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>> Youth and Violence

Reducing the Threat

VIOLENCE HAS BECOME a pervasive presence in American life, especially violence involving young people. Families worry that their children will become targets or fall into the wrong peer group. Those who live in neighborhoods where crime is common strive to keep their children safe. And nearly every parent is concerned about the growing violence in American culture—on the streets and in the media.

Violence is the second leading cause of death for young people between the ages of 10 and 24, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). While juvenile assaults and homicides have declined dramatically since the early

to mid-1990s and the arrest rate has fallen nationwide, these statistics do not provide any real comfort. The issue of violence hasn't gone away and people in communities everywhere remain concerned.

For example, in 2009, in Scranton, Pennsylvania, citizens became worried when youthful offenders were found to be involved in more than one-quarter of the city's violent crimes. "There's nobody home for these kids, nobody to teach them structure, teach them respect, instill values," Cliff Hoffman, director of Lackawanna County's juvenile detention center told the *Scranton Times-Tribune*. He spoke for many people, not just in Scranton, but

nationwide. Who is home for our young people? How do we ensure that they grow up respecting authority and obeying the law? What can we do when they commit crimes?

Physical assaults are not the only threat to young people today. Bullying has become an all-too-common experience. About 20 percent of high school students reported being bullied on school property in 2009. But “cyberbullying”—sending threatening text messages or using the Internet to harass and humiliate victims—extends bullying far beyond the school walls, making abuse nearly impossible for victims to avoid.

Tyler Clementi, 18, jumped to his death off the George Washington Bridge after his roommate at Rutgers University secretly videotaped his sexual encounter with another male and posted it on the Internet. Hope Witsell, 13, killed herself after topless photos of her were sent from cell phone to cell phone of students in her hometown of Ruskin, Florida. “Cyberbully Suicide: Did she have a chance?” asked one newspaper headline after Hope’s death. How well prepared are any of us to help young people cope with such high-pressure harassment?

The spread of violence in American culture has seeped into movies, television, popular songs, and video games in a way that troubles many people. Players of the video game Grand Theft Auto can “kill” on-screen prostitutes to get money; in the video game Postal 2, school girls beg for mercy and are decapitated. One 2010 survey of 2,100 adults showed that 73 percent would support an outright ban on selling violent video games to minors.

Whether violence manifests itself on the screen or in the streets, the central and most urgent question remains: How can we reduce violence in the lives of young people?

This issue guide offers three options for addressing the issue. It avoids legal debates and aims instead to spur deliberations about sometimes conflicting values we all hold dear. Each option reflects a fundamentally different concern. Each concern suggests actions that we might take to address it, although any action has a downside or a trade-off.

- Option One suggests that demanding more accountability on the part of young people, their parents, and the community is the best approach to reducing violence.
- Option Two recognizes that lack of maturity and troubled families play a role in juvenile violence. The key is to focus on intervention and rehabilitation.
- Option Three holds that youth violence is a symptom of the spread of violence throughout our culture. We must address these larger problems to keep our children safe.



The National Issues Forums Institute

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Youth and Violence: Reducing the Threat

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Society and parents must hold juveniles to a reasonable standard of lawful and civilized behavior. Children and teens who are violent need to face clear consequences; parents need to be held accountable as well.



>> Focus on Accountability

JORDAN MENDES, 16, of West Yarmouth, Massachusetts, was a sophomore in high school when three teenagers shot and stabbed him to death in December 2008. Two of the three arrested for his murder—including his half-brother Mykel—were just 13 years old. The motive, police said, was a conflict over drugs and money. If the two younger boys are convicted in this case, which has dragged on for years, their ages will spare them possible life sentences. They could serve a maximum sentence of just seven years.

In Massachusetts, only convicted teens who commit felonies at the age of 14 and older can be sent to adult prison. Those under the age of 14 are diverted to a juvenile system, from which they are released at 21. That prospect sparked outrage from the community as well as state officials, who called for tougher laws to allow treating some

juveniles below the age of 14 as adults when they commit serious crimes.

Option One says that we must send a clear message that violence is unacceptable and that young criminals must be held accountable for unlawful and uncivilized behavior. Children and teens who are violent need to face clear consequences. Young people who are guilty of assaults or murder ought to go to prison or serve time in “boot camps.”

