Aggression and Violence in the United States: Reflections on the Virginia Tech Shootings

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The shootings at Virginia Tech University in April 2007 have again brought home the tragic consequences of violence. As yet another instance of senseless aggression unfolded, the nation watched as details emerged about the perpetrator and the deaths of 32 students and professors. The shooter, Seung-Hui Cho, lived a troubled life characterized by social isolation, alienation, and depression. Furthermore, professors at Virginia Tech had recognized erratic behavior in Mr. Cho and had referred him for counseling and mental health treatment on several different occasions. On the other hand, Mr. Cho's victims were, by all accounts, normal students going about their daily routines. Sadly, we could easily substitute the name of any U.S. university for Virginia Tech.

Images of what happened on April 16 in Blacksburg have filled the thoughts and minds of university students, faculty, and staff across the nation. Reports of frantic parents trying to reach their loved ones and of cell phones ringing in the pockets of dead students affected the psyche of an entire country. The Virginia Tech shootings were preceded by deadly violence on at least 12 other college campuses dating to the well-known Kent State shootings of 1970. It is disturbing that seven of these 12 incidents have occurred since 1991; four have happened since 2000 (Smith, 2007).

The shootings at Virginia Tech remind us that violent behavior often occurs in unexpected places under hard-to-predict circumstances. It is interesting that recent shootings on U.S. campuses have occurred when rates for most types of aggression and violence have achieved their lowest levels in years.

TRENDS IN AGGRESSION AND VIOLENCE

Trends in aggression and violence generally mirror a host of individual, social, and economic patterns. For example, the well-documented increase in youth violence between the late 1980s and mid-1990s was linked to increases in gang involvement and crack cocaine use. Conversely, reductions in youth violence in the past decade have been associated with the implementation of innovative law enforcement strategies, improvements in economic opportunities, and efficacious prevention approaches in communities and schools (Blumstein & Wallman, 2006). Disentangling and interpreting trends in violent conduct, however, is a daunting task for policy officials and practitioners.

Offender and victimization data compiled by the U.S. Department of Justice reveal a decrease in violence between the mid-1990s and 2004. For example, the rate of violent crime for the offenses of murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault decreased 26% between 1996 and 2004 (Crime in the United States 2004, 2005). Similarly, data from the National Crime Victimization Survey, an annual household survey of crime victimization in the United States, indicate that the victimization rate for violent crime fell to an all-time low of 21 incidents per 1,000 residents in 2005 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2007). Finally, a decline in juvenile violence has also been reported widely in recent years; for example, the arrest rate for violent crimes by youths under the age of 18 decreased by 49% between 1994 and 2004 (Snyder, 2006).

However, an increase in violent crime rates among adults in the past few years may signal an end to the downward turn in violent crime in the United States. Notably, overall violent crime increased by a little more than 2% between 2004 and 2005 (Crime in the United States 2005, 2006), and data released in 2007 by the Federal Bureau of Investigation indicate that violent crime increased 1% between 2005 and 2006 (http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm). Data published later this year will show whether similar increases are occurring among persons under age 18.

In sum, trends of violent conduct in the United States reveal both optimism and concern. On the
one hand, a decade-long decline in violence has led to a greater sense of security among many citizens and to more opportunities for people at greatest risk of criminal involvement. However, recent increases in violence may signal that a new trend of escalating violence is emerging among adults and young people in the United States. Regardless of the validity of these apparent trends, U.S. citizens appear to be concerned about the sheer volume of media reports detailing violent conduct among adults and young people in the past several years. Aggressive and violent behavior remains unacceptably high in the United States, particularly in comparison to other nations in the international community (Zimring, 2006; Zimring & Hawkins, 1997).

**DIRECTIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY, AND RESEARCH**

Although helpful in understanding the epidemiology of violent conduct, offender and victimization trends neither offer specific solutions to preventing aggression and violence nor portend exactly the type of violent acts committed at Virginia Tech. However, trends in violence and advances in detecting, preventing, and treating violent offenders suggest at least two key areas of social intervention.

**Connecting Violence and Mental Illness**

Profiles of the perpetrators of school shootings in the past decade reveal that many shooters experienced mental health problems before their decisions to engage in violence (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). In many cases, including the Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, CO, the perpetrators had been isolated socially from their peers and had been the recipients of bullying and teasing from other students. Other shooters had been diagnosed with mental health problems such as depression and anxiety that went untreated. Mr. Cho was referred for counseling several times at Virginia Tech following his submission of violence-laced poetry and short stories in English classes. Images in his writings included frequent references to hate and death. Unfortunately, his participation in counseling and therapy was sporadic, and no requirements were available to force Mr. Cho to continue his therapy.

