fourteen. Both Jeffrey and Roger had juvenile records. Crystal did not. Crystal was granted immunity and was not prosecuted. Roger was convicted of robbery and sentenced to twenty years. After the victim died, Roger was charged with murder and is now awaiting trial on that charge. Jeffrey pleaded guilty to the robbery and was sentenced to life imprisonment. After the victim's death, Jeffrey was charged with murder, tried by a jury, found guilty, and sentenced to death. His case is currently being appealed.*

He looks like the kid next door. Unassuming, he greets you through the prison visitors' window with a shy but ready smile. He is nervous, speaks thoughtfully, and clearly appreciates your attention. His body and his mind move quickly. Anxious for approval, he pours out complete explanations of what he anticipates you came to ask, far more than you would comfortably request. You are a stranger to

this boy, but you recognize your own kids' mannerisms, language, interests. He is just days past his eighteenth birthday. He likes to sing and write poetry, which he shares somewhat hesitantly, glancing up often to gauge your reaction. His light brown hair is clean and well kept. His eyes are hazel and clear. Insights unusual for one so young permeate his stories. He chooses to stand apart from his present peer group, hanging out mostly with his cellmate, with whom he shares an interest in self-education and social reform, particularly of the criminal justice system.

Three years ago Jeffrey seemed like just another kid living in the backwash of an unremarkable rural community. A casual observer might have easily overlooked the predictably explosive mixture of life circumstances that heralded disaster for Jeffrey—to say nothing of his victim. Jeffrey's story is one told hundreds of times daily in courtrooms across our nation. It is a story told by events, psychiatric reports, interviews with victims, witnesses, friends, and family. The quest for explanations in the aftermath of violence often delves into adolescence, into grade school and childhood. But the beginning of stories like Jeffrey's goes untold. One chapter is nearly always missing—the first chapter, encompassing gestation, birth, and infancy. And because it goes unseen and unacknowledged, it repeats itself over and over at a rate now growing in geometric proportions.

We overlook this period in our search for the causes of violence because we believe that it is irrelevant, not only to this particular crime, but to later experience generally. The popular belief in the United States is that the baby, let alone the fetus, is exempt from thought and the capacity to record enduring experiences. Nothing could be further from the truth. This overlooked chapter of early growth sees the building of the capacities for focused thinking and for empathy—or the lack of these. From the time of late gestation and birth, we begin to develop a template of expectations about ourselves and other people, anticipating responsiveness or indifference, success or failure. This is when the foundation of who we become and how we relate to others and to the world around us is built.

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So Jeffrey's story and others like his become ghost stories. Accompanying this convicted murderer to death row is the ghost of the baby he once was and the echoes of the forces that transformed that baby. As is true of most ghosts, these aspects remain invisible, at least to the naked eye. And in that invisibility lies the power of these forces to continue to haunt us.

Though he was just sixteen at the time of his crime, many would argue that Jeffrey was an accountable adult. When faces like his appear in the news, we see the adult or adolescent criminal and place responsibility with the individual, holding him culpable for his actions. We can readily dismiss the Jeffreys as criminals who now deserve to pay their debt to society. There are procedures and facilities in place to contain and punish adults. That these people are costly to taxpayers, that their contributions are lost to society, and that their numbers are growing at an alarming rate are all issues that concern us.

But the truly terrifying and more complicated addition to this conversation is the wave of new young criminal faces in the news, such as the eighty-pound twelve-year-old whose chin barely rises above the table in a hearing room of the Wenatchee, Washington, courthouse. His thin wrists are cuffed and his ankles are bound with chains. As he sits listening to the prosecutor tell the story of his premeditated murder of a migrant farm worker, his legs barely touch the floor. Using handguns stolen earlier in the afternoon, this boy and several friends had strolled along the Columbia River firing at bottles and logs. When fifty-year-old Emilio Pruneda called from a nearby thicket to "chill out," the boys circled the thicket and fired. Pruneda threw a rock, hitting one boy in the face. The boys fired more shots and then ran to a bank and reloaded the guns. When they found Pruneda lying where he had been hit earlier, one boy emptied the rounds from a .22 caliber semiautomatic pistol and a .22 caliber revolver into Pruneda. There were eighteen bullet holes in his body.

In May of 1995, headline news introduced the country to Robert Sandifer, nicknamed Yummy. Yummy was an eleven-year-old gang member who, having shot a fourteen-year-old girl, brought so much

negative attention to his gang that he was executed by them. Yummy was found dead in a highway underpass, shot in the back of the head. His executioners were fourteen and sixteen years old. Yummy captured the nation's attention when he appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in June 1995. Later that month in an interview with Patrick Murphy, the Cook County public defender, Oprah Winfrey asked whether Yummy and others like him had "slipped through the cracks." Murphy responded emphatically:

There was no crack here. We knew—we should have known exactly what was going on. . . . What you saw in Sandifer wasn't a kid who fell between the cracks. You saw a kid that was born to a mom who had her first child when she was fifteen, who was welfare-dependent, who came from a family who is welfare dependent. . . . The grandmother was in her younger thirties when Mom had the kid at fifteen. Robert's father . . . was in and out of the picture at best. When he [Robert] came into the system at two years and ten months, he had cigarette burns on his arm, his neck, his butt. . . . The sister was brought into the system when she was ten months old, about three months before Robert. . . . She had second-degree burns in her vagina, and the mother said that she dropped her on the radiator.<sup>1</sup>

Very young and generally undetected victims of trauma or chronic maltreatment who become very young perpetrators of violence are no longer rare news stories. And the growing percentage of the crimes being committed by these children are shocking in their cruelty and aggression: a ten year old who killed a nine-month-old baby by kicking and hitting her with shoes and a basketball until she stopped crying; a four year old who climbed into a crib in his grandmother's day care center and stomped an eight-week-old baby to death; a ten year old who killed an eighty-four-year-old neighbor by beating her with her cane and then slashing her throat with a knife from her kitchen; four second-grade boys who pinned a seven-year-old girl to the ground during recess and tried to kill her for "breaking up" with their eight-year-old gang leader.

As in Jeffrey's case, we don't see the ghosts from the nursery in these stories. Because of the tender age of these criminals, however, as we look for explanations, we may look more in depth at the childhoods they have not yet left behind. It is this group of offenders, children twelve and under with a history of chronic aggression, who are forcing us to look earlier. For the majority of these early offenders, the records are clear: By age four they show consistent patterns of aggression, bullying, tantrums, and coercive interactions with others.<sup>2</sup>

The headline of a *New York Times* article on November 19, 1995, which reported a decline in the rate of adult crime also warned of "coming storms of juvenile crime." Professor John DiIulio of Princeton University said that we are experiencing "a lull before the crime storm." He cited the "40 million kids 10 years old and younger" who are about to become teenagers, the largest group of adolescents in a generation. He believes that there are more children now than ever before who are growing up without guidance, responsibility, or internalized social values.

