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“First, Do No Harm:” Nonviolent Ways to Address Youth Violence

BY TARA HUFFMAN

Each year, millions of children and youth across the United States are exposed to violence as both victims and witnesses. All too often, children exposed to violence undergo lasting physical, mental and emotional trauma, and may be more prone to aggression, delinquency, further victimization and involvement with the juvenile justice system.

Research shows that early identification and intervention are valuable strategies to prevent or decrease these impacts. Thus, those who interact with children and youth, especially children and youth who demonstrate harmful behaviors, have a

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responsibility to create interventions that address harmful youth behaviors while decreasing or preventing the trauma associated with exposure to violence. Too often, however, the very systems set up to respond to youthful offenders exacerbate and even inflict trauma and violence on those youth.

What follows is a brief summary of four existing practices and policies that hold great promise for responding to youth violence, preventing youth violence in the first instance, and helping youth who have been exposed to violence cope and recover from trauma. While most of the examples cited above are particular to Baltimore and Maryland, each one easily is replicated in other jurisdictions.

MINDFULNESS TRAINING

Mindfulness awareness practices are exercises that promote a state of heightened attention to moment-by-moment experiences in the individual doing the exercises. Common practices include meditation, yoga and Tai-Chi. The study of mindfulness is still new, but early research shows that mindfulness can help youth develop executive function, which translates into better decision-making, judgment, management of emotions and impulse control. One study suggests that mindfulness training may be better than cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) for many youth, as CBT requires the young person to tap into his or her executive function when it already has been established that such functioning is underdeveloped.

With support from Open Society Institute-Baltimore, the Holistic Life Foundation has provided mindfulness training to elementary, middle and high school students in Baltimore since 2010. Preliminary findings from a randomized-

Overview

Youths traumatized by violence can become adults who commit crimes and acts of violence against others and engage in gang activity.

Nearly 200 people attended the University of Baltimore School of Law’s Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC) Seventh Annual Urban Child Symposium last April, “Violence and the Urban Child: What Can We Do?” Focusing on children, violence, juvenile detention, gang activity, trauma and family engagement, panelists discussed ways to minimize children’s exposure to and commission of violence.

This Unified Family Court Connection issue is devoted to the following articles:

- **Tara Huffman**, Director of the Criminal and Juvenile Justice Program at Open Society Institute - Baltimore, writes about non-violent ways to address youth violence.
- **Colin Starger**, associate professor of law, University of Baltimore School of Law, discusses how the problems of youth are the “inherited problems of adults” and adults must listen to the concerns of youths.
- **Katie Davis**, an attorney for CFCC’s Truancy Court Program in Baltimore, writes about Greland Lowery, a former gang member who now works as the gang prevention and intervention specialist in Baltimore City Public Schools. His mission is to educate youth about gang violence.
- **Robert Kershaw**, Baltimore City Circuit Court Judge, writes about the complex issues facing youths today and the impact on the juvenile justice system.

controlled trial of this school-based intervention showed that practices such as meditation and yoga had a positive impact on students' problematic responses to stress, including rumination, intrusive thoughts and emotional arousal. Participating students demonstrated a reduction in involuntary stress reactions and improvements in social, emotional and behavioral development. At one particular high school, suspensions dropped approximately 50 percent between the 2012-2013 and the 2013-2014 school years.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

While traditional justice is focused on punishing the offender, restorative justice emphasizes repairing the harm caused by the offense. Victims, offenders and community members who have been affected by the offense collaborate to find solutions that seek to repair harm and promote harmony. Adolescent brain science confirms that young people under the age of 25 still are developing the executive functions that support impulse control and good decision-making. Because of this, youth are good candidates for restorative justice interventions that hold them accountable but also help them fully understand the harm they have done, make amends with those whom they have offended, and, as importantly, avoid a criminal conviction that likely would hinder them later in life.

The Community Conferencing Center (CCC) is a Baltimore-based independent nonprofit organization that provides restorative justice interventions to schools, neighborhoods and the justice system. Through CCC's unique community conference process, a victim and his or her friends and families are able to share with the wrongdoer the negative impact of his or her conduct, and all participants have an opportunity to develop a plan and agreement for repairing the harm done in ways that do not involve suspension, expulsion or incarceration. At the same time, with the full engagement of the wrongdoer and his or her family, participants explore the underlying reasons for the wrongdoer's behavior and seek to address it in the plan and agreement.

