

Commentary: Want to curb violence? Give Black men a job

By Dahleen Glanton
Contact Reporters

There aren't many things we can all agree with when it comes to curbing violence in Chicago. But it would be difficult for anyone to make a sensible argument against this: If young black men went to work every day, they wouldn't be out in the streets killing each other.

But in our city, nearly half of the young African-American men between the ages of 20 and 24 neither have a job nor are enrolled in school, according to a recent report from the University of Illinois at Chicago's Great Cities Institute. That's a dire statistic by itself, but what it represents is even more disturbing.

It means that only about 1 in 2 black men will be able to lift himself or his children out of poverty. It means that nearly half of all black men in Chicago could be on the path to a life without a future, a journey that will likely land them in the Cook County Jail or the Cook County morgue. It means that the fate of African-American men is being cemented into a permanent underclass, a legacy they will likely pass on to their children, their grandchildren and their great-grandchildren.

And we wonder why Chicago has an escalating problem of violence?

Some minds, I'm sure, already are churning away at the reasons for the high level of unemployment. You say that young black men don't want to work minimum-wage jobs because they can make more money selling drugs on the streets. Your rationale is that black boys goof off in school and eventually drop out, leaving themselves unprepared for the workforce. You think the biggest problem is too many single-parent homes and the lack of black male role models.

All of those things could be contributing factors in some cases. But we won't know for sure how much of a factor they are until there are enough jobs to go around for black men. When someone can show me that black



Young men discussed unemployment on Jan. 25, 2016, at the Urban League. A new report said nearly half of young black men in Chicago are unemployed or not in school.

men are being offered jobs and are turning them down, then we'll talk about that.

But for now, let's talk about what we do know. In Chicago, 47 percent of 20- to 24-year-old black men were out of work and out of school in 2014, compared with 20 percent of Hispanics and 10 percent of whites. The rate for black men in Chicago was higher than in New York and Los Angeles.

The highest rates of unemployment in Chicago were in South and West side neighborhoods that also have some of the highest rates of poverty and crime — Englewood, East Garfield Park and North Lawndale. That's no coincidence.

When there is a difference of 37 percentage points between the number of unemployed black men and the number of unemployed white men in the city, it doesn't mean that most African-American men don't want to work. That would be as ridiculous as assuming that every young white man is eager to find a job. What it means is that something is wrong with the system that provides the jobs.

The unemployment report commissioned by the Alternative Schools Network, a nonprofit that supports urban education programs, proposes that the state commit to employing 35,000 youth in summer and year-round

programs. It asks that Cook County employ 10,000 youths and Chicago commit to hiring another 10,000.

That's a tall order when the city and state are facing a financial crisis. We can't rely solely on our government to fix the problem, but we can expect it to lead the charge. If we want to get serious about stopping the killings, there has to be a joint effort between Chicago-area businesses, nonprofits and individuals to mentor young people and give them work.

The research was presented during a hearing Monday on the South Side, where one young male after another talked about the difficulties they have getting a job in Chicago.

In particular, I liked what 24-year-old Johnathan Allen had to say. Allen, who lives in the Back of the Yards neighborhood, last worked in a summer youth program in 2014. No funds were available for that program last year, so when the Urban League needed some young people to talk about their experience, they had to go back two years to find them.

That alone, Allen said, exemplifies the problem. What's more, he asked, what good does it do for young people like him to come in year after year and talk about the benefits of

having a job? Educated, intelligent people, he said, already know that. And for anyone who has any doubts, he suggested that they take a little stroll through the neighborhood.

“It’s insulting to me and everybody here because we’re still seeing the problem. We need jobs,” he said.

“You don’t need any research, all you’ve got to do is come outside. We’re on 47th Street. You can see what happens when we don’t have the jobs.”

Allen is right. Just think about the difference between the quality of life for a young man who has a job and one who doesn’t.

A young man without a job gets to hang out on the corner day and night, whether the temperature is below zero or near 100. He gets to dodge bullets every time he takes a step outside. He gets to hold the hand of a brother or a friend since grade school as that buddy takes his dying breath.

A young man with a job gets to hold his head high when he walks down the street. When his children are afraid, he can look them in the eye and tell them that everything is going to be OK. And a man with a job gets to believe in the American Dream — that if he works hard, he will eventually earn the success he deserves.

You’re wrong if you think the majority of black men would walk away from a chance at that.

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