The Uniform Crime Report issued by the FBI in October 1997 shows that for the last two years there has been a decrease in violent crimes by juveniles. The report also shows that given this decrease, the juvenile arrest rate for violent crime far exceeds the adult rate (464.7 per thousand compared to 318.3 per thousand among adults.) James Alan Fox, Dean of Criminal Justice at Northeastern University responded that the new numbers are "reason to be hopeful, but not reason to be overconfident." In a press conference following the release of the data Fox pointed out that the population of teenagers will grow by fifteen percent by 2005. "If we become complacent and think that all of our problems are over, we will be blind-sided by another crime wave," he responded. In spite of the recent drop, the violent crime rate among juveniles has quadrupled over the last twenty five years and the last decade has seen a doubling of weapons offenses for children 10 to 17. Internalized or self-directed violence has also soared, with the suicide rate for children ten to fourteen years of age tripling in the same period. Aggravated assault by teenagers has jumped by 64 percent in

the last decade. And forty American children have been killed in schools each year for the last five years.

Reported nationwide trends on the magnitude and the projected magnitude of juvenile crime vary depending on the source. Many, if not most, knowledgeable individuals at local, state, and national levels remain concerned about the rates of aggression and violence among young people. School resources for dealing with delinquent children at the junior and senior high school level, particularly in city schools, are increasingly overwhelmed beyond their capacities. The juvenile justice system is similarly besieged. And the building of prisons is a major growth industry in the nation.

On March 9, 1997, the U.S. Department of Justice released the results of a new study that showed that if our present rates of incarceration continue, one out of every twenty babies born in the United States today will spend some part of their adult lives in state or federal prison. An African-American male has a greater than one in four chance of going to prison in his lifetime, while a Hispanic male has a one in six chance of serving time.<sup>3</sup> A quarter of all households in the United States are victimized by crime each year. Homicide is a leading cause of death among our young people.<sup>4</sup> And our prison population has exploded. California, for example, is now spending more on its criminal justice system than on higher education.<sup>5</sup> Though we have been greatly concerned about government spending on the U.S. health care system, which many deem to be in crisis, we have not noticed that the cost of the criminal justice system is three times the cost of the nation's entire health care budget.

While we have more than doubled our rate of incarceration in the last decade, people still do not feel safe. The inmate population is expected to expand further as politicians of all stripes try to outdo each other in being "tough on crime." If the current rate continues, according to the *New York Times*, the number of people incarcerated will soon overtake the number of people attending colleges and universities in our country. Already one in three African-American men in this country are under the supervision of the criminal justice sys-

tem.<sup>5</sup> Even community policing—our most effective crime prevention effort to date—has resulted in warnings from the officers that they can already see a wave of children who in numbers and in depth of rage far exceed our current levels of concern.

Media coverage of violence—murder and rape, gang violence, serial killings, the murder of parents, children, and coworkers—treats violent behavior as if it suddenly emerges from a developmental void. It is a rare story that looks for the sources of this behavior even in preadolescence or grade school. And this is far from the real root in most cases. In order to understand the tide of violent behavior in which America is now submerged, we must look before preadolescence, before grade school, before preschool to the cradle of human formation in the first thirty-three months of life. Those months, including nine months of prenatal development and the first two years after birth (33 months), harbor the seeds of violence for a growing percentage of American children. In the violence equation, in the stories of Jeffrey and each of the children described earlier, this is chapter one, the missing chapter.

The ghosts of children lost to rage and despair, overlooked or abused by a community unaware of their existence, do retaliate. These children—like all children—“do unto others.” It may be easy and politically expedient to ignore them or to close our eyes to the appalling circumstances of their lives while they are voiceless and powerless—little bodies tucked away where no one is looking. But these children—grown larger and angrier—are swelling the rising tide of violent young offenders in our communities. Rage-filled adolescents only seem to come out of nowhere. They come, too often, from the nursery.

We yearn for simple answers. When horrific details reel from television or newspaper stories, we grasp for quick explanations. We want to believe that we can separate ourselves from the infection. Poverty and race become easy scapegoats. But neither adequately explains the increase in violence, particularly not among younger and younger children. The answers are complex but no longer unknowable.

Historically, theories have abounded regarding the source of criminal behavior. Much of this discussion has been polarized by a

pervasive and very human effort to reduce this quest to a single factor. The “nature-nurture” argument has raged for hundreds of years and has crossed many fields, including science, religion, and philosophy. The effort to account for criminal behavior—especially violent criminal behavior—is confounded by the complexity of human nature, to say nothing of cultural variables.

But we have made progress. We know, for example, that in spite of a clear role for genetics in explaining some antisocial behavior, there is no “crime gene.” Several studies point to the possible role of heritable genes in explaining chronic property crimes such as stealing, but no links have been found for inherited tendencies toward violent crimes.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, genetic deficits stemming from environmental causes such as prenatal exposure to alcohol or drugs do play a strong role in setting up violent behavior.<sup>7</sup> By causing subtle changes in the organization of the genes of the fetus, the baby’s brain may be damaged, causing, for example, difficulty with focusing on learning or controlling impulsive behavior. These vulnerabilities in turn render the child even more vulnerable to negative environmental conditions such as child abuse or neglect. Genes may have a role in shaping later violent behavior, but environmentally altered rather than inherited genes are implicated. And in order for even those altered genes to have an adverse role in later behavior, they must interact with negative factors in the child’s environment. For example, during the early critical period of maturation of the brain, prolonged periods of intense stress may actually alter DNA, the building material of the genes.<sup>8</sup>

The understanding of the interaction between internal vulnerabilities and external risk factors is essential to understanding the story of Jeffrey and the plethora of young criminals surfacing in the following pages. This interactive process is even more crucial as we seek to understand adult violence. In a hallmark study of the genesis of violent behavior in 1989, noted criminologist Dorothy Lewis found that neither exposure to early violence nor internal factors alone predicts adult violence. She also found that the combination of one vulnerability with an abusive family was not predictive of adult violence. While each of

these factors is a clear warning signal that a child may be on a course toward violence, Lewis found that adult criminal violence resulted from the interaction of two or more internal factors (i.e., cognitive and/or neuropsychiatric deficits) with early negative family circumstances. Lewis's theory amplifies the new emphasis on the interaction between these internal vulnerabilities and negative environmental factors. In reviewing the medical histories of violent juvenile delinquents, Lewis found a significantly higher incidence of neuropsychiatric and cognitive impairments among the most aggressive offenders, including hyperactivity, impulsivity, attention deficits, and learning disabilities. Both prenatal complications and serious accidents or injuries appeared often in their histories. The parts of the brain responsible for judgment, impulse control, and reality testing are disproportionately impaired in this population, along with the capacity for empathy and the ability to accurately interpret the actions and intent of other people.<sup>9</sup>

This analysis of the biological and social variables that go into the making of adult violence places a whole new emphasis on the human brain, where all of the variables meet and where central control is generated for all of our behaviors. Dr. Bruce Perry of Baylor University succinctly summarizes this concept by saying: "It's not the finger that pulls the trigger, it's the brain; it's not the penis that rapes, it's the brain."<sup>10</sup> As the brain and its functions emerge as the mediator of human experience, we begin to appreciate the crucial nature of physical, emotional, and cognitive care during the first thirty-three months of human life. As we begin to discover the previously unimaginable impact of the smallest insult to the brain at crucial times in development, we are beginning to see that much of what we have formerly written off as unknowable in origin and therefore unchangeable, can and must be prevented. The current upswing in violent behavior is a clear sign of systemic distress. If human life is to continue, our entire species needs to attend differently to our young.

