

METRO

Kids are not the threat

The most dangerous problem isn't youth violence, it's violence against youth — and the way we accept it

It was a terrific story, and in this year of school shoot-ups, it was played big.

An 11-year-old girl was murdered in Chicago, and the killers were an 8-year-old and a 7-year-old, who had bashed her head in with a rock to steal her bike. They had also, said the cops, molested the girl sexually. Since there was no secure facility for kids their age, they were sent home with electronic anklets.

The story fit right into the Killer Kids theme of this year's headlines.

"Just when we think killers can't get any younger," throbbed one columnist, "this."

Except, some weeks later, "this" wasn't true. The police lab

found a stain on the girl's underwear that could not have been produced by a 7-year-old or an 8-year-old. The kids were let out of their anklets.

That part wasn't quite as big a story. Instead of another Kid Killer chiller, it was just another child assaulted by an adult.

And that's hardly news.

All year, we've been warned that our children are coming after us with guns, that we're producing a violent generation, that our schoolkids are dangerous. Thursday, Attorney General Janet Reno met in Salt Lake City with 50 mayors and 15 police chiefs, and talked about school uniforms and keeping guns away from kids.

Certainly, youth violence is a problem, and it deserves all the effort we can manage — and a lot more than we're providing. But as Lisa Cohn of the Centers for Disease Control told the group, violence by high school students, although still frightening, has been declining since 1991.

Statistically, for example, kids in 1997-98 have spilled more ink but less blood.

Statistically, the real threat isn't kids, it's adults — especially if you're a kid. And a botched Chicago murder investigation isn't the only evidence of that.

Citing data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, the Children's Defense Fund concludes, "Children are at much greater risk of being the victims than the perpetrators of a violent crime."

For one thing, in the most recent numbers from 1996, there were 930,001 victims of child abuse and neglect in the country. That's not exactly a two-way street; according to Justice Department figures for that year, "Offenses Against Family and Children" included 1,879 arrests of kids under 15; 5,850 arrests of minors under 18, and 97,950 arrests of adults.

No wonder a kid killing an adult is a better news story. So is Man Bites Dog.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics also has an intriguing report on violence-related injuries treated in emergency rooms. Of the 75,600 admissions of kids under 12, 56.3 percent were injured by a relative — almost triple the percentage for adults.

As Gary Dombroff, psychologist and executive director of Children First of Oregon

puts it, "My impression is that adult violence against children far outweighs child-on-child violence."

And even if those stories are less likely to make CNN, there's considerable evidence that Dombroff's impression is right.

The Multnomah County District Attorney's office has recorded all serious felonies referred by police since Measure 11 went into effect. From April 1, 1995 to September 22, 1998, there were 807 victims 10 and under; suspected in those cases were 723 adults and 84 minors. Among kids 11 to 14, the accused included 340 adults and 138 minors; for crimes against victims 15 to 17, police brought in 381 adults and 161 juveniles.

And it's not that juvenile criminals are concentrating on older targets; in crimes against victims from 30 to 50, adult suspects outnumbered juveniles 10 to 1.

If we're really worried about violence by kids, a good place to start might be attacking violence against kids. For one thing, it would be easier to find — there's so much more of it.

Somehow, however, that part's never interested us quite enough. That's why it's a much more exciting story when a kid shoots up his school. That's why Los Angeles was transfixed about the trial of the Menendez brothers for killing their parents, over the course of a year when hundreds of California parents killed their kids. It's why an alleged killing by an 8-year-old and a 7-year-old was so newsworthy, while the reality of just another murderous adult pedophile immediately slipped from the national news.

"It's really an epidemic," says Dombroff, "the way children are maltreated by adults in our culture."

After the case was thrown out in Chicago, the 7-year-old's defense lawyer, Elizabeth Tanzia, complained about the process, "This is a terrible thing to do to little children."

We do lots of terrible things to children.

And then we say we're scared of them.

