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TOP STORY

Sharp increase in shootings in Madison prompts search for creative solutions

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A car riddled with bullets in May. The passengers in this car, parked on Raymond Road near Mulberry Lane, escaped without significant injuries.

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When he was in his early 20s and living on Chicago's West Side, Michael Johnson found himself running from the barrel of a gun.

He had gotten into a fistfight with a man he was attempting to buy a car from, and the man pulled a gun on him. With his adrenaline rushing, Johnson weaved around the buildings in his neighborhood as the bullets flew.

Although he survived, a bullet went into Johnson's leg.

"Some of my friends were saying 'You can't let that go,'" Johnson said. "But then, thank God, there was somebody in my life. ... Another one of my friends was like, 'Mike, if you go back and you shoot him and kill him, he loses his life and then you lose yours. You're going to go to jail. Probably for the rest of your life.'"

Now president of the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County, Johnson credits the support and guidance of a peer with keeping him on the right path. It's an approach he and others hope can stem the violence in what is one of Madison's deadliest summers.

Through July 11, police have confirmed 101 incidents of shots fired in Madison, a 53 percent increase over the same period last year. The number of homicides has also risen — from six in 2015, eight in 2016, to 10 people killed so far in the city this year, tying the record set in 2008.

Worried that the spate of shootings will result in retaliatory violence, police and city officials have partnered with a nonprofit organization on a pilot program to recruit peers of victims and their associates to help calm the impulse for revenge.

"I think peers can be more impactful because they have the relationship," Johnson said. "They're usually in the same age range, and culturally they connect to one another. I think if there were a few more guys in my ear saying, 'Let's go get him,' I don't know. I probably would have caved in."

The initiative, a joint project of the Focused Interruption Coalition and Nehemiah Development Corp., is funded through a \$50,000 contract between the city and Nehemiah. The contract provides funding for a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week rapid-response support program with paid peer-support specialists. A longer-term peer-support program, part of a 15-point anti-violence plan offered by community and faith leaders, is in the works.

Those who deal with the aftermath of shootings say the new approach can't come fast enough. Harboring real or imagined slights, young people with easy access to guns are avenging disputes over drugs, girlfriends or reputations with deadly force.

"The lack of an ability to sufficiently deal with conflict resolution is underlying all of this," Police Chief Mike Koval said. "I think that what we have is an abundance of guns, a lack of conflict resolution, a sense of gang posturing in some instances."

Causes vary, run deep

It's not clear why Madison has seen such an increase in shootings this year or to what extent they're related. But organizers said they hoped the partnership would bring more focus to what many believe are the root causes of much of the conflict: the lack of opportunity and sense of hopelessness that leads many young men, especially those of color, to turn to gangs or selling drugs.

"A good way to take a gun away from a young man is to train him in a job," Johnson said. "Without that, the streets will pass that gun along to him or her. The streets will try to employ them."

An unstable life and a lack of mentors at home and school can severely limit one's options, said Ald. Sheri Carter, 14th District, adding that Madison has lost many of its manufacturing jobs, worsening the gap in opportunities.

"In every city, there was some kind of factory that, whether you had education or not, you can go down, and they could say, 'This screw goes here,'" Carter said. "Those jobs now, not only do you have to have an education, you have to have computer skills."

Compared to a job that pays \$7.25 an hour, selling drugs can look like a more sustainable way to pay the rent. But maintaining a criminal occupation brings constant risks. Many offenders end up in a cycle of hopelessness that affects their judgment, Koval said.

"I think that then you become, at the worst desperate, or just as bad, indifferent about your life and certainly more cavalier about the lives of others," Koval said.

Loose firearm laws also make it easy to respond to any threat with lethal force, said Ald. Samba Baldeh, 17th District.

“In the past, guns were not always accessible, and people could talk to each other over fistfights,” Baldeh said. “But now, guns are all over. So conflict resolutions have become, ‘If you disagree with me or I feel you disrespected me, I just go get a gun.’ With guns, you can’t just fight. You kill each other.”

Anthony Cooper Sr., executive director of the Focused Interruption Coalition, said that some people who lead criminal lives don’t see other options and those who do might not believe a different life is possible for them. He said FIC’s peer-support specialists can mentor those people and help them find another path.

“It’s more than just telling them where the resources are,” Cooper said. “It’s taking them where they need to go and pointing them in the right direction.”

Search for solutions

Some shootings are accidental or posturing, and not intended to kill, Koval said. But an errant bullet can travel half a mile, if it doesn’t strike something or someone first. In July, a woman narrowly missed being shot inside her home when a gunman opened fire outside. She was sitting on her bed when a bullet burst through the headboard and her pillow. A 3-year-old was in the room playing.

“What we’re faced with is so many innocent people who are not tied with the conflict, they’re at risk,” said Ald. Barbara Harrington-McKinney, in whose 1st District the shooting occurred. “That’s what raises this to that sense of urgency for me.”

In response, Harrington-McKinney set up “Operation Clean Sweep,” a neighborhood cleanup project to help foster community and a sense of pride.

Police are continuing to build relationships between gang unit officers and community members who may be able to provide tips on where intervention may be needed.

