

Listen to the children

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
Thursday, 04 April 2013 12:27

"My friends are dead. I saw the bad man. He was next to me when we ran out."

"I played ball with him. Now he is dead."

"My friend got killed cause she didn't hide good enough."

"Do you think it is my fault?"

These are some of the devastating voices of children from Sandy Hook Elementary School. Elaine Zimmerman, the executive director of the Connecticut Commission on Children, joined by others, has been offering support to children and families in Newtown, Connecticut since the shootings at their school in December 2012. She shared these quotes at a recent Harvard Graduate School of Education Askwith Forum where she, PBS NewsHour correspondent and Learning Matters president John Merrow, and I participated in a panel on school violence. Less than two percent of fatal gun violence against children takes place at school, but everyone's heart broke with Elaine's as she told the audience, "I am haunted by the child who said, *'There is nothing you can do or say that will convince me that this will not happen again.'*"

Although many children in the school building and school system were not physically hurt on December 14th, all these children and their siblings were also victims of the horrific violence that day. They carry an enormous burden and are paying an incalculable price that may never disappear. It's the same price paid by children fifty miles away in Hartford's North End—though the gun violence there and in inner cities across the country does not always make headlines, adding another layer of anger and frustration about feeling invisible on top of the Black community's already deep pain. From rural Southern communities to small Midwestern towns, child and adult survivors of gun violence all over America pay a high price every day. The psychological and emotional toll of gun violence on bystanders, victims, and families can be overwhelming and leaves effects that last for years.

What about the costs we *can* count? In addition to the trauma that is so deep and pervasive that it is harder to quantify, there are actual costs to gun violence that can be measured and are enormous. Victims and families often find themselves paying a high economic price while struggling with the emotional one, and other taxpayers share the economic burden.

A recent study by the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation found that gun injuries and deaths in 2010 cost the country \$8.4 billion in medical and mental health care, emergency services, and administrative and criminal justice costs.

Those shot and killed and their families and employers were estimated to have lost \$52.5 billion in forgone wages and productivity due to death or injury. This adds up to a total of \$60.8 billion, twenty percent of which was borne by local, state and federal governments. On top of these costs to the victims, their families, employers and taxpayers, the researchers also estimated the economic value of the pain, suffering, and loss of enjoyment of life among those shot and their families to total an additional \$113.3 billion. This gives a sense of the magnitude of the loss experienced by those killed or injured and their families. Together all these costs add up to \$174.1 billion a year, a little over one percent of our nation's gross national product. This is an average of \$1.7 million in one year for each of the 105,177 gun deaths and injuries that occurred in 2010. And even this number is an underestimate. It does not count the larger toll

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and economic impact of gun violence on entire communities, including lower housing values, lost property tax revenue, and lost quality of life due to fear of violence.

The lost quality of life is the price Sandy Hook's children are paying right now, along with every other child in America who has seen gun violence in their own neighborhood, their own street, or their own home. The 2008 National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence found that more than one in five 14-17 year olds had witnessed a shooting at some point in their lives. This number is thought to be even higher among low-income children: one study found that 43 percent of low-income Black school-aged children had witnessed a murder. Behind those children are millions more who have seen pieces of news stories on television or passed armed guards or policemen at their school and wonder whether the grown-ups they know will ever be able to protect them and keep them safe. *There is nothing you can do or say that will convince me that this will not happen again.*

A December 2012 report of the Attorney General's National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence found that exposure to violence takes an enormous emotional toll on children with effects including difficulty sleeping and eating, irritability, attention and concentration problems, aggression, depressed mood and withdrawal, relationship problems, anxiety and intrusive thoughts, and impulsivity (which includes dangerous risk-taking, alcohol and drug abuse, delinquency, and promiscuous sexual behavior). The task force also reported that chronic violence can lead to long-lasting changes in brain anatomy and physiology, including long-term psychiatric problems and lifelong limitations on health, well-being, relationships, and personal success.

It's not fair. Our whole country and our nation's economy bear the financial burden caused by gun violence. Survivors and family members pay the highest price of all. No one should be forced to pay a lifelong emotional or physical toll because a fit of anger, an episode of depression or other mental illness, or a careless accident ended with a gunshot. No child deserves to have their childhood snatched away in an instant and their life changed forever because of an adult's decision to carry and use guns, including high-powered assault weapons and high capacity ammunition clips.

Listen to the children. The costs of gun violence in America are far too high for them and for all of us. They are a price none of us can afford and none of us, especially our children, should be forced to pay. It is past time to protect children, not guns.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrendefense.org .