Chicago's youth violence epidemic *is* your problem

Many of us hear about kids like Hadiya Pendleton getting shot on the South and West Sides and assume there's nothing we can do. **Alex Kotlowitz**, renowned author and producer of the documentary *The Interrupters*, argues our city's children deserve better. Illustration by **Øivind Hovland**

The numbers are unimaginable. During this century's first decade, 5,352 people were killed in Chicago and, according to an estimate from the University of Chicago Crime Lab, another 24,392 were wounded by gunfire. So many that the violence has spawned its own language: To "change" someone is to kill them; a "black cat" refers to a woman who has children fathered by at least two men who have been murdered. So many that funeral homes have rules about burying the murdered: only during the day. No hats. Police present. So many that during the spring and summer, makeshift street-side memorials—consisting of balloons and flowers and liquor bottles—pop up like perennials in full bloom. So many that people arm themselves in self-defense, and so the police pull anywhere from 7,000 to 8,000 guns off the street each year. So many that *RIP* is commonly scrawled on walls, embroidered on shirts and hats, and tattooed on bodies. So many that should you walk into a classroom in any of these communities, virtually every child will tell you he or she has seen someone shot. Indeed, the vast majority of murders—82 percent of them in 2011—occur in outdoor spaces such as parks and streets and alleyways.

I recently met one high-school student, Thomas, who rattled off for his social worker the people he's seen shot. The first was at a birthday party for a friend who was turning 11. She was shot and killed when a stray bullet struck her in the head. Then Thomas saw his brother shot, on two occasions, the second time paralyzing him. He saw a friend shot while waiting at the bus stop. And then this past summer as Thomas chatted on a porch with a fellow student, a boy with a gun approached. Thomas begged him not to shoot, but he ignored the pleas, and Thomas's 16-year-old friend was shot three times in her torso. She died on the porch. After this last incident (*incident* seems completely inadequate for such bloodshed), Thomas retreated into himself, pulling inward, unwilling, unable to acknowledge his grief. He could only manage to tell his social worker, "I want to hurt someone. I want to hurt someone." It was the only way he could articulate the pain.

We think that somehow people get hardened to the violence, that they get accustomed to the shootings. I've made that mistake myself. When I first met Lafeyette, one of the two boys whose lives I chronicled in 1991's *There Are No Children Here*, he recounted the time a teenaged neighbor had been shot in a gang war and stumbled into the stairwell outside his apartment. There, the boy died. I remember that as Lafeyette recounted this moment, he showed virtually no emotion, and I thought to myself, He didn't care. Over time I came to realize that the problem wasn't that Lafeyette didn't have feelings. It was that he felt too much, and the one thing he could do to protect himself was to try to compartmentalize his life, to push the dark stuff into a corner where he hoped it wouldn't haunt him.

But the violence festers. It tears at one's soul. I've met kids who experience flashbacks, kids who have night terrors, kids—like Thomas—who become filled with rage, kids who self-medicate, kids who have physical ailments (Lafeyette would get stomachaches whenever there were shootings), kids whose very being is defined by the thunderous deaths around them. For many, it's a single act of violence around which the rest of a childhood will revolve. And then there are parents who must bury a child, who swim under a sea of what-ifs and regrets. One mother and father I knew visited their 15-year-old son's gravesite every day for nearly a year, even grilling meals there. A mother whose 14-year-old boy was executed by a gang member grieved so deeply that for a time she only had a taste for sand. Another mother so mourned the loss of her son she kept his bedroom just as he'd left it as a kind of memorial: his slippers by the end of his bed, his basketball balanced precariously on his dresser and his collection of M&Ms dispensers lined up on a closet shelf.

