

## **STOPPING THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE: A SELF-ORGANIZING APPROACH**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article argues that traditional approaches to controlling and managing the spread of violence are flawed and that insights from new science thinking can help us find novel ways of creating safe communities. Too often elected representatives, along with members of various agencies and groups, have failed to understand the interconnected nature and complexity of violent behavior. It is precisely here where the metaphor and logic of self-organizing practices are able to provide a new lens for reexamining the nature of violence and possible solutions. This study suggests that, through self-organizing methods such as the future search process, citizens are motivated to return to their communities and assume a direct, more responsive role for stopping the cycle of violence.

There may be in the cup  
A spider steep'd, and one may drink, depart,  
And yet partake no venom, for his knowledge  
Is not infected; but if one present  
The abhorr'd ingredient to his eye, make known  
How he hath drunk, he cracks his gorge, his sides  
With violent hefts. I have drunk, and seen the spider.  
— *William Shakespeare*

Shakespeare's spider reflects a chilling image of a society where the ability to predict and control is elusive; where the notion of objective, material reality is

illusory. The thought of the spider sets forth a pattern of behavior, aware that at any moment we are threatened. As a result, our fear becomes pervasive, assuming a life of its own. Our response is passive, detached from the thoughts that underlie the fear that controls us. Instead of engaging our fears, we establish rituals grounded in a hegemonic set of rules and regulations. We take comfort in the belief that the laws we create establish barriers and boundaries and, therefore, make us less vulnerable to the spider's whim. Hunt, in a penetrating story called "The Mugging," describes our vulnerability as: "What alarms us and most gravely damages our faith in our society is the ever-present threat of some sudden, unpredictable, savage assault upon our own body by a stranger—faceless, nameless, fleet-footed figure who leaps from the shadows, strikes at us with his fists, . . . and then vanishes . . ." [1, p. 520].

This view of the unknown, along with our response, is fundamental to what Elias refers to as the "civilizing process" [2]. Elias suggested a civilized society cannot survive without controlling individual behavior and that control is possible only when people exert constraints on each other [2]. Through such control, we become secure. Security, therefore, is linked to our willingness to limit individual freedom and the extent to which people are willing to establish a controlling body of authority. Like other Western democracies, the United States has not been able to escape this fundamental dilemma between protecting the self-interest and autonomy of the individual and the competing interests of a safe and secure society. Certainly, the threat of potential violence, where so many people feel they can maintain a sense of security only by keeping their children indoors, putting bars on the windows, and seldom venturing out after dark suggests we continue to fear the spider in the cup.

In response to such fears, we have allocated extensive public resources to the construction of an ever-expanding prison system, supported the creation of private police forces to patrol our communities, and relaxed various civil and constitutional rights concerning the apprehension and adjudication of suspected criminals [3]. Although a number of laws have been enacted to limit the growth of guns and other weapons, along with increases in penalties for criminals, including so-called three-strikes laws and an expanded use of capital punishment, few elected representatives have called for alternative strategies and methods to increase citizen involvement in decisions directly affecting the safety of their homes and communities [4, 5]. With few exceptions, most notably the notion of community policing [5], a throwback to the cop on the beat, our elected leaders have shown little inclination to restructure the relationship between the government and the citizens it is designed to serve. Despite the public's general criticism and frustration with the violent character and aggressive nature of society, we seem to be held captive by a culture symbolized by growing fragmentation, social strife, and political indifference. For example, as issues associated with safety and security continue to spiral, widespread confidence that elected leaders and the government sector can effectuate improvements has declined [3]. Further, public apathy, while

seemingly being ignored by the media and elected representatives, has resulted in declining voter interest, with less than 15 percent of eligible voters participating in the political process [6].

Currently, however, a highly diverse set of political parties outside the mainstream of the two-party system, joined by a growing number of social and post-modern writers, is offering its thoughts and suggestions in response to the public's disenchantment with its elected representatives and the overall political landscape. Representative democracy, where a few individuals represent the many, has been criticized often by a variety of writers who called for deepening the democratic process by challenging the position and power attributed to expert representatives [7], recognizing the self-worth and importance of the body politic [8], and emphasizing greater citizen choice, openness, and tolerance [9]. Consistent with these views, Toffler and Toffler suggested our system of government has not kept up with the current rate of economic and social growth [10], while others proposed the expansion of public debate [11], suggesting greater decentralization [12], and a recognition of all ideas and viewpoints as legitimate and essential to the decision-making process [13]. Instead of a single set of values or political loyalties, Harvey believed people need to be exposed to a wide variety of groups, classes, aims, and ideologies [11].

