

# *The Atlantic*

## A Matter of Black Lives

Since 1980, more than 260,000 black men have been killed in America. Mitch Landrieu, the mayor of New Orleans, is on a crusade to stop the killing.



Landrieu consoles a grieving woman at a prayer vigil, held during the Essence Festival in New Orleans for mothers who have lost their children to gun violence.

William Widmer / The Atlantic

**JEFFREY GOLDBERG** | **SEPTEMBER 2015 ISSUE** | **U.S.**

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**I**N LATE APRIL of 1994, a 9-year-old African American boy from the broken-down Central City neighborhood of New Orleans wrote a letter to President Bill Clinton, asking him to bring about an end to the violence that was devastating his city.

“Dear Mr. Clinton,” James Darby began. “I want you to stop the killing in the city. People is dead and I think that somebody might kill me. So would you please stop the people from deading. I’m asking you nicely to stop it. I know you can do it. Do it. I now you could.” He signed the letter, “Your friend, James.”

Ten days later, on May 8, Mother’s Day, Darby was visiting A. L. Davis Park with several members of his family. The park, named after Abraham Lincoln Davis, the first African American to sit on the New Orleans city council, is a compact rectangle of basketball courts and grass patches situated directly across the street from a public-housing complex.

Darby, his mother, Janice Payne, and her sister laid out a picnic for their family. Soon they were playing in an impromptu touch-football game with other families. At first, spirits were good, but the game became tense, and amiable mockery suddenly gave way to taunting. A fight erupted. One of the players, apparently associated with Darby’s family, punched a 16-year-old girl named Karen Norfleet in the eye. Norfleet’s 14-year-old brother, Michael, turned to members of Darby’s family and, according to witnesses, said, “Wait here. You’re going to get yours.”

Michael and Karen Norfleet ran home to their apartment in a nearby housing project. They found their 19-year-old brother, Joseph, seated on a couch, drinking Bacardi. Joseph saw Karen’s eye and became angry. He had just returned home from a shift on a lawn-maintenance crew. He was tired, somewhat drunk, a bit stoned, and in a foul mood. A short discussion about the merits of immediate retribution ensued. An older man in the house, a 32-year-old convicted felon named James Walker, the son of Norfleet’s mother’s boyfriend, urged Joseph to defend his sister’s honor.

Joseph Norfleet admired Walker, and so rose to his challenge. He grabbed a shotgun from a closet, and the men drove with Michael to the park. They soon located the people involved in the football-game altercation. The car slowed.

Someone inside the car is believed to have yelled, “Yo, bitches!” Joseph pointed the shotgun out the window and pulled the trigger. Joseph Norfleet had been shot twice in his life—the first time when he was 15, as a victim of a robbery, and then, at 17, during a drive-by shooting in his neighborhood—but he had never before fired a weapon.

Norfleet missed his intended target, a man associated with the Darby family. James Darby, who was eating potato chips when the Norfleets rolled up, was struck in the head. Two other people, including Darby’s uncle, were wounded when they were struck by fragments of the boy’s skull. Janice Payne laid herself atop her son and told him that she loved him. The 9-year-old who had feared being killed lay dead on the street.

Mitch Landrieu and Jeffrey Goldberg discuss the mayor's mission to curb violence in New Orleans at the 2015 Aspen Ideas Festival.

Darby was one of 424 people murdered in New Orleans in 1994. At the time, New Orleans had the highest murder rate of any city in the country.

The killing of a small child will generally provoke immense public and police

attention—even when the murder takes place in an otherwise overlooked African American community—and Joseph Norfleet and his brother Michael were quickly arrested. Joseph was convicted of first-degree murder. His sentence was predetermined by Louisiana law: life without the possibility of parole.

Louisiana’s sentencing guidelines are among the most stringent in the country, and so Norfleet, who was then 19, understood that, barring a pardon from the governor—an improbability, given both the infrequency of such pardons and, especially, the age of his victim—he would spend the rest of his life as a resident of the country’s largest maximum-security prison, the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola.

