

SHOCKING VIOLENCE

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TITLE PAGE

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*To the safety, protection, and care of our children,
our most precious gifts, and our hope for the future.*

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FOREWORD

Youth. Violence. These are two words that have unfortunately been paired all too often over the past few years. Times have changed so that what once would have been a fistfight in a schoolyard can become a bullet-ridden bloodbath.

We know that over the past twenty years, there has been a clear rise in the episodes of youth violence. Gangs are no longer limited to the inner city; they have found their way into the midst of mainstream suburban life. Furthermore, violent episodes are no longer associated only with gangs. Of late, the media has unveiled the reality of the isolated, withdrawn teen as the perpetrator of violence.

The events at Littleton, Paducha, Jonesboro, and other sites have raised questions about every aspect of our children's world—our parenting, policing, teaching, school administering, counseling, the prevalence of violence in our media, the availability of guns, and many more things.

As adults, parents, professionals, and citizens, we are now challenged more than ever by this pressing phenomenon of youth violence. We must be able to provide safe schools, homes, and communities in which our children can thrive and feel comfortable—where they do not have to feel bullied, harassed, or alienated. We have learned that those who are the victims of such bullying, harassment, and alienation may be predisposed to become the future perpetrators.

We must educate not only the adults who interact with youth but youth themselves. All of us must learn the warning signs, address the harassment, heal the victimized, and help those at risk from resorting to violence as a response. We must stop denial and encourage openness and communication regarding the reality of violence in our society. To this end, I helped initiate a program titled *Voices on Violence*, which began with a gathering of hundreds of students in Washington, D.C. and is continuing in many regions around the country, including in my own district in central New Jersey.

In my many visits to schools, it has become apparent to me that we must listen more closely to the students. They have important, perceptive things to say and far too many tell me that they have no one who listens. Listening is part of the diagnosis of the problem, and, I believe, part of the cure.

Voices on Violence is but one of many anti-youth violence initiatives which are beginning to appear across the country. It is up to us as citizens to encourage our legislators on the state and national levels to continue to support programs and efforts to address the needs of our youth and to help keep our schools, homes, and communities safe.

Likewise, please join me in supporting efforts such as this book, *Shocking Violence*, that can provide current, invaluable knowledge to all of us. Knowledge is the first step on the road to problem solving. I think that as you read *Shocking Violence* you will appreciate its multidisciplinary focus. We can all learn from the perspectives of psychologist, teacher, attorney, parent, social worker, educator, clergy, and others; then we must put our heads together, integrate our approaches, and coordinate our knowledge in the best interests of our youth.

Rush Holt
United States Representative
Member of Congress

A MESSAGE FROM THE COMMISSIONER OF THE STATE OF NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SENIOR SERVICES—YEAR 2000

These chapters sample our current understanding about youth violence from experts in the fields of mental health, law, religion, and education. The issues discussed—morality, cultural influence, physiology, and psychology—demonstrate that everyone has a part to play in the prevention of youth violence and in fostering the growth of our children.

I am gratified that New Jersey professionals assembled this material because their efforts are a reflection of our state's commitment to addressing this critical issue of youth violence that is affecting our communities, schools, and families. As part of this commitment, Governor Christine Todd Whitman, with the strong support of the general public, has launched a V-Free initiative that encourages youth to take responsibility and action toward reducing youth violence. V-Free stands for violence-free, victimization-free, and vandalism-free. This initiative empowers youth, giving them the resources they need to protect themselves and others.

Just as the editors and authors of this book have committed themselves to spreading the word, so too should we encourage our youth to spread the word against youth violence. The V-Free program begins with a pledge “to respect myself and all people; to respect my school and property that does not belong to me; to assume responsibility for my own behavior and to think about the consequences of my actions; and to promote an environment free of violence, vandalism, and victimization.” By supporting our youth with grants to students for creative ideas on how to make their neighborhoods and schools safer, and with a confidential tip line that connects teens with law enforcement counselors, we are empowering our youth to join the adult community, their teachers, parents, neighbors, clergy, and others in preventing youth violence.

Many of the issues presented in *Shocking Violence* will enable us to better understand youth violence and help us all to walk down the V-Free path. I commend the editors and authors for donating their time to prepare this valuable book. It is my sincere hope that *Shocking Violence* stays off the book-

shelf and remains in the hands of parents, teachers, mental health professionals, and people who have faith in our youth.

