

Commentary

Help our youth; here's how

The first response to the recent killings in Colorado was shock and horror. Television images of a wounded student escaping from a second-story window had one television anchor in

tears while describing the live event. But as soon as the shock wore off, the blame game began. Blame violent movies and video games, blame the parents, blame the schools, blame law enforcement, blame the kids who knew something was wrong, and blame a lack of religious teaching. There is currently a bill in the Senate that would make penalties against delinquent youth even harsher. Blame the children.

I would like to suggest that we are having the wrong debate. Children are at a much greater risk of being the victims than the perpetrators of a violent crime. And children who are victimized are much more likely to become perpetrators. According to the Children's Defense Fund: "In 1996, 3.1 million children were reported abused or neglected, and those reports were substantiated for at least 969,000. At least 14 children die each day from gunfire in America — approximately one every 100 minutes."

Hot off the press is the "Status of Oregon's Children" report published by Children's First of Oregon. The child abuse and neglect victim rate for Oregon in 1997 was 11.8 per 1,000 children under age 18. The is the highest rate since 1990 and 16 percent worse than 1996.

And if others are not victimizing children, they take their frustration, rage, and confusion out on themselves. A recent article in the Oregonian noted that "teen suicide is a daunting problem in the Northwest. Suicide has increased fivefold in Oregon in the past 35 years, fueled by a jump in suicides among teenagers."

Oregon ranks 17th among states in teen suicide. "On average, 30 Oregon teenagers kill themselves each year. For every teenage suicide, there are 20 attempts."

But if you are reading this, you probably know all the statistics. Every few months, as state and federal agencies release their reports, a news article will report on the increase in child abuse, drug abuse, and delinquency. Most of the daily stories of children — who are killed, raped, wounded, assaulted, or overdosed — rarely make the front page of even local newspapers. Because these stories are so common, they cease to be newsworthy.

Arnie Green

The Children's Defense Fund has a web page entitled Every Day in America. Just a quick glance will help you understand why it takes a slaughter in Colorado to get our attention. Every day in America, 78 babies die. Eleven children are homicide victims. Six children commit suicide. That's every day in America.

So, what can we do? There is that wonderful bumper sticker: "Think globally — act locally." Here in Ashland, a group of folks decided to look at the problem, study the research, and at last, do something. I've outlined some of the dangers facing our children, today. The research suggests that violent crime triples during the hours of 3 and 8 p.m. Children are more likely to be the victims of a violent crime by a non-family member between 2 and 6 p.m. Children without adult supervision are at significantly greater risk of truancy from school, stress, receiving poor grades, risk-taking behavior, and substance abuse.

It sounds too simple to be true, but, in fact, most of our at-risk children suffer from lack of adult supervision during the after-school hours. In combination with quality activities, an after-school program can improve school attendance and performance and reduce the incidence of delinquency and abuse.

In March, Ashland and Community Works celebrated the opening of the Ashland Youth and Family Resource Center. It is next door to the Civic Center on east Main Street. Dozens of children are currently using this facility. But there is still much work to be done. The program needs adults, who will volunteer to supervise and manage activities. It needs monetary support. Even programs that are essentially volunteer driven need staff to recruit and support volunteers.

But the Resource Center is not just about providing an after-school program. When youngsters are identified as needing help, a team of social service professionals can be assembled to design a case management plan with the family.

It is tragic when children are gunned down in their schools. It is a tragedy of epic proportions to fail to act, when we know how to prevent childhood violence and victimization. Join us, today.

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