

MAYNET PRO

The uncounted wounded

It feeds entire public's senses of fear, vulnerability when parents can't get help for troubled children.

Shootings at Thurston High School, tragedies at other schools and grisly coverage of increasingly random violence by young people have created an adult populace that is afraid of kids.

The self-protective instinct is to wall one's family away from risk — keep children inside and let tough, mandatory prison sentences hem of fenders inside, too.

But we can't stay in bunkers forever or keep others in them. What to do?

Many things "can reduce anti-social trajectories" that lead to violence, says an Oregon researcher. Excellent studies are available "that we just don't use," says a state education official. We know so many things that can help, say two state senators.

Becoming afraid for kids is society's best defense against dangerous behavior. Intervene before noncompliance ratchets up to defiance, anger intensifies to anti-social acts and aggression escalates to brutality.

More than the dead and wounded suffer from Springfield carnage, Portland gang wars



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and shots in the neighborhood that no one will investigate. We all become victims when such occurrences make us feel vulnerable, unsafe and fearful. Crisis planning for communities and metal detectors in schools don't relieve the anxieties. The feelings of exposure stick like leeches to legs.

News and entertainment shows reinforce the distress. Sissela Bok dwells on symptoms in "Mayhem" (Addison-Wesley, 1998, \$22), a book on how long-term media violence affects our national character.

Exaggerated senses of insecurity and mistrust lock people of all ages in cages of "mean-world" images. Disproportionate attention to rare forms of violence — the JonBenet Ramsey killing and the 1993 kidnapping and murder of 12-year-old Polly Klaas — make people "wrongly believe that crime is uniquely high and rising."

Many parents, fearful themselves, no longer say to their children, "Go out and play." Safely watching TV indoors, Bok says, they become more convinced of the risks on the outside and stay inside — gaining confirmation that "out there" all is mayhem.

Fearfulness, depression and pessimism affect higher proportions of young people than in the past. Suicide rates for adolescents have tripled in the last three decades. Parents and teachers talk more and more about students'

irritability, inability to concentrate and hypersensitivity to sudden noises.

Excessive fear, said Bok, "undercuts resilience, the ability to bounce back to resist and overcome adversity." It dulls resourcefulness, the capacities to extract human warmth in adverse situations and to attract aid from outside the family if it is unavailable within. It stultifies the ability to relate one's difficulties to others or to empathize with theirs while keeping a safe emotional distance. It promotes a "bystander effect" of callous noninvolvement. And on and on.

In all this we can intervene, we can help. □

The 12-year-old has become disrespectful, disobedient, and aggressive. His fascination with violence is growing. He stole his father's handgun from its locked drawer. He is "on the brink of making a bad mistake."

The stepmother tearfully tells of her pleas for aid from public agencies. Sympathy yes, but as to help: Come back after your child has committed a crime.

This frustrated Portland-area parent's tale came June 3 at a Children First for Oregon forum, "After Springfield's Sorrow." A House Minority Leader Kitty Piercy, D-Eugene, followed with her own and constituents' stories "of how frightening it is when parents can't get help for children."

The gathered experts nod their agreement. We can pay on the front end or suffer more afflictions like Springfield.

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