

Editorial: Nurturing and educating young children can reduce gun violence involving teens

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Memphis police have handled 27 incidents in which juveniles were shot at or injured by gunshots between July 13 and Aug. 13, according to the mayor's office. The youngest victim was 12.

Those numbers do not include the numerous adults who have been shot to death or wounded by bullets since mid-July.

The numbers are sobering and feed the perception that some areas of Memphis are not unlike Hollywood's depictions of 19th century Wild West cow towns, where disputes, even minor ones, are settled with flying bullets that sometimes do not differentiate between the intended victims and innocent bystanders. Unfortunately, that reflects what happened in some of the recent incidents of gunplay.

And when children are involved, the gun violence garners more of our attention.

The recent spate of shootings prompted Memphis Mayor A C Wharton to call for a "fierce sense of urgency" to deal with the situation. He called for a meeting of crime and youth specialists Tuesday.

Among those expected to attend are Memphis Police Director Toney Armstrong; James E. Nelson, head of the city's office of youth services, and Bishop Mays, leader of the Memphis Gun Down program. Wharton said the group would review their current anti-violence efforts.

This city over the years has experienced similar spurts of gun violence, spawned by domestic violence, street gang activities and illegal drug trafficking.

Each spurt has resulted in hand-wringing and community rallies. But they have also led to implementation of more tangible strategies for fighting gun violence: stiffer federal and state prison sentences for gun crimes, conflict resolution counseling in schools and street-level intervention strategies, such as the city's Memphis Gun Down program.

The importance of these programs should not be underestimated, especially the efforts by

neighborhood activists who are working to reduce violence in their neighborhoods. Yet we still have too many young people using guns to wreak havoc in their neighborhoods and, occasionally, in public gathering areas.

One thing that could help is for parents to become more responsible for the behavior and activities of their children. Granted, some teens can be hard to corral, no matter their economic status. Still, here is something to think about: The 12-year-old was wounded about 9:50 p.m. on a school night, a time when a child that age should have been preparing for bed, if not already there.

Frankly, by the time these young men and women are teenagers, turning them away from violence is difficult. That is why it is important that young children receive the nurturing of responsible parents who make sure their children come to school prepared to learn. And that is why excellent teachers are needed in classrooms to make sure those young children achieve academically, graduating from high school ready for college or to succeed in a job.

That gives young children and teens a doorway to the positive things life holds for them if they succeed in the classroom and in the workplace. That certainly is a better outcome than terrorizing a neighborhood with gunfire, and then having to constantly watch your back for someone seeking to retaliate. The other likely alternative is spending years in prison.

Programs like Gun Down are good and necessary. But this community, or any urban community in the same situation, will not solve the killing and wounding of our children until more parents step up and schools adequately educate more of the children who come from environments that breed youth crime.

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