### THE INFLUENCE OF THE SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY

While literary criticism has a long tradition of guiding and establishing boundaries for political and social thought, a new group of emerging writers gives cause to reconsider the structure and format of our political process. Brockman's thought-provoking review of the scientific community's bid to communicate directly with the general public represents an important shift in how ideas are developed, spread, and furthered throughout society [14]. Brockman suggested that a growing number of scientists, through their expository writing, have introduced a new mode of intellectual discourse and, as a result, have engaged the public in an exciting and dramatic way. He described this trend as:

Throughout history, intellectual life has been marked by the fact that only a small number of people has done the serious thinking for everybody else. What we are witnessing is a passing of the torch from one group of thinkers, traditional literary intellectuals, to a new group, the intellectuals of the emerging third culture [14, p. 19].

Third-culture intellectuals are the men and women at the frontiers of knowledge in the physical and biological sciences, who, according to Brockman, are attempting not only to describe our world in new and different ways but to render deeper meanings for our relationships with each other and what it means to be connected and involved with our world around us [14]. For example, by relying less on a Newtonian or mechanistic interpretative view of the world, this new set of

intellectuals has established the groundwork for questioning such trends as rising expectations and competitive strategies, along with the demand for continual growth and expansion. Such thinking gives rise to a new interpretation of how we relate to each other and ourselves. The Newtonian model, which has dominated the world for the past 300 years, is now being challenged by a growing interest in so-called complex systems based on a limited set of simple rules. Offering new insights on organizational design, individual rights, and personal responsibility, third-culture writers have presented a variety of ideas likely to influence the social and political fabric of our basic institutions.

Translating their findings into practical terms, a variety of science writers suggested that the question of what constitutes a safe and just society may be determined not by any particular set of rules, form of government, or style of leadership, but by our ability to maintain a tightly knit social web or community of relationships that supports and nourishes individualism and diversity of thought [15-22]. In other words, neither the individual nor the collective is primary in creating changes in social and cultural conditions; it is both, working together.

These and similar views have prompted a highly charged and provocative challenge to representative democracy that encourages authority figures, centralized decision making, and hierarchical structures [23-26]. Such traditional beliefs are grounded in scientific and social traditions based on a predictable, deterministic environment that can be understood in the form of causal, linear relations. How we respond and use new scientific thinking in a world where relationships are not fixed, but shift and change, may manifest itself in new practices that not only allow but require the direct participation of citizens. Specifically, can we create new decision-making processes to restore public confidence in society?

### **CHANGING PERCEPTIONS: SELF-ORGANIZING SOCIAL SYSTEMS**

If we concede the point that any action by its very nature is relational, we can conclude that all interaction is context dependent and cannot be treated as isolated or segmented events. Relationships are not static. They cannot be predetermined or prescribed by a set of rules or regulations. For example, at the subatomic level, quantum physics has shown that individual particles exist only as mathematical probabilities and that the act of observing a physical system influences its behavior. In other words, the observer affects what is being observed, which makes us active participants in the formation of events. Strong evidence exists that the continual interacting and adapting (self-organizing) of a system's parts to each other and their local environments results in a highly complex, emerging order.

Physicists were shocked to find that at the core of the atom, at the center of matter, were not basic building blocks, but patterns of probability tightly woven together in a web of relationships. Contrary to conventional thinking, what was revealed was no centralized controlling force or structure [27-28]. Such

discoveries have not only revolutionized the physical sciences but have also encouraged organizational theorists to evaluate the metaphors and models they have used to explain human behavior and interaction [29-32]. As a result, organizational thinking, based on goal-oriented, rule-based designs, while efficient and reliable, is being questioned. Reductionism and analytical approaches to solving problems are being replaced by integrative practices that focus on patterns of information and their relationship to social structure and culture. Methods, based on individual expertise, where people are viewed as fixed, knowable quantities that are expendable and replaceable, is changing to a new set of images emphasizing the importance of individuals participating in self-organizing, decision-making activities where they explore a limitless number of possibilities. Consistent with this new participatory landscape is less of a reliance on how individuals should relate to each other, based on a set of ideal beliefs and values, and more on how can individuals relate to each other within the context of a highly diverse set of beliefs and values.

For social systems, the clustering of individual beliefs and values—information—can be seen as behavioral patterns that emerge throughout the organization. These patterns result in a system's structure, which forms the organization's intuitive climate. An intuitive climate remains in a state of flux, where information is interdependent and contextual as it is distributed throughout a system. That is, information is not communicated from one person to the next in a linear, progressive fashion. Rather, information is woven together, tightly, residing within the web of relationships that form the texture or feel of the system. For example, we are often astounded at how easy it is to sense the psychological climate of the office where we work, the feel of the staff lounge where we relax, the character of a community or civic forum, and the emotional state of a family get-together. Comments such as you can cut the tension with a knife, you can feel it in the air, or it was a suffocating experience are often used to describe intuitive climates.

