What Works to Prevent Violence

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Much discussion of violence takes place without awareness of what the social sciences are demonstrating does work to prevent it. My purpose in this short space is to present some of the well-demonstrated research results about what does work, quoting extensively. The results are corroborated by multiple studies with different methodologies. Furthermore, they strikingly resemble the results of just peacemaking theory, developed by twenty-three interdisciplinary scholars focusing on preventing the violence of war, *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* (Pilgrim Press, 1998). There we also show the striking correlation between these results and biblical teachings about peacemaking.

Emphasize Preventive Initiatives

"This book was inspired by the fundamental belief that current policies aimed at addressing personal violence... are obsolete, ineffective, and deceptive to the public.... We are guided as well by the belief that, in the long run, prevention is cheaper, more effective, and more humane than the vast majority of our current efforts at detection, deterrence, punishment, or containment" (Wolfe, *Alternatives*, ix; see also Benson, *passim*). "Unfortunately, new scientific evidence about the causes of violence or about the effectiveness of some intervention might also be rejected merely because its implications conflict with" many people's politically, ideologically, or ethically formed values. "In effect, people use their convictions about policy to judge the accuracy of findings and the effectiveness of interventions, rather than the other way around.... Violence control policy is therefore less innovative and effective than it
should be" (Reiss 38-39).

Maybe Jesus was saying something similarly critical when he said revenge and hate are not the way of deliverance, but instead we should engage in transforming initiatives of peacemaking (Matt 5:38-48; cf. Romans 12:17ff.)

**Take Direct Action with Television**

"According to the American Psychological Association task force report on television and American society..., by the time the average child... who watches 2 to 4 hours of television each day finishes elementary school, he or she will have witnessed at least 8,000 murders and more than 100,000 other acts of violence on television" (Wolfe 85). This is powerful conditioning.

Studies indicate that "exposure to media violence at a young age can have lasting, long-life negative consequences. If aggressive habits are learned early in life, they may form the foundation for later antisocial behavior." One research team "concluded that early viewing of violence on television stimulates aggression and that early aggression is a statistical precursor to later criminal behavior.... Their analyses indicate that approximately 10% of the variability in later criminal behavior can be attributed to television violence" (Geen 177-78; Benson 42).

The most important initiative parents can take, and that they can teach children to take, is to boycott TV shows that especially influence people to be violent. These are shows in which:

- perpetrators of violence are rewarded or not punished;

  perpetrators are portrayed as admirable or similar to the viewer;

  violence is portrayed as being justified in the circumstances;
violence is portrayed as a real event, rather than concocted;

violent acts are portrayed so they please the viewer;

viewers are young children. (Geen 185-91).

Beyond boycotting, parents can encourage programs that model ethics and conflict resolution. During the 1980s, the three major television networks cut the number of hours they devote to prosocial and educational programming for children by 80%. Sesame Street and other such TV programs were highly successful, not only in teaching reading, numbers, etc., but also prosocial concepts such as "sharing, empathy, concepts of right and wrong, deferred gratification, saving, stereotyping, and appreciation of different people, cultures, and religions" (Hampton 133f. and 148-9).

"Parents can be taught to view television as a resource that needs to be managed." The process of establishing priorities and discussing program preferences as a family "makes children think about the issues of gratuitous sex and violence, concepts of right and wrong, and what constitutes viable entertainment. As such, it helps children form their own value systems within the family context" (Hampton 152). It's like nonviolent direct action modeled by Martin Luther King, Jr.: boycotts as protest and as economic pressure for change, and direct action to affirm prosocial programs.

**Talking is Crucial: Do Early Training in Conflict Resolution**

Research results indicate that "most violent events are preceded by escalation from verbal conflict through insults and threats," and that teaching people to interrupt escalation by mediation and conflict resolution is effective and lasting if they are taught in the early grades. They are much less effective if not taught until high school, after habitual responses to conflict have been formed and reinforced by years
of practice (Reiss 8 and 108-9). It is all the more effective to teach conflict resolution and talking things through even earlier in life, in the family, rather than parents relying on physical dominance and bodily punishment. "Research on maltreated children and adolescents clearly shows that in interactions with their parents, these children receive less verbal interaction, less approval, less instruction, less shared play..., and less reasoning during conflict situations. Similarly research on violent adolescents shows that" their relationships have low amounts of positive emotional expression and communication. This parallels research on attachment, which shows that warmth and sensitivity by the mother produces secure attachments and positive child behaviors and adjustment. Furthermore, "what young people value more than anything else are relationships. They want good interpersonal ties and they want to be loved. The contest isn't even close" (Wolfe 97-99). Maltreated toddlers and violent men alike have poor verbal skills for describing their own emotions (Wolfe 110). "Association of high levels of anger and violence is bolstered by the lack of verbal skills and verbal assertiveness of violent-prone individuals. In other words, not being able to effectively 'talk' it out, abusive individuals 'act' it out, using violent actions to regain control" (Wolfe 95, 97).

