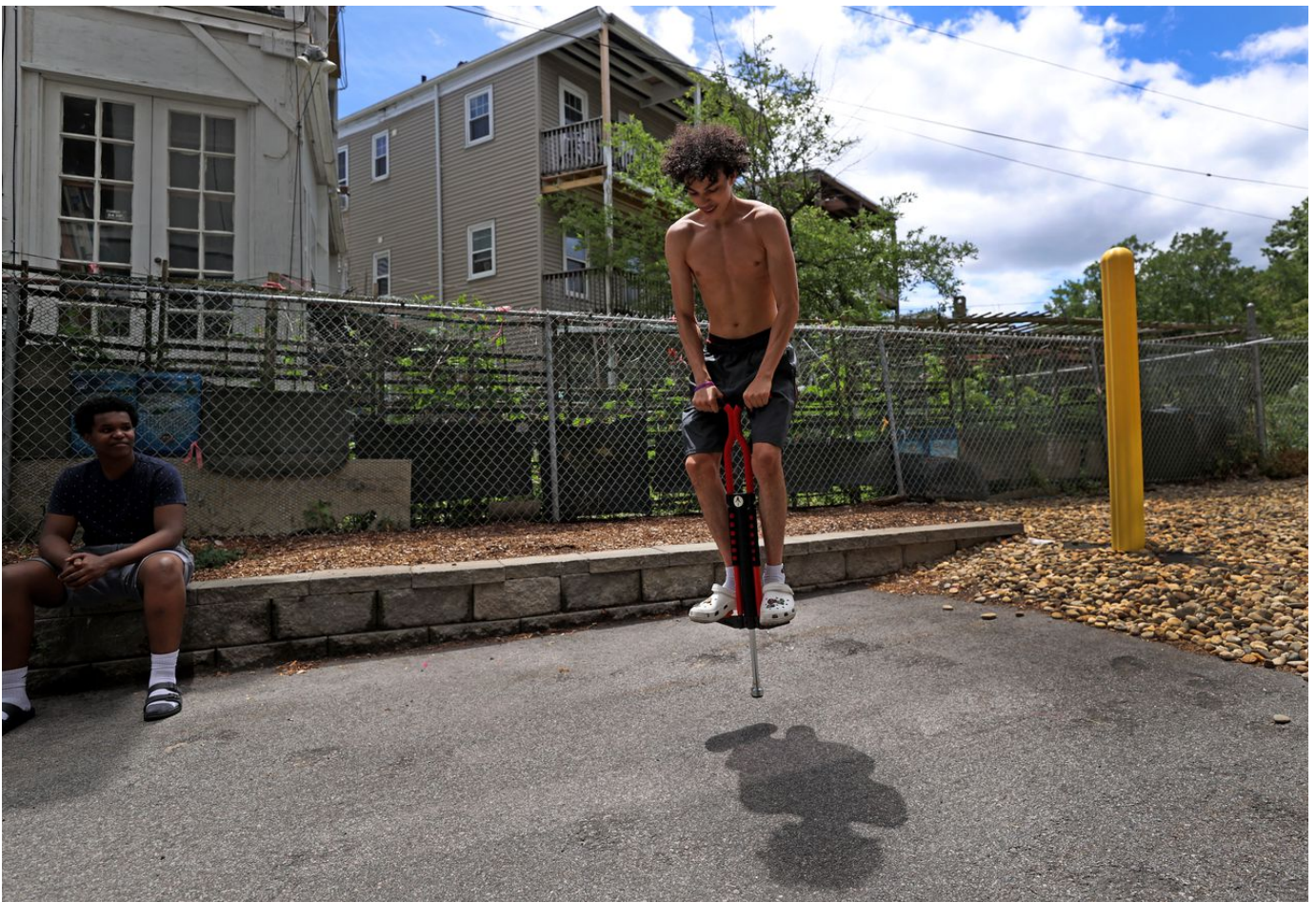


OPINION

Boston Black leadership has a problem

Why is it largely silent on violence in the Black community?