Since its inception in 2000 and with support from OSI-Baltimore, CCC successfully has diverted 4,500 young people from Maryland's juvenile justice system. A study by the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services showed that youth who participated in a conference were 60 percent less likely to re-offend. CCC's services also have contributed to an approximately 25 percent reduction in school-based arrests.

REMOVING YOUTH FROM ADULT JAILS

Today, all U.S. states have laws that allow or mandate criminal prosecution of some young offenders, and nearly 40 states have laws that allow youth prosecuted in adult courts to be placed in adult jails pre-trial. As a result, more than 200,000 youth are incarcerated as adults every year across the United States. Youth incarcerated with adults are 36 times more likely to commit suicide in an adult jail than in a juvenile detention facility, and the National Prison Rape Elimination Commission found that youth incarcerated with adults are at the highest risk for sexual abuse.

Maryland is giving heed to these findings and, as of October 1, 2015, youth charged as adults in Maryland, with some exceptions, may no longer be held in an adult jail but instead must be held in a juvenile facility. This policy helps ensure that youthful offenders, including

those accused of serious crimes, are not themselves victims of violence and are treated in a more age- and developmentally-appropriate way.

STRENGTHEN AND REAUTHORIZE THE FEDERAL JUVENILE JUSTICE AND DELINQUENCY PREVENTION ACT

The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA) - enacted in 1974 - established core protections for youth who come into contact with state and local juvenile justice systems. These protections prohibit:

1. The locked confinement of youth charged with status offenses, e.g., truancy and running away, as well as abused and neglected youth involved with the dependency courts, with exceptions;
2. The placement of youth charged as juveniles in adult jails and lock-ups, with exceptions;
3. Sustained sight and sound contact of youth with adult inmates if youth are detained in a locked facility.

The JJDPA also requires states to identify and address where youth of color come into contact with their juvenile justice system at a disproportionate rate.

More than 40 years later, the JJDPA still seeks to ensure that justice-involved youth are protected from further harm and instead receive age-appropriate treatment. On July 23, 2015, the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee approved S. 1169, the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA) of 2015. If adopted, S. 1169 would, among other things, expand the protections of the JJDPA to reduce the placement of youth in adult jails pre-trial; better assist states in reducing racial and ethnic disparities; and accelerate the adoption of trauma-informed, evidence-based practices for justice-involved youth.

CONCLUSION

"First, do no harm" is more than a catchy title. It is a principle that is as instructive in our treatment of youth as it is in a doctor's treatment of his or her patient. When we take steps to respond to offending and even violent youth behavior, we must take care not to do physical, mental or emotional violence to the child and the child's future. We must keep in mind that in far too many instances the young people we encounter are responding to violence that they have endured or witnessed.

Each of the aforementioned practices and policies reflect this principle of nonviolence and demonstrate the better outcomes that can be achieved when responsible adults commit to addressing youth in non-violent ways.



Tara Huffman is the Director of the Criminal and Juvenile Justice Program at OSI-Baltimore. A graduate of the University of Maryland School of Law, Tara has both national and local experience with reforming criminal and juvenile justice policies and systems to reduce incarceration and increase community-based solutions.

Listen to the Youth: Reflections on Violence and the Urban Child

BY COLIN STARGER

What is called “the problems of our children” might be better described as “the inherited problems of adults.”

That was my conclusion in a panel discussion, “Violence and the Urban Child: What Can We Do?” at the Urban Child Symposium, sponsored by the University of Baltimore School of Law’s Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC).

To properly tackle the issues of violence plaguing our communities, I argued, we need to listen to and empower youth even when we disagree with their sometimes-radical tactics and proposals. Little did I know then, but my call for listening to the youth would soon take on new meaning.

Less than a month after the CFCC symposium last year, Baltimore’s sometimes radical youth became the focus of television viewers worldwide. On April 12, 2015, Freddie Gray Jr., a 25-year-old black man, was arrested by Baltimore City police. While being transported in a police van, he allegedly suffered a severe spinal injury, was taken to a trauma center and died a week later.

