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ABSTRACT

This article is an adaptation of the authors statement to the U.S. House of Representatives Bipartisan Working Group on Youth Violence on September 15, 1999. Specifically, the Working Group asked Dr. Steinberg, an adolescent behavior researcher, to address issues concerning the role of parents and families in the genesis and prevention of youth violence. The author notes that among the most powerful predictors of mental health problems among children and adolescents are poor family relationships, and that children with mental health problems are at risk for developing patterns of antisocial and violent behavior. Conversely, parental engagement in their children's lives is one of the most important contributors to children's healthy psychological development. It is argued that any attempt to reduce youth violence must include a systematic effort to improve the home environments of Americas children and adolescents, and in particular, to engage parents in the business of parenting. (GCP)

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Youth Violence: *Do Parents and Families Make a Difference?*

By Laurence Steinberg

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What follows is an adaptation of Dr. Steinberg's insightful and thought-provoking statement to the U.S. House of Representatives' Bipartisan Working Group on Youth Violence on September 15, 1999, described below. The Working Group asked Dr. Steinberg to address issues concerning the role of parents and families in the genesis and prevention of youth violence.

about the author

Laurence Steinberg, Ph.D., is the Distinguished Professor of Psychology at Temple University in Philadelphia. For the past 25 years, he has been conducting research on factors that influence adolescent behavior—both normal and abnormal. He is especially interested in the role of the family in adolescent development and in the ways in which parents can help foster healthy youth development. Dr. Steinberg is the Past President of the Society for Research on Adolescence, the largest organization of social scientists interested in adolescent behavior and development. He also is the director of a national initiative funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to examine a number of issues concerning the treatment of youthful offenders within the juvenile and criminal justice systems.

I am pleased to be able to address the Bipartisan Working Group on Youth Violence—a matter of national importance. (See "The Bipartisan Working Group on Youth Violence.") I want to commend the committee for taking on this task, for doing so within a climate of bipartisanship, and for selecting a range of briefing topics that reflects the complicated and multifaceted nature of the phenomenon of youth violence in America.

You have asked me to address issues concerning the role of parents and families in the genesis and prevention of youth violence. I shall do this, but before I do, I'd like to make a few introductory comments that will place my remarks in a broader context. I do this because I can think of very few topics that inspire more heated, or more misinformed, debate than that of juvenile violence, and I want to make sure that whatever this group recommends is based on solid evidence and not inflamed rhetoric.

The Bipartisan Working Group on Youth Violence

The Bipartisan Working Group on Youth Violence was formed by Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Rep. J. Dennis Hastert and House Minority Leader Rep. Richard Gephardt, on June 25, 1999. The Working Group's goals were to study the issue of juvenile violence and help provide solutions. A Final Report was released in early March 2000.

The Working Group explored six main issues:

- Parents and families.
- Law enforcement.
- School safety.
- Community programs.
- Pop culture and media.
- Health.

The Working Group identified the following seven themes:

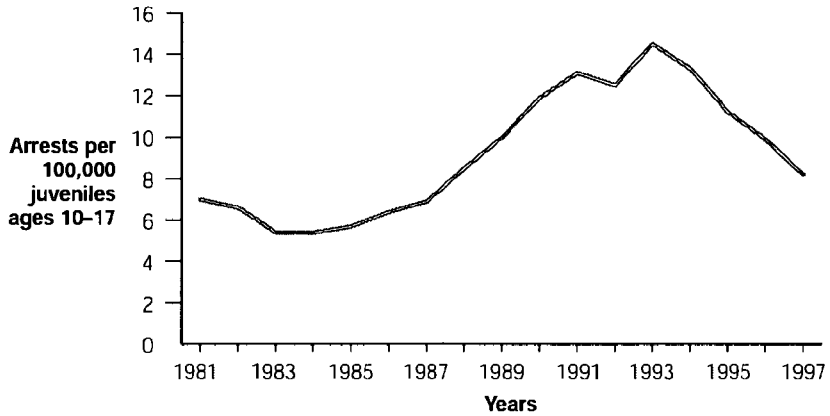
- Prevention and early intervention programs are essential.
- Parents and communities must play active and positive roles in children's lives.
- Youth health programs and mental health services must be accessible.
- The juvenile justice system should treat youth individually, with the goal of rehabilitation.
- Sharing of information among educators, law enforcement, judges, and social services is essential.
- Schools are prime locations to identify at-risk youth.
- Congress should fund only programs showing effective outcomes and demonstrating continuous benefit.