Tougher penalties lead to accountability

If Massachusetts toughened legal penalties for juveniles, it would have plenty of company: just over half of U.S. states impose adult sentences on children under the age of 12 who commit serious crimes. Twenty-two states

Drill Instructors yell at a juvenile recruit during the intake process of the the first day of the Pinellas County boot camp. To supporters, boot camps like this one are a great way to break the bad habits of teenage offenders, of instilling discipline and self-esteem, and of saving lives that otherwise seem destined for prison.



John Pendygraft/St. Petersburg Times, reprinted with permission.

and the District of Columbia have laws allowing children as young as seven to be sent to adult prison. Option One holds that more states need to send violent juveniles to prison to hold them accountable for their crimes.

One way to impose discipline, but avoid sending children to adult prisons, is to establish “boot camps” that include military-style discipline and drills. These became commonplace in the 1990s.

Before a young person lands in court, there are often danger signs that do not get addressed at home. Option One suggests that parents be held responsible for the destructive actions of their children. This would go a long way in ensuring that parents do what they can to keep tighter control over their children and raise young people properly so behavior problems do not escalate into criminal violence.

Every state except New Hampshire and New York have some form of parental accountability laws. Most impose fines on parents whose children commit crimes against property or injure someone. But well over half the states limit fines to \$5,000 or less, and many laws are geared to punishing vandalism or shoplifting, not violence. Increasing the fines and ensuring that such laws address violence might impress upon more parents that they would have to pay the consequences for the actions of their minor children.

Most parents want the best for their children and they do what they can to help them succeed. Nevertheless, young people from even the best of homes are capable of making serious errors of judgment, falling into drug addiction, drug dealing, and other dangerous or criminal behavior. Many parents need outside help, especially when their children begin to get into serious trouble.

Police presence

Option One says police departments should work with schools and community organizations to reduce the drug and gang activity that ensnares many juveniles. These departments combine police work that reduces crime—creating computer databases with detailed information on gang members and keeping track of their activities and locations—with outreach programs that involve schools and parents in trying to identify young people most likely to join gangs and in sponsoring activities that deter gang membership and drug use.

In towns and cities beset by juvenile violence or crime, law enforcement officials are the first to admit that despite their best efforts, no police department is likely to arrest its way out of the problem. This is a problem that requires the help of many others in the community. One course of action, according to Option One, might be the formation of citizen groups to patrol neighborhoods. For example, when three women, including a 90-year-old, were raped by teens in northwest Detroit in August 2010, outraged citizens formed the “Detroit 300.” Driving cars with two-way radios, members of the group patrolled the neighborhood in two-hour shifts to guard the streets.

Several states tap the power of community organizing in a different way. They establish boards of community members that intervene in the lives of young people before they get in trouble too often. Juvenile Review Boards in Connecticut are run on a local level. This system brings convicted juveniles before citizen boards made up of police officers, teachers, ministers, and others to face the very members of the community they have hurt.

The boards present juveniles with a carrot-or-stick choice: either face up to what you have done and agree on a plan to change, or go to prison. Most choose the carrot and do what they can to avoid serving time.

What we could do:

Option One says that we must send a clear message that violence is unacceptable, holding young people accountable for illegal and violent behavior. Here are some things that this option suggests we could do, individually and collectively, along with some of the drawbacks:

- We should send juveniles to prison when they commit serious violent crimes. Doing so would send a clear message that we will not tolerate violence. At the very least, violent juveniles should serve time in boot camps that impose the kind of tough, consistent discipline they may never have faced before.

But . . .

This puts juveniles in adult prison under the daily influence of hardened criminals, making it likely that they will have learned new and better ways to commit crimes when they get out. It would also add to prison overcrowding. Boot camps or harsh detention centers do not address the issues that landed juveniles in trouble in the first place—lack of jobs, poor education, drug and alcohol addiction, and problems with anger.

- Parents should be accountable for the young people they raise. If juveniles break laws, parents should face serious consequences.

But . . .

Some parents are largely absent in their children's lives or have serious problems of their own. Others do everything they can to raise their kids right—often making futile efforts to get their children into overcrowded public drug and mental health programs—but cannot prevent their children from committing crimes. Blaming the parents doesn't make juveniles accountable for their behavior.

- Communities could bring law-breaking teenagers before neighborhood and town boards to give them a chance to change their ways rather than going to prison. Police can crack down on gang activities, keeping track of who and where gang members are, and work with schools to try to deter young people from joining gangs. Citizen groups could organize to keep neighborhoods safe.

