

Communities Struggle to Break a Grim Cycle of Killing

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BATON ROUGE, La.—Police found Silas Gibbs Jr. early in the morning of March 3, slumped against the seat belt in a red Mustang, with blood streaming from his ears and mouth. He had been shot, allegedly by one of his closest friends.

Mr. Gibbs, 24 years old, is one of hundreds of young black men across the U.S. to die violently in the past six months. Their deaths are overshadowed by tragedies like the massacres at the Aurora, Colo., movie theater and the Sikh temple in Wisconsin, as well as the killing of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Fla. The latter case prompted nationwide outcry in part because of its racial aspect: Mr. Martin's killer is white and Hispanic, and Mr. Martin was black.

But Mr. Martin's death is a racial aberration, according to data kept by the Justice Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Law-enforcement officials nationwide are battling a far more widespread and intractable problem: the persistent killing of young black men by other young black men.

Homicide victims usually are killed by people of their own race and ethnicity. The pattern goes back at least a generation.

Bureau of Justice Statistics data show that from 1976 to 2005, white victims were killed by white defendants 86% of the time and black victims were killed by blacks 94% of the time.

Then there is the matter of who is dying. Although the U.S. murder rate has been dropping for years, an analysis of homicide data by The Wall Street Journal found that the number of black male victims increased more than 10%, to 5,942 in 2010 from 5,307 in 2000.

Overall, more than half the nation's homicide victims are African-American, though blacks make up only 13% of the population. Of those black murder victims, 85% were men, mostly young men.

Despite the declining U.S. murder rate, killings remain stubbornly high in poor pockets of cities large and small. In some cases, the rate is rising sharply. That increase is draining resources from police, prosecutors, social workers and hospitals.

As of Friday, Philadelphia police had been called to 223 homicides, compared with 198 last year. Chicago has recorded 337 murders, compared with 263 in the year-earlier period, a 28% jump. Public outcry there escalated after June 27, when stray bullets fired by an alleged gang member killed 7-year-old Heaven Sutton in a poor area on the city's West Side. Uproar over the little girl's death led Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel to announce a gang crackdown in neighborhoods with high murder rates.

The increase isn't uniform. In New York, 246 people this year have been murdered as of August 5, a 17% decline from a year earlier, police say.

Overwhelmingly, the victims are black men like Mr. Gibbs, who was shot in the back of the head in his car in Louisiana. Or Rahiem Bailey, 29, who was killed during an apparent robbery in Norfolk, Va. He died the evening of Feb. 26, an hour before Mr. Martin, the Florida teenager, was killed by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watchman. Lecarlos Todd, a 19-year-old college student, was shot to death earlier that same day in Jackson, Tenn., one of numerous people hurt during a melee at a local night spot. Jackson police said he was an innocent bystander.

In each of these cases, the victims were African Americans younger than 30, and the people charged also were young black men.

Law-enforcement officers know the pattern, said Fraternal Order of Police vice president Frank Gale, during recent testimony before a subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary Committee. "As a black law-enforcement officer, I sure would like to see a serious approach to the epidemic levels of violence that exist in far too many of our black communities," he said. There is little national attention from policy makers. "I have not seen any federal legislation which would tackle the huge problem" of crime among black Americans, said Mr. Gale, a captain in the Denver County sheriff's department. "I am not even sure what such a bill would look like," he added.

Because black-on-black violence tends to stay concentrated within poorer, inner-city areas, there is a lack of wider awareness of the depth of the problem, said Jack Levin of the Brudnick Center on Violence and Conflict at Northeastern University in Boston. "Nobody in this room would even know the name Trayvon Martin if it had been a black kid who shot Trayvon Martin," said Philadelphia Police Commissioner

Charles Ramsey, an African American, speaking at a gun-violence research forum.

Beyond the race question, the case sparked a national debate over controversial "stand your ground" laws, such as Florida's, which don't require a person to retreat from a threat. It also raised questions about the role of neighborhood watchmen like Mr. Zimmerman, who faces second-degree murder charges and says he shot Mr. Martin in self-defense. Prosecutors say Mr. Zimmerman ignored a dispatcher's instructions to not pursue Mr. Martin, precipitating the fatal encounter.

