

POLICY FORUM

Prevention and Control of Injury and Violence

Introduction

Injury and violence are all too common in our world. There remain too many hazards where we work and play and too many opportunities for harmful events, stresses, and conflicts among and between people to expect a peaceful and harmonious society. We move too fast, pay less attention than we should, and let hazards go unrecognized for too long to avoid real harm to ourselves. We harm each other far too often, as well.

Even without external provocations, humans remain subject to impulses and behaviors that bring harm to others. "Violence is as American as cherry pie" is how H. Rap Brown put it, speaking at a time when violent conflicts were becoming far too common. But we endure perhaps more-personal violence within families and among close partners. Violence and conscious and unconscious harms are born of many causes and occur in many places. The toll of violence is calculable in terms of injuries and deaths, which occur with such frequency that we can easily assign violent harm to the list of leading public health problems for the nation, as well as for North Carolina and its communities.

The policy forum of this issue addresses injury and violence in terms of victims, mechanisms, and preventive solutions. This taxonomy is necessary to help reduce the incidence of harmful events. The problem is not a unitary one that invites a single society-wide solution; rather, it represents a multifaceted flaw in the human condition and the ways in which we structure our environment that requires that we learn the nuances and brutal reality of the many manifestations of harm.

It may be easy to recognize that violent deaths from motor-vehicle crashes are preventable by changing the behavior of drivers, but the extent to which we need to change the physical structures that protect pedestrians from the deadly kinetic force of vehicles is less obvious. Devices can cause harm by their misuse. Guns are a device of sorts: they have a deadly purpose, but they can also serve as a deeply political symbol or a pragmatic instrument of protection. Again, behavioral change is necessary to reduce harms, but structural protections are equally necessary to prevent injury or death.

Our social institutions have evolved to protect and build society. Humans are social beings who live in families and groups to fulfill their lives. These joint lives are often stressful, and the power and strength of the participants is not equally shared. This can create the opportunity for harms and injuries that are not always viewed as avertable or even unjust. Partner violence and violence against women are no longer subjects to be ignored in their physical and psychological manifestations. The lonely psychology of suicide presents another challenge as we reflect on how to make people aware of the reality of mortal threats while supporting their place and purpose in life.

It is this last paradox that makes injury and violence due to nonbiological events a challenge to unite as a topic. We must increase awareness about injury and violence, to help people avoid the harmful consequences of these threats. At the same time, we must work to eliminate injury and violence, which decrease awareness of their existence.

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