

With an average that exceeded one homicide a day last year, Philadelphia has been nicknamed Killadelphia by some residents. And while violent crime rates have dropped across the country, the code of

# NUMBER ONE WITH A BULLET:

INSIDE AMERICA'S MURDER CAPITAL

the streets has made being gunned down the final rite of passage for too many young Black men. ESSENCE Senior Writer JEANNINE AMBER spent six months investigating the situation in Philadelphia. In this special report, she examines a national crisis as experienced through one neighborhood under siege

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RYAN DONNELL



### FAMILY

Relatives rally around Vanessa Thompson (back row, third from left) and Ted Canada (back row, second from right), whose son Lamar was shot to death on a North Philadelphia street corner. ▶



**T**hey go out every Wednesday night, casing the streets of Philadelphia, on the lookout for trouble. Usually they roll 20 to 30 deep, some of them ex-cons, most of them fathers, all of them worried about what's happening in their city. But other nights it's just these two, Bill Cobb, 38, a big tattooed brother, and Hassan Freeman, 37, tall and imposing; the two men have more than 20 years of prison time between



**VICTIM**  
"I know he wasn't an angel," says Thompson of her dead son, "but he was a good boy."

now, people just walk right past."

To visit Philadelphia's newly minted downtown or tony Chestnut Hill with its broad tree-lined streets and million dollar homes, you'd never guess that parts of North, West and South Philly are reeling from a killing spree. Last year in the city, 392 people were victims of homicide. The year

**"If I said to my homies, 'Yo, I just had an altercation, let me hold your gun,' they're going to let me hold it, because they'd rather see me in jail than in a box."**

them. Dressed in skullies and Woolrich parkas, these outreach workers for the activist group Men United for a Better Philadelphia want nothing more than to talk some sense into the young men coming up after them: the ones hanging out on the corners, dealing drugs, with guns tucked in their waistbands.

On this December night, a wet snow is falling. A storm is in the air. Still, Cobb and Freeman are out, driving through a North Philly neighborhood that looks as if it's been bombed, run-down row houses flanked by empty lots filled with broken glass and mounds of garbage. A hulking factory, half a city block long, sits abandoned at the end of one street, a reminder of a time when folks could leave their homes and walk to work. Now there are no jobs here.

Freeman points to a fire hydrant buried under a pile of stuffed animals. Teddy bears, puppies, monkeys and cartoon characters, filthy from the elements, are crudely fastened to the hydrant with electrical tape. This is all that marks the spot where a young man was shot down earlier this week. Across the city, makeshift memorials like this one go up every few days—collections of stuffed toys, dime-store candles and wilted flowers affixed to hydrants, chain-link fences and mailboxes. "I was out here one night after a brother got killed," Cobb recalls. "The next day his mother came out with a mop and pail, cleaned off the sidewalk, and the pile of stuffed animals went up. These memorials are so commonplace

before that, 406 people were killed, bumping Philadelphia's homicide rate to the highest of any big city in the nation, including Los Angeles, Chicago and New York, all cities with larger populations. And overwhelmingly the victims—and the shooters—are young Black men, many still in their teens.

Law enforcement officials have cited a host of reasons why urban homicide rates began to spiral out of control: the worsening national economy, a dismal education system, and cutbacks in policing and social services in many large cities. Other experts point to the fact that 20 years after the crack epidemic, the children raised by those addicts in chaotic home environments are coming of age. But perhaps most to blame is the ready availability of guns and drugs, and the relentless glamorization of violence. Whatever the cause, in 2005 and 2006, when the rest of the country experienced a slight increase in the homicide rate, Philadelphia's shot up to more than ten times the national rate, according to data supplied by the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports.

A generation ago, if a young man had an argument with someone, they'd get into a fistfight, says newly elected Philadelphia Mayor Michael A. Nutter. Cuts, scrapes, bruises, and it would have been settled. "The problem today," he reflects, "is that a lot of these young guys are watching movies and videos and turning guns sideways and upside down and all this kind of insanity." On the streets, young

men boast of their city's notoriety with T-shirts emblazoned with the slogan KILLADELPHIA, PISTOLVANIA. Downtown in the Gallery Mall, there's an airbrushing shop that does a booming business making R.I.P. tees inked with images of murdered boys. At funerals, young women arrive in black dresses festooned with pictures of the slain—smiling for the camera, holding up a middle finger, posing Wild West style, brandishing two guns.