When police do get word of possible retaliation but don't have probable cause for arrest, Koval said, they may make arrests for probation violations or unrelated offenses. Police want potential shooters to know they're on their radar, he said, adding such arrests won't be "wholesale suppression" but rather "very limited, pinpointed and strategic."

Role for police, others

But Johnson said police also need to work on building trust among communities of color by simply being more present in their lives. For children in violence-stricken neighborhoods, their first interactions with officers often can be negative and create a lasting bias, he said.

"A lot of times, young people don't see police officers until a loved one is arrested," Johnson said. "So good community policing strategies get local officers involved in community projects — engaging with young people in community centers, at festivals and other events where young people can see police officers in a positive light."

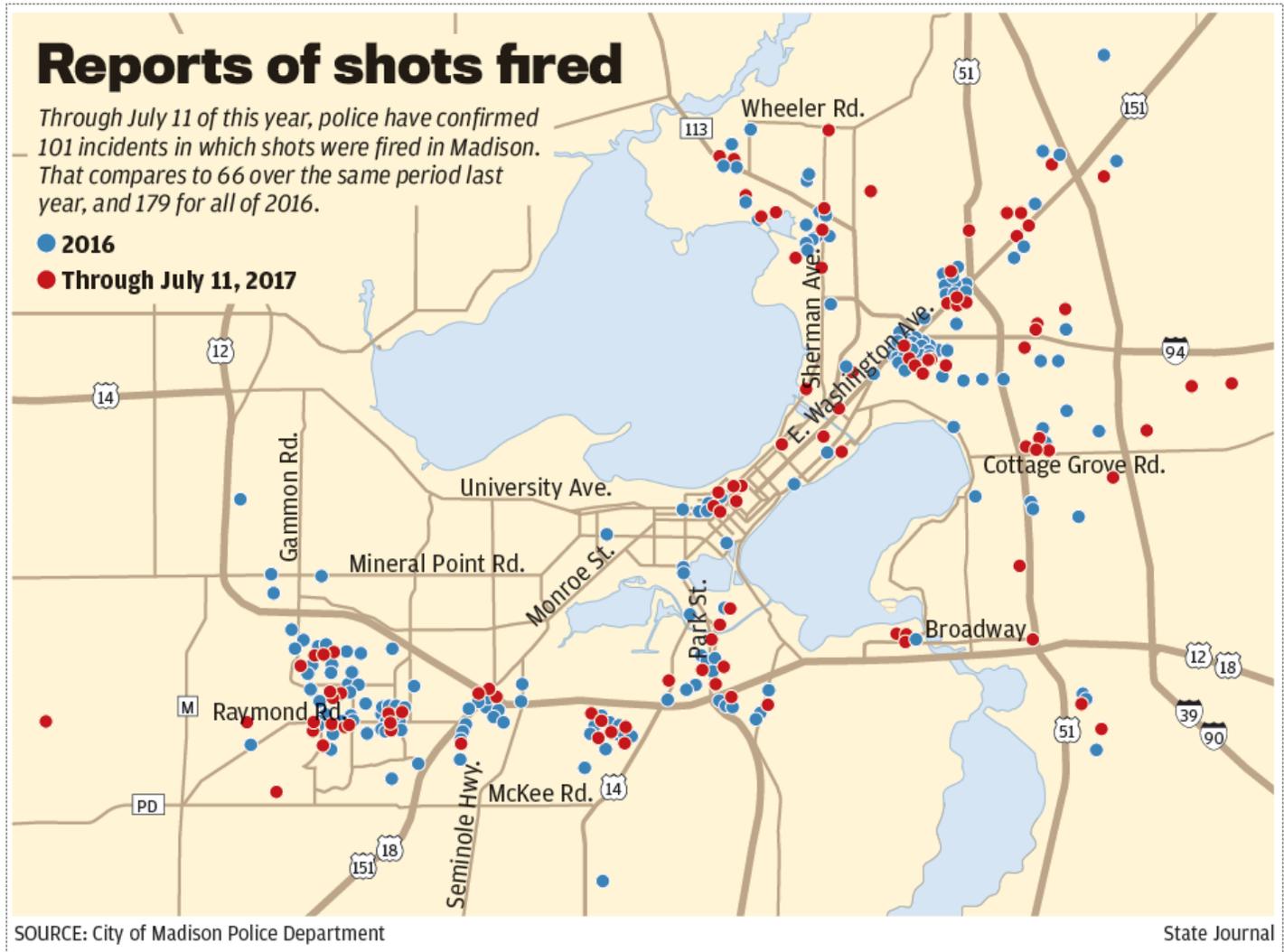
Koval said a lack of witness cooperation has frustrated efforts to solve some shooting cases. Victims and witnesses sometimes won't provide helpful leads because they are afraid the shooter or an associate will see them speaking with police, Johnson said. And the consequences of "snitching" can be dire or even fatal.

Organizers hope the partnership with the Focused Interruption Coalition can address that by operating independently of police.

"I don't want (FIC members) to share their notes with me for the simple fact that that will destroy their credibility," Koval said. "They need to keep an arm's length distance from the police ... to try and accomplish their mission objective, which is to stop the violence or at least mitigate the violence."



A roster of Madison's homicide victims of 2017
Aug 6, 2017



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