The Importance of Universal School-Based Programs in Preventing Violent and Aggressive Behavior

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With the release of the publication, "Effectiveness of Universal School-Based Programs to Prevent Violent and Aggressive Behavior: A Systematic Review,"[1] along with its corresponding article,[2] the Task Force on Community Preventive Services continues to provide valuable information to policymakers and practitioners interested in significantly reducing youth violence in this nation's communities. In a highly ambitious series of papers, the Task Force has elevated the field's ability to understand the variety of components that would constitute a wide-ranging and comprehensive set of preventive services. Designed to promote evidence-based public health practice, the series is providing public health practitioners and decision makers with important and credible recommendations regarding population-based interventions to promote health and to prevent disease, injury, disability, and premature death in communities.

Through its focus on universal school-based violence prevention programs, the Task Force builds on its exploration of program-intensive therapeutic foster care,[3,4] early childhood home visitation,[4,5] and firearms laws in the prevention of violence,[4,6] with a particular emphasis on juvenile violence. This work is further enhanced by the recent review of the harm caused by policies that facilitate the transfer of juveniles from the juvenile to the adult justice system,[7,8] as well as the upcoming review of the benefit associated with group and individual cognitive behavior therapy for juvenile offenders (in prep). As part of this cluster of publications, the review of universal school-based programs further makes the case for the importance of "place" in terms of how we construct a comprehensive youth violence reduction strategy. It is one that builds on what we know about the potential for success in using an ecologic framework targeted at individual-, school-, family-, peer-, and community-based interventions.

In this regard, the articles by Hahn et al.[1] and by the Task Force on Community Preventive Services[2] advance approaches that vary widely. Some address interpersonal relationships, the physical and social environment, and the implementation of curricula that provide information about the problem of violence and ways to avoid it; others relate to the adoption of programs grounded in theories related to self-concept and self-esteem, social learning, and those providing experience in dealing with social problems and thinking about ways to improve behavior around conflict and aggression. It is an important body of work.

As both a practitioner and policymaker at various times in my career, it is my belief that this Review and Recommendation, and the other products of the Task Force, have been both important and highly successful undertakings in deepening our knowledge. The field has benefited greatly from the work done to date—work that has reminded us of the need to attack the critically important issue of youth violence as the public health problem it is. This thoughtful approach is one that flies in the face of the tendency of many policymakers and practitioners to find the "silver bullet" in seeking solutions to problems receiving heightened public attention.

This certainly was the case in relation to youth violence in America as it was experienced in the mid-1980s through the early 1990s. Dramatic increases in both the rate and seriousness of youth violence led to pronouncements that we were experiencing the by-product of the arrival of a generation of violent youth. Some politicians, academicians, and social policy pundits had their predictions captured in the doom and gloom comments of United States Representative Bill McCollum, warning his fellow representatives during a Congressional hearing in the mid-1990s to "brace themselves for the coming generation of super-predators."[9] What was of even greater consequence, was that these predictions were accompanied by the political rhetoric of the need to get tough in fighting youth crime and adopt more punitive policies. Thankfully, a more reasoned and methodic approach advocated by a number of influential national and local leaders, calling for a balanced and evidence-based approach to fighting youth violence, served as a successful counterbalance.

Nevertheless, the debate, which began at that time on the best balance and course of action to reduce youth violence and improve outcomes more generally for our young people, has continued. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately in terms of the exigency with

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which these issues are currently being treated, we have seen a tremendous decrease in youth violence in this country for almost a decade. This is a welcome turn of events, but it has also led many of our leaders to lose their focus on the need to build on this downturn and avoid falling into the trap of believing that our current levels of youth violence are somehow acceptable.

This tendency for our public and political will to turn on the exigencies at hand is not surprising, but it is a phenomenon we must resist, and the work underway by the Task Force provides us with a tool in this regard. Our challenge is to use these tools in capturing, in a strong and sustained manner, the elements of the public health model and then adhering to them as our model for change.

Albert Einstein put forward the proposition that:

"A human being is a part of a whole, called by us 'universe,' a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal decisions and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole nature of it beauty."[10]

In making this statement, he framed the challenge we face in adopting a public health framework in attacking youth violence. In general, the public's interest in the most effective means of achieving greater levels of safety is driven primarily by its concern for its own immediate safety, and only for as long as that safety is in question. Once the crisis has passed, we move on to other issues that have reached crisis proportions—and as a result, the financial and intellectual resources, and political will to stay the course, are focused elsewhere. We fail to embrace the notion that our concern must be one defined by a wider circle of compassion. Our failure to do this endangers our ability to achieve even greater reductions in youth violence than the significant reductions reached in the last decade.

Even more specifically, our task is to find the will in three critical areas that will allow us to take full advantage of the very challenging and ambitious work undertaken by the Task Force on Community Preventive Services. The first is to find and maintain the forceful leadership needed to support a public health approach in reducing youth violence, one that embraces that wider circle of compassion; the second is the full-scale implementation of comprehensive prevention services that uses an ecologically based framework; and third is a commitment to evidence-based practices that create the platform from which a well-trained and equipped workforce can carry out its work, including the implementation of evidence-based programs.

As noted in an earlier commentary by Calonge[11] on the work of the Task Force, the barriers to this work can be categorized into four primary groups: fiscal, political, structural, and perceptual.

- Fiscal, consisting of ongoing budget constraints, limitations on deficit spending, and tax limitation laws
- Political, including the challenges of proving the benefit of the long-term impact of prevention programs
- Structural, related to the challenges of working across local, state, and federal governmental agencies, and in collaboration with agencies within and across jurisdictions
- Perceptual, dealing with the community's willingness or desire to prioritize a specific issue above others

Each of these items is inextricably linked to the three noted in the prior paragraph. Forceful leadership is affected by political and perceptual barriers; full-scale implementation is affected by fiscal and structural barriers; and the commitment to adoption of evidence-based practices and programs is often stymied by fiscal, structural, and political barriers.

So how do we break down these barriers? The answer is singularly found in leadership. We need leaders to inspire and lead our citizens, create community partnerships to help promote the understanding and commitment to this issue, and navigate the obstacles we will experience in building interagency cooperation, public will, and the societal responsibility for our most challenged and challenging youth.

In this regard, a concerted effort to reach children and youth in the environment in which the vast majority spend significant amounts of time—our schools—with universal programs that the Task Force has identified as having the potential to reduce violent behavior by 15%, is one that school officials and other leaders should embrace. Staff time, training, and other efforts need to be allocated and an understanding developed of the intricacies involved in adopting the evidence-based programs and the underlying evidence-based practices needed to be in place to ensure the integrity of their implementation.

School officials, becoming cognizant of the fact that positive program effects of universal school-based violence prevention programs can be achieved at all grade levels and affect not only levels of violence, but also other behaviors and school performance in a positive manner, should be drawn into taking the next steps in exploring the work of the Task Force, that is, working with others across systems of care in advancing this agenda and broadening and deepening the use of this programmatic approach.

As noted above, this does not make the work easy. Indeed, it is not for anyone in it for the short haul or

the weak of heart. Collaborating across agencies and integrating services using the ecologic framework; creating a prevention agenda including many of the programs considered in this review; building a strong, experienced, well-trained workforce; developing the array of services needed across the continuum of treatment needs; and embedding the use of research and data in our reform and systems improvement efforts takes time and great skill. It also takes the relentlessness many of us know is a prerequisite for success. The Task Force should be proud of the fact that it has given those of us committed to this path yet another valuable tool in achieving better outcomes for our young people and our communities.

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