

Chapter Nine

United States: Duane Dennis' Story

Although it is the richest industrialized nation in the history of humankind, when compared to other industrialized countries the United States of America ranks 25th in infant mortality; 22nd in low birth rates; 18th in the percentage of children living in poverty; and 13th in the gap between rich and poor children. Additionally, children under 15 in the United States are 12 times as likely to die from gunfire as children in the other 25 industrialized countries combined.

This chapter will focus on children and community violence in the United States. A disproportionate number of children who are affected by violence (as victims and perpetrators), live in the urban areas of the country. These children are also affected by high levels of poverty and racial divisions, the proliferation of gangs and drugs in their

communities, and easy access to guns, which are used in the majority of crimes committed in the United States. Children who live in such environments are at risk of abuse, injury, developmental disorders, and long-term mental illness.

Duane Dennis, the Executive Director of Pathways, a community-based organization (CBO) located in central Los Angeles, has been working in early care and education for 18 years. Previously, Dennis was the first Executive Director of the Baltimore City Child Care Resource Center. He began working on violence prevention in some of the most impoverished housing projects in the city of Baltimore, concentrating on interventions for providers, parents, and children.

Estados Unidos La historia de Duane Dennis

Aun cuando Estados Unidos de América es la nación industrializada mas rica en la historia de la humanidad, cuando se compara con otros países industrializados esta en el puesto numero 25 en cuanto a la tasa de mortalidad infantil; en el lugar 22 en nacimiento de niños con bajo peso al nacer; el puesto numero 18 en el porcentaje de niños/as que

viven en situación de pobreza; y el 13 cuando se evalúa la brecha entre los niños/as pobres y ricos. Adicionalmente, niños y niñas menores de 15 años en Estados Unidos, tienen 12 veces más probabilidades de morir por efecto de armas de fuego que los niños y niñas de otros 25 países industrializados de manera combinada.

Este capitulo se enfocara en la violencia en las comunidades y contra los niños y niñas o causada por estos. Un numero desproporcionado de los niños

y niñas afectados por la violencia (tanto víctimas como victimarios) viven en las áreas urbanas del país. Estos niños también están afectados por altos niveles de pobreza y divisiones raciales, la proliferación de bandas y drogas en sus comunidades, el fácil acceso a armas de fuego, las que son usadas en la mayor parte de los crímenes cometidos en los Estados Unidos. Los niños y niñas que viven en tales ambientes están en riesgo de abuso, de ser heridos, de presentar desordenes en su desarrollo, y desarrollar enfermedades mentales a largo plazo.

Duan Densos, es Director Ejecutivo de “Pateáis,” una organización de base comunitaria (CBO) localizada en Los Angeles, ha estado trabajando en áreas relacionadas con el cuidado y desarrollo infantil temprano durante 18 años. Previamente Densos fue el primer Director Ejecutivo del Centro de Recursos sobre el Cuidado Infantil de la ciudad de Baltimore. Se inicio trabajando sobre la prevención de la violencia en algunos de los proyectos de vivienda mas pobres de la ciudad de Baltimore, concentrándose en intervenciones dirigidas a proveedores, padres y niños y niñas.

Setting the scene: Violence and inner-city United States

The situation regarding young children and violence in urban areas in the United States is a bit different than in most places affected by violence in the rest of the world. There is no internal civil war. There is no war with other countries occurring within our country. The conflict in Iraq does not directly affect most children here. But when you look at children in the United States, especially in our major cities, you are looking at a lot of violence. You are looking at the impact of drugs. There are also high levels of poverty and the impact of the abundance of guns. All of these, separately and combined, have a profound impact on the lives of children and also their families and communities.

There are several issues related to violence that go on for young children who are located in a large United States inner-city like mine. There is a greater degree of crime than in other areas in the country and a greater likelihood for those children to be affected by crime — to see crimes, to be a part of a crime, to see their parents or friends being impacted by crimes. This means that their developmental processes are likely to be somewhat stifled because they are

Box 9.1 Child poverty and its impact in the United States

- Over 13 million children in the United States live below the poverty level.
- Of the 24 million under age 6 in the United States, 21 percent or 5 million live in poor families.
- The research also suggests that there are economic differences by race. For example, while 34 percent of black children and 30 percent of Latino children live in poor families, only 11 percent of white children and 10 percent of Asian children do so.
- Compared to other industrialized countries, the United States ranks: 25th in infant mortality; 13th in the gap between rich and poor children; 22nd in low birth weight rates; and 18th in the percentage of children living in poverty.
- American children under age 15 are 12 times as likely to die from gunfire as children in the 25 other industrialized countries combined.

