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IN THIS ISSUE

*Sexual Assault & Domestic
Violence; Current
Legislation Addressing
Domestic Violence; Elder
& Vulnerable Adult Abuse*

2

*Recommendations to
Minimize Violence*

3

*Resources for Further
Reading; Quotes of Interest*

4

CONFRONTING VIOLENCE IN SOCIETY

“Respect for human life is the starting point for confronting a culture of violence.” —*U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Confronting a Culture of Violence, 1994*

Regardless of where one turns, violence permeates nearly every segment of society. From television programming and in the newspaper, to the movies and across the Internet and throughout social media, violence has encircled nearly every aspect of day-to-day life. Much of the violence depicted on screen or online is intended for “entertainment” purposes to drive ratings and website clicks or to increase the number of ticket sales. Closer to home, it is difficult to catch the local morning or evening news without hearing of an act of aggression, criminal activity, or court sentencing for a crime committed. In all of its forms, violence can be physical, verbal, or emotional, and it impacts people of all ages — too often with deadly consequences.

Much of the violence that exists in society is person against person, frequently involving assault or murder with weapons acquired legally or otherwise. Gang violence is especially responsible for deadly crime that rips apart neighborhoods and communities. In 2013, according to the FBI, more than 70 percent of the murders committed in Michigan involved a firearm¹; nearly 50 percent of the robberies in the state involved a firearm²; and approximately 30 percent of the aggravated assaults involved a firearm³. The Catholic Church opposes the use of any instrument for the purpose of carrying out deadly violence: forceps during an abortion, a needle that finalizes a death sentence, or an assault weapon in the hands of a person on the street. Accordingly, the Church is urging greater control of firearms and, from a pro-life position, opposes the preponderance of deadly weapons as they represent a direct threat to innocent life.

One of the more disturbing elements of violence is how it manifests itself to children through violent video games, music, and mass media. As young people grow and mature, they learn life lessons by interacting with those around them and through what they see and hear. Children form their actions and thoughts based on their environment and what they believe to be acceptable or “normal.” This includes the all-the-more pervasive presence of pornography, especially online, where a distorted and unhealthy interpretation of human sexuality glorifies violence against women, assaults their dignity, and leaves youth with a confused sense of physical love. Acts of violence against children, including those gunned down in their neighborhoods and the young girls physically assaulted walking home or to school, are heart-wrenching.

As society constantly bombards us with varying forms of violence and reports of aggression, many, including children, become desensitized to its act, thereby tacitly accepting violence as a way of life and at times thinking little of its impact. Unfortunately, in our communities, not enough has been done to promote a culture of life that protects and builds up individuals. More often, there is an acceptance and contribution to what Pope Francis calls a “throwaway culture,” using and discarding others rather than respecting and caring for them. Going forward, Catholics and all people of goodwill can help to stem the tide of violence by committing to peace — in our homes, our workplaces, our neighborhoods, and our social interactions. ■

Sexual Assault & Domestic Violence

In addition to the deadly use of firearms, sexual assault and domestic violence are other forms of violence that occur in Michigan's communities and on college campuses. As referenced in the quote below, violence contradicts the very notion that every person is deserving of love and respect, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, or any other classification. To address the problem of sexual violence, First Lady Sue Snyder and members of the Michigan Legislature have

sought to enact policies and to increase awareness on college campuses. These efforts include state funding to implement best practices on campuses to prevent sexual assault; creating the Sexual Assault Evidence Kit Tracking and Reporting Commission; requiring health workers to inform victims about the availability of a rape evidence kit; and increasing awareness and providing information about sexual assault while changing the culture around reporting incidents.

"Violence against another person in any form fails to treat that person as someone worthy of love." —USCCB, *When I Call for Help*, 2002

Current Legislation Addressing Domestic Violence

Michigan Catholic Conference has supported several pieces of legislation intended to update and enhance existing domestic violence laws. House Bills 4476–4481 would:

- Limit mediation in domestic relation actions to protect victims;
- Increase penalties for the assault of a pregnant woman;
- Allow survivors of a sexual assault, when a pregnancy results, to present evidence so a judge may prohibit custody or parenting time from being granted to the victim's attacker;
- Keep from public record the address of a victim that has filed for a Personal Protection Order; and
- Prevent negative consequences during a custody dispute if one spouse removes a child from the home for his or her protection from the other violent spouse.

800.799.7233

National Domestic Violence Hotline

800.656.4673

National Sexual Assault Hotline

Elder & Vulnerable Adult Abuse

Too often crimes are committed against elderly or other vulnerable adults with an intent to either physically harm the person or to exploit their weaknesses for financial gain. Abuse, neglect, and exploitation are behaviors committed against an elder or vulnerable adult who is unable to protect him or herself because of a mental or physical impairment or advanced age. According to Michigan law, vulnerable adults are those who, because of age, development disability, mental illness, or physical disability, require supervision or personal care due to a lack of personal, physical, or social skills required to live independently. While statutes are in place to protect elderly and other vulnerable adults, current legislation supported by Michigan Catholic Conference would strengthen those laws and prescribe criminal penalties for harming or financially exploiting a person known to be elderly or vulnerable.

