

Laura Washington: Job skills and opportunities deter violence

By Laura Washington

They are denigrated and disregarded. To some, they are deplorables of the “inner city.”

They live in a “war zone,” and reside in “hell,” says the president of the United States.

Most of the victims of Chicago’s murderous violence are black and Latino young people from the city’s South and West sides. The headlines tell us they are victims and criminals.

They tell us they want — and desperately need — work. That’s the headline from a panel of six strivers who spoke at a recent symposium at the Chicago Urban League.

OPINION

The Jan. 30 program kicked off with a report, “Abandoned in their Neighborhoods: Youth Joblessness Amidst the Flight of Industry and Opportunity.” There is a “high correlation” with violence and unemployment, shows the study, commissioned by the Alternative Schools Network and produced by the University of Illinois at Chicago’s Great Cities Institute.

Teens and young adults are trapped in “a downward and long-term trend of economic abandonment in many of Chicago’s neighborhoods, leaving behind chronic and concentrated conditions of joblessness,” researchers found.

In 2015, about 89 percent of Chicago’s black male teens ages 16 to 19, and 82 percent of Latino teens were out of work. Forty-three percent of black men ages 20 to 24 and 18 percent of Latinos were jobless and out of school.

Behind the grim numbers are the voices of young people who have emerged from chaos. The six speakers were articulate, passionate, and prepared. They represent thousands of young Chicagoans who don’t want to be another number.



(Photo by Scott Olson/Getty Images)

Listen.

Darron Gunnings, 18, has lost many young friends to the streets. Would it have been different if they had been able to get jobs?

“My friends that passed on, they were good friends of mine,” he told the audience. His snappy, red jacket and tie belied the somber moment. “My friends, they were out in the streets. They were. But they loved to work.”

There was no work, so “they just got wrapped up into the wrong path.”

Gunnings had a close call with jail. His mother pushed him into job training and mentoring programs. He will soon graduate from CCA Academy on Chicago’s West Side.

Everett Sprags loses friends “every day,” he said. “It’s hard finding a job especially at 16 years old. You try every day, to help your family out, try to make friends, try to become something in a society where hope has died.”

He told the audience, “It’s hard talking about

it, because, it’s like, you guys, y’all, don’t go through the same things that we go through, that we see every day.”

Everett connected with the Chicago Area Project, an agency that gave him “a sense of home, where someone actually cares about, and ... what we want to do.”

Devin Wise, 22, has been homeless. The group La Casa Norte helped him get a job and stay in school. He is reaching back, eager to share job opportunities with his peers.

“And I will tell them ‘look, you come to my job.’” They say, “well, your job turned me away.” And I said, like, “that’s impossible. They just hired 20 more people.”

They were turned away. That’s 20 more who may end up dead.

An antidote to the violence is job readiness and skills training, and mentoring. Don’t let hope die.

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