“Why Children Are Killing Children - African American juvenile crime” -Abstract


It starts and ends with tears. Tears and sobs of children and parents. Tears as the children are led away in handcuffs and sobs as they lie still in small white caskets, clutching teddy bears.

Children and violent crime, including murder, has become a public health issue. In 1998, we witnessed an unprecedented string of violent crimes in which young children, many of them Black, were killed at the hands of other children, many of them Black. Six random school shootings occurred over the last 15 months, killing 16 children and adults. African-American children were involved in one of the mass school shootings and in random shootings and stabbings from Baltimore to Bessemer Ala.

Every four hours a Black child is murdered in the U.S., says Slenda Hatchett, chief presiding judge of the Fulton County Juvenile Court in Atlanta.

In Michigan, a 12-year-old boy is charged with first-degree murder in the killing of Ronnie Lee Greene Jr., 18. The suspect, who was 11 years old at the time of the crime, is the youngest child to be tried for first-degree murder in Michigan. He is being charged as an adult and faces life in prison if convicted.

In California, second-degree murder charges have been filed against a 9-year-old boy charged with murdering his 11-year-old brother. The prosecutor there says neither he nor his supervisor can recall a younger suspect charged with murder in their county.

A 14-year-old boy in Richmond, Va., is accused of opening fire in a high school hallway and faces up to 70 years in prison if convicted. He is being tried as an adult. The magnitude of violence has become a public health problem," says Evelyn K. Moore, president and CEO of the National Black Child Development Institute.

Although juvenile violent crime arrests have declined in rite last two years, Black children are still disproportionately represented in the statistics, both as perpetrators and as victims. According to FBI reports, 2,900 juveniles were arrested for murder in 1996. Sixty-one percent of those arrested for murder were not White. Although Black children make up only 15 percent of America's youth population, 46 percent of juveniles in correctional facilities are Black, according to a study by the U.S. Justice Department's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

The new twist to this story is that murder is being committed by children whose feet can't touch the courtroom floor, who can't get into a PG-13 movie without an adult and who can't comprehend why, in many cases, they can't go home with their mommy after murdering someone else's child.
Adult concepts of dead and gone, never to return again, apparently don't apply to the video-age generation, which seems to believe in the old Southern proverb that every goodbye is not gone.

Experts say children lingering in a fairy-tale world have been desensitized to the violence around them by our culture. "Young people don't fully understand what it is they are doing," says Dr. Robert Newby, professor and chair of Central Michigan University's sociology, anthropology and social work departments. "It seems to be a Hollywood script as opposed to real life, and that's one of the problems."

Another fundamental problem, Newby says, is that society itself has condemned millions of Black children to a climate of violence. "Poverty is violent," he says. "People who live in poverty and particularly urban poverty live in a violent environment. It's not just guns and knives; the very existence itself is harsh," says Newby.

The Rev. Jesse L Jackson, founder and president of Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, blames "a culture that is marketing violence for profit." Jackson says violent movies, violent video games and "violent music which says it is imitating reality when in fact it is creating reality" are part of the problem.

By age 15, he says, this generation has watched 18,000 hours of television and has seen about 500 conflicts solved by murder. "So what is Chicago, or Jonesboro, Ark, or Paducah, Ky., or Springfield, Ore.?" he asked, speaking of the sites of school shootings last year. "It just shows how pervasive the marketing forces that determine the shape of our culture are."

Clementine Barfield, founder and president of Save Our Sons and Daughters (SOSAD), knows firsthand the legacy of violence. Twelve years ago her two teenage sons were shot; Derick, 16, did not survive. Since then, she has been leading a crusade to reduce the level of violence. Barfield says the causes of violence have changed because children's reality has changed. "Children today have seen violence all of their lives," she says. "When we talked to elementary schoolchildren, we found that 80 to 85 percent of them personally know someone who has been killed. The majority, believe it or not, have had a grandparent killed. If your reality is that you could die any day, then why is killing someone so farfetched?" she asks.