Thirty years ago, Rachel Carson penned her classic *Silent Spring*. That book was an urgent warning by a field biologist who was distressed by the plight of eagles, peregrine falcons, and many songbirds

that were quietly disappearing from the American landscape. Carson revealed an unseen and insidious threat to the entire chain of life. Through the use of DDT and other chemicals routinely applied in farming, forestry, and mosquito abatement, our nation was leading the world into destruction of the natural environment. Not only were pesticides poisoning our air, earth, rivers, and seas, they threatened the survival of our own species.

In spite of considerable controversy and an ongoing debate, *Silent Spring* penetrated the national consciousness. A spring without songbirds was a chilling image, and, in contemplating that grim prospect, we finally began to understand the true price of insecticides. Carson confronted us with our own passive participation in the destruction of the natural world. We now understand the intricate linkages that exist and the cumulative devastation that occurs when poisons are introduced at the front of the ecosystem.

More than thirty years after *Silent Spring*, however, we have yet to understand that the same dynamic is at work in the human system. Toxic experiences—family violence, abuse, and chronic neglect, along with toxic substances such as nicotine, alcohol, and illegal drugs—are being physically and emotionally absorbed by our babies in record numbers. As a result of this systemic degradation at the beginning of human life, our nation faces a threat that is potentially as lethal as the effects of DDT.

As in the natural world, there are complex links between the quality of individual human development and the status of the human community. Infancy, a time to which our nation is blindsided, is a crucial developmental stage when an individual forms the core of conscience, develops the ability to trust and relate to others, and lays down the foundation for lifelong learning and thinking. The quality of the human environment is directly tied to each individual's ability to love, to empathize with others, and to engage in complex thinking. By failing to understand the cumulative effects of the poisons assaulting our babies in the form of abuse, neglect, and toxic substances, we are participating in our own destruction. —

Our ignorance of and indifference to the complex nature of infancy has significantly contributed to one sign of systemic distress that we can no longer ignore. Violence is now epidemic in American society. It dominates our media, permeates our play, steals our loved ones, implodes our families, and claims a growing percentage of our young. Our response is to deploy the most rapid rate of incarceration in the world.

While it appears that the overall crime rate has decreased slightly, over the last three years (the last data available are for 1995), crime remains a source of great concern in the United States, particularly as compared to other industrialized nations. In April 1997, *Parade* magazine reported an Interpol census that analyzed America's status in relation to the rest of the world on a number of indicators.<sup>11</sup> The census reported that in spite of recent decreases, we have the second highest murder rate of all industrialized nations, after Russia. In addition, compared to all nations in the world, including developing third world nations, we have the second highest rape rate, the eleventh highest rate of serious assault, and the third highest violent rate of theft.

Each year the Children's Defense Fund publishes a yearbook entitled *The State of America's Children*. According to their 1996 and 1997 issues:

- A baby is born every minute to a teen mother.
- The mortality rate for American babies under the age of one is higher than that of any other western industrialized nation; African-American babies are more than twice as likely to die in their first year of life as white babies.
- Twenty-five percent of our preschool children live below the poverty level.
- One in four foster children in five states sampled entered foster care before his or her first birthday. Newborns make up the largest share of those infants.
- One in three victims of physical abuse is a baby less than twelve months old. Every day a baby dies of abuse or neglect at the hands of his or her caregivers.

- Three of every four children murdered in the twenty-six top industrialized nations *combined* were American.
- Only 8.4 percent of infant and toddler care in U.S. child care centers is considered developmentally appropriate care; 51.1 percent was judged mediocre quality care, and 40.4 percent poor quality care.

In reviewing this data, the Carnegie Corporation called this the “quiet crisis.”<sup>12</sup> The grim reality is that a growing percentage of our babies are now gestating in and being born into an environment perfectly designed to breed rage and despair. Violence takes many forms—physical, emotional, social, verbal—to name but a few. It has many definitions and is to some degree a concept that varies with time and culture. For example, killing for God or country or ideological affiliations may be considered a noble and highly valued behavior. Killing as random vengeance is generally not. For the purposes of this discussion, violence is defined as behavior not condoned by law, which is intended to inflict harm on others, behavior that actively victimizes another person by an aggressive act. Perpetrators of unlawful violence fall roughly into one of two types: impulsive or premeditated. The great majority of violent crime committed in this country is of the impulsive type. Most of the research in this area is based on the study of “hot-blooded” impulsive violence. While premeditated, or “cold-blooded,” violent behavior has some roots in common with impulsive violence, it also develops from some unique causes. Whenever relevant, these two distinct paths of development are distinguished in the following chapters.<sup>13</sup>

While the causes of violence are highly complex and multifaceted, a growing body of scientific knowledge demonstrates that maltreatment during the nine months of fetal growth and the first twenty-four months after birth often leads to violent older children and adults. The poisons accumulating in the human community from widespread maltreatment of babies are only in part the toxins we already recognize—drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. The last three decades have provided us with research that brings to light a range of more subtle

toxins profoundly influencing our children's earliest development: chronic stress or neglect, which affects the development of the fetal or early infant brain; early child abuse and neglect, which undermine focused learning; chronic parental depression; neglect or lack of the stimulation necessary for normal brain development; early loss of primary relationships or breaks in caregiving. These are the precursors of the growing epidemic of violence now coming to light in childhood and adolescence.

We must broaden the scope of our conversation about violence. Infancy and toddlerhood are times of enormous complexity when potentials for favorable adult outcomes can be maximized, diminished, or lost. Through the interplay of the developing brain with the environment during the nine months of gestation and the first two years after birth, the core of an individual's ability to think, feel, and relate to others is formed. Violent behavior often begins to take root during those thirty-three months as the result of chronic stress, such as domestic or child abuse, or through neglect, including the prenatal ingestion of toxins. Even where violent behavior does not occur as a direct result of these stressors, maltreatment of a baby may lead to the permanent loss or impairment of key protective factors—such as intelligence, trust, and empathy—that enable many children to survive and even overcome difficult family circumstances and later traumas.

And so we return to Jeffrey. Through his story we can see that there are many kinds of ghosts from the nursery. Some result from biological factors such as head injuries or learning disabilities. Others emerge from familial experiences such as child abuse, domestic violence, or the impact of maternal depression or rejection. As children grow older, larger societal factors, such as chronic community violence, may compound the damage from earlier experiences. One factor by itself rarely creates antisocial outcomes in human development.<sup>15</sup> As in Jeffrey's case, several factors combine to produce those outcomes. But a majority take root in the nursery, where few people are looking.

Mileyboy

Sept 1998

## MEN

By ASA BABER

**D**uring the past two years, ten young students have killed 21 people and wounded at least 46 others by shooting their peers and their teachers on school property without warning. The oldest perpetrator was 18, the youngest 11. The sites ranged across the U.S., from Pennsylvania to Alaska, and the towns involved had such wholesome names as Pearl and Pomona.

