OPINION&COMMENTARY

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EDITORIALS

Seeds of violence

Low expectations can lead to crime

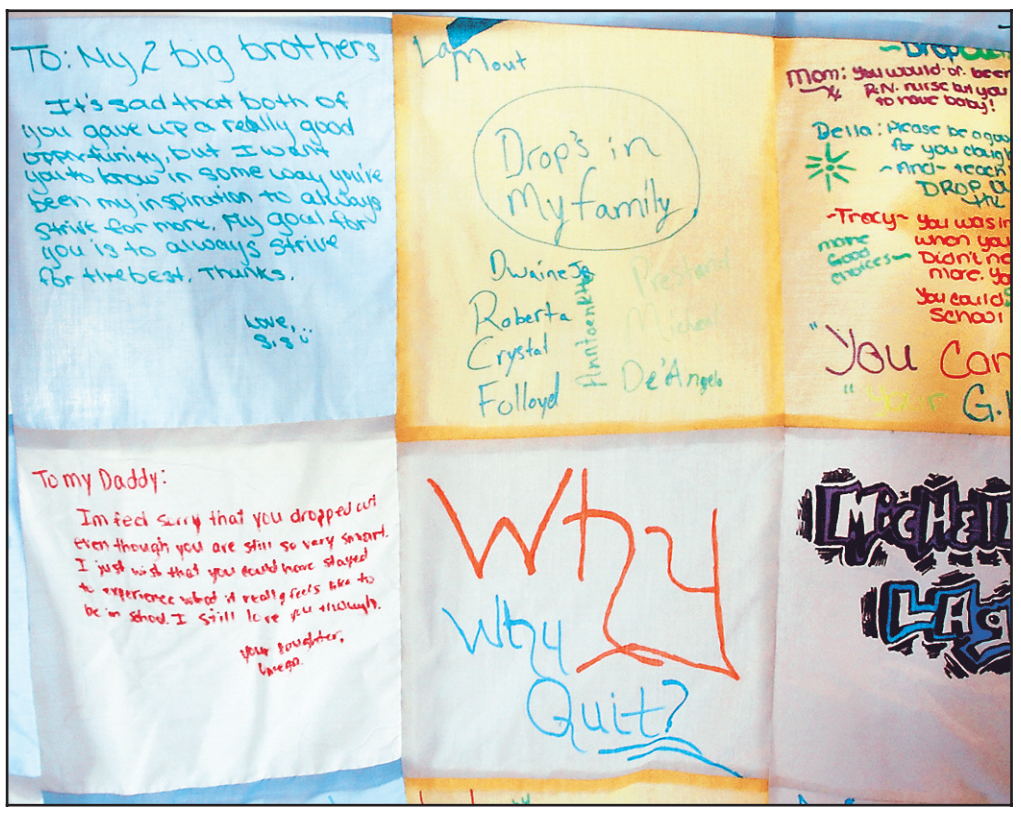
Our position:
Solving the crime wave in the long run will require more than cops.

As far as Tamiko Jordan is concerned, so many young men and women are fueling the city's two-year-long crime wave in part because of the low expectations from parents, schools and the community when they were younger.

Kids latch onto drug dealers, notes the former Indianapolis Public Schools administrator and vice president of the Center for Leadership Development, because they offer them a path that gives them something to do. Says Jordan: "If you expect nothing, they will give you nothing."

She's right. The long-term neglect of the public safety system by officials is a key factor in rising crime rates. At the same time, problems aren't solved simply with more arrests and full jail beds. Steering children away from criminal acts and dropping out of school is among the toughest of challenges yet is the most needed.

It calls for good parenting and government and community groups providing interventions that can turn around the lives of children. But it's also about each one of us becoming active in our communities. Lives are at stake. It's time to get involved.



FRANK ESPICH/ The Star

FABRIC OF OUR LIVES: This "dropout quilt" was created and sown by students at Indianapolis Public Schools, urging their friends, relatives and fellow students to stay in school.

Neglected brothers can't avoid trouble

William and Joseph epitomize the failures of both family and government to turn their lives around, a reason why Indianapolis' quality of life is in decline.

(The Star generally doesn't identify alleged juvenile offenders.)

The two brothers have spent more time growing up at Marion County Juvenile Detention Center than in the shadows of the Eli Lilly complex on the Southside, where they both live.

Sent to state juvenile prison for violating his truancy probation, then-14-year-old William returned there for a second stint in 2001 after violating his truancy probation (which was later overturned on appeal). He had gotten out just months earlier.

Sixteen-year-old Joseph garnered his own list of convictions in juvenile court. Since age 9, he has been charged with such crimes as arson, intimidation, criminal recklessness and battery.

