# In The Crosshairs

Homicide is the leading cause of death for black men ages 15 to 34. What can families and communities do? A national Real Health roundtable.

June 1, 2007 By Jimmie Briggs

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With urban murder rates rising rapidly nationwide, it seems that black youth are unwittingly picking up where slavery, Jim Crow and the Ku Klux Klan left off in the wholesale destruction of African- American men. *Real Health* asked several leaders in the war against community violence to share their views on this emergency. They include:

- **Josh Sugarmann** executive director of the Violence Policy Center in Washington, DC
- **Otis Johnson** sociologist and mayor of Savannah, Georgia, a besieged city
- **Carnell Cooper, MD** a Baltimore trauma surgeon and founder of the Violence Intervention Project, the nation's only in hospital violence prevention program
- **Ronald Mincy, PhD** a social work professor and fatherhood and urban policy expert at Columbia University in New York City
- **LaMarr Darnell Shields** cofounder of the Urban Leadership Institute, a Baltimore-based non-profit focusing on youth leadership and violence prevention
- **Dorothy Johnson-Speight** a Philadelphia mother whose 24-year-old son was murdered in a fight over a parking space, leading her to form Mothers in Charge (MIC), an advocacy and support group with chapters nationwide

**Real Health: Does having guns in our homes actually make us safer, or just make us *feel* safer?**
**Otis Johnson:** When you look at the statistics, guns that are being used in a violent crime are not the ones in the home. People can go outside and find so-called dirty guns, illegal weapons they're getting from gang members or drug dealers. The mentality of a person who wants to take someone's life is what we have to deal with. If we don't change their mindset, they will kill with guns, knives, anything.

**Dorothy Johnson-Speight:** You have angry youth in our communities. People are getting killed

over parking spaces, cell phones and other things because someone can easily get a gun. They could argue, fistfight and hopefully walk away, but the availability of a gun makes every encounter potentially lethal.

**Josh Sugarmann:** I think that parents don't have the awareness of the extent that gun culture filters down to youth. There's a myth that having a lot of guns in your state or home makes you safer. In fact, more guns mean a higher homicide rate, higher suicide rate, higher violence rate. A lot of parents think that if they tell their kids about guns and teach them about safety and being street-smart that it protects. It doesn't. A lot of cities would like to have stricter gun control laws, but they're often preempted by state or federal law.

**RH: What do we need to do to keep our children out of harm's way, whether as victims or perpetrators of violence?**
**Otis Johnson:** We work on getting to young people as soon as possible, and sending a message [through parents and law enforcement] that the community will not tolerate this type of behavior. School dropout and poverty are not excuses.

**Dorothy Johnson-Speight:** I don't know if good parenting, or even having both parents in a child's home can protect them. No matter how much you try to protect your child, teach them about safety, about staying away from certain situations or people, there's still an uncontrolled element [drugs, guns, gangs, poverty, crime] out there that can grab hold and undermine everything you've done.

**LaMarr Darnell Shields:** Parents can really talk to children about violence, whether they're living in the projects or whether they're wealthy. Fathers who can't be in the household can find ways of spending time with their child. The best alternative is for advocates and parents to be involved in a young person's life. The best programs that I've seen are those where the parents, guardians or caretakers are 100 percent involved, exposing kids to after-school programs where they talk directly to victims of violence.

**RH: In addition to loving our children, what can parents attempt to provide for our young people that it appears many of them are not getting now?**
**Carnell Cooper:** They need life coaching. Some of our patients in their twenties have never had a job, or they grew up not knowing how to read or write. We help them do these things and more—dressing, shopping, balancing a checkbook. We fill gaps they have from growing up.

**Otis Johnson:** Research says five things are essential to the development of a healthy young person: connection to a healthy adult; positive gap-time activities (i.e. after-school programs, weekend activities); engagement in work or public service; help in transitioning successfully between elementary, middle and high school; and the opportunity to make decisions about their futures.

**Ronald Mincy:** Some things parents can contribute are checking in, helping children rehearse their day, roleplaying things that happen, and interpreting their experience with the mind of an

adult. Adults help kids interpret their adversities in ways they can learn, so they will come out on top.

**RH: What role does an involved father play in reducing a child's risk for violence?**
**Ronald Mincy:** Sixty-five percent of African-American children live inhomes without fathers. Many live in dangerous communities. Low-incomekids face more adversity—and different adversity—than others. Fatherscan help protect them and help them negotiate dangerous environments inways that are better than [the strategies used by] children who grow upin the same community in the absence of their fathers. I have a friendwho says that fathers help children interpret negative experiences in away that helps them come out on top. In the absence of this kind ofcontribution, much of the adversity that low-income kids experience cantake them down.

