

Prevent Violence for Better Public Health

*James A. Mercy of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention participated in the panel discussion, “Exploring State and Federal Policies That Would Support Violence Prevention Work on the Local Level.” The panel was part of The California Wellness Foundation’s Conference on Violence Prevention held in October 2010, in Los Angeles. The following narrative is excerpted from his remarks.**

Violence Makes Us Sick

Violence literally makes us sick. We know through decades of research that exposure to violence—especially during childhood, adolescence and young adulthood—contributes to poor mental and physical health throughout the lifespan. In addition to serious physical injury and death, exposure to violence increases risk behaviors such as smoking, overeating and illicit drug abuse. It increases mental health issues like depression and anxiety, and it even contributes to chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

How does this happen? One way that exposure to violence leads to negative health outcomes is by damaging the brain’s architecture. Neuroscientists now recognize that exposure to the stress of violence can damage the formation of healthy neurocircuitry and the brain’s stress regulation system. Because of these impacts children exposed to violence may have difficulty dealing with stress later in life. One way they may deal with their inability to regulate stress is by using cigarettes to self-medicate. And smoking, in turn, leads to many other health problems down the road.

Violence is every bit as much a health problem as a criminal justice problem. The growing body of evidence linking child maltreatment, youth violence, intimate partner violence and other forms of violence to a broad range of health consequences makes it abundantly clear that exposure to violence has

* The findings and conclusions in this presentation are those of the speaker and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.



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health implications. The realm for public policy to address violence thus extends well beyond the field of criminal justice. Effective violence prevention policies therefore bring more substantial social and economic benefits than policymakers generally realize. Violence prevention policies are not just an investment in greater community safety, but also in improving the overall health of our communities.

Policies that support safe, stable and nurturing relationships are fundamentally important. This is the antidote to the toxic stress that damages the brain. For many of us it has been a privilege to grow up in families that are safe, stable and nurturing; we must recognize that growing up in these types of environments should be the case for every child.

Preventing Violence & Chronic Disease

Violence blocks us from healthy living and eating. In communities that are plagued by violence, it's the responsible parent who keeps children indoors and doesn't allow them to go outside and play and run around in order to keep them safe. For young and old alike, the perception that their neighborhood is unsafe limits involvement in physical activity, which we know contributes to better health. It's also more difficult to access healthy food choices in violent neighborhoods where convenience stores and fast food are more common, and violence keeps businesses from thriving and new business from starting up. Violence in communities also makes it more difficult to build social cohesion—the trust and social interactions that are needed to build healthy communities. Violence affects our ability to live healthy, active lives and have healthy choices in our communities.

This has several important policy implications. One promising policy direction is to structure the physical environment in ways that reduce violence, that create better access and a sense of safety and trust among people. Policies affecting building and housing codes may be an area we need to look at more closely at, so we design communities that promote healthy living and eating. Communities that want to reduce chronic diseases by promoting healthy living and eating have to deal with the safety issue first. Before they can get people active and increase access to healthy food choices, they have to make the community safe. This is not about telling people what to do; it is a policy direction designed to give people a broader range of choices that includes more healthy alternatives.

Effective policies in this area will also require creative and new approaches to partnering. The reality is that oftentimes, the policies that are most effective in violence prevention don't have violence in their title at all, so we need to partner with advocates for reforming things like public housing, schools and justice. This also presents an opportunity for those interested in violence prevention to partner with groups directly involved in health care reform. Investing in violence prevention and creating healthier communities should be seen as one in the same.

ADDRESSING THE INTERSECTION

Violence and the fear of violence are major roadblocks to the success of chronic disease prevention strategies. But until Prevention Institute published *Addressing the Intersection—Preventing Violence and Promoting Healthy Eating and Active Living*, there was very little research on this fundamental relationship. *Addressing the Intersection* serves as a resource for practitioners, advocates, policy-makers and other stakeholders working to build safe, healthy communities. The paper is available for free download at the Prevention Institute web site, www.preventioninstitute.org/publications.

Violence as a Health Disparity

Violence makes us unequal. Violence sustains health and economic disparities that exist in communities. A child exposed to severe violence, for example, is more likely to have mental and physical health problems and underachieve in school. People who have mental and physical health issues are less likely to be able to take advantage of social opportunities, to do well in education and move up the social ladder, so they stay stuck at the bottom rung of the social strata. In turn, poverty contributes to violence. There's a cycle here that keeps people stuck in health, social and economic disparities.

Policies that break this cycle are critically important. This might include, for example, policies that promote business improvement districts or help families move out of areas of concentrated poverty. Housing vouchers can enable public housing residents to move to better neighborhoods, and tax advantages might encourage businesses to open in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Prevent Violence for Better Public Health

In public health, we're always looking for levers. Archimedes said, "Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world." In public health, we have found these levers. Policies restricting smoking, for example, have broad impacts for health. Childhood immunization has been an incredible lever for moving and changing the world in terms of better public health. Millions of children are alive today that wouldn't have been except for childhood immunization. Motor vehicle safety is another example. Hundreds of thousands of people are alive today who wouldn't be, if it weren't for the policies and strategies to make cars and roads safer in the U.S.

Violence prevention is also a lever through which we can move the world to better public health. One of the most powerful ways we can change the world is to make it free of violence.

Urban Networks to Increase Thriving Youth (UNITY) builds support for effective, sustainable efforts to prevent violence before it occurs so that urban youth can thrive in safe environments with supportive relationships and opportunities for success. A Prevention Institute initiative, UNITY is funded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as part of the CDC's national youth violence prevention initiative, Striving to Reduce Youth Violence Everywhere (STRYVE), and in part by The California Wellness Foundation (TCWF). Created in 1992 as an independent, private foundation, TCWF's mission is to improve the health of the people of California by making grants for health promotion, wellness, education, and disease prevention programs.

For more information on UNITY: www.preventioninstitute.org/unity

"UNITY is a project to identify effective and sustainable violence prevention programs in cities to address youth violence prevention. Working with partners like Prevention Institute through programs like UNITY is one way [the CDC is] trying to engage and educate public health leaders about the importance of these ideas. [The UNITY City Network is a forum for exchanging information] about what policies and programs work or don't work in terms of addressing violence and improving this country."

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