

Black-on-black crime: Portland's youth

by Lantia Duke

One of the most awesome effects of black on black crime is on our youth. Ernest Cathcart from Give Us This Day, a community-based adoption organization, says black children are exposed to too much violence. "Just look at T.V. There is so much exploitation of sex and violence. Kids today can discuss a movie filled with sex and violence like we used to discuss Howdy-Doo-dy."

"Many people today are angry and we are relying on violence. This contributes to black on black crime. One of the things that is hurting us is that we are beginning to see ourselves the way that whites see us. We have this attitude of when someone does me wrong and that person is black then I've got to kill that nigger. There needs to be more of a community feeling. We are not teaching our children a sense of community, or a pride in one's existence or heritage. We act like we believe what whites say about black people. Why we even call one another 'nigger.'"

A report released two weeks ago by the Portland Chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women found that minority children were receiving harsher punishment than whites. Cathcart said this does not surprise him. "The system reacts that way to Afro-Americans, both children and adults. The system is racist and works a double standard. You see that not only in the criminal justice system but the educational system as well. As a group of people the system does not work in our behalf. The criminal justice system turns juvenile offenders into adult criminals. The problem is that more of our people end up behind bars. From what I've seen or read prisons just make good prisoners."

Cathcart says that the weakening of our family structure doesn't help either. "The extended family is also weakening. We may rationalize it by saying in slavery we were not given the chance to develop a family. Or the black man may say that the black woman won't let him be a man. No one lets you be a man. You either are or you are not. The black

man is very important to our race and he must take a stand to see his importance. Black men offer stability. But, if you allow the family to be run down you will destroy the race. What black children need are black adults."

Janice Barnett, a juvenile counselor, says that peer pressure has a lot to do with juvenile crime. "You get a couple of brothers together and they start talking about what they don't have; they become inspired to commit crime. They boost one another up until they commit the crime. Parents are spending all their time battling with white folks on all fronts. They are fighting the schools, courts and at their jobs. We are living from day to day. There is nothing that comes easy for black folks. We are dealing with racism from left to right. The effects on our children is slow death."

"If you don't have a community with some kind of pride you can't pass that on to your children. They go to school and learn they were slaves. They go to the store and it's dirty. How can you feel good about going to Fred Myers on Union and Killingsworth?"

Ms. Barnett says that education in Portland perpetuates racism which leads down the road to crime. "Look at the kids who get bussed. I have a little girl on my caseload who was bussed over to the west side. She said the reason she got involved in crime was that all her friends had different items and things. By the time her friends were seniors in high school they had clothes and cars. She wanted to be in that group of kids. The only way she saw was to steal."

"In the criminal justice system you have counsellors who work with black youth superficially or not at all. You have black males who have been through the system a number of times. In the end the kid gets the message that it's O.K. to commit crimes. All of a sudden five crimes down the road he hits a little old lady in the head and steals her purse; then he ends up in MacLaren or Hillcrest."

She concludes that it is easier for black children to enter the criminal

justice system because they get arrested more often because they are black.

The National Urban League's report, "The State of Black America, 1982," says that the median age of the black population is 25 years, as compared to the median age of the white population, which is 41. Black teenagers comprise a larger portion of the black population, nationally as well as locally. This means that the problems of today's black teenagers in the long run will affect the entire black population.

Avel Mayfield, director of the N.E. Youth Service Center, spells out the sheer numbers under 18. "Within I-5 on the west, Columbia Blvd. to the north, 42nd Street to the East and the Banfield Freeway to the south lies 70.2 percent of Multnomah County's black 10-18 year-olds. Within this service area black youth accounted for more than 53.3 percent of all juvenile justice involvement. Now, when you look at these numbers you must begin to talk about black youth as not being a risk, but being at risk. The lives of black youth are at greater jeopardy than at any other time in our history. The problem is systemic, or systematic, racism. We must focus on black children's lives being at risk. We need to make sure that we are not blaming the victims for circumstances beyond their control."

Ms. Mayfield defines the status of black youth in Portland as a "crisis." The unemployment rate among black teenagers is 52 percent in Multnomah County. Lack of skills and preparation are among the reasons why. But still you can't take fault away from the system which created the problems that become the burden for black youth to overcome."

In terms of resources that could be utilized to chip away at this problem, Ms. Mayfield says that the distribution of funds is inequitable. "If we were to look at the types of support that should be in our community I would have to say that it isn't enough. If I were to look at our

current funding situation I would have to say that we are underfunded. We have always been underfunded. In this current funding cycle we are proposing an allocation formula—a formula that will take into account the high rate of black youth in juvenile justice involvement. Until we begin to use an allocation formula the funding situation will remain inequitable. There is no way that this community receives its share of the funds to deal with its share of the problems."

Role models

As adults, one of the most important impressions we can leave on our children is the imprint of our lives. Tya Anderson from Portland's Hot Line says "It's hard for parents to serve as role models because of the double standard society has required for us to act under. We tell our kids not to lie, yet, when a bill comes due, our children hear us lie. Once I left the house with no money and I came back with groceries."

"Many parents have forgotten about role models. Their only thought is survival. Although we can't supply the physical model we can still create values within our children. We must begin to deal with their minds."

Eugene Perkins, author of "Home is a Dirty Street: The Social Oppression of Black Children," defines how the image of a role model relates to our children. "Persons who are in the street are those whom children of the ghetto [black community] will try to emulate. These men and women are products of the ghetto and as such personify the values and life styles which are transferred to the youth The choices given to black children are often narrowed to self-defeating and self-destructive models whose lifestyle only reflect the hopelessness and powerlessness that accompanies restricted mobility. (In Portland our children have some positive role models like Ronnie Herndon and the late Leon Johnson whose impact changed the lives of many a youth by reaching them at The Albina Youth Opportunity



Waiting for a friend. Many young people this age have little opportunity and few role models to help them seek a productive life. (Photo: Richard Brown)

School."

Many children, especially young men, are blinded by the glitter of the street life. Yet, when you compare the streets of Portland to those of L.A. and New York what we have in Portland is a penny-ante manifestation of what we think the street life should be. In Portland we have the so-called hustler who hustles his own mother, and Tri-Met pimps who are the first to tell you how many women they have, or the man who stands on the corner with a handful of one-dollar bills telling us how sporting he is. Many youth are around the streets to hear these tales. But they aren't getting the full story. If they decide to enter the fast life they will realize the game is not all fun, and "cop and blow" is how they spend their money. Iceberg Slim, an ex-pimp, sums up the experiences he had as a pimp: "I had

spent more than half a lifetime in a worthless, dangerous profession. If I had stayed in school, in eight years of study I could have been an M.D. or an attorney. Now here I was, slick but not smart, in a cell. I was past forty with counterfeit glory in my past and no marketable training, no future. I had been a bigger sucker than a square mark. All he loses is scratch. I had joined a club that suckered me behind bars five times."

Perkins concludes, "The black community needs positive role models that can be felt on the streets and throughout its total environment. It needs strong models which can show black children how to stand proud and firm and face their oppression head on, instead of turning their frustration inward and against their fellow blacks."

(Continued next week)

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