

2006 Saw a Resurgence in US Violence Rates

In 2006 the news contained 22 incidents of school violence and reports show that violence in some major US cities was higher last year than it has been in decades. Violence among females and pre-teens is also rising, and the US has a greater violence rate than any other Western Nation. As a country, we need to act now to stop this epidemic.

Most Americans put their faith in the penal system. We think that by investing money in jails and rehabilitation centers, we will be able to cut down on violence and deter future criminals. It is necessary to place these offenders in jails and prisons to protect society; however, in order to substantially cut down on future violence, we must shift our focus and invest time and money into more resources for prevention and intervention.

USA Today reported that cities, such as Cincinnati, Houston, New York, Chicago, Oakland, Philadelphia, and New Haven, had higher murder rates in 2006 than in prior years ("Murders are up in New York, several other U.S. cities for 2006," USA Today, December 28, 2006).

Authorities blame this violence on issues surrounding respect, revenge, reputation, and romance. Others say it is the availability of firearms. While either explanation may be true, we need to look deeper at societal issues, such as violence in American families and schools. For example: Shortly after ringing in the New Year, the news carried reports of 2007's first school shooting. Douglas Chanthabouly, 18, was taken into custody for the shooting of Samnang Kok, 17, at Henry Foss High School. Now there are reports of two teens cooking a puppy in an oven, one teen stabbing and killing another, and a group of teens beating three teen girls severely last Halloween.

Children should feel safe school, and yet far too many do not. While most schools have emergency and evacuation plans for what to do during and after the crisis of a school shooting, how many have prevention plans?

School prevention plans should include three elements:

- 1) Immediate and easy access to mental health services for all troubled youth and their families (Only 10% of all school districts in the US currently have an established School Based Mental Health Programs. (CSMHA - Dr. Weist, University of Maryland)).
- 2) Early screening of children with behavior problems to determine the services that are needed
- 3) Major reform and coordination of the Educational, Mental Health, Juvenile Justice, Criminal Justice, and Social Services systems.

Youth at risk for violence have problems in multiple areas of life, such as school failure, behavior, mental health, and social skills. Helping them in one area and ignoring other problems is not sufficient to solve the problem.

Patricia Crowther, a pioneer in school-based mental health, believes that there are an astounding number of children who need mental health services, but never receive them. "One of the most pressing and plaguing problems presented to educators," she says, "is the ever increasing number of children, who despite an inherent ability to learn are not benefiting from a regular classroom teaching experience as shown by their continuing academic underachievement." She believes that the student's lack of improvement is often due to unaddressed mental health, stress, family, and trauma issues that could also lead to future delinquent and violent acts.

Studies have shown that only 16 percent of all children receive any mental health services. Of that same 16 percent, 70-80 percent receive that care in a school setting (Health In School Organization).

"The burden of suffering experienced by children with mental health needs and their families has created a health crisis in this country," writes David Satcher, MD, PhD in his "Report of the Surgeon General's Conference on Children's Mental Health: A National Action Agenda." Clearly our violence problem is a public health crisis, as well, and it must be fixed.

As a solution, we can continue to spend more money on trials and jails. However, we must also put more money into prevention, identification, and therapy for troubled youth and their families. Money spent in pre-school programs with family involvement, home visiting programs, and school based mental health programs is well spent and has demonstrated great results. It's time to take a stand and do more to prevent violence in this country.

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About the Author

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