This view of information contradicts the notion that communication is content-specific; something that is created, evaluated, and exchanged through day-to-day conversations. When information is viewed as substance, our attention becomes focused on its transmission: how much to move, when to move it, and when to keep it hidden. Further, when information is seen as a commodity, it is objectified and is subject to the dictates of the strongest political forces. Cilliers suggested information is not a thing that can be categorized or delineated within some pre-determined structure [33]. Rather, information, displayed as pattern, is the creative process that designs structure. Capra described the association between pattern and structure as:

The structure of a system is the physical embodiment of its pattern of organization. Whereas the description of the pattern of organization involves an abstract mapping of relationships, the description of the structure involves describing the system's actual physical components . . . [33, pp. 158-159].

For Wheatley, the structure of relationships within organizations or society in general cannot be defined in terms of individual acts or initiatives [30]. Rather, the global, community, and personal problems of our time are systemic in nature, which means they are all interconnected and interdependent. They cannot be understood in isolation. Capra suggested that both the problems and solutions society faces are interconnected and that

the more we study the situation, the more we realize that all these problems . . . are just different facets of one single crisis, which is largely a crisis of perception. Only if we perceive the world differently will we be able to act differently. So we need a change of perception, a shift of paradigms in our thinking and in our values. We need a shift from fragmentation to wholeness, . . . from domination to partnership, from quantity to quality, from expansion to conservation, from efficiency to sustainability [17, pp. 7-8].

### **DESIGNING A NEW APPROACH: FUTURE SEARCH**

Efforts to reduce crime in our homes, schools, and communities have ranged from a fatalistic perspective where no solutions exist and we should simply punish and imprison criminals [34], to those who seek to develop programs for predicting and preventing criminal behavior [3]. While both approaches appear to be in opposition, it is more likely they are in reaction to each other. That is, as society becomes confused and questions crime prevention programmatic strategies, there is a tendency to reject the possibility that the underlying causes of criminality can be discovered. As violence increases, society's response fluctuates between punishment, incarceration, and efforts to prevent violent behaviors through education and social programs [3, 5] (see Figure 1). Influenced by the media and the entertainment industry, much of the debate has been grounded in the dichotomy between punishment and prevention, leaving little opportunity to consider other possibilities [6]. Further, as both points of view are promoted, with little or no perceived success, public confidence has declined, resulting in a general sense of helplessness and distress [26, 36].

This article argues that traditional, rule-based approaches to controlling and managing the spread of violent crime are flawed and that insights from new science thinking can help us find novel ways to create safe communities. The suggestion is that the new sciences, generally, and self-organizing methods, specifically, hold more promise for curbing the spread of violence than centralized or narrowly directed initiatives. It is further proposed that stopping the spread of violent behavior requires a coordinated approach—one that includes all stakeholder groups from the community. While public officials, law enforcement authorities, school representatives, and community activists hold numerous forums and conferences on the proliferation of violence, the debate has generally centered on attempts to find one single solution or set of solutions to the violence epidemic.

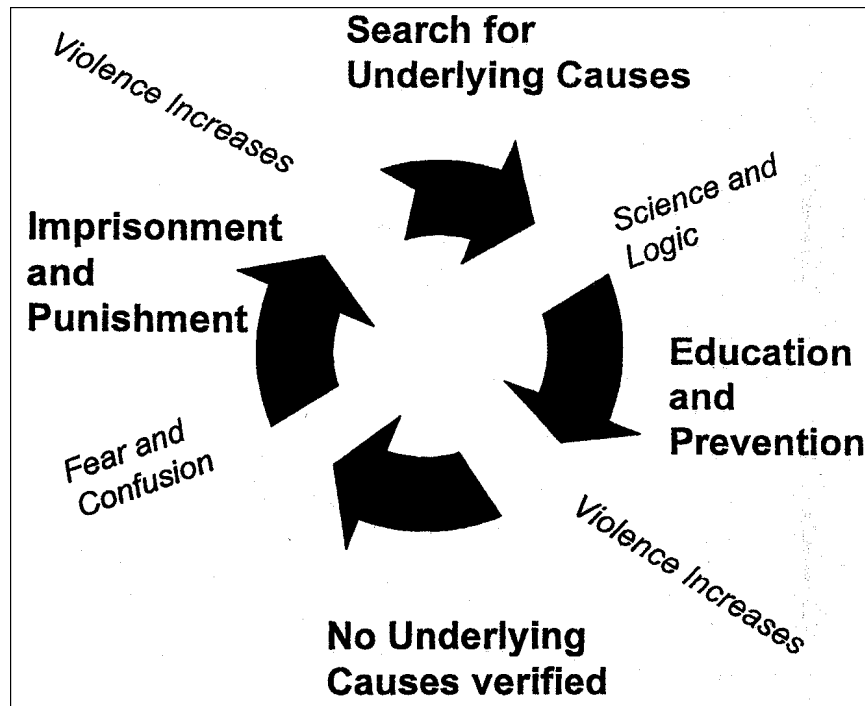


Figure 1. Cyclical views of crime and violence.

