

Chicago Tribune

February 1, 2017

The Midwest's largest reporting team

Editorial: Fix Chicago's violence? Start by helping kids land jobs

By Editorial Board

The despair that courses through Chicago's West Side and South Side neighborhoods has many causes. Underperforming schools. The prevalence of guns. The scourge of gangs. Sometimes, troubles at home. And, youth joblessness.

A new report by the Great Cities Institute at the University of Illinois at Chicago dives deep into that last cause. In 2015, about 43 percent of black men ages 20 to 24 were neither working nor in school, the report says. That's an improvement over the figure for 2014, which was 47 percent. Either statistic speaks volumes about the trough where young people — detached from educational attainment and jobs — in so many impoverished neighborhoods find themselves.

Joblessness almost certainly is a big reason that violence in Chicago has spiraled into an urgent crisis and national headlines. According to the report, five of the city's 77 community areas accounted for a third of Chicago homicides in 2016. Those same five community areas had jobless rates of 79 to 92 percent for teenagers, and 49 to 70 percent for young adults.

Young people who don't work, or who aren't involved in schooling, make perfect recruits for gangs. It's not just Englewood's problem, or Roseland's problem. Employers and citizens across the city and the metropolitan area have a stake: Chicago's epic struggle with violence has grave ripple effects for a region that needs to ceaselessly grow new generations of dependable workers, skilled professionals and prospering consumers. The city's overall health — its economic health included — depends on what happens to young people in Roseland and Englewood.

Government can throw money at the problem, but too often that approach yields a heap of red tape and a dearth of results. There'll never be enough public jobs, or enough public funding, to engage all of the young people who need jobs. What's a better



The Manufacturing Careers Internship Program is one of several efforts aimed at reducing unemployment among young people, training them for careers in the manufacturing industry. (Terrence Antonio James / Chicago Tribune)

answer?

Consider this a new bullet point in the job description for the region's business community: When you're penciling in teens for summer jobs, pencil in a teen from the South or West sides. When you're looking for internship candidates, look at 20-somethings from the city's bleakest neighborhoods. When you're thinking about hiring three kids for summer jobs, ask yourself if you can afford to hire four.

Asking employers in those neighborhoods to provide those jobs is a limited solution, because for the most part the employers just aren't there. Those neighborhoods have been ravaged by a yearslong, relentless flight of people and businesses. But there's still a strong, viable labor pool in those neighborhoods in need of that first toe-dip into the workaday world, a first taste of responsibility, reliability, routine: getting to work on time, hitting deadlines, collaborating with co-workers.

Every youth — from Gurnee to Glen Ellyn, Franklin Park to Ford Heights — needs that experience. But for youths growing up in Chicago's gang-ravaged neighborhoods on

the South and West sides, the need is acute. Why? Because jobs can firewall youths from the lure of gangs, drugs and guns in those neighborhoods. For teens and young adults, jobs do much more than put a little spending money in jeans pockets. They imbue a sense of self-responsibility and self-worth, and perhaps, in the case of an internship, a step toward a career.

The institute's report cites youths from Chicago's broken neighborhoods talking about jobs and violence. One youth's plaintive request:

"Everyone wants drugs and violence to stop. Well then ... get us off the streets and get us into some work clothes and you will see the change."

Chicago hasn't forgotten President Donald Trump's impetuous tweet Jan. 24 warning that he would "send in the Feds!" if the city doesn't solve the "carnage." We have a better proposal. "Send in the employers!"

Putting teens and young adults to work isn't the only fix to Chicago's violence — but it's a good start.