Though Freddie Gray’s death in police custody initially sparked protest, events hit a new level when youth became involved in clashes with police near the Mondawmin Mall and Frederick Douglass High School, located in northeast Baltimore. Images of riots, fires and property destruction went viral worldwide.

City, state and national leaders took the opportunity to condemn Baltimore’s youth and paint them as “thugs” or animals. Yet this critique was wrong on the facts and reflects a deeper problem that we must address before real progress on the problem of violence and the urban child can occur.

The civil unrest at Mondawmin Mall had complicated origins. Public transportation was shut down and police preemptively moved in, helping to exacerbate chaos and confusion. Although there certainly was looting and property destruction, it should not be forgotten that no lives were lost on that infamous day. While the problem of violence continues to plague our city, the idea that it was all started by thuggish youth is plain wrong. Scores of adults eventually were arrested for looting.

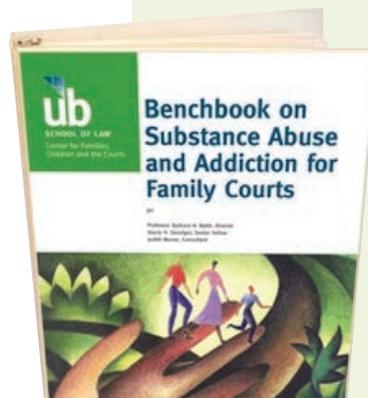
The deeper problem is with the world we have created for our children and our failures as adults. Consider the now-cancelled reality show, “Supernanny.” In that show, Jo Forest, a parenting expert, helps parents deal with unruly children who are making their parents miserable. Granted, Supernanny inevitably saved the day, but usually she diagnosed the underlying problem as originating from the parents, not the children. It always was about the parents.

That is the reality in many homes in the “real world.” The bottom line is the problems of the children are the problems of adults. We should not pretend otherwise. As such, it is critical that we address the problem of adult violence whenever we are searching for solutions to the problems of youth violence.

While I deplore adult criminal violence, I am most concerned with the violence we have built into our social fabric that ostensibly responds to crime. This is the violence in our institutions and social practices. We often resort to violence to solve our social problems and even to advance our political policies. Our television programming, computer games and news programs are overloaded with daily images of abhorrent violence. As a society, we are addicted to violence.

Consider the alleged police violence like that seen in the Freddie Gray case. Or consider the violence of a prison system warped by mass incarceration. Adults have tolerated these practices for far too long out of an understandable yet misguided desire for safety and security. Yet our desire for safety and security blinds us to the reality that police violence and prison violence do not actually make us safer. It just makes us more violent.

Our children intuitively understand this and adult hypocrisy about violence angers them. We tell our children to be peaceful and to “use their words,” but then we act differently when it comes to addressing



BENCHBOOK ON SUBSTANCE ABUSE IS NOW AVAILABLE

While substance abuse and addiction are pervasive throughout the family court system, few resources are available for family law attorneys and members of the judiciary who want information specifically geared to parents and children in the family justice system.

In order to meet this need, the University of Baltimore School of Law Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts has published the *Benchbook on Substance Abuse and Addiction for Family Courts*. The long-awaited publication provides clear and concise information about the range of substance abuse and addiction issues affecting families and children in family courts.

To learn more, visit: <http://law.ubalt.edu/centers/cfcc/publications/index.cfm> or email cfcc@ubalt.edu.

our concerns. Our violence problem extends beyond the home front. Our country seems to endlessly fight wars overseas. We counsel conversation to solve disagreements, yet invade Iraq, citing false evidence of weapons of mass destruction. We condemn rioting and property destruction, yet dispatch drones to eradicate our enemies. It boils down to one consistent reality: when children act violently, they often are following our society's example.

Instead of professing surprise or dismay at youth anger, I believe, we should instead help channel the anger productively. Sometimes this means taking our lumps when children call out our contradictions. Sometimes this means working with youth groups to advocate or fight for change even when we disagree with particular tactics or policy prescriptions employed by youth groups. Most of all, productively engaging with youth means not labeling youth as vicious animals or irredeemable thugs when they react in anger or rise up to protest. We must let children make mistakes, do stupid things and forgive them. Perhaps then, we can forgive ourselves for the mess we, as a society, have made.