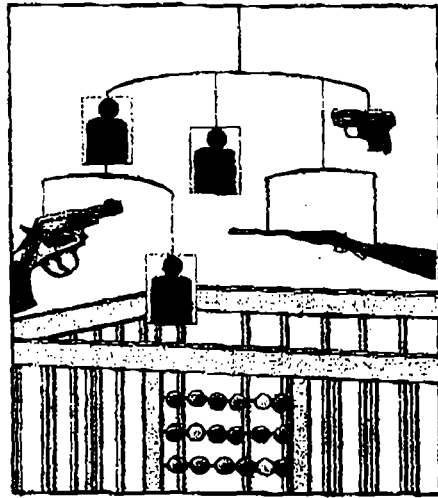
One of the more disturbing incidents occurred in Springfield, Oregon on May 21, when 15-year-old Kipland Kinkel gunned down several classmates with a .22-caliber semiautomatic rifle in the school cafeteria—this came after he allegedly shot and killed his mother and father in their home. Kinkel hails from what appeared to be a normal two-parent household.

"I've seen the best that people have to offer," Springfield police chief Bill DeForrest said at a funeral for one of the victims, "and I've seen the worst. My concern is this—I'm seeing more of the worst these days." Most of us understand exactly what DeForrest is talking about, especially when it comes to America's children. Here in the late Nineties, we are witnessing a new trend in murder and mayhem.

There are many theories about why children become murderers, and we are being deluged with them by so-called experts. Some people claim youthful violence is a response to the things children see on TV and in movies. Others say the easy access to firearms prompts adolescent executioners into action. Fatherlessness is high on the list of presumed causative factors, as is a general decline in moral values. Overworked parents, poverty, the destructive power of illegal drugs, the siren call of dark forces on the Internet—you name it and somebody is promoting it as the primal cause of the problem. But does anybody have the answer?

The experts offer many suggestions about how we might counter the specter of childhood violence: We should pass tougher drug laws, ban guns, ban Jerry Springer, control Internet access, sue parents whose children commit these crimes, establish tighter security parameters around our educational institutions, create more after-school programs for misguided teens, offer psychological counseling to grade-schoolers, etc.

These proposals are sincere, but they



## KILLERS IN DIAPERS

may miss a major point, one that is difficult to acknowledge. So let me be a fool for a theory for a moment and suggest that a child's tendency toward violence could be imprinted on his or her brain far earlier than most people think (within the first three years of life, according to the research I've been studying). We are, perhaps, looking for murderers long after they have been released into our midst.

The possibility that violent circuitry is wired into place early on is generally ignored in our discussions about kids and destructiveness. Why? Is it because it flies in the face of our most tightly cherished and sentimental myths about childhood? We've been told an infant is a blank slate who isn't really affected by much that happens in its world until it attends kindergarten. A newborn child, lacking language and memory, obviously has no enduring recollection of trauma it encounters in its earliest years. A cuddly little tyke, even when abused, can later be healed of its wounds by love and attention.

We resist giving up these myths because a deeper dilemma exists as well: If we agree that our perceptions of babies are false, and if we concede that it is in the nursery that violence-prone children are shaped and set in their ways, how can we hope to control the problem?

This society does not have the ability or the means to intrude in every home and supervise all the activities around every bassinet.

Nonetheless, I submit that tomorrow's killers are being prepared in their cribs today. Abusive and neglectful things are being done to them as you read this, and their murderous impulses are being brought online right now, hardwired, to be accessed later when their bodies catch up with their brains.

Along with positron emission tomography scans and magnetic resonance imaging, the mysteries of the human brain are being deciphered. The latest research shows that by the time a child reaches its third birthday, its brain's wiring is in place, for good or for ill.

For example, in their book, *Ghosts From the Nursery: Tracing the Roots of Violence*, authors Robin Karr-Morse and Meredith Wiley write, "The poisons accumulating from widespread maltreatment of babies are only in part the toxins we already recognize—drugs, alcohol and tobacco. The past three decades bring to light a range of more-subtle toxins influencing our children's earliest development: chronic stress, chronic parental depression, neglect or lack of stimulation necessary for normal brain development, early loss of primary relationships. These are the precursors of the growing epidemic of violence now coming to light in childhood and adolescence." And, they add, "The parts of the brain responsible for judgment, impulse control and reality testing are disproportionately impaired in this population, along with the capacity for empathy and the ability to accurately interpret the actions and intentions of other people."

To bring this home, I confess that the last sentence quoted describes me to some degree. I will not bore you with the details, but my earliest years were brutal in the extreme, and I have spent the rest of my life overcoming the damage done at that time. I can't prove it, but I know in my heart that we are pounded into strange shapes before we realize it. So until we protect our kids in their cribs, we will have more killings, more violence, more sadness.

Our future is in diapers today. Let us protect it and nurture it so we can have a brighter tomorrow.



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## **David M. Kennedy**

David M. Kennedy is a senior researcher at the Program in Criminal Justice Policy and Management, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. His work focuses on strategies for assisting troubled communities. He has written and consulted extensively in the areas of community and problem solving policing, police corruption, and neighborhood revitalization. He has performed field work in police departments and troubled communities in many American cities, London, Sydney, and Puerto Rico. He is the co-author of a seminal work on community policing, *Beyond 911: A New Era for Policing*, and numerous articles on police management, illicit drug markets, and gun control. He is currently focusing on the problem of youth violence, and strategies for preventing youth violence, with a special emphasis on the role of chronic offenders; the nature of the illicit markets supplying guns to youths; and the possibilities for city-specific strategies to deter chronic offenders and disrupt illicit gun markets. He has advised the Justice Department, the Department of the Treasury, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms on these issues. He is currently directing a National Institute of Justice-funded project in Boston designed to give the first detailed account of the youth gun problem in any American city and, based on that account, implement and evaluate a city-wide intervention to reduce youth violence. Partners in this enterprise include the Boston Police Department; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms; the Office of the US Attorney; the Office of the Suffolk County District Attorney; the Massachusetts Department of Probation; the office of the Mayor of Boston; the Massachusetts Department of Youth Services; and others. Its chief intervention, Operation Ceasefire, was implemented in mid-1996 and appears to have been principally responsible for a two-thirds reduction in homicide victimization among those 24 and under citywide. Operation Ceasefire was one of 10 programs recognized nationally by a 1997 Ford Foundation Innovations in Government award. It also informed the 27-city Youth Crime Gun Interdiction Initiative launched by the Clinton Administration in July, 1996.

## THE NEW YOUTH VIOLENCE

David M. Kennedy

The youth violence epidemic has left the cities and is taking root in the countryside. Such is the nearly universal assessment in the wake of the last year's appalling wave of school spree shootings. It's a natural, almost inevitable, conclusion: kids and guns have been a problem in the cities for more than ten years, kids and guns are apparently now a problem outside the cities. Surely we must be dealing with essentially the same problem in both settings?

