

VIOLENCE: A GROWING DANGER TO CHILDREN THE AMERICAN CASE

*James W. Sayre MD**

The world we live in is full of violence. There is recurring and persistent fighting in Northern Ireland, the former Yugoslavia, Russia, the Middle East. These are conflicts between differing religious groups, civil wars, wars of a political nature. I'm alarmed and ashamed to say that in our land we have our own issues of violence. These are not religious, civil or political but of a different kind. There are no warring factions; there will never be a winner or loser, for this is becoming what I think you can call a lifestyle. It strikes us suddenly, unexpectedly and usually unpredictably. Worse yet, these episodes of violence have become more frequent lately.

In June of this year we had four gunshot injuries in patients of our inner city office. This is where I do my pediatric practice. In the month of July in our city of Rochester, with a population of around 300 thousand, there were 14 homicides. There were recorded 50 homicides in the first eight months of this year, as many as occurred in all of 1992.

In the U.S. we count over 60 homicides per day, equivalent to 23,000 per year. By comparison, the U.S. military lost 46,000 men in all the eight years of the Vietnam war.

Homicides by handguns among all ages in 1990 have been compared in seven countries:

Australia	10
Sweden	13
Great Britain	22
Canada	68
Japan	87
Switzerland	91
United States	10,567

Our numbers are more than 100 times higher than the next highest country.

Furthermore, there has been a marked increase in homicides in children recently. In the age range 15-19, a 100% increase was noted between 1985 and 1991. Judging by preliminary figures for 1993, that will be much greater this year.

* Pediatrician, Rochester, United States of America.

As of this time we have no way of counting violence-related injuries as compared to mortalities, since hospitals and doctors do not report to a central agency. The likelihood of a permanent injury to the brain or spinal cord is great. We've had three that I've been personally involved with in the past two years. For a young person, this is a hard life to face.

How Does This Happen ?

While one might think that most such episodes of violence occur during house robberies, hold-ups in shops or on the street, to motor car occupants, this is simply not the case. The Federal Bureau of Investigation reports only 6% of such violence being related to drug use or drug dealing. Alcohol use is surely a factor, greater than drugs.

Demographics

The demographics are striking. Males predominate, in the 15-25 age range. Black, inner-city residents are four times more at risk than other males, and far more than females. Poverty, broken families, and unemployment loom large. The assailant and victim are frequently related, are commonly acquaintances and live near one another. The incidents occur in any location where children go: at home, on the street, on playgrounds, and increasingly in the schools.

Guns are Everywhere

In the United States, guns are easily available. The size and power is appalling. It is estimated that there are at least 200 million guns in non-military hands, of which about 60 million are hand-guns.

Studies repeatedly tell us that most people keep their guns at home, "at ready," loaded, easily available in a drawer, under the bed or pillow. We know that few of these guns have any kind of safety device. Many larger guns are loaded, in the closet, behind the door. Young children are, of course, fascinated by guns, have toy guns of their own for play. The real gun of father's is, of course, much more interesting, and we hear the story so often that a youngster was showing the gun to a neighbor child when it went off. One of my own patients, a two-year-old visiting his mother down in North Carolina, found a pistol and shot himself in the abdomen.

A Legal Right

We have a Constitutional amendment that specifies that to maintain a militia (a citizen's reserve), the right to own guns is protected under our Constitution. A very powerful group of gun enthusiasts, the National Rifle Association (the N.R.A.), resists any and all attempts to restrict ownership, importation, and

manufacture of any and all forms of guns, including so-called assault weapons, which are used for one purpose only, to kill. The N.R.A. rewards financially our legislative representatives to see that they do not allow any measures to be passed that would restrict gun activity in any way. On any occasion when our county legislature considers any measure that would restrict gun use or require safety devices, a massive turnout of N.R.A. members fills the room and noisily defends their views.

A Population Afraid

This epidemic of violence, stabbings and shootings has produced a state of great fear in our communities. People feel they are no longer safe, not just on the streets, but in the home, at work or in the car, even in hospitals. As a result, many people purchase guns for self-protection, carrying them at all times. There is a fallacy in this, however. A study just published shows clearly that gun ownership increases threefold the risk of death to the one possessing the gun. More police protection has developed, leading to more arrests, more jail sentences, more crowding of prisons. Meanwhile, in spite of this, homicides increase.

