

“The word on the street is if you want to commit a murder, Allen County is the place to do it because there’s no conviction.”

– **Anthony Pettus**, pastor of Greater Progressive Baptist Church, about the number of black homicide victims



Samuel Hoffman | The Journal Gazette

Wendy Morris and her brother, the Rev. Michael Latham, remember her son Antoine Latham, who died in a 2006 shooting.

Black victims ‘too many’

Account for 60% of homicides in past 10 years; pastors seek answers

HOLLY ABRAMS
The Journal Gazette

It’s been three years since Wendy Morris lost her youngest boy. When she remembers the good times, she laughs. But then her expression turns serious, tears well up in her eyes and the pain resurfaces.

“I haven’t healed. I don’t think I’ll ever heal from it,” she said. “There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t think of Antoine.”

In February 2006, Antoine Latham, 20, was shot to death in an argument over a game of dice.

Sadness overwhelms Morris when she thinks about both her son and the man who killed him, Ezekiel Jones, who was sentenced to 55 years in prison for the murder.

“There’s two more kids that are just gone,” Morris said. “My heart goes out to him and his family.”

Over the last 10 years, nearly 60 percent of Fort Wayne’s homicide victims were black, according to police records.

Only 17.4 percent of the city’s population is black, according to the most recent available

FORT WAYNE HOMICIDES

Broken down by race

Year	Black	White	Hispanic	Unknown
2008	16	5	4	0
2007	18	3	3	0
2006	11	6	1	0
2005	14	7	4	0
2004	12	9	1	0
2003	9	7	3	0
2002	13	8	2	1
2001	20	2	1	0
2000	9	10	0	1
1999	10	8	1	1

Source: Fort Wayne Police Department

U.S. Census data.

Nationwide, Indiana ranks third in the percentage of homicide victims who are black. Nearly 33 of every 100,000 blacks became homicide victims in 2006, according to a study released by the Violence Policy Center this year. That number is six times the national average.

“It’s kind of a national phenomenon,” police Chief Rusty York said.

“More and more these victims are younger and typically male.”

Stephen Terry, pastor of New Life Church of God, has attended at least 30 funerals for victims of crime. He has performed eulogies for six of those victims.

“That’s too many,” he said.

Anthony Pettus, pastor of Greater Progressive Baptist Church, said the numbers reflect a community crisis “not just an African-American problem.”

Alarming, in 2001, close to 87 percent of the city’s homicide victims were black, according to police records.

When people are killing and then running free in the community, there is little fear among criminals, Pettus said.

“The word on the streets is if you want to commit a murder, Allen County is the place to do it because there’s no conviction,” he said.

York maintains that police are working diligently on solving open homicide cases, but officers alone can’t solve them.

Detectives need witnesses to come forward



Dean Musser Jr. | The Journal Gazette

Mitchell Griffin, associate minister at St. John Missionary Baptist Church, speaks at the Fort Wayne Urban League's Breakfast Club.

BLACK

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and help from the community to curb crime, he said.

Moral discussion

The black homicide study was first conducted in 2007. That year, Indiana ranked third. The next year, it ranked fourth.

"It's a steady increase by any measure," said Josh Sugarmann, executive director of the Violence Policy Center. "It should raise concern."

And it does among local residents. But the answer of "why" is not simple.

Community leaders point to a number of factors. Among them: teen pregnancy, drugs, gang violence, morality, poor leadership and fear.

A large part of those factors, said the Rev. Bill McGill, Fort Wayne NAACP president, is unwed teen mothers — and the society that accepts that lifestyle.

"We've almost become numb to this activity," he said. "Children need to be raised better. That kind of moral discussion hasn't been going on in our community."

Many of the young people involved with homicides have a lack of direction and no mentor in their life. Raised with absentee parents, they make poor decisions, he said.

"It contributes to the pain that I hear in a lot of young men's voices," Terry said.

Children begin to be raised by the culture and the community around them. That might include a life of drugs and violence, McGill said.

No way out

Jonathan Ray, president and CEO of the Fort Wayne Urban League, said one of the underlying issues for violence is depression. People get to a

BLACK HOMICIDE VICTIMS

Percentage of black homicide victims in Fort Wayne of the total number of victims

2008.....	64
2007.....	75
2006.....	61.1
2005.....	56
2004.....	54.5
2003.....	47.3
2002.....	54.1
2001.....	86.9
2000.....	45
1999.....	50

Source: Fort Wayne Police Department

HOW OTHER STATES RANK

Proportion of black homicide victims by state in 2006.

Homicide rate per 100,000 people	
1. Pennsylvania.....	36.86
2. Michigan.....	33.40
3. Indiana.....	32.65
4. Kansas.....	32.47
5. Nevada.....	32.26

Source: Violence Policy Center

point where they feel they have no options left.

Young adults may already have a police record that prohibits a "job that would provide the lifestyle they would want," said York, Fort Wayne's police chief. "They don't have much of a positive outlook on their own life and don't have it about others."

Drugs can provide that lifestyle, if even temporarily. But that world holds other consequences.

"We have to stop buying into this fast-cash mentality," McGill said. "If you are either selling, or dealing drugs — that's a world of gunplay."

During a brief period from late March to mid-April last year, the city saw an unprecedented 11 homicides. Nine of

VIOLENCE POLICY CENTER

Based in Washington, D.C., the Violence Policy Center is a national non-profit educational foundation that researches violence in America and works to develop violence-reduction policies and proposals. The foundation's study on black homicide victims is based on an analysis of 2006 FBI supplementary homicide reports.

those victims were black.

Afterward, Pettus scoured the streets talking to families of victims and gang members alike. Many young men told him they are being shot at and see no other option than to carry guns as self-defense, Pettus said.

"That generation out on the streets is a hard generation to reach," he said.

Antoine Latham already had a brush with the law before his death — having been shot in a separate case in 2004. But his uncle, Michael Latham, who also pastors Renaissance Baptist Church, said his nephew was making changes in his life.

He also was becoming more and more active at church and with mentoring youth, he said. And before his death, Antoine had expressed interest in going to school at Brown Mackie College, his mother said.

Even so, in the time since Antoine was killed, Morris has seen at least six other young men in the community die in the same way.

"It just keeps going on and on," she said.

Hope for the future

Instead of allowing the violence to continue, Terry and more than three dozen other pastors from the Fort Wayne area have combined efforts, hoping to transform the city.

The group "Uniting Pastors" was formed last April. The pastors meet regularly with York and other law enforcement leaders to discuss crime in the community and how to put a stop to it.

In addition, pastors went door to door after the killings a year ago to ask people how they felt. The biggest responses: Frustration and fear.

"Right now, everybody's scared of everyone," the Urban League's Ray said, adding that law-abiding citizens often feel they are being looked at by police as suspects.

After last year's killings the Urban League also took a stance to end violence — a stance it continues today.

Part of that stance has consisted of meetings with youth in the city. At those meetings, a number of questions about violence were asked.

A summary of the Urban League's findings was compiled with one concern topping the list — the church needs to play a bigger role.

Several weeks ago, the Urban League started the "Breakfast Club," which meets every Saturday morning at its headquarters.

At the meeting, a warm meal is provided to children, and they are given a message of hope and faith by a pastor.

In the near future, the Urban League hopes to partner with Park Center to provide mental health services to the Hanna-Creighton neighborhood as well.

And the Urban League will continue to provide youth education and aid for adults looking for decent work, Ray said.

"People think they are stuck," he said. "Educate them and provide opportunity for change. People need hope for opportunity."

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