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To get at reasons for street crime, we need to look at black youth unemployment

By Mary Mitchell

I nearly rear-ended someone Friday because I got so engrossed in the news on the radio about a string of robberies near DePaul University.

Six students had been robbed in three separate incidents in a span of a half-hour.

But that wasn't what shocked me.

What shocked me was the reaction of one of the victims.

"What else are they going to do?" the woman asked the interviewer.

That's an astonishingly insightful observation from someone who must have been terrified.

NBC5 described the robbers as "four of five men between the ages of 18 and 22."

In two of the incidents, the men wore surgical masks, and they put guns to their victims' heads.

As of Friday, none of the crew was in custody.

The Chicago Police Department has vowed to beef up security in the area. And that's a good thing.

The radio report I heard didn't give the race of the robbers. But the police reports say they were black.

Sadly, that's not shocking to me.

A recent groundbreaking study by University of Illinois at Chicago's



Bureau of Detectives – Area North

Community Alert



Alert# 18-CWP-001(CA)
January 25, 2018

Armed Robberies
11th, 14th, 18th, 19th District

The Chicago Police Department is warning people about a string of robberies near Depaul University.

Great Cities Institute found that over 40 percent of black men in Chicago between 20 and 24 years old are unemployed and out of school.

The state isn't taking care of them. The churches aren't taking care of them. Their families can't take care of them.

Far too much of this population has been completely shut out of the legitimate economy.

It's a cruel irony that when marijuana is legalized, one of the few jobs that have been open to them will then go to wealthy entrepreneurs.

So how are the 40 percent of unemployed black men making it, especially those who don't have families that can support them financially?

It should surprise no one that some of them are robbing folks.

Earlier this month, police were warning Southwest Side residents about a string of robberies in Marquette Park and Chicago Lawn.

Most of us see these crimes as acts committed by depraved persons. Don't get me wrong, there's no excuse for armed robbery.

Impoverished or not, a thief is still a thief, and an armed robber is still a dangerous criminal.

But the lack of economic development on the South Side and the West Side has created a situation in which some people feel like their backs are against a wall.

Obviously, there are young people out here with criminal intent, and they aren't interested in a job.

But a lot of the young men who are on the street engaging in criminal behavior don't see that they have any options.

Thankfully, not all impoverished youth resort to getting a gun and robbing people of cell phones and designer purses.

Some of them get caught up in the drug trade. Some of them hustle bootleg CDs and loose cigarettes. Some of

them sit on a curb with a bucket hoping a driver will drop something in it.

Every now and then, a young person will ask me for money to get something to eat or to get on a bus.

In just about every instance, the young man will ask if I need some work done first.

Contrary to what most people believe, most black youth are desperate to earn their own money.

But unfortunately for us, too many uneducated and unemployed youth have given up, and those are the ones who are willing to take what we have at gunpoint.

Because what 20-something man feels good about himself when he's walking around without a dime in his pocket?

What father wants to show up every week without money to contribute to his child's care?

What son wants to sit at his struggling mother's table without being able to provide something toward the meal?

While many of us can see wanton disregard in these robberies, it was encouraging that someone could see the desperate need.