

Local comment

Stop youth violence cycle

Fear over safety drives behaviors that lead to confrontation

By DAVID J. HARDING

With temperatures soaring and a national economy struggling to create jobs for even well-qualified adults, summer has always been a fraught time for youth violence in our nation's inner cities.

This year, violence began even before summer got into full swing. In late May, a 19-year-old was killed in a drive-by shooting not long after the sun set on Detroit's Alden Park neighborhood.

Less than a week later, a 14-year-old Boston boy was killed after being pulled from a moped and shot at close range. In mid-June, a 17-year-old New York girl was shot and killed just days before her high school graduation, apparently in retaliation for a fight with a boy who punched her sister.

Stopping inner-city youth violence requires a deep understanding of the daily lives of adolescents in our nation's poor communities. The fatalities that make the headlines are only the tip of a much larger iceberg of fights, threats and intimidation. And summer violence is merely an extension of similar patterns that exist year round.

My own research with adolescent boys in inner-city Boston reveals that youth violence has very clear antecedents. Neighborhood identities and

long histories of feuds between rival communities determine who is a friend and who is an enemy, what areas are safe and where confrontation is likely. Sometimes these feuds are linked to drug territories and formal gangs, but often the adversaries are small, informal street-corner groups whose "beefs" wax and wane with cycles of retribution and revenge, motivated by the need to protect one's reputation and that of one's neighborhood.

Why is this reputation worth fighting for? A reputation for toughness is a source of protection from future victimization. Violence, and the fear it creates, begets more violence.

It is critical to understand, however, that only a small number of adolescents drive most of the violence. The majority subscribe to mainstream values about the importance of school and work, even if their family backgrounds and neighborhood environments make it more difficult to live up to those values.

The omnipresent threat of violence or victimization affects this silent majority as

much as it does the dangerous few. The attentions of parents and teens turn to staying safe rather than succeeding in school or avoiding early parenthood.

Young people develop safety strategies, such as traveling in groups, that increase the overall frequency of violence, while reducing the danger felt by the individual. Strategies like turning to older peers for protection can have unintended consequences, as this group's "street" messages compete with those of parents, teachers, ministers and service providers.

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Young people growing up in violent environments learn to display what sociologist Janelle Dance calls a "tough front" to ward off threats, mannerisms that are often interpreted by educators and police as antisocial behavior.

The heavy-handed police response that typically occurs in violent neighborhoods can often backfire. With few young people actually engaged in the most serious violence, stop-and-frisk tactics are unlikely to work, and for the silent, law-abiding majority, negative interactions with the police merely stoke distrust of basic

institutions, a distrust that spills over into school and other domains.

Teens reasonably ask, if the police are so powerful that they can search us without cause, why can't they keep us safe? It's hard to counter their perception that most powerful adults don't seem to care about their well-being and aren't to be trusted.

Neither are stronger criminal penalties likely to deter young people from carrying and using weapons. Research tells us that deterrence works only when it is specific and swift. Distant criminal penalties cannot compete with the immediate need to feel safe, especially during a developmental stage when capacities for long-term planning are not fully developed and the need for peer approval is at its peak.

Unless we as a nation commit to reducing the fundamental drivers of street violence — the concentration of poverty and racial segregation — combating youth violence will require a long-term commitment by local politicians, police and social service providers to disrupt the actions of the dangerous few while respecting the silent majority.

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