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They don't value life

By Kimball Perry

Streets may be hiding teen fugitives

In the last month, Zachariah Hassell and Alfonzo Price have come to have a lot in common. Both are 15. Both have cute nicknames linked to their size or age. Both are accused of brutal killings. And both still haven't been caught.

How do 15-year-olds - who aren't old enough to drive and don't have jobs - manage to hide so well that police can't find them? "From the help of the streets or adults who are part of their family," said Cincinnati homicide Detective Jenny Luke.

Bob Mecum, head of a social-service agency that helps kids, said the reason can be even more nefarious. "There are plenty of adults on the street who are perfectly willing to provide their couch or their homes in exchange for money, drugs, sex or all of the above," said Mecum, president of Lighthouse Youth Services in Walnut Hills.

One of the services his agency provides is giving 350 children and their families a place to sleep each night. Many of those kids are homeless, come from juvenile jails or are abused or neglected. Mecum, Luke and others describe a loose-knit "street" underground of family, friends, thugs, opportunists and criminals who hide youngsters wanted by cops.

"You're talking about adults protecting them and not taking care of the seriousness of the situation," said Cincinnati police Sgt. Robert Liston, a detective with the homicide unit. "They don't value life. It's an altogether different world."

Police believe Hassell, an eighth-grader known as "Little Zach," and friend Germaine S. Taylor shot and killed 37-year-old Michael Aufrance on June 18 in Over-the-Rhine. Taylor, 16, of the West End, told police Aufrance was trying to steal drugs from the 5-foot-7, 150-pound, baby-faced Hassell when Taylor pulled out a gun and shot him in the head and wounded an innocent bystander. Taylor has been arrested and charged with murder.

Hassell's family told police a month ago that they'd turn him in within 48 hours. But he's still on the run. He might be in Dayton, Ohio, with family members. He might be sleeping in a vacant building in Cincinnati. Police aren't sure, but they are frustrated. "People that will hide him from us will lie to us," Luke said. Hassell has an older relative, Luke said, who is feared by the community, making it more difficult for police to get public cooperation.

"If, when you were 15 years old, you did something like this, do you think for one minute your family would lie, your family would hide you?" Luke asked.

"People do not tell us the truth. I don't know if they just hate the police, don't trust the police or are criminals themselves."

That's what police believe is happening in the hunt for Alfonso "Lil' Al" Price. Kerria Anderson, 18, was eight months pregnant when, police say, three teens beat her July 11 in Over-the-Rhine. Her fetus died as a result of the beating. Police believe Price, the baby's father who kept telling Anderson to have an abortion, wanted to kill the fetus by stomping on Anderson's belly. Police have been looking for Price since the July 11 incident.

Again, adult family members, friends or the street crowd are believed to be helping Price while he's on the run. "The average citizens are clueless as to what really goes on and the network down here. Now, you knock on the door and get the old 'F you,'" Luke said. In so many ways, Hassell and Price - and others like them - live in a world foreign to most people.

In their world, many make their living by selling drugs or committing other crimes. Parental supervision often is lacking. They have few positive adult role models. They have easy access to guns that can be bought for \$20 "anyplace," Luke said. They prey on others. Violence rules their world.

Go to many neighborhoods, especially poor ones, late at night or early in the morning, Mecum suggests, and there they are. "You'll see all kinds of young kids totally unsupervised on the streets," Mecum said. "They have no idea where their mom is, no dad at home. They're living in a world that you and I don't know. It's shocking to the people who don't deal with them."

The situation shocks even veteran police officers. "We don't deal with decent people," Luke said. Liston compared it to a jungle. "Being on the street, they're violent," Liston said. "If it's done on the street, it's done by who's the strongest, who's the baddest. It's survival of the fittest."