

Murder Factory, Part 3: KC needs to fight back and - Kansas City Star, The (MO) - January 27, 2009 - page A1

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When elected mayor in 2006, Cory A. Booker challenged the people of Newark, N.J., to reject their complacent attitude about violent crime on city streets.

"The true threat to our city," he said, "is not the small group of violent criminals, but the apathy and indifference of countless good citizens who refuse to stand up for their neighborhoods and their city."

Kansas City needs to embrace the same challenge if it wants to end the violence that has taken more than 1,000 lives over the last decade -- and made ZIP code 64130 the state's biggest producer of incarcerated killers.

But a new attitude is only the first step.

Strong leadership and innovative thinking will be needed to fight decades of apathy and overcome the social conditions that foster crime. And the fight must be sustained -- victory declared is victory soon lost.

With Booker setting the tone that enough is enough, his city dramatically decreased its homicides.

Newark began 2008 by going 43 days without a homicide, something Kansas City hasn't witnessed in at least 18 years. Newark finished the year with 67 homicides, down nearly a third from the year before. Kansas City recorded 126 killings, a 30 percent increase from 2007 and one of its worst years in a decade.

Inside The Kansas City Star today, leaders and ordinary people promote strategies for combating that toxic environment.

Many residents of 64130 and the convicted murderers it produced quickly pinpoint the area's key needs: more jobs, better education and more personal responsibility from everyone, especially from men who father children.

It is possible to dismantle the murder factory, but doing so will take a total community effort, said the Rev. Eric Williams, pastor of Calvary Temple Baptist Church and a founder of the Concerned Clergy Coalition.

The violence doesn't just affect the inner city, he said. People anywhere potentially are at risk, and everyone pays the bill for incarcerating so many convicted criminals.

Imprisoning just one killer from 64130 for 10 years costs taxpayers more than \$164,000, according to the Department of Corrections. That's more than \$16 million when multiplied by 100 inmates -- and most of them are serving much-longer sentences.

Ultimately, those most at risk of dying or ending up in jail must have a constructive alternative to the destructive pull of the streets, Williams believes.

"If you see yourself having a future, and you're around trusting and caring people, then your behavior will clean up," he said. "It's all about hope. If you don't have hope, why pull your pants up or comb your hair?"

The problem: How to engage the community -- and keep it engaged.

As demonstrated elsewhere, making a real dent in violent crime requires enlisting the entire community. In an era of tight government budgets, existing programs and services must be maximized. That requires a focused and coordinated effort.

Many 64130 residents say that if they had the right leadership, they would be willing to help.

What Kansas City can do: Learn from the successes and failure of other cities.

In Boston, they called it a miracle.

There, an extraordinary communitywide program saw the city's homicide total, which had averaged about 100 per year, drop to 43 the first full year after its implementation. Two years later, homicides fell to 31.

The key was recognizing that even in the most crime-ridden neighborhoods, only a handful of small, loosely organized criminal groups accounted for the majority of offenders and victims.

"If we want to stop the killing, all we have to do is stop the behavior of these groups," said David M. Kennedy, an architect of the Boston program and director of the Center for Crime Prevention and Control at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York.

A partnership including police, social service agencies, parents, ministers, gang outreach workers, neighborhood groups and former offenders united their previously disparate efforts into one focused message that they took to those at-risk youths in face-to-face meetings.

The youths were told that the violence must stop and that their families needed them in the community, not dead or in jail. Violence would be met with swift law enforcement consequences, but whatever help they needed would be available through existing social service avenues.

It was a simple message, but it worked, Kennedy said.

Unfortunately, Boston also demonstrated how a successful program, if not sustained, can fall apart.

"The city declared victory and stopped paying attention," said Howard Spivak, who co-authored a book on preventing youth violence.

As the program declined, violence grew again, he said.

Chicago, which set up a similar intervention program utilizing former convicts in some of the city's highest-crime areas, experienced significant drops in reported shootings in those areas compared with others without the program.

But since 2007, when state lawmakers cut about \$6 million in funding, shootings in those areas have increased dramatically.

The failures in Boston and Chicago demonstrate the need for perseverance, experts say. Once it finds a solution that works, Kansas City cannot quit fighting the fight.