Not so fast. There's reason to believe that these are in fact two very different phenomena. The urban youth violence epidemic began in the mid-1980s and progressed at a dizzying pace, with homicide victimization rates tripling among teenagers and doubling among those into their mid-20s. Drive-by shootings, guns in schools, and street violence that would have made Dodge City shudder became emblematic of all too many core urban areas. Politicians, parents, and academics soon constructed a now-familiar list of often overlapping reasons for the historically unprecedented carnage: television, rap, and other cultural influences; access to firearms; community problems like single-parent households and poor schools; gang and drug activity; lack of local job opportunities; and more. Certain verities took root: all kids in tough neighborhoods were at risk; the violence was senseless and unpredictable; schools were particularly dangerous places. Taking action meant sweeping prescriptions, like getting rid of guns and teaching dispute resolution to whole generations of kids. The recent school shootings certainly look like a widening of these basic problems, and to many suggest the same solutions.

In retrospect, though, this initial diagnosis of the urban youth violence problem looks like an unfortunate rush to judgment. As time has allowed a more careful look at what's been going on, a different picture has emerged. It includes the following key features:

- *Drug markets lit the fuse.* The youth violence epidemic did not come from nowhere; it was sparked in most cities by the arrival of crack and the involvement of young minority males in chaotic street drug markets. Kids got guns to protect their business interests, and some of them used them. The influence of television, music, and all the rest pale in comparison. The drug markets also fostered the formation of what might variously be called gangs, crews, and sets: street-active groups of young men with weapons and reasons to carry and use them.
- *The fuse kept burning.* Drug markets started the process, but other dynamics then took over. Groups of armed young men were a fertile setting for disputes over respect, girls, and slights real and imagined. As the streets got more dangerous, guns became an essential part of staying safe for many youth. But more youth with guns and a willingness to use them made the streets more dangerous: and the cycle continued.
- *Not all young people were involved or at risk.* Far from it. Even in the hottest neighborhoods, most kids steered clear. Both victims and perpetrators of youth violence tended to be chronic offenders, engaged in a wide variety of crimes, and caught up in a dynamic in which today's shooter could be tomorrow's victim. In Boston, at some 70% of youth homicide came out of a population of only about 1300 young people; both victims and perpetrators tended to be involved in street crews; and three-quarters of both victims and perpetrators had arrest records, averaging nearly ten apiece.
- *The violence was not "senseless."* From where such highly active youth sat, the violence was in fact understandable, and to some extent predictable. Violations of an increasingly draconian street code, paybacks for violence by others, and the maintenance of

"respect" - itself an asset to survival - could all precipitate violence. From an adult perspective it was madness, but the stories were there to be seen, and from a certain perspective the stories were coherent. When somebody got hurt, youth offenders - and often street cops, probation officers, and many local adults - often knew why.

- *The schools were the safest places of all.* The general public soon got the impression that schools were hot spots for violence, an impression fueled by rising gun seizures in schools, surveys that showed gun carrying in schools was up, and by occasional violent incidents. In fact, the schools represented safe havens for most kids, were much safer than the streets outside, and incidents in schools were vastly outnumbered by incidents outside. The special efforts that went into keeping schools safe were entirely justified; schools should indeed be safe havens. But when things happened in schools, they usually represented the streets coming inside, not the other way round.

So what about the recent school shootings, and don't they mark a widening of this pattern? Probably not, for they fit none of this picture. They are not being caused by suburban and rural crack markets, or any other crime wave disturbing formerly peaceful communities. They are not being committed by kids afraid of other kids, and making preemptive strikes for their own protection. They are not being committed by, or aimed at, chronic offenders whose violent acts or violent victimization is part of a long pattern of overt criminal behavior. They seem altogether senseless, with even the after-the-fact investigations leaving most questions unanswered. And they are, most obviously, happening in schools, with the traditional quiet of the streets outside continuing undisturbed.

In fact, the school shootings resemble other kinds of *youth* violence much less than they resemble certain kinds of *adult* violence. They have far more in common with such spree shootings as the Long Island Railroad and the paradigmatic post office massacres than they do with drive-bys in South Central. Those adult shootings are, like the school shootings, essentially inexplicable; committed by people in retrospect disturbed but in prospect generally unremarkable; designed in part for dramatic impact; and basically impossible to predict. Springfield, Jonesboro and the other school shootings have more in common with the famous tower in Texas than with the high-rise housing projects of Chicago.

So why the rash of incidents? If it's not the epidemic most think it is, what is it? In fact, these shootings do very much resemble a different kind of youth violence problem: the suicide cluster. It is very well known that a youth suicide often provokes a rash of follow-up suicides: in the school the first victim attended, in his community, and the like. Such clusters are strikingly akin to the recent cluster of school shootings: they are provoked by a high-profile incident, they occur only among youth, and they draw victims from youth who are very difficult to identify ahead of time but whose vulnerabilities are often evident in retrospect. The school shootings seem likely to be this kind of broadly imitative behavior. The very fact that they are all happening in schools is part of the imitation, and something that sets them apart from the broader youth violence problem.

The key question here, and the factor that will most govern what happens next, is that of the pool of "susceptibles": how many youth are there, nationally, who are prone to being "tipped" into action? Youth suicide clusters are terribly difficult to prevent and terribly difficult to intervene in. Usually, only the fact that the pool of susceptibles is very, very small contains them. We simply do not know whether this is true for potential school shooters. My own guess is that it is true - that there are not very many kids, even given means and opportunity, who wish to do this. If that's right, we will see a natural waning. We will never go all the way back, for a line has been crossed that cannot be uncrossed. But there's reason to hope that this is neither a widening of the old epidemic, nor a new one of its own.

Regardless, there are things we should do. The shootings have rightly reinvigorated basic debates about guns, national and youth culture, the services and opportunities available to youth, and the

like. Those debates will continue, and no doubt some will lead to action. In the meantime, there are some things we can do immediately.

- *Pay attention to the warning signs young people themselves provide.* It's likely to be all but impossible to predict very far ahead of time who might actually do this kind of thing. "Prediction," in this case, is more likely to mean the day before, or the morning of, a potential event. In many of the recent incidents, there were, at least in retrospect, clear indications that something might be going on. When kids take guns to school, threaten their classmates and teachers, and promise to kill their girlfriends, we should listen.
- *Listen to the other kids.* There are, unfortunately, too many instances of kids, even in the quietest communities, carrying weapons and making threats to treat each one as a red alert. Most of these "warnings" will be about nothing. How are we to sort out which really matter? The best path here is likely to be asking other students what they think. Kids fool adults with ease; their own peers, though, will often have a very good sense indeed whether a particular classmate is blustering or genuinely scary. Principals should work out ways to quietly sound out their more trustworthy students in the wake of such warnings, and incorporate their guidance into their response to trouble signs.
- *Do something about the guns particular kids have access to.* When the decision is made that a given youth may represent a real risk, authorities should work with his parents and friends to secure any firearms he might be able to lay his hands on. Guns owned by his immediate family and relatives, or which his close friends and their families have, or which he might otherwise be able to reach, should be made thoroughly inaccessible. Even in areas where guns are prevalent, it's harder than one would think for a kid to get guns that aren't ready to hand. This kind of local, cooperative, voluntary, and probably temporary "gun control" might make a substantial difference.

Are the school shootings an inevitable expansion of urban youth violence, and is the countryside doomed to a bloodbath? Probably not. But they're bad enough as they stand, and we should take them seriously and act intelligently. Part of that is not making the same mistake we made with the original urban problem. This time, let's make sure we know what we're dealing with.