But . . .

Bringing juveniles before community boards might help some young people reform, but in smaller towns, just bringing them before such a board might unfairly give teens a bad reputation. Keeping gang members under surveillance may violate their civil rights. This also takes police time better spent solving crimes that have already been committed. When citizens form groups designed to help law enforcement officials prevent crime, they may well overreach their authority. Group members may become vigilantes and do more harm than good.



Audrey de la Cruz, Richmond, CA

Residents from the North & East neighborhood in Richmond, California, have formed a roving, highly visible, regular patrol as a supplemental deterrent to vandalism, drug dealing, and property crimes.

We need to intervene early in families with troubled children who are violent or at risk of engaging in violent acts. Violent juveniles often inflict pain on others. But they are still children, after all. Their poor decisions can be blamed, in part, on their youth.



>> Focus on Prevention and Rehabilitation

IN 2005, A CLOSELY DIVIDED Supreme Court ruled in *Roper v. Simmons* that states could not execute those who committed capital crimes before the age of 18. Writing for the majority, Justice Anthony Kennedy noted that adolescents are overrepresented statistically in nearly every type of reckless behavior, and because of their lack of foresight, nearly every state forbids minors to serve on juries, vote, or marry without parental consent. “As any parent knows . . . lack of maturity and an underdeveloped sense of responsibility are found in youth more often than in adults,” he wrote. “These qualities often result in impetuous and ill-considered actions and decisions.”

Option Two holds that when it comes to youth violence, the most important thing to remember is that these

are children, not miniature adults—they must be given a chance to mature and to learn how to avoid violence. Violent juveniles are nearly always troubled. We need to intervene early enough to catch problems before they become court cases. And we need to focus on rehabilitation when youngsters do commit crimes. The right help could improve their behavior, as well as their lives.

Scientists and parents alike understand that juveniles are subject to more extreme emotions than adults and are more likely to bow to peer pressure. While many point out that young people are still developing moral reasoning, researchers also point out that the brain itself is still developing physically long after other parts of the body have ceased growing. In particular, the part of the brain

that controls impulses, reasoning, and good judgment is not fully developed until the mid-20s.

Option Two says that we need to keep this in mind as we consider how to respond to youth violence. The important thing is to help young people grow into responsible adults. It isn't fair to judge young people the way we judge adults, and Option Two advocates for help and rehabilitation rather than prison. Parents, teachers, and other adults can often spot children who seem headed for trouble before it happens. If the right intervention occurred early enough, according to this option, it might make all the difference in the lives of these children.

Start early

Quality preschool is one of the answers, according to Option Two. A good preschool has a long-term positive impact on children. Its influence extends further than merely helping a child read sooner or get higher test scores. Studies have found that quality early education makes it more likely a young person will finish high school, attend college, and stay out of trouble with the law.

One such study is the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, which began in 1962 in Ypsilanti, Michigan. It provided quality preschool education to three- and four-year-old minority children living in poverty. Researchers have followed the students ever since. They found that they were 46 percent less likely to have served time in prison compared to a similar group whose members did not attend preschool. The preschool group also had a 33 percent lower arrest rate for violent crimes.

Good preschool education does not come cheaply and is likely to be beyond the means of many families. In this

view, states and local communities should support pre-school education for those who cannot afford it, because doing so would create substantial long-term savings in criminal justice.

Option Two also says that schools could be used in creative ways, after hours, to steer students onto a better path. For example, five states have Youth Service Bureaus that operate in partnership with local school systems to provide children with after-school activities, recreational programs, and extra study help. They also provide prevention programs to keep young people from getting involved with drugs and alcohol, which are at the root of some violent behavior. And they provide counseling services to intervene with young people who are beginning to get into minor trouble with the law. "Youth Service Bureaus are there to serve the kind of students people forget," said Agnes Quinones, the manager of Connecticut's program.

Schools can also be used as community centers. As many as 5,000 schools across the country operate as community centers after the school day has ended. They provide safe places and positive activities for young people after school, as well as offering activities for senior citizens and other adults.

Families are key

Option Two says that it is important to see young people, not just as individuals, but as part of a family. Helping to make families stronger is one way to help youth at risk. This might be as simple as helping parents find time to be with their children when they come home from school. Lack of supervision can be a problem, particularly for teenagers.