Christine Grant
Commissioner
State of New Jersey
Department of Health and
Senior Services

PREFACE

Although we are co-editors of this book, we are also psychologists, educators, but most importantly, mothers. And so it was that after a Saturday morning meeting of the New Jersey Psychological Association (NJPA) Committee on Neuropsychology, of which we are co-chairs, our discussion about youth violence began. Over decaffeinated coffee, we shared our own experiences as mothers of children who had viewed or experienced the aggressive behaviors of other children. To each other, we described detailed stories of preschool bullies and middle school sexual molestation. We discussed the issue of denial we had observed not only in the school officials but in the students and in the parents of students. We initiated our mission and solidified our commitment to the endeavor of educating both professionals and our communities about the problem of youth violence.

This was back in 1997, before the more horrific episodes of Jonesboro, Columbine, and others. We set forth to convince the New Jersey Psychological Association to include as one of its initiatives a comprehensive educational experience regarding youth violence. We believed that this experience should cater not only to psychologists, but be a statewide effort to include a multitude of organizations. With a core committee, and the invaluable support of NJPA, we created a landmark conference, the goals of which included: 1) to provide a forum where various groups that interface with youth violence can coordinate knowledge and expertise, rather than continue to proceed in isolation, often replicating efforts or lacking protocols; 2) to provide cutting edge information regarding the prevention of youth violence, the identification of at-risk youth, treatments and interventions with youth, and responses to acts of violence; and 3) to integrate scientific research, practical approaches, and the needs of those who interact on a regular basis with youth.

This conference was both impressive and alarming in its success. The Honorable Christine Todd Whitman presided as Honorary Co-chair and our major sponsors included Toys 'R Us, the American Psychological Association, and the New Jersey State Department of Health and Senior Services. Other organizations and individuals joined on as Advisory

Committee members: Assemblywoman Barbara Wright, Catholic Charities, Diocese of Camden, International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, Mercer County Medical Society, N.J. Association of Mental Health Agencies, N.J. Association of School Psychologists, N.J. Association of School Social Workers, N.J. Counseling Association, N.J. Department of Education, N.J. Education Association, N.J. Institute for Continuing Legal Education, N.J. Principals and Supervisors Association, N.J. School Counselors Association, N.J. School Nurses Association, N.J. State Association of Chiefs of Police, N.J. State Nurses Association, Probation Association of New Jersey, Spring Lake Heights Police Department, Temple Emanuel of West Essex, and the Violence Institute of New Jersey. An exhaustive list!

We desired to produce a product that would capture the spirit of this conference so that others could benefit from this unique endeavor. Thus, the idea for this book came about. Many but not all of the chapter authors were involved in the conference. However, each author presents a diverse point of view on the problem of youth violence. We have attempted to include a variety of perspectives: developmental psychologist, neuropsychologist, forensic psychologist, teacher, parent, military officer, attorney, clergy, trauma responder, and public health expert. We also wanted to address the issues of both the perpetrators and the victims. As we did so, it became increasingly apparent to all that these two roles overlapped and blurred. An individual whose name was withheld by request poignantly illustrated this paradox in a letter to the editor of *Time* magazine in the January 1, 2000 issue:

The Columbine tapes gave me chills, but not for the politically correct reasons. You see, that was me at 17. I was like those kids on the tapes. I hated everybody at school; I was an outcast loner who mostly stayed at home and listened to gangsta rap. I wanted to kill the school leaders, *the members*, everybody who had screwed me. My plans for mass murder never got beyond the fantasy stage, but under the right circumstances, they could have gone as far as Columbine. How can we stop kids who kill? Many need mental-health intervention. Many simply need someone their own age who gives a damn about them as a person. Teens want approval from their peers, and not getting it can lead to horrible consequences.

