NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

New Jersey city copes with grinding reality of killing

Tom Roberts | Jan. 2, 2013
Camden, NJ

While the nation has turned its attention to the question of gun violence in the wake of the massacre of schoolchildren in Newtown, Conn., residents of the city of Camden are dealing in relative obscurity with a record number of homicides in 2012, killings that are both a numbing, everyday reality as well as a persistent, distorting force shaping the lives of the city's children.

Such seems to be Camden's cultural plight, to take the role of the familiar, forever disfigured character in the shadows -- that's just the way Camden is -- while the nation's attention gets riveted to the latest episode of unthinkable carnage in a place where it just *shouldn't* happen.

Jesuit Fr. Jeff Putthoff knows all about the grinding reality of violence in a city that has earned the designation as one of the most dangerous in the country. He spends most of his time there directing an organization whose name, Hopeworks 'N Camden, might seem naively optimistic if one were unfamiliar with Putthoff's determination to understand Camden's darkness as a way of getting to the goodness he is convinced exists.

News operations use innumerable metrics, some of them perhaps defying logic, to gauge the effect events have on us -- what makes news and what doesn't. Those metrics were in play again in mid-December when a crazed young man blasted his way into an elementary school in Newtown with a semi-automatic weapon, killing 20 children ages 6 and 7, as well as six adults, before killing himself. Once again, a high-profile massacre gripped the nation, flags again went to half-staff, more mothers, as Putthoff would say, found themselves at the foot of the crosses of their murdered children.

Just weeks before the massacre in Newtown, however, the 59th person was killed in Camden this year, a new record. Among those killed, 34 were below the age of 30; 11 were teenagers; one was 2 years old; another 6 years old. Of the two youngest, one was decapitated, the other stabbed to death while sleeping.

Unlike Newtown, a tiny (1,941 residents in 2010), upscale, overwhelmingly white New England village, where the median household income in 2009 was $109,767, Camden is a deeply dysfunctional city where 47 percent of its 77,000 residents, a majority of them black, live below the poverty level, many way below it, and where violence is a terrifyingly familiar part of life. According to a recent report by Lucas K. Murray of the South Jersey *Courier-Post* website, homicides occurred in Camden every five-and-a-half days or at a pace of one every 130 hours in 2012.

Since those calculations were made, another eight people were killed, bringing the total for the year to 67 as *NCR* went to press before Christmas.

By contrast, nearby New York City, with a population of 8.2 million, is experiencing a record low number of homicides this year. By mid-November, there had been 356 murders, 20.5 percent lower than at the same time last year. While that still represents about a murder per day, if murders were occurring at the same per capita

rate as in Camden, New York would have more than 6,400 by the end of the year, Putthoff said.

And while the tragedy in Newtown has spurred a nationwide discussion that might result in new gun laws and more introspection into the cause of such jarring episodes, no one expects a presidential visit to Camden or that most of CNN's anchors will take up stations for days on end in its grimy streets. There aren't any national TV crews there to document the simple memorials, displays of crosses, one in a park near City Hall, the other at the entrance to the Ben Franklin Bridge connecting the city to Philadelphia. The crosses will be used in a service in Camden's Catholic cathedral at year's end to remember the victims.

It is an accident of timing, perhaps, that such comparisons can be made, but if there are connections between the dramatic mass killings that capture our attention and the slow, steady rollout of violence that is far more common in many cities, Putthoff has a theological reflection to offer. It is a reflection hard-earned through years of work with youth in Camden, trying to get young people in the 14-23 age range to reimagine their lives, to train for a return to school and to make a choice to move away from the violence.

"My experience is that I think this is Christ crucified here, and I think it's also the suffering servant, the one who is so disfigured that we don't want to look at him or her. I think that's what captures what Camden is. Camden is really hard to look at."

Being hard to look at is another way of saying easy to ignore. "Camden is a place that is very bloody and very disfigured, and it bothers us fundamentally to look at it because if we acknowledge it as disfigured," Putthoff said, "then we have to do something about it." The alternative, what most do, is avert our gaze and "find ways to justify it. We either make it invisible or we blame people for it."

He knows the lines: "These are just gangbangers." "Those are just drug dealers." "Why don't you just move out if you don't want that to happen to you?" In another context, he said, such comments "would be intolerable."

Perhaps Putthoff too would have been able to ignore the enormity of the problem if it had not invaded, in unanticipated ways, the agency he founded to school young people in technology skills and much more.

From the start of Hopeworks, the staff involved understood that changing lives meant more than simply teaching new skills. It meant, for youth coming from some of the bleakest circumstances to be found anywhere in the country, refashioning their imaginations and somehow helping them to see possibilities that would have been previously unimaginable.