For more information about the Working Group or to request a copy of its final report, visit http://www.house.gov/dunn/workinggroup/wkg.htm.

Youth Violence—Increasing or Decreasing?

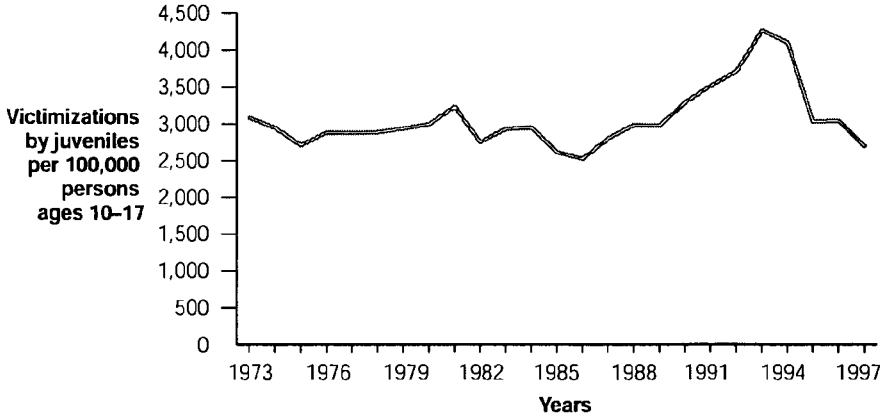
Let me begin by correcting a commonly held misconception. In your statement about the purpose of the working group, you indicate that the group's goal is to identify causes and advance solutions to fight the rise of youth violence in our Nation today. I think it is important to point out, however, that youth violence is *not* on the rise in America today. According to reports from the U.S. Department of Justice, the juvenile homicide arrest rate has dropped steadily and dramatically since 1993. (See figure 1, next page.) This occurred, as you know, along with a steady decline in violent crime among all age groups.[1] But the steepest decline in violence during

Figure 1: Juvenile Arrest Rate for Murder, 1981-1997



Source: Snyder, Howard N., *Juvenile Arrests 1997*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, December 1998 (NCJ 173938). Analysis of arrest data from unpublished Federal Bureau of Investigation reports and from *Crime in the United States* for 1995,1996, and 1997 (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996, 1997, and 1998, respectively); and Bureau of the Census, for 1980 through 1989, *Current Population Reports*, P25-1095 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, 1993), and for 1990 through 1997 from *Population of the U.S. and States by Single Year of Age and Sex*. For data, see the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Web site at http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/ojstabb/qa257.html.

Figure 2: Rate at Which Juveniles Committed Serious Violent Crimes, 1973-1997



Source: Snyder, Howard N., and Melissa Sickmund, *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1999 National Report*, Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, National Center for Juvenile Justice, September 1999 (NCJ 178257).

the 1990's, and especially during the last 5 years, has been among young people. The percentage of violent crimes attributed to youth is lower today than it was 25 years ago. (See figure 2.)

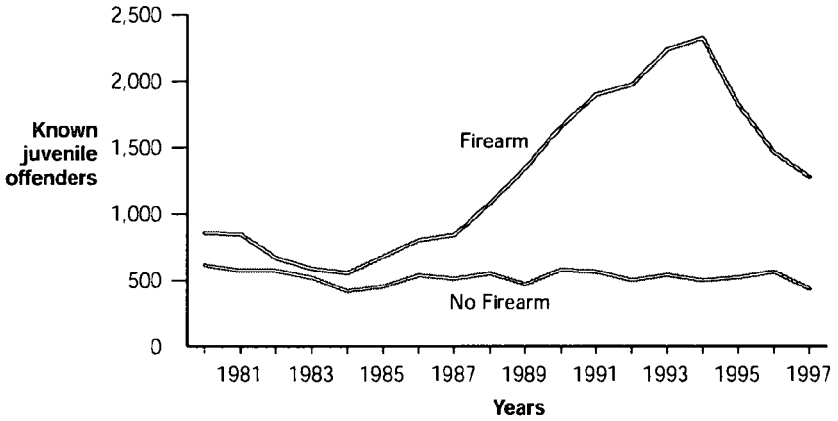
This welcome decline in youth violence in America also includes a decline in school-related violence. Despite the attention given to school violence by the mass media over the past year, the number of violent school-related deaths in the United States is lower today than it was in 1992.[2] Statistically speaking, schools are among the safest places for children to be. Yes, 12 children were killed at Columbine High School in one horrific incident. But more than 12 children die from gunfire in the United States every single day—not in school, but in their homes and neighborhoods. So if we are concerned about preventing youth violence in America, we need to focus on settings other than schools. We can put security systems inside each and every school in America, but this will barely affect the overall rate of youth violence because only a very small portion of violence committed by or against young people occurs in schools. In terms of preventing youth violence, there are better ways to spend our tax dollars than equipping schools with security systems and metal detectors.

