

Lost boys

Growing up without a father can set youth up for a violent life and an early death.

A member of the black community writes about remedies

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By Ingrid Walter - Special to the Star

Amon Beckles and Jamal Hemmings had a lot in common. Beckles, 18, and Hemmings, 17, were best friends, tough guys who came from low-income Toronto neighbourhoods. They had fathered children. Perhaps the strongest bond of all, they had grown up fatherless.

Tragically, they also had death in common. Hemmings was killed Nov. 9 in a west-end parking lot. Beckles was gunned down at Hemmings' funeral on Nov. 18.

Toronto has experienced a stunning wave of gang violence that some say is inexplicably bold and callous. But at least one man who works with the city's black youth understands better than most why some of them are living a life of crime and violence, why they, and innocent bystanders, are dying in such great numbers.

The common thread, says Pastor Bruce Smith, is the absence of fathers and the feelings of powerlessness and frustration that breeds.

Smith's seen it all before. The stories of snuffed-out young lives today in Toronto bear an eerie resemblance to the stories of his friends, many of whom lost their lives to gang wars and crime.

"They equated power with respect," he says, "(and) money with power."

Smith spent his youth in Huntsville, Texas, but says the common denominator with Toronto's problem is young people growing up without a father or a father figure. Like the youth of today, his friends were trying to make up for what they were lacking.

"The reason they did it is because they felt, like me, powerless. As a young kid, you need that security, so if you don't have it, you will try to create it, by being tough, by being mean, being part of a gang. That's how it happens."

Smith, who grew up to become a CFL superstar with the Argonauts and in 2000 joined the King-Bay Chaplaincy, based in the Toronto-Dominion Centre, is among those who are trying to help the black community change the dynamic around being fatherless and create a more constructive environment — particularly by providing father figures for youth at risk.

Rev. Al Bowen has been working in Toronto housing projects for six years and estimates more than 90 per cent are single-parent families — and the vast majority of single-parent families are

headed by women. "Here, the mother is not at home, (she's) doing a minimum-wage job," he says. "The kids are being raised by older brothers, by sisters, BET and MuchMusic.

"We become what we eat and we also become what we take into the mind and we become what our friends are."

Smith finds a similar situation in Sparrow Way, the housing project in northeast Toronto developed by the King-Bay Chaplaincy where he ministers to young men. He estimates 80 per cent of mothers there are raising their children without a father, but there are men in these women's lives who are doing more harm than good.

"A number of these single women also have boyfriends who are abusing their children. Lots of these kids have stuff happen to them.

"But how can a young kid say, 'I'm being abused'? They get a gun and say, 'I'm going to kill somebody.'"

Willingness to commit violence is only part of the problem. The casual nature of some of the violence in Toronto has been particularly horrifying. On Boxing Day, 15-year-old Jane Creba was killed in a shootout while shopping on Yonge St. In another case, a youth was killed in a dispute about a cellphone.

Researchers can link this kind of callousness to the absence of a father. "The single most important childhood factor in developing empathy is paternal involvement," says a landmark report on the subject, which was published in 1990.

The report's authors, Richard Koestner, Carol Franz and Joel Weinberger, conducted a 26-year study of 379 individuals and found that fathers who spent time alone with their kids, performing routine child care at least two times a week, raised children who were the most compassionate adults of the group studied.

Conversely, says University of Toronto criminology professor Scot Wortley, the effects of being fatherless can lead to several negative behaviours, particularly in low-income single-parent homes.

Even if there is a bond with the mother, says Wortley, "with no male role models, there is often gravitation toward the worst stereotypes of masculinity and they adopt what they see in the media, which often are extremes of masculine behaviour."

Wortley adds that some youth are quick to use guns as a sign of masculinity "and try to get young women pregnant as a sign of virility and control."

Other research traces the general disadvantages faced by children who grow up without fathers.

"Children who grow up in a household with only one biological parent are worse off, on average, than children who grow up in a household with both of their biological parents," say sociologists

Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, who have studied the relationship between fatherlessness, race, income and education.

These disadvantages hold true regardless of the parents' race or educational background, regardless of whether the parents are married when the child is born and regardless of whether the resident parent remarries, they say.

Robert Brodie, whose Toronto company, Court Agency Limited, helps people get pardons and waivers, sees the same phenomenon. His clients include former gang members from a number of racial and ethnic backgrounds and a significant percentage are young men who grew up without fathers or father figures. "I was amazed when I actually looked at the cases and talked to the families," he says of the connection.

He thinks gangs provide vital security. "This is protection for them," he says of these clients. "The gang becomes the family unit. Once in, they have to do a lot and sometimes a killing might be initiation for them."

Smith emphasizes the point that the problem is not confined to any one race. "If you take any community and you remove the fathers Ñ black, white, red, green Ñ you're going to have the same problem. It's not a black problem, it's a relationship problem."

It's a problem often encountered by Neleitha Hewitt, a single mother who is a chaplain on call at the King-Bay Chaplaincy and ministers to at-risk youth. She recounts what happened recently when addressing 75 young people at a church in Scarborough. "After I finished, I wanted to know how many of these children had fathers. I said, `All of you who have a father, stand' Ñ and only five were standing up."

Hewitt says Toronto single mothers are overwhelmed. Many beg her to pray for them, fearful their fatherless child will become another statistic, caught up in the gang and gun culture.

Hewitt's son Carl has grown into a responsible 18-year-old and for that she is grateful to a compassionate school principal and a church minister.

Although there may be men in these single mothers' lives, Hewitt says many of them represent a negative model because they are abusive.

Youth, seeing their mothers being abused, get angry and frustrated, she says. "When the men start to abuse their mom and they can't do anything with the men, then they become bullies and get involved with the wrong crowd."

That was Smith's experience growing up in the poverty-stricken, segregated southern United States, with few employment opportunities for blacks, virtually no recreational facilities for youth and an environment where desperation and anger often led to violent crime.

Smith, who preaches at the Rock and River Congregation Mission in Mississauga as well as working for the chaplaincy, is writing a book about the importance of having engaged, nurturing fathers in the lives of children.

During his childhood, he had several stepfathers. He calls this generational behaviour a historical pattern that's been hard to break.

Smith says he understands that the problem of being fatherless, particularly in the black community, is complex. But he believes he and his non-denominational chaplaincy can find solutions.

He is creating a ministry he plans to call Church Fathers, a group of men who will serve as surrogate fathers to troubled fatherless youth. "We also need a training program to teach them how to become fathers, training them to take on the proper role of father in the household and to be protectors and providers," says Smith.

He also wants to develop a project by which business people will teach these young men the ins and outs of commerce. Meanwhile, he and his team of church volunteers spend hours ministering to at-risk youth, engaging them in sports activities, taking them to games.

Bowen's focus is on giving single mothers all the support they need.

"We need to find intelligent ways to replace what she is missing," he says.

He argues that the welfare system should be overhauled so it doesn't encourage young girls to have children outside of marriage.

"We have to promote the long-term, two-parent relationship (so) that they (young people) buy into that. We have to sell it through the music, the literature, the schools, in the workplace."