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Violence prevention programs can work

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Recent violence across the nation is disturbing. The risk of violence is predictable under certain conditions. But it is not inevitable — and it can be minimized.

Reducing violence requires a shift from merely reacting after it occurs, to a proactive, preventive approach. The need for comprehensive violence prevention initiatives is all the more urgent because the likelihood of violence is escalating as global temperatures rise.

Violence can take many forms: child abuse; spousal abuse; gender-based, racial, and ethnic violence; bullying and harassment; elder abuse; alcohol, drug and crime-related violence, and collective violence between groups or nations.

Violence arises from a complex mix of factors — researchers call them social determinants. Long-term unemployment and poverty are major social determinants of violence. Another is a lack of cultural norms that promote safe, equitable, just, and healthy behavior. A deteriorating physical and natural environment is still another causal factor. The loss or lack of protective factors such as personal resilience skills, durable social networks, and organizations that work to ensure public health and safety and assist those in distress is yet another.

Today, poorly crafted trade policies, new technologies and other factors have eliminated thousands of jobs, hollowed out the middle class, and produced growing poverty.

Our society fails to promote non-violence. Persistent racism, for example, is now impossible to hide because videos of white police officers harassing and killing

blacks are posted on the Internet. A belief that anyone has the right to purchase firearms has flooded the nation with weapons and made Americans 10 times more likely to be killed by guns than people in any other developed nation. The ideology of extreme individualism makes it difficult to promote the common good.

In addition, infrastructure is dilapidated while the natural environment is deteriorating due to improper development, pollution and climate disruption. Education, police, social services and other systems are underfunded and struggling to meet growing needs.

These and other social determinants indicate the risk of violence is growing.

Although they sometimes bring people together, disasters also escalate the risk of violence. According to the International Red Cross, sexual assaults increased by 300 percent and domestic violence rose by 600 percent after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake in California. Following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, physical violence rose in Louisiana.

Violence occurs in disasters when vital protective systems break down and distress becomes overwhelming. People may try to cope by over-consuming alcohol and drugs, causing some to lose self-control. Others can take their angst out on household members, or on outsiders. The mentally ill can be pushed over the edge into violence. Ideological fanatics can use violence in a crisis to advance their agendas.

Human-induced climate disruption is generating more frequent and extreme storms, floods, droughts, heat waves, wildfires and other disasters, and intensifying other stresses, all of which aggravates existing social determinants of violence. Unless preventive initiatives are launched, more violence is certain as temperatures rise.

But solutions exist. Dr. Howard Pinderhughes from the University of California-San Francisco worked with The Prevention Institute in Oakland, Calif., to develop an exciting new framework for effective violence prevention initiatives. He told me that the most successful will be comprehensive, locally based, built on existing community strengths, and focused on both reducing risks and building resilience.

Effective initiatives organize teams of respected leaders and networks of organizations that foster safe, equitable, just and healthy behaviors. They also boost individual knowledge and personal resilience skills, while helping people repair and strengthen their social support networks. In addition, they build social cohesion by

engaging a diverse set of people, including marginalized individuals, in collaborative projects that address community-wide problems.

Violence prevention efforts engage adults and young people in repairing deteriorating infrastructure, housing and public spaces so they are safe to use. They also strive to improve economic conditions and job opportunities for the unemployed by expanding job training programs and other actions.

In addition, they employ restorative justice programs that hold offenders accountable to the victims of violence. Some offenders, for instance, might be employed in living-wage jobs so they can pay restitution to their victims while learning how to be responsible citizens.

Oregon has its share of violence. Many social determinants of violence are present, and as global temperatures rise they will be intensified by more disasters and persistent stresses. But if we build on the efforts of the many people and organizations already working on the issue, and launch comprehensive prevention initiatives, much violence can be avoided.

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