

Who is to blame for black on black youth crime?

30 May 2006 Deborah Gabriel

Are children becoming more violent or more fearful?

It used to be the case that when there was a violent death involving a child or teenager it used to evoke shock and disbelief; but as a sad indictment of the times we are living in it is no longer shocking and the familiar sentiments of the waste of a young life and empathy for the families of the victim still persist.

Incidents such as the recent death of 15 year old black teenager Kiyon Prince, who was stabbed to death at his school gates usually provoke a knee-jerk reaction. In this instance campaigners called for the the government to take stronger action against illegal knives and they duly responded by announcing a knife amnesty. But will this stop the killing?

In November 2000 ten year old Damilola Taylor was stabbed to death in Peckham, South London. In June 2004 15 year old Kieran Rodney-Davis was knifed to death in Fulham West London. And there are others who didn't make the headlines.

A Youth Justice Board Survey revealed that **51 per cent of pupils carry a knife and 38 per cent of them carry knives to school.** But are young black kids becoming more violent or is this just a perception and if they are becoming more violent then who is to blame?

Decima Francis, MBE, is a member of the Trident Advisory Group, a community group that monitors the way the police deal with crime within the black community and which also works with Operation Trident, the tactical police unit that deals with black on black crime.

When Black Britain asked Francis why black kids are more violent towards each other she responded by saying: **“Everyone is more violent than they have ever been. It has got steadily worse over the last twenty years...we now accept violence as a part of life”**

But Francis was quick to point out that what we are witnessing is not new at all: **“Look at the sixties – the rockers carried knives and the black men carried machetes to protect the black community. The skinheads carried knives – people have always carried knives.”**

The major difference between then and now asserted Francis is the fact that whilst knives were carried in the past, they were not used, whereas today: **“Under-age children are using weapons and killing each other in places where it should never happen – in schools.”**

This is the strongest indicator that adults have crossed the boundaries and children have followed suit, but the level of fear experienced by young people is the cause:

“Kids are afraid of kids because of the way society is at the moment. They don't think that adults can protect them and they don't think that the police can protect them. If someone pulls a knife on you, by the time you pull out your mobile phone you could be dead,” Francis told Black Britain.

She warned of the **“intimidation and violence”** spreading in society, recalling stories from young people that she speaks to during the course of her work with youths. One eighteen year old said that when he has been to Brixton he has been asked by local youths whether he had a **“passport”** to walk in Brixton. Another youth who attends drama school recalled another incident where a group of youths sitting on a bench formed a line across his path blocking him from passing and he turned and ran.

Black Britain caught up with Social Intervention Specialist Twilight Bey, founder of the **Social**

Solutions Institute dealing with social literacy development, youth work, conflict mediation and gang intervention.

He was giving a presentation at **B.L.A.K FRIDAY (Blak Liberation African Knowledge)**; an educational initiative centred around historical and contemporary issues affecting the global African Diaspora involving monthly presentations by respected black scholars; which is the brainchild of Dr William Lez Henry.

Twilight told the audience that it is important to look at the role of parents in ensuring that their children feel safe: **“The parents are the ones responsible for protecting the child but if they don’t feel protected then they will find someone to protect them.”**

Referring to the tendency of youngsters to go about their daily lives in groups on the streets, he said it is merely **“a means of protection.”**

Where do children learn about violent behaviour?

According to Francis, the cause of conflicts and hostilities between our black youths is down to: **“fear, rage anger, greed , lack of value system, lack of respect for life, lack of respect for each other,”** all characteristics that they are learning from the wider society.

Whilst violence is more prevalent in the inner cities, in general the behaviour of adults towards each other is more violent and the way that people speak to each other is less than respectful: **“There is something very wrong with what is happening and something very wrong going on between all of us,”** Francis warned.

The home is the place to start with parents needing to set better examples of appropriate behaviour. Referring to an incident where two mothers were involved in an argument in South London which culminated in one mother stabbing the other in the neck on the school run at 9.50am in the morning; Francis told Black Britain:

“How many children saw that on their way to school? Where are children learning to be violent? It’s not just in the media – it’s happening in their homes and it’s happening in their streets and it’s [carried out] by adults as well.”

Such incidents where parents resort to violent behaviour rather than engaging in dialogue send children the wrong message about what is acceptable behaviour. At the same Francis feels that young people are making the wrong choices because it is easier to do so. Rather than communicate to sort out problems it’s easier to pull out a knife.

Francis told Black Britain: **“Children have no respect for adults and no respect for each other...they think about their needs and what they want and it is the parents’ responsibility to train them and have them under control, to guide and protect them.”**

Twilight also raised the issue of how parents’ actions affect their children during his presentation pointing to parents who do not push their child to their full potential, who do not show an interest in their child’s future and to the levels of abandonment within the black community.

Referring to his own childhood experience, he told the audience: **“My father had a drug addiction so he left home. I don’t care if he had a drug addiction, I just wanted my father. When I talk to adults and young people about how they feel about their fathers...our fathers have such a strong impact on how we turn out – and then they’re not there.”**

Parental involvement is all the more important for black children given the way that educational

institutions fail them. The national curriculum is supposed to provide education for a child's moral and cultural development as well as for their academic development, but they are not doing that, argued Twilight.

He told the audience that parents should beware of video games as they are just simulators for **“pimping, dealing and killing.”** He pointed to the PlayStation game **Grand Theft Auto** which provides: **“pimping and punting lessons in the game and passwords that can be used to pay for sex in the video game.”**

Twilight asked the audience how many parents were aware of this and that there are lessons on car-jacking as well as how to do drive-by shootings. He charged: **“The whole point of the game is to be a master criminal.”**

But the most damaging aspect of the video game is the perpetuation of stereotypes as the people portrayed as the most violent on the streets who are always out shooting, stabbing and killing people are young black males, with the star character of Grand Theft Auto a black criminal: **“Then you wonder why people see us the way that they do,”** he said.

Many of the stabbings that have resulted in the deaths of black teenagers have involved material things such as mobile phones. Twilight told the audience that he always ponders where children get their expensive tastes from: **“I always want to go to the home and look at how the parents live. Then maybe I can see why the children have so much interest in pursuing the money. Maybe that's all the parents are doing.”**

He said that whilst it may not be intentional as most parents strive to keep a roof over their children's head and put food on the table: **“But if you allow that to dominate your life so much that you can't invest and protect...your children, then what was the point of having them?”**

Francis pointed out that back in the 1600s – the days of Shakespeare, people had to deal with violence in society: **“Did they not have robbery, muggings, street crime, under-age sex, drugs and didn't teenagers kill themselves in gangs? That was in the 1600s – it's the same story now.”**

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