In a forthcoming book, *How Long Will I Cry? Voices of Youth Violence*, edited by DePaul's Miles Harvey (see page 16), you'll meet a number of parents who have lost children to the city's violence. One of them, Pamela Hester-Jones, says of her son Lazarus, "He loved art and loved to dance. He liked jazz music, and he loved to draw. He loved to swim, he loved going to play golf, he loved going to the movies, he loved Hot Pockets and vanilla ice cream.... I let my Lazarus go outside. I would never do it again." Is that what we've come to? That the world is such a threatening place it's best not to let your children leave their houses?

These are parents and communities who have lost loved ones. They've lost ground. They've lost hope. They've lost trust. They've lost a part of themselves. Drive through the city's West and South Sides and you'll be greeted by an array of Block Club signs. On each of them, neighbors have listed not what they celebrate, but rather what they dread: NO GAMBLING (PENNY PITCHING OR DICE PLAYING). NO DRUG DEALING. NO ALCOHOL DRINKING. NO SITTING IN OR ON CARS. These signs speak not to their dreams, but rather to their fears. These are communities, to borrow a term from the world of psychology, that are hypervigilant, that are back on their heels, trying, understandably, to keep the world at bay.

In *How Long Will I Cry?*, one former gang member says to his interviewer, "We're telling each other, 'You're not alone in this.'" It's something many need to remind themselves of because more than anything the violence pushes people away from each other like slivers of magnets of opposite poles. Neighbors come to distrust neighbors. Residents come to distrust the police, and the police come to distrust the residents. The police decry the no-snitching maxim, and think it's solely because residents don't respect the police. There is, indeed, a history there, most notably the torture committed by Commander Jon Burge and his underlings—though what really had people incensed was not so much that it had

occurred but that for so many years those in positions of power, from Mayor Daley on down, refused to concede it happened. But people also don't snitch because they don't trust each other, because they no longer feel a part of something, because they no longer feel safe.

Which brings us to the blunt, discomforting truth about the violence: Most of it occurs in deeply impoverished African-American and Latino neighborhoods, places where aspiration and ambition have withered and shrunk like, well, a raisin in the sun. Look at a map of the murders and shootings; they cut a swath through the South and West Sides, like a thunderstorm barreling through the city. How can there not be a link between a loss of hope and the ease with which spats explode into something more? When we were filming *The Interrupters*, Ameena Matthews, one of the three Violence Interrupters whose work we chronicled, reflected on what she calls "the 30 seconds of rage." She described it like this: "I didn't eat this morning. I'm wearing my niece's clothes. I just was violated by my mom's boyfriend. I go to school, and here comes someone that bumps into me and don't say excuse me. You hit zero to rage within 30 seconds, and you act out." In other words, these are young men and women who are burdened by fractured families, by lack of money, by a closing window of opportunity, by a sense that they don't belong, by a feeling of low self-worth. And so when they feel disrespected or violated, they explode, often out of proportion with the moment, because so much other hurt has built up, surging, threatening to burst.

Then there's the rest of us who hear of youngsters gunned down while riding their bike or walking down an alley or coming from a party, and think, They must have done something to deserve it, they must have been up to no good. Virtually every teen and young man shot, the police tell us, belonged to a gang, as if suggesting that "what goes around, comes around." But life in these communities is more tangled than that. You can't grow up in certain neighborhoods and not be affiliated, because of geography or lineage. (An administrator at one South Side high school estimates that 90 percent of the boys there are identified with one clique or another.) Moreover, it's often safer to belong than not to belong. You want someone watching your back. And honestly, as Matthews suggests, many if not most of the disputes stem not from gang conflicts but rather from seemingly petty matters like disrespecting someone's girlfriend, or cutting in line, or simply mean-mugging. This doesn't explain the madness. Not at all. It's just to suggest that it's more complicated and more profound than readings of a daily newspaper or viewings of the evening news would suggest.

