

PSYCHOANALYTIC INSTITUTE

November 1995

Perspectives

Violent Street Crime

by Susan Newman, L.C.S.W.

America is in a panic over crime. Violent street crime used to be a phenomenon removed from middle class America, confined to flickering images on a television screen or blaring newspaper headlines. But families in our inner cities have long felt the nightmare of crime. Now the venue is no longer confined to inner city poor. Instead, it has moved from America's urban areas to encompass suburban, affluent neighborhoods and families as well.

We often feel helpless about the violence around us and depend on the experts to explain this enormously complicated subject. And in fact, the experts do have useful ideas about how to understand a perpetrator, often labelled a "psychopath" or an "antisocial personality." Dr. Andrew Chirchirillo feels, "The more we can understand the dynamics of the violent offender and our own reactions to him, the more likely we are to increase our chances of surviving a street assault."

To understand the violent perpetrator, we must begin with early human development. How does a human infant emerge from a state of total dependence and selfishness to one who has regard for others, feels remorse and has self-control? We speak of "good enough mothering" in the first three years of life to

describe what most of us get. This kind of parenting misses the mark at times but soothes and comforts us enough of the time so we may learn how to internalize ways to contain our own hurts and frustrating experiences in gradual steps.

Poor parent-child relations, abuse, neglect or a chaotic environment overwhelm a very young child's limited resources to cope and asks him to do the impossible. Without the buffer of constant, loving human guidance, he is unable to protect himself from overpowering feelings in the face of frustration. And instead of internalizing nurturing images, he absorbs the idea that adults persecute instead of help.

Freud's essay, "The Psychology of the Exception" helps us to understand the psychology of dehumanizing violence. Specifically, chronic suffering and unresponsive treatment by caretakers or society fosters a sense of destructive rage and entitlement. People are dehumanized, objects that get in the way or exist only to meet the offender's needs. It is not difficult to see, then, says *(cont. on page 2)*



Andrew Chirchirillo, Ph.D.

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Dr. Chirchirillo, that "violent offenders do not see their victims as people with rights of their own."

Another way to understand street violence is to examine the psychobiological model of human behavior. The hunter-gatherer period in human evolution shows us that aggression is normal and adaptive in human functioning. In fact, from this point of view, our first task was and is to ensure the survival of the species. Historically, males have used aggression to establish their status in groups of males and to attract females, a natural expression of sexuality and authority. Dr. Chirchirillo continues "The expression of aggression or power as part of the natural order of things has been devalued by society even though some threat of punishment is almost always present in power politics." So problems of respect and pride or "narcissistic injury" have evolutionary roots and are "normal, adaptive and cut across all races and circumstances." Therefore, says Dr. Chirchirillo, "Street violence is normal aggression gone awry."

Psychoanalytic and evolutionary explanations, also, help us to understand why problems of violence are more pronounced during adolescence. Most violent offenders are between the ages of fifteen to twenty-two years old. States Dr. Chirchirillo, "Adolescence is a time to separate from the parents of our childhood and in the process, re-work issues of identity. This is done in the midst of a resurgence of aggression and sexuality so that problems of impulse control are predictable and normal." The adolescent's flash points are wounded pride, humiliation or "losing face." Without adult intervention, the end result is often violent crime. "The homicidal adolescent degrades and humiliates others to reestablish a fragile sense of self in the face of overwhelming frustration," says Dr. Chirchirillo. Current movies like "Pulp Fiction" and "The Unforgiven" reflect how these issues of pride and respect can lead to homicidal rage.

Dr. Chirchirillo's talk on November 2 will blend contemporary psychological theories to explain the violent perpetrator and our reactions to him with the teachings of Eastern principles of self-defense. This is psychological theory at its best, providing us with practical information and important ways to maximize our chances of self-protection and escape in the face of danger.

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Dr. Andrew Chirchirillo speaks on:

- **Adolescence and Society:**

"Throughout the history of civilization, all societies have needed to find a way for older men to contain younger men and to teach them through modeling. Whenever there are groups of unsupervised children, there are problems with aggression."

- **Aggression:** "These are problems fundamental to the human condition which have gone awry in the inner cities and now spread to the white affluent suburbs where middle class youths carry guns to school."

- **Adolescence and Group Identity:** "The young of the human species are susceptible to cultural indoctrination. The need for group identity makes adolescents easily exploited by society or subcultures of society such as youth gangs."

- **Personal Safety and Self-Defense:** "Two-thirds of all self-defense is mental training. We need to learn more about using our minds, rather than guns, when reacting to a potential assault."