

VIOLENCE, YOUTH

National Information Center
for Service Learning
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and A Way Out



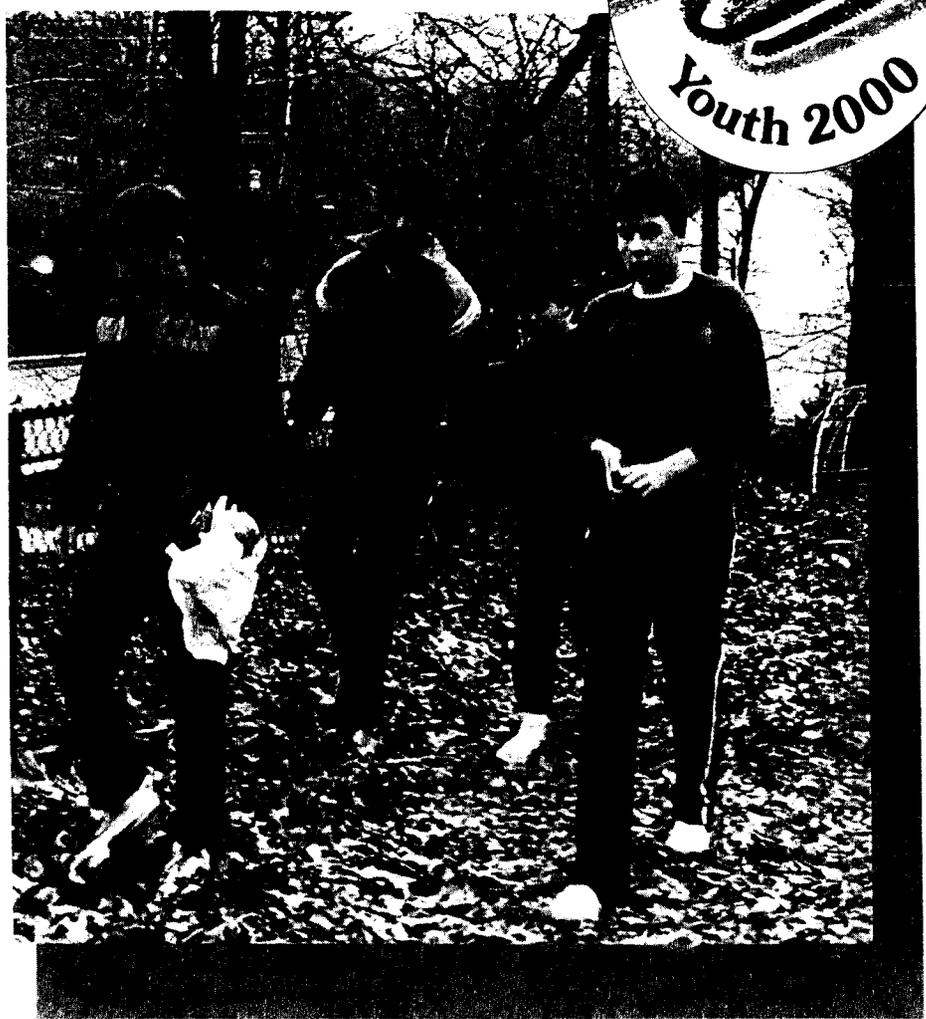
by John A. Calhoun

It is a conviction shared by those who care for young people and their families that violence among youth has reached intolerable levels and that a response is demanded. The homicide statistics are chilling: In 1986, four to five people under age 18 were murdered per day, 10 percent more than in 1985. Equally chilling, three to four people under 18 were arrested for murder every day, a seven percent increase over 1985.¹

The violence that engulfs young people goes beyond homicide. Although teens commit crimes in disproportion to their numbers, they are twice as likely as adults to be victims of violent crime and 10 times more likely than the elderly. Violent crime against teens doesn't come from total strangers. About 45 percent of teen victims report that they recognized the offender. And the violence is predominantly intra-racial: 83 percent of black teen victims report black assailants, while 76 percent of white teen victims report white assailants.²

While the statistical picture is appalling, the key question is not "How many?" but "Why?" Why does a 14-year-old think that robbery is the way to get a radio or jacket? Why does a 12-year-old see assaulting someone as a rite of passage? Why is the acceptable retort not "I disagree" but "I will get you. . . ." And why has "I don't like you" been replaced with "Now that you're dead, I don't have to deal with you anymore?"