Source of data: NCCP (2006)

introduced to those conditions that speak to violence, conflict, and disruption at an early age.

Violence and poverty in an urban community: Baltimore

My experiences related to dealing with violence and children really started in inner-city Baltimore in 1990. It was just by chance that I started looking closely at the issue of violence in inner-cities and how children were impacted. I was working in Baltimore as a child care resource and referral (R & R) director. We made links between the parent and child care providers so the parent could make decisions and choose a provider with whom they were comfortable. These child care providers ran small child care programs in their own homes. Unfortunately, there was an unsavory element that knew of the work we were doing and went to providers' homes as parent imposters. What they would do once they got into the home was rob the family child care provider.

We were quite disturbed by what was going on and consequently looked at what we could do to stop it. One of the first things we realized was that we could not deal with the issue independently. If we were going to help prevent family child care providers from being robbed and assaulted, we had to develop some coalitions in the community. With this in mind, we joined forces with the local police department. We had training sessions with family child care providers where we taught them some probing questions to ask if somebody came to their door saying they were referred from the R & R.

Out of that I began asking myself, "What is going on in our community? We have people robbing and victimizing family child care providers — those who are responsible for the upbringing of young children." There was something grossly wrong with that scenario. I decided back then that we needed, as an R & R, to take a stance. We began to develop trainings for providers and young children and their parents on issues of violence.

It soon became broader than just the robbery issue, but that was the trigger. That was the incident that made us pay attention to what young children and families in inner-cities had to deal with. We realized there was a role for the R & R in helping mitigate some of the impact of that violence with parents and work with children. We secured a little funding and began to work with parents, the child care providers, and the children around violence and violence prevention. We really felt that you had to work with all three of them together — the parents, the provider, and the child — for this to work.

Promoting resilience and a sense of safety in children

We developed independent trainings especially for children and their child care providers related to issues of safety and fear. We worked on many practical things. "What do you do if you see a needle on your playground?" This is very common in inner-cities where there are a lot of drugs. One of the things that teachers learned to do, before the children would go onto the playground, was check to make sure that there were no needles or any other dangers to children. "What do you do if you see needles?" and "What do you do if you see somebody with a gun?" We went over the concept of hit the ground and do not run. These were the kinds of practical trainings we developed for our providers and children in child care settings.

We knew there were children at that point who had actually seen guns. For instance, most of the children in the child care centers at housing projects had seen knives and guns. Parents had been victims of violence and there were family members who were perpetrators themselves. Having the ability to address these issues became one of the roles of our R & R. We worked with providers about their own fears, because their abilities to work with children are often impacted by the degree to which they are fearful of the environment and feel that they are susceptible to the same violence that the children are.

A major challenge was giving providers the skills they needed considering their own experiences with violence.

Then the next level was to actually work with parents and children together, because those same children at the centers needed the support to continue when they went home. We wanted to make sure their parents had skills so that they would be able to address their children's fears, too. We know the degree to which we are successful, with regards to the impact of violence, is directly related to the degree that the adults in those children's lives have a positive sense of who they are; and a sense that they are in control and have power to make sure their children can be safe and develop in a healthy way.

Box 9.2 Reducing the impact of violence on children

- A critical factor in determining how violence affects a child, especially at a very young age, is related to caregivers' abilities to cope with their own trauma and grief.
- Many research articles indicate that not all children sustain developmental damage and that there are several factors that contribute to resilience. One factor that research indicates mediates the degree of impact is a secure attachment with a primary caregiver. Parental attention and support is, therefore, extremely important in preventing poor outcomes for children.

Source of information: Berkowitz (2003); NAEYC (2006); and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2002). For additional information on U.S. issues see: Garbarino (1999); Garbarino, et al. (1991, 1998); Levin (2003); and Rice & Groves (2006).