: the Louisiana State Penitentiary, better known as Angola, the largest maximum-security  
ome 2,000 men from New Orleans are imprisoned there, many of them for life. (William

**A**T THE TIME OF DARBY'S DEATH, Mitch Landrieu was a Democratic state legislator who lived less than two miles from the park where Darby was shot. Perhaps because of Darby's age, or perhaps because of the utterly random quality of Darby's death, Landrieu, who is now serving his second term as the mayor of New Orleans, mentions his name with some regularity in speeches about crime and public order and the decimation by gunfire of his city's poor African American neighborhoods. Landrieu notes melancholically that, had Darby lived, he would be 30 years old today. "Maybe he'd be a doctor, maybe he'd be a lawyer," he says. But he adds that, given the straitened circumstances of Darby's youth, he might one day have found himself, as a young man in an unforgiving neighborhood, armed and ready to kill.

"It's a roll of the dice. People get out of Central City, they do," Landrieu told me recently. "But many don't. If life had gone differently for Joseph Norfleet and James Darby, who knows? Joseph Norfleet could have been that 9-year-old victim. Maybe Joseph Norfleet would be dead and James Darby would be in prison today. We see this so often—today's shooter is tomorrow's victim."

Landrieu and I were talking about the Darby murder while driving to Angola. The prison, 130 miles from New Orleans, could legitimately be considered the city's most distant neighborhood. Of the roughly 6,300 men currently imprisoned at Angola—three-quarters of them there for life, and nearly 80 percent of them African American—about 2,000 at any given moment are from New Orleans. Thousands of children in New Orleans—a city whose population today is roughly 380,000—have fathers who will reside until death in Angola.

"This place will bring you to your knees," Landrieu said.

Why?

"What you're going to see is a huge governing failure on the part of our society.

This country has the highest incarceration rate in the world, and Louisiana has the highest incarceration rate in the country. That's failure.”

Landrieu visits Angola on occasion to learn more about a crisis that has come to consume him. He decided, early in his first term, to devote the resources of his city to solving one of this country's most diabolical challenges—the persistence of homicide in poor African American communities. The numbers are staggering. From 1980 to 2013, 262,000 black males were killed in America. By contrast, roughly 58,000 Americans died in Vietnam. In New Orleans, about 6,000 African American men have been murdered since 1980. The killers of these men were, in the vast majority of cases, other African American men. In New Orleans, 80 percent of murder victims are believed to have known their killer.

Coming soon from *The Atlantic*: Jeffrey Goldberg visits the Louisiana State Penitentiary to speak with warden Burl Cain and discover how the maximum-security prison approaches rehabilitation.

After a three-year decline in the number of homicides in New Orleans, a recent spike in murders—matched by spikes in other cities, including Chicago and Baltimore—threatens to make 2015 a much more violent year in Landrieu's city

than he would have imagined.

“We do not know why it’s curving back up,” he said. “We do know that the gang and group violence is down in areas where we’re interrupting violence. But maybe this is like pressing one side of a balloon, I don’t know. I do know that if we as a country took this seriously, we would treat this as a crisis and not stop until we fixed it.”

Landrieu’s preoccupation with the homicide plague afflicting black America is an unusual one, even among big-city mayors who face the same appalling challenge, especially because his city confronts a unique set of threats to its health, and even to its existence. When Landrieu was first elected mayor, in 2010, he inherited a city—from a mayor, Ray Nagin, who would soon be off to prison himself—that had been broken by a hurricane. “It looks like a lot of that place could be bulldozed,” the then-speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Dennis Hastert, said of New Orleans in 2005, shortly after the levees gave way.

New Orleans did not disappear, of course, but neither did its troubles. As we drove to Angola, I asked Landrieu why he has made homicide—a seemingly ineradicable disease in a gun-saturated country whose popular culture glorifies violence—his chief priority.

“I didn’t grab this. This problem grabbed me,” he said. “I guess you could say I’m obsessed with it. I don’t understand why it’s okay in America—a country that’s supposed to be the greatest country in the world, a place with more wealth than anywhere else—for us to leave so many of our citizens basically dead. Why do we allow our citizens to kill each other as if it’s the cost of doing business? We have basically given up on our African American boys. I’d be a cold son of a bitch if I ignored it, if I just focused on the other side of town, or focused just on tourism.

Michael Nutter listens to Landrieu talk about reducing urban crime, September 26, 2013.

“I’m absolutely certain we have the money and the capacity to solve this problem, but we do not have the will. This problem doesn’t touch enough Americans to rise to the level of a national crisis. But these are all our children. I’m embarrassed by it. How could this be normal?”

