Oakland a war zone for its young people
Statistically, it is safer to be deployed to a large and well-protected American military base in Afghanistan or Iraq than to survive unprotected in many parts of America, including some of the East Oakland streets where 17-year-old Raymen Justice died on his way home from school.
By Scott C. Johnson
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OAKLAND, Calif. — Seventeen-year-old Raymen Justice was shot in the neck in broad daylight half a block from his East Oakland apartment in September while walking home from school. His father, Rayven, performed CPR for 40 minutes. Then, as a crowd of onlookers stood by, Justice held his son close and watched him die.

"It was the hardest damn bullet I've ever taken," said the 58-year-old veteran, who was wounded in the Vietnam War.

More than 1,000 people have been killed in Oakland in the past nine years. That bleak statistic is important because it closely parallels the toll of American dead from hostile encounters — 996 — during Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, which began nine years ago.

In some cases, the killers here used AK-47s, the weapon of choice among guerrilla movements and insurgencies around the world. Dozens of the dead were children.

As award-winning author Sebastian Junger points out in his recent book, "War," for which he spent 15 months embedded with soldiers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade in an isolated and exceedingly violent valley in northeast Afghanistan, "You'd have to go to a remote firebase ... to find a level of risk that surpasses that of simply being a male adolescent back home."

Junger looked at statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and found that, statistically, it is safer to be deployed to a large and well-protected American military base in Afghanistan or Iraq than to survive unprotected in many parts of America, including some of the East Oakland streets where Raymen died.

"Children in these neighborhoods get assaulted, shot at, traumatized, and then swept up in this arms race of escalation," said James Garbarino, an expert on trauma at Loyola University in Chicago, who has worked extensively in war zones from Bosnia to Iraq. "Before you know it, you have a war-zone neighborhood. Fear leads to fear, which leads to pre-emptive assault."

The toll of this violence is disproportionately heavier among African-Americans and Latinos, and has been for at least a generation or more. According to the latest figures from the CDC, homicide is the leading cause of death for 10- to 24-year-old African-Americans and the second-leading cause of death for Latinos. In parts of Oakland, black males are at least 16 times more likely to die from homicide than their white peers, according to recent figures from the RAND Corp.
A father's pain

That will come as no surprise to the hardest-hit of Oakland's neighborhoods, where schools are generally dire and community centers rare. Violence is pervasive and can be extreme. Two of Raymen Justice's closest friends in Oakland also were killed in the months leading up to his death.

Wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the faces of his son and his two dead friends, along with the words, "Separated by Violence," Rayven Justice twitched angrily in his chair recently.

"My country called me to fight in Vietnam. When I got there, got my first kill, I vomited for hours," he said. "Now this is worse. I feel like I'm in a war zone all over again."

Very often, experts say, the social stresses in Oakland's most troubled neighborhoods take on a life of their own. When that happens, said John Rich, a physician and trauma specialist at Drexel University in Philadelphia, the environment reaches a kind of tipping point and becomes "toxic." The results can be catastrophic, not just for the individuals, but for the long-term health of the entire community.

"Toxic stress is cumulative," he said. "Being under threat makes your brain adapt to that condition. Is that different from veterans? I can't say there's a whole lot of difference."

Inner-city youth

The war at home isn't just about casualty figures, though. It's also about trauma and how to deal with it. Children, like soldiers, cope by overcompensating. Experts refer to this cycle of increasingly out-of-control vigilance as "hyperarousal."

Rich and his colleague Timothy Corbin began focusing on the effects of this super vigilance in a largely African-American community of Philadelphia, where inner city conditions mirror those in Oakland.

The teens in the Drexel program routinely expressed the same fears about their experience on the street that troops often do when speaking about the turmoil of combat, especially the unpredictable and exceedingly fast-paced rhythms of counterinsurgency.

They feared their lives could end at any moment. Their expectations for the future were diminished. The droning threat of constant, unanticipated violence numbed their emotional experience to a minimum, and in some cases wiped it out altogether.

But the key difference that distinguished the children in America from those fighting overseas was the conviction that nothing was going to change.

"Somehow there is a sense that the violence we see in Oakland is inevitable," Rich said. "People have thrown up their hands. The devastating loss of life is unacceptable, in the same way it is in a war zone. Many people see the victims as expendable in some sense."

The toll of a toxic environment on the community is potentially even more damaging.

When Loyola's Garbarino visited Cambodia's killing fields several years ago, he found that victims' mothers were experiencing depression rates of about 50 percent. He was surprised to find the same high rates of depression among mothers while visiting New Orleans' inner city neighborhoods shortly before Hurricane Katrina hit.
Garbarino argues that far-flung war zones, where he has spent much of his time doing research, are eerily similar — and more so every year — to America's inner cities.

"Just like in a war zone, it's a dysfunctional system," he argues, "The people at the bottom bear the brunt of it."

As that happens, a parent's experience may come to resemble that of one of the platoon commanders that Junger profiled in his book who, faced with the reality that his men were fundamentally vulnerable, broke down: "I realized I might not be able to stop them from getting hurt," he told Junger, "and I remember just sitting there, trembling. That's the worst thing ever: to be in charge of someone's life. And then if you lose them? I could not imagine that day."

"The platoon is the same as your family," Junger said in an interview. "A lot of the same feelings of love and commitment kick in."

Whether it was crime or war or something else entirely that killed Raymen Justice, his father cannot walk by the corner where he died anymore. He cannot take the No. 57 bus because it stops right there. He walks around instead, up one hill, down another, and into the quietness of his home.

He touches his hand to his forehead, indicating the spot where Rayven would kiss him every morning before leaving for school.

He says "I love you" in his son's voice.

"I gave up my life to raise him," he said. "They just don't know what they took from me."