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These neighborhoods are so physically and spiritually isolated from the rest of us that we might as well be living in different cities. When was the last time you had lunch in Englewood? Or tossed a football in Garfield Park? Or got your car repaired in Little Village? Or went for a stroll in the Back of the Yards? To understand—I mean really understand—what it's like to grow up in these communities requires a leap of faith. For reasons that no one can really explain, Chicago has been the epicenter for very public and horrifying youth murders—Yummy Sandifer, Eric Morse, Ryan Harris, Derrion Albert and now Hadiya Pendleton. And each time public officials shout, "never again," and then do very little to strengthen these neighborhoods, do very little to ensure a sense of opportunity—real opportunity—for the kids. Let's be frank, we've abandoned these places, just walked away. We tore down the public-housing high-rises and, in places like the State Street corridor, have rebuilt just a little more than half of what was promised. We talk of dismantling neighborhood schools in communities where the local school is the very fiber that holds things together. A place like Englewood is pockmarked by boarded-up, abandoned homes, as many as every other structure on some blocks. Where's the outcry? Sometimes it feels like even a nod of acknowledgement would do.

Yet in the midst of all this, people in these impoverished neighborhoods go about their lives. They hold down jobs. They raise families. They go to school. They play basketball and skip rope. They attend church and get their hair done. They shop and grill and mow their lawns (and the lawns of neighboring vacant lots). They tend their gardens and rake their yards. They gossip and share a beer. In other words, despite the five people each day (on average) who are shot, people still are immersed in the routine and banal. They seek some normalcy. So lest we forget, those in Englewood share more than you might think with those, say, in Lincoln Square. Maybe it's not a leap of faith that's required, but rather just simply a faith, that everyone wants the best for themselves and for those around them.

A few years ago, on the city's West Side, someone posted a handmade wood sign on a tree. It read: WE ARE ALL GOOD PEOPLE. It felt as much a statement of fact as it did a plea, really, that things need not be this way. And yet all these promises. Like tear down public housing, and the poor will be better off.

These are young men and women who, despite the cacophony of their neighborhoods, live in silence.

Alex Kotlowitz contributes to a two-part series about youth violence on American Pubic Radio's This American Life *Friday 15 and February 22.* *See "30 ways you can stop the violence," page 14.*

5 THINGS CHICAGO POLICE CAN LEARN FROM AURORA

Chicago's homicide rate made international news last year when it reached 506 murders. So did the homicide rate for our neighbor 40 miles to the west, but for a different reason: Aurora, the second-largest city in Illinois, had no murders last year. Zero. (So far this year, it has clocked one.)

Of course, Chicago houses 2.7 million residents while Aurora is home to about 200,000 people. But it wasn't so long ago that Aurora had a crime problem. In 2002, Aurora counted 26 murders—or nearly the same number per capita as Chicago's 2012 figure. Aurora police chief Greg Thomas is quick to credit the sharp decrease in violence to the rise of community programs, but the police force also played it smart. Here's what it has done right:

1 Nurture a network of citizen cops. In some cases, police officers give out their cell-phone numbers to block captains of neighborhood watch groups, Thomas says.

2 Step in before it's too late. As part of the "Knock and Talk" program, when police officers hear about a teenager hanging around with a gang, they visit that teen's home to talk with him or her and his or her parents "about the ills of joining gangs," Thomas says. "We try to have intervention early."

3 Focus on drug arrests to get criminals off the streets. "It was easier to target drug offenses than violent offenses" during widespread sweeps, and the same perpetrators were often committing both, Thomas says.

4 Be realistic. Just because a policing program in another city sounds promising doesn't mean it's going to be the right fit for Aurora. To the north, the city of Elgin has been running the Resident Officer Program of Elgin, in which officers live in distressed neighborhoods throughout the city. A program like that, according to Thomas, wouldn't have been a great fit for Aurora in part because of the financial resources involved. "Chicago [police have] helicopters," Thomas adds, "and I'm not going to purchase helicopters."

5 Consistently talk with residents. Aurora police began holding public discussions about the rising number of shootings and murders. Now, Thomas says, "instead of gangs, drugs and violence, we talk about parking, speeding and loud music."
—Erin Chan Ding