Catherine Avalone/The Middletown Press

At the "I Have a Friend" Youth Center in Middletown, Connecticut, children ages 6 to 12 receive after-school help with homework from high school, college, and adult mentors; a hot meal; and an opportunity to play games and talk until returning home at 8:00 p.m.

For many kids unsupervised, unstructured time is a recipe for disaster. “The highest juvenile crime rate is between 3 and 6 p.m.—and in many neighborhoods, the juveniles that are doing that crime or getting in trouble are between the ages of 11 and 14 or 15 years old,” said Walt Thompson, executive director of After School All Stars on the Web site of the Atlanta-based organization, Connect with Kids.

Option Two suggests that one answer is for parents to work with their employers to arrange for a more flexible time schedule that would enable them to be home after school and reduce the number of hours their teenagers spend without supervision.

Let the community pitch in

Helping the family is one way of intervening to change a teenager’s destructive behavior, including drug involvement that could lead to violence, without sending him or her away. One such intervention is called Multi-Systemic Therapy, a holistic approach that sends counselors into homes to conduct intensive, family-focused therapy. The families and counselors then work with the schools, teachers, churches, neighbors, and friends who “orbit” the troubled juvenile, to create change.

For Dana, a woman in Colorado, the approach made all the difference for her 15-year-old daughter, a freshman in high school. Laura (her name has been changed) had become increasingly violent for years, breaking things and punching holes in walls. “We were at the point of not being able to live with my daughter,” Dana said. She was encouraged to ask for the help of others in Laura’s circle, including her 4-H leader and her teachers. “I’m a shy person, and it helped me to connect with members of the community I didn’t even know,” she said. “For me to say that everything is fixed, and my daughter is perfect, that wouldn’t be true. But she’s talking more and is listening more, and now we can help her be a better person.”

Another approach treats violence among young people as though it were a kind of epidemic, and mobilizes the community to fight it. That’s the view of Ceasefire in Chicago. The organization takes a public health approach to crime, seeking to “interrupt” the violence, as a doctor would the spread of disease. Community mobilization is the key component of its strategy, which also includes youth outreach, public education, working with police, and drawing upon the leadership of churches.

Tio Hardimann, director of Ceasefire Illinois, explained that the organization gains the trust of young men who are often gang members and are among the most likely to become violent. The organization convinces a young man to call an “interrupter”—often a reformed former gang member—if he is on the verge of lashing out. The interrupter, acts like a volunteer firefighter, putting out a spark before it becomes a raging inferno. The approach has been credited

with reducing crime and is used in a number of cities.

“We are in the behavioral change business, and community building is what it’s all about,” Hardimann says.

What we could do:

This option holds that young people need a chance to grow up and learn how to avoid violence. Here are some things that this option suggests we could do, individually and collectively, along with some of the drawbacks:

- Community organizations can help families by intervening in the lives of troubled teenagers. That way, teenagers could be helped while staying in their own schools and neighborhoods, making it more likely that they would be rehabilitated.

But . . .

Some juveniles really should be sent away because they may pose a continuing danger to their own communities. Changing a violent juvenile is a daunting task. Untrained people may say or do the wrong thing and make matters worse. Not every community will want to get involved.

- We could intervene early to give children a good start through quality preschool programs. This has been shown to reduce violence later in life. For older students and teens, schools could function as community centers and offer programs to make sure young people were supervised after school and had positive, structured places to be.

But . . .

Then the schools, not the family, would assume the dominant role in the lives of children and teenagers. Schools are not open all the time. If we rely too much on schools, there would be gaps during the year when young people would be without support. Students see many schools as uninviting, so schools would have to make a considerable effort to appear more welcoming.

