



Violence and Youth

Trying to Make Sense of the Senseless

Jim Wheeler found himself doing something he surely hoped he would never have to do. "I think people are just overwhelmed with the level of violence and the magnitude of the event. A lot of people want to help, but they're just in shock." A Presbyterian pastor, he was trying to make sense of the senseless as he spoke at a community meeting following a horrific attack on a teenage girl in Richmond, California, last October. The 15-year-old girl had left a high school dance early and joined a group of boys who were drinking in a courtyard on the school's campus. What happened next has been described as a gang rape that went on for over two hours and in which as many as ten people participated while as many as twenty others looked on. No one who saw the incident called the police, sought help, or attempted to stop the attack. Six people were arrested in the aftermath, all but one of them teenagers themselves.

Shootings among youth seem to be making headlines on a regular basis. On New Year's Eve in Baltimore, Maryland, a 14-year-old boy was arrested for shooting his 13-year-old former schoolmate four times. In March 2006, 14-year-old Starkesia Reed was killed by a stray bullet when another youth, who was settling a score with someone else, sprayed the street outside her home with an AK-47.

In September 2009, a 16-year-old Chicago boy was beaten to death when he accidentally ended up in the middle of a street fight between two factions of students.

Youth are far too often both the victims and the perpetrators of acts of violence in our communities. What are the root causes of such violence? What is going on both within and around our young people that sometimes explodes in acts like this? How can Christians respond and work toward new dynamics that reduce the violence?

The Extent of the Problem

The first question to ask may be, Is this really a problem? Are we struck by stories of youth violence because they indicate a pervasive issue or because they are the exception? There is some evidence that youth violence is actually on the decline in the United States. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that homicide

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The Session at a Glance

News reports remind us that youth are frequently victims and perpetrators of violence. How do we understand the social, cultural, and economic roots of such violence? How can Christians work with young people and institutions in order to reduce violence?

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victimization rates are much lower now than when they peaked in the early 1990's. For children under 14, the rate has been at a historic low since 2000. Even for older teens and young adults aged 18–24—the most victimized group—the rate has declined since 1993. For teens aged 14–17, the victimization rate had increased dramatically between 1985 and 1993; but since 1993 the rate has dropped to a level comparable to the late 1970's and early 1980's.

What the decline does not reveal, however, is the persistent level of violence that permeates American culture. At one point in the last decade, the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence estimated that among twenty-six industrialized countries, 86 percent of the gun deaths among children under 15 occurred in the United States. Facts for Families, a resource published by the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, reported in 2004 that more than ten children and teenagers are murdered in the United States every day, with many more wounded.

All this high-level violence comes within the context of other violent influences for youth and children. Gang-related crimes, school fights, and bullying are a reality for many young people; and they create a climate of insecurity. At the same time, many youth are seeking out entertainment that is increasingly violent in nature. ProCon.org reports that 97 percent of young people aged 12–17 in the US played video games in 2008, and half of all best-selling titles from that year involved violence. While many debate the link between this virtual violence and its impact in real life, a 2008 study called “Grand Theft Childhood” concluded that middle-school boys who played at least one mature-rated video game were 21 percent more likely to hit or beat up someone than those who did not play such games.

Despite reports indicating a decline in youth violence, several demographic groups have seen a significant rise in recent years. “The National Survey on Drug Use and Health,” published in December 2009, revealed that one in four adolescent females was involved in some sort of violent behavior in the past year. According to a January 2010 article in *mensnewsdaily.com*, girls constituted 30 percent of the arrests for violent activity between 1991 and 2000. During that same time period, violence among girls increased faster than violence among boys. The trend line for black teens is also rising. Between 2000 and 2007, homicide arrest rates for African American boys aged 14–17 rose 34 percent, while the rate among whites stayed level or fell, according to a 2008 report from Northeastern University. The number of black youth killed during the same period also rose.

Core Bible Passages

Zechariah 8:3-6 portrays Jerusalem as a restored community in which people of all ages, from the elderly sitting by the streets to the boys and girls playing in them, live in security and with the knowledge of the presence of God. **Verse 6** describes the natural inclination of the people to doubt that such a vision could one day be fulfilled; but God says, “Should it also seem impossible to me?”

