

## **the VICIOUS CYCLE - Perpetual force of neglect and decay foil efforts to make solutions stick, says TOD ROBBERSON**

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I'm a firm believer in the adage that success breeds success. Experience also tells me that failure breeds failure, and that's the challenge facing southern Dallas.

The problems south of the Trinity all seem to be feeding on one another in ways that frustrate even the most dogged do-gooders. There might be an occasional housing project here, a redevelopment initiative there, with local leaders declaring that, yes, this marks the moment of real turnaround. But a vicious cycle of failure winds up erasing everything, replacing it with the same old dismal decay.

Outsiders who view the problem from a comfortable distance to the north often oversimplify southern Dallas' problems. Some think the answer is arresting crack dealers, eliminating "hip-hop culture" or getting boys to pull up their pants. The vicious cycle I'm about to describe is, in itself, a gross oversimplification of a complex, multilayered conundrum that defies simplistic characterizations and easy solutions.

Let's start with the home. Obviously, southern Dallas covers an enormous swath, and plenty of thriving neighborhoods don't fit this description. But underemployment and poverty are endemic in much of southern Dallas, as are single-parent households. In neighborhoods such as Frazier, 80 percent of households are led by a single woman, according to a 2006 report by the J. McDonald Williams Institute.

A single, working mom is going to be hard-pressed to earn a living and feed her family making minimum wage. Many work two or even three jobs to survive. That means spending most days rushed, exhausted and stressed-out, with less time to devote to the children.

In the naïve north, I hear people say, "If only they were better parents, they wouldn't have all these problems." Have you tried working long hours at minimum wage while raising a family alone?

Even two-parent families are hard-pressed. If their housing starts to look run down, that's probably because a new paint job and well-kept lawn are way, way down on the priority list.

Put a few rumpled houses on the same block, and everything takes on a bleak appearance. Property values tumble. This scenario of blight is exactly what makes grocery and retail stores flee, according to developers I've interviewed.

When stores move far away - as they have for 400,000 Dallas County residents, according to a Williams Institute study - parents have to choose between buying food at convenience stores or spending even more of their precious time away from home shopping for necessities.

What happens to the kids? If they're like children I know, they won't be disciplined enough to stay home studying without parental supervision. They'll find other ways to keep busy.

In the toughest parts of southern Dallas, will neglected kids be more inclined to hang out with gangs to cure boredom or to find a sense of belonging and inclusion? Yes, according to southern Dallas ex-gang members, who say that neglect or abuse at home are primary causes of involvement in gangs, crime and drugs.

When there's trouble at home, teachers say they see an uptick in classroom discipline problems. Students don't stay focused on learning, and when grades fall, parents blame the teachers. When enough students face these same conditions, overall school performance levels drop.

Bad schools and low property values push middle-class families away. Real estate developers, restaurants and retailers go where the middle class goes - to the north or to places like Duncanville. They leave behind vacant

commercial property, which attracts liquor stores and pawn shops looking for cheap rent. Blight begets blight.

Without commerce, employment sources dry up. That means local residents have to travel farther to find work. Which brings us back to the hard-pressed single mom - now spending even less time at home because her job is so far away.

See how the cycle feeds on itself?

And whenever someone comes in to fix things up, the stormlike, overwhelming momentum of cyclical failure quickly erases anything positive in its path.

Simplistic answers do nothing to help solve this complex problem. So please, spare us the finger-pointing about drugs, saggy pants and hip-hop culture. To me, that's like blaming trailer homes for tornadoes.

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Low-paying jobs and unemployment put pressure on parents to take on extra jobs. They spend more time away from home, meaning neglect for the family.

Cash-strapped homeowners have less time and motivation to care for houses and yards. Neighborhoods acquire unkempt, dismal appearance.

Street crime, gangs and blighted neighborhoods cause property values to decline, discouraging commercial development.

Child neglect and delinquency are reflected in poor school performance. DISD must offer incentive pay to attract quality faculty.

Poor school performance and low property values lead to middle-class flight to the north, further discouraging retail and commercial investment in southern Dallas.

As name-brand retailers flee, rents drop. The low rents attract liquor stores, pawn shops and other businesses that add to the "decay" profile of southern Dallas.

Absence of retail and commercial investment adds to a scarcity of jobs close to home. Parents spend more time commuting to far-away workplaces.

DigitalEXTRA

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**Caption:** CHART(S): DigitalEXTRA. ILLUSTRATION(S): (MICHAEL HOGUE/Staff Artist) The vicious cycle.

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