VIOLENCE IN SOCIETY

Position Statement
Adopted: 10/29/96

All human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27)[i] and are thus worthy of respect. Violence defiles God's creation and denies dignity to God's creatures. Violence is a result of the human condition of sin, evil, and alienation from God.

A successful approach to any life-threatening issue requires a concern for the broader attitude in society about respect for human life. Life is God's first love-gift to us. From its beginning, life is intended to be a sign of our love for each other. This means rejecting all forms of unloving, all forms of hatred or violence.

In the face of violence, God's resolve for peace in human communities is unshakable. Deliberate acts to harm or kill people violate God's intention for humanity. God's commandment is "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. . . . And a second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37, 39). As Christians, we are called upon by God to confront the violent tendencies within ourselves and our society, and find ways to cultivate the practice of peace. As citizens in a democracy, we take seriously our responsibility to work together with government to fulfill its God-given responsibility to promote justice and peace.

The Montana Association of Churches calls upon the state of Montana to strengthen the exercise of laws and policies to address specific forms of violence and victim support in our communities:
- Domestic violence
- Youth violence
- Hate groups

And to seek solutions through such means as:
- Moderate and reasoned regulation of firearms
- Long-term solutions addressing underlying causes of violence
- Legal protection of potential victims targeted by hate group ideologies and activities
- Community support for victims of violence

Supporting Statement
Revised: 10/19/2004

Domestic Violence, Child Abuse, and Elder Abuse
The most violent place in America is not our streets, but our homes. Domestic violence occurs every 15 seconds in this country. In 2000, 1,247 women were killed by an intimate partner. In that same year, 440 men were killed by an intimate partner.[ii] In 2001, the U.S Department of Justice found that more than half a million American women (588,490 women) were victims of nonfatal violence committed by intimate partners.[iii]

Children and elders are the most vulnerable in our society. As defined by both Montana and Federal laws, child abuse is the non-accidental injury or pattern of injuries to a child under the age of eighteen. It includes physical injury, sexual molestation, neglect, and emotional abuse. In 1997, 21,568 children were reported abused or neglected in Montana, an increase of 95.6% from 1990. Three children died as a result of abuse or neglect in 1998.[iv] Of the 12 homicides of children dying in Montana from 1997-2000, 42% had a history of prior abuse/neglect and the local review teams

determined that 100% of the homicides were preventable.[v]

In 1998, Montana had over 2,000 reports of elder abuse, neglect, or exploitation.

Youth Violence

Our culture of violence impacts young people. In a fall 1999 survey, 32% of Montana students reported being involved in a physical fight during the past year; 4% were injured in a fight. Twenty percent reported carrying a weapon in the past 30 days. Nineteen percent of the Montana students reported they seriously considered attempting suicide in the preceding 12 months and 7% actually attempted suicide.[vi] In the four years, 1997-2000, 40 Montana children completed suicide. Montana adolescent males were almost nine times more likely to complete suicide than were females.[vii]

The Children's Defense Fund reports that between 1979 and 1997, nearly 80,000 children and teens were killed in America—more than the total number of American soldiers in battle in Vietnam. In one year, firearms killed no children in Japan, 19 in Great Britain, 57 in Germany, 109 in France, 153 in Canada, and 5, 285 children in the United States. Homicide is now the third leading cause of death on American children ages 5 to 14.[viii]

Efforts to strengthen and support struggling families, community-wide programs that reach out and assist at-risk children, and investment in public services can make a difference in this growing problem of youth violence. Some contributing factors, such as glorified violence in television, videogames, music, and movies may require citizen action and censure rather than legislative action. Policy makers, however, can still play a role, such as supporting safe and affordable alternatives for latch-key families where at best television may be used as a babysitter and at worst, children roam the streets, vulnerable to violence as givers or receivers.

Firearms

Issues surrounding firearms are highly controversial in Montana. Montanans are accustomed to use of guns in hunting, predator control, collecting and marksmanship activities. Consequently, there is a high degree of skepticism in the state with respect to federal or state attempts to increase the regulation of firearms. And yet Montanans, too, are subject to firearms injuries and deaths both by accident and homicide.

