

TREATING SHOOTINGS AS A DISEASE HEALTH EXPERTS JOIN FIGHT AGAINST YOUTH VIOLENCE

Detroit Free Press (MI) - Sunday, December 18, 1988

Author: JOE SWICKARD Free Press Staff Writer

Sometimes the child victims of this epidemic die instantly. Sometimes they struggle for days, weeks, months to breathe, to move, to see, before death cheats them out of their futures. Sometimes they live on, cruelly scarred.

Not even polio, that indiscriminate child killer andcrippler that terrified the city a generation ago, stalked Detroit's children with the vengeance of the guns of 1988.

Detroit's child-killing epidemic is the result of gunfire, a hail of bullets that has wiped out 52 Detroit children younger than 17 and wounded another 237 in 1988.

Black male youths bore the overwhelming burden in this year's death toll; they accounted for 39 victims, and 10 black female youths died. Two white male youths and one white female youth have been killed by guns this year.

Of the 52 gun deaths, six were suicides; in two others involving apparently self-inflicted wounds, it could not be determined whether the deaths were suicides or accidents.

The Free Press has kept the grisly count for three years. In 1986, it was 43 dead; in 1987, 37.

Michigan public health officials are beginning to mobilize to attack the gunfire epidemic.

"The public health community is just waking up to" homicide as a sickness to be attacked like an epidemic, with the traditional medical researchers' weapons, said Dr. Richard Levinson, director of the city's Health Department.

Some aspects of the problem, such as the economy, "are obviously beyond" the reach of his department, he said, but "others such as substance abuse are things we can deal with. . . . It wastes lives and needs our concerted attention. When there are so many deep-seated causes, many people would shy away from it. But the situation is so critical we must use the best resources we have."

Even the Detroit polio epidemic of 1939, when the opening of school was delayed to stem its spread, pales in comparison to 1988's toll of children killed and injured by gunfire. In 1939, when the city's population was about 1.6 million, polio was blamed for 22 deaths in the city. It was no respecter of age -- 10 of the dead were children. Many other child victims suffered permanent paralysis or crippling effects.

In response to the polio epidemic, frightened parents drew their young closer, kept them from parks, pools, theaters, beaches or anywhere the killer was likely to move among them.

Newspapers and magazines warned of symptoms and suggested protective measures. It seemed that polio -- with its prospect of death or paralysis -- was a childhood terror without equal.

But only in 1924 did polio take more than 52 Detroit lives in one year. That year, 60 people of all ages were killed by polio. The next-highest years were 1946 and 1950, when 27 victims of all ages died.

Measured by polio's grim standard, gunfire has reached epidemic proportions in Detroit, with a current population of about 1.1 million, and qualifies as a major public health concern, health officials and others agree. Medical officials and researchers in Detroit are starting to examine homicides and violence in that context.

They face a task law enforcement officials struggle with every day.

"The killings, the drugs, guns and violent crime are related," Wayne County Prosecutor John O'Hair said. "It's been going on for so long that there is no reason to believe or to hope for an immediate change. . . .

"This is not surprising for a number of obvious reasons: Drugs are almost everywhere, guns are available and school drop-outs. When you take kids who are uneducated, unskilled and uninterested and place them in a high-risk environment where easy money is to be made through criminal activity and the criminal justice system is without great accountability -- well, you're going to have the problems we have now."

The war against crime, with children often the victims, is being fought the way the Vietnam war was, he said.

"Washington -- the government -- was willing to make the commitment to contain the situation, but not willing to make the all-out effort necessary to bring it to an end," he said.

The Detroit Police Department refused to comment on this year's juvenile death toll. Attempts to set up interviews with ranking police officials through the department's public information section were rebuffed.

"No one will respond to that," said Lt. Phil Foster.

Likewise, Mayor Coleman Young and his spokesmen declined to be interviewed on the increasing **shootings** of juveniles.

One of the public health experts studying the child death toll as an epidemic is Dr. John Waller of Wayne State University's Department of Community Medicine. Waller is the former director of Detroit's Health Department.

He said there has been no aggressive response to the killing and wounding of Detroit's children, in part, because "the non-black community sees that it is mainly black-on-black violence, so they think it doesn't affect them."