There are many factors that contribute to the phenomenon of youth violence, many of which are presented in this book. For some youths, brain impairment and neuropsychological functioning are significant factors resulting in weak social judgment, impulsivity, poor anger control, and acting out

behaviors. For other youths, a dysfunctional family unit and a lack of community resources set the stage for future episodes of violence. Abuse, bullying, harassment, the media, and our culture are also critical in completing the picture of youth violence. Many argue that for some individuals, especially those who become hardened criminals, treatment may barely alter the pattern of antisocial behavior. But, for a good many, early intervention, supportive families and communities, and treatment can result in saving the lives of not only the victims but the perpetrators as well. Identifying at-risk children, at-risk families, at-risk schools, and at-risk communities is crucial to reducing the episodes of youth violence in our country.

We know that indeed, over the past few years, youth violence has actually decreased, and that the recent, heightened concern has been accentuated by the isolated outrageous events of school shootings. We also know that death by shootings by youth has increased. Obviously, the youth violence issue is a complex one which nonetheless requires our attention, focus, and action. The loss of one child to violence, whether as victim or perpetrator, is too high a price to pay in exchange for denial, ignorance, or indifference by our families, schools, and communities. As citizens, we each have a responsibility to care for the welfare of our youth, the future of our world. We hope that *Shocking Violence* will allow the reader to gain a greater understanding of the complex problem of youth violence that we face and the need for all of us to work together and integrate our perspectives, knowledge, and tools for the benefit of our communities.

Rosemarie Scolaro Moser
Corinne E. Frantz
Editors

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We would like to thank the following individuals and groups who helped make this book a reality:

Our chapter authors who so generously donated their time and expertise in the writing of this book; the New Jersey Psychological Association and its Board members who provided the support and trust in us to produce the landmark, *Shocking Violence Conference 2000*; the NJPA committee members, multiorganizational advisory members, speakers, participants, and donors of the *Shocking Violence Conference 2000*, whose actions reveal their ongoing commitment to our youth; Christopher R. Barbrack, Esq., Ph.D., who donated legal consultation in matters regarding this book; our husbands, Robert B. van Dover, Ph.D. and Robert L. Moser, MD, whose patience, support, and intelligent feedback during the process were invaluable; and our children, Timothy, Christopher, and Geoffrey van Dover and Rachel and Alex Moser, who continuously enlighten and educate us about the importance of our responsibility as parents and as professionals to protect our youth.

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SHOCKING VIOLENCE

Chapter One

YOUTH VIOLENCE AND VICTIMIZATION: AN INTRODUCTION

CORINNE E. FRANTZ
ROSEMARIE SCOLARO MOSER

THE PROBLEM

ON OCTOBER 1, 1997, a sixteen-year-old boy in Pearl, Mississippi, shot nine students in his high school, killing two, after having killed his mother.

On December 1, 1997, a fourteen-year-old boy in West Paducah, Kentucky, shot eight students in the hallway of his high school, wounding five and killing three.

On March 24, 1998, two boys, eleven and thirteen years old, in Jonesboro, Arkansas, opened fire from the woods and shot fifteen people coming out of their middle school, wounding ten and killing four girls and a teacher.

On April 24, 1998, a fourteen-year-old boy in Edinboro, Pennsylvania, shot and killed a science teacher in front of fellow students at an eighth-grade dance.

On May 19, 1998, an eighteen-year-old honor student in Fayetteville, Tennessee, opened fire in the parking lot of his high school and killed a classmate.

On May 21, 1998, a fifteen-year-old boy in Springfield, Oregon, killed his parents and then opened fire on classmates in his high school, wounding twenty and killing two.

On April 20, 1999, two students in Littleton, Colorado, gunned down twenty-three of their classmates, killing fifteen including themselves. Their intended targets were athletes. The actual victims were a random set of students.

One month later, on May 20, 1999, a depressed fifteen-year-old in Conyers, Georgia, opened fire on his high school classmates, wounding six but killing none.

On February 29, 2000, a six-year-old boy took a .32-caliber semiautomatic handgun to his school and shot one of his first-grade classmates, killing her.

These are among the most visible school shootings in recent years, visible because of national media coverage. In the initial shock and subsequent horror that accompanies the reporting of these and similar events, we feel tremendous sympathy for the victims, the victims' families and friends, and horror and disbelief toward the perpetrators of these crimes. It is only weeks or months later, after the heightened media interest subsides, that we learn through other media venues of the protracted suffering that the perpetrators themselves endured prior to their horrific acts of hate, revenge, and despair.