In the wake of the Virginia Tech shootings, President Bush formed a study group to examine a variety of issues, including the relationship between mental health and violence. Released June 13, 2007, the *Report to the President on Issues Raised by the Virginia Tech Tragedy* describes the need for universities, law enforcement, and human services agencies to more effectively share information about troubled students such as Mr. Cho (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007). The report also emphasizes the need for people with mental illness to receive treatment.

We know that the link between mental health problems and violence should be given more attention in education, research, and policy circles. School social workers and mental health professionals should receive ongoing training in recognizing the possibility that students with mental health problems may be at elevated risk of aggression and violence. Researchers need to improve the ability to detect the likelihood of violence among young people who suffer from mental health problems or disorders. Finally, institutional policies must be more effective in ensuring that students who are referred for treatment actually receive the help they need. Of course, the line between experiencing mental health problems and committing violent acts is a complex and fuzzy one. Most young people and adults with mental health problems never engage in violence. Yet, finding markers that elevate the risk of violence and ensuring appropriate treatments for mental health disorders must be key public policy, research, and practice goals.

**Enhanced Gun Control Policies**

Gun control legislation has had a long and inconsistent history in the United States. Congress first passed laws controlling firearms in the early 20th century. Throughout the past century, the issue has been debated frequently by opponents and proponents. Each side has used a different interpretation of the Second Amendment of the Constitution, a provision giving citizens the right to bear arms, to boost its arguments for or against gun control. Background checks and purchasing limitations, trigger locks, and the use of assault weapons have been among the hotly debated issues.

Historically, the majority of gun control acts have been generated and either passed or not approved at the state level. State dominance of gun control legislation has resulted in a rather piecemeal approach to the regulation of guns. The House of Representatives recently approved legislation to close the loophole that allowed Mr. Cho to buy
firearms despite a documented history of mental health problems. Symbolically, the bill was approved on the same day the national report detailing what occurred at Virginia Tech was released. The new legislation, pending approval from the Senate, should help ensure that information about people restricted from purchasing or possessing firearms is contained in the National Instant Criminal Background Check System.

Although gun control legislation occurs in the context of cultural and social tradition and is fueled greatly by conflicting special interest and political beliefs about the role of government regulation, history tells us that countries using strict laws to regulate firearms consistently have lower homicide and violence rates than the United States. Strict gun control might have averted the recent Virginia Tech shootings. However, rational gun control legislation remains one of the nation's best ways to curb aggression and violence.

SUMMARY
Aggression and violence in the United States remain vexing problems that require several key responses. First, universal prevention programs and targeted treatment strategies for people at risk of aggressive behavior are needed to address the established link between mental illness and the potential for violence. Sadly, many perpetrators of gun violence are themselves victims of mental illness who find it all too easy to obtain and use firearms (Freedenthal, 2007). Efficacious interventions that break the potentially dangerous relationship between violence and mental illness should be a public policy priority. Finally, in an effort to find legislative solutions to regulate firearms effectively, lobbying efforts aimed at sane gun control policies must be a public policy priority. Social work's presence in these efforts should be continued and enhanced.

THE CURRENT ISSUE
Several articles in this issue address parenting practices, peer relationships, and adolescent problem behavior. Coombs-Orme and Wyse examine a mother's ability to develop effective parenting skills in the face of weak bonds with her own parents or caregivers. Analyzing data obtained from a sample of 210 new mothers, the authors find four distinct types of child–parent bonding and parenting skills. They offer critical suggestions about ways to interrupt cycles of weak bonding between parents and children that contribute to ineffective parenting practices across generations.

Articles by Williams and colleagues and by Nebbitt, Lombe, and Lindsey examine substance use, academic performance, and peer affiliations among African American adolescents. Williams and associates point to the importance of addressing family-related correlates in social interventions aimed at improving academic performance. The authors identify a number of prevention strategies specific to African American students. Nebbitt and colleagues examine the influence of parental behavior and peer affiliations among 238 African American adolescents living in public housing communities. Their findings reinforce the importance of parental supervision as a protective factor against involvement with antisocial peers.

Peters, Nason, and Turner present results from a test of a revised version of the Hypermasculinity Index (HMI). They correctly note that hypermasculinity is frequently associated with rape. Thus, instruments like the HMI are essential in assessing attitudes and behavior that may help practitioners identify people at risk of participating in violent behaviors such as rape. The authors' findings indicate that a new version of the HMI yields less social desirability and improves the ability to detect hypermasculinity in young adult males.

Finally, in the Research Note column, Gainey, Haggerty, Fleming, and Catalano report findings from an experimental study aimed at improving the parenting skills of parents in methadone treatment. Using data from the Focus on Families project, the authors found significantly higher parenting skills among the experimental group, compared with a no-treatment control group. This finding indicates that parenting skills of those typically viewed as hard-to-treat parents receiving methadone treatment can be modified.

REFERENCES
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