One of the primary purposes of the **Book of Proverbs** is to instruct young people how to live rightly through attention to wisdom and instruction. **Proverbs 1** depicts wisdom as something passed along generationally: “Hear, my child, your father’s instruction, / and do not reject your mother’s teaching” (**verse 8**). **Proverbs 24:1-2** connects violence with those who reject wise teaching.

Matthew 26:50-52 depicts a scene of violence from Jesus’ arrest in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus, who has chosen to accept his arrest nonviolently, chastises one of his followers for drawing a sword and striking out against a slave of the high priest. Jesus reacts by declaring that such an impulsive act of injury ultimately comes back to the one who inflicts it, implying that retaliating with violence only leads to more violence.

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Looking for Causes and Solutions

The Northeastern University report indicates societal neglect as one of the factors in the continuing reality of youth violence. “Regrettably, as the nation celebrated the successful fight against violent crime in the 1990s, we grew complacent and eased up on our crime-fighting efforts,” claim the authors of the report. Among their recommended solutions are more funding for community policing, juvenile crime prevention, and after-school programs, along with a tightening of gun laws. They say that federal cutbacks in these programs disproportionately affect impoverished minority communities.

Other researchers look to how we are raising children. Even with the rise in female youth violence, males are still the vast majority of those engaging in violent behavior. Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson have explored the question in their book *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*. In a related documentary on PBS, Thompson addressed the fact that many boys in the United States struggle in the classroom, fail to express their emotions, and are prone to acting out violently.

Thompson says we miss the issue when we focus on the impulses of young males to play games of war or shooting. “All boys have normal aggressive impulses which they learn to control, [and] only a small percentage are overly aggressive and have *chronic* difficulty controlling those impulses,” he says. Joseph Tobin, a professor of early childhood education at Arizona State University, says, “Teachers and parents need to help children find ways to resolve . . . conflicts. But the problem isn’t that boys have these impulses and interests; the problem is that we over-react.” Helping boys express their emotional life and their natural need for activity are just some of Thompson’s recommendations to reduce the tendencies toward violence.

Making Connections

In Utah, a coalition of government and nonprofit agencies is focusing on another suspected culprit contributing to youth violence: the lack of connections between youth and positive role models. The Utah Mentoring Partnership pairs adult volunteers with programs that allow them to mentor youth and develop relationships with them. Willie Salas and Tom Midden have been volunteering with the Boys Group Home in Salt Lake County for fourteen years now, teaching guitar to teens who filter through the shelter. “I see the rewards of it. The energy, the discipline, plus the fun you can have,” says Salas. “Music is powerful and gives us a way to connect with the kids.”

Mentoring has been shown to improve conditions for young people. A 1996 study from Big Brothers Big Sisters of America revealed that youth with mentors were 46 percent less likely to use illegal drugs, 27 percent less likely to begin using alcohol, and 53 percent less likely to skip school. Terry Harper, a high school junior in Chicago, agrees that role models are important. “If you have a positive male role model, I feel like you’ll be all right. You will be able to stay in school, stay on the right path and pursue whatever career or goal you want to go to do,” he says.

When a teen acquaintance of Harper was murdered in September 2009, the crime caused a crisis of faith for the Lilydale First Baptist Church, located across the street from the high school where the murder occurred. Though the

Church Responses

How can churches reduce violence and create safe spaces for young people? Cookman United Methodist Church in North Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, started an initiative called the Beloved Community Coalition. Taking its name from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s vision of a community of love and justice, the coalition works on issues that engage youth and children, making them participants in the creation of a new reality.

One prominent area of concern is school truancy. The church website notes, “For young men, truancy is the number one predictor of future criminal activity; for young women it is number two. Together we can ensure that our kids graduate from school and lead successful lives. That means getting them to school ALL DAY, EVERY DAY.”

As part of his ministry, United Methodist pastor Frank Gomez visited inmates at the local jail in Salinas, California. “When I worked at the county jail, I visited a young man. He had a young son and asked if I wanted to see a photo,” Gomez said. “He showed me a photo of a young boy with a big smile, but it left me with a question. This young man . . . was once a smiling kid, but where did we lose him?” Gomez and his wife now run an after-school program, working with fifty-two youth on such activities as science projects for school competitions. Gomez notes, “If programs like this do not pay attention to young children, someone else will.”

city promised money, more police presence, and more neighborhood programs, the church felt the gap was in the moral leadership. “We’ve got a generation of young people, probably the first generation particularly in an African-American community, to grow up without a concept of church,” said the Reverend Alvin Love of Lilydale. “Anytime you’re disconnected from a moral center, you’re going to find violence.” The church has responded by holding male leadership retreats and meeting with school administrators and block clubs to pull together resources and work collectively on the issue.

