

Cult awareness and education must be taught

By Cynthia Kissler

THE drama of David Koresh that has been played on the front pages of newspapers and on the televisions in living rooms across America has stirred many troublesome questions about cults.

Groups such as Koresh's Branch Davidians are certainly not a new phenomenon. And the real story is not that this violence has occurred, but that there are many other groups in society that could turn to such dangerous behavior.

It is true, however, that there are some groups that are on the surface odd or different but are not really abusive to its members. These groups reflect the diversity of thought and religious freedoms that make America great.

But the dangerous cults are the ones that must be addressed. Despite its continuing presence, the cult problem is little understood, little studied and troublesome to contemplate. For us to acknowledge the problem, we must acknowledge our vulnerabilities and come to grips with constitutional and human rights issues.

Many cults were formed by leaders with a lust for power, a willingness to cross the bounds of ethical and moral behavior to satisfy that lust, and a knowledge of how to use influence techniques (some call them mind-control techniques) to control others in a bid to satisfy that lust.

Lacking an awareness of how mind-control techniques work, millions of Americans tragically are swept into cults that these ruthless leaders build. Some victims are financially exploited. Other times there is physical control that is the cornerstone around which true destructive cults create their deceptive paradise.

Many people may be unaware of the impact these destructive cults have on American society. The cost to taxpayers of dealing with the problem is high. The state of Oregon spent close to a million dollars on medical care, special education and counseling for the 51 children removed from the Ecclesia commune in 1988, which saw the beating death of a 7-year-old child. Taxpayer dollars underwrote the criminal trial against the group's leaders — the largest mass slavery trial ever brought in the history of the United States.

Cults also hurt society when their members undermine the democratic process by voting in solid blocks or by providing free volunteer labor to campaigns in return for favors from candidates. The larger, wealthier cults influence the media's ability to provide news and information to its audience, sometimes even purchasing newspapers, radio stations, magazines, and cable networks themselves and subtly injecting propaganda into their news coverage and features.

Cults compete unfairly against legitimate businesses, having members work long hours at low wages and avoiding payment of their fair share in Social Security and federal withholding taxes. In 1985, Tony Alamo of the Alamo Christian Foundation was assessed \$7.9 million in taxes for

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operating businesses as religious enterprises where his followers worked in sweatshop conditions for as little as \$20 a week.

Ultimately, though, the cost to American society of refusing to come to grips with the cult problem is far greater than the millions in dollars that can be calculated on paper. For every child that suffered and endured physical and emotional in the Jonestown, Guyana, massacre in 1978 — where 913 people died under the orders of cult leader Jim Jones — dozens more have suffered in other groups.

We owe it to these children to start educating the public on what the phenomenon is truly about. It can be identified, and it can be addressed. If we can educate about the dangers of drugs, AIDS and gangs, we can provide important information about cults.

We can teach individuals how to think critically and how to ask the right questions so that they know what they're truly joining.

We can teach our young people not to let any organization gain control of their time or convince

them to make any major changes in life without first discussing their decision with someone they trust and respect.

We can encourage them to research the background of the leadership and the history of any group that promises them attractive-sounding opportunities.

Families that have a loved one caught up in a destructive cult can gain support and insight from learning about the experiences of other former cult members. These families also can benefit from understanding the dynamics of mind control so they can learn how to maintain contact with and express their love for their relatives in ways that may eventually convince these cult members that there is a worthwhile life to be had outside of the cult.

One can measure the cost of the cult problem in America by the loss of bright and curious minds of individuals who could benefit society. For those caught up directly in destructive groups and for their relatives, cults violate constitutional rights, destroy the family and exploit the weak. Cults are, ultimately, a human rights problem.

Cynthia Kissler is executive director of the Cult Awareness Network, a Chicago-based national nonprofit educational organization, which was incorporated after the Jonestown tragedy. The group provides help to former cult members and families victimized by such groups.