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Focus in Chicago: Students at Risk of Violence

By SUSAN SAULNY

CHICAGO — The new chief officer of the public schools here, Ron Huberman, a former police officer and transit executive with a passion for data analysis, has a plan to stop the killings of the city's public school students. And it does not have to do with guns or security guards. It has to do with statistics and probability.

The plan comes too late for Derrion Albert, the 16-year-old who was beaten to death recently with wood planks after getting caught on his way home between two rival South Side gangs, neither of which he was a member, the police said.

The killing, captured on cellphone video and broadcast on YouTube, among other places, has once again caused widespread grief over a seemingly intractable problem here. Derrion, a football player on the honor roll, was the third youth to die violently this academic year — and the 67th since the beginning of the 2007-8 school year. And hundreds of others have survived shootings or severe beatings on their way to and from school.

But if Mr. Huberman's hunch is right, about 10,000 high school students with the highest risk of becoming involved the violence as victims, or even perpetrators, will be better off once his plan is in place this winter.

Financed by federal stimulus grants for two years, the \$60 million plan uses a formula gleaned from an analysis of more than 500 students who were shot over the last several years to predict the characteristics of potential future victims, including when and where they might be attacked. While other big city school districts, including New York, have tried to focus security efforts on preventing violence, this plan goes further by identifying the most vulnerable students and saturating them with adult attention, including giving each of them a paid job and a local advocate who would be on call for support 24 hours a day.

From the study of the 500 shootings, Mr. Huberman said, officials know that deadly violent outbursts are not truly random. The students at highest risk of violence, by statistics, are most likely to be black, male, without a stable living environment, in special education, skipping an average of 42 percent of school days at neighborhood and alternative schools, and having a record of in-school behavioral flare-ups that is about eight times higher than the average student.

Attacks have typically happened beyond a two-hour window from the start and end of school — that is, late at night or very early in the morning — and blocks away from school grounds, where neighborhood boundaries press against one another.

Within the three dozen or so schools where 80 percent of the victims in the study attended classes, the plan calls for a rethinking of the security philosophy so that policies favor mental health strategies and prevention over policing and punishment. And officials are becoming more strategic about providing safe passage to school by

increasing police enforcement and by keeping tabs on gang and clique activities in real time as their turf wars hopscotch around school catchment areas.

“We were hoping the analysis would reveal what we should do, and in fact it has,” Mr. Huberman said.

The new approach, which took a team of eight people six months to create, is the most detailed and expensive effort to be put to the test in Chicago. But made public last month, it is not without some controversy.

Public school parents on the South Side have grown weary of new plans as they watch the death toll for mostly minority children in poor neighborhoods rising. About 85 percent of the public school student population lives in poverty. Some question why only 10,000 students — a small fraction of the 410,000-student population — should get extra resources.

Chicago typically spends \$55 million a year on security for what is the third-largest school system in the nation. With the new plan, it will be spending \$30 million a year on just the 10,000 adolescents most at risk.

“We’re living a nightmare,” said Stacey Willis, a parent of a high school sophomore, “and the community is very upset.”

Mr. Huberman said one of the inspirations for the new approach came from his years as a rapid response officer with the Chicago Police Department, but he is clear-eyed about the plan’s limitations in a school setting. Derrion Albert, a student in good standing, would not have been on a risk list, for instance. But, as the official thinking goes, perhaps his attackers would have been because the perpetrators often seem to come from the same at-risk group of students as the victims, and that could have made a life-or-death difference.

“What this model won’t do is get every kid who gets shot, but what it does do is give us a fighting chance to identify those kids who are most in trouble,” said Mr. Huberman, who was appointed in January by Mayor Richard M. Daley after the previous schools chief, Arne Duncan, was tapped by the Obama administration to be secretary of education. Mr. Duncan and Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. are scheduled on Wednesday to visit with Derrion Albert’s family.

Upon his appointment, Mr. Huberman said, Mayor Daley gave him a mandate: think outside the box and help us figure this out.

The youth safety issue has presented numerous school chiefs here a vexing paradox. As crime is down in general and the Chicago schools themselves are among the safest places for students to be — none of the recent killings has taken place on school grounds — children continue to be killed in their neighborhoods. Reinvigorated gang wars, some say from the large-scale demolition of public housing and the scattering of tenants, have turned some West and South Side areas into terrifying places for children to crisscross. Over the years, some of the shooting victims have been affiliated with gangs, but many have not.

One was a 7-year-old waiting at a hamburger stand with her father.

“You can track where we’ve spent more or less money on security and initiatives, and it hasn’t helped,” Mr. Huberman said. “So we knew that fundamentally it was not going to make a difference for the kids. So we needed to alter how we do things.”

Other cities will be watching what Chicago does to try to solve its youth violence problem.

Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, a Washington-based coalition of the nation's largest school systems, said education officials in Detroit, Los Angeles, Miami, New York and other cities have also worked on reducing violence against students. "But the Chicago proposal strikes me as far more comprehensive than you often see in other cities," he said.

The immediate challenge for Chicago is rolling out the complicated plan, which involves the coordination of various city departments and agencies, including the Police Department and Department of Children and Family Services, and local nonprofit and community groups.

The students will also have "to bite," as Mr. Huberman puts it, adding that many are unaccustomed to having the kind of meaningful adult relationships the program envisions. To help get their buy-in, the program includes part-time jobs for students who participate. (No student who participates would be publicly identified, officials said, except to the adults involved in his or her intervention.)

"We believe that if we can change the behavior of these 10,000 students," Mr. Huberman said, "we'll be able to make a significant difference in the level of violence in the city."

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