

# Letter: Chicago must confront trauma in its neighborhoods

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**N**ot a day passes without national headlines about the violence in Chicago and the nearly 800 homicides recorded in 2016. Recently, four young adults attacked a mentally disabled peer, recording and broadcasting the attack on Facebook Live. The issue of violence in our city has ignited fierce political debate as well as outcries from the community.

It is easy to demonize offenders, blame access to guns, or declare the need for “law and order.” And while individual accountability, gun control and fair and effective policing are all important responses to violent crime, I encourage more attention be paid to examining and addressing the root causes of the violence.

Chicago’s challenged communities have experienced decades upon decades of trauma. My colleagues and I at YWCA Metropolitan Chicago, the largest provider of sexual assault services in the state of Illinois, have seen firsthand how consequential the effects of trauma can be.

For youth and adults alike, trauma can result from emotional, physical or sexual abuse, domestic violence, being a witness to violence, death of or abandonment by loved ones, personal injury or threats to safety. For many Chicago residents, every experience on that list is a reality — and their trauma is compounded by each traumatic incident. As research proves, the short- and long-term effects of trauma are substantial. It can impact emotional and cognitive development, the ability to form healthy attachments, and social, behavioral and physical health. Trauma reduces the capacity to achieve academic success and maintain employment and increases the likelihood of substance abuse.

With a consistent decline in dedicated state resources for mental health, substance abuse, rape crisis, housing and workforce development services, why are we surprised that we are witnessing a spike in violence?

While individuals and families in other Chicago area communities also experience trauma, as sexual assault and domestic violence are not unique to low-income neighborhoods, those from higher socio-economic circumstances may have personal resources that allow them to get the services necessary to heal from their trauma.

Until we acknowledge the correlation between the high levels of trauma and violence in our communities and focus the necessary resources on critical services, Chicago and its residents will be unable to lead lives free from violence.

— *Dorri McWhorter, Chicago*