

Preventing Violence
A framework for Action

Preventing Violence
In Contra Costa County

A Countywide Action Plan
&
A Framework for Action

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This document is divided into two parts. The first section, Prevention Violence in Contra Costa County: the Contra Costa County Health Services Prevention Program developed A Countrywide Action Plan, and placed on the November, 1994 ballot by the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors.

The second section, Preventing Violence in Contra Costa County: A framework for Action is working document also produced by the Prevention Program. The Framework will be updated periodically based on the recommendations of Contra Costa County individuals and community-based organizations, Health Services Department staff, school district personnel and elected and appointed officials.

The Prevention Program located in San Francisco Bay Area, is an interdisciplinary public health program that focuses on the prevention of violence, childhood injuries, and chronic disease. Rather than create new, stand-alone programs, the Prevention Program coordinates, cultivate and links existing community resources in a systems approach. The program has a national reputation for establishing and developing effective, health-related community coalitions.

For further information or to request additional supplemental materials, contact the Contra Costa County Health Services Department Prevention Program, 75 Santa Barbara Road, Pleasant Hill, CA 94523 (510) 646-6511; fax (510) 646-6520.

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WORKING DOCUMENT

Preventing Violence in Contra Costa County:
A Framework for Action

A supplement to
“Preventing Violence in Contra Costa County:
A Countywide Action Plan,”
Placed on the November ballot by the
Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors

August 9, 1994

For further information contact:
Contra Costa Health Services Department
Prevention Program

Preventing Violence in Contra Costa County:

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A Framework for Action

The Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors firmly believes that violence is preventable and that all opportunities to reduce and prevent violence in Contra Costa County should be pursued. Accordingly, on August 9, 1994, the Board of Supervisors placed "Preventing Violence in Contra Costa County: A Countywide Action Plan" on the November ballot for voter approval. In endorsing the Action Plan the Board joins with cities school districts, and community members throughout the county to make violence prevention a priority.

This document, the Framework for Action, is a supplement to the Action Plan. The Framework is a "working document" that enumerates many of the specific activities those local communities and governmental bodies can undertake to reduce and prevent violence.

Violence is a learned behavior and therefore preventable. The Framework for Action is formulated with the premise that violence is a health issue. As a health issue, violence requires attention not just the outcomes of violent injury, but to the symptoms and, ultimately, to the prevention of violence. The term "health" is used here in the broadest sense, not just the medical aspects, but as an approach that pinpoints the underlying causes and risk factors. Because violence is a complex issue, using a health approach facilitates the systematic integration of community, private, and public entities in the development of solutions.

For more than ten years, community agencies and government departments have coordinating a variety of violence prevention efforts. Many efforts by community-based programs predate the county government's role in violence prevention. Voter approval of the Action Plan is an endorsement of increased awareness, concern, commitment, and involvement of the entire Contra Costa County population so that a significant reduction in violence will be achieved.

This Framework for Action is intended as a "work in progress." A fully inclusive list of actions would require surveying existing and proposed violence prevention measures throughout communities and government. A completely effective violence prevention plan would also address the root cause of violence, including fundamental issues relating to unemployment, oppression and mental health. However, the 25 recommendations enumerated here can serve as guidelines to help identify priorities and allocate resources.

These recommendations deal with six themes: Safe Homes, Safe Schools, Safe Neighborhoods, Safe Workplaces, Government Service and Policy Initiatives. Under each recommendation a set of actions is listed; these actions are generally applicable to more than one recommendation. The actions are intended as steps and examples, but may require modification in a particular community, and certainly there are numerous other steps that could be listed and should be undertaken. This document is primarily concerned with assault homicide, sexual assault, and battering. Child abuse, elder abuse, and suicide are not as thoroughly addressed, although attention to then recommendations here would have a significant impact on every one of these concerns.

Prevention violence is a responsibility that will take many years to achieve. This Framework for Action will serve as a road map to help us reach our goals more effectively. For further information, call the Health Services Department Prevention Program, (510) 646-6511.

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I. BACKGROUND

On February 1, 1994 the Board of Supervisors adopted the preliminary plan for violence prevention presented by the Health Services Department. The Board directed the Health Services Department to work within county government, as well as with cities, school districts, and non-profit organizations, in a concerted effort to reduce violence in Contra Costa County. Meetings were held in various regions of the county to find out how to supplement and reinforce existing violence prevention activities.

