

# Unlearning Violence

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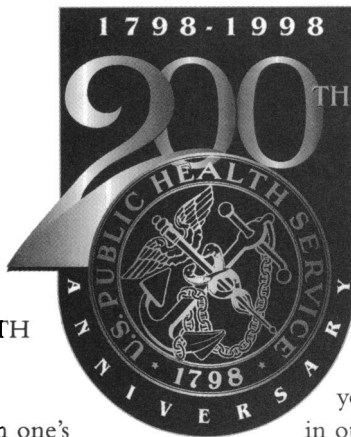
It's human nature to put distance between one's self and the perpetrators of unacceptable behavior, and that has certainly been the case in reaction to youth violence.

When 8-year-old "Yummy" Sanders was killed by gang members in Chicago several years ago, the media inundated us with reports and commentaries about the supposed violent pathology of black families.

When shootings took place at schools in Arkansas, Kentucky, and Mississippi, one of the nation's leading news anchormen decried the "violent culture of the South."

But then something unexpected happened: a shooting at Columbine High School in an idyllic suburb in Colorado, a place where this was never supposed to happen. Suddenly, the distancing didn't work; the stereotypes didn't apply. Suddenly, people began thinking: "Maybe this isn't just about 'them.' Maybe it's about all of us, and about our own communities. Maybe it's time for each of us to look around us to see how we can prevent such tragedies."

We cannot be lulled into thinking that the recent misfortune in Littleton, Colorado, is an anomaly. It is, in fact, reflective of a larger persistent problem that we face in this country. Today, violence is the second leading cause of death for those aged 18 to 24, and



for African Americans in that age group, it is the leading cause of death. While it is truly a tragedy that 15 children were killed at Columbine High School, the fact is that it was not a unique tragedy; violence claims the lives of from 13 to 15 young people in communities across the nation every day.

Youth violence has acquired a uniquely American flavor. When the incidence of youth violence in the US is compared to that in other countries, our numbers fly off the chart.

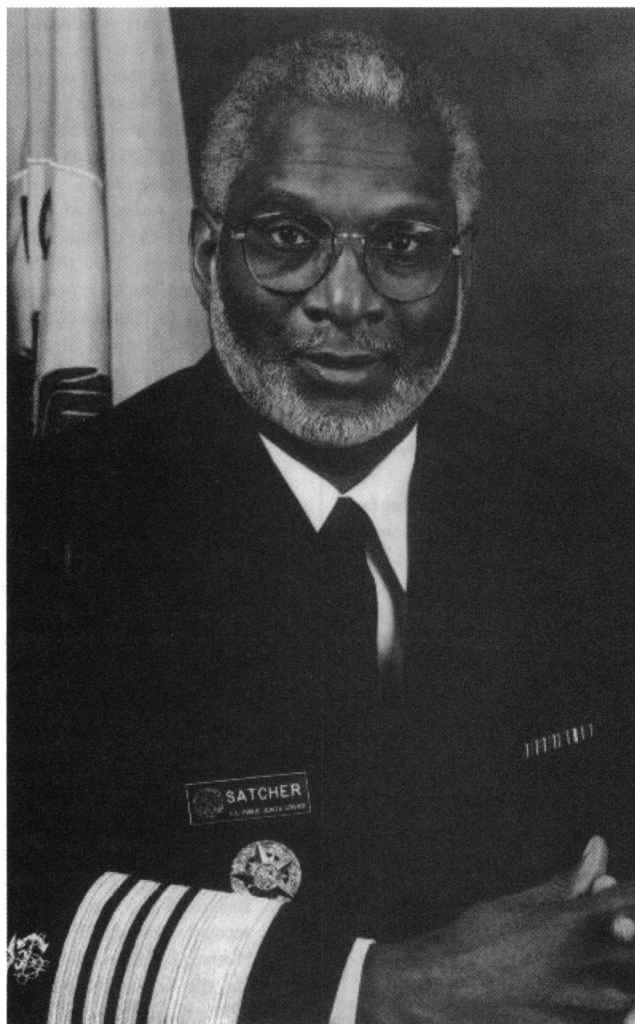
In 1996, 15 children died in Japan from firearm injuries; in Britain, 30; in Canada 105; while in the United States, more than 9,000. Comparatively speaking, America is an unsafe place for children.