# Can We Keep Guns Away From Kids?

David M. Kennedy

The Brady Bill and an assault weapon ban are finally law. Congress may add a few frills like fee hikes for federally licensed gun dealers and tax hikes on ammunition. But the killing in our core cities, especially the killing of young black men by other young black men, will continue almost as if nothing has happened.

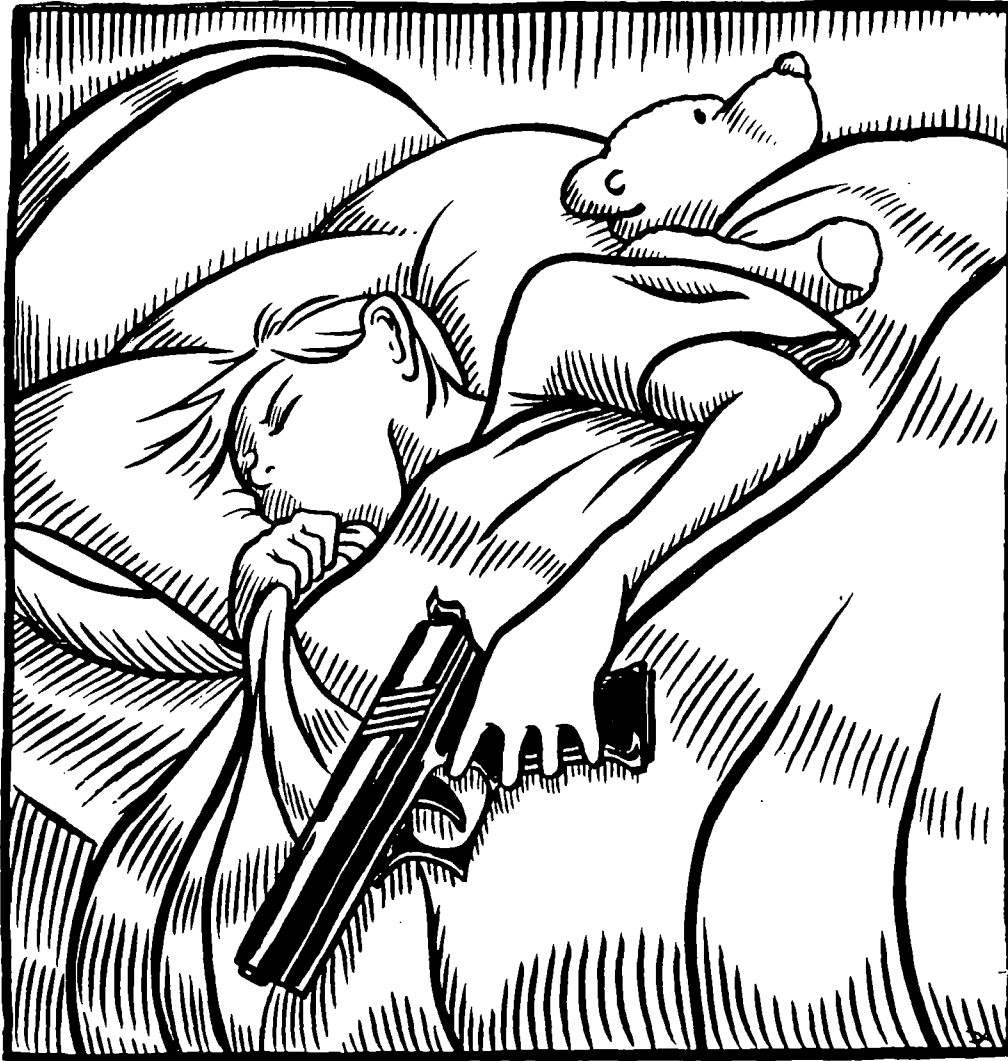
Yet something must surely be done. Youth gun homicide has risen sharply since the mid-1980s. It is now higher for teenagers than for the general population, and far higher for black teenage males: in 1990, roughly 100 killed for every 100,000 between the ages of 15 and 19 (versus 9.7 for every 100,000 white males in the same age group). The gun homicide rate conceals a mass of nonfatal woundings—some 5.7 for every death. And the problem is getting worse, not better.

The reality on the street is even starker. A 1993 national poll by LH Research found that 30 percent of black adults know a child who was wounded or killed by another child with a gun. Drive through Washington, D.C., within rifleshoot of the White House, and look at all the young black men with canes—they weren't maimed playing football. In Cabrini Green, one of Chicago's appalling high-rise housing projects, I have talked with mothers who will not let children out of their apartments except to escort them to and from school. In these communities many children do not talk about "when" they will grow up; they talk about "if." Tulane University researchers Joseph Sheley and James Wright recently surveyed high school students in four troubled minority communities—more than a third carried guns at least occasionally. (One student, asked what caliber gun he owned, pulled it out of his clothes to check.) Research by Carolyn and Richard Block

suggests that nearly all of Chicago's recent increase in gang-related killing is attributable to bigger, better handguns.

## *Close the Market*

Can we do anything to keep guns out of kids' hands? Tighter gun control alone will not work. In most cities with serious juvenile gun problems, the purchase and possession of handguns by juveniles are already illegal. The shootings and deaths have increased just the same. Forty-one percent of Sheley and Wright's students said obtaining guns was "no trouble at all," and they paid well *below* retail prices for the guns they bought on the street. Increasing penalties for violating gun laws won't help much either. The effectiveness of such laws depends on the commitment of police, prosecutors, and the courts, as well as the availability of prison space to back them up. The first is difficult to obtain (police, prosecutors, and courts tend to adjust their



actions to the nuances of each case); the second, prison space, is in increasingly short supply. And many juvenile gun offenders think and care little about even severe punishment.

A better target for our efforts would be the black market in guns, which so far has received little serious attention. Federal gun legislation mainly affects new weapons sold by federally licensed dealers. The laws do not reach many older guns, nor small-scale private dealers, and they do not create the recordkeeping and transfer protocols required to monitor and control the movement of guns. Measures to correct these

deficiencies are from time to time proposed in Congress, where they die. Gun and anti-gun activists conclude, alternatively, that there is no point in attempting to control firearms, or that there is little point to anything short of outright bans. This logjam is unlikely to be broken anytime soon.

At the local level, the illegal gun trade proceeds unhindered by anything approaching a concerted police response. Strategies and tactics routinely deployed against other threats to public safety are strikingly absent from the gun-crime landscape. Given the opportunity, police are willing to make firearms arrests, but such charges tend to be incidental to other enforcement activities.

Departments almost never give the black market in firearms the same priority they do narcotics or prostitution. They rarely take advantage of opportunities to identify and penetrate the gun trade by back-tracing illegal weapons used in crimes, demanding information about weapons sources as a condition of plea bargaining, or mounting stings or undercover operations. And they are rarely sophisticated about working with federal authorities on gun cases. "If we find a kid with a gun, we're happy to settle for a conviction," says Jim Jordan, the Boston Police Department's Director of Policy Development. "We don't even ask where he got it."

