

## DETROIT A SAD LEADER IN CHILDREN SHOT DEAD

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**Detroit**, a city long inured to bullets and body counts, has one more **sad** statistic to contemplate **as** 1986 draws to a close: Its **children** are being killed by gunfire at a rate apparently unmatched **in** other major cities.

Thirty-three youngsters 16 and under had been **shot** to death **as** of Saturday. Eight other **children** were killed by gunfire, either apparent suicides or accidents. Of the 41 fatalities, 33 were boys and eight were girls; one was white, the rest were black.

A record murder rate is nothing new to **Detroit**, which led the nation's 10 largest cities **in** homicides per capita **in** 1985 and racked up 536 slayings from January to the end of October this year, according to the most recent police figures.

But the homicide epidemic, for years the leading cause of death among black males 18 to 24, now is seeping downward to claim their younger brothers and sisters. On the city's meanest streets, a deadly conjunction of kids, drugs and guns is taking its toll of youth.

No other city for which figures are available seems to match **Detroit**'s rate of **child** slaughter. Houston came closest, with 26 deaths, but that figure includes at least six **child** abuse cases. **Detroit**'s toll of 41 **dead** by firearms does not include **child** abuse cases or deaths by other weapons. **In** Chicago, the toll for 1986 is 15, excluding **child** abuse and arson deaths. And **in** 1986, with 41 fatalities and another 317 **children** wounded, **Detroit** topped its 1985 toll when 29 **children** were **shot** to death and 237 were wounded. **In** 1984, there were 16 **dead** youngsters and 192 wounded by gunfire.

Five of the **dead Detroit children** this year were slain **in** crack houses, places where cocaine is dispensed **in** an illicit but prosperous retail trade. Four other slayings may have been drug-related, according to police.

But some experts believe an even greater number of the killings is attributable to **Detroit**'s tolerance for drugs and firearms. They say the torrent of cocaine, the carloads of guns -- and the city's inability or unwillingness to restrict either -- have created a climate where life is cheap, lawlessness is the norm and murder is an everyday affair.

THE BALLOONING of the juvenile homicide rate is no surprise, said Calmeze Dudley, a psychiatrist and director of Sinai Day Hospital **in** West Bloomfield who has treated troubled **Detroit** area adolescents.

"It disturbs me," said Dudley. "But it's consistent with a number of cultural calamities rolling downhill, so to speak. If you recall, the cocaine epidemic proliferated with older users five or six years ago, and now it's not at all astounding to see the use of crack and free-base cocaine **in** the middle schools, among kids **as young as** 12. Gun usage and ownership follows similar phenomenologic lines."

The easy rush of drugs and guns is not the only cultural calamity enmeshing young people here. There is the explosion of single-parent, female-headed families; the high dropout rate; the earlier onset of sexual activity and pregnancy among teenagers and the endemic unemployment among black men.

There is also the lack of faith **in** police, courts and other institutions to respond to conditions on the street, and the pervasive anger, envy and low self-esteem among some young black males, who make up for their feelings of failure and powerlessness by toting and using guns, experts say.

The result is carnage among **Detroit 's children** .

EIGHT OF THE 41 firearm deaths among youths this year were suicides or accidentally self-inflicted; the youngest victim was 14. Among the 33 homicides are a handful of cases **in** which kids who had never been **in** trouble were gunned down by strangers because the youngsters were **in** the wrong place at the wrong time.

But **in** many cases -- just **as in** adult homicides -- there is a striking similarity between shooter and victim. **In** the high majority of cases **in** which the police identified a suspect, the victim and suspect knew each other.

The victims, even if they were not directly involved **in** the drug trade or other criminal behavior, tended to float on the edges of the same aimless, outlaw world their assailants inhabited. They included dropouts and truants, kids who picked fights and pursued grudges, who had ready access to guns or hung around with people who did. More than half lived **in** single- parent families or were shunted off to other relatives at some time during their lives.