Why Does This Happen ?

Examining the apparent reasons why these shootings occur among our younger population, we find that there is often little or no justification for these shootings. We learn that there was an argument, that someone insulted someone else's mother, sister or girlfriend. Someone stole or even just used another's sneakers, jacket or bicycle. Someone is insulted by another on one day. The next day, to "get even," a gun is produced and used. Here's another example: Just a year ago, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, two teenagers were dressed up for a holiday party. One was a Japanese exchange student. They were looking for a party they were to attend. Mistakenly, they went to the wrong house. The Japanese student asked in broken English if this was the house of the party. The housewife who answered the door became frightened, called her husband, who came with gun, was also frightened, and shot the student dead on the spot. The citizens of Japan were so incensed they have collected two million signatures on a petition expressing their grave concerns, which will be presented to our President Clinton next month on the anniversary of the day President Kennedy was shot thirty years ago.

There's another major cause of these deaths: suicide. Depression in the young is a common phenomenon, and suicide attempts are often contemplated. The availability of a gun right in the house makes this easy to do at almost any time. The only son of a close friend and former pediatrician partner of mine took his own life along with that of a close friend in a double-suicide.

Contributing Factors

Looking more closely at the background of many of the young group from the "inner city" population, there appear to be some strongly contributing factors from family life. Our poverty and near-poverty population commonly live in very much disrupted homes where there is a pattern of aggression and ongoing daily conflict between parents, relatives, boyfriends. Young children copy these behaviors. More than half of black children are born to single-parent families lacking a father. A persistent high unemployment rate for all males can have a marked effect on their self-esteem. Such fathers feel useless, are unable to support their families. They often move from woman to woman, fathering more children. Children raised without a father's presence lack very necessary attention and control. The lack of a father figure in the home is particularly bad for boys. Having no father to pattern their lives after, they seek substitutes such as older boys, whom they see as strong, brave and daring. Many gain this identity and behavior from male TV stars whom they see doing dangerous things: fighting, crashing cars and shooting assailants. Even very young children in such families see and copy aggressive behavior. Their mothers, often barely grown out of childhood themselves, do not teach them to mind by using kindly words. Instead they holler, scream and spank them, demonstrating to them an aggressive style of personal interactions. Such children at an early age use loud, noisy and unpleasant language with their siblings and playmates. They learn to talk back to their parents. This style of interaction then gets carried along to the school setting where they annoy and challenge teachers. We know that behaviors are always established through early life experiences and are carried along, often for the rest of life.

What Can Be Done ?

Society must respond to these incidents. We think immediately of the need for more police protection. But the police response is always *after* the incident, after the damage has been done. Suspects are apprehended, often arrested. There then follows the court of law; people are imprisoned. Our prisons are overcrowded; we build more. Should young children be sent to prison? The prison scene is not a good one either. There is no treatment, no counseling in prison. And, as you may have seen from the Los Angeles police beating episode of Rodney King, the interaction of police with our black population is not a satisfactory one, producing building and lasting resentments. Schools have now begun to inspect children with metal detectors at the door. Some have a police officer in the school walking the corridors.

Limiting Gun Use

Restraints on guns is another attempt at a solution. The so-called "Brady Bill,"

presented for several years to Congress, would invoke a waiting period of five days in gun purchases to allow a police check on the purchaser. Yet the N.R.A. has repeatedly caused rejection of this. President Bush, an N.R.A. member himself, imposed a restriction on the import of assault weapons for a short time. Production in the U.S. could be stopped. One of our states, Connecticut, has been trying to limit production of assault weapons in the state, but fails to get support in the legislature. A group of us pediatricians in Rochester has campaigned for two years to persuade parents to store their guns safely and to use locks on the gun trigger to prevent childhood accidents. We developed a poster which we have given to doctors to display in their examination rooms. While waiting to see the doctor, people can read it over. This promotes discussion with parents on the importance of gun safety. Ten states now have laws that make the parent guilty in any incident where a child of theirs commits such an act.