This is quite peculiar. The black market in guns, as my colleague Mark Moore has shown, is essentially local. Guns are readily available through local sources: they can be stolen from homes or gun dealers, or purchased from licensed and unlicensed dealers and resold. Even operations to move weapons from states with loose gun laws to states with strict ones typically consist of only a few people with a car (or a gym bag and a bus ticket). Many black-market gun dealers buy guns from thieves and resell them as they would any other hot commodity. As a panel from the National Academy of Sciences noted in a 1993 report, *Understanding and Preventing Violence*, this is the kind of crime local police, whose strength and number dwarf federal enforcement capacity, should make their business.

It is thus encouraging to see, for instance, the New York City Police Department's recent decision to mount undercover operations against illegal gun dealers. But no practicable amount of ordinary police work will shut these markets down. Departments must break the classic enforcement mold.

### *The Idea Of Market Disruption*

Hope lies in a new set of market disruption approaches developed in community policing circles and deployed with great effectiveness against street drug markets. Over the past decade, several cities plagued

by serious street drug problems have successfully interfered with street trafficking so that the markets ceased to function.

For example, police in Tampa, Florida mounted a model operation known as QUAD (Quick Uniform Attack on Drugs) to combat a widespread crack problem on the streets. They made it difficult for buyers to find dealers by intensifying enforcement to keep dealers on the move. They used community allies to locate and report new street dealing sites and drug stashes. Posing as dealers, police pulled "reverse stings" and arrested buyers, making other buyers feel vulnerable. Officers interfered with business by loitering around dealing sites, used local ordinances to clear crowds from known trafficking areas, and cooperated with city authorities to knock down abandoned houses and shut down businesses used for dealing. Six months into QUAD, public dealing was virtually extinct. The disruption strategy had caused, in relatively short order, the near collapse of the street market.

**G**un markets are more surreptitious than drug markets. But a disruption strategy for the youth gun market could still succeed.

Since gun transactions among adults are not necessarily crimes, there is no easy way to tell whether a seller, a buyer, or a particular transaction is illegal. But kids caught buying and carrying guns, and people caught selling guns to them, are *prima facie* lawbreakers. Equally important, public feeling on youth and firearms is universally negative. Illegal firearms transactions among adults do not always draw public outrage or official action. If a gun dealer illegally sells a weapon to a middle-class suburbanite, the community tends to show tolerance. Even the deadly use of illegal weapons can win considerable support. But nobody thinks kids should have guns. Measures to prevent kids from getting firearms would be popular with officials and community members. If disruption strategies can be designed, communities will help.

### *Why Kids Want Guns*

To successfully disrupt the youth market we must understand why kids get guns. This means going beyond the three most common theories, which are increasingly inadequate to explain what's happening in the inner city.

**The drug trade.** Where there is serious drug dealing there will be guns. There is no question that the rise in juvenile black male homicide that began in the mid-1980s coincided with the rise of crack cocaine. In many cities, the crack market is characterized by a young minority work force and open-air trafficking with a high degree of turf-related and other violence.

But the close connection between youth violence and the crack trade sometimes dissolves upon closer examination. The Blocks' research in Chicago suggests that very little of that city's spiralling youth violence rate is drug-related. It seems, rather, to be *turf-related*, with recent increases in killings due to gangs' use of more powerful guns. In Richmond, Virginia, Russell Boxley and his colleagues found that the trafficking issues provoking drug-market killings were not significantly different from other kinds of disputes that often sparked violence among the same groups of people.

While levels of youth violence and drug trafficking increased together during the mid-1980s, more recently the trends have diverged. In Milwaukee and Washington, D.C., youth homicide continued to increase in the early 1990s even as the drug trade diminished. Today, the fact that so many homicides and assaults seem inexplicable is what most disturbs communities. Kids are killing each other over jewelry, sidelong glances, and, at times, for no apparent reason at all.

**Gangs.** Another popular explanation for the spread of violence centers on youth gangs, some engaged in drug-trafficking and some not, using guns to protect turf and to settle disputes. But what is a gang? Gangs range from sophisticated economic organizations (some of which appear to es-

chew violence except for business purposes), to moderately organized ethnic groups, to ad-hoc bands of friends. Since they tend to come to public attention only when they commit violent crimes, and since officials call any affiliated group that commits violence a gang, "gang violence" is at times a tautology.

A more important problem is causality: do gangs cause violence, or does violence cause gangs? Kids in violent areas band together for support and protection. Having done so, they are obliged to stand up for one another, and they become actors and targets in cyclic exchanges of violence. The ready availability of guns, then, must be a significant contributing factor to the creation of gangs and gang violence. Measures to keep guns out of kids' hands might serve to moderate both.

**Culture of violence.** Most recently, attention has focused on cultural factors, such as the media and the intergenerational impact of domestic violence and sexual abuse. This would explain the appalling "senseless" acts that seem more and more common, and link them to an adult world that exhibits many of the same features.

Many public health analysts use this frame. Deborah Prothrow-Stith and others have written powerfully of how movies, television, music, and parents encourage youth violence. Their research points to the inability of many adolescents to imagine nonviolent conflict resolutions; it shows how youth culture encourages and rewards violent behavior. But these arguments do not explain how presumably long-standing cultural factors could account for the explosive rise in youth homicide. Nor do they explain causality. Is the youth demand for guns driven by this cultural appetite for violence? Or is youth violence so bad in part because guns are so prevalent and have the effect of polarizing groups and raising the risks of violent behavior?

### *The Primacy of Fear*

Terror is what ties these accounts together. It appears that we have entered

into a distinct second phase of the impact of drug trafficking on communities. In the first phase, trafficking and competition among traffickers caused high levels of violence, in a pattern reminiscent of Prohibition. While appalling, this violence was fundamentally *instrumental*: it generally served or emerged from business interests, albeit illegal ones.

That violence, however, profoundly increased the fear in affected communities, which in turn brought more weaponry. Traffickers, many of them young and not particularly measured, armed themselves. The streets were the marketplace, so business disputes were settled in public. There were no safe havens—nonplayers had nowhere to escape. Many part-time drug dealers became full-time gun owners. The trade was ruled by the same self-regulation that governs all illicit enterprises: those who offend get hurt. But since traffickers were numerous and dispersed throughout the community, that gangland ethos came to govern even more ordinary interactions as well.

In short, many of the newly armed boys (and girls) in the 'hood are not depraved. They are scared—and rightly so. Sheley and Wright found more than 40 percent of their high school students had been shot at or threatened with a gun; nearly *half* knew schoolmates who had been fired on. Not surprisingly, self-defense was far and away the main reason these kids armed themselves. In the 1993 LHI Research poll, 33 percent of black adults reported knowing "a child who was so worried he or she got a gun for self protection."

The more kids arm themselves, the greater the chance of shootings, and the more readily kids arm themselves. Mix in youthful impulsiveness and the result is spur-of-the-moment mayhem. "The scariest thing," a Detroit high school senior told Carl Taylor, "is that you never know when they're going to get into an argument and start shooting."

In such an environment the "senseless" shootings that have become commonplace should come as no surprise. These kids are armed and edgy. They believe they cannot

walk away from a fight without irretrievably losing face. They are surrounded by violence, and feel that they have few alternatives. They cannot get out of Dodge, nor is anybody making them check their guns at the edge of town.

