

Baltimore Sun
Crime close to home is what public remembers
Peter Hermann
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With all my work to provide a different and smarter take on crime, readers want only one thing: "They just want to know how many break-ins are on my block."

That insightful analysis comes from Robert E. Pierre, a crime reporter for The Washington Post. We appeared together this week on a radio show put together by the federal government's Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency. In English, that's parole and probation for D.C. criminals.

Its spokesman, Leonard A. Sipes Jr., who used to speak for the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services, runs an impressive media operation that consists of TV, radio and blogs - designed to promote the agency but also to discuss criminal justice issues.

Sipes' take is that the media is failing to provide meaningful crime coverage.

Both Pierre and I try to write about different aspects of crime that go beyond the litany of daily shootings, murders, rapes and robberies. "Crime reporters can't just cover crime, they have to cover a community," Pierre said.

Nothing I have written here or in my blog has generated more feedback than stories about neighborhoods. People crave to know what is going on around them. But what is going on around them is often hard to judge, and is subjective.

A shooting in Canton really isn't a shooting, according to police, who call it a discharging because no one got hit and, thus, erase it from any meaningful statistic. That angers the people who were awakened by gunshots and who stood outside crime scene tape in the wee hours of the morning.

Crime is down, police say, even as homeowners are scared to go to the store because of the kids hanging on the corner.

Sipes feels that reporters have lost their way - we concentrate too much on the crime of the day while ignoring why it happened in the first place. And even the crime of the day, he says, gets short shrift because it seems like we've heard and read it all before.

Pierre gave an example of a man killing another man in a dispute over 50 cents (in 1995, a Baltimore robber shot a woman in the head over 52 cents, so the example is quite appropriate). He noted that the media, of course, covers this story, but he also said that if you really take the time to interview the people involved, you discover much more than a killing over something stupid.

"A lot of people who commit crime come out of the abuse and neglect system," he said. "We

want to make it this crime, this block, and a lot of times you can't separate it."

Quick hits lead to false assumptions. Pierre noted statistics from the **Brookings Institution** that show out of 1.6 million juvenile crimes committed across the country in a given year, only 1,000 involve homicide. And Sipes said the overwhelming majority of juveniles who have one contact with the juvenile system "simply drop out" and are never heard from again.

These are numbers, Sipes said, "the average person would not tend to believe."

Said Pierre: "But if you're one of the people that got knocked over the head by a juvenile, then that [statistical difference] doesn't mean anything to you."

Which is precisely the point. Perception is everything. In the end, it really doesn't matter what the stats say. Or what the analysts say. Crime is defined this way: "It's what's happening on your stoop," Sipes said. "It's what's happening on your street."