The lengthy rap sheet of their father, Floyd, includes prison stints for attempted armed robbery, arson and sexual misconduct with a minor. These days, he awaits trial in the Marion County Jail for evading requirements of his parole and failing to register as a sex offender.

Meanwhile, their mother, Mary, presides over a household filled with "excessive noise" and "cursing by children," who apparently are allowed to run the streets. All of her children, including William's and Joseph's sisters, have either been referred to or placed under the watch of the state Department of Child Services.

Neither William nor Joseph had solid role models to help turn their lives around when they got into trouble.

A school counselor tried calling Mary about William's 19 unexcused absences. She never returned his call. Little changed four years later when a probation officer called Mary about a scheduled meeting she and Joseph had missed. All she would do in getting Joseph to school was "send him down there (to the bus stop)," for a bus he always missed.

Sadly, the lack of stable, disciplined families is typical. So is the lack of comprehensive systems from both government and in communities to steer children from paths of crime and violence.

Star file photo

Marion County's juvenile justice system has been far more quick to lock up children, with some 9,600 youths incarcerated between 1990 and 2005. This is due both to the lack of early interventions and an increasing number of children coming into juvenile court on matters best handled by parents and schools.

Neighborhood involvement is not only crucial in stemming crime but in fostering relationships with children that can pull them out of wayward paths. But far too many people have been reticent to get involved.

The consequences of neglect, both by parents, community and government, can be seen in rising crime rates, including a 9 percent increase in aggravated assaults between April 2005 and April '06 within the Indianapolis Police Department district alone.

Everyone in the community has a stake in addressing these problems. If we ignore them, the lives of many of Indianapolis' children — and adults — will be shattered.

Dropping out to life of crime

The fact that so many of the men — both victims and felons — involved in this latest round of carnage in Marion County have likely never finished school is sad but not surprising.

Indianapolis Public Schools has the lowest graduation rates in the nation for both black and white males, according to the Schott Foundation for Public Education. Only one of every five male freshmen who made up the district's original Class of 2004 earned diplomas four years later. Graduation rates for black males in the township school districts aren't much better. Perry Township graduated 31 percent of black males in 2002, with Franklin and Warren townships not far behind.

The consequences of this aren't just borne out in low wages and employment prospects for dropouts, but in the character of the community. On any given day on the Eastside's Martindale-Brightwood neighborhood, young men can be found wandering the streets instead of working or attending school.

The dropout crisis begins early with lack of involvement from parents. Research indicates that poor parents devote an average of 25 hours of reading time to their children from birth until they reach first grade. Middle-class parents, on the other hand, spend as much as 1,700 hours reading to their children.

But schools also fail to help these students at risk of dropping out by failing to provide early enough adequate, intense remediation. They also place less emphasis on reading in the middle grades just as it's needed most.

The use of harsh discipline also contributes to the problem by keeping students out of school, which causes them to fall behind in studies. And black students are far more likely to be suspended than whites, no matter their grade level or socioeconomic status.

IPS in the past year has embarked on a series of reforms, including an overhaul of discipline policies and ending the practice of arresting and referring students to juvenile court for low-level offenses. Year-round schools also would help, keeping children off the streets and giving them more time for learning.

It will take concerted, sustained efforts by schools, parents and the community to stem high dropouts rates and, ultimately, crime.

Daniels & Co. churns out laudable energy policy

Our position:
The Daniels administration's energy proposal is a viable long-term answer to higher costs and reduced supply.

Gov. Mitch Daniels and the state's Office of Energy and Defense Development have taken the adage about turning lemons into lemonade to produce an ambitious, innovative recipe to turn Indiana into a "Middle East" of biofuels and clean-coal technology.

Their strategic Hoosier Homegrown Energy Plan addresses Indiana's growing and dangerous dependency on foreign fuel, soaring energy prices and aging and polluting power plant infrastructure. By using new technologies, Indiana's plentiful coal reserves, agricultural bounty and Hoosier know-how, the plan proposes a new era of clean, reliable and efficient electricity, automotive fuel and natural gas produced locally from coal and farm crops or waste.

Daniels announced the plan at several locations around the state on Friday. It contains proposals to encourage energy conservation through technology, building codes and utility pricing, as well as greater use of renewable energy. He noted that the state's natural gas reserves are largely depleted, utilities have turned to cleaner-burning but more expensive Western coal and the nation is heavily dependent on foreign oil for gasoline. Today, 75 cents of every dollar Hoosiers spend on energy leave the state.

Daniels explained that new technology will allow us to fully utilize Indiana coal and biomass to generate electricity, create synthetic gas from coal and biomass and turn agricultural products into motor fuels.