Board of Supervisor's representatives hosted violence prevention summits in Central County in May and East County in June 1994. From these summits a series of recommendations was developed dealing with the themes of Safe Homes, Safe Neighborhoods, Safe Schools, and Safe Workplaces. West County has also sponsored numerous initiatives such as the Enterprise Community, Increase The Peace Month, and the Opportunity West Community Substance Abuse Partnership.

Many sectors of the community, including non-profit agencies and government, are already taking important steps to prevent violence. The *Framework for Action* proposes actions that will enhance these existing efforts and integrate them with new initiatives for preventing violence. It looks at the role of government and institutions, as well as collaborative activities that would benefit from partnerships between communities, government and the private sector.

The *Framework for Action* incorporates the recommendations which grew out of the two regional summits; West county recommendations, research conducted by Health Services Department staff; reports on violence prevention efforts in other communities; and the expertise of individuals who have developed local programs and policies. It addressed six areas; Safe Homes, Safe Schools, Safe Communities, Safe Workplaces, Government Service, and Policy Initiatives. Information from organizations throughout the United States was incorporated into this Framework. Special acknowledgement is due the City of Seattle's Violence Prevention Work Group.

Because the problem of violence is so complex, it is crucial that all who live and work in Contra Costa County support the development and implementation of effective violence prevention initiatives.

II - THE MAGNITUDE OF THE PROBLEM

A. Rates of Violence

Violence has reached what public health officials conclude is epidemic proportions. Too many lives are lost or radically altered by violence, costing not only grief and emotional suffering, but also a huge financial burden on the public to bear the costs of emergency medical services, law enforcement and jails. Violence is as severe a problem in Contra Costa County as in much of the rest of the nation. As the following figures show, the toll is great. The rates for interpersonal violence are higher in the United States than any other industrialized nation. For example, in 1990, the rape rate in the U.S. was 8 times higher than in France, 15 times higher than in England, 20 times higher than in Portugal, 23 times higher than in Italy, 26 times higher than in Japan, and 46 times higher than in Greece.

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Nationally, motor vehicles are the leading cause of injury death among persons aged 1-34. According to data currently being analyzed by the Health Services Prevention Program, in 1992 and 1993, the number of homicides in Contra Costa surpassed motor vehicles as the leading cause of injury death.

Violence (homicide and suicide) accounted for 44.8 percent of injury deaths in the county between 1998 and 1992. Of these violent deaths, 54 percent were suicides and 46 percent homicides. In 1993, however, homicide outranked suicide, comprising 61 percent of injury deaths versus suicides (39 percent).

There are 67 million handguns in private hands in the United State.

From 1988-1990, firearm injuries were the leading cause of death for Contra Costa youth between the ages of 10 and 14.

Firearms were the weapons most frequently reported in violent deaths in Contra Costa between 1988-1992, (more than 63 percent). In 1992, firearms injuries were the leading cause of injury deaths to Contra Costa firearm residents, nearly twice as many as deaths related to motor vehicles.

Throughout the county, 4,346 aggravated assaults were reported to law enforcement agencies during 1992.

As reported to local law enforcement agencies, 309 forcible rapes were perpetrated on Contra Costa women during 1992. It is estimated that reported rapes are only one-third to one-half of those that actually take place. According to a majority staff report prepared for the Senate Judiciary Committee, at least one out of five women will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime.

Battering is the leading cause of injury to women and accounts for nearly one third of all emergency room visits by women. Each year, domestic violence generates more than 21,000 hospitalizations, 99,800 hospital days, and 39,900 physicians visits.

Alcohol is associated with two-thirds of all violent behavior; one-third of teen suicides are alcohol-related; and more than half of all convicted rapists were drinking at the time of their offense.

B. Costs of Violence

Violence caused almost one-fifth of injury medical care costs (\$13.5 billion nationally in 1992).

Direct medical costs related to violence exceed \$5 billion annually, and many of the estimated 1.5 million victims of assault each year are uninsured, placing an incredible burden on the public to bear the cost.

The average cost of treating a child wounded by gunfire could provide a student with a year of college education. Researchers surveyed hospital discharges from 44 acute care children's hospitals and found that in 1991, the average hospital charges for gunshot wounds to children were \$14,434.

More than 80 inner city hospitals have abandoned their emergency rooms in recent years due to unmanageable costs.

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Between 1982 and 1992, the share of government spending going to the criminal justice system rose from 5.4% to 7.5%. Incarcerating 25 year-old for life costs a total of \$600,000-1,000,000. Average annual cost per prisoner is \$27,000.

