

Stress, trauma, loss, rage

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
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What if we looked at violence in America as a public health crisis rather than a crime problem? What if we look for promising practices and expanded the ones that work to eliminate the epidemic of violence that keeps our graveyards, jails, and prisons full? That is exactly the approach recommended by a panel of the nation's leading gun violence researchers in a report released this week by the Institute of Medicine. Convened by the federal government in the wake of the Newtown shooting, the panel provides a national road map for the research that needs to be done to prevent gun violence and improve public safety, especially for our most vulnerable.

The odds against growing into a productive adulthood are almost overwhelming for Black boys, especially those from impoverished backgrounds. One in three will wind up in jail or prison, and some won't survive to age 21: According to the FBI, in 2011 more than 6,300 African-Americans, mostly young men, were murdered in the United States. The Children's Defense Fund's 2012 national conference featured a panel of physicians and experts who look at this ongoing loss of life and human potential as a public health crisis. Their viewpoint offers a fresh explanation for the culture of violence and points to ways to counteract it.

"We know that stress and trauma have an impact on physical and mental health and brain development," said Dr. John Rich, Chair of the Department of Health Management and Policy at the Drexel University School of Public Health and director of the school's Center for Nonviolence and Social Justice. Dr. Rich interviewed scores of young men recuperating from knife or gunshot wounds and shared his findings in the book *Wrong Place, Wrong Time: Trauma and Violence in the Lives of Young Black Men*. He found that many of our young people are under tremendous stress, "When these young men behave in ways we don't like, what we should be asking them is not 'What's wrong with you?' but 'What happened to you?'" Dr. Rich noted that many of the young men he interviewed display the same symptoms of trauma, like hyper vigilance and emotional numbing, as soldiers returning from a war zone—and he sees many of the young people caught up in the cycle of violence not as inherently bad people needing punishment, but as injured people who need healing.

Dr. Kenneth Hardy, professor of Family Therapy at Drexel University, said the young men and boys he meets in his practice come with a set of underlying and intertwined problems. The first is devaluation—persistent assaults to dignity. "Part of being Black means you are born into a group that tends to be devalued. Put on top of that male and poor." Additional trauma comes from failure in school and sometimes physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Dr. Hardy believes that persistent devaluation of poor Black boys and men is one reason many put such a high premium on respect, and real or perceived disrespect then often becomes the trigger point for violence.

Dr. Hardy has observed the erosion of community, relationships, and connectedness in impoverished neighborhoods where young people are often left to raise themselves and find a sense of belonging in the streets. There, violence is the accepted and expected way of settling conflicts and building a reputation as a man.

A third, related reality for many poor Black boys and young men is loss, Dr. Hardy said: "Their lives are inundated by losses that are unacknowledged and ungrieved." Some are tangible

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losses—a mother who is an alcoholic or drug addict and not available as a caring parent, a father in prison or gone without explanation. There are kindergartners who come to school with heavy hearts.

But, Dr. Hardy continued, "Even more profound are the intangible losses—loss of hope, loss of future orientation. You hear the story over and over again: 'I don't expect to live beyond 19.' It's not about a lack of desire to live but a sense that life is so inundated with loss you can't see beyond it."

From this "massive, pervasive loss," Hardy said, "rage is inevitable." He distinguished rage from anger, a more immediate emotion: Rage is more bedrock, formed from layers of anger, and comes from degradation.

Once we observe this trauma and rage happening, how can we help heal it? Dr. Hardy said we need to find ways to counteract devaluation with a new narrative. Punishment alone—the default in many American schools and the criminal justice system—is not effective in changing people and only adds to the devaluation.

Dr. Robert Ross, a pediatrician who is the president and CEO of The California Endowment, shared examples of successful approaches he's seen in their Healthy Communities initiative, including the simple power of programs that allow young people to tell their stories in a safe and supportive space. As Dr. Ross summed up the crisis, right now many people do not believe the health and mental health systems in America are dealing with the epidemic of violence, trauma, and stress in the lives of young people of color in a systematic and meaningful way: "There are systems that are derailing our young men into prison. We need to create a counter-system each step of the way."

We all need to stand up for children and demand the federal government fund the research that needs to be done so we can jumpstart a cure to this national gun violence epidemic. We don't have a moment to waste or another child to lose.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org.