Violence Prevention As A Public Health Priority
by Peter Edelman and David Satcher

Violence kills so many Americans and sends so many others into the health care system that we must consider it a public health problem. Reducing the incidence of violence is a major priority for our nation. Aside from its tremendous personal toll, violence destroys our communities. Even with increased law enforcement efforts, it has escalated to pandemic levels. We must pay attention to the forces that fuel violence so that we can keep it from happening, rather than simply taking care of the consequences of violent acts. One way to do so is to take a public health approach, with a focus on primary prevention. This means looking at patterns, risk factors, and causes; designing and evaluating interventions; and putting effective programs in place. This approach, which integrates the contributions of many different disciplines, sectors, and groups, has brought great successes in preventing motor vehicle injury deaths and reducing the toll of smoking.

Primary prevention aims to keep violence from occurring in the first place. In this way it can be distinguished from efforts directed at those who already have committed violent acts or who have been the victims of violence. Law enforcement is essential, but it is not enough. A focus on primary prevention means that we can address various social and economic forces that are important causes of violence. Poverty, lack of opportunity for education and jobs, and discrimination all are associated with violence. Also, our culture’s obsession with violence, which is underscored by the proliferation of firearms and the romantic depiction of violence in the media, contributes to the problem and makes it much more difficult to remedy. Recognition of these forces in society does not take away from the responsibility that all of us bear for our own actions. But it suggests that we can prevent some of the violence by changing some of the socioeconomic conditions underlying it.

Research and action. We must approach the task of prevention systematically and scientifically. To succeed, prevention efforts must be imple-
mented at multiple levels: individual, family, community, and society. We must admit at the same time, though, that we do not have all the answers about what works in preventing violence; we must carefully learn as we go.

Yet even without perfect knowledge, we can do a great deal. The problem demands immediate action, and promising strategies do exist. We can help young people to acquire both the life skills and the job training that will prepare them for a productive place in society as adults. We can enact and enforce regulations that restrict the use of alcohol and firearms among youth. And we can work to improve the physical and social environments of young people so that violent acts are less likely to occur around them.

As we put these ideas into place in the community, we must carefully evaluate their effectiveness and continually adapt our strategy to incorporate what we learn. Above all, we must keep in focus the true mission: to help our children. Therefore, our agenda must be scientific and sound. We must not exclude any potentially effective interventions on the basis of philosophy or politics.

Clinton administration priorities. This administration is interested in addressing some of the larger socioeconomic forces that cause violence at the same time that we strengthen law enforcement. To that end, the administration will move to support and evaluate new intensive and comprehensive efforts that provide an array of services to youth, including basic education as well as education in conflict resolution skills; enrichment programs to enhance understanding and appreciation of positive influences; job skills training; recreation programs; and mentoring. The administration will look at new ways of preventing firearm injuries, focusing especially on getting guns out of the hands of youth and children.

One of the most important things this administration can do is to instill hope—especially among young people—that the destruction that violence brings into our lives can be stopped. Among youth, especially minority youth, hopelessness is at the base of many problems, including violence, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, and early school dropout. Today, more than in any other period in recent history, in many inner-city communities there is a striking lack of hope, as families have deteriorated and positive role models have become scarce. This environment of hopelessness breeds despair, and it also breeds violence and related problems.

We must convince our youth that better days are coming. To do this, we need an army of peace, made up of teachers and students, police, social workers, health workers, parents, and everyone else who has contact with young people. Public health provides a model for integrating the many different disciplines and groups that need to be part of the solution. At the federal level, we already have begun unprecedented work across a number of departments. President Clinton has asked seven Cabinet agencies to
work together to analyze the problem and propose solutions. He has asked his administration to look at violence across the board: violence in the streets (which consists mainly of violence among youth), violence within families (which victimizes primarily women and children and increasingly the elderly), violence between groups (which grows out of hate and ignorance), and the violence of sexual assault. President Clinton wants answers in the policies of every department and in the ways in which the departments work together. He wants ideas for people to use everywhere: both privately and governmentally at state and local levels, both individually and in neighborhoods and communities.

If we are successful in these efforts, the benefits will be enormous. Most important will be the lives saved, the injuries and disabilities prevented that would have resulted from violence, and the improved quality of life in our communities. There also will be economic savings from reduced health care costs and costs for rehabilitation of people injured by violence. These benefits will be immediate; we will not have to wait twenty to thirty years to see the results of prevention efforts as we must do with other public health problems such as heart disease and cancer.

**Violence prevention as a public health issue.** Critics have questioned the public health approach from two sides. One criticism comes from those who see violence primarily as a problem of criminals and solutions that are limited to stronger law enforcement. On the other side are those who view violence mainly as a product of social discrimination, racism, and poverty. This group is worried that calling violence a public health problem is a form of “blaming the victim.”

In reality, as we have said above, viewing violence as a public health problem includes solutions that respond to both of these views and includes much in between as well. Violence is a significant public health problem. Public health methods can be effective in preventing violence: We can monitor the problem and conduct research to analyze factors that lead to its occurrence, to concentrate resources where needed, and to evaluate the various forms of intervention, such as conflict resolution, environmental enhancements, firearm control, and punishment of perpetrators.

It is important to recognize that all parts of our society are affected by this epidemic, and all have a role to play in its prevention. There are many forms of violence, and no geographic or socioeconomic sector is untouched. Youth violence may take its highest toll in the inner cities, but youth suicide, child abuse, and spousal abuse occur everywhere. Violence is not just a minority problem; there is no causal link with race. However, it is closely associated with poverty and other social ills that our society must address. Violence is not an intractable problem. When we all work together to prevent violence, we will make a difference.