

GUEST COLUMN

Mitch Henck: We need more gangs — of families

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Possible “revenge” fatal shootings in recent weeks at different gas stations in Madison and the town of Madison combined with a fatal shooting outside a bar have city leaders crying for an end to “gun violence.”

Madison Police Chief Mike Koval said last week we have to dispel the myth that Madison is a “shining, utopian city.” So far this year, there have been 35 incidents of shots fired in Madison. The five homicides are more than this time last year. The city experienced 11 murders by year’s end.

Already, the City Council and mayor are calling for more programs to prevent violence with guns. But isn’t it time to ask why a growing number of young people are so violent in the first place?

While police investigate possible gang connections, we should face the reality that we all join gangs or belong to a gang already.

A very large gang of my own family members gathered for my daughter’s UW-Madison graduation last weekend. She had a gang of parents, grandparents, cousins, an aunt, two brothers and my niece’s boyfriend supporting her that day.

The Rotary Club and Kiwanis Club and Women’s Auxiliary Clubs are gangs of a different sort. They engage in good works that serve the community. The problem with street gangs is they often involve guns and knives, and violent turf culture. If a child doesn’t have a loving and functional family at home, he or she will find a family away from home.

Now it’s my turn to ask parents and especially fathers to step up. Too often in Wisconsin and around the country, fathers are not involved in the lives of their children. I hear it all on my radio show. The drug war and mass incarceration of men of color are contributing to the problem. Frankly, I’m sick of hearing it.

Anyone who brings a child into the world goes to second place in line. The child has to be number one, or society falls apart. I hear it all. Dad lost his job and started to drink too much or do drugs. Mom and dad don’t get along and divorced or never married.

Nothing matters as much as taking care of that kid.

After saying as much on radio, the emails started coming from fathers who complained that family court severely restricts the time they can spend with their children.

The old standard for awarding child custody and placement in Wisconsin was “the best interest of the child.” Then Gov. Tommy Thompson changed the legal standard that now says joint custody and substantially equal physical placement are in the best interest of the child unless there is evidence of abuse.

It still isn't equal. If mom has primary placement and denies dad his visitation rights, dad has to take her to court. That could take months and cost thousands of dollars.

If that same dad doesn't have the child back to mom on time, the police can arrest him.

If we want fathers to be involved with their children, we shouldn't block loving dads from doing so. If, on the other hand, dad walks away from a child, no amount of public shaming or financial retribution is too much.

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