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"Battle Hardened Vets See It All From The Front Lines"

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We probably don't listen to young people nearly enough about how to fix the world. Sure, I hear you: What do they know? They're just kids. But on some subjects, we have to face the fact the kids are the experts. Sadly, one such subject is youth violence.

On that score, they're the battle-hardened vets who have seen it all from the front lines. They know the victims -- and the perpetrators. They've seen how violence gets started -- and dreamed about how it could end. Their solutions may not be any better than anybody else's, but they ought to be part of the discussion.

On Friday, a group of Chicago high school students briefed reporters and city officials about a survey of their peers conducted earlier this year on the causes and solutions to the violence they face in their neighborhoods.

I can't tell you the results were eye-popping, but some findings might surprise you, and as I've tried to express, they're definitely worth a listen. As one of the students pointedly asked the adults in the room: "When was the last time you guys went to high school?"

We'll start with this survey question: When do young people become engaged in violence? Elementary school, middle school or high school? A lot of adults probably look at high school as the age where young people potentially turn dangerous, maybe because that's the earliest they became dangerous when we were young.

Who do they blame?

But the survey results were definitive: 60 percent of the students said middle school (grades six to eight) is when young people today become engaged in violence. Only 22 percent said high school, which barely beat out elementary school at 16 percent.

"Middle school is every child's turning point," one student explained.

Not surprisingly, then, when asked at what grade level would be it be best to work to prevent violence, only 11 percent of the students suggested high school. Fifty-one percent recommended starting in middle school and 31 percent suggested elementary school. There were even six percent who said the best approach would be to work with kindergartners.

Here was another telling question: Who is to blame for youth violence? Possible answers were: media, society, youth, police, schools, neighborhoods, politicians and families. Students were instructed to select all that apply.

The surprise here, perhaps, was where the students did not lay the blame. Only 27 percent blamed police, and only 26 percent blamed the schools. Only politicians got less blame -- from 13 percent (proving in that department the kids still have a few things to learn).

These results do not suggest that young people feel warm and fuzzy toward police. Police know better. But neither have students lost sight of the real source of the problems in their neighborhoods: gangs, drugs and guns, along with peer pressure and the breakdown of the family structure.

One of their solutions: family support.

As far as not blaming schools, we in the news media may track the death toll of young people in Chicago by tallying the number of public school students slain, but plenty of students will tell you the safest hours every day are the ones spent in school. To be clear, getting back and forth from school can be an entirely different matter for them.

And what did the students cite most often as the best way to prevent young people from becoming violent?

Seventy-nine percent said family support. Is it any wonder we have so much trouble imposing solutions from outside?

How bad is the violence?

Bad enough that 25 percent of the students answered "yes" when asked if it would be a good strategy to send in federal troops to patrol the neighborhoods while 39 percent said "maybe," indicating they'd be willing to consider it.

The survey, conducted by the Mikva Challenge Youth Safety Council, received responses from 758 high school students at 84 high schools. Given the methodology, I'd say the results are probably more representative of the views of the best kids in the system than city high school students as a whole, but not outside the mainstream.

The Mikva Challenge is a civic leadership program that works with students across the city. Attending a Mikva event is always a reminder of all the good kids in Chicago who are trying to overcome an unseemly amount of obstacles -- violence topping the list -- to make something of themselves.

As we sat around a conference table in a fancy downtown office building for Friday's briefing, it occurred to me that we were about as far removed from these kids' daily reality as you can get, but that many of them have what it takes to return to such settings -- if they don't catch a stray bullet first.