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# OPINION

## What the Verdict says About Our Culture

### A wake-up call for all Americans

BY MARC H. MORIAL



Another mother's anguish. Another unarmed black teenager in Florida shot dead for no good reason. Another indefensible instance of Stand Your Ground rearing its ugly head. Eight months after the stunning acquittal of George Zimmerman for the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, justice again has been compromised in the fatal shooting of 17-year-old Jordan Davis.

On Nov. 23, 2012, Michael Dunn, a 47-year-old white man, fired 10 rounds into a parked SUV after arguing over loud rap music coming from the vehicle with Jordan and three other unarmed African American teenagers inside. Jordan Davis was killed at the scene.

Like George Zimmerman, Michael Dunn claimed self-defense and used Florida's "Stand Your Ground" law

to bolster his justification of the killing, as his lawyer stated in his closing argument, "His honor will further tell you that if Michael Dunn was in a public place where he had a legal right to be, he had no duty to retreat and had the right to stand his ground and meet force with force, including deadly force."

Dunn claims Jordan Davis brandished a gun so Dunn shot first. But there is one big problem with his story. Jordan Davis had no gun and neither did anyone else in the SUV.

A jury found Dunn guilty of four counts, including three for the attempted murders of Jordan's three friends. But they deadlocked on the fifth count — first-degree murder in the killing of Jordan.

Dunn may spend the rest of his life in prison for the four lesser counts. But the failure to convict him of murdering Jordan Davis raises critical questions about the devaluing of the lives of young black males in America and confirms the need for a repeal of Florida's repugnant Stand Your Ground law which

sanctions the use of deadly force by anyone who merely thinks—or claims—they are in danger from a perceived assailant.

Regardless of whether Dunn or Zimmerman chose to fully exercise Stand Your Ground provisions in their defense, this law was very clearly at the center of both cases. It is even clearer that the "shoot first" laws across the country are contributing to needless bloodshed and are ripe for unequal application based on race.

A recent Urban Institute analysis found that in Stand Your Ground states, "When the shooter is white and the victim is black, the justifiable homicide rate is 34 percent. When the situation is reversed and the shooter is black and the victim is white, shootings are ruled to be justifiable in only slightly more than 3 percent of cases."

Last September, the National Urban League, in collaboration with the bipartisan Mayors Against Illegal Guns coalition and VoteVets, issued a report showing that in the 22 states with "Stand Your Ground"

laws, the justifiable homicide rate has risen by an average of 53 percent in the five years following their passage. In Florida, justifiable homicides have increased by 200 percent since the law took effect in 2005.

These statistics and their underlying racial disparities, tell us that expansive self-defense laws such as Stand Your Ground are doing more harm than good, and when coupled with implicit racial bias and unfounded preconceptions, young black males are especially at risk.

Dunn's own bigoted words in letters from jail clearly show his disregard for their lives, as he wrote: "The jail is full of blacks and they all act like thugs. This may sound a bit radical but if more people would arm themselves and kill these (expletive) idiots when they're threatening you, eventually they may take the hint and change their behavior." and "The fear is that we may get a predominantly black jury and therefore, unlikely to get a favorable verdict.

Sad, but that's where this country is still at. The good news is that the surrounding counties are predominantly white and republican and supporters of gun rights!" This view and those like it are why we must commit today to action against the devaluing of our young black lives.

Even as the Michael Dunn trial was getting underway, we learned that Trayvon Martin's killer, George Zimmerman, had planned to capitalize on the death of a young black male by participating in a "celebrity" boxing match — when his only claim to fame is killing an unarmed Black teenager — and getting off.

Such a blatant disregard for the value of a black male's life should be a wake-up call to all Americans. We must intensify our fight against Stand Your Ground laws — and the underlying mentality — that justify the killing of young black men whose only "offense" is being black.

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

## Twin Tragedies of Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis

### All children deserve same benefit of doubt

BY DENEEN L. BROWN

On a cold night this winter, 60 African-American teenagers lined up in a banquet room. Each wore a suit and tie. Each had a straight-A grade point average.



"I wish the media were here now," said the president of the organization recognizing the students in one of the best school systems in the country. "If there were some shooting, they would be here."

I was sitting at a table in that banquet hall, not as a reporter but as a mother. I wept at the truth of that statement. And I wondered why our society doesn't see our black teenage boys for who they are — children.

Why do these kids not have the privilege of walking freely through the world, un-judged? Why don't they get the privilege "benefit of the doubt" bestows on other children?

I wish the world could see what a black mother sees — how our sons laugh and study late at night. How before the sun rises, they're up early, studying even more for a physics

test. Some of them stand taller than 6 feet, but they still giggle at a plate of fresh-baked cookies. Or talk with their friends about calculus, chemistry, and AP exams. They pore over Shakespeare's works, analyzing Othello's relationship with Iago.

But that's a privilege we mothers of black children don't often have.

Instead we have these conversations with our teens:

Mom: Did you see the story out of Florida?

Son: Which story?

Mom: The one about the man who shot the black teenager because his music was too loud?

Son: Oh, yeah. I saw that one.

Mom: What could you have done in that situation to avoid it?

Son: I don't know.

Mom: No, really, let's talk about. What could you do if you were ever in a situation like that?

Son: I guess I could just turn the music down and leave the store.

Mom: That is a good idea — avoidance.

Son: But it just seems like the man wanted to shoot somebody. Sometimes, I worry when I run home at night.

Mom: You shouldn't have to worry. You should be able to enjoy your freedom. You should be able to be a child and not carry that burden.

Son: I know.

Mom: But just know to listen to your gut. That inner-voice you have within you is the voice of God. You will be OK.

She says that last line with overt confidence, but inside she's torn up. Every time she reads a headline about another black teenager being killed, it hurts. It's a feeling of fear so deep that it rides an inner core.

She thinks about all those mothers who probably had the same conversations.

What did Emmett Till's mother say to him before he went South, before he was beaten and thrown into the Tallahatchie River?

What were the instructions of the mother of Trayvon Martin, who was fatally shot by a man who stalked him as he walked home on a rainy night?

What were the conversations Jordan Davis had with his mother? Davis was fatally shot by a white man who opened fire on him and three other teenagers as they sat in an SUV outside a convenience store.

Prosecutors argued that Michael Dunn shot up the SUV after complaining the teens' music was too loud.

A Jacksonville jury recently found Dunn guilty of attempted second-degree murder. But the jury deadlocked on the charge of first-degree murder.

Jordan's father, Ron Davis, told reporters that his son was a good kid.

"There are a lot of good kids out there," Davis said. "They shouldn't live in fear and walk around the streets worrying about if someone has a problem with somebody else that if they are shot, it is just collateral damage."

Black parents feel that father's pain and wrestle with perpetual

questions: How do we protect young black male children from a world that seems to prey on them, in a society that considers them to be menaces, guilty until proven innocent?

How do we get the world to see who our sons are: children with universal privileges that come with being fully human?

DeNeen L. Brown is a Washington Post reporter.

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