But the staff began to realize that even many who "succeeded," who moved on to college or to good jobs, often sabotaged that success by acting out inappropriately under stressful circumstances, Putthoff said. Hard-working young people who qualified to live in a residence called The Crib, located near Hopeworks headquarters, found the new, predictable environment anxiety-producing rather than peaceful. They weren't behaving the way the staff had expected.

And about two years ago, Putthoff and others began to realize that he and some staff members were becoming short and more rigid with students, disciplining youth more quickly and with stiffer restrictions than before.

The frustrations are familiar to anyone who's worked with disadvantaged youth. The violence and its effects are hardly anything new to the religious community. Heroic ministries go on throughout the city. Churches across denominations, including Camden's Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, annually conduct services acknowledging the victims of violence. At the cathedral, where an hour of prayer is said for each victim, this year's vigil will last four days, Dec. 28-31. When plans were made earlier in the year, provision was made for 60

hours. As a result, the most recent victims will be remembered during the last hour.

Since 1995, when the previous record for murders was set at 58, Sacred Heart Parish under Fr. Michael Doyle has held an annual Mass for the Murdered, where victims' names are called out.

Perhaps in the same way that the massacre of the innocents in Connecticut has caused an investment firm to give up its holdings in firearms manufacturers and a major sporting goods chain to stop selling semi-automatic weapons, Camden's record year of murder has caused concerned members of the community to increase their efforts to call attention to the problem. This year, an ad hoc group, Stop the Trauma, Violence and Murder, which describes itself as "deeply concerned about the ongoing effects of trauma upon the people of Camden," has a Facebook page documenting the activities, including the painting and planting of crosses.

As the staff at Hopeworks dug deeper, consulting outside experts and eventually working with a group called Sanctuary, they realized that they had to replace a fundamental and often-asked question, "Why did you do that?" with another, "What happened to you?"

"What's important is recognizing that even if we had no crosses, we'd still be saying, 'Stop the trauma,' because people are living an existence that is only about survival and not thriving," Putthoff said. "They learn a whole set of behaviors to help them survive, but lamentably, those behaviors don't help them thrive."

Young people of Camden, living at a constant high state of alert, learn behavior to protect themselves, but then there are situations "where a youth goes to school, gets an opportunity, gets a job and blows it," Putthoff said. "They stop going or they get mad and they blow up. They fail out or whatever."

Putthoff said that behavior that has protected the youth amid the effects of poverty and abuse -- the knowledge of friends and families killed, mothers beaten and the constant threats of homelessness and hunger -- doesn't work in other surroundings.

"We believe that we're operating more and more out of a model of trauma where our youth basically have a form of PTSD and their survival mechanism doesn't allow them to actually move forward," he said.

The staff is currently undergoing a two-year training program to be certified in "trauma-informed delivery of services."

The turning of the question from "Why did you do this" to "What happened to you" requires an openness and transparency that doesn't fit with normal Jesuit experience, Putthoff said. "What success looks like here is not what it looks like in one of our universities. To be successful, to be faithful here, people don't start as freshmen and end as seniors here. It's like Earth and Mars. I don't think there is nearly enough reflection around that. Did the women at the foot of the cross really look successful in Jerusalem that day?"

The foot of the cross is a constant reference point for Putthoff. It was an especially poignant image against which to consider the killing of the children in Connecticut by someone who himself was just beyond childhood. Does the turning of the question apply in that circumstance as it does with the youth in Camden?

Putthoff believes "it is absolutely" the question that needs to be asked in Newtown, though it might be inappropriate, he said, amid the understandable anger and grief of the moment. He is encouraged by the immediate discussion that has emerged out of the incident about mental health and society's obligation to provide better care. However, he also believes that the discussion reinforces the argument he makes "that people have a mental health reaction to endemic poverty."

When asked if he could see, metaphorically, the empty tomb from the foot of the cross, he responded with a story. He recalled that during the final week of a retreat prior to his ordination 14 years ago, he was meditating on the scene at the foot of the cross and, in a manner typical to Jesuits who enter a scene of Scripture using imagination as well as text, he saw a bloody stake in the ground, covered in dried blood, and Mary standing at the scene of the crucifixion some time after it had occurred.

"All of a sudden, Jesus was there, and kind of behind her" and he recalls understanding that Jesus' resurrection didn't take away the cross. "What was so powerful to me," he said, "was that she will always be a mother who knew her son was murdered. The Resurrection doesn't get rid of that."

True incarnation, he said, "is being fully at the cross and fully at the Resurrection," a reality that even the most successful of Hopeworks youth understand in a visceral way. "That's what it means to walk with hope. It doesn't absolve or take away the pain of the experience."

[Tom Roberts is *NCR* editor at large. His email address is troberts@ncronline.org.]

Source URL (retrieved on *04/26/2015 - 01:29*): http://ncronline.org/news/people/grinding-reality-killing