



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

A eulogy and legacy for Jaewon Martin

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Hundreds lined up along Nightingale Street in Dorchester, waiting to enter the Greater Love Tabernacle Church for an 11 am funeral service. Community folks with flowers, area reporters with cameras, local politicians with agendas, and students from the Timilty Middle School with heavy hearts, all gathered to pay respects to 14-year-old Jaewon Martin who was gunned down last Saturday while playing basketball.

The mourners--a tightly-packed, standing-room-only crowd--were all too familiar with the drill: Another senseless shooting of a promising black youngster and another occasion for fiends and classmates to dress in their Sunday best to say goodbye to a life taken prematurely.

But the event was as much a political rally as it was a religious occasion. Speaker after speaker mixed their remembrances of Jaewon with urgent pleas for action against the relentless plague of youth violence. "Lay down those guns," shouted the slain boy's uncle. "We must stop this assembly line of kids destroying their lives," insisted another relative. "We can't bury our babies no more," lamented still another grieving woman.

But the strongest words and sharpest tongue belonged to Pastor William Dickerson, a tireless advocate for violence prevention who has presided over such events far too many times before. Looking directly at the corner gathering of elected officials, he slammed his fist and yelled, "it can't be business as usual any more."

For their part, dreadful events, like the fatal shooting of young Jaewon Martin, are prime opportunities for political posturing. Governor Deval Patrick blasted the gun lobby for impeding his efforts to pass meaningful gun control measures. Mayor Tom Menino convened a meeting of local clergy to question their recent absence on the street. Tragedy and politics make for very strange bedfellows.

No one, not Pastor Dickerson or any of the government officials attending the Jaewon's funeral, should be surprised by the senseless shooting--stunned and saddened, of course, but not surprised. Murder statistics have clearly shown a surge in murder involving young black males and guns, even while the rate of homicide among other segments of the population remains low.

The numbers are alarming. From 2004 through 2008, as many as 59 black males under the age 20 were shot to death in Boston. This figure is more than twice the comparable death toll for the previous five-year time frame.

Just over a year ago, I released a report on the rising tide of lethal violence among our nation's black youth. Although it was hardly news to those residents who live in Roxbury, Dorchester and Mattapan where the sound of gunfire is an all too frequent occurrence, the findings were featured in headlines in the Globe and elsewhere.

Even though study groups and task forces were charged with looking at the issue, the sad fact--actually the tragic fact--is that there are insufficient funds available to invest adequately in youth violence prevention. Still, we found a way to bail out the banks and the auto industry, how about a bail out for at risk youth?

The crime data spoke for themselves, yet apparently not loudly or forcefully enough to make a difference. The problem with statistics, of course, is that they tend to go in one ear and out the other. Youngsters like Jaewon Martin, however, put a name to the numbers, and a face to the figures. In his memory, let there be concerted action.

The past tells us that the window of opportunity for getting things done--for getting legislation passed and money appropriated--is a brief and fleeting one. A few months down the road, the name of Jaewon Martin will no longer be fresh in the minds of those with the power to effect change. A few months down the road, contrary to Pastor Dickerson's forceful remarks, it will be business as usual.

And so, the urgency is upon us. Either we pay for the youth programs now, or pray for more young victims later.