Too often, elected representatives, along with members of various agencies and groups, have failed to appreciate the interconnected nature and complexity of the problem. It is precisely here where the metaphor and logic of self-organizing practices are able to provide a new lens for examining the nature of violence and possible solutions.

A number of social thinkers have experimented with self-organizing strategies to encourage citizen decision making around a specific organization or community theme [35-39]. Self-organizing conferences, such as real time strategic change [40], open space technology [41], and future search [38, 42, 43] have been utilized in a variety of social and political contexts for the purpose of creating vision statements, resolving disputes, and developing broad-based action plans. These models bring together a diverse set of individuals for the purpose of initiating organizational change. As pointed out by Weisbrod, we are very good at bringing together large numbers of individuals to hear motivational speakers or receive training [43]. However, when it comes to organizational change, there is an underlying assumption that large groups of individuals are not capable of working together a plan and act on systemwide improvements.

Through self-organizing activities, Weisbrod and Janoff believe the future search process questions this way of thinking, offering a process that recognizes the value each individual can contribute to the system and a method that allows for large numbers of individuals to think, plan, and act together for desirable change [38]. Weisbrod elaborated on this view by describing the future search design as “creative interplay between two key strategic decisions. One is who gets to be there, the other what it is they actually do. In these conferences, the who becomes everybody—a metaphor for a broad cross-section of stakeholders. The what becomes scanning the whole system—not problem-solving it in bits and pieces” [43, p. 5].

### **Stopping the Cycle of Violence**

To dramatically shift how we perceive and respond to violence, the California Teachers Association, with the support of the Animal Protection Institute, invited a diverse set of individuals and groups to a three-day future search conference on the theme “Stopping the Cycle of Violence.” A design team of teachers, community activists, and representatives from the public and private sectors developed a conference theme, identified and invited stakeholder group participants, and oversaw conference activities. Figure 2 shows the stakeholder groups that participated in the conference. A major goal of the conference organizers was to establish a temporary community dialogue on violence, with the hope that a confluence of individuals, given sufficient freedom to participate in self-organizing activities, could design a new vision for increasing public safety and reducing crime.

### **Designing a Future Search**

During a future search, individuals take active rather than passive roles and are encouraged to speak freely, hold open-ended conversations, and trust their experiences as authentic. Beginning with the first future search in 1960, conferences

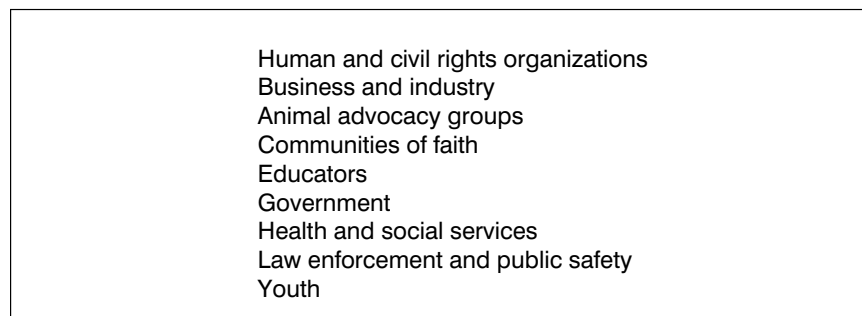


Figure 2. Stakeholder groups.



designed to increase citizen participation have been held in Australia, Canada, Mexico, United Kingdom, Norway, India, Sweden, Turkey, and the United States. Future searching had been organized in public and private sectors, including trade unions, public agencies, health and human services, not-for-profit organizations, and higher education institutions [43, 44]. In a future search, 64 to 150 participants over a three-day period work to create a system's most desirable future and develop action plans to achieve that future.

For the first part of a future search, individuals are asked to think about the past and reflect on their personal experiences, their communities, and the world in general. Participants examine past traditions, individually at first, and then share this information with each other. One-by-one individuals tell their stories as they highlight those traditions and relationships that stand out in their minds.

Following their investigation of the past, participants assess the present by creating a social field or mind map. The mind map illustrates the relevant forces influencing the conference theme or topic. The map is used as a practical guide for examining the present based on participant experiences and expertise. Issues are defined in terms of the *meaning* they hold for participants, as well as factors participants believe are influencing the future.

After the past and the present are explored, participants design future scenarios and action plans. Scenarios take into consideration participant histories in combination with present issues and trends. Individuals are encouraged to be creative, unconventional, and innovative as they project themselves into the future. Actions incorporate what participants can do as individuals with others in the planning phase, and what systemic changes need to take place.