My intent is not to minimize the extent or seriousness of the problem of youth violence in America. No level of violence against America's children is acceptable. At the same time, however, one of the most important functions this committee can serve is to make sure that the record is set straight and that the American public is not unduly alarmed by incendiary remarks about "superpredators" and unsafe schools. Youth crime is declining. Youth violence is declining. School violence is declining. American schools, by and large, are safe places for children.

Restricting Young People's Access to Firearms

I understand that the committee has been asked specifically to look at issues beyond gun control, perhaps in an effort to stimulate, or simulate, bipartisanship. Yes, the problem of youth violence in

Figure 3: Firearm Related Homicides by Juveniles, 1981-1997



Source: Snyder, Howard N., and Melissa Sickmund, *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1999 National Report*, Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, National Center for Juvenile Justice, September 1999 (NCJ 178257).

America is attributable to many factors in addition to the easy access that young people have to lethal weapons. But I would be remiss as a social scientist if I did not say that there is overwhelming evidence that the availability of guns is the single most important factor that distinguishes youth violence in this country from youth violence in other parts of the world.[3] Our young people are no more violent than young people from other nations. What is different about youth violence in America is not that the violence our young people commit is more frequent, but that it is more lethal, and this is because of the weapons they use. Analyses of crime trends from FBI data show quite clearly that the rate of nongun-related violence among American youth has remained constant over time and that all of the increase in youthful violence during the past 25 years has been in gun-related incidents. (See figure 3.) It is the *nature* of youth violence, not its prevalence, that has changed.

This does not mean that we should ignore other factors, like those you will be discussing over the coming weeks. They are important, too. But it does call for some truth-in-advertising in the committee's report. If we are serious about reducing youth violence in America, we need to restrict the access that young people have to guns. I know it, you know it, and the American people know it.

The Role of the Family

I doubt that there is an influence on the development of antisocial behavior among young people that is stronger than that of the family. My goal in this presentation is to share with you what social scientists have learned about the role of the family in the genesis of youth violence and to suggest some possible ways of using parents and communities to help prevent violent incidents among our young people.

There is no single cause of youth violence, but when there is a common factor that cuts across different cases, it is usually some type of family dysfunction. Many young people who become involved in violence come from families in which there is a long history of domestic violence. Many young people who are violent have been raised in homes that have been, if not technically abusive, hostile and conflict-ridden. Many come from families in which parents are negligent or disengaged from their child-rearing responsibilities. Exposure to violence or abuse in the home, exposure to hostile and punitive parenting, or growing up in a home environment in which parents are not sufficiently involved in their child's life are among the most important risk factors for the child's subsequent involvement in violent and other types of antisocial behavior.

Modeling. There are a number of psychological pathways that connect parental aggression, hostility, and disengagement to violence and other types of antisocial behavior in adolescence. One certain pathway is through modeling: When children are exposed to violence in the home, they come to see violence as relatively more acceptable, and they are more likely to resort to violence to solve problems. This is often referred to as the "cycle of violence," and there is good evidence that the acceptability of violence in interpersonal relationships is often carried from one generation to the next. Children who are themselves the victims of violence, or who witness violence against others in their home, are at risk for becoming violent themselves at some later point in time.