III ROOT CAUSES AND RISK FACTORS

The first step to effective action is to define the problem. Only after understanding the dimensions of violence, its roots causes and risk factors, can appropriate solutions be developed.

Nationally, as well as locally, experts are finding that the same elements underlie the problem of violence. Three causes (economic, oppression, and mental health) and six community risk factors have been identified/ addressing the root causes is critical and requires substantial re-ordering of political and social priorities. Although the risk factors are also difficult to change, they are more amenable to modification.

A. Three Root Causes

1. **Economics:** the depressed economic conditions within a given community, as well as individual cases of unemployment and underemployment, lead to significantly higher levels of violence.
2. **Oppression:** Sexism, racism, and discrimination based on age, class, and cultural background lead to a sense of inequality and powerlessness that is an underlying component of many types of violence.
3. **Mental Health:** In the absence of individual responsibility and family support for responsible behavior, violence, is more likely to occur. An unsupportive home life, including physical or psychological abuse, can produce low self-esteem, in both the victim and perpetrator. Violence begets violence; it is frequently cyclical. A culture which reinforces violence makes the goal of individual; responsibility more difficult to achieve.

It is important to note that while African Americas are the most severely affected by violence and the most likely to be jailed for violent offenses, neither race nor ethnicity is a primary risk factor. The disproportionately high levels of violence in the African American population are indicators of the underlying economic and social conditions in which the population is likely to find itself. The devastation of these communities by violence is best understood according to Dr. Deborah Prothrow-Stith, author of *Deadly Consequences*, as a reaction to poverty and to over-crowding, in the context of an American culture where violence “is as American as apple pie.”

B. Six community Risk Factors

1. **Guns:** By virtue of the fact that guns are involved in the vast majority of homicides and suicides, their availability and lethality is a major concern that needs to be addressed.
2. **Media:** Although the mass media justify sensationalization of violence and sexual objectification by claiming that these are what the public wants for entertainment, studies show the psychological damage of such programming.

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3. *Alcohol and Other Drugs:* The drug most frequently associated with violence is the one subsidized by the government and legally marketed to consumers: alcohol. The illicit drug trade also contributes significantly to violence.
4. *Incarceration:* Although incarceration is frequently necessary, if there is no funding for adequate prevention, treatment and rehabilitation programs, then it is the only form of violence reduction available. When incarceration is the only option, prisons often can become a training ground for more violence. Building and maintaining jails also uses resources that could be channeled to violence prevention efforts.
5. *Witnessing Acts of Violence:* Experiencing violence can produce Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), similar to that experienced by war veterans. Exposure to, or direct involvement in, violence is likely to create the belief that violence is a normal form of conflict resolution.
6. *Community Deterioration:* The funding for community services throughout the United States has taken a notable downturn. Schools, health and mental health services, libraries, recreational centers, and parks, are all critical institutions that provide a buffer against the likelihood of violence. At the same time the “web” of community participation seems to be unraveling, with peoples attention focused more on the needs of their own families than on the health of the community as a whole.

IV. A PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACH

As a health issue, violence, requires, attention not just to the outcomes of violent injury, but also to the symptoms and, ultimately, to the prevention of violence. The term “health” is used here in the broadest sense, and refers not just to the medical consequences, but also to the root cause and risk factors, of violence. Dealing with violence as a health-and not just law and order-issue facilitates the systematic integration of community, private and public entities in the development of solutions.

The health of a community is a composite of physical, psychological, social, and economic variables. Consequently, the responsibility for overall community health resides in a number of systems, including the family, education, health, work, criminal justice, and social services.

An African proverb states, “It takes a whole village to raise one child.” Ending violence will require that people in each neighborhood assume responsibility for the problem-even if doing so is risky and frustrating. Stopping the momentum of violence requires a “critical mass” of people who are willing to speak out and work together to change the structures and policies that frame the way we live.

V. PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES

The *Framework for Action* enumerates 25 recommendations. They are intended as guidelines for identifying priorities and allocating resources. They are meant to augment, refine, and broaden the efforts already initiated by citizens and institutions throughout Contra Costa County. This plan is a “work in progress.” A fully inclusive list of recommendations would require a much more detailed description of existing and projected activities. The recommendations in this *Framework for Action* are followed by suggested actions. The actions are intended as steps and examples, and may require modification in a particular community. Certainly, there are numerous other steps that could be investigated and considered.

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All of the recommendations include the following principles, which are guidelines for planning, policy development, and implementation.

