

The Columbus Dispatch

Opinion

Editorial: Answer violence with a balance of community, police

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To this seemingly cursed year, add one more horror: even more deadly violence, especially among young people in the central city.

The truly shocking numbers have been out for a while: Homicides in Columbus in June were up by 40% over June 2019, and felonious assaults involving guns were up by an astounding 244%. On June 27, Mayor Andrew J. Ginther called the spike in violence a “call to action.”

On Monday, after a weekend that saw 10 more people shot in eight incidents — three of them fatally, all under 26 years old — Ginther stood at Cleveland and 11th avenues in the heart of South Linden and declared illegally obtained guns to be “public enemy Number One.”

The Dispatch long has made clear its contention that wide and uncontrolled access to guns makes our society more lethal than it has to be. But the causes for gun violence among youths go far deeper than just gun access, and this summer’s explosion almost certainly is even more complex than ever.

Some critics of the Black Lives Matter movement against racially motivated police brutality like to draw a line between the protests, sometimes violent, that followed the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the general increase in

violence. Some conflate the two, suggesting that the protest movement has led to more crime.

Others point to the continuing tragedy of Black children killed by guns and fault the Black Lives Matter protesters for not talking about those deaths. “Where’s the outrage?” they ask. It’s a false argument that must be deeply offensive to Black and brown people who have been living with the crushing weight of violent crime for decades — long before the current rounds of protest.

Try telling the mother who just lost her daughter to a random drive-by shooter that she doesn’t care about the deaths of Black children. Try telling it to the pastor who works to guide some young people away from crime and trouble but has grieved for far too many who were killed.

And good luck telling that to the uncounted community groups that work, year in and year out, to make neighborhoods safer by supporting parents in need and giving young people options for good futures. At Ginther’s news conference Monday, he and Columbus Urban League President Stephanie Hightower spoke of the value of funding groups such as My Brother’s Keeper, the Center for New Directions and others.

The fact is that Black Lives Matter can’t stand in for all Black people and represent every Black person’s concerns any more than any other one group. Founded in the aftermath of the killing of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman, the group’s stated focus is on police brutality, which it describes as “the rampant and deliberate violence inflicted on us by the state.”

How, then, should the Columbus community respond to the ongoing violence in the urban center, especially in this year of particular stress and anxiety?

Indeed, experts asked about the causes of added violence point to the pandemic and its economic fallout more than the protests. Everytown for Gun Safety, a national group that advocates for gun control, argues that a lack of economic opportunity — of better options — is a key driver of gun violence.

Undoubtedly, the programs that can provide better options — summer jobs and recreation for youth, gang intervention programs — have been hampered in their work by the social distancing requirements of the pandemic.

Families challenged by poverty have been further stressed by job losses and interrupted schooling.

It seems only logical that the enormous spike in anxiety, felt society-wide since March, could cause more conflicts to turn lethal.

The political polarization that plagues this country shows up in this argument, too — between those who want to see police funding scaled back in favor of social services and those who think it obvious that the answer to more crime is more police.

Surely, the answer lies in a reasonable balance. Columbus has a history of ramping up police force in response to crime waves. In 2005, then-Mayor Michael B. Coleman hailed the creation of a police “summer strike force” — teams of officers authorized to track gang activity and go anywhere in the city to intervene. While the tactic was credited with increasing arrests and seizing guns, it wasn’t welcomed by some of the people living in the target neighborhoods.

Community groups said the teams unfairly profiled young Black men, and protests following the police-involved killings of Henry Green and Tyre King in 2016 prompted the city to reevaluate what was by then called the Community Safety Initiative.

In 2020, Ginther and City Council have pledged two things: to stop unjust policing and to make neighborhoods safer. By no means do those goals conflict.

We believe the best strategies will be those that do the most to give people healthy options for their lives.

One interesting approach comes from Cure Violence Global, a group founded by an epidemiologist, which treats violence as a pathology that spreads much like a disease. Its response depends on people who understand the communities and have the training to detect potentially violent conflicts, build relationships and intervene to change the behavior of those most likely to commit violence and gather community leaders to spread the message that violence is unacceptable.

Another, Hospital-based Violence Intervention Programs, intervenes with people when violence has sent them to the hospital. That’s when they’re most likely to be receptive to the services and mentoring that could help them avoid

situations that lead to further violence.

A city with high crime needs police to catch bad guys. But police and the myriad groups working to assist those in need also must focus on helping good people find opportunities for good lives. Effectively addressing the causes of violence will always be preferable to dealing with the painful aftermath.