By **Eugene F. Rivers III** Updated July 22, 2022, 3:00 a.m.



Javari Toney, 15, enjoys jumping on his pogo stick by his home on Dorchester Ave. on July 6th, after a weekend of multiple shootings in the city. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Over the Fourth of July weekend, at least 13 Black people were shot in the city, according to the Boston Police Department. However, there is an eerie silence about this grave situation.

When Black activists organized a protest regarding a Black man who was allegedly attacked by a white supremacist group and met with Boston Mayor Michele Wu to

discuss the incident, astonishingly no one mentioned the 13 Black people who had been shot the same weekend. The rising violence is not even discussed as a serious concern. Often an expression of alarm is treated as a case of blaming the victim, with the belief that youth are not responsible for the violence because of the structural disadvantages they face.

In some sense, the growing violence is a statement about the increasing irrelevance of the Black political leadership in Boston. The blame falls on politicians, clergy, and academics alike, who as a group have lost touch with the problems of the Black poor. For those who have boots on the ground, the violence comes as no surprise.

As I observed in [an essay](#) on the specter of nihilism in inner cities across the United States in 1992, “As entry into labor markets is increasingly dependent on education and high skills, we will see a generation of economically obsolete black Americans... a new jack generation, ill equipped to secure gainful employment.” Over the long term, the violence is an expression of the nihilism and decay of a politically orphaned underclass of youths who have been largely ignored.

Public health models of violence prevention are necessary but insufficient to address the spiritual and political sources of the violence. In the past several years, faith-based activists introduced new frameworks for addressing this challenge, such as clergy reaching out to drug dealers, providing alternatives to dealing, and monitoring youth on the streets. The advantage of these approaches is that they are rooted in the community instead of being bureaucratic and top-down.

Another dimension of the Black political leadership crisis has to do with its intelligentsia. Boston is the Athens of America, but this fact has not necessarily benefited the poorest of the poor. Despite ample resources from the major universities, academics have produced few powerful new ideas in the areas of politics or policy to reduce the substantial suffering of the Black underclass. There have been rare exceptions. One example is the W.E.B. DuBois Society, a 20-year partnership between Harvard University and the Ella J. Baker House to enlist Harvard professors and undergraduates to teach African and African American studies to high school students of African descent. Another was the work of sociologist William Julius

Wilson in advocating for Blacks in the Obama administration's economic recovery package and health care bills.

Among elected officials, there has been a shift from a focus on policy development on race and poverty to issues of gender and sexuality and "woke" Black politics.

Politicians who championed the Black poor have been replaced by those focused on identity politics.

Those officials have shifted their focus away from the issues of the Black poor. There is little national policy discussion of issues such as affordable housing or education.

Perhaps most telling has been the recent failure to ensure the permanence of the child tax credit that [lifted 3.7 million children out of poverty](#) that was passed at the start of the pandemic.

Black churches must also bear some of the blame. It is the failure of the Black churches and the leading factions of the civil rights industry to adequately serve the Black poor that created the vacuum for the Black Lives Matter. BLM emerged as a protest movement to address the legitimate concerns around police violence against Black people. Had the Black churches been doing their job, they would have already addressed this issue. Beyond protests, the movement advanced no effective ideas to address community violence. BLM's accomplishments in mobilizing national, and even global, protests against police violence are substantial and should not be denied. That said, their blanket statements about police conduct and questioning the very existence of a police force were absurd at best and contrary to the interests of the Black poor, as the rising violence now highlights.

Black leadership in academia, politics, and the church must all confront the nihilism in the Black community and its relationship to violence. They need to develop policy options to address these challenges Black Bostonians face. This includes focusing on programming that redirects youth involved with violence into pro-social activities, year-round and in and out of school times; providing resources and training to single mothers; and instituting culturally appropriate academic programming for youth in detention centers and jails.

With viable policy options for its community, Black leadership in Boston could reestablish itself.

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