Harper High School Feature: ‘ Whether Or Not You Want to Be In A Gang, You’re in One’

By: Lisa Belkin

If it had been any other high school, you would know this story by now. Had some other "kind of school" logged a year that saw 29 current and recent students shot, eight fatally, "we would all know the name of that school," says [radio show host Ira Glass](http://www.thisamericanlife.org/contributors/ira-glass) in a new episode of ["This American Life" on NPR](http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/487/harper-high-school-part-one). "If you grafted those facts onto another high school -- in a wealthier place, maybe a suburb ... it would be national news."

But it wasn't another school. It was Harper High, in Chicago, during a year when the murder rate in that city [climbed to 506](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-12-21/national/36017398_1_gun-violence-homicide-rate-national-gun-debate) while it plateaued or fell in New York and Los Angeles. Three ["This American Life "](http://www.thisamericanlife.org/) reporters spent five months in that school last fall, and beginning this weekend, Glass hosts the remarkable two-part program that results from their immersion.

One early section of the first hour finds reporter Linda Lutton laying out of "the rules" of Harper High. It is a chilling lesson. Parents everywhere think they set the do's and don'ts of their children's lives: Do your homework, don't talk to strangers, don't join a gang. Parents in places that aren't like Harper tend to think that parents in places that are somehow slack in the rule department. "I would never allow my child to ..." we say when the news report mentions that the latest dead student was a member of a gang. And then we go about our day feeling safe.

But as Lutton makes clear, the parents of Harper don't make the rules, and the kids don't really "choose" to follow them. She says:

When I ask kids what their parents don't understand about gangs these days, they say it's this: their parents tell them not to join a gang -- as if there's some initiation to go through, some way to sign up. Today, whether or not you want to be in a gang, you're in one. If you live on pretty much any block near Harper High School, you have been assigned a gang. Your mother bought a house on 72nd and Hermitage? You're S-Dub. You live across the street from the school? That's D-Ville.

There are more than 15 gangs in the neighborhoods around Harper, she reports, and while being part of one puts kids in danger, it also keeps them safe. You don't dare walk to school, or anywhere else, without the company of a gang. And, no matter what your parents say, you don't find a way to stay neutral. As Aaron Washington, a police officer assigned full-time to the school, tells Lutton:

It used to be if you played sports or you were academically better than the average kid, they didn't bother you. Now it's different, it doesn't matter. If you live here, you're part of them. You know, you live on that block, or you live in that area, you one of them. The way they get to school, they have to come to school with one of these factions, one of these gangs. They gotta come to school with them. They don't have a choice.

The reality took the journalists of "This American Life" by surprise. "I've done other reporting on gangs and neighborhoods like this," Glass said in an interview from his Manhattan office. "I am not new to this subject. But what we learned was how little we knew."

Among the many moments that made this clear, he said, was a conversation the team recorded between the father of a murdered teen, and the boy's friends. That dad, Glass said, did "all the right things, everything that every parent really does, like signing the kid up for citywide football leagues and trying to keep him out of trouble." But the friends tell the father -- gently but definitely -- that the gangs are stronger than any parent. "You reach a certain height and people start shooting at you," Glass said. "You are in the game."

Added Alex Kotlowitz, who has [made a career of writing about life in "bad" neighborhoods](http://www.amazon.com/There-Are-No-Children-Here/dp/0385265565), and who reported through the prism of Harper's on-site social workers, said this series made him see that just as parents can't protect their children, they can't heal them, either. "In the wake of Newtown," he said in an interview from his Chicago home, "we asked all the right questions. Why did this happen? How do we help the children who witnessed and were traumatized by it? What is going to happen in Newtown going forward?"

And yet, Kotlowitz said, "we don't ask those questions at a place like Harper. Virtually every kid in that school has seen someone who was shot or knows someone who was shot but we have never really dealt with the issue of trauma in the inner-city."

Instead, Kotlowitz said, we leave parents and children, teachers and students to navigate terrain that is impassable. And we convince ourselves that their presence there is somehow their own fault.

"What this illustrates in a really vivid way is that all of us hear on the news that a kid got shot and he was a gang member," Glass said, "but we really don't understand what they mean. The feeling we have that well, that couldn't be my kid? You hear these stories and realize, yes, it could."