Violence among young people is a complex problem. Preventing violence, like other forms of crime pre-



vention, requires a variety of solutions. And while we must treat the symptoms—the manifestations of violence—we will have failed if we do not simultaneously treat the diseases that underlie the symptoms.

This article explores some of the underlying causes of violence, examines approaches to solving the problems, and looks at some specific programs that offer hope. While doing so, two facets of the issue need to be kept in mind: Most kids aren't violent and, given a choice, don't

want to be around violence. However, for many of the young people who resort to it, violence works, at least in the short term. It gets them what they want—adult attention, a pair of sneakers, respect, a boom box radio, peer approval.

The Underlying Problems

Violence is one manifestation of crime, and like crime, it arises in specific communities in reaction to conditions in those communities. Crime

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can be prevented where there is trust and mutual support, even if the neighborhood is disadvantaged. But if the links of trust do not exist, anyone seeking to develop crime prevention must build them.

Community Structure and Institutions. Communities thrive or fail to thrive, become healthy or diseased, as a result of the strength or weakness of the bonds woven by and among community institutions—work, family and kin, religious and civic associations, a local economy capable of generating stable livelihoods, and good schools. Many studies reveal that increases in crime and violence are signals that the front line institutions—family, school, church and civic groups—have failed to hold. For example, Albert Reiss, Professor of Sociology at Yale University, asserts that “deviance or criminality results both from the failure of personal controls . . . and failure of formal and informal social controls . . . Certain kinds of community structure either weaken forms of social control that induce conformity to law-abiding norms or generate controls that inhibit conformity.”³

In other words, the community’s structures and institutions can either reinforce and renew its agreed-upon rules, be neutral, or at worst push large numbers away from abiding by the community’s understood rules.

Economic Health. Studies of employment and crime consistently show that the kinds of low-paying, unstable jobs often available to young people offer them no solid stake in their communities, little reliable hope for the future, and a frail counterweight to the temptations of a fast, illegal buck.

Loss of Control. Weak parental and community controls over youths give rise to a peer control system that supports co-offending, and to networks that simplify the search for accomplices. Hence, there is crime and a predisposition toward violence—learned, perhaps, from domestic example.

Our current national obsession with

the issue of violence may actually rise from a more basic source of anxiety: What worries so many people is a sense of loss of control and authority of social institutions.

Absence of Role and Recognition. Psychologist Rollo May notes the connection between crime and powerlessness: “. . . deeds of violence in our society are performed largely by those trying to establish their self-esteem, to defend their self-image and to demonstrate that they, too, are significant.”⁴ Alvin Poussaint believes that poor black teenagers with little education and low self-esteem resort to macho displays of violence to preserve a “twisted sense of dignity. It’s not the content of the argument that turns a minor dispute into a murder,” he maintains. “These kids will kill to save face. . . .”⁵

Disconnection. Arising from and along with these disruptive forces on the community are a series of problems centered more proximately around adolescence. Teens are by definition in transition. They are undergoing the radical change into physical, intellectual, emotional and economic maturity. Their self-images may be clouded; their self-esteem is often fragile.

However, teens also bring to adolescence freshness, vigor and an undaunted spirit. If these assets can be captured for the community, we can help to enhance teenagers’ self-image and self-esteem and help the community meet vital needs. Teens are eager to explore their community, to test their growing skills and abilities in the adult world. In order to mature, they need to interact with adults in the community, to gain a sense of place and a stake in that community, as well as a useful and responsible role in it. If these are lacking, many youths may disconnect from the anchors of family, school, work, community and the future. The absence of such bonding strikes at the very heart of our political structure, for if teens do not view themselves as being subscribers to the social contract to which the rest of us subscribe,

they will see no sense in following it.

What’s The Answer?

Obviously, there is no single solution to preventing violence among youth. Nor does the responsibility for doing the job rest solely with “the government” or “the community.”

The response and the responsibility must be shared. There are roles to be played by each level of government—federal, state and local—and by private as well as public bodies. Multiple steps on multiple fronts are critical to eventual success.

But the strongest response is possible when many segments of society join together. One avenue that the National Crime Prevention Council is pursuing is to encourage government at federal, state and local levels, along with parents, schools, police, business owners, churches and social institutions, to work together to help prevent that wasteful and destructive disconnection of young people from their communities. In other words, to help them develop a sense of stake in their communities and in the future.