Working Toward Change

Instead of vengeance, the parents of the girl who was raped in Richmond, California, released a statement expressing their hope that violence not be met with violence: “Please do not respond to this tragic event by promoting hatred or by causing more pain. We have had enough violence. . . . Work toward changing the atmosphere in our schools and in this community so that this kind of thing never happens again.” This sentiment is echoed by the great-aunt of the Chicago youth who was beaten to death. She pleaded for communities to start working together “so this won’t happen to anyone else’s child ever again.”

Given the persistence of youth violence, it may seem that the changes called for are hard to enact and destined for futility. One hopeful sign, however, is that youth who are in close relationships and nurturing environments have a much better opportunity to escape the pitfalls that lead to violent acts. Churches are places where those environments and relationships can be built, and they are such places because of their people’s faith in a God who holds out a vision of peace in which swords can be beaten into plowshares (**Isaiah 2:4**).

United Methodist Perspective

In Resolution 5033, “Justice with Young Persons” (*The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, 2008*; pages 670–72), the General Conference of The United Methodist Church notes that for many children, “the quality of life continually declines due to poverty, gangs, school violence, emotional, sexual and physical abuse, and other social ills that have yet to be recognized.” In searching for root causes of youth violence, the resolution points out, “There is considerable evidence that the punitive methods of dealing with children play a major part in developing criminal tendencies.” The resolution urges approaches emphasizing connections with mentors and caring communities, like churches, rather than harsh criminal sentencing for youth involved in violent acts.

In Resolution 3424, “Violent Video Games” (page 511), the denomination takes a strong stance against such games, urging the “elimination of violent games that specifically target children and youth, specifically those games that glorify death, show killing, and depict all acts of violence.” The resolution goes on to advocate teaching “young people conflict resolution strategies as an alternative to violence.” Resolution 3425, “Prohibition of Bullying” (page 512), addresses the harmful impacts of bullying on youth, as well as on adults and children. It commits the church at all levels to increase awareness of bullying and to work with those injured by it.

Raising Boys

The producers of the PBS documentary *Raising Cain* developed some suggestions for parents and other adults on helping boys develop what they need to be successful in life. Among their suggestions are the following:

- Give boys lots of opportunities to use their physical energy.
- Remember that boys learn as much from what adults do as what they say.
- Help boys learn to notice and talk about their feelings.
- Use discipline to help boys improve their behavior, not as punishment.
- Make sure there are men in your boys’ lives. Introduce them to men you know and respect: male neighbors, coworkers, and others in your community.
- Create a special time each week when just you and your boy do something together.
- Let your boy know that you believe in him and want him to be successful in all areas of his life.
- Let your boy know that you respect him by showing an interest in his pursuits and preferences, even if you do not share his interests or taste.
- If your boy is going through a difficult time that he does not want to share with you, respect his need for silence; but do not stop talking to him. Find ways to talk to him while he is engaged in other activities (such as playing ball or riding in a car), because he may feel more comfortable opening up emotionally while he is feeling “busy” or does not feel pressured to look at you.

Violence and Youth

How can Christians work with young people and institutions in order to reduce violence?

CREATE Your Teaching Plan

Keeping in mind your group members and your group time, choose from among the OPEN, EXPLORE, and CLOSE activities or from “Teaching Alternatives” to plan this session.

OPEN the Session

Pray Together

Read out loud the focus statement of the session. Then invite the group to pray as you read the following prayer:

God who turns swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, our lives are full of light and shadow, and too often we cannot dream of planting because our vision is clouded by the violence around us. Help us hear the cry of the young and the plea of the youth for a new day and a promised future, and may we dwell secure in you. Amen.

Discuss Examples of Violence

Read “Trying to Make Sense of the Senseless” (page 1). Ask: How do you respond to these violent acts? What feelings or thoughts do you have about them?

EXPLORE the Topic

Survey Images of Youth

Bring in some recent magazines and newspapers for your group members to review. Ask them to cut out articles and images that involve youth. Using a glue stick, paste them onto a large sheet of paper or posterboard. Ask: How are youth portrayed in the items you have collected? How often are they mentioned or pictured in connection with violence? What messages do our media send about who youth are? How different are these from the portrayal of youth from your own time as an adolescent? What key differences do you see between then and now?

