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Street code of silence contributes to violence

By [Daveen Rae Kurutz](#)

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Gwen Levert found the reason behind much of her neighborhood's problem with violence while at a stop sign in North Braddock. Someone had scrawled "stop snitchin'" in an attempt to remind residents to keep quiet.

"We're afraid to take our neighborhoods back," said Levert, of North Braddock. "People know who do these killings and won't say anything. That's why it's not safe."

Levert was one of nearly 300 Braddock, North Braddock and Rankin residents to give local and county officials feedback on the prevalent youth violence problem in the Mon Valley at a recent community dialogue on violence prevention.

In 2005 alone, Braddock, North Braddock and Rankin saw 15 young people murdered. In all, 50 people were shot that year.

"We need to talk to our kids," said Rankin Police Chief Ryan Wooten. "Parents need to know what's going on in their lives. Anybody can raise a kid, but it's hard to be a parent, and that's what we've got to be."

"It's a pretty tough topic, considering this is something dealt with on sometimes a day-to-day basis," said Allegheny County Chief Executive Dan Onorato, who gave the opening remarks at the forum. "This is something we all have to help with."

The forum, held Friday at Braddock Carnegie Library, was sponsored by Tri Boro Communities That Care, a nonprofit organization funded by Turtle Creek Valley Mental Health Mental Retardation.

Several Woodland Hills School District students performed a shortened version of "Bang Bang You're Dead," a nationally circulated play inspired by the 1998 Springfield, Ore., school shootings.

After the play, a panel discussion allowed residents to question local officials, including Braddock Mayor John Fetterman, Braddock Police Chief Frank DeBartolo and Wooten. The panelists fielded questions about unsolved murders, drug dealers, delayed police response times and youth confrontations with police.

Some residents suggested that borough officials should concentrate on bringing back community activities, including reopening overgrown playgrounds.

"To live in a community does not mean just to live there," said Marcie Gans, 47, of Braddock. "It means to be in the community, play in the community, grow in the community. It makes it that much harder to shoot and kill someone when you've learned and grown together."

One of the biggest problems in the eyes of residents and officials is the unspoken code of silence on the communities' streets. Fetterman, like Levert, said witnesses' reluctance to cooperate with police is one of the biggest obstacles for the community to overcome.

"We need to hold the community accountable," Fetterman said. "If not, this violence is never going to end."

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