A veteran of the anti-violence movement, Barfield has spent more than 11 years trying to stop violence and killing. Her organization fights on two fronts to promote peace and to support families torn apart by grief. Most families, she says, suffer from posttraumatic stress reaction, similar to the posttraumatic stress of Vietnam Veterans, after a family member is killed. "I want to emphasize that it's not about getting over [the grief]; it's about getting through," she says. "It's been 12 years
since my son was killed and the trauma that we have experienced has taken a toll on
my family. We are veterans of the war here on the streets in America's concrete
jungle."

One of the problems is that an increasingly large number of children are left
home alone after school with access to guns, says child and adolescent psychiatrist Dr.
Marilyn B. Benoit of Howard University Hospital and Medical School.

"They are 1.2 million latch-key kids, unsupervised, with access to guns after
school," says Benoit, who is secretary of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent
Psychiatry. "Somewhere in the middle of this problem, the adults have disappeared."
There are, she says, two related problems: One, parents spend less time today with
their children than they did 30 years ago, and two, the same children are growing up in
very violent time. Between 1985 and 1995, there was a tremendous rise in murders in
the U.S., she says, meaning that school-age children born and raised during this time
also grew up in one of the most violent periods of this country.

"We [the U.S.] have the most homicides and the most guns; put those two
together and you have a very lethal situation," she says.

Benoit says other contributing causes to the increasing number of children killing
children include rampant drug abuse in our communities, the lack of parental
supervision, and the breakdown of the family. "Kids witness most violence in the
home," she says, adding that children witness poor control of aggression through
domestic violence, and are also the victims of their parents' abuse or neglect, brought
on by parental mental illness [that's] exacerbated or brought on by extreme poverty.

"Children are easily frustrated and have no coping skills. This [youth violence] is
the psycho-social cost of poverty," she adds.

To counter poverty, media violence, joblessness, hunger and other widespread
systematic influences on children, experts say that society's institutions—family,
church, state and government—need to mobilize.

Dr. Diane R. Brown, president of the Association of Black Sociologists, says that
young children do not inherit a tendency to commit violent acts and therefore need
adults "to teach and reinforce an appreciation for the value of human life and to
clarify the differences between fantasy and reality."

Conventional and common-sense wisdom says it will take more than words to stop
the senseless slaughter of children by children. SOSAD offers a violence prevention
program in the schools that promotes a "philosophy of peace." Barfield says, "Our
children have no frame of reference for peace, so we have to help them identify the
words and character traits that represent peace. We've got to make peace popular.
We also have to return to the African and African-American idea that it takes a village to raise a child.”

Providing safe havens for children in the critical hours after school when children are on their own is one key area where church and state call make a difference, Barfield and other experts agree. "With so many fathers, mothers and grandmothers working," Moore adds, "we need federal and city governments that provide safe and caring places for children after school closes."

Moore advocates early intervention programs for children, before there is a problem, as well as education for parents, "because if the adult hasn't been nurtured, it's hard to nurture a child.

"I think," Moore continues, "we're not doing as good of a job with our children in terms of really loving them and developing relationships that are so loving and caring that they cannot bring themselves to do any harm." But only helping your own child won't work, experts add. "You can't sit in your door in peace, if the neighbors' kids are playing with guns on their porch, Jackson says. "They say it takes a village to raise a child? Well, sick, violent villages raise sick, violent children," he says. "And well-healed villages raise well-healed children. So the village must come together."

The solution starts at home, but the problem is bigger than any one home, experts agree. "One of the long-term solutions is providing a more just society," says Newby. "Providing opportunities for people that they don't presently have so they feel like they have a stake in society ... I'm not optimistic. It's not a ‘just say no' program. There's no discussion on how to solve problems like joblessness and hunger."

What's needed, Newby continues, is a basic reform of society, "so that we begin to have a different set of values where a human being is appreciated. Those are the kinds of things that will give people a little more hope and more stake in society."