- a) Build on existing local efforts and support initiatives that arise from within communities. Many community groups and organizations, individuals, and collaborative throughout the county grapple with violence-related prevention efforts. Their work must be acknowledged, supported, and enhanced.
- b) Foster individual responsibility and involvement. Each person has the responsibility for behaving nonviolently. Resources to support individual and family mental health need to be readily accessible.
- c) Utilize available data and state-of-the-art violence prevention strategies. Violence prevention efforts can be most effective when based on accurate information about what works.
- d) Encourage partnerships and collaboration and integration of services. Violence is a complex issue, which requires removing barriers that inhibit solutions from emerging. Pay special attention to the expertise of existing coalitions.
- e) Emphasize a multi-level approach. Individual change, institution-wide programs, community activities, and countywide policies are needed. Every level of involvement, from home to school and boardroom, is critical to changing the “culture of violence.”
- f) Support and involve youth in decision-making. Many young people feel isolated and unsupported. Some are victims and/or perpetrators. Changing the experience of young people, and adult attitudes about young people, is crucial to finding a solution to violence.
- g) Resources must be made available. Those who work with young people in schools and communities throughout the county are painfully aware of the dearth of resources for violence prevention activities. There can be no substitute for funding such programmatic efforts.
- h) Develop concrete criteria for success. The accomplishments of the elements of this *Framework* must be measured and reviewed. Violence prevention requires a long -term commitment. It is not enough to simply put programs in place; they must be of high quality and play a clear role in achieving the goal of reducing violence in Contra Costa County.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

HOMES

Recommendation 1: Promote the concept that all Contra Costa home environments can and should be violence free.

Key elements to include:

- Conflict and anger management
- Communication with children
- Communication with schools and other organizations

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- Discipline guidelines and techniques
- Reducing the impact of television violence
- Instilling respect and kindness
- Diminishing risk associated with firearms in homes
- Developing a family safety plan
- Alcohol and other drug risks

Urge parents to seek alternatives to aggressive interpersonal confrontations at home.

Recommendation 2: Provide community and governmental support to families that will assist them in reducing the risk of violence.

Provide education, materials, and referrals which assist residents in becoming more aware of community and school resources, current violence prevention related services, and alternative activities.

Develop ongoing care, services and training in parenting, conflict resolution, substance abuse, and mental health for high-risk families and victims and perpetrators of violence.

Using an integrated service model, provide enhanced support services for youth who are having difficulty at home.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Recognize family violence as a problem in all parts of the community and reduce its prevalence and impact.

Set the goal for zero tolerance for family violence.

Initiate countywide Domestic Violence Council to advise government and improve community support for family violence reduction and prevention.

Mandate treatment for spousal abusers.

Require vertical prosecution (a consistent prosecutor for an entire family violence case) to maximize consistency and competence in prosecuting such cases.

Provide domestic violence treatment in county jails to inmates convicted of spousal abuse.

Immediately restrict ownership of all guns by people who are under court restraining orders, or where a domestic assault has been provided to occur.

Encourage health care providers to establish and maintain referral systems for victims of domestic violence.

Enhance police training for handling domestic violence situations and making appropriate referrals and accurate police reports.

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Support shelters for people at risk of domestic violence.

SCHOOLS

RECOMMENDATION 4: develop educational interventions to empower youth who, despite disadvantages, can develop social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, resiliency, and a sense of purpose or future.

Develop and implement k-12 curriculums that equip students with the skills and tools that help prevent violence.

- Communication skills, conflict and anger management;
- History from a variety of cultural perspectives;
- Causes and prevention of violence which integrates culturally diverse approaches;
- Family life skills education; and
- Alcohol and drug issues.

Encourage safe opportunities for youth to express the impact of violence on their lives.
Improve reading skills of young people and adults.

Include community service involvement as a requirement for graduation at all elementary, middle, and high school levels.

Lobby for modifications in the Education Code, such as those, which mandate appropriate teacher training, that supports the development and implementation of violence prevention curriculums.

RECOMMENDATION 5: Raise awareness of the link between violence, alcohol, and other drug abuse.

Incorporate violence prevention into existing alcohol and other drug interventions in school and community settings.

Include alcohol and other drug treatment in interventions for violent individuals.

Publicize accurate information on the relationship of alcohol and other drugs to violence, and base policies on accurate information.

RECOMMENDATION 6: Create stronger linkages between schools, community groups, and government for violence prevention.

Enhance community access to school facilities for community events.

Support programmatic partnership involving community and school groups.

Coordinate school-based “zero tolerance for weapons” policies with existing county and community based efforts.