URBAN JOURNAL: Stopping the violence
By Mary Anna Towler on February 10, 2009

The shooting of a young Rochester police officer has jerked the public's attention back to the problem of violent crime in this city. And the usual angst has set in: "We've got to do something!"

Our usual response is more police power. There's been a good bit of finger-pointing, too. Some City Council members insist that the school district bears part of the blame for violent crime. We wouldn't have so many criminals, those Council members say, if schools were doing a better job.

Certainly we want an adequately staffed police force. We want Rochester children to get a good education. We want graduation rates up, drop-outs down. But there's a more important way to reduce violent crime.

"The problem of solving crime," says RIT criminal-justice professor John Klofas, "is different from raising the graduation rate."

"As bad as the whole dropout question is," he says, "that issue is not the same as the serious-crime problem. We have to be much more focused and targeted than that."

Not all high-school dropouts will commit violent crimes. And Klofas says it's not hard to predict which ones will. The teenagers and young adults committing violent crime in Rochester are often well-known in the criminal-justice system, Klofas says. The cops know them. The judges know them. The adults in truancy and curfew work know
them. And teachers know them.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of these young people have serious mental-health problems. Many have been abused or severely neglected. (Remarkably, apparently there've been no studies on the backgrounds of Rochester's young, violent criminals.)

If we really wanted to reduce violent crime, says Klofas, we would identify the services our most troubled children need and get help to them - and to their families - for as long as they need it.

"Rochester treats some categories of kids extremely well," says Klofas. "We have lots of services for kids not diagnosed as 'bad' kids." But, he says, that's not true for the "bad" kids - and services for those young people are very expensive.

"In probation, they have 140 people in a caseload," says Klofas. "In these kinds of cases, 10 might be too much. And you need to intervene with families, with everything the kid touches. The commitment and the resources it takes are just incredible."

We're talking about young people who grow up in Rochester's poorest neighborhoods - and the neighborhoods themselves have a profound influence. Not only is there often no adult male presence in the youths' families, but there also is little positive adult male presence in the neighborhood. Many of the criminals who return to Rochester after serving their time in prison - 1000 a year, 20 a week - end up living in these neighborhoods.

Klofas gives these statistics: In the 14605 zip-code area (North Clinton Avenue, Joseph Avenue), there are 1.63 females for every male age 19 to 49. One out of 3 young males is under some form of correctional supervision: in jail, in prison, on probation, or on parole. Forty-five percent of the residents live below the poverty level.

Despite the challenges, Klofas thinks intervention can work. "You can have successes with those kids," he says. But the community will have to be willing to spend money identifying the troubled kids - the "bad" kids - and getting services to them.

Rochester ought to be able to do this. And we ought to be able to serve as a model for other cities. We have researchers and specialists at our medical centers, strong mental health and social-service agencies and advocacy groups. We have a history of remarkable philanthropic giving.

The question is whether we have the smarts and the willpower to target all of that toward our most troubled youths.
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