



Youth violence: The “warning sign” for our society

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ABSTRACT

Headlines proclaim that the epidemic of youth violence that began in the early 1980s is over, but the reality behind this seemingly good news is far more complex and unsettling. Public health studies show that youth violence is an ongoing, startlingly pervasive problem. Violence prevention and intervention efforts hinge on identifying risk and protective factors and determining when in the course of development they emerge. To be effective, such efforts must be appropriate to a youth's stage of development. Parents remain busy in their professional life, and do not know what their child is doing in school. In school the effects of joining the wrong group is obvious on their child. There have been many cases in which a high scoring student has ended up with below average grades with a mean temperament and foul language. Keeping all these factors in mind this chapter describes the magnitude of and trends in violent crime by young people.

INTRODUCTION

Violence has historical, cultural and societal roots in our society. It is a growing problem especially among youths all over the world. Exposure to violence can have lasting and pervasive effect on an adolescent's mental and physical health, general well being and ability to become a productive adult. In other words, violence is a form of aggressive behaviour that has a debilitating effect on the optimum growth and development of our youths. Recent high profile cases involving violence in schools and communities have heightened awareness and interest in the literature that deals youth violence. The overall frequency of youth violence is increasing day by day and that is matter of concern for all of us as a citizen and as a family member. Why youths are more susceptible? Why they are the most vigilant factors wherever violence occurs? How frequently the youths are engaged in

violence and why? For answering these entire burning questions one should have to have the in-depth knowledge of youth psychology. Who are youths and what motivate them to be affected by the violence whether as a preparator or its victim.

During adolescence the personality patterning process that is taking place within a maturing youth is affected by the physical and physiological changes which he is experiencing, by the expansion of his intellectual powers and his increasing skills and broadening knowledge, by his developing urge to attain adult status and to achieve satisfactory group relations and his growing concern about life values. Personality development of a youth is a two way process. Environmental conditions and situations set the stage for the kind of experiences through participation in which boy or girl is helped or hindered in his development and adjustment. In addition, the attitude, behaviour, habits,

degree of emotional control and self understanding, kind of personal social relationship that are carried over from childhood to and through the adolescent period determine in great part the extent to which youth experience results in well adjusted or mal adjusted life patterns. The shock of youth change produces vibrations which resonate with the intervening years. The tune produced does not stop at the front doors but strikes chords in the community at large. Society's response impinges back on each family, increasing either harmony or dissonance as the case may be.

The theorized etiology of youth violence involves exposure to and reinforcement of violence in the home, ineffective parental supervision, weak family bonding and the acquisition of values which support the use of violence. Risk factors found to be specific for youth violence have been categorized into four areas (Dawn Dawson MD and Jack Reiter)

Community risk factors:

It includes availability of fire arms, community laws and norms favorable towards drug use, fire arms and crimes, media portrayals of violence, declining neighborhood attachment and community organizations and extreme economic deprivations.

Family risk factors:

Include family management problems, family conflicts, parental attitude favorable to violence, parental involvement in the problem behaviour. Sometimes family provides a setting in which inner erroneous assumptions can be corrected while in other views shared family misconceptions and illusions can reinforce violence in youth.

School risk factors:

Include early and persistent anti social behaviour and /or academic failure beginning in elementary school. During adolescence, the influence of family is largely supplanted by peer influences. The strongest risk factors are weak ties to conventional peers, ties to anti social or delinquent peers belonging to a gang and involvement in other criminal acts. Risk factors do not operate in isolation and schools are the best source for peer group interactions. The more risk factors a child or youth is exposed to, the greater the likelihood that he /she will become violent. Schools are the one of the greatest place

of exposure to such situation.

Individual and peer factors:

Include friends who engage in the problem behaviour, early initiation of the problem behaviors and one's innate or constitutional predisposition to violence.

The youth's exposure to media violence is another area of concern. Violent programmes on television may lead to a change in the youth's value and an increase in violent behaviour. Television desensitizes the youth to violence in general and to the pain of others. If youth are "glued" to the television for a substantial portion of their days, they may view them as more dangerous than it really is. Today in the era of information technology revolution, the children and youth are continuously exposed to even a mildest crime in a strongest way through various news channels and this is going to affect their view of the world. The effect of media violence are negligible if there is protection via adequate monitoring of youth's behaviour and strong family bonding in concern with the effective teaching of moral values and norms. Without these protections, its effect can be quite strong in an immediate exposure to violence, when the adult care provider is calm and effective; the youth have increased "adaptive success". Protective factors include an internal locus of control, Personal competency, good problem solving skill, good social skill, high self esteem, high IQ, family cohesion, a good relationship with at least one parent or other adults in the family, and a good relationship with at least one person outside home. Such factors as weak bonding, ineffective parenting (poor monitoring, ineffective excessively harsh or inconsistent discipline, inadequate supervision), exposure to violence in the home and a climate that supports aggression and violence puts children at risk for being violent in later life.

As far as Indian context is concerned, our community is passing through a transitional stage marked by tension and social dislocation. Culture conflicts between generations are particularly noticeable. The norms and values of society are changing fast. The urge to rise faster in the social scale in terms of materialistic possessions gratification of immediate desires, pleasure seeking and emotionalism set the violent pace high. At the same time there has been considerable weakening of traditional control exercised by the extended family is practically gone. Even the restricted or single unit family is forced to give up its controls. Earlier the patriarchal

system of control was there. Once the decision for anything has been set up by the parents, everyone has to follow that. No arguments or discussions over the decisions had entertained. Freedom of expression of thoughts within a family was restricted only to the authoritative personalities. This system is declining at a faster pace but not destroyed fully. Even today the system persists with its full effectiveness in some parts of the country. This type of system suppresses the desires and feelings of youth which later on can be converted to violent behaviors to show their existence in the society. Earlier due to less exposure to outer world the mind set of youth was suppressive but now the modern world's mobility and pervasive mass media of communication such as radio, television, newspaper and emancipation of the individual from traditional restrictions coupled with economic freedom have shaken the entire society.