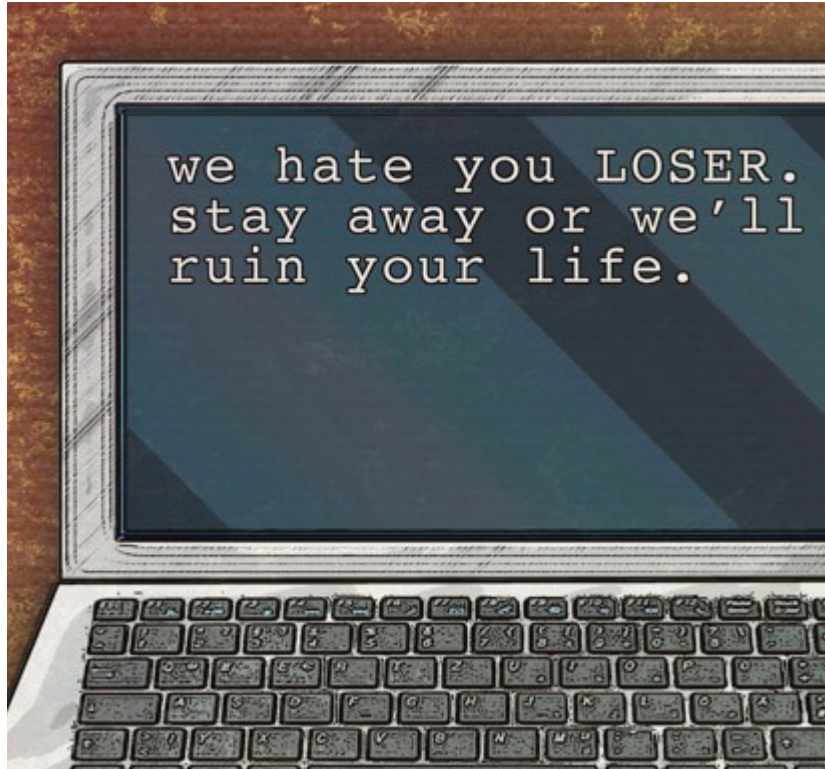
- We should support families, helping parents stay home with their children after school to keep them out of trouble. Employers would have to offer workers flexible hours to allow them to be home sooner. Families whose teenagers are in trouble could get in-home help, which would enable their children to stay in the community rather than being sent away.

But . . .

Parents would need to find more time so they could be home soon after the school day ends, but many of them work at jobs that don’t offer flextime. And some workers can’t afford this option. It’s great to offer troubled teens a way to get better and still be at home, but not all juveniles have intact families that can offer the strong support needed to make this option work.

OPTION THREE

Violence and images of violence are pervasive in American culture—on the streets and in the media. It sends the message that violence is normal and that bullying—an increasing problem—is a routine part of childhood. The key to reducing juvenile violence is to change the environment in which our children grow up.



>>Change Our Violent Culture

VIOLENCE AND THE IMAGES OF VIOLENCE are widespread in American culture. Even the most nonchalant television viewer will have noticed, for example, an erosion of standards over the years as violent behavior on the screen has become more commonplace. Video games popular with the young are even more explicit; games like *Grand Theft Auto*, *Resident Evil 4*, and *God of War* depict murder and mayhem at virtually every turn.

At the same time, daily, real-life outbreaks of gun violence leaving multiple injuries and fatalities don't surprise many Americans any more. Frequently, it seems as though street violence has become an accepted part of American life.

This third option holds that the violence that permeates American culture is at the root of the problem. If we are to have any success in reducing the violent behavior of many young people, we will have to reduce the violent images that pervade their lives. This means targeting popular culture—movies, TV programs, song lyrics, video games, and cyberimages—and many other aspects of modern life as well: bullying and the prevalence of easily obtained guns on the streets, among other problems.

Don't tolerate bullying

Parents everywhere are faced with the need to keep their kids safe from both threats and the harsh reality of an ever-coarsening culture. But we can't protect our children all the time.

Bullying—an increasingly dangerous form of violence—has become difficult for many kids to escape, according to Option Three. The Internet, text messaging, and social networks like Facebook leave victims nowhere to hide and no respite. Hope Witsell, 13, committed suicide after people sent topless photos of her through cell phones, embarrassing her before hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of people. Some school boards across the country are finding it difficult to draft effective policies that regulate students' use of the Internet to bully others, struggling with what is fair and with the problem of what to do about messages sent from a home computer over which they have no real control.

While most schools are free of weapons, few are free of bullies. In a recent poll of high school students, 20 percent said that they were bullied at school. The same percentage bullied others. Too often, the harassment takes place in front of teachers and other adults who should intervene,

but don't. Option Three says that adults bear the responsibility for reducing the violence around young people, including bullying.

Many states have passed laws encouraging schools to start anti-bullying programs. Most focus either on the bully, or the victim. One program that takes a different approach and shows promise is the Olweus Bullying Prevention program, named after the Norwegian researcher Dan Olweus. He contends that the way to reduce bullying is to help third-party bystanders speak out. This approach relies on everyone at school—students, teachers, and noneducational staff, such as janitors, cooks, and bus drivers—to intervene.