But violence is a legitimate health concern, Waller said, in light of federal studies that have found homicide the "No. 1 killer of black males from 15 to 45. And that is just homicides. When you add to that the hospitalizations of people who don't die and the disabilities sustained, you get some idea of the scope of the health problem.

"Sometimes, after work, I read the paper or see the stories on television news and tears just run down my eyes, and I think I can't take it anymore."

Experts agree that if it were germs -- not guns -- infecting 289 children with an 18 percent mortality rate, there would be clinics in every neighborhood and Jerry Lewis- style telethons clogging the airwaves.

In Waller's preliminary study, he is charting violence in the city's neighborhoods as he would track an outbreak of **disease** . Using his own research and eight years of police reports and statistics, he is trying to identify the factors that contribute to the violence and its spread so that the causes can be isolated.

Likewise, neighborhoods where violence is less widespread can be studied to see which factors inhibited its growth.

Allen Bukoff, one of Waller's assistants, said the epidemic may be greater than officials imagine.

Preliminary checks of hospital emergency rooms show that many assault victims get treatment, but never report the attack to police, he said. Compounding the situation are attacks for which no hospital treatment is sought.

Part of the problem with gun deaths, the health department's Levinson said, is that there is not a single cause to isolate and cure.

"The problem is more multifaceted," he said. "The factors are much more nebulous."

Racism, poverty, drugs, weakened families and communities and the widespread availability of firearms are well- recognized factors in the death rate, Levinson, Waller and others said.

And the drug culture feeds the growth of violence, the experts agree.

Drug dealing organizations such as Young Boys Inc., which used teenagers and sometimes pre-teens in important positions, introduced a lethal factor into the city, Waller said.

"It's a planned strategy to sell drugs in an area with the least resources to resist and then recruit the kids into the operation," he said.

Guns are an essential part of the drug trade, he said, and the death and injury they can spread extend beyond the immediate sellers and buyers.

The drug trade helps create and sustain an atmosphere of violence within communities it infects. The brutal efficiency -- rich rewards for success balanced against beating or death for failure -- can become part of the norm, he said.

And Wayne County Juvenile Court Referee Mary Ann Quinn said parents can't always be counted on to help their children. Some parents, she said, are ensnared in drugs themselves and may profit from a child's drug-dealing or be supplied through the child.

The result, she said, is that "you do not necessarily have a close working relationship between that parent and any system, the school, the court, the police -- anybody. That's just gone."

Dr. Don Coleman, chairman of Michigan State University's Community Health Department and head of the Black Child and Family Institute, said he is "amazed at the level of access to drugs and guns by young people."

Many young people seize on drugs for quick profits without recognizing other "tracks for upward mobility," he said.

Tackling social problems might seem an unlikely approach to epidemic control, but Dr. Patrick O'Carroll, of the Centers for **Disease** Control in Atlanta, said other great killers of the past were tamed by correcting social ills.

One of those killers, typhoid, raged through London 100 years ago. Its toll was greatest in the fetid slums, where some said the poor lived in conditions that reflected their squalid nature. Crime and violence were rampant.

"In old London, it couldn't be worse," O'Carroll said.

But when housing codes cleaned up the worst of the slums, when clean water was provided and sewage was removed, typhoid and related **diseases** were brought under control even before the exact causes were identified and before antibiotics came onto the scene, he said.

"Yes, these were massive social changes -- and a lot of people opposed them -- but they helped wipe out that **disease** ," he said.

"If you chip at the major factors, the situation is not **as** hopeless **as** it seems when you look at the big mass of problems."

Victims of **shootings**

Victims 16 and under for the past three years in Detroit

1986 1987 1988

shootings * 365 336 290

Deaths 43 37 52

*Estimated

SOURCE: Detroit Police reports

Caption: Map; Chart

Edition: METRO FINAL

Section: COM

Page: 5E;

Index Terms: JUVENILE ; SHOOTING; DEATH ; DETROIT ; INJURY ; STATISTIC ;
MAJOR STORY

Record Number: 8802250334

Copyright (c) 1988 Detroit Free Press