Our approach involves both program and process. The program focuses on providing teens with opportunities for responsible contribution; the process focuses on “dignity of exchange” in which the ability of the individual to contribute is acknowledged as an integral part of the individual’s receipt of needed services. We must help teens, but we must also start *claiming* them as assets.

We have termed the concept “Youth As Resources” to highlight the positive engagement of teens’ abilities and skills. The program, now in its third year, currently involves hundreds of young people in Boston and three Indiana cities in activities that prevent crime and improve their schools and communities.

Youth As Resources

In 1986, the National Crime Prevention Council received a grant from

the Boston Foundation to design a program to provide small grants for locally-generated community service projects. The projects had to meet three criteria: They had to be run by teens (if necessary, with adult assistance); they had to address needs deemed important by the community; and they had to allow those participating some kind of public recognition. Ten "Youth As Resources" projects were funded during the program's first year. They included projects in which students built a playground and garden for a women's shelter, handed out surplus food, and served as mentors for younger children. More than 200 youths participated in the pilot project.

In July 1987, Lilly Endowment, Inc. awarded the National Crime Prevention Council a \$768,848 grant over a 3-year period to begin Youth As Resources projects in Evansville, Fort Wayne and Indianapolis. Each of the cities has set up an independent board comprised of local leaders in community service, business, education, youth affairs, criminal justice, social and employment services, and communications. The board awards grants, ranging from \$500 to \$5,000, to projects in which teens are respon-

sibly involved at every stage from planning through final evaluation. The National Crime Prevention Council's role is to provide consultant services, training, monitoring and evaluation, and to produce and disseminate policy documents as well as appropriate reports.

The boards in each of the cities have funded a variety of projects, with a great diversity of participants. In one local project, for example, youths serve as "reading buddies" throughout the summer and school year to neighborhood children who are reading below grade levels. A Boy's Club group in another city produces and performs skits for younger children on such topics as avoiding drug use and staying in school.

In other projects, youths are helping elderly residents of their neighborhoods with chores and errands, working with other young people in detention facilities, and building houses in the inner city for no-interest mortgaged sale to low-income families.

Conclusion

Such projects are giving young people positive and constructive opportunities to explore their com-

munity and identify ways to integrate themselves in the community they will share as adults. Such efforts are telling the youths, "We want you; we need you; there's a place for you."

Claiming and valuing teens, both in general program opportunities and in social service exchanges, can enhance self-esteem and develop that vital sense of stake, even overt investment, in the community and the future. Teens with such a stake not only have no reason to resort to violence; they have every reason to avoid and deflect violence, and to help drive it from their environment. ■

¹Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in America*, Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of Justice, 1985 and 1986.

²Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Teenage Crime Victims*, Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of Justice, 1986.

³A. Reiss (Ed.), "Why Are Communities Important in Understanding Crime?", *Communities and Crime*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986.

⁴E. Currie, *What Kind of Future? Violence and Public Safety in the Future? Violence and Public Safety in the Year 2000*. San Francisco, National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 1987.

⁵Ibid.

National Crime Prevention Council

The National Crime Prevention Council was founded in 1982 in response to the soaring crime rate of the 1970s and the growing concern of citizens to combat it. A nonprofit organization, NCPC receives financial support from the U.S. Department of Justice, as well as from corporations and foundations.

In addition to the "Youth As Resources" project described in the accompanying article, NCPC conducts the "Take A Bite Out of Crime" campaign—featuring McGruff, the Crime Dog—and has

developed, with the National Institute for Citizen Education and the Law, a curriculum entitled *Teens, Crime and the Community*. Currently being used in almost 300 high schools in 19 cities, the curriculum focuses on reducing young people's chances of becoming a victim of crime and engaging teens to help make schools safer and better. Other NCPC publications include:

• *Making A Difference: Young People in Community Crime Prevention*, which documents how teens have helped make schools and com-

munities safer and better.

• *Watch Out, Help Out—The Teen Action Kit*, a collection of camera-ready masters of brochures and articles to help teens both reduce their own risk of becoming crime victims and aid friends and their community.

Further information on NCPC's programs and resources may be obtained from John A. Calhoun, Executive Director, National Crime Prevention Council, 733 15th St., N.W., Rm. 540, Washington, D.C. 20005.