Possessing a gun is viewed by many ordinary citizens as their last line of defense against the chaos in society. Guns kept in private residences are 43 times more likely to be used to kill a family member or friend than an intruder. According to the FBI, "when assaults by type of weapon are examined, a gun proves to be seven times more deadly than all other weapons combined." Guns have taken the lives of over 936,000 Americans since 1968. In 2001, 29,573 people were killed by guns. These deaths make up 18.8 percent of all injury deaths in that year. 57 percent of those deaths were suicides, and 38.7 percent were homicides.[ix] In 1996, Montana ranked 10th in the nation for firearm deaths and second in the nation for suicides with firearms. The presence of a firearm in the home increases the risk of suicide among Montana teens tenfold. Of the Montana youth suicide cases reviewed, 23% had attended hunter or gun safety classes. Both handguns and long guns contribute to the risk of youth suicide.[x]

Firearms killed 3,365 children and teens in the U.S., age 19 and under in 1999- nine children every day. Of these, 1,990 were murdered, 1,078 completed suicide, and 214 were victims of accidental shootings.[iv] More children and teens died from

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gunfire than from cancer, pneumonia, influenza, asthma, and HIV/AIDS combined in 1999.[xi]

White males over age 85 are at the greatest risk of all age-gender-race groups for taking their own life. Firearms are the most common means of completing suicide among the elderly.[xii]

Extremism and Terrorism

Extremist groups and individuals thrive on a culture of hate and fear. Ideologically motivated individuals and groups commit, incite and inspire acts of violence and intimidation. Web sites, radio, cable TV, music and other media outlets make possible the dissemination of opinions in a way not possible in a pre-electronic age. Many elected officials and public employees, as well as community leaders exercising their constitutional rights of free speech live in fear because they have received threats of bodily harm to themselves or loved ones. Law enforcement personnel are also at risk of injury or death from individuals and groups. As communities, and as a state, we must stand firmly against such forces of anarchy, fear and intimidation.

Corrections and Law Enforcement

Those who commit crimes must be swiftly apprehended, justly tried, appropriately punished, and held to proper restitution. However, correctional facilities must do more than confine criminals; they must rehabilitate persons and help rebuild lives. The vast majority of those in prison return to society. We must ensure through public policy that incarceration does not simply warehouse those who commit crimes but helps them overcome the behaviors, attitudes, actions, and situations that lead to criminal activity.

Harsher, more punitive sentences (including the death penalty which the Montana Association of Churches has opposed) have much popular appeal, despite their expense and failure to deter further crime. Although police and prisons help to protect society, more prison cells and larger police forces do not necessarily lead to greater security. The United States has the highest imprisonment rate in the world, but that has not significantly affected its high rate of violent crime. Prisons can often become 'schools' that harden criminals. We need to question a one-sided approach to violence, which would make punishment the primary remedy.

According to a study done by the Human Rights Watch[xii], a staggering number of persons with mental illnesses are confined in U.S. jails and prisons. Corrections and mental health professionals both blame inadequate community mental health services and the country's punitive criminal justice policies. Many of the country's mentally ill, particularly the poor and homeless, are unable to obtain the necessary treatment. These citizens are ignored by society, and large numbers commit crimes and find themselves entangled in the nation's criminal justice system. Jails and prisons have become, in effect, the country's front-line mental health providers.[xiii]

In a report to Congress, the National Commission on Correctional Health Care presented the following prevalence estimates: On any given day, between 2.3 and 3.9 percent of inmates in state prisons are estimated to have schizophrenia or other psychotic disorder, between 13.1 and 18.6 percent have major depression and between 2.1 and 4.3 percent bipolar disorder (manic episode). A substantial percentage of inmates exhibit symptoms of other disorders as well, including between 8.4and 13.4 percent with dysthymia, between 22.0 and 30.1 percent with an anxiety disorder, and between 6.2 and 11.7 percent with post-traumatic stress disorder.[xiv]