**LaMarr Darnell Shields:** You can see the girls that are doing wellacademically and socially generally have a strong relationship withtheir fathers. We believe that fathers need to be acknowledged and wantto give them affirmation and services. They need to get their GED,connect with their child, and [access help from] agencies, if necessary.

**RH: What can churches and other community and civic organizations do to help stem the tide of violence?**
**Josh Sugarmann:** We have to limit the free flow of guns in this country.You have an industry run amok that cares very little about who's beinghit with the firepower. The traditional gun-buying public is gettingolder and dying off, sothe industry is trying to remake their clientbase by pursuing a younger demographic.

**Otis Johnson:** In Savannah, we're funding after-school programs andlooking to do mentoring in public schools. We're also working to helpthose coming back into the community after being incarcerated, becausemany times their families abandon them. If someone doesn't help them,they fall back into a life of crime. Society hasn't put into place asuccessful reentry mechanism for juveniles and adults.

**LaMarr Darnell Shields:** Girls are the first teachers of our children.If we took care of the girls first, the queens, the boys would fall inline. Ten-, eleven-year-old girls are getting pregnant by men who aretaking advantage of them. They're starting sexual activities early.We've gotta jump in and intervene with them.

**Dorothy Johnson-Speight:** We need to reach outside of our homes and intothe lives of young people who don't have parents or direction in theirlife, or whose parent or parents don't know how to do the right thing.Ultimately, the parenting issue affects all of us. Parents have toreach out to children other than their own to protect their families.

*Jimmie Briggs, a New York–based writer, authored* Innocents Lost: WhenChild Soldiers Go to War *(Basic Books), a book about child soldiers andwar-affected children.*

**GRIM STATISTICS**

*A snapshot of gun violence in 2003*

4,845 black men ages 15-34 lost to homicide
4,670 black men ages 15-34 lost to the next four leading causes of death (accidents, suicide, heart disease and HIV) combined
3,268 White men ages 15-34 lost to homicide
49% percent of all homicide victims ages 15-34 who were black men
6% percent of Americans ages 15-34 who are black men
91% percent of black homicide victims slain by African-American offenders

**IS YOUR CHILD AT RISK FOR VIOLENCE?**
Experts say parents should watch for:

- Fighting
- Verbal threats or abuse
- Substance abuse
- Violence toward animals
- Expression of violent and destructive fantasies or dreams
- Possession of a weapon

If you see these signs, take the following steps:

**Seek support.** Tap into the resources available at your church or a local social service agency, or call a professional mental health counselor. Even if the young person won't go to counseling, parents and family members can. A therapist can provide objective advice, help you solve problems, and identify resources that can help you and your child.

**Keep guns out of your home.** And let your child know in no uncertain terms that you do not support him—or her—owning or carrying one.

**Find a mentor for your youth.** Enlist an older family member or find a volunteer through an organization such as your local chapter of 100 Black Men of America (www.100blackmen.org). Engage children in organized activities. Music, sports, art, church, plays, spoken word jams and video production are all positive outlets through which kids can channel their energy and creativity.

**Try to reduce their exposure to violent images and music.** Studies show that these make viewers and listeners more violent.

**RESOURCES**

**Children’s Defense Fund**
www.childrensdefensefund.org
800-233-1200
Advocates for children by working with government and community agencies.

**Mothers in Charge**
www.mothersincharge.org
215-235-7283
Philadelphia-based group offers grief support and works on gun legislation.

**Urban Leadership Institute**
www.urbanyouth.org
877-339-4300
Empowers youth to create their own enterprises.

**Violence Policy Center**
www.vpc.org
202-822 8200
Provides research, investigation, analysis and advocacy.

**Youth Alive**
www.youthalive.org
510-594-2588 x300
Works to prevent youth violence in Oakland and LA.

*Byron Keith Hill (1978-2003)*
*Called helpful and lovable, Byron graduated from high school and had completed Ford’s auto repair training program.*

*Khaaliq Jabbar Johnson (1977-2001)*
*A graduate of the University of Maryland, Khaaliq was to begin a master’s program the month after he was killed.*

*Latief Lewis Abdullah (1981-2002)*
*Latief worked, attended school to study art, and regularly went to prayer meetings.*

*Mervin Spady Jr. (1978-2000)*
*Mervin was a talented basketball player who would often write lyrics to rap music in hopes of becoming a star.*

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