Biological Factors. A second pathway connecting experiences in the family with subsequent violence involves the developing brain. Here we do not know as much as we would like to know, but the knowledge base is expanding rapidly, and it looks as though some children may be *biologically* more inclined toward violence by the time they reach adolescence. This does not necessarily mean that violence is genetically transmitted, however,

because, as many of you know, early experience in the family can affect brain development in profound ways. It is likely that poor prenatal care, prenatal exposure to drugs and alcohol, exposure to high levels of lead in the environment, and early abuse or neglect can alter brain development in ways that lead some children to have more difficulty controlling aggressive impulses.

Mental Health. A third pathway connecting family dysfunction with adolescent violence is through the development of mental health problems. I understand that this working group will devote one of its subsequent meetings to a discussion of mental health and its relation to youth violence, but it is relevant to raise this issue in the context of today's discussion. Children with serious mental health problems, including conduct disorder, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse problems, and anxiety disorders, are far more likely than other youngsters to become involved in antisocial and violent activities. Among the most powerful predictors of mental health problems among children and adolescents are poor family relationships. Children whose parents are hostile and punitive, as well as those whose parents are neglectful, are at risk for developing all sorts of mental health problems, and children with mental health problems are at risk for developing patterns of antisocial and violent behavior.

Parenting and Personality Development. A fourth link between negative parenting and youthful violence is through the impact that negative parenting has on youngsters' personality development. Two particular pathways stand out as very important. First, children who have been exposed to hostile parenting are more likely than others to develop problems in controlling their emotions—psychologists call this emotion regulation—and this places these children at risk for letting aggressive impulses spiral out of control. Second, children who have themselves been victims of violence at home are likely to develop a biased way of looking at the world. They see other people's actions as intentionally hostile when their actions may actually be innocuous. They may interpret a strange look from someone else or an accidental bump while standing in a school lunch line as deliberate and malicious, and they may lash out as a result.

Among the most powerful predictors of mental health problems among children and adolescents are poor family relationships. Children whose parents are hostile and punitive, as well as those whose parents are neglectful, are at risk for developing all sorts of mental health problems, and children with mental health problems are at risk for developing patterns of antisocial and violent behavior.

Academic Performance. A fifth pathway linking family problems with adolescent violence is through the impact of negative parenting on youngsters' academic performance. There is now some very good research indicating that involvement in aggressive and antisocial behavior during adolescence is frequently preceded by school problems of one sort or another, including academic failure and conduct problems. Children who have problems in school often gravitate toward peer groups of other troubled children, and these peer groups frequently become involved in antisocial behavior. Engagement in school is a strong protective factor against antisocial behavior, and positive family relationships are predictive of school engagement.

Peer Pressure. A final pathway connecting family problems with subsequent violence concerns the role that the family plays in influencing adolescents' susceptibility to peer pressure. One of the most important differences between the criminal behavior of adolescents versus that of adults is that adolescents tend to offend in groups, along with other adolescents. This is not to say that peers are an inherently negative influence on teenagers' behavior, but it is to note that a large proportion of violent acts committed by adolescents are

committed within the context of peer pressure. Many adolescents will do risky, dangerous, or illegal things when in the company of their peers that they would not do when on their own. Adolescents who are most able to resist peer pressure are those who have strong and positive relationships at home. In contrast, a lack of parental involvement or supervision places adolescents at risk for involvement in antisocial peer activities and increases youngsters' vulnerability to negative peer influence. Thus, even if large numbers of adolescents are unsupervised after school because their parents are working, not all unsupervised adolescents will engage in acts they know are wrong simply because their friends pressure them to do so.

What the Research Tells Us

Research conducted by my colleagues and myself, reported in the 1996 book, *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to Do*, is informative in this regard. In this study of a diverse sample of more than 20,000 American teenagers from nine different high schools, we looked at the prevalence and consequences of different types of parenting. By far, the adolescents who had the greatest number of problems—not just with antisocial behavior, but also in school, in personality development, and in general mental health—came from families in which parents were hostile, aloof, or uninvolved. These predictors of adolescent dysfunction were identical across ethnic, socioeconomic, and household groups, in that children from homes characterized by negative parenting were at risk for problems regardless of their ethnicity or income and regardless of whether their parents were married, divorced, single, or remarried. In other words, the quality of the parent-child relationship matters much more than the social demographics of the household.

