

Preventing school violence

A time for “hard, solid thinking”

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On my office wall hang several quotes from the Rev Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. That is probably not surprising, considering that much of my work involves the prevention of youth violence. No one in American history has spoken more passionately or eloquently than Dr King on the evils of violence. One of the quotes from Dr King on my wall, however, is not found in books of famous quotations, nor has it become part of the lexicon of American history as have so many of his words. Yet, as I work on youth violence prevention, this is often the quote I find most inspirational:

Rarely do we find men who willingly engage in hard, solid thinking. There is an almost universal quest for easy answers and half-baked solutions. Nothing pains some people more than having to think.

At times of crisis, it is especially important to listen to Dr King’s message. For US schools, never had there been a crisis on the scale of what happened in Columbine High School last year. On April 20, 1999, two students at this high school in Colorado killed 12 students and 1 teacher and injured 21 others before committing suicide. This followed several school shootings during the previous school year. After the tragedy at Columbine, parents, government officials, and the news media called for immedi-

ate solutions to school violence. Proposed solutions included restricting access to campuses so that students and others could not enter or leave during the school day, posting armed police officers in schools, increasing the use of metal detectors, tightening gun control legislation, and trying young perpetrators in adult courts. Loud cries were heard for the development of “warning signs” to identify students who might perpetrate such crimes in the future. Security companies began offering their services to “profile” possible school shooters.

It is understandable that the public would want easy answers and quick solutions in the face of extreme violence such as that at Columbine. We all are concerned for the safety of children at school. But as scientists concerned about young people, we are responsible for doing “hard, solid thinking” rather than accepting these easy and quick solutions. To implement solutions that work, we must first understand the nature of school violence and the characteristics of effective interventions.

The problem is more one of youth violence than school violence. While school shootings like the one at Columbine High School have increased public attention to violence associated with schools, the fact remains that most American schools are safe places. Less than 1% of all homicides and suicides among school-aged children (5-19 years of age) occur at school or on the way to or from

school.¹ Nonetheless, homicide is not rare among American children. It is the 4th leading cause of death among Americans aged 10 to 14 years and the 2nd leading cause of death among those aged 15 to 24 years. In 1997, 283 children aged 10 to 14 years and 6,146 adolescents aged 15 to 24 years were murdered. The US child homicide rate, 2.57 per 100,000 for children younger than 15 years, is 5 times that of 25 other industrialized countries combined.²

Violence is not amenable to easy or quick solutions. Behavioral, biological, social, and environmental factors all are associated strongly with the development of violent behavior. These factors have been addressed, using many primary and secondary prevention approaches, by the fields of criminal justice, social services, mental health, education, social sciences, and public health. No single discipline alone can prevent violence. A complex problem such as violence must be prevented through a combination of approaches.

In the week after the shootings at Columbine High School, US government agencies met to develop a coordinated research agenda for preventing youth violence. At the same time, agency staff working on youth violence prevention were inundated with urgent requests from higher ranking officials, legislators, the press, and the public for new projects, studies, and announcements regarding school violence. It soon became clear that no one understood what each agency was already doing to address youth violence. Without this knowledge, it was impossible to prevent duplicative work, create new partnerships, or develop better interventions.

As a result of the meeting, an inventory of federal activities that address violence in schools was developed. Each agency listed its activities related to school violence and recommended other agencies to contact for additional activities. The agencies described activities that directly seek to prevent or respond to violence that occurs on school property, on the way to or from school, or at school-related events. They also described activities that indirectly address school violence by focusing on precursors of violence, factors associated with violence, or mechanisms for preventing violent behavior.

The inventory includes more than 100 activities involving some 10 federal departments and more than 25 agencies, including those targeting health, mental health, education, justice, labor, and housing and urban development. The activities are grouped into several categories: surveillance, evaluation research, other research, research synthesis, programmatic activities, resources, and technical assistance centers. The inventory was published in April 2000 in the *Journal of School Health*³ and posted on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site: www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dash/violence/index.htm. Schools, community groups, national organizations, and

state and local agencies can use the inventory to find school violence prevention resources and to get accurate information about federal violence prevention and research activities.

By describing the breadth and depth of current activities, the inventory may provide a base for planning future violence prevention research and practice. A wide variety of activities are under way. The sponsoring agencies understand that these activities might generate a greater return on investments if funds were pooled rather than used for multiple similar interventions. Fewer than a third of the projects listed in the inventory name collaborators. Most collaborations involve sharing advice, information, data, or access to constituents. Only a few projects involve joint funding. A close examination of current federal activities can help us understand those aspects of violence development and prevention that might be better addressed jointly and direct funding toward those areas.

More intensive collaboration can be hampered by the lack of a common vocabulary. We need to understand that people from different backgrounds have different vocabularies. Vocabulary differences need to be described and understood by all parties for them to collaborate effectively. A good example is the term "surveillance." Ask a person trained in public health to define it, and the response will approximate the official CDC definition of



The shoes of students killed in the Columbine High School shooting, included among those of other victims of gun violence displayed at a gun control rally

public health surveillance: “the ongoing and systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of health data in the process of describing and monitoring a health event.”⁴ On the other hand, ask someone involved in criminal justice, and you might hear something like “the surreptitious collection of information about an individual or organization.” Although sometimes comical, conversations between public health and justice agency staff about “improving surveillance of school-associated violence” can be frustrating and confusing to the point of breaking down collaborations if we do not make an effort to communicate better.

Developing a shared logic framework is an excellent way to examine differences in vocabulary and define areas of responsibility. In the United States, the White House Council on Youth Violence is leading an activity to map federally sponsored projects onto an agreed-upon logic framework of violence causation and prevention. The clusters and gaps identified will point toward areas of possible duplication of effort and areas where we can increase collaboration across agencies.

One example of a cross-agency activity that made the effort to develop a shared logic framework is the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative.⁵ This initiative brings together various agencies within the departments of Education, Justice, and Health and Human Services. Staff from each agency has been assigned to work together on Safe Schools/Healthy Students. Funding streams have been combined. Although it took nearly a year, the definitional and turf issues of collaborative work have been addressed. This exciting new project is funding more than

70 communities across the United States to implement activities such as school and community-based mental health services, police support in schools, and educational activities directed at reducing school violence and increasing opportunities for healthy childhood development. The pooling of funds also has allowed for the development of a national evaluation and a technical assistance center to support local projects.

It has been more than 30 years since Dr King, who spoke so eloquently in support of nonviolence, was himself a victim of homicide. In the years since, many hundreds of interventions have been developed and implemented in isolation from one another. The time has come to recognize that successful violence prevention involves multiple interventions and multiple partners. It is time for those from all fields of study interested in violence prevention to come together and do the hard work of thinking through a comprehensive solution.

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