They died **in** quarrels with boyfriends or the crossfire of other people's battles. They were killed **as** their companions clowned with guns that were supposed to be empty. They died **in** penny-ante robberies or **in** revenge for petty insults. They were killed while taunting their killers or hanging around crack houses, and their stories, after a while, run together **in** a weary chronicle of wasted lives and casual death.

"ALL THE PATTERNS you describe here, all the kinds of reasons why people seem to kill each other have been evident for years **in** the 18-to-25-year-old range," said Darnell Hawkins, associate professor of sociology and black studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Hawkins blames the violence primarily on long-term joblessness and hopelessness among young minorities and, **in** lesser degree, on the turf wars that go with the drug business, which often is perceived by young men **as** the only ready and remunerative source of employment.

More young black **children** are growing up **in** the state of permanent economic deprivation that has scarred their older brothers, Hawkins said, and the youngsters are reacting the same way. The 18-25 age group is already **a** "slaughterhouse" among urban blacks and Hispanics, he said. "What is going to be the pattern **in** urban areas when these groups of 10-, 11- and 12- year-olds become 18-to-25?" Hawkins asked.

That many blacks are moving into the comfortable middle class, said Hawkins, only sharpens the anger of kids who are left behind, aware that with neither diploma nor job ahead of them, they are destined to be life's losers. "They feel doubly deprived," said Hawkins. "Everybody's got the goodies that they are denied."

**DETROIT** ALSO is suffering from the notion that people are on their own if they want protection, justice or retribution, said Walter Allen, associate professor of sociology and Afro-American/African studies at the University of Michigan.

"Police are the folks who come **in** and clean up after the fact, take **a** few notes, arrest whoever is left standing and then go away," Allen said. Courts are viewed **as** ineffectual **in** resolving conflicts or keeping dangerous people off the street. "Police will tell you homicide is something you can't prevent," Allen said. "I don't buy that. You can prevent it **in** middle-class communities." The key, he said, is how quickly and effectively police and other institutions respond to the events that lead up to homicide -- the threats, fights, bullying and assaults that are the stuff of daily life for youngsters **in** some neighborhoods.

"We've done it **in** the area of domestic violence by making it very clear at the beginning of the cycle that if men assault women they will pay **a** price for it **in** arrest and prosecution," Allen said. But while authorities are figuring out how to do that with violence-prone youngsters, Allen said, "Those guns have to be gotten off the street."

**WITHOUT JOBS** or hope for the future, young black men skip marriage, but not sex, and the generation of fatherless kids already on the streets is repeating the cycle: **Children** are conceiving **children** they can't support and whose mothers they will never marry -- **a** guarantee of poverty and family instability for years to come.

The connection between being without **a** father and juvenile crime showed up strikingly **in a** study of 250 young male offenders done **in** 1979-80 by Isaiah McKinnon, former head of the **Detroit** Police Department gang squad, now an adjunct professor and director of security for the University of **Detroit** .

McKinnon, with 8th (Northwest) Precinct Police Inspector David Simmons, asked each youngster: "Whom do you admire most **in** your life?" About 90 percent named mothers or grandmothers. A few said champion boxer Muhammad Ali or basketball star Julius Erving. About 98 percent, McKinnon said, had no positive male role models. Most never mentioned their fathers.

McKinnon said: "If **a** kid tells you, 'I don't know where my father is,' or 'My father is **a** terrible or rotten person,' that obviously says something about his background and about his future and about how he views himself and other members of society, and the consequences of that are what we see right now **in** terms of crime."

ALTHOUGH MANY of the nation's largest cities share **Detroit** 's conditions of idleness and despair among young blacks, few seem to share its juvenile homicide rate. Comparisons are difficult because police departments differ **in** the way they break down homicide statistics, and many of those called by the Free Press do not keep separate records of victims under 16. (Neither does the **Detroit** Police Department, officially. The figures used by the Free Press were compiled from the department's daily homicide reports.) Recent figures were unavailable for New York or Los Angeles.