### SHOTS IN THE NIGHT

One of those dead boys is Lamar Lee Canada, just 18 years old when a hail of bullets ended his life. Standing 5 feet 6 inches tall, with the lean, wiry body of a teenager always on the move, Lamar had a wide grin and a way of chatting up girls that, to this day, leaves his best friend Reggie Isaac, a soft-spoken young man with a chiseled jaw and sleepy brown eyes, shaking his head in admiration. "All we used to do was mess with girls," says Reggie, 22. Lamar did most of the talking.

Lamar lived with his mother, Vanessa Thompson, in a rough-and-tumble section of North Philly, where violence has become the norm. Even so, it took a lot to rile him up. Vanessa, 50, remembers the time she got into an argument with an old man across the street. The man hit her on the head with a cane, and she was so angry she called on Lamar to defend her, to hit the guy, *do something!* But Lamar took one look at the old man and said, "I can't hit him, he's half dead already," and walked his mother back home. That was just his way, Vanessa says. He was a lover, not a fighter.

But with his friends, it was different. No one was going to step to one of his boys without his doing something about it. In July 2005, according to his older sister BeBe Thompson, one of Lamar's good friends was badly beaten on the head with a gun. A few days later, Lamar and Reggie were outside Vanessa's two-story row house with the friend who had been beaten, when a group of men from Somerset Street, two blocks away, came by. The men all knew one another. In high school, says Reggie, if the guys from Somerset



**BEST FRIEND**  
Reggie Isaac stands on the block where Lamar was gunned down on a warm July evening in 2005.



**PARENTS**

Ted Canada memorialized Lamar on the back window of his ride. Both mother and father wear T-shirts bearing the name and image of their slain son.

The bullet lodged near her left kneecap, forcing her to quit her job as a waitress. It didn't help that she was particularly suspicious of anybody who came from Somerset Street. Years before, her older brother had been shot to death on that very street. There was no way she was going to sit by and let her son take a bullet, too.

The next afternoon, while Lamar was frying up sausages, Vanessa told him he needed to go and stay with his dad across town, at least until things calmed down. Lamar refused, telling his mother he wasn't going to be afraid in his own neighborhood, and besides, there was a girl he wanted to see. The girl lived on Somerset. Vanessa stood on her porch later that afternoon and shook her head as she watched her son leave the house. She noticed how sharp he looked, wearing a crisp new T-shirt and bright white sneakers. That Sunday in July was the last time she would see her son alive.

**WALKING THE WALK**

Men United held its first meeting January 2, 2002, in response to a spate of shootings that had erupted in the weeks before. For months they strategized, eventually deciding that talking with at-risk men on their own turf was the best way to bring about a change. Every Wednesday night since then, Men

parenting classes and health services to GED and job-training programs. "When I do that, suddenly I'm not just another dude trying to criticize the way he's living," says Cobb. Instead, to the brother on the corner, Cobb might become a confidant, a friend, a role model. "I did six and a half years in prison for robbery," Cobb points out. "I walk their walk, I talk their talk. So now these guys will tell me what's going on, when they're about to go to war. And that's when we step in and try to diffuse the situation."

It's impossible to quantify the success of Men United. Cochair Bilal Qayyum, a lanky, bespectacled 61-year-old, says, "Sometimes we reach these men, sometimes we don't." But the group's commitment is unwavering: Last year Qayyum walked 103 miles from Philadelphia to Harrisburg, the state's capital, to bring attention to the issue of joblessness. "Before the walk, all people were talking about was law enforcement as a way to combat the violence," he says. "We really put jobs on the table as a major solution."

**WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION**

Qayyum's commitment stands in sharp contrast to what many see as the willful neglect of Philadelphia's state legislature. David Kairys, professor of law at Temple University and a leading expert in gun violence in urban communities, describes what is happening in Philadelphia as a national crisis. "We have abandoned the inner city for the last three decades," says Kairys, coauthor of the upcoming *Against the Wall: Poor, Young, Black and Male* (University of Pennsylvania Press). "Initiatives to combat poverty and improve schools and health care have been largely ignored. During this same period, we've allowed handguns and assault weapons sales to become, essentially, unregulated. So we are

sprinkling handguns on the most deprived areas and on those who are the most desperate. Then the very same people who created this situation—the state legislature and the NRA supporters—turn around and say, 'Look, they're acting like animals.' "

Philadelphia's Mayor Nutter points out that the state's general assembly has repeatedly thwarted attempts to enact legislation that would stem the flow of guns into the city. In 1995, after the city council passed a law prohibiting assault weapons such as AK-47s and MAC-10s, the state passed another law that overrode it. The city is now forced to comply with the state's gun regulations, which are among the most lax in the nation. Owners don't have to register their firearms or be licensed to carry them. There is also no mandatory waiting period before making a gun purchase and no limit to the number of guns an individual can buy. "It's this simple," says Kairys. "You show your driver's license, and if you don't have a criminal record, you can buy as many guns as your credit card will bear, and you can walk right out with them. Fifty, one hundred, whatever." He adds that the laws governing gun resale are lax as well, which only compounds the problem. "This guy who bought 50 guns can now turn around and sell them to someone else without anyone ever doing a background check," he explains. "People talk about an 'illegal gun market,' when in fact, most of what goes on is surprisingly legal."

Nutter observes that Pennsylvania is a predominantly rural state, home to farmers, hunters and plenty of gun enthusiasts, the constituents the Republican-dominated senate is most responsive to on the issue of gun control. "We have tried to explain that we're not talking about restricting hunting rifles," he says. "We're talking about handguns, whose only purpose is to shoot as many >

**"The police and politicians are seen as having abdicated their responsibilities to these communities. And when there's limited trust in civil law, street justice fills the void."**

had a beef with someone, they'd call Lamar and Reggie to back them up. That's how cool they used to be.

But on this summer night, things were definitely heated. From inside her house, Vanessa and her then 17-year-old daughter Tasha could hear the boys arguing back and forth. Reggie says it was just a big misunderstanding: Apparently the other guys thought Lamar and his friends were making money selling drugs, and they wanted to get hooked up. But according to Reggie, the cash he and Lamar had was from Reggie's maintenance job in the projects. "We always had nice stuff," he says, describing two \$1,500 watches he'd bought for himself and Lamar on layaway. "They were just jealous."

The yelling outside Vanessa's house went on for a while, and then suddenly, Vanessa heard the *crack! crack! crack!* of gunfire. Lamar and his friends scattered, racing through an abandoned lot, ducking behind parked cars, running behind his mother's house. None of them was hurt, but Vanessa was shaken. She had been shot herself two years before, caught in cross fire, coming out of a restaurant where she'd been celebrating her birthday.

United members, who number in the hundreds, have taken to the streets trying to stop the killing.

"Thirty of us will pull into a high-crime neighborhood wearing Men United T-shirts and handing out pamphlets," says Freeman. Sometimes women come out of their houses and applaud when they see the men coming. But the guys on the corner aren't so hospitable. "When they see us, they might walk away," says Cobb. "We can clear a corner in no time." But the next week the men come back. And again the week after that. After the men have put in six or seven weeks working the same few blocks, the brothers on the corner begin to talk. Says Freeman: "The first thing they usually tell us is, 'I wouldn't be out here if I had a job. I've got to feed my seed.' "

"Once we start talking," adds Cobb, "we learn that this guy might need a lot more than a job. Maybe he can't fill out a job application, he dropped out of school, he's got three kids." Men United, which is financed by contracts with the city's Department of Human Services and various school districts, can offer tangible assistance, putting the men in contact with everything from

## STOPPING THE VIOLENCE!

We spoke to law enforcement officials, politicians, criminal justice experts and social commentators around the country to get their take on how to turn the tide

**ROBERT C. WHITE, chief of police, Louisville, Kentucky, recently ranked the eighth-safest large city in the U.S.:** "Thugs count on people being afraid to work with the police, which is key in allowing them to continue their crimes. We have a police department that understands what it means to engage with the community. People have to feel comfortable enough with us to say, 'If I do this, the police will not compromise my safety.'"