"Numerous studies have shown that violence in the home creates a pattern and expectation among children and youth that violence is an appropriate reaction to stress and an effective way to express anger. Children who are abused at home are much more likely to become violent youth" (Hampton, 164). African Americans are more likely to use physical violence in disciplining children, including belts, cords, switches, sticks, and straps. Hispanic parents are less likely, and white parents are least likely to use physical violence in disciplining. This (and not something intrinsic to race) is a likely explanation of the different homicide rate among the three groups who are raised with more or less violence as children. (Hampton, 64-65). "One study of African-American adolescents found that three factors most closely correlated with their perpetration of violence: exposure to violence and victimization in the community, degree of witnessing family conflict,
and severity of corporal punishment used at home" (Hampton 69). "Reinforcing positive social behavior, providing positive adult role modeling, and actually teaching children skills such as how to resist negative peer pressure and how to resolve conflicts peacefully are among the most promising approaches for preventing both alcohol and other drug use and violence.... Family-oriented programs that offer prenatal care for expectant mothers, teach parenting skills, and offer health, social, and educational services to parents in need are a crucial first step in violence prevention" (Hampton 171-2).

**Foster Economic Justice**

Relative economic deprivation is a major cause of homicides. "The national homicide rate has peaked twice in this century; each peak was followed by a decline. The first peak was in the early 1930s," during the Great Depression. After 1934, as jobs and real income steadily improved, "the rate then fell for the next 30 years, to reach a low in the early 1960s." When the post-Vietnam stagflation hit, the homicide rate began to increase in 1973 until it hit something of a peak in 1980-1983, and a higher one in about 1989, during the period when job-providing and job-training programs were being canceled, real income of workers and of the poor was declining, and income was being shifted to the wealthy, so that the ratio of income of the wealthy to worker income doubled. Then in the 1990s, as real wages and employment steadily improved, the homicide rate has declined steadily each year (Reiss 3, 51, 64, and chapter 2; Gurr *passim* ). This economic deprivation effect is confirmed in another way: "Rates of abuse--physical and sexual--are 6 times higher for children in families with income under $15,000 than for other children" (Reiss 10). It follows that job training, assistance to the working poor, and greater justice in income distribution are effective ways to cut homicides.

Better police-community relations, so police get more help and are more
effective in catching criminals, does help decrease homicides. But punitive justice, as in increasing length of sentences and putting juveniles in adult prisons, does not help. "While average prison time served per violent crime roughly tripled between 1975 and 1989, reported levels of serious violent crime" did not decrease (Reiss 6). Evidence suggests that putting juveniles in adult prisons results in a "much lower probability of any treatment while in custody, and an increased risk of subsequent offending when released" (Elliott, 10-11, 171). Putting people in jail for longer sentences does not cure the widespread culture of violence, but a public-health approach like the Los Angeles Coalition does work effectively to reduce violence (Hampton 197 and 202-6).

Strengthen Community Organization

Community breakdown is a powerful cause of violence. Violence is increased by the inability of parents "to distinguish neighborhood youth from outsiders, to band together with other parents to solve common problems, to question each others' children, to participate in voluntary organizations and friendship networks, and to watch neighborhood common areas. Single parents who work have less time for such activities and constant family turnover in large multidwelling housing units makes them more difficult to carry out" (Reiss 15).

When middle- and working-class families move out of ghetto areas, community networks of informal social control break down. The remaining residents experience high levels of family disruption via divorce, desertion, female-headed families, and the breakdown of community networks of informal social control. Furthermore, "in studies of neighborhood rates of violent crime, measures of the density of multi-unit housing, residential mobility, and the prevalence of disrupted family structures generally accounted for more variation than did measures of poverty and income inequality." (Reiss 131-5).
Community disorganization also causes school violence: The National Institute of Education study in 1978 "reports higher rates of student violence in schools in which students perceive signs of ineffective social control: undisciplined classrooms, lax or arbitrary enforcement of school rules, and a weak principal." Identification with school values is important: "In secondary schools, violence rates increased with the percentages of students who did not aspire to good grades, who did not view their curricula as relevant, and who did not believe that their school experience could positively influence their lives" (Reiss 155-6). The Search Institute focuses on "resiliency"—those factors that enable youth to succeed in spite of disruptive influences, and community support and involvement seem crucial for developing those practices that cause resilience (Benson 98 et passim).

The antidote is to strengthen neighborhood and community organization. In Boston, the Ten Point Coalition was organized by pastors of small community-based churches that committed themselves to do youth evangelism in the streets where the youth were; to establish mentoring and tutoring relationships; to help in preparing for jobs and finding jobs; to involve youth in church youth activities and community service. Churches adopted gangs and showed they cared.