The latest figures available from other cities, however, seem to show that **Detroit** 's 1986 juvenile homicide rate is unusual:

- \* Chicago recorded 35 homicide victims 15 and under by Dec. 16, but five of those were arson victims and 15 were **child** abuse cases, leaving only 15 homicides by all other means, including guns and knives.
- \* Philadelphia had 20 homicide victims age 19 and under **in** the first half of 1986, but police said most of those were older teenagers. "We don't have **a** lot of kids 16 and under that are victims of homicides," said Detective Jerry Whartenby.
- \* Houston tallied 26 homicide victims age 16 and younger by mid- December, including at least six who were killed by their parents **in** two separate family tragedies. Only three were killed by firearms.
- \* San Diego had 16 juvenile homicides **in** the 22 months ending with October 1986, four of them by firearms.
- \* Phoenix had four homicide victims under 16, only one killed with **a** handgun. The suspect was an eight-year old playing with **a** gun.
- \* Several cities did not have 1986 figures available. But **in** 1985, Dallas had **a** total of 12 juvenile homicides, nine with guns. Atlanta had six juvenile homicides and Washington, D.C., had five.

"WE HAVE PAID too high a price for the privilege of bearing firearms," said psychiatrist Dudley. "The victims of that privilege are most disturbingly adolescents and **children** ."

**Detroit** 's murder rates have been so high for so long that they may now be self-perpetuating, as juveniles and adults alike assume that gunplay is a fact of life. "The more people who do something, the more the assumption is that we can't all be crazy," said Dr. Martin Gold, psychiatrist and researcher at U- M's Institute for Social Research.

Even among delinquents, Gold said, there is an acceptable range of behavior, with some actions regarded as ordinary and permissible, others as so kooky and bizarre that people shy away from the perpetrator.

While Gold cautioned against drawing conclusions from one year's rash of juvenile homicides, he wondered if homicide may be becoming socially acceptable in some circles in **Detroit** . "I wonder if youngsters are less likely to refrain because it's OK, you gain a reputation, you will not be shunned by the other kids," Gold said.

**IN DETROIT** and elsewhere, it is still a mystery precisely why some young people become delinquent and others in similar circumstances do not. The ones who do have "very fragile, fragile egos," said Rosalind Griffin, a forensic psychiatrist in Southfield. Street-smart but poor in almost every other measure of mental ability, they are creatures of impulse; they seem unable to consider the alternatives, to visualize the future, to think about the consequences of their actions or to empathize with friends or victims.

With a gun, Griffin said, "They think they're making history. It gives them a greater sense of power, of control. That's very tempting to a 14-year-old, to think, 'Me, getting respect of someone twice my size and age, getting my name on the front page.' That will certainly get them through the night. Tomorrow is another problem."

But Griffin insisted that violent **children** and the victims who flutter in their orbit have the capacity to choose something different.

The offenders "seek out evidence that proves what they want to believe. If you want to believe that having a gun changes people's behavior, then you seek out people who prove that," she said. Such people, she said, seem easier to find in **Detroit** than in some other places.

Of the victims, she said, "It's rare that you find a naive victim that's being bullied or beaten up." Most **children** learn early the language and the trappings of the troublemakers, and by their teens, she said, they can choose to flirt with violence or flee from it.

On the streets of **Detroit** in 1986, too many **children** chose wrong.

How the 33 died

Many of the 33 youths 16 and under who were **shot** to death by others **in Detroit** this year were killed under similar circumstances:

- \* Six were **shot** by people playing with guns.
- \* Five were **shot in** suspected drug houses.
- \* Five were hit with bullets apparently intended for others nearby.
- \* Four were **shot in** grudge fights.
- \* Two were **shot** by their boyfriends.
- \* Two were **shot in** robbery attempts.
- \* Two were **shot** at parties.

Joe Swickard

CUTLINE:

John and Vera Rucker still look for an answer **in** the slaying of their 16-year-old daughter, Melody, below left.

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