**GEOFFREY CANADA, president/CEO, Harlem Children's Zone:** "A lot of our boys feel they can't be a man unless they're prepared to fight. We have to start teaching our boys how to deal with conflict in a nonviolent way. That

means parents have to stop resorting to violence themselves and begin to handle conflicts without anger. We also have to take on the handgun industry. There is no way we can just stand on the sidelines and remain neutral."

**MICHAEL A. NUTTER, mayor of Philadelphia, who has proposed a controversial stop-and-frisk program in the city's more violent neighborhoods:** "Young people on the streets know how to get a gun quicker than they know how to get a book. As mayor, I have the primary responsibility of protecting the rights of people so they can walk down the street without being shot. No one has the right to carry an illegal weapon, and if you're carry-

ing one, I'm going to take it away from you."

**SHERRY LUPTON, juvenile probation and parole supervisor, with 17 years of experience in law enforcement:** "Somewhere along the line, we've lost our relationship to God. Our grandmothers knew something about faith and its ability to overcome problems and circumstances. We must return to our roots of knowing God by taking our children to Sunday school and finding services that cater to young adults. We have to counsel our young mothers so they have good parenting skills. Many of the young Black men in the juvenile system are lost and just need direction."

—AS TOLD TO WENDY L. WILSON



**ACTIVISTS**

The grassroots group Men United for a Better Philadelphia conducts outreach aimed at encouraging people to put down their weapons.



**“They started pulling guns from everywhere. The four men had twelve guns between them. That way, if things got hectic they wouldn’t have to take time to reload.”**

bullets as quickly as possible to hurt as many people as possible. Handguns in Philadelphia, and in many cities across America, are our own domestic version of weapons of mass destruction.”

**ANOTHER DEAD BOY**

About an hour after Lamar left his mother’s house, a kid on a bicycle hit his brakes in front of her home and started shouting for her to come outside. “I think that’s your son lying in the street!” he yelled, pointing in the direction of Somerset. Vanessa told him he had the wrong person. Her son had gone to visit a girl. The boy on the bike was insistent. “What was he wearing?” he demanded, because the kid who lay bleeding in the street was wearing brand-new white sneakers—just like Lamar’s.

Vanessa clutched at the door frame, suddenly feeling as if the air had been sucked from her lungs. “Mar, Mar!” she heard herself wail, as she stumbled down her front steps and ran into the street to go find her baby.

Lamar was gunned down just after 7:00 P.M. on the corner of Somerset and Twenty-second streets. He’d been struck at close range more than a dozen times. The bullets ripped through his body and then, after he hit the pavement, the shooters fired at him some more. They pumped bullets into his chest, his arms, his face, even into his mouth. Investigators examining the crime scene later would find bullet holes in the concrete under Lamar, and all the way across the street in the municipal building where people went to pay their water bill.

When police arrived moments after the shooting, they took one

look at Lamar’s bullet-riddled body and decided there was no time to wait for an ambulance. By the time a frantic Vanessa got to Somerset, police had already loaded her boy into a patrol wagon and rushed him to Temple University Hospital. He was pronounced dead at 7:33 P.M. Homicide Detective Joseph Centeno recorded on a police form each bullet’s entrance and exit wounds. “The kid had over 20 holes in him,” says the detective. “The bullets went through him and hit the concrete at such velocity that it caused the concrete to bust back and that tore his skin too.”

Lamar’s father, Ted Canada, 44, a city bus driver with a stocky build and graying beard, got to the hospital approximately twenty minutes after the shooting. A crowd of family and friends were already gathered in the parking lot, near hysteria. Vanessa, who had run out of her house shoeless and half-dressed, had been driven to the hospital by a neighbor. She was now wrapped in a hospital sheet, sobbing in a wheelchair an attendant had brought for her. An hour went by. Then Centeno emerged from the hospital and approached Lamar’s father. He introduced himself as a homicide detective. “That’s when we knew,” says Ted. “And everyone just went crazy.” When Reggie, who was speeding to the hospital, got the call that Lamar was dead, he lost control of his vehicle and crashed into a pole.