What are the practical implications of this perspective? I point to youth-led organizations that do good work in the city and suggest we should lend them our support. We might strategize on how to work with and learn from organizations like the Baltimore Algebra Project, Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle, and The Just Kids Campaign, to name a few. I always encourage people to look for new happenings at the grassroots.

While it is important to establish a healthy dialogue with such groups, it is essential that we not balk when the road gets bumpy. Inter-generation organization and coalition building is bound to encounter difficulties. Youth often will promote a more radical stance than adults prefer. Although adults may disagree, they must support and listen to youth on an ongoing and consistent basis. It is the role of youth to make adults uncomfortable, just as it is the role of adults to inform youth perspective with the insights that accumulated through our experience and years.

Adults must admit that the world facing our children involves the failure of the older generation. This world needs truly radical change. Adults must listen to the radical voices of youth and work with them to change the world. The key is to keep the conversation about change alive through deepening the relationship between adults and youth and reaffirming a mutual commitment to social justice.



Colin Starger is an associate professor at the University of Baltimore School of Law. Before joining UB's faculty, Starger was a staff attorney at the Innocence Project in New York.

Former Gang Member Helps Youth Avoid a Life of Crime

BY KATIE DAVIS

Turning around an urban youth who is on a destructive path marked by violence and crime requires "confidence, support and diligence."

That was the assessment of Greland Lowery, the newly-appointed Climate Lead at Reginald F. Lewis High School and Gang Prevention and Intervention Specialist for the Baltimore City Public Schools. Lowery works with youth in Baltimore City to steer them away from criminal behavior and gang participation.

As a speaker at the Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts' (CFCC) 2015 Urban Child Symposium on youth and urban violence, Lowery explained how his experiences with criminal behavior and within the criminal justice system led him to his current passion.

Lowery, a gang member for 17 years, spent years in prison before he decided to follow a different path. He recognizes that he uniquely is suited to help children turn their lives around and change habits, just as he did. He wants to help them avoid the pitfalls he encountered and mistakes he made.

The gang specialist said his friends call him a "trauma surgeon." This is accurate, he says, because, like a doctor, he looks at what these youth experience, where they live, and what they are doing in order to help them get a plan to make changes. Unlike a surgeon, however, he has no timeline for his work. He stays with a child as long as he is needed to make a change happen—sometimes a week, a year or much longer.

The students, however, refer to him as "tow truck." As Lowery noted, when a car gets stuck on a highway, it needs a tow truck to get it off the road. If a tow truck doesn't come, the car eventually will rust and rot away. If all the broken-down cars were left on the highway, the road would be blocked and no one could get through, he explained. For many students at Reginald F. Lewis High School, Lowery is that tow truck. He helps them get off the highway and rebuild their lives so that they can move forward.

Criminal behavior is an addiction, Lowery said. Prisons only make better criminals. When Lowery works with youth embroiled in criminal behavior, his tactic is to provide them with the confidence and knowledge they need to change. He points out that these children deal with post-traumatic stress and are numb to reality. "If they are okay seeing a dead body on the street, then they are more okay with violence," he added.

Lowery familiarizes himself with what the youth learn on the street and then offers them a better way. He wants children to be aware of who they are. He promises them that if they understand themselves, believe there is hope, and set concrete positive goals, they will succeed in making a change.

Lowery gives youths the inspiration to change by helping them define positive tangible goals. As he describes it, he puts a plate of food in front of these youth and helps them distinguish between the meat, the vegetables and the junk food to help them make good choices. He gives them a positive goal to work toward. He wants to make school a

“Our kids want to do better but cannot do better on their own,” Lowery notes. “When the [students say] ‘I can’t’ . . . we break that cycle and get them to change.”

safe place for them and a priority in their lives. He shows them where he used to be and that they can turn their lives around too. He leads by example, offering living proof that they can refocus their lives.

While Lowery is uniquely suited to help urban youth avoid criminal activity, he believes he is not the only one who can do this work. Asked what he thinks the Baltimore community can do to help curb the violence affecting city youth, he said: “We need more people to get involved without a paycheck.”

Mentors and others who work with children must be willing to stay with the youths as long as necessary to make lasting changes in their lives, he said, adding that urban youth know when an adult is involved only because of an obligation to fulfill.

