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Commentary: Hopelessness: A Byproduct of violence in Chicago

By Inger E. Burnett-Zeigler

A long with many other South Side Chicago natives, I bemoan the detestable way President Donald Trump describes our beloved city as a “war zone.”

These characterizations do not reflect the experience that I had growing up in the Chatham neighborhood. My parents were productive citizens in the community; they had careers in the Chicago Public Schools, and most of their friends did too.

I spent summers in enrichment programs, riding my bike around the neighborhood. My friends and I didn't carry or own guns. We were never involved in criminal activity or police encounters. We graduated from college and now have successful careers.

It is true that my experience is not reflective of all people on the South Side of Chicago. The culture of the South Side is diverse and richly textured. The violence is a multifaceted problem for which there is no easy fix.

In the first 29 days of January, there were 295 shooting victims and 50 homicides in Chicago, up 5.5 percent from this time last year. Trump has called Chicago's violence problem “very easily fixable,” promising to “send in the Feds!” if things don't start improving soon.

The problem of Chicago violence extends far beyond the tragic premature loss of lives. For months and years to come, friends, family and community members — as well as the perpetrators of violence — are left to cope with grief and fear.

The shootings are concentrated on the South and West sides, where the majority of residents are black. In the Austin neighborhood, where there have been more than 40 shooting victims and at least 9 homicides this month, 86 percent of the residents are black. One-fourth of its residents do not have a high school diploma, 21 percent are unemployed and 27 percent have a household income below poverty level.

The Great Cities Institute report released

this month examined data from Chicago, New York and Los Angeles and suggests that spikes in violence in Chicago can be in part explained by youth joblessness. In 2014 and 2015, Chicago had the highest total percent, or 42.8 percent of 20- to 24-year-olds who were out of work and out of school. Chicago also had the highest percentage of black 16- to 19-year-olds, at more than 16 percent, who were out of work and out of school. Communities with high jobless rates are primarily on the predominantly black South and West sides.

The report includes testimonies of youth who commented, “Jobs solve violence. If you are busy working, you don't have time for violence.” Or, “If you want to save lives, you want to see a difference, give these teens jobs.”

Despite the desire to work, and for violence to end, the lack of economic investment and resources in communities on the South and West sides may cause many to feel hopeless.

“Feeling a sense of worth when surrounded by messages that black lives don't matter is difficult.”

In my experience as a clinical psychologist and assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Northwestern University, I understand that feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness are critical signs of a poor mental and emotional state that can severely impact one's ability to be productive and function.

It is a universal human need to want to know that you are valued, that you have a purpose and that your life matters. When these needs aren't met, it can negatively impact self-esteem, which in turn impacts behavior. Existing in an environment where you are experiencing constant social and environmental stress has far-reaching negative implications for the individual, family and community at large.

Feeling a sense of worth when surrounded by messages that black lives don't matter is difficult. Feeling purposeful when resources are cut and the available opportunities are

scarce and bleak is almost impossible. Hope is elusive when you question if you'll live to see tomorrow.

Stricter gun laws and increased policing have been offered as short-term solutions to the violence. Community investment, education and training opportunities and job creation have been offered as long-term solutions.

While Trump's promise to bring in the feds may temporarily resolve the immediate problem, it does little to address the institutional structures and policies that have led to the conditions at hand, nor the hopelessness and despair that is being left in the wake of what Trump calls “carnage.”

Instead of federal intervention, what the people of Chicago need is equitable access to readily available and visible resources, which reinforce self-worth and provide a sense of hope.

Opportunities inspire hope. All people are motivated by a sense of possibility.

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