Reggie and Lamar had been friends since they were children. “People used to think we were brothers,” he says. He is sitting in Lamar’s mother’s living room, his hands clasped between his knees, his eyes trained on the floor. “Before Lamar got killed, he was in summer school and I used to pick him up every day just to make

sure he went. I would do whatever for Lamar.” There are long pauses as Reggie searches for the words to describe his friendship. “I just miss him,” he says finally, his voice barely audible.

After the shooting, Centeno and his partner, Detective John Rossiter, a 16-year homicide vet, immediately got to work, going door-to-door looking for witnesses. Someone told them there had been two boys on a porch across the street from where the shooting happened, says Centeno. The detectives questioned one of the teenagers, who insisted he hadn’t seen anything. The cops say that the other boy, Johnta Gravitt, eluded them for six months before he was finally brought in for questioning. Based on his statement, on January 31, 2006, Dominick Peoples, a 23-year-old who was already on probation for a gun charge the year before, was arrested and charged with Lamar’s murder.

**UNDERGROUND ECONOMY**

What causes Lamar’s father the most pain is that right before his death, Lamar really seemed to be getting himself together. He had been arrested a few months before for possession of marijuana and had spent a night in jail. Ted Canada thinks that experience scared him straight. “After that, Lamar did a complete turnaround,” he says, sitting at his dining table across from Vanessa, who is wiping tears from her eyes. Snapshots of their dead son are fanned out on the table between them. “He started telling me how he was going to get his stuff together,” Ted continues. “We made a pact that if he got his high school diploma and his learner’s permit, I’d take him to the Super Bowl. And he was really doing it! He was right on the verge of becoming a young man.”

But for those with limited skills and education, Philadelphia can be a particularly difficult place. The city suffers from a 6 percent unemployment rate (higher than the national average), but the rate among Black men is more than three times as high. And while a quarter of Philadelphians live in poverty (one of the highest poverty rates in the country), that figure is even higher in African-American communities. “The problems in Philadelphia need to be understood in the context of an increasingly global economy,” explains Elijah Anderson, professor of sociology at Yale University and author of *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (W.W. Norton). “Corporations that used to hire unskilled labor now send their jobs overseas, leaving many people who lack the education, skills and social connections to acquire jobs in the emerging fields of service and technology. When people can’t make ends meet in the mainstream economy, they often turn to the underground economy of drugs. And if you’re going to sell drugs, you’re going to need a gun.”

Reggie just shrugs when asked if Lamar sold drugs. “Yeah,” he says, “he did what he had to do. But it was nothing heavy. Just to, you know, eat.”

**STREET JUSTICE**

The preliminary hearing for the murder of Lamar Canada was set for March 22, 2006. Lamar’s sister BeBe, 32, recalls that as she and her family sat in the courtroom, members of Dominick

Peoples’s family were seated across the aisle, making comments about the defendant being unfairly locked up. “I had so much rage,” BeBe says now, sitting on a tan suede sofa in her tidy living room in Germantown, a 10-minute drive from her mother’s house. “All I kept thinking was, *My brother’s dead. At least you still get to see your boy. We can’t do anything but go visit dirt.* I could literally have shot and killed all of them in that courtroom. That’s how much rage I had.”

During the hearing, Johnta Gravitt, the DA’s key witness, identified Dominick Peoples as the man who shot Lamar. Ten days later, Gravitt, who Lamar’s mother describes as a “nerdy straight-A student,” was gunned down and killed on Somerset Street, just a few feet from where Lamar had been shot.

According to Detective Centeno, Gravitt had repeatedly been offered protection, but refused. And while Lamar’s family suspects Gravitt was killed as retaliation for speaking up, Centeno is not convinced. “We weren’t the investigating detectives on the Gravitt murder,” he says, “but there were rumors that in the days preceding his death, he had beat somebody up.” Adds Rossiter: “We just don’t know why he was killed. He could be a witness to this one murder and have another problem altogether different, and someone was gunning for him over that. So in terms of why he got killed, anything is possible.”

Over a lunch of linguini and clams at their favorite Italian restaurant just steps from the courthouse, the detectives shake their heads at the scores of young men they’ve seen killed over girls, money, drugs and, in one case that haunts Centeno, over a dirt bike. Centeno seems genuinely perplexed by the situation on the streets. “Sometimes out here we’ll see five murders committed in six hours,” he says with a sigh.