Perhaps the most worrisome finding in our book concerns the high level of parental disengagement we saw in our sample. About one-fourth of the students in our sample were allowed to decide what classes to take in school without discussing the decision with their parents. About 30 percent of parents did not know how their child was doing in school. One-third of parents did not know how their child spends his or her spare time. One-fourth of the students we surveyed said their family "never" did anything together for fun, and only 30 percent said their parents spend some time talking with them each day. Our estimate of the prevalence of parental disengagement at somewhere between 25 and 30 percent is in accord with data reported in other national surveys.

In our study, the problems associated with disengaged parenting were evident across all of the outcomes we studied, including antisocial behavior. Adolescents from disengaged homes were substantially more likely

MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice

The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation founded the Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice in 1997. It combines policy analysis, research, dissemination, and technical assistance to expand knowledge about the juvenile justice system. The Network examines the assumptions upon which current practices are based, both to improve legal practices and policymaking within the system and to ensure that the most accurate adolescent development information is used. The Network has sponsored two edited volumes, both of which will be published by the University of Chicago Press in 2000: *Youth on Trial*, edited by Thomas Grisso and Robert Schwartz, and *The Changing Borders of Juvenile Justice*, edited by Jeffrey Fagan and Franklin Zimring.

In addition to Dr. Steinberg, the Network's members are Jeffrey Fagan of Columbia University; Sandra Graham of the University of California–Los Angeles; Thomas Grisso of the University of Massachusetts Medical Center; Darnell Hawkins of the University of Illinois at Chicago; Amy Holmes Hehn of the Portland, Oregon, District Attorney's Office; Daniel Keating of the University of Toronto; Patricia Lee of the San Francisco Public Defenders Office; The Honorable Paul McGill of Concord, Massachusetts; Edward Mulvey of the University of Pittsburgh; Robert Schwartz of the Juvenile Law Center; Elizabeth Scott of the University of Virginia; and Franklin Zimring of the University of California–Berkeley.

Among the Network's many research efforts is the first-ever large-scale longitudinal study of serious and violent juvenile offenders. The study will track 1,200 adolescents in two major metropolitan areas who have been convicted of felony charges and will look at the ways in which different sorts of sanctions and treatments, as well as forces in adolescents' homes and communities, affect patterns of desistance and recidivism.

to show psychological immaturity and adjustment difficulties, as evidenced by less self-reliance, lower self-esteem, and diminished social competence. Adolescents from these sorts of homes were more likely to show psychological problems, both in terms of various types of misconduct (drug use, delinquency, etc.) and in terms of various types of distress (anxiety, depression, psychosomatic complaints). And adolescents from disengaged homes were less interested in and less successful in school.

Parental engagement in their children's lives is one of the most important—if not the single most important—contributors to children's healthy psychological development. Not only our studies, but also those of several other researchers, show quite clearly that adolescents whose parents are not sufficiently engaged in their lives are more likely to get into trouble than are other youngsters. Parental disengagement is a very good predictor of many of the problem behaviors whose levels have reached alarming proportions: Alcohol and drug abuse, delinquency and violence, suicide, and sexual precocity. The fact that nearly one in three parents is disengaged from their adolescent's life is a clear reason to worry about the future well-being of America's young people.

I want to stress here that parental aggression, hostility, and disengagement are *risk factors* for the development of youthful violence, but they are not infallible predictors. In fact, the majority of children who have aggressive, hostile, or disengaged parents are *not* violent. And this is precisely what makes the prediction of adolescent violence so difficult: When we look backward into a violent child's developmental history, we often see patterns of family dysfunction. But if we were to try to predict forward, by identifying children from dysfunctional families and asking whether they eventually become violent, we would be extremely disappointed with our forecasting. This is why I believe that attempts to identify potentially violent young people before they have committed acts of violence will prove unsuccessful. The vast majority of children we would identify as potentially violent on the basis of background factors will never commit an act of violence, and, consequently, many youngsters would be unfairly stigmatized under any such screening system. At an aggregate level, however, at a public health level, it is safe to say that if we could reduce the prevalence of negative parenting—if we could reduce abusive, hostile, neglectful, and disengaged parenting—we would see a significant drop in youth violence and a significant improvement in adolescents' mental health, school performance, and general well-being. It therefore makes sense to ask about the antecedents, or causes, of negative parenting and whether there is anything we can do to reduce its prevalence.

