OPINION

End the War against Young Black Men

No justice in Trayvon Martin's death

BY MARC H. MORIAL

Being a young black man has been called the hardest job in America.

Young black men are much more likely than white men to be jobless, in jail and labeled "suspicious," sometimes with deadly consequences. Such was the case on Feb. 26, when 17-year-old high school student, Trayvon Martin, was shot and killed by a neighborhood-watch vigilante in Sanford, Florida.

The shooter, George Zimmerman, a 28-year-old Hispanic, noticed Trayvon walking through his gated community and called 911 to report a suspicious person. Instead of following the dispatcher's instructions and ending his involvement there, Zimmerman continued following Trayvon. An altercation ensued and Trayvon was shot.

Zimmerman claimed self defense and has not been charged with a crime. Trayvon's parents are both heartbroken and outraged. As Benjamin Crump, the family's lawyer put it, "If Trayvon would have been the triggerman, there would have been nothing Trayvon Martin could have said to keep police from arresting him Day 1, Hour 1."

Of the many unanswered questions in this case, two stand out. First, Trayvon Martin, who had just stopped off at a convenience store, was armed only with a bag of Skittles and a can of ice tea. George Zimmerman, who weighed over 100 pounds more than the victim, was armed with a 9 millimeter handgun. Even if there was a physical altercation between the two, why was such deadly force necessary?

Second, one of the reasons the police gave for not immediately arresting Zimmerman was that he had a "squeaky clean" record. A few days later it was discovered that Zimmerman had been arrested in 2005 for resisting arrest with battery on a police officer. Trayvon Martin, on the other hand, had no criminal record.

These and other troubling facts have led the Central Florida Urban League and others, to call on the State's Attorney's Office and the Department of Justice to conduct an independent investigation.

Central Florida Urban League president and CEO, Allie Braswell said, "A private citizen taking law enforcement into his own hands cannot be condoned. If it is found that a crime has been committed, the shooter must be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law."

This case is now generating national attention and we will be following it closely. We do not know for sure why George Zimmerman killed Trayvon Martin. But we do know, according to a 2011 College Board report, that 45 percent of African American high school graduates between the ages of 15 and 24 will end up "unemployed, incarcerated or dead."

We also know that the murder of innocent black men in the American South is nothing new. Fifty-seven years ago, the white murderers of 14-year old Emmitt Till in the Mississippi Delta were acquitted of the crime in a clear case of racial injustice.

As the father of a 10-year old African American son, I join all African American parents and Americans of conscience everywhere in calling for an end to the war against young black men and a thorough investigation of the death of Trayvon Martin.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

Suspicious Enough for a Death Sentence

Gunned down walking while black

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

Every parent raising black sons knows the dilemma: deciding how soon to have the talk. Choosing the words to explain to your beautiful child that there are some people who will never like or trust him just because of who he is, including some who should be there to protect him, but will instead have the power to hurt him.

Training him how to walk, what to say, and how to act so he won't seem like a threat. Teaching him that the burden of deflating stereotypes and reassuring other people's ignorance will always fall on him, and while that isn't fair, in some cases it may be the only way to keep him safe and alive.

But sometimes it isn't enough. It wasn't enough to protect 17-year-oldTrayvon Martin. Trayvon's English teacher said he was "an A and B student who majored in cheerfulness."

Trayvon loved building models and taking things apart, his favorite subject was math, and he dreamed of becoming a pilot and an engineer. Instead, he was gunned down by a self-appointed neighborhood watch captain vigilante who profiled him, followed him, and shot him in the chest.

His killer, George Zimmerman, saw the teenager on the street and called the police to report he looked "like he's up to no good." At the time Trayvon was walking home from the nearby 7-11 carrying a bottle of Arizona iced tea and a bag of Skittles for his younger stepbrother, leaving many people to guess that the main thing he was doing that made him look "no good" was wearing a hooded sweatshirt in the rain and walking while black. George Zimmerman's decisions made that suspicious enough to be a death sentence.

Now there is widespread outrage over the senseless killing of a young black man who was doing nothing wrong and the fact that the man who killed him has not been arrested. People are trying to make sense of the series of gun laws that allowed George Zimmerman to act as he did, starting with the Florida laws that allowed someone like Zimmerman, who had previously been charged for resisting arrest with violence and battery on a police officer, to get a permit to carry a concealed weapon in the first place.

Many more questions are being raised about Florida's "Stand Your Ground" law, which also has been described as the "shoot first, ask questions later" law, and gives the benefit of the doubt to Zimmerman and others claiming "self-defense" by allowing people who say they are in imminent danger to defend themselves. Some states limit this defense to people's own homes, but others, like Florida, allow it anywhere.

As Josh Horwitz, executive director of the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, says, this law "has turned common law—and common sense—on its head by enabling vigilantes to provoke conflicts, resolve them with deadly force, and avoid ever having to set foot in a courtroom."

The fear in Trayvon's death is that this is exactly what has happened so far: that the story told by witnesses, phone records, and Zimmerman's violent past and earlier complaints during his neighborhood patrols shows an overzealous armed aggressor who followed Trayvon even after police told him to stop, chased Trayvon down when the frightened boy tried to walk away from the stranger following him, and then shot the unarmed, 100-pounds-lighter teenager while neighbors said they heard a child crying for help.

The prospect now that Zimmerman might never set foot in a courtroom for the shooting has caused widespread frustration and fury.

Just as sadly, Trayvon's death was not unique. In 2008 and 2009, 2,582 Black children and teens were killed by gunfire. Black children and teens were only 15 percent of the child population, but 45 percent of the 5,740 child and teen gun deaths in those two years. Black males 15 to 19 years-old were eight times as likely as white males to be gun homicide victims.

The outcry over Trayvon's death is absolutely right and just. We need the same sense of outrage over every one of these child deaths. Above all, we need a nation where these senseless deaths no longer happen. But we won't get it until we have common-sense gun laws that protect children instead of guns and don't allow people like George Zimmerman to take the law into their own hands.

We won't get it until we have a culture that sees every child as a child of God and sacred, instead of seeing some as expendable statistics, and others as threats and "no good" because of the color of their skin or because they chose to walk home wearing a hood in the rain. And we won't get it until enough of us—parents and grandparents, stand up and tell our political leaders that the National Rifle Association should not be in charge of our neighborhoods, streets, gun laws, and values.

In Trayvon's case, his father Tracy speaks for what his family needs: "The family is calling for justice. We don't want our son's death to be in vain." I hope that enough voices will ensure that it is not.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund.

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