Although the proposal is short on specifics, it is practical and doable. It calls for creating an "energy corridor" beneath the proposed I-69 extension, jumpstarting the number of gas stations offering ethanol, upgrading the state fleet to make it flexible-fuel capable, and developing policies to ease connections to the power grid by non-utility electric producers such as wind farms.

There's much about the plan worth debating. For example, it is relatively silent on greenhouse gas emissions, environmental degradation from coal mining, disposal of wastes produced by clean-coal technologies or the need to include alternate transportation and energy efficiency as part of community planning.

Nevertheless, it offers a practical, forward-looking answer to growing shortages and costly energy supplies.

BLOGS: Check out IndyStar.com/opinion for The Star's Web logs: **Expresso**, by Star Editorial Board members and local columnists; **VarvBlog**, sketches and notes by cartoonist Gary Varvel; **IN Touch**, by local panel members; and **Fresh Thoughts**, by college and high school students. Also read **My Indiana**, short articles by readers about life in the Hoosier state. Online comments about each blog item are welcome.

DANNY LEE

Frayed edge unraveling back to center

In my desk at work I have a small handful of fingertip-sized, mashed metallic lumps that I found here and there on my office parking lot over the years, the way a farmer walking his fields will turn up old arrowheads.

I'm not a ballistics expert, but it's obvious that these are spent bullets, probably handgun rounds.

Were they were fired in anger? Celebration? Just to hear the bang? Who knows?

But here they are, misshapen droplets of a hard rain that went mostly unnoticed until this spring and summer, when people began to see that the puddles on the Eastside, Downtown, at 56th and Georgetown, were blood.

It turns out there's no need to visit Baghdad or southern Lebanon to get a taste of violence; we have our own armed factions, our own home-grown Hezbollahs, shooting it out right here.

There are many similarities: Just as in Iraq, we have work crews in the affected neighborhoods, trying to build a civil society literally from the ground up. Our armed forces, the police, are working overtime to try to take back the streets. Politicians are promising action. Money is being spent.

But the truth is none of this will work, either overseas or here at home, until the gunmen are turned out by the wives, dads, moms, kids, grandmas and grandpas who feed, clothe, succor and shelter them.

We took a step in that direction last week, when a suspicious mother brought her teenage son in for questioning in a shooting. "You know your kids, and I know my son," was her grim comment to The Star.

What a tough thing. But anyone bound by affection to a family member chained to drugs or alcohol has to learn that first you have to withdraw the support that enables the addiction. Would those addicted to violence be any different?

We have our own armed factions, our own home-grown Hezbollahs, shooting it out right here.

And violence is a sort of addiction, at least in the sense of its thrill, its edgy nonconformity, its easy shortcut past the knot of difficult problems. And it is one of the most common in our culture. In fact, the people settling squabbles with gunfire are just the tip of the spear that includes vicious rap and metal music, "raw" professional wrestling, short-tempered athletes, hazing, bullying, road rage, trash talk, and simple, in-your-face-sass.

In a culture that honors such ill-tempered behavior as "getting real," is it any surprise that, at the fringes, disputes are now so "real" that people don't come back alive?

"When I was a kid . . . people punched each other in the nose," Indianapolis Police Department Deputy Chief Tim Foley told The Star. "They don't do that anymore. They pull guns and shoot each other."

And that frayed edge is unraveling back toward the center. Sports parents bully and batter coaches and referees. Hazing among athletes has gone from disrespectful to dangerous. And kids who watch pro wrestling are more likely to engage in date fighting.

"Date fighting"? It turns out there is such a thing and it's common enough to be studied. And girls actually watch the horrific orgy of sexualized violence that professional wrestling has become.

"The relationship between watching wrestling on television and being the perpetrator of dating violence was strongest among females," said Wake Forest Professor Robert H. DuRant, who conducted the study.

Guys, this is not your father's prom date.

In Indianapolis, we still slow down to let merging traffic enter, usually. We pause in entryways, holding a door open for strangers trailing along behind. We smile at strangers' kids.

But we also tailgate impatiently, hurry ahead to beat other diners to the Olive Garden waiting list, and teach our kids to use the telephone machine to screen Aunt Geneva's calls.

Those won't usually get you into shooting scrapes (depending on your Aunt Geneva), but they do show a community where the margins of behavior are on the move.

Who would have guessed that cutting ourselves loose from the gentler graces at one margin would send us drifting further out into the violent chaos of every-man-for-himself at the other?

For now, the victims have mostly been young black men, often with criminal records of their own. And you can't argue with Marion County Prosecutor Carl Brizzi when he says, as he did last week, "If you are involved in criminal activity, there is a risk that you yourself might become a victim."

But if those old bullets rattling around in my desk mean anything to the rest of us, it is that ammo doesn't care where it lands. How long before that starts to hit home — literally?

★ Lee, of Greenwood, is editor of Jack & Jill magazine.