Causes of Negative Parenting

Negative parenting, like adolescent violence, has multiple causes. Yet, we can make some broad generalizations about the conditions under which parents become abusive, hostile, or neglectful. By far, the most insidious cause of negative parenting is poverty. Economic stress, whether chronic or acute, increases the risk for negative parenting, which in turn increases the risk for youthful violence. Anything we can do to help more American families out of poverty will reduce adolescent violence.

A second cause of negative parenting is parental mental health problems. Parents who themselves suffer from a mental illness or who have a substance abuse problem are more likely to be abusive, hostile, and neglectful toward their children. Thus, if we could do a better job of identifying and treating adults with serious mental health and substance abuse problems, we would likely see a decline in antisocial and violent behavior among young people.

A third contributor to negative parenting is the lack of community support for families. I want to be clear about this: I do not believe that it takes a village to raise a child, nor do I think there is any evidence in contemporary America that children are raised by villages. I believe that it takes competent and caring parents to raise children, but that parents' ability to be effective in this role is influenced by the community in which they live. Parents under stress, because of deteriorating housing, inadequate childcare, conflicts between work schedules and family life, terrible schools, inadequate transportation, or poor health care, cannot parent as effectively as those who live under more benign conditions. I am not saying that poor day care, poor housing, or poor medical care causes youth crime. What I am saying, however, is that these and other stressors increase the likelihood that parents will be abusive, hostile, or neglectful, which in turn increase the risk of youth violence.

Finally, a significant contributor to negative parenting is the widespread dissemination of information about parenting that is often incorrect and sometimes even harmful. Many parents believe that their children do not need them any more after they have entered adolescence. Many parents believe that physical punishment is the best way to discipline children. Many parents believe that parents don't matter because children's development is determined by genetic factors or by factors out-

Parental engagement in their children's lives is one of the most important—if not the single most important—contributors to children's healthy psychological development.

side the family. All of these beliefs are wrong, and all are contradicted by scientific data. We need a public health campaign in America to make sure that all parents know how to raise psychologically healthy children and that they are willing to take responsibility for doing this.

I noted earlier that my colleagues' and my research indicates that the fundamentals of effective parenting cut across different demographic groups. How does this observation square with the widespread belief that the problem of youth violence is concentrated among a small segment of the population that is disproportionately composed of families who are poor, from ethnic minority groups, and headed by single parents? The answer is that these groups are most likely to live under the sort of stressors I described a moment ago and that it is these stressors, and not the color, marital status, and income level of a family, that most affect the child's behavior. Simply put, it is harder for a poor, single inner city parent than for an affluent, married, suburban parent to be a good parent. But when poor, single parents in the inner city raise their children in effective ways, their children are unlikely to engage in violence and other antisocial activities. By the same token, and as the Columbine tragedy indicates, coming from an affluent, suburban, two-parent household is no guarantee against violence.

The Role of Popular Culture

Much has been said in recent discussions of American youth violence about the contribution of popular culture to the problem. I, therefore, want to say a few words about the role of the family in the development of youth violence within the context of a culture that glorifies violence and exposes young people to countless images of murder, mayhem, and mass destruction.

I fear that discussions of the role of the mass media in the genesis of youth violence have made many parents believe that they are insignificant in the face of their youngsters' exposure to the media. If anything, however, just the opposite is true: The exposure of adolescents to potentially negative influences outside the family makes the involvement of parents in their children's lives all that much more important.

Exposure to violence in the media plays a significant, but very small, role in adolescents' actual involvement in violent activity. The images young people are exposed to may provide the material for violent fantasies and may, under rare circumstances, give young people concrete ideas about *how* to act out these impulses. But the violent impulses themselves, and the motivation to follow through on them, rarely come from watching violent films or violent television or from listening to violent music. I say this for several reasons.

First, there is good evidence that aggressive children are more inclined than other children to watch and listen to violent entertainment; for this reason, it is difficult to say whether the observed correlation between being exposed to media violence and actually engaging in violent behavior is due to the impact of media use on behavior, which is what critics of the mass media contend, or due to the fact that individuals already inclined toward violence simply have more violent tastes to begin with. Very few studies have taken this so-called "selection effect" into account, but when it is accounted for, the alleged "impact" of media violence on aggressive behavior is very small.