Fight loosening standards

Option Three says that the violence in our culture is fed by loosening standards in movies, television, and video games. Harvard researchers documented “ratings creep” in a 10-year study culminating in 2003. They found that images and events that would have been rated “R” 10 years earlier were now rated “PG-13.”

Option Three sees organizing as a way to reduce violent images in our culture. People can join national organizations whose members monitor and organize protests against too-violent images. The Parents Television Council, for example, offers parents information on violent television movies and video games, as well as a variety of ways to protest explicit images, from filing complaints with the federal government to joining one of its 55 chapters, which conduct grassroots campaigns against violence in the media.

On a local level, some parents network with other parents to agree on what video games and movies their children will see when they are in each other's homes. This presumes, of course, that parents can agree with one another on what is objectionable and what is not.

Reduce the number of guns

According to this option, we need to address the easy availability of guns, which enables young people to commit many violent crimes. Access to guns increases the likelihood that young people will become injured or will hurt someone else. Juvenile males are more likely to die of gunshot wounds in America today than from most natural causes combined. Option Three says that the increased availability of guns makes it easier for volatile young people to carry them, making neighborhoods and schools less safe.

In some communities, law enforcement agencies have made particular efforts to reduce youth involvement with guns. In Kansas City, Missouri, the police department instituted a program that relied on surveillance, reports of suspected drug dealing, and a policy that encouraged officers to look for any infraction that would allow them to search cars or people to reduce criminal activities and to search for illegal guns. The aim was to take guns out of cir-

ulation. Called the Kansas City Gun Experiment, the police used tough gun laws as a way to aggressively trace guns to criminal behavior and get the people involved off the streets. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives worked with another 21 communities to take the same approach to reduce gun violence.

Other cities have relied on gun buy-back programs to get guns off the streets. In most cases, police departments offer to pay citizens money for the guns they turn in. While the number of guns available in the United States is daunting, this option argues that firearms are such a fundamental element of violent crime, we must take action.

What we could do:

This option holds that we must reduce the violence that surrounds young people if we have any hope of reducing violence by youth. Here are some things that this option suggests we could do, individually and collectively, along with some of the drawbacks:

- Schools should institute anti-bullying programs to minimize how often harassment occurs in elementary and high schools. Children should never be harassed when they are just trying to get an education. Everyone deserves respect.

But . . .

Schools may get so busy watching out for bullies that academic standards become secondary. If we spend all this time trying to protect children and teenagers, they won't develop thick skins. And they won't learn to handle these difficult situations without somebody intervening.

- Parents should organize and talk to other parents to ensure that their children aren't watching inappropriate films at other houses or playing with video games that are too violent. They should write to movie producers and sponsors of television shows to protest scenes of violence in movies and on television.

But . . .

Grassroots organizing is a burden for busy parents. Imposing one's own moral values on movies is a form of censorship. If certain images offend people, they should just not allow their children to see them, rather than interfering with the right of others to do so.

- Guns, and their easy availability, are at the heart of violence in American society. We should do all we can to get guns off the street by aggressively prosecuting anyone who carries a gun illegally. We should buy back all the guns we can.

But . . .

Gun ownership is protected by the Second Amendment to the Constitution. Prosecuting people who have guns illegally won't necessarily make the streets safer. And reducing the number of guns with buy-back programs means that public funds will be used for what amounts to gun control.

>> Youth and Violence

Reducing the Threat

VIOLENCE IS AN URGENT, national problem in the United States, particularly when it involves young people. Far too many children are either at risk of becoming victims of violence or are committing violence against others. The frequency with which violence occurs not only undermines the values that most of us hold dear, but it is a collective problem that everyone has a stake in addressing because of its far-ranging potential to touch all of our lives.

Assaults and murders spark the most headlines. But not all forms of violence are found in arrest records. The rise of bullying—in schoolyards as well as on the Internet—has led to sometimes fatal results. About 20 percent of high school students reported being bullied on school property in 2009.

Children and parents alike worry about their safety. Random violence continues to have a negative impact on suburban and city neighborhoods alike. How can we reduce violence in the lives of young people?

OPTION ONE

Focus on Accountability

Society and parents must hold juveniles to a reasonable standard of lawful and civilized behavior. Children and teens who are violent need to face clear consequences, and parents need to be held accountable as well.

EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE

Police should arrest violent juveniles, so they understand that out-of-control behavior won't be tolerated. For some, prison or "boot camps," or the threat of them, are the only ways to make them understand the seriousness of their crimes.

Communities could require violent juveniles to come before committees of parents, teachers, police, neighbors, and clergy, so that they face the communities and the victims they have hurt and make amends.

Police could use community policing techniques to keep track of gang members, as well as disrupting gang activities. They could work with schools and community groups to try and keep young people from joining gangs by meeting with neighborhood groups and hosting after-school activities.

The courts should hold parents responsible for the illegal behavior of their children. When parents must answer for their children's crimes, they're more likely to enforce higher standards at home.

Communities could band together and organize against violence. Neighborhood watch groups could work with police to make their communities safer.

SOME CONSEQUENCES AND TRADE-OFFS TO CONSIDER

Prison and "boot camps" will stop some children from committing further crimes, but we would be abandoning others who could be reformed by less harsh measures. We would also be locking up many juveniles, which would add to prison overcrowding.

Young people who come before community boards might unfairly gain bad reputations if details of the proceedings get out.

Meeting with neighborhood groups and hosting school activities are distractions from the primary responsibility of the police—protecting our streets.

Some conscientious parents would be unfairly prosecuted for acts of children that are beyond their control. Some parents are absent, living elsewhere, or in some cases may be in prison themselves.

Community groups could overreach, blurring the boundaries between law enforcement and vigilantism.

OPTION TWO

Focus on Prevention and Rehabilitation

We need to intervene early in families with troubled children who are violent or at risk of engaging in violent acts. Violent juveniles often inflict pain on others. But they are still children, after all. Their poor decisions can be blamed, in part, on their youth.

EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE

Communities could organize to help, using the churches, parents, and neighborhoods, engaging former gang members and ex-convicts to reach violent young people.

Social service agencies and schools should identify young people who need help early. Schools could provide intervention programs for young people at all stages of development.

Government should more broadly fund quality preschool programs, which have been shown to reduce the rates of criminal behavior years later.

Government should fund therapeutic approaches that treat violent juveniles and those involved with drugs in the community rather than sending them away to institutions out of town. Family, neighbors, and schools should help the children change.

Families should find a way to spend more time with their children during the hours when many of them get in trouble: after school and early evening. Parents could also network with each other, providing an adult presence when kids come home from school, and setting up summer camps.

SOME CONSEQUENCES AND TRADE-OFFS TO CONSIDER

Relying on community efforts instead of law enforcement may leave people vulnerable to being victimized by the people they are trying to help.

Schools and government agencies would be more deeply involved in family life and begin making decisions once made by parents. Some children also could be typecast prematurely as troublemakers. Many schools are unwelcoming.

Beginning school earlier would deprive youngsters of having a free, unscheduled childhood, free of academic demands.

Treating children in the community leaves neighborhoods at risk and puts a very complex task in the hands of people who may not be prepared for it.

Many parents, especially single parents, who work full-time would find this difficult if not impossible. Parents would have to make sure that other adults with whom they might entrust their children share their values.

OPTION THREE

Change Our Violent Culture

Violence and images of violence are pervasive in American culture—on the streets and in the media. It sends the message that violence is normal and that bullying—an increasing problem—is a routine part of childhood. The key to reducing juvenile violence is to change the environment in which our children grow up.

EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE

Schools should encourage both children and teachers to intervene when they see bullying so that everyone understands that being a passive bystander is not acceptable.

Parents could agree together not to allow their kids to see movies and video games inappropriate for their age groups.

Local governments could have gun buy-back programs to reduce the number of guns available.

Local and federal governments should support undercover police work and surveillance that leads to gang arrests, disrupting the drug trade that is at the root of violence and gang activities in many neighborhoods.

Parents should organize to protest the ever-loosening standards for movies and violent video games. What was once considered “R” material is now “PG-13” and children are exposed to far more depictions of graphic violence.

SOME CONSEQUENCES AND TRADE-OFFS TO CONSIDER

We would be shifting responsibility for safe schools from principals onto the shoulders of students and teachers who already have their hands full.

This likely would make off-limits games and movies more attractive to children. It also could be harder for young people to make decisions about such games and movies once they’re adults.

This means local governments will use public funds to engage in gun control.

This could erode civil liberties, encouraging the government to spy on its own citizens.

Establishing standards for a number of families would require a lot of organizing from time-strapped parents.