



## COMMISSIONER'S COMMENTS



### *Public Health and Violence*

The horrible violence in Charleston last month is part of a large, systemic problem. Racial animosity was the immediate cause of the recent tragedy, but a real and broader problem lies in the growing population of disaffected youth, particularly young men. The perpetrator could just have directed his rage against Jewish, gay or any number of groups, if he had come across other hate ideologies.

Violence is recognized as a public health problem and clearly we must move beyond sole reliance on the criminal justice sector in solving this problem. There are millions of men between the ages of 16 and 24, who are not in school or employed. They are disengaged from the mainstream, with few skills, no job and little future. It's easy to understand how they may drift toward and be susceptible to hateful beliefs. They are often socially excluded and disconnected from prevailing social values. Disaffected youth have lost all confidence that by following standard social norms they will have a decent life. They are deeply discouraged about any possibility of a pathway to a better future.

The critical question is how they became this alienated, not whether they are racist or anti-Semitic. Why aren't they excited about developing skills and launching a satisfying career? What about falling in love, getting married or having children?

One obvious explanation is a breakdown of family bonds, of schools, of religion, of community organizations. It has become equally evident that our political process often encourages acrimonious debate that contributes to the weakening of these very institutions.

If the disaffection, anger and demoralization leading to this anti-social behavior continue to fester in this group, society can expect increasingly violent outbursts.

Public health measures have been quite successful in preventing and treating many infectious diseases. A greater focus is now needed on violence, suicide and poor mental health because they persist as leading causes and contributors to death in the United States.

We need a serious discussion about the large numbers of children living in single parent homes and other families without adequate support. Shouldn't we have policies that strengthen and reward parents' full engagement in the rearing of their children?

During my years of practice as an obstetrician gynecologist, I saw that when financial strains come in the door, love and harmony often went out the window. What about modifying the tax code to ease the burden on the middle class and rewarding stable family foundations?

As in medicine, like other areas, treating the symptom is never as effective as addressing the root cause. Better schools, jobs, mentoring programs, supportive institutions are all helpful, but strengthening family foundations and formation offers the best choice to cure the epidemic of disaffected youth. I am glad that Putnam County has acknowledged this keystone, recognizing this year as the "Year of the Family." All policies should be viewed through the lens of how they will strengthen the family.

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