Currently, fewer than 1% of all violent deaths of children in America occur on school grounds. A child is far more likely to be killed out in the community or at home than in school. Even so, the recent spate of violence in our nation's schools reminds us that none of us can be complacent about school safety. And just as

schools are an important part of the life of every community, they will be an important part of our approach to youth violence.

I have long maintained that violence is a public health problem. By that, I do not mean that it is a disease that can be treated medically. But violence is susceptible to the public health approach of identifying risk factors, developing interventions to address them, and implementing those interventions.

Researchers have documented that early intervention and other prevention efforts can effectively reduce in-school violence and other troubling behaviors in schools. Sound, research-based strategies can help parents and educators recognize the warning signs early so that children can



get the help they need before it is too late. And some of the most promising prevention and intervention approaches involve the entire educational community—administrators, teachers, families, students, support staff, and community members—working together to form positive relationships with children.

With that in mind, the Departments of Justice, Education, and Health and Human Services have come together to support a new Federal initiative, Safe Schools/Healthy Students. The goals of the initiative are: (1) to help students develop the skills and emotional resilience necessary to experience positive mental health, engage in pro-social behavior, and avoid violent behavior and drug use; (2) to ensure that all students who attend the targeted schools are able to learn in a safe, disciplined, and drug-free environment; and (3) to help develop an infrastructure that will institutionalize and sustain integrated services after Federal funding has ended.

Awards will be made to approximately 50 sites designated as local educational agencies (LEAs). The LEAs must be joined in their applications by local law enforcement and mental health authorities.

The funded programs will receive support from the agencies for up to three years to provide a wide variety of developmental, educational, and public safety services. The deadline for applications for the first round of funding was June 1, 1999. Annual awards will be made subject to the continued availability of funds and the progress achieved.

Maximum awards will range from \$1 million a year for rural school districts and tribal schools, \$2 million a year for suburban school districts, to \$3 million a year for urban school districts. In addition, funds are available from the Office of Community Oriented Policing of the Department of Justice for the provision of School Resource Officers in collaboration with local law enforcement authorities.

The Safe Schools, Healthy Children initiative draws on the best practices of the education, justice, social service, and mental health systems to promote a comprehensive, integrated framework for use by communities in addressing school violence. The initiative is seen as very important by both the agencies and Congress, but there is still more we can do about youth violence.

Last year, at the request of the President and the Attorney General, eight major gun manufacturers agreed to put trigger locks on all new guns they manufacture. While that was a dramatic step forward, there were already more than 200 million guns without trigger locks in circulation in the US.

In his recent book, *On Killing*, military psychiatrist

David Grossman describes the way the military has systematically trained its recruits since World War II to be desensitized to violence and killing. He notes that some of these techniques are now used in movies and on television as well as in some video games.

The efforts to reduce youth violence must be viewed as a shared responsibility if they are to succeed. Together, we must limit access by unsupervised youth to weapons of violence; we must reduce the gratuitously violent content of television, movies, and video games; and we must strengthen the role of parents and mentors in helping children to deal with anger, resolve conflicts, and have empathy toward others.

President Clinton recently asked me to prepare a Surgeon General's report on youth violence. This will not be the first such report. In 1972, a panel of experts put together a report to the Surgeon General demonstrating the impact that television violence has on children. The panel found that some children imitate the violence they see on television and some may even be provoked to violence by what they see. In 1985, a report of a workshop held by Surgeon General Koop called for reducing the violent content of our television shows and movies as well as reducing youth access to firearms.

The role of the entertainment media, obviously, is to entertain. But the media can educate as well as entertain. When I was director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, we worked with entertainment programs such as "E.R." on episodes that showed America the true face of HIV/AIDS and the growing epidemic of hepatitis C infection.

While some portrayals of violence can be entertaining, it is important to point out that violent acts have consequences. Those consequences are real and lasting for the victims, the perpetrators, and certainly for the people who work in the criminal justice system. We see those consequences every day in the public health system, not only in the form of death but also in the form of unnecessary pain and suffering, chronic disability, and chronic dependency.

The public health community must work with the entertainment media to educate the American public, and particularly young people, about the consequences and preventable nature of violence. We can help show that violent behavior is learned and that it can be unlearned.

I look forward to working on the Surgeon General's report on youth violence. I want it to be a transparent process that will be open to scrutiny and to contributions from the public. At the same time, we must not let our work on this latest report be an excuse for a delay in taking those actions that research has already shown will work. ■