People who dismiss high homicide rates in poor, mostly black neighborhoods as someone else's problem ignore the cost to society, from police efforts to social services for victims' families, said Chuck Wexler of the Police Executive Research Forum, a Washington, D.C., think tank that conducts research on criminal justice initiatives. His group calculated the national cost for gun homicides alone in 2010 was more than \$43 billion. That encompasses victim costs like lost productivity and medical care, as well as costs for police, prosecution, courts and prison. It also includes costs to the offender's family.

A 2009 study by Iowa State analyzing other data estimated that a single murder runs up more than \$17 million in costs to the police, courts, prisons, social services and to the families of victims and suspects.

"We can and must find a way to stop the killing," New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu said in May as he announced a new strategy there to combat homicides. It takes a "public health" approach, emphasizing prevention of murder through education, community policing and targeting possible

offenders.

The effort, now under way, focuses on poor neighborhoods that are hot spots for violent crime. Some poor black neighborhoods in New Orleans are dominated by "a culture of death" that needs to be broken, Mr. Landrieu, who is white, has said.

It isn't just major cities. Baton Rouge, La., with 230,000 people, Kalamazoo, Mich., 74,000, and other small metropolises have violent neighborhoods, some with rising numbers of murders, although the numbers are much smaller.

Baton Rouge has had at least 54 murders so far this year, according to police. By the end of August last year, 43 people had been murdered.

In Kalamazoo, police and community leaders have brought in an expert on inner-city violence because of concerns that one neighborhood has been generating most of the city's murders in recent years. So far this year, four of Kalamazoo's five murders took place in this one area.

"Sometimes you can guess who is next by who was killed the night before."

—Hillar Moore, district attorney

"The last national data we have says it's increasing and it's been increasing fastest in medium-size and small cities," said David Kennedy, a criminologist at John Jay College in New York.

Government numbers, while imperfect, show the homicide rate in cities of 1 million or more declining to 11.9 per 100,000 U.S. residents in 2008 from 35.5 in 1991, according to a report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics last year. But it appears to be rising in smaller cities: Separate FBI numbers indicate that homicides rose 4.3% in 2010 from the previous year in cities of 250,000 to 499,000 people.

Mr. Kennedy says one promising solution involves bringing in violence-prone people in specific neighborhoods to meet with law enforcement, clergy, relatives, residents and other government services. People who cooperate get employment and education help. If bad behavior continues, prosecutors push for maximum penalties.

Boston tried a version of this in 1996, and saw youth homicides drop precipitously. In one two-year period, no teenagers younger than 18 were killed. The program ended in 2000, in part because of its success. It restarted several years later when youth murders increased.

Critics say the Boston plan gets too much credit. They cite an overall decline in homicides nationwide during the period it was in operation.

In the area where Mr. Gibbs died in Baton Rouge, a variation of this kind of intense anti-violence effort is being tested. Known as the Baton Rouge Area Violence Elimination Project, it focuses on a three-mile-square economically depressed area considered the epicenter for violent crime in the city. About 160 young men have been identified and are being brought in to talk to police and other officials.

Northeast of the Louisiana state capitol, fast-food restaurants, bail-bondsman offices and rundown homes abound. The area holds 13% of the city's population but accounts for 30% of homicides, according to the District Attorney's Office. From 2007 to 2011, police reported 11,256 people were victims of firearm crimes in the area, more than 90% of them African-American.

Hillar Moore, the district attorney for East Baton Rouge Parish, says authorities must try new methods to break the pattern. Mr. Moore tries to go to every homicide scene, he says, and finds that the "vast majority" of the killings "will be over nonsense."

At 3 a.m. just this Friday, Mr. Moore was out again, this time at the scene of the shooting death of 18-year-old Ty O'Brian Porter. Police don't have a suspect but say they believe the shooting resulted from a neighborhood dispute.

Retaliation is a recurring theme in the homicides he investigates, Mr. Moore said, which perpetuates the cycle of killing. "Sometimes you can guess who is next by who was killed the night before," he said.

But because people often are reluctant to cooperate with an investigation, the next killing can be tough to prevent. "They know they're next, and yet still they do not want police intervention," he said.

