

A Call to Action – Our Silence is Killing

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According to the Centers for Disease Control, homicide is the number one cause of death for African Americans and the second leading cause of death among Hispanics between the ages of 10 and 24 years old. This country has one of the highest rates of interpersonal violence of any industrialized country, and violence is the major cause of nonfatal injuries among youth. These facts should disturb our souls and cause us to act in bold unprecedented ways.

The problem of violence involving youth is devastating and complex. Individual and social influences contribute to an individual's susceptibility to use violence. Our media images often glorify interpersonal violence - image after image reflecting the violence in society and in some cases may exploit or contribute to it. Our children are exposed to images of violent acts daily and we passively promote violence by not acting.

It affects us all – even youth who are not direct victims of violence are victims to the chronic presence of violence via the media, in their homes, and in some neighborhoods, it is a part of daily life.

In light of the above facts, and the increase in violence facing our communities here in Chicago, we are compelled to face this issue head on, seek solutions, and take action to reverse the trend. Just as we have a responsibility for saving a child in the womb, we too have the responsibility to respect and protect life from birth through “natural” death.

Since November 2009, the Black Catholic Deacons, in collaboration with a few of our Hispanic Catholic Deacons, several Priests and Youth Advocates have collected best practices, ideas and recommendations from other church communities that have effective violence prevention initiatives up and working.

Our goal is to provide a menu/toolkit with solutions for addressing the issue of violence. Several topics have been addressed through these meetings, unemployment and job skills training; the power of restorative justice and the blending of the borders to help create safe places in the community; the positive impact of parenting programs; the need for after-school programs; the need to have motivated principals, teachers, staff; greater community awareness and involvement; basic human services; gun control; funding, etc. All of the programs and strategies discussed aim to prevent youth violence and related risk factors.

We are asking everyone to share in the responsibility to address and reverse this trend of violence. Violence is a learned behavior that is not uncontrollable or inevitable. It is within our power to change.

Every faith based community (Protestant, Catholic, Islamic, Jewish...) could offer after school or out of school programs in their community at least one day a week. If we want our youth to stay off the streets, we must provide a place for them to go. Youth need a safe place to gather after school that provides extracurricular activities, tutoring, mentoring, workshops, cooking classes and various other activities that are engaging. Collaborate with neighborhood organizations to establish and provide activities. If every church, mosque, synagogue, and temple, in every community, provides a program one day a week, our youth would have a safe place to gather every day. That is why our institutions of faith exist – to ensure that the people of God are served.

Schools have a unique opportunity to engage families and are a practical venue for violence prevention initiatives that teach conflict resolution and interpersonal development and decision-making skills and techniques. Our Catholic Schools are the institutions committed to creating and strengthening healthy morals encouraging the skills for living out nonviolent solutions to social conflict.

Parents are to understand that our youth are more likely to behave violently if they witness violence at home. Our youth have learned attitudes accepting aggressive behavior as normal and as an appropriate way to solve their problems. The more they are exposed to violence in their homes, in the media and in their neighborhoods, the greater their risk for aggressive, violent acts. We are asking parents to learn how to resolve their differences non-violently. This includes non-violent language. We are the example they will follow. We are asking parents to become proactive – seek to improve communication skills and relationship building techniques. Limit the amount and types of media programming children are viewing. Decide what your household can do as a family to improve your neighborhood.

We are asking the entire Church community to seek out and participate in the various events and initiatives to reduce the trend.

Social and economic imbalances are rooted in the systemic causes of violence. Hatred of another economic class, race, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, religion, continues to incite crimes of hate. Our politics reflects and delivers speech that feeds the anger of opposing political parties. Fears of those we do not know and understand appear as threats to our security within our countries boundaries and beyond. We are engaged in a war on terror outside our borders. BUT Moreover, we face another great war on our own homeland, the war against youth violence.

We are calling ALL to Action – Our Silence is Killing