

**Testimony on Preventing Violence**  
**to the Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security**  
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Thank you for the invitation to speak to you today about violence prevention. My name is Deborah Prothrow-Stith, and I am an adjunct professor at the Harvard School of Public Health where I have conducted research, national training, and technical assistance on violence prevention for years. I have also provided expert testimony and participated on numerous advisory and expert boards around the country and written multiple articles and several books and on the topic, such as *Murder Is No Accident*, a blue print for community-based violence prevention work. Currently, I am a co-chair and lead partner in a national initiative called Urban Networks to Increase Thriving Youth, or UNITY. Funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, UNITY supports US cities in advancing more effective, sustainable efforts to prevent violence that affects young people. Today my testimony builds on what we have learned in this initiative and lessons from a growing body of prevention work around the country.

For the most part, traditional approaches to addressing the problem of violence have focused on after-the-fact strategies, largely through enforcement and criminal justice strategies. Much violence is preventable and investments in prevention will result in lives saved, improved quality of life in highly impacted neighborhoods, improved academic outcomes, and reduced expenditures in the criminal justice and health care systems.

Let me share more information about the problem of violence and prevention solutions.

**1. Young people, families, and communities across the country are seriously impacted by violence**

- 5.5% of high school students feel too unsafe to go to school, 18% report carrying a weapon, 35.5% were in a physical fight, 12% report having been forced to have sex and 14.5% report having seriously considered attempting suicide.<sup>i</sup>
- More than 720,000 young people ages 10 to 24 were treated in emergency departments for injuries sustained from violence in 2006.<sup>ii</sup>
- Homicide is the second leading cause of death among youth between the ages of 10 and 24<sup>iii</sup> and for each such homicide; there are approximately 1,000 nonfatal violent assaults.<sup>iv</sup>
- The consequences of violence for victims and those exposed are severe, including serious physical injuries, post traumatic stress syndrome, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and other longer term health problems associated with the bio-psycho-social effects of such exposure.<sup>v</sup>
- 1 in 3 African American males and 1 in 6 Latino males will enter the criminal justice system if we don't take action.<sup>vi</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *UNITY [Urban Networks to Increase Thriving Youth] is a cooperative agreement (Award No. 5 US4 CE924970-04 to Prevention Institute) funded by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Through tools, training, consultation, and information about the problem and solutions, UNITY supports US cities in advancing more effective, sustainable efforts to prevent violence that affects young people. While some of this testimony is based on the findings of this initiative, the information presented here does not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.*

2. **Violence is costly to individuals, families, communities, businesses, and government, and preventing violence can contribute to economic recovery and growth**

- Medical and lost productivity costs associated with violence range from more than \$70 billion<sup>vii</sup> to \$158 billion a year.<sup>viii</sup> Criminal justice costs account for more. For example, criminal justice costs related to gang violence in Los Angeles County alone total \$1.15 billion annually.<sup>ix</sup>
- Violence is a factor in the development of chronic diseases<sup>x</sup> which account for a majority of premature US deaths, lost productivity and the majority and fastest growing percentage of our healthcare spending<sup>xi</sup>
- Violence inhibits economic recovery and growth in cities around the country.<sup>xii</sup> Youth violence affects communities by increasing the cost of health care, reducing productivity, decreasing property values, disrupting social services,<sup>xiii</sup> and can deter tourism, business relocation, and other investments.

3. **Leaders are calling for action**

- Mayors, police chiefs, school superintendents and public health directors have stated that violence is a serious issue and responses are inadequate<sup>xiv</sup>
- The US Conference of Mayors declared youth violence to be a public health crisis. They called for cities to work with a broad range of stakeholders to develop a sustained multi-faceted approach focused on *prevention* and for the federal government to support investments in youth development throughout US cities.<sup>xv</sup>
- Enforcement, suppression, and intervention efforts alone do not address the underlying reasons violence occurs and therefore cannot prevent violence before it occurs. Police chiefs and other enforcement leaders are increasingly saying, *we can not arrest our way out of this problem.*
- UNITY has established a growing network of cities around the country whose mayors have signed a Memorandum of Understanding to advance prevention-oriented approaches to violence. Cities include Boston, Louisville, Cleveland, Tucson, San Diego, Minneapolis, and St. Louis and a number of other cities around the country are looking to also join.

4. **Violence is preventable -- Prevention programs and strategies have a demonstrated track record in reducing violence.**

- Cities with more coordination, communication, and attention to preventing violence have achieved lower violence rates.<sup>xvi xvii xviii</sup>
- The CeaseFire Chicago model has been replicated 16 times and has been validated by a 3 year U.S. Department of Justice study conducted by four universities, showing 41-73% drops in shootings and killings, and 100% drops in retaliation murders<sup>xix</sup>. The first year of impact regularly shows 25 - 45% drops in shootings and killings, and the return of businesses have been seen in these neighborhoods.
- Schools can reduce violence by 15% in as little as 6 months through universal school-based violence prevention efforts.<sup>xx</sup>
- The City of Minneapolis has documented a 40% drop in juvenile crime in 2 years since implementing its 4 point, public health based Violence Prevention Blueprint for Action.
- Violence is a learned behavior that can be unlearned or not learned in the first place; it is preventable.<sup>xxi xxii xxiii</sup>

5. **We need a national commitment to and action on preventing violence before it occurs** in order to support and complement enforcement and suppression, improve outcomes for young people,

families and communities, strengthen our economic recovery and growth, and finally break the cradle to the prison pipeline.

- Cities working with UNITY have identified a set of key strategies that would support violence prevention efforts in cities. The *upfront* strategies are: positive early care and education; positive social and emotional development; parenting skills; mentoring; quality after school programming; youth leadership; social connections in neighborhoods; quality education; and economic development. In the thick strategies are mental health services, family support services, street outreach, and mentoring. Aftermath strategies are successful reentry and mental health services.
- Prevention components in the Youth PROMISE Act are in alignment with the kinds of strategies that cities have prioritized in their work with UNITY, such as early childhood development services, parenting and healthy relationship skills training, family support/stabilization programs, after school programs, mentoring programs, conflict resolution skills training, and mental health services.
- Having the resources and policies in support of these kinds of programmatic prevention efforts is key to success on the ground.
- Programmatic programming will have the greatest impact in the context of being part of a city-wide strategy and directed in a coordinated way to the neighborhoods and people with the greatest need. Programs must be implemented to scale and allotted sufficient time and dosage to ensure their benefits. In addition, they should be directed in a coordinated way to the neighborhoods and people with the greatest need.
- More and more cities are putting plans in place (e.g. Minneapolis, Nashville, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, San Jose), and their efforts can be greatly supported through federal prevention policies and resources.
- Putting some prevention dollars through Centers for Disease Control and Prevention would help support prevention efforts at the local level by bringing prevention leadership, in addition to law enforcement and criminal justice and education, to the table. Also, it would be important to consider building infrastructure through the nation's lead public health agency, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, to provide the technical support.

Violence is extremely costly – in the form of criminal justice and medical costs and disinvestment in urban centers. Further, violence and the trauma from it is linked long-term to the onset of chronic diseases, the most costly and quickly rising portion of unsustainable health care costs for individuals, businesses, and government. Research shows that reducing violence is the single most effective way to stimulate economic development in affected communities. The economic benefits of reducing urban violence include saving unnecessary costs, the return of businesses to neighborhoods, and tens of thousands of direct jobs provided by staffing prevention planning and implementation and building adequate infrastructure to support prevention efforts.

Violence is preventable, and I value and welcome the opportunity you have given me today to share our learnings about it from decades of research and practice.

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