

TEEN Violence

Teen violence is a serious problem in the United States today. In 2005 people under the age of 18 made up 16 percent of the nation's violent crime arrests. More teenagers were also the victims of violent crime than people of any other age group.

In 1999 many high schools around the nation installed metal detectors to prevent students from carrying weapons into school. This safety measure was influenced by the Columbine High School massacre in Colorado that same year, when 12 students and a teacher were murdered by two of the school's students. Since Columbine, more than 18 school shootings have occurred on high school campuses across the nation. In 2005 seven people were murdered by a student at Red Lake High School in Minnesota in the nation's second deadliest high school shooting.

With the growing incidence of school violence, sociologists have been searching for clues to the causes of teen violence. What accounts for the prevalence of violence

among teenagers? Some studies suggest that the answer lies in American youth culture, particularly media-related aspects of the culture. In addition, other studies have concluded that teens who use drugs are more likely to engage in violent and delinquent behavior and join gangs.

The Media and Violence In a study on the media and violence, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) noted that television shows and movies—particularly those made for children and adolescents—are filled with violence. Much of this violence is presented in an entertaining and glamorous fashion. Because young people, on average, spend six hours a day using the media, they will likely be influenced by this view of violence. Some young people imitate the behavior they have seen others exhibit. The AAP suggests that if young people see their heroes resorting to violence to solve problems, they will do the same. In time, some young people accept violence as a legitimate form of behavior.

Citing several studies, the AAP argues that exposure to media violence is connected to several teen-related problems. Media violence may encourage aggressive behavior. For example, after playing video games, some teenagers show more aggression and exhibit violent behavior. In addition, the AAP asserts that the media's heavy emphasis on violence makes the world look like a



In Red Lake, Minnesota, victims of a deadly school shooting are memorialized with crosses. Seven people were murdered at the local high school, including 15-year-old Thurlene Stillday (shown at left).



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much more dangerous place than it is. As a result, some teens act more aggressively as a way to protect themselves from becoming victims of violence. Sociologists argue that the “violence as entertainment” presented by the media clouds teenagers’ understanding of the consequences of violence.

Drug Use and Violence In 2007 a study released by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy reported that teens who use drugs are twice as likely to commit violent acts. The report also found that the more drugs teenagers use, the more likely they are to engage in violent behavior. In addition, one in four teens who used illicit drugs in the past year report attacking others with the intent to harm.

According to a recent national poll conducted by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, many teens think adults should be doing more to solve the drug problem. The poll also found that teens strongly associate violence with drug use. Almost 80 percent of the teens polled said that they believed teens who use drugs are more likely to be exposed to violence.

Teen Violence and Society According to sociological studies on teen violence, violent teens do not transition well into adulthood. Many are filled with anger during adolescence and are prone to lashing out and blaming others for their problems. They might also be seeking revenge against bullies or groups of teens who have rejected them. Sociologist Katherine Newman tries to explain the mind of the violent teen by stating, “this is someone who is a failed joiner, who is trying to gain access to peer groups that reject him.”

What do you think?

1. What are some of the causes of teen violence?
2. What else do you think can be done to prevent teen violence? Discuss.