As senseless as it might seem, Elijah Anderson says that in the hood, gunplay has a point—to let folks know that the shooter and his people are not to be messed with. “Whether it’s fair or not, the police and politicians are seen as having abdicated their responsibilities to these communities,” he explains. “And when there’s limited trust in civil law, street justice fills the void. People put a lot of effort in shoring up their street credibility and maintaining their reputation for kicking ass. The message is, If you mess with me, or even look like it, I’m coming for you.”

But Reggie insists that most of the time, a gun is just a matter of survival. “It’s not that you’re the bad guy,” he says. “It’s just that you don’t want to be the next victim. They shoot you out here over anything. You can get shot over a stare. Over nothing.” Even Lamar, the kid who would sooner spend his days talking to girls than fighting, was armed the day he was shot. According to the police report, a loaded 9 millimeter gun was discovered at the hospital, tucked in Lamar’s waistband.

Reggie doesn’t know where his friend got the weapon. “But it’s not hard,” he says with a shrug. “Everyone’s got one, so he might have borrowed it. Like, if I said to my homies, ‘Yo, I just had an altercation, let me hold your gun,’ they’re going to let me hold it, because they’d rather see me in jail than in a box.”

Of course, a gun isn’t always about protection. Sometimes ▶



those carrying a weapon are preparing to go to war. Bill Cobb recalls an incident three years ago when he learned some trouble was brewing over in Germantown. He drove to the neighborhood and approached some men he recognized on the corner. One of them told Cobb that things were about to pop off, and lifted his shirt to flash two guns tucked in his jeans. “Then the other guy said, ‘You ain’t seen nothing,’ and the two of them start pulling guns out from everywhere,” Cobb says. One was hidden in a pile of trash, another was inside the wheel well of a parked car, still another was concealed in the cracked base of a utility pole. The four men had twelve guns between them. That way, they explained, if things got hectic they wouldn’t have to take time to reload.

Cobb, who says he’s seen the price of guns on the street drop from \$500 to as little as \$25, was determined to mediate a truce. He questioned two of the men and discovered they were fighting over a woman. “I asked if they were ready to die over this, if they were ready to have their mothers and girlfriends crying at their funeral over somebody touching a girl.” Cobb urged the men to work things out without their guns. A few days later he went back to the block. “By the time I got there, the two main guys had already talked and the problem was squashed,” he says. “This situation is solvable. It just takes time.”

Unfortunately, men like Bill Cobb were nowhere in sight on the night Lamar lay dying in a pool of blood.

## TIME TO BE GROWN

This is what remains of Lamar Lee Canada: a framed high school diploma hanging on his mother’s living room wall, a tattoo of his name on her right arm, a plywood board nailed to her front window with vinyl letters spelling out the words REST IN PEACE. There is also a manila envelope marked “personal effects” from the Philadelphia medical examiner’s office that his sister BeBe keeps. She reaches into the envelope and pulls out the contents. “The afternoon Lamar died, he wasn’t thinking about fighting,” she says, holding in her hand a crumpled Trojan condom and a breath mint. “He was going to see a girl.”

In the months following Lamar’s death, his family was a portrait of grief. His younger sister Tasha, who had just

given birth to her second child, tried to take her own life by swallowing a handful of pills. Her aunt discovered her lying in bed with a note that said, “I want to be with my brother.” Several months after that, Vanessa, too, attempted to overdose. “I just wanted to go to sleep,” she says now. “That’s how much pain I was in.”

Ted tried to hold things together, but his daily bus route took him right past the block where Lamar was killed. Ten times a day he would have to pass the spot where his son was gunned down. So for three months he didn’t return to work. And then one day it struck him, *Why should I avoid this? I’m thinking about him every day anyway.*

Reggie, who had his first child, a daughter, not long after his best friend died, says everything is different now that Lamar is gone. His grief is palpable as he haltingly speaks about the plans he and Lamar had made: to buy a van, to start a home-remodeling business, to get their mothers out of the ‘hood. “We realized it was time to be grown,” Reggie says. “But I’m not supposed to be doing all this on my own. My boy is supposed to be by my side.” He pauses again and stares at the floor. “There are times when I can really feel my blood boil, and I think somebody else needs to feel the pain that I feel,” he whispers.

