Criminal Kids

BY KATRINNA CHERI HUGGS

A Rise in Violent and Other Serious Crimes Committed by Juveniles Should Be Setting Off Alarms in Lafayette.

School's out for the summer and most kids are cooling off the traditional way, in swimming pools and ice-cream parlors. Others are earning money by mowing their neighbors' yards. But this summer some kids will be cooling off in Lafayette in other ways, like shooting friends or strangers who upset them. And increasing numbers of children no longer meet with marching layers for summer jobs, not when they can make 50 times that selling crack cocaine around the neighborhood.

In the last three years, the number of violent crimes committed by children has tripled nationally, prompting the National Centers for Disease Control to declare violence a disease because it's killing adolescents at such an alarming rate. Youth violence is no longer a big-city issue, either, reserved for communities like Los Angeles, New York or Cincinnati. It's finally hit Main Street, USA, including Lafayette, where idle time for children is more and more often coming to mean violent-crime time, not play time.

Consider that Lafayette city police made 817 juvenile arrests in 1990 and 1,323 arrests in 1993, for an increase of 62 percent, according to statistics from the Police Department's Youth Services Section. Of the 18 murders committed in Lafayette last year, four of the victims and six of the suspected assailants were teenagers. In two of the cases teens were suspected of killing other teens.

Or, just read the newspaper:

- June 15, 1992, a 17-year-old Lafayette man and two 15-year-old males face multiple charges in connection with a kidnapping and robbery.
- July 12, 1992, a 16-year-old local youth is held in the Lafayette Juvenile Detention Center in connection with the shooting death of a man. The youth is charged with second-degree murder.
- Dec. 27, 1993, police held a 13-year-old New Iberia female on charges of second-degreet murder for fatally stabbing her boyfriend in the chest.

Or, talk to Lafayette Parish Assistant District Attorney Diane Sosula, who has prosecuted juvenile cases for the state for the past 11 years. "The numbers are there," she says. "What you see is a definite escalation in violence among kids today. Sometimes I'm in court with four out of five cases with kids involving weapons."

Or, stop over at the Lafayette Juvenile Detention Center and pay a visit to its administrator, Alton Malreaux. According to Malreaux, there are about the same number of children coming into the center as before, but for the same criminal acts as even two years ago.

From behind his desk Malreaux reaches for the daily population list of juveniles at the center. "All you've got to see what's developed here is where you once had kids coming in here for things like simple burglaries, shoplifting, simple battery or auto theft, now you've got this."

The list includes sexual battery, armed robbery, aggravated rape, aggravated battery, escape, possession with attempt to distribute cocaine, possession with attempt to distribute crack and aggravated battery on a school teacher, just to name a few.

"Those are the types of crimes and complaints we're getting now," says Malreaux. Of the 35 children in the detention center on this particular day, only two are 17 years old. The rest are between the ages of 12 and 16. The aggravated rape was committed by the youngest, the 12-year-old.

Those who work with children in Lafayette—from the D.A.'s office to the sheriff's office to the Boys and Girls Club—all agree that the crisis point may not have arrived yet, but violence among local children is definitely on the rise.
Edwards' effort during the recent special session to pass a bill that would have severely curtailed the rights of minors was shot down, so says Soleta. As an attempt by Rep. Melanie Flumoney (D-Shoreview), says Soleta, "We have about this many reports that come in every two weeks or so. Every year, people lose their jobs because of this. Even if you have a clean record, you can't make them go to school or stay at home at night. There are even parents who are losing their jobs because their kids are put into detention."
Continued from Page 3A
fident draft of the ordinance includes a num-
er of exceptions, including minors who are
working in the company of their par-
tents, traveling on an internship or attending
an official school, religious, recreation or
city-sponsored activity.

Individual agencies around Acadiana are
working to combat youth violence. Two,
for example, the Boys &
Girls Clubs of Acadiana will be instituting a
Targeted Outreach Gang Prevention
Program that is partially funded by the city.
And plans are in the works for the Sheriff's
Department to soon hire several more
bailiffs to help investigate the cases.

Louisiana Gang
Investigators Association. The representa-
tives will cover gang activity from Lake
Charles to Whiskey Bay.

Maureen Brennan believes Lafayette
should implement more programs like
teen court, where first-time offenders get
feedback from the parents and make an
commitment to not repeat the crime by
performing hours of community service.

Additionally, the parents of the child who
may have slain someone in a shooting or
a stabbing must stop their behavior.
A new program called
Migrant Hoops, where school gyms are
opened on weekend nights from 7 p.m. to
midnight for kids to play basketball.

But nothing—a no educational program
or “boot camp” nor alternative school nor
teen court—is going to work as well as
turning the backs on Lafayette’s increasingly
violent children as much as simple parental
involvement will.

Take it from someone like the Crips
gang member, Geno. When he was 13
years old, Geno killed a man.
When he was 16, he was arrested for the
first time, for armed robbery. He says
he would kill for another “loved one” (a
gang member) without questioning whether
the act was right or wrong, but just because
of the strong bond established when his
father bought his dad.

I got my teachings from the older homies
in the “hood,”” says Geno. “The love they
showed us was the love we never got from
an older male. If my father could have
been the man he should’ve been, I wouldn’t
to have gone the route I did.”