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City homicides highest since 1971

'Black people are killing black people'

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Raeshawn Hand Jr. liked his music loud.

He also liked guns and drugs.

Hand's life ended the way many rap songs do, with a shot silencing the beat.

Hand, 28, died Feb. 8 in Westwood - a bullet in his body, white powder at his side, two young children left fatherless.

Hand's is the more common, unglamorous story of a young black man gunned down on the streets of Cincinnati, a city that saw more bloodshed in 2005 than in the previous 34 years.

Cincinnati police investigated 79 homicides last year, 20 percent more than the 66 in 2004.

The violence was centered on black dropouts in poorer neighborhoods and often involved handguns - increasingly the weapon of choice in Hamilton County.

About 85 percent of the solved cases - or a little more than half of all investigations - involved a black suspect and black victim. Only two of the cases involved suspects and victims of different races.

"Black people are killing black people," said Tom Jones, president of Neighborhood Support Center, a community group that analyzes and maps crime statistics to reduce violence and improve the quality of life. "That's what it is."

Fifty-six of the 79 homicide victims in 2005 were black men.

"If you look at most of the communities where poverty exists, it's predominantly black," Jones said. "It's not happening in Hyde Park. It's happening in predominantly black neighborhoods. What else would you expect to see other than black-on-black crimes?"

The killers are using guns, particularly handguns, more often.

The number of people killed in Hamilton County by a handgun has increased from about one of every two cases in 2000 to more than three out of four cases in 2004, according to the coroner's office.

"You're dealing with a new society of kids, kids who will shoot you to get ahead," Jones said.



ZOOM Enquirer file photo
Cincinnati Police investigate a homicide in Over-the-Rhine last February. The victim was Terrance Carlisle, 31.

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This year, they also killed five bystanders: Teresa Hill, Cleveland "Pepi" Parker III, Tawnia Kirksey, De-Shawn Brocks and Chanel Jordan.

Behind the bodies in the morgue are mothers, often single, crying, guilt-ridden, wondering what they could have done differently.

"They're hard-working, church-going with morals," said Lucy Logan, founder of Who Killed Our Kids. "About 25 percent have a father in the picture."

Hand's mother, Brenda Kelly, raised him and his two older siblings, mostly in Evanston, while working a variety of jobs. She eventually returned to school for nursing. "I tried my best," she said. "That's all I could do."

Hand hid things from his mother, who later learned from neighbors about some of his problems.

Hand attended school and got good grades.

"He was getting all A's and B's, but he found a crowd to be with," his mother said.

Hand dropped out in the 10th grade.

"About 80 percent of the homicide victims did not finish high school," Dr. O'dell Owens, the Hamilton County coroner, said.

"You either wear a cap and gown, or you wear a body bag," Owens tells the kids when he talks to them at school. "My message to high school kids is if they finish high school, they can have all the things they need. If they go to college, then they can have some of the things they want."

Kelly offered the same advice to others that her son didn't follow.

"Stay in school," she said. "Keep your head in the books because the streets offer you nothing. ... Don't stop because that's what Raeshaun did, and he was doing good" in school.

Hand had part-time jobs, but he spent much of his time on the streets, getting in trouble and serving time behind bars.

Most homicide victims in 2005 led lives like Hand's. About two-thirds of the 79 homicide victims last year had criminal records in Hamilton County.

Cocaine trafficking and weapons charges led Hand to his first prison stint in 1997. He pleaded guilty to drug abuse and served four years behind bars. The weapons charges were dismissed.

He spent another six months in prison in 2001 after being found with a loaded .357 Magnum handgun, according to court records.

Hand supposedly began living cleaner after his last term behind bars. He even earned his GED, although he didn't always check in with his parole officer.

"He was interested in music," Kelly said. "He was supposed to be producing music. He was rapping music at 15."

Hand fathered his second child, Taeshaun, in December 2004. His first son, Raeshaun III, was 10 when Hand was found dead in the 3100 block of McHenry Avenue. His red and black fur coat was gone, as were his red Timberland boots.

Hand's killer has not been caught.

Hand was one of three people killed in Westwood last year.

Once again, Over-the-Rhine led Cincinnati in homicides. Ten occurred there last year. Police investigated 16 homicides there in 2004.

Ninety percent of the city's homicides are drug-related, Owens said.

The opportunities for those wanting to make an honest wage are hard to find.

Pockets of poverty, seen across the neighborhoods of Over-the-Rhine, Avondale and West End, offer children no windows into a world where owning the finer things in life is accomplished through legitimate work, Owens said.

"When we have an opportunity to rebuild a neighborhood, it has to be diverse," Owens said. "You can't have concentrated areas of one kind of housing."

Jones, the community support group president, stood at the counter of a College Hill convenience store recently, waiting to pay for a cup of coffee, when a young black man walked into the store. The young man asked the clerk about the application he had filled out for a job mopping the floors. The clerk asked him if he had any experience.

"How much experience do I need to clean or mop?" the man asked the clerk.

The young man then told the clerk that he had been earning cash the fast way but wanted to get a legitimate job to raise his new baby, Jones said.

"They didn't have anything at the time for him, so they said," Jones said. "This guy was clearly disappointed."

That might have been the young man's moment to break away from the street life.

"How many opportunities have to be passed up?" Jones said.

Jobs are even harder to come by for those who have spent time behind bars. Many, such as Hand, find life easier on the street.

"It's very attractive, and it's very easy to fall into," Logan said. "You don't fall out until you wake up one morning and say, 'This is crappy,' or you're in jail or you're dead."

Cincinnati's rising number of homicides is a statewide problem. Columbus, Cleveland and Akron all saw more homicides last year than in 2004.

Still, Cincinnati has the highest homicide rate, at 25 for every 100,000 residents. "I pray that nobody has to go through what I went through, but I hear it on the news every night," Kelly said. "The world is so hard now."

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