# Minister wants 'street code' revived to help lessen violence

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Akron Beacon Journal USA TODAY NETWORK

AKRON, Ohio – What happened to the code of the streets in Akron, Ohio? There was a time when these unwritten rules would have likely prevented the June 2 mass shooting that injured 27 and killed one at a birthday party in East Akron.

Violence against women and children was once forbidden during neighborhood dust-ups.

So was shooting into a crowd or a house where civilians – people not involved in a conflict – could get hurt.

But with mass incarceration, some say, there are not enough men living in city neighborhoods to teach young people – particularly young men – street code, or to dole out consequences for breaking the rules.

See MINISTER, Page 11A

### Minister

Continued from Page 1A

In Akron, Minister Stephen Muhammad has been trying to revive the code to stem the blood-

Muhammad, part of the Nation of Islam, reached out to older men reached out to older men who had turned around their lives and discussed with them the unwritten rules. He then put them in writing and into the hands of younger men hands of younger men who are likely to be involved in Akron violence. not only gang-related ac-

tivity.

The "Street Codes" flyer shows a photo Mu-hammad took on on Me-morial Day in 2018. It shows the aftermath of a shooting, when people in a red Chevrolet Camaro

a red Chevrolet Camaro
exchanged gunfire with
people in a parking lot.
"It was surreal in the
middle of the day," Muhammad said. "People
were just running in all
directions."

The mass shooting

The mass shooting June 2 on the other side of the city can make people feel powerless, he said.

"But we can take the position that we don't have to be powerless in the future," Muhammad

Police have yet to make any arrests in the June 2 any arrests in the June 2 shooting. A week after the gunfire, they said they didn't even have a description of the shoot-er's car despite dozens of witnesses who were at the birthday party where it happened. "We know somebody

saw something," Muham-mad said, "but the level of danger is very real."

### What is street code?

The code of the streets dates back to at least an-cient Rome in Biblical times, Elijah Anderson, a professor of sociology and African American

and African American Studies at Yale Univer-sity, said during a recent interview. Street code emerges, he said, when govern-ment is weak and "police seem to abdicate responsibility to the communi-

Yet no one delved into Yet no one delved into the origins of modern street code until Ander-son's 1999 book, "Code of the Street: Decency, Vio-lence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City."

of the Inner City." The book explained The book explained why crime was happening in poor and working-class neighborhoods. Violence that may have looked random to outsiders was instead being regulated by a street code, he said said.

Anderson's research focused on a Black neighborhood in Philadelphia, but could have been set in but could have been set in scores of other similar places across the U.S., in-cluding Akron, he said. In Philadelphia, work-

ing-class people - who were called "decent" by themselves and others lived alongside street hustlers and other crimi-

"Most people in the hood, even in the poorest communities are decent and trying to be decent,"

and trying to be decent,"
Anderson said.
They live alongside "street" people, he said, who tend to be much poorer economically and who don't have the same drive for upward mobility.
In this world, street credibility and prestige drive everything, he said.
"A lot of this is related."

"A lot of this is related to the sense of two differ-ent systems of law – one for white people and one for Black people," Ander-son said.

In many ways, these



Minister Stephen Muhammad, who is with the Nat of Islam, has been going door-to-door and on the streets in Akron, Ohio, handing out cards that say "Stop the killing." He has turned to men released from prison for help re-establishing a street code aimed at stopping some of the killings.

MIKE CARDEW/AKRON BEACON JOURNAL

neighborhoods have es-tablished their own laws because they don't be-lieve they are served by the judicial system that governs the larger soci-

governs the larger soci-ety, Anderson said.

How you dress, how you talk and even how you walk is judged by the street.

To keep safe, everyone who lives in these neigh-

borhoods is expected to have street credibility, demonstrating fearless-ness and strength, he

Holding onto that credibility can be precari-ous. So can violating someone else's credibil-

Something that may something that may seem petty in a middle or upper-class neighbor-hood, like maintaining eye contact for too long, can be considered a seri-ous incident of disrespect in a street code neighbor-hood and almost certainwill have conse quences, Anderson said.

So can stepping out-side street code for help by calling on or co ing with police.

# 'I came out to a completely different

Muhammad said so Munammad said so-cial media is filled with pictures and videos of young Akron men flash-ing stacks of cash, guns and singing about sad-ness and revenge. In one rap video post-

ed on YouTube a couple of years ago, a group not only bragged about who they already killed, but who they would kill next, Muhammad said.