Second, the very same violent imagery that is purportedly behind the high level of violence among American youth appears to have no impact on young people from other countries, where violent films and music are at least as popular, if not more so, than they are in the United States. If violent behavior were so clearly associated with violent film viewing, rates of violent youth crime would be sky-high across Europe, Asia, and South America, where Hollywood exports an awful lot of its violent entertainment. Violent youth crime in these countries is far less prevalent than in the United States, however.[4]

Finally, studies that have documented harmful "effects" of media violence have typically looked at very minor sorts of outcomes—whether children push each other on the playground or punch inflatable dolls, for example. Beyond anecdotal evidence, I know of no research that links the sort of serious violence this working group is concerned about with exposure to violent entertainment. And given the tremendous

For More Information

- Steinberg, Laurence, B. Bradford Brown, and Sanford M. Dornbusch, *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to Do*, New York: Simon & Schuster/Touchstone Books, 1997.
- The MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice, http://www.mac-adoldev-juvjustice.org. Marnia Davis, Network Administrator, Department of Psychology, Temple University, 215–204–0149.
- PAVNET (Partnerships Against Violence Network), http://www.pavnet.org, is a virtual library of information about efforts, many of them federally funded, to reach children and young people at risk for violence. Compiled with input from several Federal agencies, it is a one-stop, searchable information resource to help reduce redundancy in information management and provide easy access to information.
- *Preventing School Violence: Plenary Papers of the 1999 Conference on Criminal Justice Research and Evaluation—Enhancing Policy and Practice Through Research, Volume 2*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, April 2000 (NCJ 180972). Includes "Community and Institutional Partnerships for School Violence Prevention," by Sheppard G. Kellam; "Research-Based Prevention of School Violence and Youth Antisocial Behavior: A Developmental and Educational Perspective," by Ron Prinz; and "Controlling Violence: What Schools Are Doing," by Joseph F. Sheley. Copies can be downloaded from the NIJ Web site: http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij. Hard copies can be obtained by calling the National Criminal Justice Reference Service at 1–800–851–3420.
- Federal Government agencies are collaborating through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Division of Adolescent and School Health. An inventory of the collaborative efforts related to school violence, categorized by type, can be found at http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dash.

and widespread exposure of American youth to media violence, this is very good news. It is likely to be the case that exposure to violent entertainment increases the likelihood of violent behavior only among teenagers already inclined to behave this way, and the weight of the evidence suggests that this inclination likely has its origins in the home. Curbing adolescents' exposure to violent entertainment, without addressing the familial problems I noted earlier, will have little impact on youth violence in America.

Strategies Needed to Reduce Youth Violence

Any attempt to reduce youth violence in our country must include a systematic effort to improve the home environments of America's children and adolescents and, in particular, to engage American parents in the business of parenting. We cannot afford to have a generation of young people come of age where one-third do not have parents who are sufficiently engaged in their lives. In addition to policies designed to limit young peoples' access to lethal weapons, I can think of no more important strategy than one designed to reduce abusive, hostile, and negligent parenting and promote healthy parent-child relationships. We can do this by improving prenatal care, expanding parent education, and promoting family-friendly policies that reduce poverty, prevent and treat mental health and substance abuse problems, and enhance parental effectiveness.

These are goals on which we can achieve a broad and enthusiastic bipartisan consensus.

NCJ 181732

Notes

1. *National Crime Victimization Survey 1973–1997*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1998. *Uniform Crime Reports*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1998.
2. Serious violent crime constitutes a small percentage of the total amount of school crime, and homicide is extremely rare. While the number of multiple homicide events at school has increased, there exists a less than one in a million chance of suffering a school-associated violent death. Fewer than 1 percent of the more than 7,000 children who were murdered in 1992 and 1993 combined were killed at school. In the 1992–93 and 1993–94 school years combined, 63 students ages 5 through 19 were murdered at school and 13 committed suicide at school. Nationwide, during roughly the same time frame, a total of 7,357 children aged 5 to 19 were murdered and 4,366 committed suicide, both in and out of school. Preliminary data indicate that school-associated violent deaths have decreased in the past 2 years. U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice, *Annual Report on School Safety, 1998*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, October 1998 (NCJ 173934.)
3. Zimring, Franklin E., *American Youth Violence*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
4. Ibid.

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