

HOMICIDE'S TRAGIC TOLL : 10 CHILDREN IN 16 WEEKS - DETROIT'S YOUTH ARE BEING KILLED IN A YEAR OF SHOCKING VIOLENCE. AS OFFICIALS LOOK FOR REASONS AND SOLUTIONS, A SADDENED CITY WEEPS.

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Alesia dreamed of becoming a pediatrician. Cherrel relished playing in her school's marching band. Destinee loved Mickey Mouse and eating Doritos.

Though each child was unique in life, they shared the same horrible fate -- death by a bullet.

Their slayings have combined with others to give Detroit an alarming distinction: a youth homicide rate that has put the city on a path to outpace the nation's biggest cities this year.

Ten children 16 and younger have been homicide victims in metro Detroit since January -- eight from gunshots, according to a Free Press analysis of medical examiner records in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties. All were killed in Detroit -- giving the city a child homicide rate higher than Chicago, Los Angeles and seven other large cities surveyed by the newspaper.

Tiffany Vaughn, an eighth-grader at Butzel Middle School on the city's east side, said everyone in Michigan should be upset by the number of children who have been killed in Detroit this year.

"How would you feel if somebody did that to someone in your family?" asked Tiffany, 13, one of dozens of young people who attended an antiviolence forum last weekend. "Some of these kids had no chance to experience life. You have to think about them. You can't just think about yourself."

Detroit's homicide rate for children in the first quarter of this year is 3.5 homicides for every 100,000 children.

Of particular concern to police, prosecutors and community leaders is that nearly as many Detroit children have died from gun violence in four months as did in all of last year. In 2001, 10 children ages 16 and younger were fatally shot in Detroit, according to police.

"The violence is out of control," Wayne County Prosecutor Michael Duggan said Monday. "We've just got to chip away at it."

Michelle Oliver has seen first-hand what guns can do. Her oldest child, Alesia Robinson, 16, was killed on March 28 while sitting on her front porch with friends on Detroit's east side. Now, every time Oliver walks into her home, she pictures Alesia on that porch, bloody and dying.

Alesia, a junior at Kettering High School, was shot in the face by her boyfriend, police said. Accidental? Intentional? Oliver, 33, said she can't answer those questions. But Alesia's boyfriend, Darron Kilgore, 19, has been charged with first-degree murder and is awaiting trial.

Oliver, who has five other children, said she needs to know why her Lesi was killed. These days, Oliver just tries to stay busy. She spends much of her time focusing on her 13-year-old son who has leukemia.

"I just don't think people realize the effects of what a gun can do," she said. "It's crazy. And it's stupid and senseless. Most of these shootings are."

In the crossfire

The randomness of some of the killings is what has law enforcement officials most concerned. Many of Detroit's young homicide victims weren't the intended targets, police say.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the city's child homicide rate soared and the number of children being fatally shot was 30, 40 or more a year, many of the kids were slinging dope or gang banging.

Many of the children shot to death this year -- ages 3, 7 and 8 -- were simply caught in the crossfire of other people's battles.

Destinee Thomas, 3, was eating chips and watching television on a Saturday afternoon, March 23, when rounds from an AK47 riddled her home and killed her. Another victim, Brianna Cadell, 8, slept in her first-floor bedroom when someone opened fire on her home April 10 and an AK47 round pierced a wall and killed her.

But the drug trade still plays a role in the deaths of these children, Duggan said. He noted that Brianna was killed near the most popular corner in Detroit for getting drugs: Seven Mile Road and I-75.

"That location is riddled with drug dealers, right on the Oakland County border and serving Detroit and large volumes of suburban customers," Duggan said.

The same problems

Marvin Zalman, interim chairman of Wayne State University's criminal justice department, said law enforcement officers often tell him that the issues of guns and drugs that plagued Detroit in the 1980s -- when the city was called the nation's Murder Capital -- still exist.

"I don't see that crack has disappeared from the streets of Detroit -- there's still a drug problem," Zalman said. "I don't see any of the factors changing. There's still a population in Detroit that is afflicted with poverty. There's still a proliferation of guns in Detroit. There's still some family dysfunction. Social ills exist in our community. It's not a secret."

"There's a lot of overlap of problems," he said. "But every injured child is a matter that should concern everyone in society. The criminal justice system -- prosecutors, police, judges -- have a role to play, but it would be much better if these things never happened."

Duggan explained the reason for the deaths succinctly: early release of criminals from the Wayne County Jail due to crowding; 5,000 people in the county roaming free with felony warrants and 5,000 more with probation violations who haven't been picked up.

For example, Cedric Pipes, charged with first-degree murder in the shooting death of Destinee Thomas, was wanted for numerous probation violations at the time of her slaying.

"You've got a complete collapse of the system and the result is that dangerous people are out on the street every day who shouldn't be there," Duggan said. "In almost everyone of these cases, you see suspects with long criminal records."

Sometimes the dispute that results in a child's death involves as little as \$40.

That was the value of the car radio allegedly purchased with counterfeit money that police and prosecutors believe led to the fatal shooting of Ajanee Pollard, 7, while she sat in a car with her family. Three of Ajanee's siblings and their mother also were wounded in the Feb. 25 shooting.

Their grandfather Harold Pollard Jr. has flashbacks every time he reads the newspaper or sees a TV news report about another child killed. He thinks back in horror to when Ajanee died as the family's car was hit with more than a dozen bullets.

Ajanee's younger brother, Jason, nicknamed B.J., was just recently released from the hospital and is finally back at school and able to play outdoors. But the 6-year-old has extensive physical therapy and counseling ahead of him.