### **Conducting a Future Search**

Once introduced to the Cycle of Violence Future Search process, stakeholders were asked to record on timelines throughout the room significant themes, milestones, and traditions they had experienced and that had occurred in their communities and globally over the past thirty years. Within twenty-five minutes the walls were filled with thirty years of memories. Viewed first as isolated occurrences, individuals in mixed groups began to make sense out of a seemingly hodgepodge set of events. As individuals looked for patterns and key relationships, they found similarities in their histories—the highs and lows as well as the cyclical nature of their overall experiences.

#### *Searching the Past: A Personal Perspective*

At first, participants described their personal memories as a sequence of events, one incident following the next. Individuals reported they had found a sense of commonality with others as they reviewed various past events, rituals, and ceremonies. After about forty-five minutes, the stages of the past became less important, and greater emphasis was placed on the stories told by participants around

such topics as the family, group affiliations and friends, and influence of religion, formal education, marriage and children, materialism, individual achievements, and careers. Using these stories as touchstones, participants talked about the changes in their lives, citing health-related issues, a growth in vegetarianism, changing perceptions about work and leisure, a redefining of sexuality, changing attitudes toward government and big business, and the rise of countercultures. Individuals commented that their personal lives had been closely intertwined with community and global events. From social and economic issues to family and educational concerns, participants reported that their lives had been influenced by what was taking place not only in the local community, but what was also happening in countries around the world.

#### *Searching the Past: A Community Perspective*

Individuals attending the conference viewed themselves as activists, grounded in traditions of political and social causes. Several groups reported they had been taught to work the system by focusing on amending and creating new laws. Other groups commented on how actions associated with civil disobedience, riots, drugs, and the fight for civil rights had influenced their basic belief systems. A diverse set of stakeholders reported that community interests had become secondary to self-serving personal needs. Several mixed groups reported that issues linked to the environment, cultural diversity, and technology have had a major impact on their lives. A number of participants also indicated that they were personally involved with issues such as animal rights, expanding educational opportunities, and professional growth.

#### *Searching the Past: A Global Perspective*

Mixed groups described the past thirty years as a time of global turmoil and hostilities. Participants listed global issues, such as political assassination, riots, the Vietnam War, the environmental and energy crises, and the growth of fundamentalism, as helping shape their personal attitudes and public opinion. Individuals also noted the loss of friends and families in international conflicts as having had a major impact on their lives. Other global issues included the AIDS epidemic, the growth of technology and the Internet, space exploration, alternative energy sources, and the gay and lesbian movement.

#### *Searching the Present*

After the past had been explored, participants moved to scan the present by creating a map of external trends influencing the Cycle of Violence right now (see Figure 3). Trends were defined as either an increasing or decreasing condition, situation, or set of influencing forces. During the mapping process, individuals added to each other's suggestions until such a time as everyone felt

