

PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Confronting the Violence That Betrays Young Lives

Twenty children were horrifically gunned down last month at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Their untimely deaths have highlighted for all of us the stark vulnerabilities that our nation faces from gun violence. Mass killings in the United States are indisputably linked to the ready availability of assault-type weapons; such easy access is virtually unknown anywhere else in the world. But we should not overlook an equally disturbing reality: in separate incidents that receive far less media attention, dozens of children and teens are killed by handguns *each week* in this country – in street violence; at the hands of friends or family; as victims of suicide. The simple truth is that serious examination and reform of our laws to promote greater gun control and gun safety are long overdue. Psychologists for Social Responsibility joins other broadly respected voices in calling for our nation's leaders to move swiftly and effectively on these fronts.

At the same time, PsySR believes that there is also a critical need to address the prevalent institutional sources of *structural violence* that condemn so many of our nation's children to childhoods of neglect, abuse, lost opportunities, and shattered dreams. This is violence just as real, and it takes many forms, including racism, discrimination, social exclusion, inequality, and chronic poverty. On a daily basis in their early environments, children challenged by structural violence must confront inadequate medical care, food insecurity, dangerous air and water quality, neighborhood crime, and deficient schools. Their life chances are diminished and their futures as adults become uncertain – solely due to chance circumstances of birth that people living in the wealthiest country in the world should never find acceptable. And yet today politicians are debating the extent to which government spending should be reduced by further eviscerating key social programs on which disadvantaged youth and their families depend. PsySR calls upon elected representatives and the public to take the steps necessary to protect our children from this senseless violence as well.

In this context, it is noteworthy that the United States is one of only three countries that still has not ratified the decades-old UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (along with Somalia and South Sudan). The Convention directs us to be devoted to the best interests of the child and to respect children's views. It identifies as human rights with special relevance to children the right to survival; the right to protection from harmful influences, abuse, and exploitation; and the right to participate fully in family, cultural and social life. These need not be controversial principles. Yet politically influential opponents of ratification argue that the Convention would weaken US sovereignty and place unwarranted limits on parental authority. PsySR views these claims as misguided, undercutting valuable international collaborative efforts. We call upon the President and Congress to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Although here we have highlighted issues of violence within the United States, PsySR wishes to emphasize that child welfare is a matter of profound global concern. Violence against children is deplorable wherever it occurs, whatever form it takes, whoever the perpetrators may be, and regardless of the circumstances. Societies throughout the world strive to educate and empower children so that they can grow into socially engaged and responsible adults, creative and productive workers, and loving parents. We aim to provide both the protections and challenges that enable them to thrive. We witness the remarkable resilience of children in the face of hardship, but we know that it is not limitless. And we recognize that among the most difficult and unforgiving adversaries for youth everywhere are the peril and trauma that violence brings. We can best honor the lives lost in Newtown – precious young children and the courageous adults who sought to protect them – by working together with determination to reform our gun laws and to address all forms of violence against children at home and abroad.

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