"Abandonment is the most serious 'illness' of the elderly, and also the greatest injustice they can be submitted to: those who have helped us grow must not be abandoned when they are in need of our help, our love, and our tenderness." —Pope Francis, *Address to the Pontifical Academy of Life*, March 5, 2015

855.444.3911

Elder Abuse 24-Hour Hotline

By the Numbers:
Sexual Assault & Domestic Violence in Michigan (2013)⁴

3,236
Number of reported rapes

97
Percentage of rape victims that were female

49
Percentage of rape victims aged 10–19

159
Number of reported sexual assaults on Michigan's public and private college campuses

93,572
Number of reported cases of domestic violence

71
Percentage of domestic violence victims that were female

Recommendations to Minimize Violence

The following recommendations have been presented by the U.S. bishops through various teaching documents in an effort to reduce and eliminate violence in society and to promote peace as part of the Catholic Church's pro-life message. The documents from which these recommendations

have been assembled include *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship (FCFC)*; *Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action (CVC)*; and *Responsibility, Rehabilitation and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice (RRR)*.

Societal Factors

- Curb violence in media (FCFC).
- Require background checks for all gun purchases; make gun trafficking a federal crime; ban assault weapons; and support reasonable restrictions on access to handguns (FCFC, CVC).
- Promote a culture of life and speak out against the use of abortion, euthanasia, the death penalty, and gun violence, all of which discard life (RRR).

Crime & Offenders

- Reach out to offenders and their families during their incarceration through programs such as prison ministry (RRR).
- Support prisoner re-entry programs, as the opportunity for past offenders to find employment and housing can be extremely difficult, yet necessary for their dignity and to avoid returning to criminal behavior (RRR).

Community Responses & Alternatives

- Support community programs that engage youth, build their self-esteem, and give them alternatives to crime (RRR).
- Promote neighborhood watch groups, community-oriented policing, and partnerships between law enforcement and the local faith community (RRR).
- Encourage the teaching of conflict resolution (RRR).
- Work to address root causes of crime in the community, such as poverty, substance abuse, mental health, and lack of employment (RRR).
- Examine our own attitudes and actions for how they contribute to or diminish violence and the "throwaway culture" in our society (CCV).
- Build bridges across racial and economic lines (CCV).

Victims

- Stand with victims and their families. Help connect them with services and explore ways to fill gaps in victim ministry (RRR).
- Listen to the pain, anger, and frustration that comes with and from violence (CCV).

Resources for Further Reading

Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action: A Pastoral Message of the U.S. Catholic Bishops. USCCB, 1994. <http://goo.gl/OlMQzE>

Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States. USCCB, 2011. <http://goo.gl/crvLxt>

Proposals to Reduce Gun Violence: Protecting Our Communities While Respecting the Second Amendment. Testimony Submitted by USCCB to the United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary. February 12, 2013. <http://goo.gl/ueNjFM>

Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice. A Statement of the Catholic Bishops of the United States. USCCB, November 2000. <http://goo.gl/Zq8FfU>

USCCB Committees Call For Action in Response to Newtown Tragedy. December 21, 2012. <http://goo.gl/T0AuZD>

When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women. USCCB, 2002. <http://goo.gl/Qu1FSi>

1. "Murder by State, Types of Weapons, 2013," FBI, <http://goo.gl/4U6IXz>
2. "Robberies by State, Types of Weapons, 2013," FBI, <http://goo.gl/j3nOHq>
3. "Aggravated Assaults by State, Types of Weapons, 2013" FBI, <http://goo.gl/xA7nWP>
4. "2013 Domestic Violence Information and CSC-1st Degree," Michigan Incident Crime Reporting, Michigan State Police, <http://goo.gl/LjyomC> and <http://goo.gl/NFNI2Z>

Quotes of Interest

"We are still a long way from the time when our conscience can be certain of having done everything possible to prevent crime and to control it effectively so that it no longer does harm and, at the same time, to offer to those who commit crimes a way of redeeming themselves and making a positive return to society. If all those in some way involved in the problem tried to...develop this line of thought, perhaps humanity as a whole could take a great step forward in creating a more serene and peaceful society."

St. John Paul II, Message for the Jubilee in Prisons, July 24, 2000

"Violence is not conquered with violence. Violence is conquered with peace."

Pope Francis, Angelus of July 20, 2014

"Life in its fullness is the height of peace. Anyone who loves peace cannot tolerate attacks and crimes against life."

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, World Day of Peace Message 2013

"We cannot but widen our gaze to recall that arms, throughout the world, are also instruments for legitimate defense, but surely they are everywhere the main instruments used to bring threats, violence and death."
"Against Arms" Editorial of Fr. Federico Lombardi, SJ, Papal spokesperson, January 19, 2013

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