The Bureau of Justice Statistics has also reported that nearly one in ten prisoners are taking psychotropic medications, with that number increasing to nearly one in five in Hawaii, Maine, Nebraska, Oregon, and Montana.[xv] Michael Mahoney, the warden of Montana State Prison, said

"By default, we get forced to be a pseudo [mental] hospital."[xvi]

Community Prevention

Research indicates that communities that work well together show lower incidence of crime, violence, and substance abuse. When schools, police, parents, churches, civic organizations, businesses, and public and private social service agencies come together to seek solutions to problems, the result is less violence. Community policing models have shown remarkable success by engaging the public in crime prevention. Teens are willing to participate in programs designed to prevent violence according to the Attorney General's Youth Council on Violence Prevention citing a California study.

Innovative programs such as Billings' Courtesy and Respect Empower (CARE), The Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance, the Search Institute Asset Building in Youth, the Center for Media Literacy's Challenging Violence in the Media, restorative justice programs, and Second Step for Parents and Teachers seem to show great promise. The simple effort of a school wide emphasis on basic manners has resulted in significant reductions in fights in two elementary school settings over one year. Such initiatives help us to understand and appreciate the power we have to make a difference.

Other key factors in a community to address long term solutions may include assessing the availability of high quality, low cost child care for low income families; after-school programs for latch-key children; and meaningful programs and opportunities for teens in their off-school hours.

Montana does not have a Child Access Prevention law requiring safe storage of weapons and firearms nor is there a Trigger Lock law. Montana's Department of Public Health and Human Services recommends: providers should counsel families of high-risk youth about removing access to lethal means in and around the home, including prudent firearm storage; Public Health Nurses should include an assessment of the presence of firearms in the home, and education regarding safe storage of weapons and firearms; resources for helping suicidal adolescents should be well-known; adolescents should be screened for risk of suicide at all routine exams.[xvii]

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Martin Luther King, Jr.: *"The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. . . . Returning violence for violence multiplies violence. . . . Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that."*

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[i] All Scripture is from the New Revised Standard Version.

[ii] United States Department of Justice,
www.usdoj.gov

[iii] ibid.

[iv] Child Welfare League of America: Montana's Children

[v] Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, "Montana Fetal, Infant and Child Mortality Review, November 2002

[vi] Montana Office of Public Instruction, "Montana Youth Risk Behavior Survey," 1999.

[vii] Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, "Montana Fetal, Infant and Child Mortality Review, November 2002.

[viii] Children's Defense Fund, "Children Dying from Gunfire in America," 1999.

[ix] Centers for Disease Control National Vital Statistics Report 2001. www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr. Accessed on 10/29/03

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[xi] 1999 Firearm Deaths of Persons age and Under. Calculations by the Children's Defense Fund, Protect Children Instead of Guns 2001 Report, from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, Division of Vital Statistics, 2001: Table III.

[xii] www.suicidology.org accessed on 5/26/04

[xii] Human Rights Watch, "Ill Equipped: U.S. Prisons and Offenders with Mental Illness." www.hrw.org. Accessed on 10/28/03

[xiii] "Jails are not designed as care facilities for those with mental disorders, but in fact many jails today are the largest inpatient mental health institutions in the United States." Maryin Drapkin, *Management and Supervision of Jail Inmates with Mental Disorders.* (Civic Research Institute, New Jersey, 2003), p. 1-1.

[xiv] National Commission on Correctional Health Care, "The Health Status of Soon-to-be-released Inmates, A Report to Congress" (March 2002), Vol. 1, p 22.   Accessed 10/29/03 at http://www.ncchc.org/pubs/pubs_stbr.vol1.html.

[xv] Allen J. Beck, Ph.D., and Laura M. Maruschak, *Mental Health Treatment in State Prisons, 2000*(Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, July 2001) http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/mhtsp00.htm. Accessed on 10/29/03

[xvi] Jennifer McKee, "Mental Illness Behind Bars, Part II: 'We're all kind of strange.'—inmate," *The Montana Standard*, June 29, 2003.

[xvii] Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, "Montana Fetal, Infant and Child Mortality Review, November 2002.