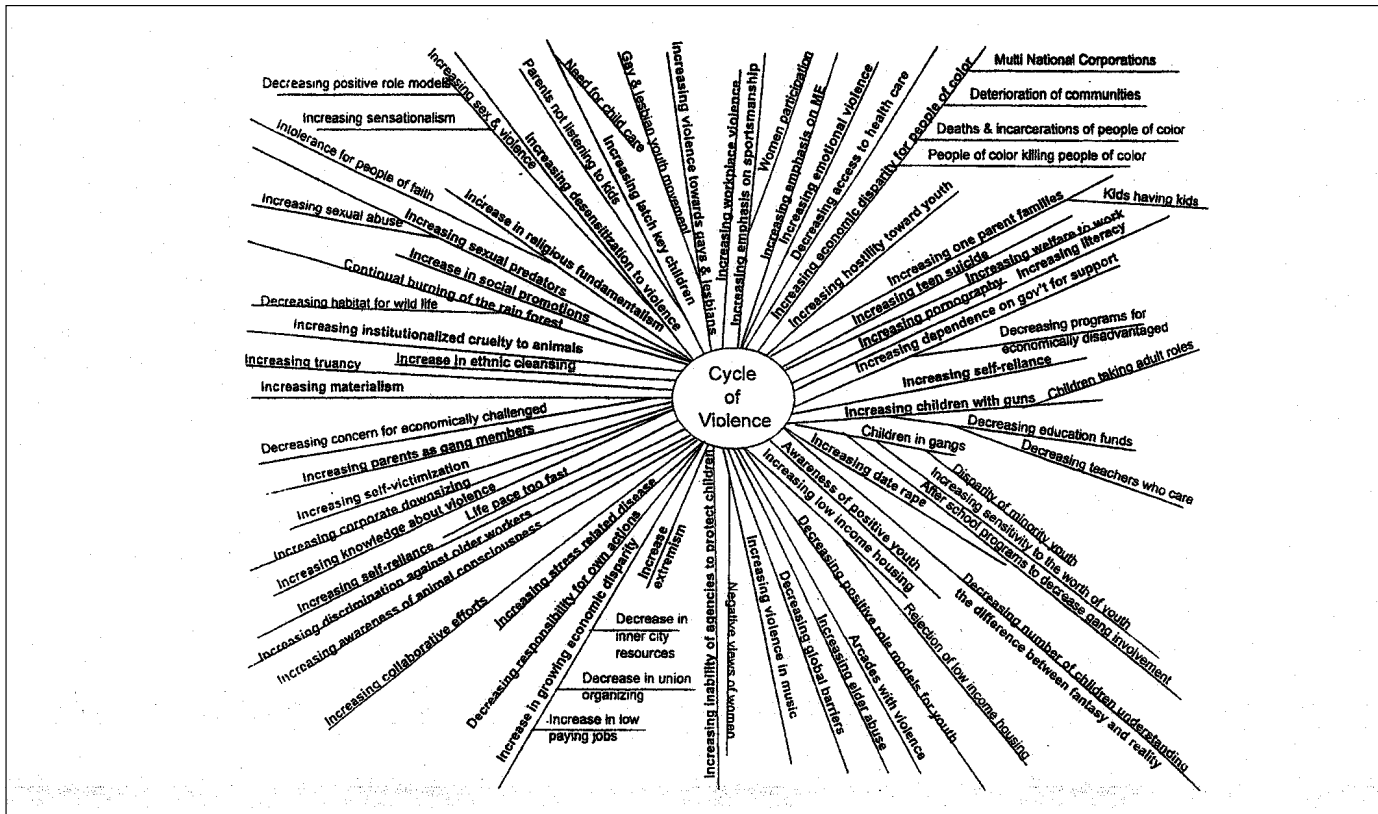


Figure 3. Cycle of violence mind map.

comfortable with the community map that had been created. In stakeholder groups, individuals participated in a dialogue noting the challenges and opportunities posed by the identified trends.

Participants also examined the present from an internal perspective. Specifically, stakeholders were asked to think about their “prouds” and “sorries” regarding the spread of violence in their communities. Prouds were what stakeholders wanted to keep and bring to the future. Sorries were what stakeholders wanted to relinquish and leave behind. By identifying prouds and sorries, stakeholders reported an increased sensitivity to violence in their communities as well as greater specificity as to what they could do to limit or reduce the spread of violence in the future.

The mapping process, with the identification of prouds and sorries, helped participants visualize the complex nature of violence. Stakeholders voiced their apprehension that any external trend or combination of trends could represent either a cause or a consequence of violence. Rather, violence was described as an assemblage of external trends that is constantly changing and is a function of environmental conditions. Stakeholders, depending on their set of prouds and sorries, interpreted and made sense of the mind map in a manner consistent with their underlying beliefs and experiences. However, most participants acknowledged that the web-like quality of the mind map suggested the impossibility of fixing or resolving any single problem. “We need to create something new; an alternative point of view, a different vision.” Members of one stakeholder group went so far as to think of themselves as developers and no longer problem solvers.

### *Creating the Future*

During the next phase of the future search conference, participants designed future scenarios. To create their scenarios, participants were asked to take into consideration the histories, trends, and prouds they wanted to preserve while creating methods to accommodate sorries. In their mixed groups, participants presented dramatic portrayals of what the future might look like based on the conference theme, *Creating Safe Communities: Stopping the Cycle of Violence*. Participant scenarios touched on a variety of topics ranging from child-rearing practices to the arts. Groups presented their visions of the future through simulated talk shows, news conferences, television, and magazine interviews. Individuals, eager to share their hopes and dreams, became energized as they watched each other not just talk about the future, but act it out.

Common to most of the presentations was the belief that a violence-free context was possible if all sectors from the community connected. Presentation after presentation showed that participants knew what was necessary to create a violence-free society. Stakeholders did not require an outside expert to recognize the relationship between violent thoughts, images, and behaviors. Participants did not have to attend a workshop to acknowledge the need for more cross-cultural and

intergenerational communication. Nor did they need training to understand and express the linkage between human and nonhuman animal cruelty. Participants, without the assistance of outside consultants, reached the conclusion that individually they had the necessary skills and motivation to create a safe and secure society. Based on the scenarios, participants worked together in mixed groups to generate future themes. Figure 4 lists the themes that were common to all participants.

After two days, this highly diverse group of individuals concluded that only through a total community effort, which took into consideration the past and present, could they create a safe environment. They now had to consider the next critical step. Could they, without any form of representation or steering committee, make decisions as an entire group? Further, could they find a common meaning and purpose to encourage actions that were sustainable?

