

# **Guns and Gangstas Part One: Why black on black crime plagues our communities**

25 September 2005 Deborah Gabriel

## **Why do black youths take up arms?**

The question of what causes many of our black teenagers to either drop out of school or be expelled and end up roaming the streets in gangs, drifting into criminal, violent, behaviour, is one that experts are falling over themselves to find answers to.

But the problem with much of the theorizing that goes on concerning so-called 'black on black' crime is that a lot of it is made by people who are observers, looking at the issue from the outside.

One man who can claim to understand the situation from the inside, at a grass roots level is Social Intervention Specialist, Twilight Bey.

He grew up on the housing projects of South Central Los Angeles and has first hand experience of poverty and the effects of gang culture and drugs and the impact they have on communities.

Twilight has over 16 years experience in social literacy development, youth work, conflict mediation and gang intervention.

He was instrumental in the 1998 peace talks between rival street gangs in Los Angeles and helped to organise the ceasefire between the Bloods and Crips of Watts, California in 1992.

## **The link between council estates, gang culture and gun crime**

Take any sprawling council estate in London and there will be an incidence of gangs and violence: Stonebridge Park, Stockwell Park, Loughborough Park and the list goes on.

In the final edition of BBC One's Murder Blues, about the attempted murder of Douglas Mullings on a Tottenham council estate, a Trident detective refers to it as **"a breeding ground"** for gangs and criminal activity.

Twilight Bey told Black Britain that gang culture and its association with council estates is exactly the same as in America, except that:

**"Here we don't call them estates we call them housing projects.**

**When you cramp people together in a controlled environment that is cut off from the outside community, there will be a process of associating together among the people who live there."**

Twilight said that people who live on council estates soon start to look out for each other and before long people build their lives around the estates:

**"On the projects you start to aspire to those outside your primary family as the means of protection, socialisation and education, because the primary family has broken down."**

According to Twilight, in the absence of the father and with the mother unable to provide the material trappings of success dictated by mainstream society, youths begin to associate **"with people who are looking at how to make those things happen."**

Commenting on how living on council estates affects some people, Twilight said:

**“The impact of living in these types of closed-in environments, the impact of having a family unit that has broken down and the fact that youths are left open to assault, attack and abuse in various forms, it should not surprise anyone that they should seek protection among their peer group.”**

Twilight told Black Britain that it is not surprising that youths choose guns as their preferred choice of weapons when their own country demonstrates a process of bullying:

**“You cannot disassociate gun violence on the street with gun violence on the global stage in the form of war. They are related to one another and they are all tied in to the same purpose.”**

### **The link between gang culture, gun crime and rap music**

Many experts blame rap music for selling a ‘bling’ lifestyle and glamorising violence in their lyrics and music videos.

Twilight Bey told Black Britain that many young people who listen to this type of music lack the analytical skills to understand that what they are listening to is in effect a newspaper on a CD.

Describing rap music as a way of sharing things happening within the community, Twilight said:

**“Just like you have tabloids and periodicals and facts-based news, it’s the same thing as a newspaper- you have to be able to tell the ‘it’ from the ‘shit’.”**

Therefore without the necessary skills to analyse and decode much of the music **“you will be made a victim by those that understand that and abuse it.”**

Referring to the Ice Cube song: 'Gangstas Make the World go Round', Twilight referred to the verse which says: *‘Go to school is what you tell us but Niggas in school is scared of the Goodfellas.’*

**“Now if you take the movie ‘The Goodfellas’ what are you looking at? A Mafia lifestyle: violence and killing.”**

Twilight told Black Britain that basically what the lyrics are saying is: what good is a degree if it only takes a bully to keep you in check?

Even when a rapper takes a responsible position and openly denounces the glorification of violence in music there can still be undesirable consequences as a result of the association in the minds of die-hard fans of rap music with guns.

In February of this year on the day that American rapper Nas, released a single rebuking violence in rap music, a concert he was giving in Brixton, South London had to be stopped when gun shots were fired 25 minutes into the show.

Around 30 policemen, a third of them armed, arrived on the scene and evacuated the building, spoiling the show for the rest of the law-abiding concert-goers.

At the time his publicist said: **“It’s ironic because only today he released his latest single, Just a Moment, which is about the fact he is dead against violence in rap. This is not something he stands for.”**

## **The link between gangs, guns and cultural identity**

According to Twilight many youths become disaffected because they are so far removed from the culture that gave birth to them.

He said that having been detached from their culture for so long, when they finally return to the countries their parents were born in they are called **'English'**.

So there is a sense that they don't fit there and they don't feel as if they fit into British society either:

According to Twilight as a black person in the UK, referring to one's self as Black British does not solve the issue of identity, because it is a nationality:

**"A nationality is nothing but a construct. It's something which someone created and is not the same as an identity.**

**This is saying that this is your nation and that this is the essence of where your people came from, but the reality is, that is simply not true."**

**"I say it's a generation that never knew its way, because of our lack of understanding of who we are and the lack of cultural integrity, we don't have the insight we need in order to properly negotiate the realities of living in an alien environment."**

As black people we should be able to celebrate our culture and lifestyle without being stigmatised because we are different.

Living life, said Twilight, is about learning, growing, developing and enhancing who and what you are, except:

**"We're not given those opportunities because we are basically fighting for the necessities of survival.**

**And when we do that in an environment where the majority of people at the bottom look like us, who do you think we are going to be fighting with?"**

Twilight told Black Britain that when the consciousness of a community is killed then the community becomes unconscious:

**"Our young people are nothing more than the living dead. We kill our children by not giving them a sense of self.**

**They don't know who they are. They don't have a reason for why they should be anything that they should be."**

*Now read 'Guns and Gangstas Part Two: A criminologist's perspective'*

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