Urban children see too many adults, systems and programs come in and out of their lives without establishing a connection or any consistency, he said, noting that youth need people who are committed for the long haul.

These children need people to come into their communities and enjoy them rather than to simply point out where the problems are and to offer short-term solutions. The youth need someone to give them the tools to rebuild their communities from within, Lowery said.

Lowery is spearheading a new initiative at Reginald F. Lewis High School aimed specifically at students who currently are court involved, including those returning to school from detention, on monitoring devices or on probation. Through a partnership with the Department of Juvenile Services (DJS), Lowery has identified about 60 students who would benefit from his program. Of those 60 students, Lowery has selected 28 “high-need” students who will receive more intense services.

Recognizing that these students, unlike court-involved adults, have a unique opportunity as juveniles to clear their records and start anew, Lowery has developed a process to help them achieve their goals and avoid involvement with the adult criminal justice system.

The main objective is to help these students re-adjust their core values and build skills to attend college and succeed in life. He initially meets with each student individually and asks for a self-evaluation, which allows them to recognize their deficits and take ownership of the journey to overcome them.

With Lowery’s help, the students develop and implement individual “treatment plans.” For example, if a student recognizes a need to avoid certain friends, his treatment plan might include minimizing the time spent with those friends rather than avoiding them altogether. The plan initially may include improving behavior two days each week. As the student progresses and meets his goals, Lowery helps him expand his treatment plan to include more challenging and long-range goals until the improved behavior has become a habit.

Using constant monitoring and progress reports to help ensure success, Lowery relies on attendance records, progress reports from teachers, report cards and individual meetings to ensure that the pro-

gram participants are meeting their goals. Lowery also is in the school daily, greeting students as they enter school, walking the halls, monitoring the lunchroom, and regularly meeting with students, teachers and administrators.

Lowery sees the culture and climate at the school changing. As part of his new initiative, Lowery wants to create a curriculum that can be replicated at other schools. By changing behaviors one student at a time, he hopes the program will lower suspension rates, raise graduation rates, and improve college and job placement for court-involved youth across Baltimore City.

“Our kids want to do better but cannot do better on their own,” Lowery notes. “When the [students say] ‘I can’t’ . . . we break that cycle and get them to change.”



Katherine Davis is the Truancy Court Program Attorney for CFCC. Prior to joining CFCC, she worked as an adjunct professor of law and political science and served in Maryland and Georgia as an assistant attorney general.

SUPPORT CFCC'S VITAL WORK

The Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC), a non-profit organization, offers strategic planning and technical assistance to structure Unified Family Courts (UFCs), as well as evaluations of the effectiveness of these courts and their related programs.

Other CFCC services include compiling surveys and reports, formulating performance standards and measures, providing training and workshops, and organizing conferences for the judicial, legal and court communities. CFCC relies on the support of foundations, grants and partners to fulfill its mission to improve the lives of families and children and the health of communities through family court reform.

Visit <http://law.ubalt.edu/centers/cfcc> for additional information. See also: <http://www.facebook.com/CFCCatUBaltLaw>.

Society and the Courts Face Complex Issues in the Juvenile Justice System

BY ROBERT B. KERSHAW

Cases coming into the juvenile justice system must be viewed not only according to the facts of an alleged offense, but with a careful assessment of the individual child involved, the level of violence, the complex causes and consequence of the alleged offense, any mitigating circumstances and whether restorative justice would be indicated.

Consider the following example. Bobby B., a 14-year old boy, is charged with robbery with a deadly weapon. On the evidence presented at adjudication, the judge must decide if the robbery with a deadly weapon occurred and whether Bobby committed the robbery beyond a reasonable doubt, in which case Bobby B. may be found to be a delinquent child. If found delinquent, Bobby B. may be placed on probation or committed to the Department of Juvenile Services for community based or out-of-home residential reform or formation services.

Robbery with a deadly weapon is a violent delinquent act. The extent of the violence depends on the facts of the case: the “deadly weapon” could range from a brandished stick to an automatic weapon/handgun, for example. The court must assess each case where facts are sustained and analyze the level of violence committed and its complex cause(s), consequences, mitigating circumstances and possible restorative justice responses.