#### *Creating Action Plans*

While individuals may have been surprised at the high degree of participant commitment, most stakeholders were still in a state of confusion as they moved

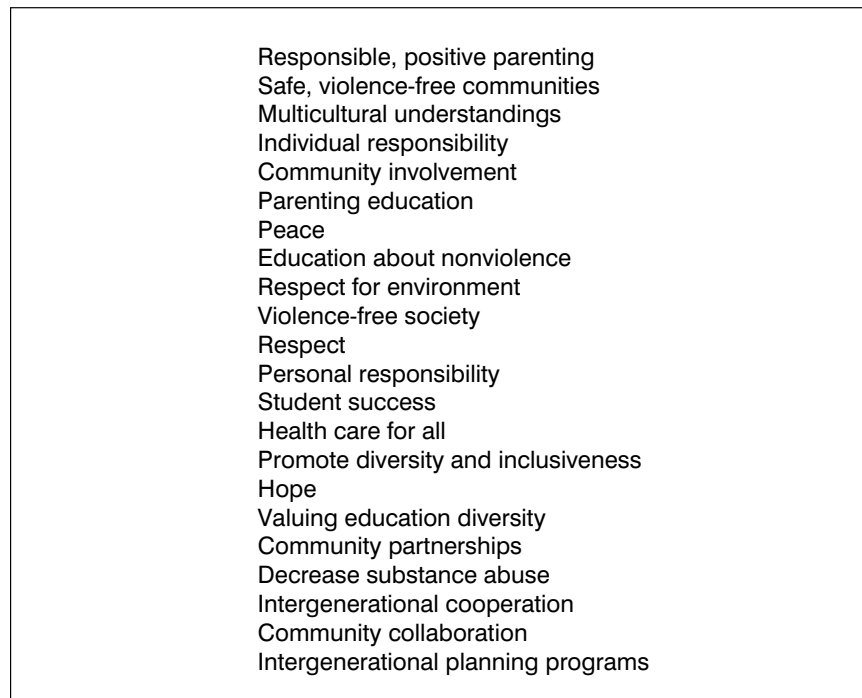


Figure 4. Common future themes.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Law Enforcement and Public Safety Action Plan</b></p> <p>Goal: Promote community collaboration.</p> <p>Tasks: 1. Identify and work with high-risk families. 2. Work with governmental agencies and human and civil rights organizations on violence prevention programs. 3. Identify volunteers.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Educators' Action Plan</b></p> <p>Goal: 1. Encourage parenting education programs. 2. Promote diversity and inclusiveness by organizing community partnerships.</p> <p>Tasks: 1. Identify community resources for parenting education programs. 2. Make available community resources to the classroom. 3. Share findings through the Internet. 4. Encourage CTA locals to sponsor a training program.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Business and Industry Action Plan</b></p> <p>Goal: Work to encourage student success and hope for the future.</p> <p>Tasks: 1. Offer career education and assistance to youth groups. 2. Act as a clearinghouse for resources.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Communities of Faith Action Plan</b></p> <p>Goal: Use community collaboration to encourage a violence-free society.</p> <p>Tasks: 1. Network with other organizations on common problems associated with violence. 2. Share with others the benefits of working toward a violence-free society.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Students' Action Plan</b></p> <p>Goal: Work with others on increasing respect and tolerance for all ideas and beliefs.</p> <p>Tasks: 1. Work with other community organizations to encourage mutual respect. 2. Work with parent groups.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Government Action Plan</b></p> <p>Goal: Safe/violence-free communities.</p> <p>Tasks: 1. Connect Cal Works with the Elk Grove Schools on alcohol and drug prevention and mental health-related issues. 2. Work with the County Animal Control Shelter to develop violence-prevention programs.</p>
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Figure 5. Stakeholder group action plans (Part 1 of 2).

<p><b>Human and Civil Rights Organizations' Action Plan</b></p> <p>Goal: Develop antiviolence education programs.</p> <p>Tasks: 1. Implement lesbian, gay, BI, transgender education programs in public and private schools in California. 2. Develop and deliver teacher and administrator training with the County Office of Education.</p>
<p><b>Animal Advocacy Groups' Action Plan</b></p> <p>Goal: Preventing accepted and legalized violence toward animals</p> <p>Tasks: 1. Develop an advisory committee of educators interested in the ethical treatment of animals. 2. Reduce the number of animals killed in Sacramento shelters by at least 30 percent. 3. Develop curriculum regarding non-violence toward animals. 4. Design workshops for educators on nonviolence toward animals.</p>
<p><b>Health and Social Services' Action Plan</b></p> <p>Goal: Find a connection that binds us.</p> <p>Tasks: 1. Build community collaborations through awareness and prevention programs about all nonviolence. 2. Organize positive/responsible-parenting classes for youth. 3. Create awareness education programs about diversity.</p>