Engage the Scripture

Read “Core Bible Passages” (page 2). Have participants form three teams, with each team reading and discussing the passages indicated in one of the paragraphs in the sidebar. Have them answer the following questions as they apply to their Scripture: What barriers, internal or external, keep us from embracing Zechariah’s vision as possible? What lessons are young people learning about violence from their elders in the

church? from the media? How have we seen Jesus’ truth about retaliatory violence in our lives and the lives of our youth?

Create Skits

Alternatively, invite each of the teams from the “Engage the Scripture” activity to present a skit of their passages. After the skits, ask the questions related to each of the Scriptures. Allow time for group discussion of how the Scriptures relate to the theme of youth and violence.

Discuss “The Extent of the Problem”

Read highlights from “The Extent of the Problem” (pages 1–2). Ask: What surprises you about the youth violence statistics indicated here? Do you feel youth violence is a particular problem in your neighborhood? How is your neighborhood responding to the issue?

Discuss Causes and Connections

Read highlights from “Looking for Causes and Solutions” and “Making Connections” (pages 3–4). Ask participants to identify some of the root causes of youth violence mentioned in these sections. Some

answers may be: societal neglect, lack of funding for crime prevention programs, violent media, socialization of boys, lack of mentor relationships, and declining participation in church. Ask: What other factors may contribute to the persistence of violence in the lives of youth? Write responses on a markerboard or large sheet of paper. How can we learn more about the issues facing youth in our communities? What resources are available?

Consider Violence in Media

Read the following quote from a report by ProCon.org, a non-profit group that studies violent video games: “Sales of video games have more than quadrupled from 1995–2008, while the arrest rate for juvenile murders fell 71.9% and the arrest rate for all juvenile violent crimes declined 49.3% in this same period.” Compare this to the “Grand Theft Childhood” study and its conclusion mentioned on page 2. Ask: Based on these statistics and your own experience, do you think there is a valid connection between video game sales and a drop in crime? Explain. What are the negative consequences of the violent

images youth are exposed to in video games and other media?

Explore Youth Empowerment Opportunities

Resolution 5033 in *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, 2008*, titled “Justice with Young Persons,” has a number of suggestions for local churches to act on. Ask participants to take a few moments and read the resolution. Then ask them to reflect on how your local congregation or community of faith is responding or might respond. Write the ideas on a large sheet of paper or markerboard under three categories: “Things Individuals Can Do,” “Things Small Groups Can Do,” and “Things Our Congregation Can Do.” Consider talking with the appropriate boards or committees in your church about how some of these ideas might be implemented and promoted.

Share Stories of Belonging

Invite the group to observe a few minutes of silence. Then ask participants to be prepared to share a brief story of a time in their adolescence when they felt like they belonged (however they may interpret that). Following the

silence, invite group members to turn to a neighbor and share the story. Ask: What contributed to your feeling of belonging? Did anything happen along the way to change that feeling? What steps can we take to instill a sense of belonging in our youth today?

CLOSE the Session

Visualize Youth and Commitment

Invite group members to close their eyes and visualize one young person in their lives with whom they could grow in relationship. Then ask them to write down the young person’s name and one action they will take in the coming week to begin this commitment. Ask participants to put their written commitment in a place where they will see it each day.

Pray Together

The United Methodist Book of Worship offers the prayer “For a Victim or Survivor of Crime or Oppression” (547). Use this prayer to close your session. Where it leaves space for a name, insert “all youth who have been caught up in violence,” then pause to allow group members to offer particular names either aloud or in silence. Continue with the prayer. (Make sure you explain this before beginning the prayer.)

Teaching Alternatives

- Invite an adolescent psychologist to talk to your group. Some community service boards will have psychologists and social workers available to share some of their observations on the stresses facing youth in your community. Ask the person you invite to offer ways that members of your group or church might have an impact on these areas of stress.
- Plan or assist in an activity with youth in your congregation. It is a powerful thing when people in congregations meet across generational lines. Talk with your pastor or youth director about ways that members of your group can be involved in an upcoming youth activity. Try to plan an event that allows for relationships to develop.

Next Week in FAITHLINK

Lent

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. What is Lent? How and why do we observe it? How does observing Lent enrich our lives?