

Death of Black Boys: Lack of the Right Kind of Policing

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Source: NPR: <http://www.npr.org/2015/01/26/381589023/ghettoside-explores-why-murders-are-invisible-in-los-angeles>

Jill Levore's book GhettoSide argues that black boys are being murdered by their peers and their murders are being ignored by the police. In following the stories of a few victims in LA she finds the good cops among the indifferent and explores how a distrust in the police and a disbelief that the police would work for the community leaves disaster in its wake.

NPR Fresh Air: 'GhettoSide' Explores Why Murders Are Invisible In Los Angeles

January 26, 2015

Dave Davies, Host

LEOVY: There's no way to fit it in any kind of understanding of the natural order of things. It's always going to feel colossally wrong. It's going to feel like something's been taken from you arbitrarily by another human being. The way people respond to homicide deaths of loved ones - it's the worst pain that I've seen a human being experience that isn't physical. It's astounding what people go through, and it often gets worse as the years go by, instead of better. Doing "The Homicide Report," I had people who contacted me who had lost their loved ones 20, 30 years before, and would say, you know, I'm just going through my hardest phase now.

There was a woman I interviewed. Her son was a black man, I think in his 20s or 30s, maybe even a little bit older - an adult, black man that got no coverage. She would go to the cemetery at night, and she would lie, overnight, spread-eagled on the grave. It's - I've heard stories like that from other people, too. The other version of it that I've run into is going to the spot on the street where the son is killed and lying there.

You know, I had a mother - in one of the anecdotes that I didn't include in the book - who, at the funeral, after they cemented the vault in the wall where her son was, she flattened herself against the wet cement, and they - the relatives had to peel her off. She would've climbed in there, I think, if she could have.

DAVIES: The first section of your book is called The Plague. What's the plague you're referring to?

LEOVY: Well, most simply, it refers to the quotation I use for the book, which is from Albert Camus's novel, "The Plague." I love the metaphor of the plague because Camus is talking about bubonic plague in a quarantined Algerian city, a walled city, and that's exactly - especially in the years where the homicide rate was much higher, that's how South LA felt. There were neighborhoods that felt like a walled city. One of the officers I interviewed for the book says it's like I'm not even in America, anymore. This is a place with different rules and radically different daily events.

And then in very public health terms, it is a plague. The rate of homicide for black Americans has been five to eight times the white rate, going back decades. Year after year after year, we're talking about thousands and thousands of people. I think - I have in my footnotes, 1995, which was after the big crime wave of the early '90s - 1995 to 2005 - that decade of falling crime - total homicides in the U.S., I think, are 187,000. Well, about 90,000 of those victims were black, mostly black, adult men. And they're 13 percent of the population. And so that's astounding - those numbers.

DAVIES: You note that black men in particular are being, you know, murdered at an alarming rate. How many of these murderers get solved? Well, looking at numbers from LAPD from about '88 through the early 2000s, around 40 percent, if the victims are black men. And I have no reason to think that that's different with agencies, by the way. I've done sort of spot surveys of sheriffs and other agencies. It seems to be pretty

consistent across the board. On paper, it's going to look a little more. When they report it to the federal government, they add in what's called cleared others.

DAVIES: That's cleared others - cleared meaning solved, yeah.

LEOVY: Yes, and so that gets you maybe up to the high 40s, low 50 percent. But you also have to consider that injury shootings, which are very similar to homicides, have much lower solve rates - in the LAPD, maybe 25 percent if you don't count cleared other. So if you put that all together, it ends up with better-than-average odds of getting away with it if you injure somebody by shooting them or kill them.

DAVIES: So there's all these families who want justice for their victims, and it doesn't happen, at least not from the police. What's the impact on the community of the failure to solve so many of these shootings?

LEOVY: A pervasive atmosphere of fear, rampant intimidation because, I think, the killers are emboldened. I did a story in the early 2000s where a colleague, Doug Smith, and I looked at all the unsolved homicides in LAPD South Bureau over about 15 years. And we came up with the finding that there were 40 or so unsolved homicides per square mile...

DAVIES: Wow.

LEOVY: ...In the South Bureau area of the LAPD. So think about what that means in real terms. It's one thing if you hear, vaguely, of a homicide that doesn't involve anyone you know far away from you. It's another if it happens on your street. And it's another, still, if you know who did it, and they never get arrested. And by the way, they did it again, and they still didn't get arrested. And maybe there's three or four others around you. Imagine what that does to people and what that does to their own assessment of safety and how they're going to respond.

I spoke to a mother, once, in South Bureau - black woman - her son had just been murdered. I think this was maybe a couple of days after the murder. I had gone to her door. And it was one of these cases where the police just had no witnesses. The case wasn't going anywhere. The mother told me that since the murder, the killers, who she knew, who were, I think, the gang members who lived on her street, had been knocking on her door and taunting her and laughing at her - her grief. She had another surviving son, and he was, I think, 15, 16. And you could see that he was thinking really, really hard about this situation. And that's something you see all the time. I go to a lot of funerals, and I always study the pallbearers because they're generally young men the same age as the victim. And you can just see the smoldering anger and grief in their faces and how they're trying to hold it down and try not to cry. And then they march out and collect in knots in the parking lot after the funeral, and you could tell what they're talking about. They're talking about, what we do now?

DAVIES: You write that when there's a homicide, you describe situations where there's a murder scene, and a crowd naturally gathers. And things are said at the police lines that reflect a lot of the community's attitude towards the police and what they perceive as their attitude toward the crimes and the victims. Do you want to talk a bit about that?

LEOVY: Police hear that all the time. They hear that all the time. You don't care because he's black. You're not going to solve it because he's black. And it's very interesting, I - in terms of Ferguson and some of the other recent controversies - I was thinking that this is so complicated because there is, very definitely, a standard black grievance against police that you hear in South LA, that has to do with the generally understood problem - too much consent searches, we say, in LA, too much stop-and-frisk, too heavy of law enforcement, too much presumption of guilt when you take stops.

What I hear, when I'm in these neighborhoods, is a combination. It's a two-pronged grievance. There's another half of that. And the other half is, I get stopped too much for nothing, and the police don't go after the real killers. They don't go after the really serious criminals in this neighborhood. They're stopping me for what I've

got in my pocket, but I know someone who got killed down the street. And they haven't solved the homicide, and yet, that second half seems to never break out and make it into the national dialogue about it. To me, it has always been that double-sided grievance of too much of the wrong kind of policing, not enough of the policing we actually want in these neighborhoods....

LEOVY: You know, I think it varies across the police force. One of the fascinating things to me is the way people change. A lot of officers that work in gang unit or were patrol officers end up sort of graduating into homicide units, and I've seen this over the years. They change once they start working homicide. One of the detectives in my book says, you know, I worked patrol for so many years and I never saw this. I never saw the pain to the extent that is present in homicide work. So there's this kind of personal transformation that people go through. I think you hear - you hear harder views from other functions in the police department. Homicide work is so different because it's intimate because it involves long-term relationships with families because it really gets the police officer into homes and into people's emotional lives, both witnesses and bereaved families. And not a lot of police work is like that. And there is a lot of work - and I would actually extend this to some fire department employees, some of the medical staffers who you see working - where it's very glancing, where you just have momentary contact with people and then you have to move on. You see these glimpses of misery. You can't do anything with it and you just have to go on to the next call. And I think that you see a lot of exasperation in people and to me that's a defense mechanism.