

Crime coverage divides Chicago

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Letter to the Editor

BY JOHN FRITCHEY

This is a tale of two cities. The vicious and senseless attack on two young white women in Bucktown was a tragic reminder that violence can occur anywhere in Chicago. So was the drive-by shooting murder of a 16-year-old black teen in front of his house in the South Side's Roseland community.

How the media have covered these incidents, and many others like them, however, has also served as a poignant reminder that while black and white Chicago residents may all live in the same city on a map, we find ourselves worlds apart when it comes to how violence is perceived and covered in Chicago.

The imagery of two women being beaten and robbed by a cowardly attacker with a baseball bat has garnered international attention and endless amounts of television coverage and newspaper stories. On Sunday, a week after the attack, it still dominated the front page of one major Chicago paper -- the Sun-Times -- with a two-page story inside about one of the victims and her family, along with multiple photos.

One had to look deeper in the same newspaper, however, to read about the killing of the Roseland teen. There on Page 8, under the color photo of a dog at a shelter benefit and another color photo of kites being flown in a city park, were four meager sentences providing the scantest of details about his murder. There were no details of a life cut too short, of the heartbreak of a family that has lost a child, or of the circumstances leading to the loss.

Chicago has become a modern day tale of two cities. In those parts of the city ravaged by gun violence, predominantly on the south and west sides, there has emerged a culture of complacency marked by a sad acceptance that crime and shootings are as much a part of life as the sun rising in the east and setting in the west. It is this culture that turns what should be cries of despair and outrage into muted sighs of tolerance and resignation.

By contrast, residents in those large swaths of the city that are for the most part devoid of gang problems and the shootings that are their byproduct go about daily life with a blissful ignorance toward the plight of their less fortunate neighbors to the south and west.

The media, in turn, magnify these urban mind-sets by devoting significant coverage to almost any instance of violent crime that tarnishes the otherwise placid (and mostly white) parts of Chicago while giving the equivalent of a journalistic yawn to the murders of youths in crime-ravaged (and mostly black) parts of the city. And since public reaction to a story is often dictated by media treatment of that same story, when one puts all of these pieces together, one has the makings for a self-perpetuating mix of ennui and apathy that brings us to where we are today.

Until the shooting of a child in Englewood spurs the same media coverage and outrage as would the shooting of a child in Ravenswood, we will not be truly united in our battle to end the violence that mars our streets. Until we realize that every child in Chicago is one of Chicago's children, we will not be able to come together to emphatically tell the criminals that there is only one Chicago. Our Chicago.

John Fritchey is a state representative from Chicago's North Side.