In the days following Lamar’s murder, Reggie says he had a chance for revenge. A few of his friends pulled him aside to ask if he wanted them to take care of things, retaliate, settle the score. The offer was tempting, but in the end, Reggie declined. “It’s not worth it,” he says, shaking his head. “If you think like that, the killing is just never going to stop.”

**Jeannine Amber interviewed Tyra Banks for the February issue of ESSENCE.**

**EDITOR’S NOTE:** *On October 16, 2007, three days after the photographs for this story were taken, Reggie Isaac was arrested and charged with ten criminal counts stemming from an altercation at a local bar, including robbery, assault and firearms violations. He faces up to 20 years in prison. At press time, Dominick Peoples was scheduled to go on trial for the murder of Lamar Lee Canada.*

## MURDER, INC.

In 2005, law enforcement officials noted a sudden spike in violent crime in urban centers, an upsurge that was all the more troubling because, in the decade prior, rates of violence had been flat or decreasing. “What’s particularly frustrating about our homicides is that they come up over the smallest issue—someone feels disrespected,” said Richmond, California, Police Chief Chris Magnus in a 2006 Police Executive Forum report, “I get that call that there’s been a killing, and within 72 hours there are two or three more killings in this retaliatory cycle.” In 2006, the latest year for which official numbers are available, the nation’s largest cities continued to post alarming murder rates.

### NATIONAL HOMICIDE RATE

MURDERS PER 100,000 PEOPLE: 5.7

### NEW YORK

POPULATION: 8,165,001

HOMICIDES: 596

MURDERS PER 100,000 RESIDENTS: 7.3

### LOS ANGELES

POPULATION: 3,879,455

HOMICIDES: 480

MURDERS PER 100,000 RESIDENTS: 12.4

### CHICAGO

POPULATION: 2,857,796

HOMICIDES: 468

MURDERS PER 100,000 RESIDENTS: 16.4

### HOUSTON

POPULATION: 2,073,729

HOMICIDES: 377

MURDERS PER 100,000 RESIDENTS: 18.2

### PHILADELPHIA

POPULATION: 1,464,576

HOMICIDES: 406

MURDERS PER 100,000 RESIDENTS: 27.7

Based on data from the FBI Uniform Crime Reports 2006

**essence.com**  
Log on for updates on both cases and to learn what you can do to stop gun violence in your neighborhood.

## TAKING IT TO THE STREETS WITH BILL COSBY

In an exclusive interview with ESSENCE, the straight-talking actor-comedian, author and activist addresses the violence that has taken over his hometown BY WENDY L. WILSON

In recent years Dr. Bill Cosby has decried the mediocrity he believes is epidemic among low- and middle-class Blacks, citing poor parenting skills as the root cause of urban violence. Now Cosby is going straight to the source, talking to parents and youth who wield handguns like American Express cards, never leaving home without them. In solidarity with the group Men United for a Better Philadelphia, Cosby recently met with students from the Ready Rap program, which offers mentoring and other social incentives to young men attempting to get back into the school system after incarceration. And late last year he joined Philly rapper Beanie Sigel on a march through the bitterly cold streets of North Philadelphia, a section that has been plagued by drug dealing and numerous homicides. ESSENCE caught up with Cosby after the march to talk about his message of tough love, hope and healing.