Many of the kids involved in this life do not really want to live it. Less readily available weaponry would ease tensions and diminish the deadliness of incidents. It might lead to clearer divisions between dangerous offenders and other less committed users, and allow responses more appropriately tailored to each class. A weapon-centered approach is certainly not a perfect or complete response to youth violence, but it would facilitate and reinforce other approaches.

Can we design such a program? Yes, but it will take custom-designed strategies, developed and implemented primarily by local authorities. Different local markets require different disruption plans. Patterns of acquisition and distribution are different in Georgia, which has few restrictions on gun sales, and Massachusetts, which is heavily regulated; or in Chicago, where the killing is largely gang-related, and Washington, where it has more to do with drugs. The strategy must be comprehensive, with mutually reinforcing tactics tailored to local circumstances. Stiff penalties for selling and buying, measures to reduce gun movement from the legitimate to the black market, and measures to reduce youths' fear are unlikely to have much impact if they are pursued in piecemeal fashion.

Central to making those strategies work will be detailed, timely information on particular youth gun markets. Among the questions we need to ask: How do kids acquire guns in a particular city? Why do they do it? Do they buy from the same sources as adult offenders? Is there a distinct illicit gun market, or are guns passed along channels also used for drugs and other contraband? Are there many sources of supply, or relatively few? How open is

the trade? Are sellers bold or wary? What makes them willing and unwilling to sell? Are there different supply channels to hardcore and casual consumers? Are particular weapons in vogue? How does information about sources of supply reach consumers, and how widely is it known?

Although police departments already have a great deal of scattered information on gun markets, they seldom put it together. A first step would be to consolidate existing information in a fashion that supports problem solving.

From there, police could tap other sources of information, including:

**Kids.** If youth gun markets are as vigorous as they appear to be—they often include *rental* markets for busy weekends, parties, and such—their workings will be fairly widely known. Some knowledgeable youth, both players and nonplayers, will be willing to talk if police can ensure their safety. Departments need to develop new relationships with young people to learn what they need to know.

**Offenders.** Criminals are useful sources of information. In Tampa, interviews with jailed criminals helped convince the department that suppressing street crack markets would reduce crime and disorder. Boston's gang unit has found gang members willing to share information useful for understanding and sometimes preventing gang violence. Black market gun dealers and kids who have acquired weapons illegally are rich sources of information.

**Parents and other community sources.** Parents in communities troubled by youth gun violence are potentially powerful sources of information. They should be encouraged to help the community set a "zero tolerance" standard. Some are likely to cooperate with police if they think their children will be treated well, and if they can do so safely. Departments should explore ways to build working relationships with such parents. School security authorities, teachers, youth social service workers, and church leaders could also develop information on the youth gun market. Some will be

willing to cooperate with police if their own interests are protected.

**Gun dealers and gun regulators.** Legitimate gun dealers may have information about how kids obtain guns and which adult intermediaries deal guns to kids. Black market gun dealers may be willing to inform on rivals or bargain with information when facing prosecution. Federal authorities may have information useful to local police, as well as the investigative and enforcement capacity to support local information gathering.

### *Putting It Together*

Although strategies would differ from city to city, one can sketch a hypothetical operation. To block access to gun supplies, police could work with parents and kids to identify owners of gun stockpiles. (Parental authorization would be sufficient to allow police searches of houses and apartments, perhaps during an initial amnesty.) Private and nonprofit partners could offer residents in high-burglary areas trigger locks and advice on storing firearms securely. Federal authorities could trace illegal weapons to licensed vendors, and put them under scrutiny or arrange for their licenses to be revoked. Prosecutors and courts could work to ensure swift and stiff punishments for adult "straws" selling to kids.

To attack the security of sellers, we need state laws making straws who sell guns to kids jointly liable for crimes committed with those guns. Police could work undercover and cultivate confidential informants to buy guns illegally. They could also offer juvenile offenders caught with guns plea bargains based on naming their suppliers. To attack the security of buyers, police could mount stings, offer black market dealers plea bargains based on fingering clients, work with parole and probation officers to intensify supervision of kids who are court-involved for gun offenses, and negotiate protocols for street searches with representatives of troubled communities. (To avoid antagonizing the community, these should be aimed at enlisting local

support for the exercise of existing police powers.)

To deter black marketers from selling to kids, authorities could mount comprehensive enforcement efforts against drug and fencing organizations known to be selling guns to kids (thereby sending a signal that such dealing will trigger attacks on all fronts of one's business). States could legislate asset forfeiture for dealing guns to minors. Related suppression of the street drug trade would take money out of the pockets of kids likely to buy and use guns. Raising the costs and lowering the benefits of the youth gun trade might dissuade new entrants into the business. To the extent that stores, bars, and other businesses were fronting for youth dealers, civil abatement proceedings could shut them down.

Fresh insights and strategies are likely to emerge both from close examination of particular markets and from experience gained as particular disruption strategies evolve. Richer information and operational experience could reveal unexpected opportunities.

In Tampa, for instance, equipping officers with digital beepers that allowed rapid, personal, but clandestine contact between the police and community supporters turned out to be critical to a robust flow of timely operational intelligence about street markets. And new tactics were developed during the operation that nobody could possibly have imagined ahead of time. Street dealers, for instance, generally hide stashes not on their persons but nearby—in a tree or a patch of tall grass—in case they are robbed or arrested. QUAD officers started getting calls from neighborhood sources who observed the dealers closely and could pinpoint the stashes. Police simply seized the drugs, strangling the dealers' cash flow. If we look hard, we are bound to find equivalent weaknesses in youth gun markets.

### *Other Strategies for Fighting Fear*

The more kids' fear can be reduced, the less they will want guns and the more effective

market-disruption strategies will be. Three ideas deserve particular mention. First, street drug markets and gang disputes create high levels of violence, disorder, and fear. Cities should explore QUAD-type operations to shut down drug markets, and work with kids and others close to the street to prevent gang violence. Police units like the Boston antigang violence squad and grass-roots groups like Clementine Barfield's Save Our Sons and Daughters in Detroit have had success preventing individual incidents from growing into vendettas. Second, criminal justice resources should be focused on taking repeat violent juvenile gun offenders off the streets. Third, some community policing departments are developing innovative means to identify and address fear. In one model operation in Baltimore County, officers defused a budding racial conflict by separating bus stops that brought warring groups of black and white kids into regular contact, then worked with both groups to prevent further trouble. More along these lines is possible.

No one of these measures is likely to make much of an impact. The power of market disruption and allied approaches would come from multiple attacks, and the interaction of multiple attacks, to the incentives and free functioning of the market. The mounting of the operation would itself be a deterrent; in many jurisdictions buying and selling in the youth black market is a largely risk-free enterprise, and a clever operation (including a community actively mobilized against guns) could hope to raise participants' sense of vulnerability considerably.

It is too much to hope that any of this would end illegal dealing in guns. But an effective youth market strategy might serve to split the adult market off from the youth market, leaving illicit dealers still in the gun business but unwilling, or substantially less willing, to deal to kids. It might, along with other efforts to fight fear, arrest the spiraling juvenile arms race. Given the juvenile death toll, and the special contribution of armed kids to the disruption of troubled communities, that would be a success. ♦