How to End Violence in America

Statement of the International Psychohistorical Association, 1 January 2013

Enough is enough. In the wake of the December 14, 2012 Sandy Hook massacre in Newtown, Connecticut, a new moral consensus has finally emerged in America about the need to rein in the country's out-of-control epidemic of gun violence. But how? Should the federal government ban civilians from owning guns with high capacity ammunition magazines, the kind used to kill 26 children and their teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary School? Or should an armed sentinel be stationed in every school in the country, as recommended by the National Rifle Association a week after the Connecticut shooting? What else should be done? Americans have a right to authoritative answers to these questions, answers based on evidence, logic, moral wisdom, psychological understanding, scientific knowledge, and all the other resources that human beings can bring to bear in understanding and preventing intolerable human suffering.

This statement is intended to provide such answers. It is the consensus that has emerged after two weeks of discussion in the International Psychohistorical Association, whose membership and interests span a wide and diverse range of disciplines that include (in alphabetical order) clinical psychology, education, ethnic studies, film criticism, gender studies, genetic psychiatry, history, media studies, peace studies, political psychology, psychoanalytic studies, psychobiography, public policy, social work, and sociology. We begin by defining violence and explaining its causes. We end with a program of social policies designed to end violence in America, or at least greatly reduce it.

I. Causes

To ameliorate and prevent violence, it is necessary to understand it, which in turn requires definitions and classification. Civilian gun violence—such as the mass shootings that have afflicted America in recent decades—can be classified as a form of individual violence. It will helpful to begin with a general overview. Violence can be classified into two types—direct and structural. Direct violence can be defined as the use of physical force, or threat of use, to hurt or gain power over others. Direct violence can be committed by individuals acting on their own behalf (e.g. physical abuse within families, murders) or by agents of state institutions (e.g. the use of force by police or soldiers). Structural violence is preventable suffering, such as poverty, resulting from property relations and other social structures.

Individual Violence

Individuals may use physical force or threaten to use it as an act of aggression or in self-defense. Aggressive uses of force are generally defined as criminal. Why do some people engage in acts of violent aggression, at the risk of incarceration? As with all human behavior, every individual has a unique pattern of motivations that arise from their heredity, experience, and their own past decisions. As for heredity, there is no scientific evidence that some individuals are genetically

predisposed to be violent or self-destructive.[1] There is no gene for using a gun, or any other kind of weapon. The kind of behavioral dispositions attributable to genes are inchoate, and can only express themselves as violence in the context of a culture that provides the models and means for such behavior. Countries that institute gun control have less gun violence. If children were socialized into a culture of peace and not subjected to corporal punishment, it would most likely be rare for people to hit other people.

Similarly, while most direct violence is committed by males against other males, this does not constitute evidence that males are "inherently violent." Only some males in any culture are violent, and anthropologists have identified cultures, such as the Aka Pygmies, in which violence is rare or non-existent.

What, then, causes individuals to be violently aggressive or self-destructive? In short, such behavior is generally learned from experience. When an infant cries, the response of care-givers will profoundly shape the personality of the adult that the infant will become. Persons whose needs were met in infancy and early childhood will generally feel empowered to meet their own needs in non-destructive ways as adults. Persons who experience love and empathy will in most cases become loving and empathetic. By contrast, a person who was punished for crying as an infant and whose developmental needs were not met will most likely grow up into a troubled adult who will cause suffering to themselves and others. In some cases, this will take the form of violent aggression. This is of course a simplification of how individual personality and motivation develop, but it is the least misleading simplification we know for explaining individual destructiveness.

State Violence

The institution of war has its origins in the Neolithic period, when towns based on agricultural surplus became vulnerable to raids by armed nomads. The acts of aggression by nomads had clear economic motivations and the earliest warriors of agricultural societies most likely played a defensive role. With increasing class inequality, political elites gained increasing control over resources and used force as an instrument for gaining yet more control. It was in this historical context that the institutions of war, the state, and slavery developed simultaneously and persisted for millennia. While war has always been a complex result of psychological, political, and economic factors, it is fundamentally an instrument for the accumulation of wealth and power by self-interested elites whose perceptions of self-interest are distorted by psychopathology.[2]

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[1] To be sure, there is evidence that some individuals have low thresholds for reacting to slights, frustration, and perceived external threat, a behavioral disposition that may have some genetic or epigenetic basis. However, there is reason to believe that such individuals, if provided with suitable treatment, are capable of compensating for this disposition and learning non-violent ways of meeting their needs.

