

Examining the Real Causes of Gang Violence in Chicago and Other Cities

by Allan C. Brownfeld

ALEXANDRIA, VA -At the beginning of the school year, 16-year-old Derrion Albert was beaten to death in Chicago as he headed for a bus stop near Christian Fenger Academy High School, where a melee broke out between feuding factions. In the beating, one teenager swung a plank, knocking Albert down. Others hit him as he struggled to get away. Four youths stand charged with his murder.

We know of this case because of the video capturing the violence that is all too typical of Chicago and other urban inner-city schools. More than 125 people ages 25 and younger have been killed in Chicago this year. Chicago public school officials say that 290 students enrolled in the nation's third largest school system have been shot since September 2008.

Because of the attention the video produced, U. S. Attorney General Eric Holder, Jr., joined by Education Secretary Arne Duncan, former head of the Chicago public schools, traveled to Chicago and met with public school students and elected officials. Mr. Duncan defended his own actions in Chicago, which, critics argue, led to his closing dozens of Chicago public schools and reassigning thousands of students to campuses outside of their neighborhoods -- and often across gang lines. This has led to a spike in violence that has turned increasingly deadly, according to many activists, parents, and students.

Before the 2006 school year, an average of 10 to 15 public school students were fatally shot each year. That number soared to 24 deadly shootings in the 2006-07 school year, and 34 deaths and 290 shootings in 2008.

At the Chicago meeting, Holder declared that, "Youth violence is not a Chicago problem any more than it is a black problem, a white problem, or a Hispanic problem. It is something that affects communities big and small and people of all races and colors. It is an American problem." In fact, the situation is more complex. Almost all of the teenage victims in Chicago -- and almost all of the perpetrators -- were African-Americans. The same is true in other urban inner-city school districts. We ignore reality at a high price, for if we do not recognize the real problems we face, we are unlikely to resolve them.

The Washington Post, in its report about the Chicago violence, quotes Mieshe Houston, 28, who grew up near the latest murder scene. She declared: "It's going to take a lot more than policies and police. It's poverty, drugs, rap music, the media. There are a lot of single-parent homes and parents on drugs, so kids don't want to be home. And when they go outside, there's trouble."

The dilemma of an enduring underclass in our urban areas has rarely been confronted. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, in 2004, 69.4 percent of black children were born to unwed mothers. That contrasts with 24.5 percent for white children and approximately 45 percent for Hispanic children.

Within the larger black community, progress has been dramatic. Today, half of all black families are middle-class, earning at least twice as much as the poverty line. Only 1 percent of black families made that claim in 1940. Rates of college graduation have skyrocketed. In 1940, the out-of-wedlock birth rate for blacks was 19 percent. In fact, at the start of the 20th century, black people had higher marriage rates than whites.

Despite the dramatic progress of the black middle class, out-of-wedlock birth has become a way of life, as have involvement with drugs and lack of respect for education, for an underclass that largely lives in our inner cities.

Only 50 percent of black students who enter the ninth grade later graduate with a regular high school diploma. A 2004 study by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University and the Urban Institute found that the black high school graduation rate was even lower than the 53 percent rate of Hispanic students, many of whom are recent immigrants who face a language barrier. Within the 50 percent graduation rate for black students is an even lower graduation rate for black males. Only 43 percent of black boys graduate from high school with a regular diploma.

In his book, *Enough*, respected black author and journalist Juan Williams notes, "Official graduation rates for blacks have not significantly changed since 1982. Something terrible has happened, and school officials have been hiding this festering rot behind flimsy claims that 84 percent of black students get some version of a high school certificate. The fact is that many of these high school degrees are worthless in a competitive global economy. According to federal data, the average black American twelfth grader scores worse on basic skills than 80 percent of white twelfth graders. This is a serious gap. It is a mortal threat to the race."

The gap between black and white students already exists when the children are entering kindergarten. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, half of black children starting kindergarten scored in the bottom quarter on general knowledge.

Juan Williams laments that, "Very few leading black voices in the pulpit or on the political stage are focused on having black people take personal responsibility for the exorbitant amount of crime committed by black people against other black people. Today's black leaders sing like a choir when they raise their voices against police brutality and the increasing number of black people in jail.... But

any mention of black America's responsibility for committing the crimes, big and small, that lead so many to prison is barely mumbled or mentioned at all."

Charles H. Ramsey, former police chief in Washington, D.C., who is black, declared: "Behavior has to change. Responsibility for your own behavior has to change. We have people who just let t.v. and video games and music raise their kids and instill values... and then we wonder why we have a problem."

It is unfortunate that an accidental video of inner-city teenage violence is needed to focus attention on a continuing problem. It is ironic that when Attorney General Holder and Education Secretary Duncan traveled to Chicago to address the situation, they tended to generalize the problem rather than focus attention on the inner-city underclass, an increasingly intractable problem that is largely ignored. Misdiagnosing a problem is the best way to see it perpetuated. That, it seems, is where we are at the present time.

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