Next, my R & R actually wrote a basic paper on this issue primarily using the work of James Garbarino (1999; see also: Garbarino, et al. 1991; 1998). At the time we wrote it, around 1992, it was a really cutting-edge paper for an organization like ours. We were talking about the crucial role of R & Rs and child care providers in reducing the impact of violence on young children and their families. We were asked to present at the National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC) annual conference, the biggest early childhood professional organization in the United States. This was when NAEYC was starting to look at the whole issue of violence in children's lives.

Another urban community affected by violence: Los Angeles

My work on young children and violence was placed on hold when I moved to Los Angeles (L.A.) in 1996. But in 2001, the World Forum on Early Care and Education asked me to be on a keynote panel about children, violence, and reconciliation, along with representatives from Israel, Palestine, and Northern Ireland. By that time, I was the Executive Director of Pathways in L.A. It was extraordinary. Even though I was too busy with other business of the agency to focus on violence, the organizers had heard about my work in Baltimore and wanted to have my perspective from the United States along with the other countries that were represented. This whole experience relit the fire, and I started my research again; and as I soon realized, Pathways was the right place to do the work.

Pathways' service area is really diverse, covering a very poor area yet extending to the very affluent Beverly Hills, with everything in between. In addition to helping parents find child care programs for their children, we do a lot of work with children who have special needs. We also distribute the government child care subsidy for our service area;

so as low-income parents are in need of child care we pay providers through the agency. Those were the core services we were doing when I presented at the World Forum on Early Care and Education in Athens. It was during that keynote that I said to myself — the research that I did in Baltimore is very transferable to L.A. Why am I not doing it here? So I began to look at ways Pathways could do the work.

Creating partnerships to better meet children's needs

After my experience with the World Forum, I quickly got Pathways involved, collaborating with several other community organizations in the northeastern part of L.A. — a place called Highland Park — to find ways to respond to the issues of violence in children's lives. This is a high crime, high poverty, and low-income area; and there have been many initiatives there because of the community's vulnerability. Let me just describe what we have been doing there. We have been working with an organization called Hathaway, where one of the collaborators has a Peace Initiative Project. Historically, Hathaway has worked with abused and neglected children. But recently, it has been doing a lot of work in early care and education, believing that this work will reduce the abuse and neglect. They are looking at several issues to make families whole, and they asked us to do the early childhood development piece by training parents and providers. There is a piece in this collaboration that addresses violence. Fortunately or unfortunately, it is less concerned about the child and more concerned about the parent. It works with parents around modeling peaceful behavior for their children and making sure that parents are equipped with tools for being the best possible parents they can be. We have little research thus far; but anecdotally I am seeing parents change their behavior and, therefore, their children are changing.

Another thing we are trying to do now is to look at how we make violence prevention a part of the core

work we do in our R & R. I am trying to establish approaches in L.A. that are similar to those developed in Baltimore 10 years ago — a comprehensive approach that is for children, parents, and providers. But, in addition, I've begun really looking at some of the macro issues involved. For instance, the Hathaway project has a very good connection with the police department. We are looking at the gangs in L.A. and why young men choose gangs. We find that those children want what every other child wants. They want to feel supported, they want to feel nurtured, they want to be thought highly of; and they do that through the gangs. If their parents are not able to do this, then the gang becomes, in essence, the surrogate parent. We have, therefore, been looking at alternate ways to meet the same needs; and we are looking at how to intervene with children when they are young, so that they don't go down that path of gangs and violence. For instance, we are trying to develop programs in cooperation with police departments as well as focusing in on pre-teenage children when the gang issue begins. In his books, *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun* and *Reaching Up to Manhood*, Geoffrey Canada eloquently describes, including from direct experience in his own youth, how street culture in urban areas in the United States can lure boys into a gang culture. He also describes, from his direct experience as a social service professional, how he developed programs for youth that offered them positive ways to meet similar needs to those met by gangs.