[2] The policy-making process is more complex than indicated here, of course, and involves international relations, the politics of state and other elites, and the mass public. The decisive support for militarism and wars of aggression, however, comes primarily from hawk political elites and the predatory investors and corporate elites who benefit directly or indirectly from militarist policies (see Brian D'Agostino's *The Middle Class Fights Back: How Progressive Movements Can Restore Democracy in America*, Santa Barbara, CA:

In the United States today, elites use the fear of terrorism to maintain a permanent war economy that costs middle class taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars every year, lavished on nuclear weapons, aircraft carriers, tanks, warships, fighter aircraft, missiles, and over a million troops deployed in several hundred military bases throughout the world. While legitimized in the name of "national security," this enormous apparatus of state violence serves mainly to enrich defense contractors and other big corporations at the expense of ordinary people, while failing in its supposed mission to protect the country from terrorism, which is the real lesson of 9/11.

At more than .7 percent, the United States also has the highest incarceration rate in the world, mostly consisting of persons convicted of non-violent, drug-related crimes, and disproportionately men of color. This form of state violence costs the middle class tens of billions of dollars more, while being just as disconnected as the country's war economy from the real security needs of ordinary people. While incarceration of violent offenders occurs only after the damage has been done, mental health and wellness programs for all who need them can actually prevent violence and would cost a tiny fraction of the vast resources politicians spend on state violence.

Structural Violence

If a child's brain is irreparably damaged, it matters little whether the cause was physical abuse by their caregiver, the violence of war, or malnutrition caused by economic structures not assignable to any particular agent. The end result is the same—a maimed life. An example of an economic structure that produces such violent effects is the current system of world trade, which perpetuates extreme poverty in the developing world, including brain damage caused by malnutrition. A second example of structural violence is America's political-economic system, which perpetuates joblessness and a fossil-fuel industry that contributes to climate change, of which the 2012 drought in the Southwest and Hurricane Sandy are symptoms.[3] As these examples indicate, structural violence is no less deadly than school shootings and in fact occurs on a much bigger scale.

II. Remedies

Making America significantly less violent will require far-reaching reforms. The mass shootings that periodically dominate the country's attention are only a small part of a pervasive problem, discussed above under the categories of individual, state, and structural violence. The best way to honor the victims of the Sandy Hill massacre and the thousands of others who die from gun violence in America every year will be a national commitment to reducing and eventually ending

Praeger, 2012). Individuals who actively pursue unlimited military power and wealth at the cost of vast, unnecessary human suffering harbor pathological motivations almost by definition, though the form that the actions of policy-makers take are heavily shaped by the institutional contexts in which they act.

[3] Natural disasters are instances of violence, as the term is used in this statement, only inasmuch as their increased frequency and intensity are the result of human action and thus preventable, which is the case when increased carbon emissions contribute to climate change.

violence in all its forms. To this end, the International Psychohistorical Association supports the following policy remedies:

- A federal ban on assault weapons and guns with high capacity ammunition magazines, applicable to existing gun inventories and including a buyback program for weapons already in circulation;
- Mandatory criminal background checks and a waiting period for all gun purchases;
- Increased funding for parenting classes in communities and public schools, which can help end the cycle of violent child rearing associated with mental disorders;[4]
- Decriminalizing drug abuse, defining it as a medical problem, and reallocating resources from the prison industry to effective health and wellness programs;
- Demilitarization of the U.S. economy and foreign policy;
- A Green New Deal—massive public investment in renewable energy infrastructure and sustainable technology—which can create full employment while mitigating climate change by reducing reliance on fossil fuels.[5]

Nothing less than a bold policy agenda of the sort proposed here can greatly reduce violence in America as measured by the incidence of individual, state, and structural violence. To those who call such an agenda utopian, we say: our children deserve to live in peace and security, and it is the responsibility of adults to do whatever is necessary to achieve that outcome.

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[4] Additional funding is also needed for home visiting programs for post-partum doulas and pediatric nurses to encourage healthy attachment and parent's capacity for mentalization/reflective function (empirically found to be the most important factor in healthy attachment).

[5] Such investment can be funded through carbon taxes, increased taxes on the rich, and diversion of tax revenues from unnecessary military progams.