In the spring of 1997, prior to the shootings in West Paducah, Kentucky, Michael Carneal was mentioned in the gossip column of the school newspaper as having "feelings for" a male classmate. Thereafter, he was apparently the victim of repeated and persistent harassment, being called "gay" and "faggot", in the face of which he felt impotent and ineffectual. He experienced suicidal thoughts, was socially isolated, and wrote school essays dealing with graphic, violent themes involving fantasies of revenge. In the fall of the year just prior to shooting his victims, his grades in school precipitously dropped. There is a report that he was plagued by paranoid fears and may have heard voices.

In Littleton, Colorado, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were part of a group known as the Trench Coat Mafia, a cluster of high school teens who were routinely picked on and scorned by fellow students and who identified themselves distinctively by dressing in Goth (gothic) style black clothing and wearing long trench coats. In numerous accounts and recollections, Harris and Klebold were regularly called "dirtbags", "faggots" and "inbreds" by other students with no one, neither fellow students nor faculty, coming to their defense. In one account (Bai, 1999), a classmate was cited as saying, "They'd walk with their heads down, because if they looked up they'd get thrown into lockers and get called a *fag*." In another account (Gibbs, 1999), students reported that some teachers picked on the members of the outcast group, blaming them unfairly and condoning the cruelty and abuse perpetrated at the hands of the jocks. On at least one occasion, rocks and bottles were thrown at Harris and Klebold from a moving car; in turn, on another occasion, Klebold openly brandished a gun from a moving car in the direction of taunters.

Victim turns perpetrator; perpetrator turns victim. The question, "Who deserves our sympathy?" however, is naïve and simplistic, and reveals our own failure to grasp the complexity of the underlying issues. We know that the trio of perpetrator, victim, and silent bystander can give rise to sadistic acts of brutality. We know that those who are hated often learn, in turn, to hate. Sometimes, the hate directed at themselves or people whom they per-

ceive as similar to themselves in some unconscious way can be as vicious as the hate directed at the original perpetrator. Sometimes, the violence of the marginalized group against the perpetrators of abuse is more vicious and intense than the original violence of the group in power. As one recent writer has noted (Sullivan, 1999), despite our ability to provide detailed descriptions of horrific acts of violence, we still know relatively little about the spark which ignites the act itself: Hate.

On the eve of the Littleton, Colorado, shootings, President Clinton spoke at a news conference in Washington. He called on us to teach children how to “express anger and resolve conflicts with words, not weapons,” and for those of us who are in contact with our children, “to do more to recognize the early warning signs that are sent before children act violently” (President’s Remarks, 1999, p. A17). He also cited Patricia Holloway, 1999 County Commission Chair for Littleton, Colorado, saying, “. . . perhaps now America would wake up to the dimensions of this challenge if it could happen in a place like Littleton” (President’s Remarks, p. A17). Littleton is not an inner city where we might rationalize episodes of youth violence as being more common; Littleton is a relatively homogenous, middle class suburb, southwest of Denver. Harris and Klebold were smart, privileged children in an affluent community.

In June 1997, one of the lead articles in *The New York Times Magazine* was entitled, “How Can We Save the Next Victim?” (Belkin, 1997). The article was not about mass school shootings or youth violence, but about fatal medical blunders which have resulted in the tragic deaths of patients. The writer of the article, Lisa Belkin, pointed out that when a patient dies as a result of a medical blunder, “. . . the first question is often, ‘Who is to blame?’ and it is the wrong question!” (p. 28). Ms. Belkin went on to say, “. . . finger-pointing does not provide answers and often no one—no one—is to blame. A cascade of unthinkable things must happen for a patient to die due to medical mistake and it is almost always a failure of a system” (p. 28). It is also a failure of a system when one youth aggresses against another youth, a vastly complex system that includes individual victims, individual perpetrators, families, schools, the larger community, and the culture.

From a need to address the complexity of the system that surrounds expressions of violence, *Shocking Violence*, was conceived as a multidisciplinary contribution that seeks to address the following questions:

1. What role does the media play in influencing youth violence?
2. What are some of the individual predictors or warning signs of violence?
3. What is the relationship between victim and perpetrator in instances of bullying and harassment?
4. What steps for prevention and intervention can be taken by parents, teachers, schools, crisis teams and communities? and