Medicine's Response

Over 30 years ago we began efforts to deal with a form of family violence called child abuse, declaring that medicine, particularly pediatrics, has a major responsibility to search carefully for children injured by this means. We have met that challenge by a whole system of reporting and protecting children so exposed. By the pure weight of numbers and risks, we physicians should be even more alarmed by this issue. However, little has happened so far. Medicine's response has been largely limited to a "sew 'em up," admit to hospital, approach. Since the major treatment is surgical, we practitioners often do not even learn that an injury has occurred to our patient. When we are informed, we console the family, often making referrals to mental health counselors.

A Pediatric Responsibility

As pediatricians we have told ourselves that we are in a unique position to examine and understand the functioning of the family, their lifestyle, some of their interactions, their family supports. Nowhere does this seem easier than in the first several years of a child's life, when families come for frequent well-child visits. The interactions of parent and child and even child with siblings can be examined and discussed. Since many minor disputes between parent and child occur in my office under my direct observation and often provoke parents to be harsh and noisy in attempting to control their behavior, I find I can intervene right then and discuss better means of control.

Responses of the child in school to the teacher's authority is another touchpoint of adverse behavior. Teachers often call us and look to us for help. In our offices we can discuss the matters of picking the right friends, goals for the future, interests, habits, hobbies and sports. How to settle conflicting views without

arousing intense anger is another important subject. Some extra time is necessary for these discussions—time I consider to be well spent.

School Programs

A number of schools have developed programs that take up these issues of conflict with the children in classroom groups. Curricula have been developed for this type of discussion. There are now a few pediatricians who make themselves available to conduct just such school discussions. Ingenious "mediation" and "peacemaker" programs have begun to develop. From these come some students who become just such "peacemakers" themselves.

Action in Neighborhoods

We have begun to see action on a very local level where neighborhoods pull together to change their own environment: cleaning up, clearing out drug "pushers," patrolling the streets, watching out for each other's children. In the middle of Harlem, New York City, where gun and knife injuries are a daily occurrence in the Harlem Hospital, a pediatric surgeon, Dr. Barbara Barlow, pushed the community and the city to clean up the parks, start sports programs for children. Parents began to take pride in their new parks and clean streets, chased out the drug pushers. Vegetable and flower gardens appeared in the parks. The hospital had an unoccupied floor. Barlow used the floor to start classes in dance and gymnastics for the girls. A striking result of these efforts was a 25% reduction in traumatic injuries treated in Harlem Hospital.

In an area of Newark, New Jersey, which was destroyed in the riots of the 1960s, a group of inhabitants worked together to rebuild their own neighborhood, doing construction, developing their own shops and stores, parks and sports fields, small industries, health care facilities, churches—a whole new community. All this with a very small amount of outside capital. There is no violence. The people themselves see to that.

The Role of Television

It is time for people to speak out about another part of the violence problem: TELEVISION! The television industry can CLEARLY be held responsible for adding much fire to this bad situation. America produces phenomenal amounts of violence and explicit, traumatic sex for programs directed at all ages. Efforts have been made to change this. Thus far, not much has happened on a voluntary basis, largely because the public seems to enjoy this kind of entertainment and the advertising industry thrives on popularity "ratings." There appears to be a slowly growing sentiment for more effective action through legislation, but that will probably be very slow in taking place.

Summary

A frightening, growing epidemic of senseless, irrational and inexcusable violence has seized the United States. While it involves all ages and localities, the occurrences are predominantly in areas of poverty, poor housing and unemployment. Children, particularly the adolescent and young adult male black population, are at greatest risk. There are recognized many contributing forces such as low self-esteem, family disruption and single parenting. Country-wide there is easy access to guns and lack of gun safety guards. Violent television sets an example for our youth and lends an air of adventure and excitement to their lives. The solution to this enormous problem is clearly not an easy one and must be through a combination of many social and legal changes. This is most assuredly a medical problem and demands thought and active participation by physicians. There are a number of strategies for physicians, especially pediatricians. We must look carefully at family interactions, attempting to promote more kindly behaviors, enhance self-esteem. School-age children can be helped through office discussions and collaboration with teachers. "Leave the knives and guns at home, avoid noisy arguments, use more kindly words." "Television is not real life; the actors do not die." These are our people. Their needs are great. We must help.