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VIEWPOINT

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# Media should make probe into gang violence a priority



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the almost all-white heartland, black gangs have become entrenched.

One story portrayed a woman determined to see the drive-by killers of her 18-year-old son sent to prison. But the suspects have not been tried, because the main witness — their sister — backed away from her statement to the police. She said one of her brothers told her, “[I] shot somebody, but I think I shot the wrong one ... 'cause he’s gonna join the Crips, he’s supposed to stay in the Vice Lords. I was supposed to shoot the guy in the front seat, not the back seat.”

*He was “supposed” to shoot a guy.*

The other story recounted the death by gunshot of an innocent bystander — a young Memphis woman visiting Minneapolis. The story quoted a witness who said he saw a man running across the street when a car pulled up:

“It was like he knew they were coming. Then he said, ‘Bloods, Bloods, Bloods,’ then he just pulled out this gun and started shooting.”

*Bloods, Crips, Vice Lords.*

*This is the Twin Cities?*

Ten years ago, one killing by black gang members dominated the news for days. The murder was such an aberration that some people can remember the victim’s name to this day: Christine Kreitz; she was 16 and white.

Critics of then-Minneapolis Police Chief Tony Bouza called him soft on gangs. He was a street-smart, ex-New York cop whose standard answer was a sociology lecture: “Minneapolis doesn’t have a gang problem; we have a youth problem.” He said that white racism was keeping blacks down and that if we didn’t address social problems, some day we’d have hell to pay.

If you want to know how bad it can

get, read a book called “Monster: The Autobiography of an L.A. Gang Member,” by Kody Scott. Scott, now in prison for murder, tells about growing up in a ghetto where the only reality was nightly forays into rival gangs’ turf to beat and murder young men who were, in fact, mirror images of Scott and his friends. Reprisal begat reprisal, and layer upon layer of insane violence formed a hard shell of gang history completely isolated from the rest of the city — that absorbed the dead and the living, like fossils.

One night, Scott writes, the police stopped him and, instead of arresting him for carrying a pistol they saw in his waistband, told him where, a few blocks

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away, he could find his enemies. Of course, we can adopt those cops’ philosophy: “Let them kill each other off.”

But is that the America we want? Or promised? That lack of vision could lead to a 21st century horror show in which marauding bands, having decided to stop killing each other off, team up and turn their guns outward.

Kody Scott must have killed at least a dozen people by the time he was 16. He says it never occurred to him before he went to prison that he was part of an oppressed class. He and his gang thought

of white people as “Americans,” completely irrelevant to ghetto life — and death.

Someone once said, “What we don’t know can kill us.” Some of us get a false sense of protection by not noticing unpleasant incidents. But if we ignore incidents, we cannot address conditions. The news media need to start living inside the shoes and minds of the invisible among us, to let us feel and see the elephant in the living room before it’s too late.

One of the Twin Cities’ most valuable thinkers and doers, Mahmoud El Kati, a black man who teaches history at Macalester College, says he had never seen a generation of black teen-agers like this one, whose lives have not been touched by the influence of the church. Whether people have been church members or not, he says, black churches historically have sustained the values of community.

Gangs are communities, too. But their members are unable to recognize a common bond with anyone outside their set. That means the rest of us have to do whatever it takes to make the next generation of potential gang members feel love and hope.

El Kati says the current condition of hopelessness, alienation and violence — untouched by healthy community values — is wholly new.

And that’s news.

Question: Is it as important to investigate and illuminate that condition as it is to devote tons of resources to revealing official corruption? We all ought to urge the news media to answer with a resounding, “Yes.”

Gilson is executive director of the Minnesota News Council.