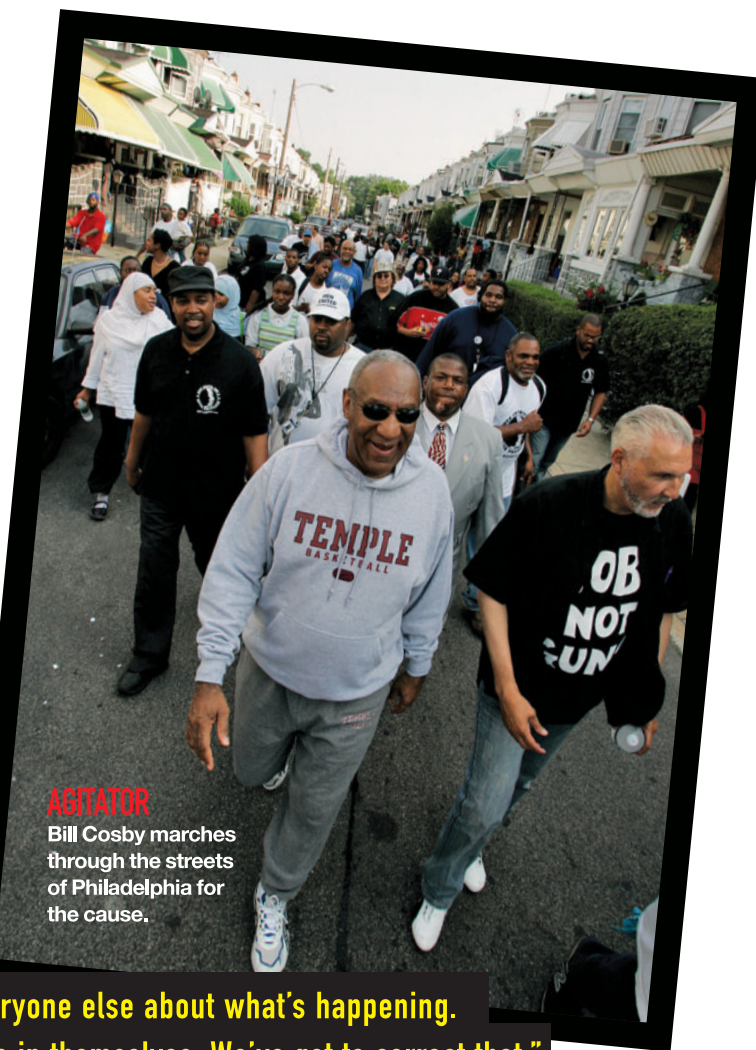
**“I’m angry. I’m frustrated. I’m just as sad as everyone else about what’s happening. I’m sad because these kids don’t believe in themselves. We’ve got to correct that.”**

### On reaching out to at-risk young men:

“I met with 35 boys, ages 13 to 18, who are part of the Ready Rap program, which helps them get a high school diploma. All they have to do is study. But most of them aren’t ready because mentally they have a mantra that is from the streets. It doesn’t take much to pull a trigger or to pull off a stupid robbery. And let us not forget that chronologically a boy may be 16 years old, but could be 4 years old in terms of maturity, because he’s never been taught anything. His character has never been corrected. All these people who stand there and say, ‘There’s too much emphasis on character correction,’ they’re dead wrong. It has to do with character. We’ve got to correct what was taught in the street.”

### On parenting our children:

“The most difficult job for parents is to ask questions like, ‘What are you doing?’ ‘Where are you going?’ I met a teenage boy who sat sleeping [in class]. I went over to him, tapped him, and said, ‘What’s happening, man? Where were you last night?’ He answered, almost with a smile, ‘I was out with a girl until four in the morning.’ He’s just out of jail, sleeping in a class that is set up to help him move on in his life. But his character hasn’t changed. He didn’t get that in the 16 months of incarceration. But I have to also ask, Who’s the girl who will be out until four o’clock in the



**AGITATOR**  
Bill Cosby marches through the streets of Philadelphia for the cause.

morning with a guy with no high school diploma who just got out of jail? Where are her parents?”

### On why it’s so important to fight for our youth:

“I’m angry. I’m frustrated. I’m just as sad as everyone else about what’s happening. I’m sad because these kids don’t believe in themselves. I tell them, Boys, girls, you’ve got to make changes in yourself, and if you can’t make a change in yourself, just do one thing. Leave the people alone who are trying to do better. Don’t go around messing with them, telling them they’re traitors. Just wish them well.”

### On how mentoring can help stop the violence:

“We must understand how important mentoring is in character development. You don’t have to know a bunch of formulas. All you have to know is character correction. Our young people need to be straightened out. They need to be talked to and talked at. Yes, I’m harsh. And I’m going to continue to be harsh until they stop blowing each other’s brains out. We’ve gotten to the point where we just say, ‘Okay, 392 people are dead.’ The only time people fall down or cry out is at the funeral or maybe at the arraignment. By then it’s simply too late.” □

**Bill Cosby’s latest book, coauthored with Dr. Alvin F. Poussaint, is *Come on People: On the Path From Victims to Victors* (Thomas Nelson).**