It was quick-trigger violence that ended the life of Silas Gibbs, once an aspiring football running back, in the early morning hours of a rainy Saturday in March. Mr. Gibbs grew up in the small town of Clinton, about an hour's drive northeast of Baton Rouge, and is remembered as "quiet and respectful," said

Clinton police Chief Eddie Stewart. He was the kind of young man who would go unnoticed, "until Friday nights. Under the lights on the football field, playing for Clinton, that's when you noticed him. He came alive."

He headed to Southern University in Baton Rouge in 2007 to play football. But things started to fall apart. Because of poor grades, he remained academically ineligible to play ball for most of his time at the school.

When his father was diagnosed with prostate cancer, he started traveling back and forth to Clinton to care for him, his mother said. At the same time, Mr. Gibbs had a daughter, born in 2008, and sought ways to support her.

He pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor conviction for intent to distribute marijuana in 2008 following a traffic stop, when a Drug Enforcement Administration agent found Mr. Gibbs in possession of 23 bags of marijuana and \$900 in cash. When the DEA agent who stopped him asked why he was involved, Mr. Gibbs answered he had a small child to support, according to court records.

Mr. Gibbs received probation for a year. The judge set aside the conviction in 2011 after Mr. Gibbs had no further legal problems.

Mr. Gibbs dropped out of Southern. He hauled scrap in the absence of full-time work. His father, the man who had guided him to football and helped him find odd jobs, was dead from cancer. He had a second daughter and helped raise a young nephew whose mother had died in a car wreck.

Toya Williams, Mr. Gibb's live-in girlfriend and mother of his second daughter, described in an interview the night he died. The two had argued, by text message, as Mr. Gibbs spent the evening with friends while she stayed with her daughter in the mobile home they shared. She went to bed.

When she awoke in the morning, she noticed two missed calls on her cellphone from 1:20 a.m. They were both from Mr. Gibbs's phone. She called back. "It just kept ringing and ringing," she said.

Hours earlier, at 2:45 a.m., police received a call of an abandoned car on the highway. An officer found Mr. Gibbs in the car with the stereo blaring. At first, the officer thought Mr. Gibbs was sleeping, but then he saw the blood.

He summoned an ambulance, followed soon by a homicide team. The detectives began canvassing relatives and friends in the early morning for possible leads.

Ms. Williams caught a ride to her job at Wal-Mart, where she works in maintenance. She first learned of Mr. Gibbs's death around 8 a.m., when a neighbor phoned with the news. His sister texted the message next. Then a Baton Rouge police detective called. Only when Mr. Gibbs's mother, Rosie Triplett, phoned to talk about his funeral, Ms. Williams said, did she accept that he was dead.

Her life, already a financial struggle, is now more difficult. Among other things, she must now hire baby sitters when she is at work. Previously, Mr. Gibbs provided child care.

Witnesses to the killing told Baton Rouge police that Walter Fort, 22, a longtime friend of Mr. Gibbs and his former dorm-

mate in college, shot him from the back seat of the car. Prosecutors say Mr. Fort pulled the gun during a heated argument, and haven't said what caused the dispute.

Mr. Gibbs's family say they believe Mr. Fort had been jealous of Mr. Gibbs's popularity and athletic success, but they are struggling to understand the rationale for the alleged shooting. "Nobody's giving us a motive," said his mother, Ms. Triplett. "I just want...I just want to know why he did it. For what reason? Is it a hate thing or a jealous thing?"

Mr. Fort had no previous criminal record aside from a 2008 rape charge that was dropped when the alleged victim declined to cooperate.

Mr. Fort fled Baton Rouge and was arrested at Texas Southern University in Houston. He is currently being held in the parish jail in Baton Rouge, without bond, as he awaits trial on charges of second-degree murder and illegal use of firearms.

Prosecutors are now preparing their case. Barry Milligan, Mr. Fort's public defender, declined to comment.

Mr. Gibbs is buried beside his father and his sister at Mount Carmel Cemetery in Clinton, La. The family is trying to pull together the funds to buy a headstone.

Mr. Gibbs's younger sister, Lakitia Triplett, was pregnant at the time her brother died. She lives with her mother, a few blocks east from where her brother's body was found, in Baton Rouge's most dangerous neighborhood. Earlier this year she described her anxieties over the future prospects of her then-unborn child. "I have to be worried, you have to," she said. "People killing people every day over just nonsense."

A few weeks ago, Ms. Triplett gave birth to a son. She named him Silas.