The real danger comes from urbanization, industrialization and migration. In India a large population is under the age of sixteen years. One consequence is lowering of per capita income as the youth are mostly below full manual working age and earning capacity is necessarily lower. There is a tendency to marry early. When people marry very early, a greater portion of the income has to be spent on food and upbringing of children. Little is left for leisure time activities or recreational facilities. Frustration, economic instability and insecurity in the background of unemployment, rising prices and food shortage give rise to many behaviour problems. In the absence of vocational or educational facilities leading to betterment of prospects, interstate migration may act as safety valve economically though a high price has to be paid when there is no well coordinated social welfare programmes to counteract the evils generally associated with large scale migration. Industrial projects like Dam and factory construction lime quarries and mines attract migrants. Temporary camps are set up. There is little opportunity for healthy recreation. Government regulations are by passed with impunity. Social or cultural activity is non-existent. Alcoholism, drug addiction and gambling flourish. As wives are mostly left behind to look after village homes and lands, prostitution in these areas gets an impetus. The family, both extended and single unit is fragmented. Left in the villages, the children grow up in indiscipline in the absence of a father's discipline. In an urban setting, where there is little living room, the children may become

unwanted with all the evil consequences that follow.

To a young mind in ferment village life is not comfortable and certainly not glamorous. There are far too many restrictions. The mind of young is captivated by the prospect of material advantages held by towns, a chance of rising fast in the social scale unhampered by any group control. Disillusionment comes quickly. Unemployment, malnutrition and ill health follow. The dream of desirable things vanishes. Devoid of any anchorage the disillusioned young man turns to a world of crime.

Urbanization brings in its wake an initial shock of adaptation, creating anxiety, neuroses in youths and making them delinquency prone. Loneliness and depersonalization of human relations beset the young migrants on arrival in a friendless city; some of them are preyed upon by criminals and utilized for committing crimes as the police don't know them yet. Living in conditions of physical deprivation they compare their status with that of wealthier section of society and become filled with anger, resentment and antagonism. Crime or violence is a byproduct of this unhealthy state of mind.

In Indian scenario, inter-generational tension between the young and the old leads sometime to vandalism to work off aggressive feelings. Some time in urban situation the father is busy with his work and has hardly any time to exercise discipline or to see that their children are engaged in studies or any constructive occupation. Discipline when exercised is not always consistent. Arbitrary or excessive punishment without an explanation is equally bad, giving rise to bitterness and resentment which will pave the way to violent behaviour by way of revenge. Abdication of authority by the father also has serious consequences so far as the youths are concerned.

Conclusion:

Youth violence is an escalating problem in our society today. There are many different factors that can be blamed for this problem as of now, no one can give the right answer to the problem or the reason that it happens because there is no right answer yet and nobody can be sure that they know the cause. All we have to go by are the opinions of different people. There are many misconceptions about the prevalence of youth violence in our society and it is important to peel back the veneer

of hot-tempered discourse that often surrounds the issue.... While it is important to carefully review the circumstances surrounding these horrifying incidents so that we may learn from them, we must also be cautious about inappropriately creating a cloud of fear over every student in every classroom across the country. Around the world, newspapers and the broadcast media report daily on violence cases, the consequences of which are abominable. It is indeed a matter of deep concern that youth violence which is among the most visible and disheartening forms of violence in society has always been a critical part of delinquency. However, its increasing prevalence in our modern age is extremely alarming since if kept unspoken, it can be an obvious cause of harm to the next generation. Moreover, despite its various forms, physical, verbal, sexual, emotional and cultural, to name a few, the problem of youth violence cannot be viewed in isolation from other problems behaviours since it is closely related to activities such as truancy, dropping out of school, substance abuse, compulsive lying, reckless driving as well as high rates of sexually transmitted diseases. There is no doubt that most communities depend greatly on the capabilities of young people since the latter are the key pillars to the economic and social stability of countries at large and it is highly distressing to note that these same youngsters, if become victims or perpetrators of violence, are likely to end up in jails, hospital rooms and most heart wrenchingly in morgues. This only deprives families and communities of potential bread winners and positive role models for the next generation. Our community, society, family members and policy makers must examine youth violence and its underlying causes and make recommendations on how to:

- Create opportunities for youth to maximize their potential.
- Make communities and schools safer.
- Consider existing provincial investments and programmes related to child development, youth violence, youth at risk, and creating educational and employment opportunities for young people.
- Assess approaches used in other jurisdictions to evaluate potential for successful application in Ontario's context.
- Identify further opportunities for prevention and the rehabilitation of youth.
- Formulate recommendations on:

- Immediate and longer-term actions and solutions involving all related parties, including government (provincial, federal, municipal), communities, private sector
- Improved co-ordination between governments and with community agencies in planning and delivery of programmes
- Meaningfully engaging youth, communities, leaders, faith-based groups, neighbourhoods, police and social services agencies in developing common outcomes and objectives
- Ongoing mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating effectiveness of investments, programs and services.

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