

IPA-urban violence experts-7-18-19

Lack of love and money leads to urban violence, say “experts”

By Jim Nowlan

I left the prison this past Wednesday with a better understanding of what foments urban violence, after talking with the real experts—inmates who grew up on the mean streets of major Illinois cities.

The Life Skills Re-entry Center at Kewanee, in central Illinois, is like a small college campus, albeit with razor-wire rather than ivied walls. The place is for longtime inmates of the 30+ Illinois correctional facilities, who write essays as to why finishing their final years at this intensive career education and counseling facility would benefit them. The goal is to reduce recidivism by giving inmates a career such as restaurant management—they run the café and cafeteria—welding, and more, plus counseling on how to live productively on the outside.

The topic of urban violence is in the news much because of the mayhem in some of Chicago’s poorest neighborhoods, though homicide rates are even higher in some Downstate cities, such as Peoria. So, I asked the higher-ups at Kewanee if I could hold a roundtable discussion with a small group of inmates, to get their perspectives on why there is so much violence in the neighborhoods where they grew up.

Eight inmates, all African-American, and I sat in a circle and talked. They had grown up in Chicago, East St. Louis, Peoria, Rockford, Decatur, Champaign, often in “projects.”

The articulate inmates were not shy. Several themes kept recurring: A lack of love, trust, money, guidance, in the home and neighborhood, and a sense of profound helplessness.

Moms want to love their children, an inmate observed, yet often strung out on drugs, alcohol, caught up in the welfare system, or maybe in a minimum-wage job, some mothers somehow couldn't provide the love and nurturing needed.

The schools weren't terrible, but simply getting to school, crossing another gang's territory, was often dicey and took all the fun out of education.

And forget the quaint idea of Officer Friendly on the street. "We hated the cops," said an inmate who grew up in a project in north Champaign. "We were taught not to trust anyone with a badge, even the hall monitors at school." "And the white cops came from another part of town," said another. "What did they know or care about our neighborhood?"

"You couldn't trust the cops," said another, pounding his fist in his cupped hand. "I could sell drugs for 13 days, and they wouldn't say anything, though they might take my money. Then the 14th day, they arrest me. You couldn't trust them, or anybody."

Because they felt like they were nobodies, as kids the inmates needed to be somebodies, to be looked up to. But there were no role models, no doctors and successful businessmen, other than, you might say, the drug dealers, who always had the girls around them.

It's as if home and community cast the young teen males out onto the mean streets, where the gangs welcomed them with open arms, and the sense of belonging so desperately needed.

One inmate recalled his wrenching need to help at home, to offset his mom's drinking and drug habits. But the only way he could bring money home was to sell drugs, he said.

An obviously well-read inmate recounted the succession of slavery, Jim Crow laws, brutal segregation, and mass incarceration, which he said had created arid zones of “opportunity impoverishment” for blacks like him.

That may well be, I responded, but how can that inform where we go from here? What to do?

“Financial literacy is critical to breaking the chain!” declared the inmate from Champaign. He was referring to one of the most popular courses taught at Kewanee. “I could have left that (criminal) life if I had been financially literate.”

“More skilled trades courses,” said another. But would you have taken advantage of them, I asked? There were shrugs.

There was not enough time in our session, or in these 750 words, to deal with such a big topic.

Yet for my two cents worth, it all comes down to the home and the community. If they are strong and positive, so life will be for most youngsters.

While the days of Ozzie and Harriet are maybe long gone, it is still the case that two incomes and two adults around the house to share responsibilities are better than one. For example, a former undergraduate assistant of mine determined, after bearing two children, that she was lesbian. She and her new same-sex partner reared the two children successfully. The world is changing.

Teen birth rates are way down, which is terrific. Why, and what can we do to accelerate the decline? Will recreational marijuana dry up the wealth and reduce the appeal of the gangs?

Maybe recruit cops from the neighborhoods and send them back to patrol the streets they know so well.

What are your ideas? We must work to strengthen home and community.

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