One of the Resource and Referral Managers at Pathways is a therapist and an expert on issues related to violence in the home. Although the work we are doing is not directly about domestic violence, we have a lot of domestic violence in our communities; so in our collaboration there is a major mental health component that looks at the psychosocial problems that children deal with as the victims and witnesses of violence. It has a lot of potential to help us develop holistic ways of dealing with families. We think we will be able to find funding to support this effort, always an important consideration in our work. And we are making this a priority.

Consequences of inadequate funding

A lack of adequate funding is having far-reaching implications on what the early childhood community can do to work with children to promote their healthy development in general, including issues around violence. One of Pathways' functions is providing child care subsidies for low-income families. Unfortunately, there are 100,000 children who are on waiting lists for subsidized child care in the County of Los Angeles. There are more eligible children on the waiting lists than there are children being served. This fact has vast implications for the quality of life for the children and their families. And yet the people making the cuts do not seem to think about the far-reaching and long-term effects of what they are doing.

It means there are all kinds of crucial developmental experiences that the excluded children do not get, which undermines their school readiness and preparedness from a social, emotional, and cognitive perspective. This is so important today in those preschool years because there is an ever increasing emphasis in the United States on school readiness and getting children prepared for kindergarten. And, if we do not have well-prepared kindergarteners, there's a chain reaction — they won't be successful in elementary school, middle school, high school, and the likelihood for them to go to college is lessened.

The cuts in subsidies are not just having an impact on children's school readiness. They are affecting the family's fiscal health and economic well-being, the quality of life for people who most need assistance. Parents are more stressed out by the kinds of unsubsidized care they must put their children into because they have to work and provide for their families. This lends itself to a much more stressful situation and higher degrees of stress bring about higher incidences of violence in the children's families. Violence increases at all levels — in the home, in the community, with family members as

Box 9.3 Exposure to violence

At one of the Housing Authority (Public Housing) child care sites in Baltimore City, a trainer encountered two friendly, talkative eight-year-old girls who told of their skill at jumping rope and the rhymes they recited as they jumped. One child recited a "rap" in which the lyrics told of a mother who was on crack, had another baby, and when the social worker came the mommy threw the baby down the garbage chute, and the baby died. And the child related sorely, her big brown eyes shining, "It's true." The trainer, indeed, knew it was true. These children were exposed to a reality that none of us wants to see. Their teachers and caregivers are challenged daily to respond to the child's need to make sense of events that are senselessly cruel and violent.

victims of violence, and as perpetrators. Subsidy dollars for child care are so important in low-income families.

And we are learning more and more about the far-reaching effects violence can have on young children. Over the last 10 years there's a growing body of new research that looks at brain development (see Berkowitz, 2003). The brains of children impacted by violence will develop at much slower rates. I think that's very interesting, because now we understand that there may be some biological issues around children's development. For those children in inner-cities who are constantly being impacted by violence, the evidence now suggests that this is all having a biological effect in slowing down the pace at which their brains may be developing. Their school readiness and all of that comes into play, and their propensity to failure is increasing. I think that is essential to bring into the equation. We really need to have more research around that and take it into

account as we work with children. For example, brain research now shows that the developing brain is particularly vulnerable to the impact of violence and that experiences that are overwhelming, frightening, or dangerous can have a toxic effect on the brain. Many neurotransmitters are released at times of fear and anxiety and this can cause abnormalities in the brain during development. As Berkowitz has argued: “This may be one reason why traumatized children have problems learning and integrating new material and data” (Berkowitz, 2003).

Given all of this, it is important to remember that this lack of adequate funds for subsidized spaces is a direct result of the priorities that our government has made with regards to the care of young children. Ironically, it would seem in the United States that as poverty increases and the stakes of the early years get higher, the government tends to abandon its children more and more.

The impact of poverty on the daily life of classrooms

The rising levels of poverty and the reduced resources for child care are directly impacting the children Pathways serves, and this is a big problem. When children living in impoverished situations do not get their basic needs met, the likelihood of those families and children engaging in unproductive behavior increases; and we see this in our preschool programs. We have higher incidences of children who are aggressively acting out, who have behavior issues. When we think of children with special needs (my agency is also a special needs organization), we think of children with increasing medical issues such as: using breathalyzers; being in wheelchairs; and having acute illnesses. However, the majority of special needs children we have are those children who have asthma (which exists at a much higher rate in poor communities) and behavior problems. And in relation to this we are talking about a large number of these children in urban cities in the United States, and a disproportional number of poor urban children are children of color.