THE MARYLAND JUVENILE CAUSES ACT

In response to delinquent acts, violent or otherwise, the Maryland Juvenile Causes statute has a three-fold purpose:

- A. Hold the child and parent or guardian accountable;
- B. Protect the safety of the community and the child;
- C. Reform—that is, reduce or eliminate delinquent behaviors.

Punishment is *not* a purpose of the Maryland Juvenile Causes statute. Accountability involves appearing in court, complying with court-ordered behavior and paying restitution. Accountability is not punishment. Many individuals overstate and would unlawfully and ineffectively punish youth violence. Criminalizing youth violence triggers recidivism and more youth and, later, adult violence.

About 36 percent of all intake charges in the Baltimore City Juvenile Court involve violent acts. Nearly two thirds of all delinquency petitions do not allege youth violence. The other third alleging violence involve 1 percent for child abuse; 2.9 percent for first-degree assault; less than 1 percent for kidnapping and manslaughter; 1 percent for murder; just over 10 percent for robbery; 20.5 percent for second-degree assault; 1.9 percent for sexual offense and 2 percent for arson.

SOCIAL MEDIA VIOLENCE

Youth extensively use social media and that platform often transforms adolescent disputes into mob or gang violence. The “he said/she said” jealousies or disrespect formerly were spread by word of mouth, allowing time to reduce the emotional reaction. Today, however, those dis-

putes instantaneously are forwarded to cliques, clubs, mobs or gangs, with details offering time and location for convening street fights. Time no longer plays a role in diminishing the anger.

The resulting violence by perpetrators, injuries to victims and trauma to nearby bystanders are a significant phenomenon of urban youth violence. Reducing the use of social media for these purposes is a huge challenge, but not without opportunities. As computer savvy youth and their communities recognize the connection between social media and incitement to violence, they should develop a greater reluctance to exploit the technology in this way.

GANG-RELATED YOUTH VIOLENCE

Patterns of sudden onset and rapidly escalating acts of violence by formerly law-abiding youth often reflect gang initiation and involvement. Investigating and understanding the nature and extent of gang involvement is challenging. Gang influence or membership may be implied by tattoos, graffiti, the sudden onset of violent acts and/or unexplained truancy. When the family or school officials suspect gang involvement, that is the time to seek “safe, rapid disengagement from gang involvement” as well as behavior modification. The resources for that work, however, severely are limited and all too often are ineffective.

STREET LEVEL DRUG DISTRIBUTION

Youth who are involved in street level drug distribution—as look-outs, cash points or stash managers—are at great risk of committing violence for survival or being the victims of violence. Often associated with gang activity, recruitment of youth for drug distribution is a widespread crime of opportunity in urban, suburban and rural areas alike. Loss of drug cash or stash by arrest or theft leaves youth facing the swift and often violent retribution of unseen and unnamed “enforcers.” When youth are arrested for possession with intent to distribute or actual distribution, behavior modification treatment is challenging and often not effective. Safe disengagement from involvement in the drug trade often is difficult for the youth and their families.

YOUTH SEX EXPLOITATION

Federal, state and local agencies and courts currently are focusing on the identification of and treatment for child sex exploitation. As the magnitude of this criminal behavior by gangs, pimps and customers of prostitution is discovered, the tragic consequences of self-destructive and violent behaviors by victimized youth are better understood and therapeutically treated. A youth’s runaway behaviors with escalating violence to oneself, others and animals are sending clear signals of sex abuse and exploitation. Evidence-based therapeutic interventions for sexually exploited and abused children are often effective if implemented in a timely and compassionately way.

RESTORATIVE JUVENILE JUSTICE FOR VIOLENT BEHAVIORS

To achieve successful juvenile reformatory justice, the Juvenile Court focuses first on the root causes of youth violence:

1. Impact of early stages and capacity of adolescent brain development. The prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for good judgment, memory, reason and related functions, is not fully developed until age 25-26 for males (absent developmental delays and drug use) and 23-24 for females. Children and youth simply are not fully developed to make reasoned good judgments and civilly resolve

When the family or school officials suspect gang involvement, that is the time to seek “safe, rapid disengagement from gang involvement,” as well as behavior modification.

disputes. Hyper-alert youth impulsively react to fright, flight and fight impulses that often involve violent behaviors as both triggers and responses. A highly potent hormonal cocktail of cortisol and adrenaline from the primitive core brain fuels these basic impulsive survival behaviors. The paucity of rigorous physical activities—sports and recreation—combined with diets rich in processed sugars, leave a youth at higher than is healthy risk of cyclically escalating aggressive behaviors and victimization.