"It was unbelievable," he said

That was one of the reasons Muhammad said he turned to men released from prison for help reestablishing a street code aimed at stopping some of the killings.

Peace is preferable, he said, but not always pos-sible, so street code is there to limit the vio-

lence. Terry Hawkins, who is also part of the Nation of Islam, was among those who helped craft Akron's

code.

Hawkins, 49, spent 25
years in prison for taking
someone's life, he said.
During that time, he
watched street code
change from inside pris-

on.
Young inmates once
followed the code, he
said. They arrived, respected the older inmates, tried to learn from
them and obeyed a hier-

But in the 2000s, he said that changed.

"There was no command structure. Everybody was for themselves and they could do as they please with no conse-quence," he said.

In 2018, when he was released from prison, he saw the same thing on the



"I came out to a com-pletely different world," he said.

Hawkins and other men who served time for murder helped Muham-mad come up with the Akron "Street Codes" flyaimed at stopping the

## The Akron Street

er aimed killings.

The code is aimed at young Black men caught in a cycle of violence. It lists five rules:

1 No women, no children when the beauty of the cycle of th

- dren. Neither should ever be harmed while trying to resolve a con-flict.
- flict.

  2 No civilians (people who aren't part of gang, drug or other criminal life). That includes never behaving "recklessly, shooting into a crowd or home that might house home that might house innocents.
- innocents."
  3 Don't value money
  over human life. "Always
  do the math. Is this killing worth the overall
  cost?"
  4 Take cost of
- 4 Take care of your own neighborhood.
- 5 Never act on emo-tion/always seek coun-

sel.

The city of Akron did
not respond to questions
about whether officials
were aware of the proposed street code or
whether they believed it
could impact any viccould impact gun vio-

Hawkins said the list of rules reflects the un-written code he grew up

"You had accidents true-enough," he said. Ci-vilians sometimes got

hurt.
"But guys out there now, they just shoot up the crowd," he said. "We didn't do it at that level."

'How do we reduce

### aun violence?

It's been 25 years since Anderson's book about street code shook up the world's view of criminal justice and sociology. Now some scholars say it's time to revisit his

work.
"We argue that the pressing issue of urban violence makes this an ideal time to refresh and reground the theory by resituating it within the contemporary land-scape," K. Sebastian Leon, who teaches Latino and Caribbean Studies and Caribbean Studies and criminal justice at Rutgers University, wrote in a recent review with a

in a recent review with a colleague. Leon said during a re-cent interview that An-derson's work 25 years ago provided a compre-hensive and proven theve and proven theory about why street violence was happening at the time

the time.

Investigating how
street code has evolved
since then may answer
the trillion-dollar question: How do we reduce
gun violence?"

If you think of guns
like drugs, society can
tackle the issue in two

tackle the issue in two ways, Leon said. On the supply side, gun task forces can seize a lot of weapons. That alone, won't solve the issue, he

On the demand side, on the demand slide, he said society must figure out how to reduce young people's desire to use a gun or to even have one. Many, including the city of Akron, are relying on what they call credible messengers - people who have walked in the same shoes as today's young people - to convince teens and young men to lay down their weapons.

Early studies of credible messengers show no

effect on violence, Leon said, but he cautioned that there could be an ef-

fect over time.

"It's not as though
we've found another
model or approach," he

The Akron street code pamphlet offers another path. "When I see some-thing like that ... the un-

thing like that ... the undercurrent for me is how masculinity is constructed," Leon said.

He saidhe'd tweak one or two of the lines, but said it shows there are other ways to solve conflict particularly against

other ways to solve con-flict, particularly against the "backdrop of the trag-ic June 2 shooting."
"If you throw a punch and miss, you don't hit someone 10 yards away," like when you fire a bullet, be said

Muhammad plans to hit the streets again with hit the streets again with the street code pam-phlets once the prayer vigils for the mass shoot-ing victims ended and street tensions have eased.

"One of the goals we have had is to identify who some of the bosses are in these communi-

are in these communi-ties," he said. "So far, they ties, ne said. 'So far, they say this is great, I will take it back to my people and get to work on this, but then we get ghosted." Muhammad makes clear that he doesn't ex-pect 100% compliance to

the proposed Akron street code. But he wants Akron's Black boys and Akron's Black boys and men to know they are worth the investment. "When young people look out and don't see a future for themselves...or have parents who don't put a structure around their lives...they can't tell you why they but they just why they hurt, they just hurt," Muhammad said.

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