Boston developed a latticework of coalitions. Besides the Ten Point Coalition, Operation Cease Fire tackles youth firearm violence with a wide range of coalition partners. Officials meet with gang members and tell them to cease the violence or face federal prosecution. Operation Night Light ensures gang-involved youth comply with the terms of probation orders. The U.S. Attorney's Office has broken several weapons trafficking operations and gained stiff federal sentences for key gang leaders. The police introduced decentralized neighborhood policing to address local problems. In the Youth Service Providers Network, police officers refer at-risk youngsters to social workers hired by the Boys & Girls Clubs of Boston (under contract from the police). The social workers help youngsters and their families locate programs tailored to the needs of the youth, such as counseling and treatment,
academic services, recreational programs, jobs, and other programs. The result: 1997 homicide victimization among those 24 years of age and younger has fallen 70% from the means of the years 1991-1995; and among juveniles, firearm homicides were down 90% in 1997 compared to 1990. A 1997 survey revealed that 76% of residents felt safe at night in their neighborhoods, up from 55% in 1995. (See the website of the National Crime Prevention Council: www.ncpc.org/boston.htm).

Reduce Handgun Availability


"In 1989 gun attacks resulted in about 12,000 homicides--about 60% of all homicides. In addition,... 5.7 nonfatal gunshot injuries occur for every homicide--a projection on the order of 70,000 for 1989. For 1985, Rice and associates estimate the total cost of intentional and unintentional gun injuries at over $14 billion, including both the direct costs of hospital and other medical care and the indirect costs of long-term disability and premature death." In gun homicides for which the type of weapon was known, handguns accounted for nearly 80% in 1989, compared with 8% for rifles and 12% for shotguns" (Reiss 256-260).

A study of King County, Washington between 1978 and 1983 found that 52% of the gunshot deaths occurred in the home where the gun was kept. "For every time a gun in the home was involved in a self-protection homicide, they noted 1.3 unintentional deaths, 4.5 criminal homicides, and 37 firearm suicides." Another study of 88 cases where young children in California fatally shot a playmate or themselves concluded that 75% occurred while children were playing with a gun or demonstrating its use" (Reiss 267).
We have seen above that Boston's focus on handguns was a key part of its truly dramatic reduction in homicides. "The most thoroughly evaluated restriction on gun use is the 1974 Bartley-Fox Amendment, which expanded Massachusetts licensing procedures and mandated a one-year sentence for unlicensed carrying of firearms in public." An "extensive evaluation that compared statewide trends with trends in neighboring states demonstrated rather clearly that the law decreased gun use in assaults and robberies and also decreased gun homicides during the two-year evaluation period" (Reiss 275).

The 1977 Washington, D.C. law that prohibited handgun ownership by virtually everyone except police officers, security guards and previous gun owners was evaluated in three studies. "During periods of vigorous enforcement, the D.C. law did reduce the rates of gun robbery, assault, and homicide during the three years following implementation. The effect was especially strong for homicides arising from disputes among family members and acquaintances." There were "decreases of about one-fourth in D.C. gun homicides and suicides immediately after passage of the law. The effect ...was not mirrored by trends in D.C. nongun homicides or suicides, or in gun homicides or suicides in nearby suburban areas that were not subject to the law" (Reiss 278). This indicates that other factors were not causing a decrease in homicides generally, apart from the effects of the law.

**Spirituality and Spiritual Support are Crucial**

"But what has been lacking in the professional discourse about violence prevention and social competence promotion among adolescents is an examination of the role of spirituality.... Adults who work with youth need to step away from attempting to be objective about value-laden issues." They must "be willing to utilize the current crisis of youth..."
violence purposefully as an opportunity to identify means for youth to transition into adulthood, instead of unconsciously allowing the crisis of youth violence to turn into an alarmist campaign against teenagers. When adults avoid mentioning their values by being objective about value-laden issues, they may inadvertently teach valuelessness as the primary value. An adolescent's understanding of his or her own spiritual belief system makes a unique contribution to that person's development on both personal and societal levels" (Hampton 117f.).] Thomas and Carver's review of literature, however, "shows that religious involvement and commitment are consistently related to increases in the abilities and skills required for adequate functioning in society and to decreases in the likelihood of participating in activities that are devalued in society. To the degree that controls and restrictions are balanced with emotional support and encouragement, Thomas and Carver propose that both religion and family can be combined effectively to assist the adolescent in achieving socially competent skills, attitudes, and behaviors." They also show that a faith-mentor relationship can help the youth set prosocial goals. Williams (1989) of the Search Institute concludes that "when parents act in ways that are congruent with their stated beliefs and provide a warm, supportive atmosphere for their youth at home and in the church, youth are likely to develop values similar to those of their parents. Williams emphasizes that both discussion of values and consistent demonstration are necessary for this transfer to occur" (Hampton 122 and 124). See Search Institute research (Benson) for a strong emphasis on spirituality and resilience.

Robert Coles tells how an 8-year-old black girl's faith in God transformed a violent situation to one of peace:

I was all alone and those [segregationist] people were screaming, and suddenly I saw God smiling and I smiled. A woman was standing there [near the school door], and she shouted at me "hey you little nigger, what you smiling at?" I looked right at her face and I said, "At God." Then she looked up at the sky, and then she looked at me, and she didn't call me any more names (Hampton
Bibliography of Works Cited


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