It's too early to know if Newark can maintain its initial success, but the city is taking steps to address underlying social issues like lack of jobs and youth-oriented programs.

Communities must decide if they want to make the minimal investment in prevention programs or pay the enormous costs of incarceration for killers and medical costs for victims, Spivak said.

"The toxic environment that is promoting violence is not going away," he said. "You can't see an improvement until you change the environment."

The problem: Absentee fathers.

Again and again, convicted killers from 64130 told The Star that their lives could have turned out differently if they had the positive influence of a father in their lives.

Many of those killers have contributed to the same cycle of fatherless homes, and many of their sons have joined them in prison or ended up dead on the streets.

What Kansas City can do: Expand fatherhood programs.

Milwaukee takes fatherhood seriously.

Its three-year-old fatherhood initiative, run by the city but funded through private grants and donations, has helped thousands of men in practical ways. It has reduced interest on child support payments and helped fathers recover driver's licenses lost when they fell behind in making payments.

That initiative was established through a Maryland-based organization. The Kansas City area, meanwhile, is home to the National Center for Fathering.

Peter Spokes, chief operating officer for the center, said he would welcome a chance to partner with local city, county and business leaders to establish such an areawide initiative to address fatherhood issues.

Already, the center partners with Jackson County courts to operate a fathering court, which helps men meet their financial obligations and take a more active role in their children's lives. Since 1998, more than 400 men have participated.

The center also sponsors a program that brings fathers into schools to act as role models for young men and to be more actively engaged in their children's education.

More information about the national center and its work can be found online at fathers.com.

The problem: Too few jobs.

The raw numbers are grim.

One-quarter of 64130 residents live below the poverty level.

About 27 percent of the ZIP code's jobs vanished between 1994 and 2006, federal statistics show.

And 42 percent of its killers who responded a survey by The Star said they were unemployed before heading to prison for murder. With few viable job options, many killers said they pursued careers of selling drugs, stealing cars or robbing people at gunpoint.

"A job? That was like a sin," said inmate Royce Dudley. "Why go work for eight hours and make like \$5 an hour when I can make \$2,000 in an hour out on the corner? It didn't make any sense."

What Kansas City can do: Encourage businesses to hire more city residents.

Mayor Mark Funkhouser is working to address economic development in parts of the city like 64130 where it long has been neglected, and area residents welcome the idea.

In Newark, city officials have used their leverage in real estate transactions with new businesses to increase employment opportunities for city residents. A new retail development agreed to interview Newark residents first for open positions.

The city of Newark also is working with Continental Airlines and other existing large employers to fill more jobs with qualified city residents. That effort includes helping residents with access to online applications and prescreening city job applicants for the airline. As a result, the percentage of Continental employees who live in Newark has gone from 8 to 20 percent.

Newark also recruited more than 100 local companies to participate in a summer jobs for youth program. And Continental set up a youth internship program for 18- to 22-year-old Newark residents.

The problem: A lack of career preparation.

Young people in poor areas like 64130 don't aspire to professional careers because they don't know what that kind of success looks like, says Clyde McQueen, president of the Full Employment

Council. Few doctors, engineers, lawyers, school principals and other professionals live and work in their neighborhoods.

What Kansas City can do: Recruit professionals to volunteer their time.

Men and women with college degrees and professional careers must share their stories with young people, McQueen said. And beyond that, young people must be given guidance on how to pursue such careers.

"If they think it's out of reach, they write it off," he said. "You've got to lay it for them in direct terms."

A national organization, 100 Black Men of America Inc., provides just that kind of mentoring. A local chapter formed in December 2006 now has 38 members. Anthony Williams, president of the Greater Kansas City chapter, said its members are currently working with about 65 young men through two Kansas City schools and Operation Breakthrough to provide mentoring and educational support.

Additional information can be found online at 100blackmenkc.com.

Obtaining post-secondary education is crucial in today's job market, McQueen said, because the days of finding decent careers with just a high school diploma are long gone.

And educating young people about how to prepare for post-secondary schooling and how to pay for it should not wait until they are about to graduate from high school.

