

Crime fight is up to us, not the National Guard

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The National Guard can seem like the natural answer to any urban emergency.

Flooding? Call in the Guard.

Blizzard? Call in the Guard.

Rioting? Call in the Guard.

And Chicago certainly has what feels like an emergency. A surge in violence over the first three weeks of April has put the city on track to a yearly total of homicides not seen in a decade. The number of murders in the first three months of 2010 was up 7 percent over the same period last year.

Should we call in the Guard, as two state lawmakers urged on Sunday, to fight violence on Chicago's streets?

State Representatives John Fritchey and LaShawn Ford think so. They point out that the 113 homicides in Chicago as of the weekend matched U.S. military deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq put together.

It's time, they say. Call in the Guard.

Fritchey and Ford deserve credit for calling attention to an urgent situation. But Chicago Police Supt. Jody Weis was right, too, when he said the National Guard isn't the answer.

In post-Katrina New Orleans, the Guard served a useful role staffing checkpoints to keep people out of sealed-off neighborhoods. That's a job a military force can do.

But the Guard isn't suited to fight drug violence and gangs. Guard units are not trained to collect evidence, obtain search warrants or help build criminal cases that can stand up in court. And they know far less about our city neighborhoods than do the police who are there every day.

Good police work is more than uniformed personnel stationed on the corners of dangerous neighborhoods. And it's certainly not military rifles and camouflage.

The Chicago Police Department is 2,000 officers short of what the city budget authorizes. We need more cops, not more soldiers.

This is easy to say for those of us who write from office buildings in the Loop or live in safer neighborhoods or suburbs. It is more difficult to accept for those who must fall to the floor at night when gunfire starts or for the family of a 20-month-old girl -- Cynia Cole -- killed by an errant bullet as she sat in the back seat of her family's car.

But the problems are deep, and the solutions must run deeper.

We have been calling for years for public policies that go to the root of the problem of wasted lives, poverty and violence. We have called for better schools, backing dramatic, even radical, efforts such as Renaissance 2020, where whole schools are shut down for failure and reorganized. We have called for fundamental shifts in emphasis in education, to include what is called "social and emotional learning."

We have called for programs to treat young nonviolent offenders in their communities, rather than dispatch them off to prison, where they become hardened.

We have called for reforms in our drug laws, especially the harsh penalties for marijuana that fuel violence by creating a black market.

Others have correctly pointed out that public policy and schools can only do so much. The fate of our neighborhoods also comes down to personal responsibility -- how well families raise their children.

This year's statistics are alarming -- homicides are up 67 percent in the Harrison Police District.

But the numbers also show the police have been doing good work in many places. Murders have not increased in Austin, which adjoins the Harrison district, and are down 40 percent in Englewood. Overall, violent crime is down 35 percent in the city over the past 10 years.

Can the National Guard really do a better job?

Even if Guard units were called in, they would not stay for long. Chicago needs a permanent solution, one rooted in solving problems of poverty, poor schools and dysfunctional families.

It's tempting to yearn for the hero with the tin star to come to town and drive out the violence.

But that's not how the real world works.

The solution is not in our tin stars, but in ourselves.