Thus far I have not mentioned too much about race. We have considered the issue of poverty and the pathologies that are the result of poverty. We have also considered drugs and proliferation of guns, but we have not focused enough on race. Obviously, race is a major issue when it comes to violence in the United States. We know there are higher incidences of children of color who are impacted by violence. We know there are higher incidences of men of color who actually are in our jails or penal institutions. We also know there are higher incidences of children of color who are a part of gangs.

In addition, there are a disproportionate number of children of color who are impacted by violence and who are also perpetrators of violence and usually end up in our prisons or juvenile institutions. Clearly that suggests something about the future as we are moving forward, with more and more black and brown children occupying our juvenile, special needs, and penal institutions. This means less productivity in our society. We as a society must address the fact that so many children of color are going down those wrong paths and make a commitment to taking the multiple steps that are needed to reverse this inequity, this injustice.

Patterns of aggression at age 8 are highly correlated with patterns of aggression in adulthood (Eron et al., 1994). This means that it is highly likely that many of the older males of color who are involved with violence showed signs of aggression when they were young. Clearly, early care and education has the opportunity to deal with some of that, and I feel those opportunities are when those children are 3 and 4 as opposed to 13 and 14.

Children come to our centers and act out aggression in such severe ways that we cannot handle them. Teachers often have limited training in dealing with aggressive behavior, much less the children with severe behavioral needs. So in addition to trying to provide training on dealing with challenging behavior, we have a program called the Special Needs Advisory Project. It helps providers identify children with special needs — all too often this means

Box 9.4 Race and violence in the United States

The risk of violence is often substantially different for children and youth from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. For example, according to research conducted by Child Trends Data Bank (Brown, et al., 2003):

- Black infants are more than four times as likely as Hispanic and non-Hispanic white infants to be murdered.
- Black teens between the ages of 15 and 19 are nearly twice as likely to be murdered as

Hispanic teens and about 12.5 times as likely to be murdered as non-Hispanic white teens.

As also reported earlier, the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP, 2006) reports that:

- The research also suggests that race is related to levels of poverty such that 34 percent of black children and 30 percent of Latino children live in poor families compared to just 11 percent of white children and 10 percent of Asian children.

behavior problems. In severe situations this leads to our sending children and their families to mental health professionals. There are also other issues that we identify. For instance, there are children who are non-verbal or who cannot control their bladders, and they are four and five years old. All too often, the children we refer are in critical family situations involving both poverty and violence.

Another issue our child care programs deal with is childhood neglect and abuse. We are mandated by the state to report suspected abuse or neglect, both of which also increase when families are stressed. We conduct training for both our child care center-based staff and our R & R staff. The R & R staff consults with center staff over the phone on decisions about when someone should be referred to the local government agency that deals with abuse and neglect. However, incidences of abuse and neglect are significantly underreported.

Conflicting messages about violence

Not only do we have to be working with children to promote their development and healing, but we also need to know how violence has impacted our own

development as adults. There is a generation of children whose parents have been used to dealing with issues around trouble with violence and going to war. Right now in the United States we get mad at Iraq and so we go and bomb Iraq. So often, what our children are seeing and what we say and do is totally opposite to what adults are trying to teach them. What they are hearing about how grownups function in the world is modeling a culture of violence, at the same time we are trying to teach them violence is wrong. So, we need to think beyond the classroom in our efforts to help children deal with violence and look to the adults, too.

Another place where children learn messages about violence that conflict with what we are trying to teach is from television. They see the news where they see the nation's leaders say violence in war is okay. They see the glorification of violence on programs designed for them as well as on adult programs. And television sets are on in poor homes more than in more affluent homes, and poor children are often supervised less in terms of what they see. We need to help children see grownups promoting peace in their own lives — and in the wider community.

