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No easy answers to crime

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There have been a number of violent crimes in the South End during the past month. Just last week, a 16-year-old was shot on Dwight Street. On April 29, a 15-year-old was stabbed in the face and stomach on Washington Street. Three weeks ago, a 13-year-old was shot on Mystic Street. As of now, there have been no reports of arrests in any of the cases. Surreal, isn't it? Teenagers shooting each other while two blocks over, residents dine al fresco on a nice, warm night.

What was your reaction when you first heard the news?

Disbelief? Anger? Indifference?

I've had just about every type of reaction through the years to stories of violent crime in my neighborhood. Perhaps you've had some of these same feelings.

Resentment: "These kids are ruining our neighborhood. How dare they?" Plenty of good people have devoted their lives to bringing our neighborhoods back together so that everyone feels welcomed and safe, and then this happens. Plenty of time has passed in the South End with fewer shootings and killings, so you wonder, why are things changing, and why should we have to put up with this?

Resignation or casual indifference: "Eh, we've seen and heard this all before; Boston circa 1976, 1986, 1996." You might feel, well, this kind of thing always happens, it's part of "urban life." Now, pass me an eight-dollar tomato.

Hopelessness: "There's nothing I can do, I'm going to ignore the whole thing and hope it goes away." This is as good a reaction as any in my opinion, and one you might end up having the more violent crime increases. At some point, you just give up, lock your doors, or put your home up for sale if you've really had enough. The main emotions I think most of us have are anger, compassion or relief.

Anger: The victims in each of these incidents were male teenagers, and in at least two of the cases, the suspects are also teenage boys. On some level, you may feel that retaliation is in order; it's time to crack some heads. Maybe a citywide curfew. Maybe increased police patrols. Maybe a zero-tolerance policy (one strike and you're out).

Whenever I feel this way, I usually move from blaming the children to blaming their parents. The father of the 13-year-old who was shot told the Boston Herald that his stepson was "a quiet boy who does well in school." Really? What kind of parent lets their child wander the streets of Boston at 1:00 a.m.?

Of course, the minute you start asking questions or talking about "inner-city" youth, you get into a completely different discussion, usually around issues of race and poverty, and any rational conversation ends up going nowhere, fast.

Compassion: "We just need more jobs and better opportunities."

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Quick Poll

Boston -- and the South End -- has been the site of several movie shoots lately. How do you feel about the new Bossywood?

- It's great -- I love celebrities!
- It's great -- I love the benefits for Boston and the neighborhood!
- We're all going to be famous!
- I just hope they put things back the way they found them
- It's an inconvenience
- I could care less

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Perhaps you feel there is no way someone who is poor can ever reach the level of success found by others who have so many life opportunities. Kids are turning to crime as a short cut, or because they feel they have nothing to lose. They are raised in poverty, with broken families ill-prepared to help instill them with values.

I have to be honest. When I hear that argument, I just roll my eyes.

Saying these kids just need "more jobs" seems a terribly simplistic way of looking at the problem. These kids would be working instead of shooting each other? Or, as the Mayor of Boston said a couple summers ago, they'd be so tired at the end of the workday that they'd just sit inside and fall asleep instead?

But many good, intelligent, and knowledgeable people seem to feel the answers come from "creating a village" to raise our youth; maybe they know better than I do.

Relief: Maybe you feel better thinking these incidents happen far away from where you live. "I checked on Google Maps, and those streets are almost a mile away."

Or maybe you feel relieved when you read about where a crime takes place. Does it make you feel more at ease when you read a shooting has happened in a public housing project, because you can "explain it away" that way?

Is it better if crime only occurs in certain places, so you can just avoid them?

You can see where this leads, though, right? Because crimes don't always happen just in "certain places."

You could say, well, I won't walk down Dwight Street at 9:30 at night, which will solve that problem. But, if you follow that logic, then you'd have to include parts of West Newton Street (based on what you read in the police blotter). Also, rule out East Dedham, East Brookline, and East Canton streets (shootings, past month). Avoid blocks of Tremont Street, too (stabbings, last summer). And Worcester Street (there was a hold-up there, last week). And of course, the entire Southwest Corridor, etc., etc., etc.

When it comes to crime, to violence in the city, I'm at a loss. No reaction seems like a good one, no course of action seems practical or likely to achieve the desired results.

Everything has been tried before, yet we've seen crime drop and crime jump over the past decade. Today, some American cities are seeing lower levels of violent crime (New York, for example) while others seem headed toward 1990's highs.

I'm stumped.

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