"This family is not the same as it used to be," said Pollard, 51. "I know I'm not. When my grandbaby died, something was lost in me forever.

"Those people doing this are killing our future and we as taxpayers foot the bill for them to sit in prison. It's senseless."

B.J. still asks about his sister.

"He tells me that she is an angel and he wishes he could see her," Pollard said. "I see her, too. I look at my grandchildren and I see her face."

By the numbers

Nationally and in Michigan, the number of children killed in homicides has been on the decline since the early 1990s.

Nationally, 1,008 children 16 and younger were killed in 2000, 384 by firearms, the most recent figures available from the FBI.

Alfred Blumstein, a professor of public policy at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, said he's most shocked by the younger children getting killed randomly in Detroit.

Blumstein attributes the national decline in child homicides to a drop in demand for crack cocaine and a healthy economy before the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The peak of youth deaths came in 1993, Blumstein said, at the height of the crack market.

"What we saw starting in 1985 was the recruitment of young kids, primarily into the drug markets in part because of the growing demand for crack," he said. "Older dealers were swept off the streets and responded by recruiting young kids."

Across Detroit, people are looking for answers and ways to stem the violence.

On Saturday, young people like Tiffany Vaughn met at Second Ebenezer Baptist Church in Detroit to discuss ways to reduce gun violence in the city.

Detroit police are working to organize another community meeting on the issue next month.

Sgt. Ricardo Moore, a Detroit police spokesman, said it's time for the community to rally together and come up with answers. A date and place for the meeting have not been set.

"Quality of life is an abstract issue," Moore said. "We see children getting killed and the only way to attack an abstract issue is through concrete solutions."

"The faith community can reach the masses. The politicians can help get the business community involved. We need a collaborative effort of people getting together and sharing ideas of how to resolve these problems."

Getting others involved

Clementine Barfield, founder of the Detroit-based Save Our Sons and Daughters, said she she hopes that change will occur through a citywide peace movement and community involvement in youths' lives.

Barfield started SOSAD after her son, Derick Barfield, was killed in 1986.

That year, 653 homicides involving people of all ages occurred in Detroit. In contrast, last year Detroit had 395 homicides.

Although the numbers have dropped, the **toll** is still too high, community leaders said.

Barfield said Detroit children -- all children -- have a right to be safe as they sleep in their beds, lie on their couches to watch television or ride down streets in cars.

"But nothing has changed," Barfield said. "We never stop having high numbers of children being killed. We've let them down by letting their environment become so violent, filled with guns and drugs.

"If we don't do something to offer hope, there will be no balance to the death and chaos we see every day."

To change the culture of gun violence, Duggan pointed to programs like Project Safe Neighborhoods which calls for the prosecution of criminals with guns in federal court, instead of state courts, which often leads to stiffer penalties. He would also like to see Wayne County Circuit Court try 250 criminal cases a month. In April, the court tried 146, according to Duggan.

Project Destinee, a collaboration between Duggan's office and the Detroit Police Department, is aimed at dismantling two rival drug gangs allegedly at the center of Destinee Thomas' shooting death. The goal is to topple the drug rings at once, instead of rounding up drug suspects on a weekly basis.

"It's a six-month project," Duggan said. "Until we take them down, we don't have credibility."

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(SIDEBAR)

TO GET INVOLVED

- * To report tips about the unsolved shooting of 8-year-old Brianna Caddell or any other slaying, call Detroit police at 313-596-2260 anytime or the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office at 313-224-6644.
- * For more information about the Detroit Police Department's planned forum on gun violence, call Sgt. Ricardo Moore at 313-596-1393.
- * The Million Mom March, founded in 1999, is a national grassroots organization that works to prevent gun death and injury and to support victims and survivors of gun violence. For more information call 1-888-989-MOMS. Leave a message and someone will call back. Or go to www.millionmommarch.org.

To get help:

- * Save Our Sons and Daughters provides individual grief counseling and support groups for children and adults. For information call 313-361-5200 or 877-361-5282 anytime.

* Parents of Murdered Children Inc. Metro Detroit Chapter: 248-360-9692 or
www.pomc.com/metrodetroit/

Caption: Chart NOVIA KNIGHT/Detroit Free Press. Photo WILLIAM ARCHIE/Detroit Free Press. Photo PAUL GONZALEZ VIDELA/Detroit Free Press.

Alyah Pollard, 4, and her brother Jason Pollard, 6, play in their northwest Detroit home Monday. Alyah was shot in the leg and still has trouble walking. Jason spent weeks in the hospital with internal injuries.

CHERREL THOMAS, 15

At Mt. Hope Memorial Gardens in Livonia, Cherrel's grave awaits a permanent marker.

AJANEE POLLARD, 7

Wilted flowers mark Ajanee's grave site at Knollwood Memorial Park in Canton.

CHRISTOPHER JAMES, 11

Plywood covers Christopher's grave so Gethsemane Cemetery workers can dig a grave nearby.

BRIANNA CADDELL, 8

Straw covers the ground to help grass grow and cover Brianna's final resting place in Forest Lawn Cemetery in Detroit. No one is in custody for her April 10 killing.

DESTINEE THOMAS, 3

The headstone ordered for Destinee arrived with a typographical error. When the new one comes, it will replace this metal plate in Detroit's Trinity Cemetery.

Memo: CHILDREN FIRST. **HOMICIDE'S TRAGIC TOLL** . SEE CHARTS ("CHILD HOMICIDES NATIONALLY" and "DYING YOUNG") IN MICROFILM, PAGE 6A. SEE RELATED STORY BY YOUSSEF, PAGE 6A. SEE ALSO STATE EDITION, PAGE 1A. SIDEBAR ATTACHED.

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