2. Impact of acute, chronic and complex trauma on children/youth. Many youths are victims of both physical and psychological violence and routinely and repeatedly have observed violence in their communities.
3. Impact of poverty; domestic violence and untreated mental illness; absent/incarcerated parents; pandemic drug addiction; peer criminal pressure (gang activity); juvenile sex and labor exploitation; lead exposure; systemic, overt and implicit racism and segregation; zero-tolerance policing practices and related layered societal breakdown. The layers of unfairness, injustice, and absence of nurturing resources experienced by far too many urban youth, disproportionately by race, contribute to youth violence.

There are no magic reforms or service responses that eliminate youth violence, but there are burgeoning evidence-based practices that work to reduce violence among youth and for social justice:

- A. Trauma-informed, responsible, culturally-valid counseling and therapy. Anger “management” may address and improve a symptom of trauma—angry, aggressive and violent behaviors. Trauma-informed/responsive services reach the root experiential causes of violent behavior and then reduce and diffuse them as youth mature into adulthood. Hyper-vigilant, impulsive youth are shifted from survival mode (which is often at the expense of and injury to family and community) to reflective behaviors that are safer, less painful and keep their lives on a healthy track. Culturally compassionate providers can achieve amazing, life-affirming results with community-based individual and group counseling. Failed efforts should be redirected to new referrals and better programs. Family support and involvement are valuable. Detention, out-of-home placements and institutionalization are last resorts for child and community safety. They do not reform or improve behaviors. To the contrary, they validate racial and socio-economic stereotypes and can lead to eventual adult criminal behavior.
- B. Improved and intensive education interventions. Youth involved in the Baltimore City juvenile justice system are smart, resourceful urban survivors. Redirected, encouraged and treated fairly, they are an exceptionally valuable human resource. Their sometimes oppositional, defiant and violent behaviors are not the

product of sociopathic hard-wiring or a pre-disposition for violence, but rather are a predictable survival response to the compounded injustice and unequal circumstances that they face repeatedly from birth. Juvenile Court histories are filled with infant, toddler or pre-school Children in Need of Assistance (CINA) findings, which ultimately lead to charges of trespass, truancy, assault 2, assault 1 and gun possession and escalating violence through adolescence. The resounding message, by clear and convincing evidence, is that juvenile justice practices must empower and launch fulfilled youth to their deserved, productive and dream-fulfilled adulthood.

- C. Family empowerment. All trauma informed/responsive work to reduce violence should engage the child’s family in the broadest and most inclusive definition of family and community. Youth are not born to be perpetrators or victims of violence. They are meant to be in dependable adult and peer relationships that are supportive and life affirming. Urban youth, like all children, are hard-wired to survive. Survival is protected by impulsive flight or fight behavior fueled by cortisol and adrenaline from the core brain, amygdala and hypothalamus. Violent behavior is a symptom of that survival drive. Finding and strengthening stable and secure familial and mentor relationships are fundamental to juvenile justice and reducing urban violence and recidivism.

CONCLUSION

Research shows that only a small percentage of children enter the world with the psychiatric disposition to commit violence or with sociopathic behaviors. A lack of consistent nurturing, exposure to trauma, failure to have needs met and experience with injustice all contribute to violent behaviors in youth. Research shows that treatment and behavior modification models often reduce or eliminate violent behaviors when provided early, consistently and with the support and participation of parents, caregivers, family, school and communities.

Bringing youth safely to the age of 25-26 for males and 23-24 for females, absent developmental disabilities or delays and drug abuse, ensures they will have fully functioning brains and the necessary reasoning skills to successfully control violent behaviors. While that goal is challenging to achieve in today’s society, the Juvenile Courts have made headway toward making that a reality.



Judge Robert B. Kershaw has served as associate judge of the Circuit Court for Baltimore City since 2006 and as judge-in-charge of the Baltimore City Juvenile Court since January 2011.

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“CFCC has been a key partner in promoting family court reform in our state. Its work helps courts and their community partners remain focused on how our work can benefit families.”

Pamela Cardullo Ortiz

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