Planning should begin their freshman year and should include helping parents research how to find and apply for scholarships and other funding, McQueen said.

The problem: Lack of education.

Most children within 64130 today attend heavily segregated schools that report generally dismal test scores and high dropout rates. Of the killers who responded to The Star's survey, 61 percent said they had quit school.

Lax discipline and low expectations have hurt academic success in Kansas City schools, said Gwen Grant, president of the Urban League of Greater Kansas City.

"It's the exact opposite of what kids need," Grant said. "I believe there is a direct correlation between academic rigor and classroom management. They are less likely to act out if they are engaged academically."

What Kansas City can do: Hire the right superintendent.

And give him or her the time and support to succeed. A constant turnover in Kansas City school superintendents has short-circuited improvement efforts. Once again, the school board is looking for a new superintendent.

In Washington, D.C., where poor-performing schools have rivaled if not surpassed those in Kansas City, new leadership is trying to institute the kind of change Grant suggests here.

Chancellor Michelle Rhee is shaking up the status quo, attempting to get rid of incompetent teachers and administrators, pushing pay incentives for teachers based on student performance, and establishing an attitude that the city's students deserve the best schools.

"We still allow the color of a child's skin and their ZIP code to dictate the quality of their education, and that's the biggest social injustice imaginable," Rhee recently told an audience.

Her efforts already may be producing results. The reading and math scores of Washington students increased eight to 11 percentage points in the most recent testing, the district announced.

And this year it is continuing a Saturday Scholars program that provides additional instruction and test preparation to more than 5,000 students, whose needs are individually addressed by some of the district's top teachers.

Many in Kansas City say the same type of dramatic change is needed here. "Teachers are baby-sitting them until they get into the justice system," said community leader Alvin Brooks.

Beyond academics, schools can do other things to improve kids' odds of succeeding, local leaders believe:

** Find a way to decrease out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, said Kansas City Police Chief Jim Corwin. While safety must be maintained inside schools, kicking kids out to roam the streets only fuels the crime problem, Corwin said.

One 64130 inmate, Darren Walton, said he never recovered academically after he was thrown out of middle school for assaulting another student. He spent most days loitering with friends. "Gambling, drinking, doing drugs and crimes, just trying to keep money in our pockets," he said.

** Invest more in early-childhood education, something recently endorsed by Corwin and other area police chiefs. They cited a study that estimated increasing the high school graduation rate in Missouri and Kansas by 10 percentage points could cut about 100 murders each year across both states.

"Eventually, if we don't spend the resources to get these kids a foundation, we're going to pay dearly in the end," Corwin said.

** Help students cope early with violence they witness at home and on the streets. A five-year study of more than 400 St. Louis schoolchildren found that violence can adversely affect self-confidence, self-image and the ability to learn. A majority of students had symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Some urban districts have started counseling programs to help children deal with trauma. A Los

Angeles program reportedly helped reduce children's sleeplessness, eating problems and excessive worry. Attendance rates increased, too.

The problem: Reaching at-risk youths.

Most interviewed killers from 64130 said that while they were growing up, adults tried to help them avoid lives of crime and violence. They rejected the message because they didn't feel the adults understood their lives and circumstances.

They believe that men and women who have experienced the pitfalls of the street and prison can reach those vulnerable youths better.

What Kansas City can do: Harness that experience.

Most interviewed killers said that they are responsible for the choices that led to prison. But most expressed a desire to talk to young people and help them avoid the same path.

They generally agreed on this advice: Stay in school. Avoid drugs and alcohol. Choose your friends carefully. Don't be afraid to ask for help.

And, above all, think for yourself.

Moms and preachers and teachers may say the same things, but the inmates believe the message is more effective coming from them.

"It starts with us," said convicted killer Walton. "We need to be better people to have an influence on someone younger."

Part three of a three-part series

Sunday: Stories of killers from ZIP code 64130 highlight social factors that plagued their lives.

Monday: The Star profiles the murder factory known as ZIP code 64130.

Today: What should be done to close the factory that has ruined so many lives?

Inside

Path to Prison: A killer reflects on crime, and his victim's family speaks. | A5

@ For video, audio and photo galleries about the Murder Factory, go to KansasCity.com.

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