Addressing The Crisis Of Violence
by Donna E. Shalala

Of all the health and human service challenges we face, perhaps the most devastating and, ironically, the most preventable is the epidemic of violence sweeping across this nation. Violence is not some mysterious bacterial infection or inexplicable new disease; rather, it is a phenomenon for which we are responsible, and we can prevent it. It is time we stopped the denial and claimed our power to halt the bloodshed and save lives.

The tradition of public health is to seek systemic measures to prevent illness, injury, and death. That is why I consider violence a public health problem. But violence also is connected intimately to the very structure and culture of our society. It is demonstrably linked to dozens of social and economic problems yet to be fully addressed in the United States. These problems include poverty, poor housing, racism, sexism, homophobia, substance abuse, joblessness, and hopelessness.

When I contemplate the crisis of violence and its costs, I think first of the insanity of the deaths and needless injuries to thousands of innocent young people in our country—some at the hands of abusive adults, some at the hands of other young people, some by their own hands. It is no less tragic when a husband beats his wife, or a zealot shoots a doctor at a family planning clinic, or a caretaker abuses an elderly patient.

I will not repeat the all-too-familiar litany of statistics, which the papers in this volume address in detail. We know where the trends are heading. Instead, I want to challenge policymakers to join me in rethinking both the causes of violence and the failed solutions of the past, so that together we can begin to stem the tide.

Attitudes Toward Violence

Let’s start by looking at our own attitudes toward violence and conflict resolution. Too often the debate is only about “them”—the perpetrators of
physical violence. I suggest instead that we all look in the mirror to face the fact that there is no mysterious “them”—just us.

Here are some questions to ask ourselves: What is my own attitude toward the use of violence to settle disputes? Is it ever justified? Do I keep a loaded gun in the house? If so, why? How do I react when I approach a group of urban youth on the street? Do I enjoy watching gratuitous violence on television and in movies, and do I allow the proliferation of violence in the entertainment media to have any influence on my behavior? Has America lived up to its promise of equal opportunity for all—regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnic origin? Have I? Do I believe in the youth of America, or do I regard them, or some of them, as a hopeless generation? Do I accept the fatalistic attitude that violence is inevitable and will always exist?

In thinking about how these questions, simple as they seem, address the roots of violence in our society, we begin to realize that our attitudes create a culture in which violence is either encouraged or discouraged.

Each of us has the potential to contribute to a culture of violence, either actively or passively. In this context, the debate about television violence is vital. Two kinds of media violence command our attention. The first is obvious: the sheer volume of violent images that are available through television and movies. Children see at least as much of this as anyone else. The American Psychological Association (APA) has estimated that the average American child watches 8,000 murders and 100,000 acts of violence on television before finishing elementary school. The avalanche of violent acts tumbling out of our television sets sends a message to the youngest and most impressionable viewers that “might makes right” and that reason and compassion have no role in conflict resolution. We must pay attention to the psychological effects of this torrent of violent images on our youth—particularly young people living in high-risk environments.

Perhaps in response to all of the attention the subject is now receiving, the networks are making efforts in this area. The National Coalition on Television Violence (NCTV) reports that the three major networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) have decreased the number of violent acts shown during prime time from 8.6 per hour in 1991 to 7.7 per hour in 1992. While the networks are to be applauded for moving in this direction, television still has tremendous potential to help parents and teachers to teach our young people that violence is not the solution to the conflicts they face.

The second kind of violence is slightly more subtle, but no less insidious: the terrible, dehumanizing racial, ethnic, and gender stereotyping that still pervades popular culture. From one-dimensional portraits of young black males as dangerous drug dealers to music videos that degrade women to simplistic depictions of Asian Americans as the “model minority,” stereo-
typing commits violence against the soul. And this cultural bigotry ultimately creates the anger and alienation author James Baldwin expressed almost thirty years ago when he wrote, “To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time.”

Breaking The Cycle Of Violence

So how do we break the cycle of violence in America? At the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) we know that responding to violence must go beyond effective law enforcement, as critical as that is, and extend to its economic and social causes—everything from joblessness and discrimination to poor housing and inadequate education.

Federal policymakers in Washington are in the early stages of designing a coordinated, interagency approach to violence prevention. HHS is now talking with the Departments of Education, Labor, Justice, Agriculture, and Housing and Urban Development, as well as the Office of Drug Control Policy and other federal offices, to devise new and effective strategies. Elsewhere in this volume Peter Edelman of my staff and David Satcher, head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), outline more fully the goals of the interagency working group on violence. Our aim is to mobilize a truly comprehensive national coalition to dig at the roots of violence and begin to weed it out of our lives and our culture.

Federal strategy. Among other things, we want to (1) improve anti-violence curricula and mediation training in schools—starting with preschoolers in Head Start; (2) create youth development initiatives that connect adolescents to an array of adult mentors and role models, build bridges to the job market, and create constructive year-round academic enrichment and recreation opportunities; (3) improve intervention and alternative sentencing mechanisms for youth on the brink of serious trouble, since our research shows that a full continuum of community-based programs tailored to meet individual needs offers more promise of preventing chronic patterns of problem behavior than does institutionalization; (4) support community-based efforts to prevent violence and to heal racial and cultural divisions and eliminate hate crimes; (5) prevent family violence through a stronger emphasis on family preservation—a major component of President Clinton’s recently passed budget; (6) support the Brady bill and other sensible strategies to reduce gun violence; (7) enlist both the news and entertainment media to reexamine their depiction of violence and to deliver antiviolence messages; (8) examine more closely the connection between substance abuse and violence; (9) support research that tells us which violence prevention strategies work best in which settings; and (10) assist local law enforcement efforts to protect communities and make
Americans more secure as they conduct their daily lives.

**Comprehensive approach.** Violence in America is a complex phenomenon, requiring comprehensive solutions. Government cannot do it alone. We need input from professionals and policymakers, as well as from citizens from every walk of life. Until we all answer the call through a greater emphasis on finding peaceful remedies to conflicts, de glamorizing violence, and expanding opportunities, especially for youth, we will all remain hostage to violence and the threat of violence in our society.

To those who say that it is a task too big to handle, I say that whenever America has applied its collective will and skill to an urgent national problem we have succeeded. And we can draw strength in our struggle from the words of Martin Luther King Jr., who said, “Nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral questions of our time: the need for man to overcome oppression and violence. Man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.”

---

**NOTES**