If we want to break the cycle of violence, we can't keep going on with these conflicting messages. It is a generational thing and, therefore, it is going to take

time — 15 or 20 years for this generation. So hopefully with quality child care programs that have skills and resources to counteract violence, the 3 and 4 year olds of today won't be the 20 and 21 year olds who will be perpetrators of violence. Then they will grow up to be parents who do not perpetuate the cycle with their parents. But for any of this to happen there has to be resources to help child care and families to succeed. The ideal is to create a community where children's, parents', and the family's needs are being met. We need to work at both the home and child care level. We cannot overemphasize the fact that the degree to which children can deal with conflict is directly related to the adults in their lives. Therefore, working with children and adults in a partnership and realizing that this is a core part of our work is essential for successful outcomes.

Reflecting on a personal journey

My own personal history has played a crucial role in the professional journey I have taken. I grew up in inner-city Baltimore. I have lived in urban areas all my life and have experienced issues around violence. I have had perpetrators and victims in my family and have seen firsthand what certain lifestyles, along with drugs, can do to people, families, and communities. I have also had friends killed because of drugs and drug dealing. Not long before I left Baltimore, a friend of mine and I were talking. He was my very best friend there. We began counting the number of young men who died between the ages of 15 and 30 who were actually friends of mine, childhood playmates, and we counted 17 who had been killed. And it was the result of either a violent death or AIDS.

People often ask me why I did not go that route. I think you get it from your family. In retrospect, when I think about my friends who have been killed — who have been shot or who have died of AIDS — I look at their family structures and what happened in

them. I think it was my parents who were very important in my life. I realize how fortunate I was to have a strong family, to have good models in my life. My father continues to be a very strong figure in my life. It was their focus on issues around limit setting, discipline, and structure and definitely a sense of success through education. I also had uncles and grandparents who always rewarded us for education, if not monetarily, then with a phone call or something to that effect. Education has always been important in my family as an African-American family living in urban Baltimore City. I never thought I was poor when I was young, but in retrospect, when you look at the economic indicators we were poor. Being poor was something that had to do with other people.

Also, I now have a 13-year old African-American son. He has always lived in Baltimore and he goes to public school that does not have the resources it needs and that can be pretty rough. I am always concerned about his well-being, his development, his production, and success in school and in life. So it is just not an issue that is apart from me; it is an issue that is of me. It is not something I can depersonalize because it becomes very personal. And when I think about these issues, I realize my own experiences have a lot to do with why it is so important to me in my work with children today that we also focus on issues of violence and also on families. And it also helps me understand why I get so upset and mad when I see the resources cut that parents need to give their children what they need.

Lessons to share

I often think about how what I have learned from my efforts to help inner-city young children, their families, and child care providers deal with the violence and causes of the violence in children's lives can help others in their efforts. One thing I have learned is that we have to continue focusing on the research piece. Research and evaluation is critical at this particular time; in times of scarcity, we need to

know more about which efforts, which interventions can make the biggest difference. I really like what is happening in Northern Ireland as Siobhan and Eleanor describe in their chapter about the work of NIPPA and the *Media Initiative* that is working to reduce sectarian bias from an early age. I like the fact that NIPPA is working with Queen's University Belfast — NIPPA doing the implementation, Queen's doing the evaluation — so they will have a comprehensive evaluation of their efforts that they and others can learn from.

We need to have similar efforts and collaborations in the United States. Doing so will show, from an evaluative standpoint, what happens to young children who are impacted by violence; but more importantly it will show *what* good programs can do as well. We know some of this through the research around Head Start for low-income children in the United States. For instance, we know what has happened developmentally with Head Start children who had positive early care experiences. We need more of this with the things that we are doing now.

I also believe that we need to take very seriously the importance of training child care providers; they provide a potential resource for combating the impact of violence on children that we have only begun to tap. We also still need to work on the attitudes and values of parents, providers, and ourselves because we bring certain biases to the table as it relates to issues around violence. This is especially important with those of us who are of color because it is too easy for us to ask a question like — “If I’m not that way, why do they have to be that way?” And so this whole issue around race discrimination and prejudice comes into play, and we have to figure out how to bring that into our efforts as well.

And finally, we must take seriously the central role early care and education can play as the mitigator between children and violence. After 25 years of doing this work — first being a social worker and then coming into the profession of early childhood education — I believe this now more than ever. While the task before us is difficult, I know it’s not impossible.