

Forum on gun violence sparks debate among panelists, audience members

By [Adrian G. Uribarri](#) • May 08, 2009 @ 3:03 PM
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There was a sense, early in the night, that the woman came to make a statement. Inside the auditorium, she wore a large hat with a wide, shiny, halo-like brim. Over her shoulders, she hung poster boards with photographs of slain black youth, victims of gun violence.

"You can't look at these pictures and not feel nothing," she shouted at the panelists, after skewering city leaders for failing to stop the killing. The next words out of her mouth were, "Get your hands off me," as three police officers and a security guard pulled her out of the room.

It was a chaotic moment in an otherwise civil discourse among academics, police officials and community leaders last night at Chicago State University. But the outburst from Queen Sister — yes, that is her name — cast a spotlight on tensions between those in charge of the fight against the city's gun violence and those closest to its victims.

"School-age young people are being cut short on a promising life," said Andres Durbak, former director of safety and security at Chicago Public Schools. Durbak was one of eight panelists at the forum, presented by CSU's departments of criminal justice, history, philosophy and political science, and the school's chapter of the Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity.

Cortland Campbell, a graduate student and the moderator, said the purpose of the panel was to address the root causes of violence against Chicago Public School students. He said he plans to cull comments from the forum to draft a statement for CPS officials.

Judging from the discussion, it will be difficult to draw a single conclusion from the panelists, who differed in tone and approach to the problems of violence, particularly in Chicago's black neighborhoods. But on several points, many of them seemed to agree.

For one, they presented the problem of gun violence as separate from Chicago Public Schools, highlighting how few crimes happen on campuses as opposed to on the streets around them. Those streets are recruiting grounds for gangs, especially in the few hours after children leave school.

Second, they saw those gangs, and the drug trade that empowers them, as the primary source of violence among black youth in the city.

Patricia Hill, executive director of the African American Police League, called many of Chicago's youth "child soldiers," drawing on a United Nations definition to underscore her point.

"Our children are being cut down in the prime of their lives," Hill said.

She later admitted her views were "radical," but Durbak and other panelists said they saw a useful analogy in her reference to child soldiers, whose urban equivalents are young gang recruits told to carve new territory on the city's corners.

"You have little children who are recruited by adults for the purpose of fostering their enterprises," Durbak said.

He posed a question to the community.

"How do you deprogram child soldiers to become normal human beings again?"

Other panelists were Ronald Holt, Chicago Police officer and father of CPS student Blair Holt, who died in 2007 while shielding a classmate on a CTA bus riddled with gunfire; Leo Schmitz, commander of the gang task force of the Chicago Police Department; John P. Walsh, assistant professor of criminal justice at Saint Xavier University and president of Illinois Academy of Criminology; J. Minor Allen of Englewood Cease Fire; Cliff Kelley, former alderman and commentator on WVON Radio; and Jeff Cramer, assistant United States attorney at the Department of Justice.

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pattiebanas@comcast.net

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To : Pattiebanas@Comcast. Net <pattiebanas@comcast.net>

PATTI - I am still beaming in pride over the IAC capstone salute. After 10 years of 'retirement' to suddenly be revisiting with UIC foxhole compatriots and, astonishingly, having Professor Jacobs 'roasting' me from the four decades of my life in government service and academe was a humbling moment that will always remain with me. Thanks for all your due diligence in keeping the IAC vibrant and on target. We need more people like you on the planet. JESS

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James B. Jacobs is the Warren E. Burger Professor of Law, and Director of Center for Research in Crime and Justice. He holds a J.D. ('73) and Ph.D. in Sociology ('75) from the University of Chicago. His doctoral dissertation, *Stateville: The Penitentiary in Mass Society* (1977), is a classic in penology.



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