

[http://host.madison.com/wsj/news/local/courts/community-leader-on-vigil-shooting-we-can-t-allow-it/article\\_c842a379-237f-5192-89d7-e3b4afb57e39.html](http://host.madison.com/wsj/news/local/courts/community-leader-on-vigil-shooting-we-can-t-allow-it/article_c842a379-237f-5192-89d7-e3b4afb57e39.html)

TOP STORY

## Community leader on vigil shooting: 'We can't allow it to become part of our culture here in Madison'

ROB SCHULTZ [rschultz@madison.com](mailto:rschultz@madison.com) 7 hrs ago



Submitted photo

Jameel Easter

---

After a gun was fired several times from a car driving by a group holding a vigil in memory of Madison's latest homicide victim Saturday night, a community leader said every effort must be made to keep that behavior from continuing in the city.

"When somebody shoots in a crowd with kids, you have no respect for humanity. If you pick up a gun and shoot into a crowd, you deserve to lose your freedom. That's totally unacceptable," said Michael Johnson, the president of the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County. "We can't allow it to become part of our culture here in Madison."

The vigil for Jameel Easter, 25, who was Madison's fourth homicide victim of 2017, was held in the 900 block of Vernon Avenue where Easter was shot in a parking lot early Saturday morning. The shooting at the vigil took place around 10 p.m. Madison police officers found shell casings in the street very close to where the group had congregated, according to a police report.

"There were babies out there. There were kids diving under cars for safety. That can't be tolerated," Johnson said.

But the drive-by gunfire was effective if it was meant to keep any of Easter's friends, family members and witnesses from talking to police or anybody else seeking information. "I honestly think they are afraid for their own safety, especially after the vigil incident," Johnson said.

Retaliatory shootings are occurring in Madison but police don't have any hard numbers, partly because of the difficulty to prove legally that any shooting is retaliatory, according to Police Chief Mike Koval. But cops know one when they see one, he said.

"We are stooping to a new, unfortunate and precarious precedent when one literally can not mourn or grieve the loss of a young man without being fearful that somebody is going to indiscriminately shower that venue with a hail of gunfire," Koval said. "That is clearly the sort of perilous condition I thought we'd never see in the city of Madison. That's a new heightened level of irresponsibility and disrespect."

Koval said cooperation from witnesses and others to the Easter homicide has been “more problematic at times” than the investigation of the death of Michael Meaderds, 33, who was shot in his home in the 500 block of Northport Drive during a home invasion last month. Four suspects have been charged from that incident.

It’s human nature for people to do whatever it takes to keep themselves and their families and friends safe, “but we still need to have those people — if nothing else work through anonymous portals — to give us some measure of getting us started,” Koval said. “Otherwise this will continue to be persistent and I do believe there will be elements of self-help and retaliation that will start to rue the day.”

Johnson stands behind his prediction that he made earlier this year that Madison will see unprecedented gun violence this summer and believes that the city is not prepared for it. “We’re behind the 8-ball,” he said. “We have to be very aggressive moving forward.”

Koval didn’t disagree with Johnson’s assessment, especially after he mentioned that gunfire incidents for the first four months of the year were up 70 percent compared to 2016 and that the incidents in May were up 54 percent compared to May 2016. While the number of homicides are down compared to last year, the number of injuries and property damage from gun violence is up, according to Koval.

“Anyway you slice it, there’s no doubt this is weighing heavily on the psyche of our community,” Koval said.

Johnson believes the summer can be saved from becoming “the bloodiest ever” if resources are committed to slow gun violence. He said the vote Monday night by the council’s Finance Committee to recommend that the council immediately allocate \$50,000 on a program to reduce violence was a good start.

After some squabbling over how to finance a partnership with local nonprofits, “now there seems to be a sense of urgency that this needs to happen,” Johnson said.

The Easter shooting has been personal for Johnson because Easter’s live-in girlfriend, Rayanna Thigpen, works with Johnson at Boys & Girls Club as a youth development worker. She is on maternity leave after giving birth to a baby girl about a month ago,

according to Johnson.

“They were living together, they were madly in love with each other and they had a beautiful baby together,” Johnson said. “Each had a child before they met each other and they were all living together.”

Easter, who likes to stay home, went out with friends on the night he was shot, according to Johnson. He said some close to Easter are disagreeing with the police report that Easter was targeted.

“I want to be there to help her daughter and help her as a colleague at the club,” Johnson said. “We can provide some temporary help and support. I think that’s our responsibility.”

---

**Rob Schultz | Wisconsin State Journal**

Rob Schultz has won multiple writing awards at the state and national levels and covers an array of topics for the Wisconsin State Journal in south-central and southwestern Wisconsin.