Figure 5. (Cont'd.) (Part 2 of 2).

from old-style mechanistic behaviors to self-organizing practices—practices that assumed new meanings as stakeholders searched for innovative, appropriate ways to integrate their traditional decision-making strategies with self-organizing principles. Participants were asked to think about action plans that encouraged partnerships, flexibility, diversity, and interdependence. Contrary to most strategic planning efforts, future search action planning focuses more on stakeholder relationships than on specific outcomes. That is, individuals are guided by their own intuition and thoughts on how to create action plans likely to achieve not only desirable futures but maintain and enhance the relationships they developed during the future search. This view is consistent with Mintzberg's highly authoritative study of strategic planning, which suggests strategic planning efforts are rarely sustainable [45]. Based on the work of Mintzberg and others [46-48], it is the context for planning and not some objective procedure that determines the success of any planning effort. From this perspective, future search creates a condition that encourages a sufficient amount of expert information in the form of stakeholder group knowledge and a trustworthy environment for planning that results from the network of relationships internally designed by participants.

Figure 5 provides a summary of the action plans developed by participants. Actions ranged from scheduling a future planning session, work group, or dialogue to organizing a town hall or community forum. The educator stakeholder group decided to identify and make available community resources for the classroom, while individuals from business and industry planned to offer career education and assistance. Communities of faith discussed networking with other public and private organizations on common problems associated with violence. Students agreed to work with their classmates, teachers, student organizations, and their parents on increasing respect and tolerance for all ideas and beliefs. Animal advocacy participants decided to develop stronger relationships with the schools by establishing an advisory committee of educators interested in the ethical treatment of animals. Other stakeholders, such as government, law enforcement, and human and civil rights organizations agreed they would work with the schools on violence prevention programs in the forms of training and staff development.

## CONCLUSION

At the conclusion of the future search, two important themes emerged: 1) participants needed to return to their communities and assume a direct, more responsive role for stopping the cycle of violence, and 2) violence was similar to a virus, replicating itself while exploiting the energy and resources of the community.

Individuals remarked that as they had moved away from their communities they were becoming more isolated and helpless in their attempt to feel safe and secure. By allowing others to represent and act upon their interests, they became more dependent and less interdependent. Consequently, a major force in preventing crime and violence had been removed—namely, a strong community network. Stakeholders commented on how current efforts to reduce crime, which encouraged a greater reliance on law enforcement and government regulations, were in fact paving the way for violence to flourish.

Participants acknowledged that it was impossible for one group or individual to help make our communities safe. Rather, changes could be made only through profound alterations in how decisions are made at the local level and how people interact with each other. Such changes included not only a greater appreciation for the whole but a recognition that the diversity of ideas and beliefs in the community are its strength. Further, participants realized their world was too complex to be analyzed and categorized and, when information flows with equal probability throughout the system, it is a highly energizing experience. Finally, when individuals no longer relate to each other from a power-based perspective, they can devote their energy to creating solutions. In the end, participants realized that the cycle of violence did not consist of heroes or villains and that their fears represented the shadows of a world where people were alone and disconnected.



## AFTERMATH

Following the future search conference, stakeholders continued to work on their action plans by organizing workshops and training sessions. Animal rights advocates formed a partnership with the San Juan Teachers Association/CTA/NEA and the San Juan Unified School District to provide staff development classes to teachers on the relationship between human animal and nonhuman animal violence. A trainers' program was developed to show how animal care could reduce stress and violent behaviors. A citywide coalition of gay and lesbian organizations, child advocacy groups, domestic violence organizations and shelters, the California Teachers Association, and the Sacramento Child Welfare agency organized forums and informational meetings on issues associated with the spread of violence. A diverse set of individuals from the community and the California Teachers Association formed a *new design team* to organize additional future search conferences and to examine what possibilities existed for holding a future search conference on the World Wide Web.

Conversations and interviews with future search participants revealed a new sense of optimism for how society could be structured. Participants described their communities as evolving, with sudden twists and turns—a place to question our most cherished assumptions about reality. Further, several future search participants believed the slightest variation in events could alter and transform their community, concluding that each person is indivisibly linked to each other.

Consistent with this view, others were convinced that change did not result from external forms of hierarchical direction or control but must come from within. Thus, a safe community may simply be the result of individual acts of kindness, which manifest themselves in relationships based on mutually shared respect. This form of influence, while unpredictable, respects the dignity and self-worth of all individuals. In such a society, unknown outcomes are a function of individual acts, where Shakespeare's spider is no longer to be feared. With this realization, participants saw that the *cycle of violence* is fueled not by our fears but by a desire to control—the ultimate source of all violence.

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