Landrieu, who is 55, is bald and tank-like in build. His physical appearance would be intimidating, except that his face is open and nearly perfectly round. He is also pathologically gregarious, a retail politician of almost Bill Clinton-level dexterity, and he has a Clinton-like need to be heard, and to be liked. He is also prolix and self-winding: once he becomes fixed on a subject, the words come in torrents.

“This is absolutely not the state of nature,” he said to me. “It’s treated like it is, but this is a lie. We’ve got to figure out as a nation that the current state of affairs



is not acceptable: schools that are not working, people who don't have jobs, and, consequently, young men killing each other because they don't see anything better for themselves.”

Landrieu and a largely African American team of law-enforcement officials, sociologists, and government reformers have tried to solve this problem in diverse ways. Under the rubric of a program called NOLA for Life, they are experimenting with new and comprehensive methods of diverting young black men from the path of self-destruction.

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## **Thousands of children in New Orleans have fathers who will reside until death in Angola prison.**

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The program includes mental-health and substance-abuse counseling, job training—52 percent of African American men in New Orleans are not working—and a package of efforts designed to break the cycle of retribution that often gets sparked when someone is shot. Teams of counselors, some of whom are ex-gang members, are deployed to the city's emergency rooms to prevent aggrieved relatives and friends of shooting victims from exacting revenge.

Other aspects of NOLA for Life include summer camps and a midnight basketball league of the sort that was widely mocked when President Clinton made it part of his 1994 crime bill. But the most innovative feature of Landrieu's effort might be the city's Group Violence Reduction Strategy, which is based on the work of David Kennedy, a criminologist at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, in New York City, who argues that the targeting of small but dense networks of gang members in specific geographic locations—men in the 16-to-

24-year-old bracket who are the most likely to shoot and get shot—will yield disproportionate reductions in violence.

The centerpiece of this strategy is the “call-in,” in which young men on the precipice—those who are acquainted with the criminal-justice system but have not yet been convicted of crimes that would earn them decades in Angola—are alternately cajoled and threatened into obeying the law. Highly stylized and minutely scripted, the call-ins take place in New Orleans now at least four times a year. The call-in is initiated when a group of 20 or so young men, either on parole or in temporary residence at the parish jail, are ordered to appear in a municipal courtroom on a certain morning, without being told why.

I attended a call-in one morning not long ago. Officers seated the young men who had been summoned on two sides of the high-ceilinged courtroom. Twelve men in orange jumpsuits, prisoners brought to court from the parish jail, sat on one side, and 11 men, free but on probation, sat on the other, facing each other. Several of the young men had arranged their faces to reflect boredom and disdain, but I noticed at least a few flashes of surprised recognition when Landrieu marched into the courtroom. He was followed by a long, solemn column of prosecutors, law-enforcement officials, social workers, clergy, and physicians. The phalanx split in two—the representatives of law enforcement sat on the left side of the gallery, facing the presiding judge; physicians, counselors, and community leaders sat on the right.

The mayor slowly approached the podium, facing the judge, and began speaking in a preacher’s cadence.

“My name is Mitch Landrieu,” he began. “I’m the mayor. We asked all of you to come today because we want to talk to you. We came here with a clear and simple message. The killing on the streets of New Orleans has to stop. There’s still too much shooting. There’s too much death, too much devastation. It’s tearing us apart as a community, and it’s happening and you’re participating in it.

We came here today as a community to tell you that it's got to stop. It's got to end.

“We would not be here today, you would not be here today, if we did not care about you. I'm tired of getting a phone call in the middle of the night from the police chief saying, 'Mr. Mayor, I'm sorry to inform you that we got a message that shots rang out, we arrived on the scene, we found a young African American man on the pavement, blood running out of his head, dead on arrival. No witnesses.' This city can't survive—we can't survive—unless we get the shooting to stop. I brought some folks with me, and I'm going to ask them to talk to you and tell you who they are and what they want.”

Landrieu paused, looking over his left shoulder. “On this side of the room, you're going to see the police chief, the district attorney, the sheriff. You're going to see the United States attorney sitting behind them. You're going to see the representatives of every federal law-enforcement agency in America—the U.S. Marshals, the FBI, you're going to see the DEA, you're going to see the ATF. They came to be with you today. To talk to you.

“We want you to talk to your friends in your groups, and you can tell them the rules of engagement are changing on the streets of New Orleans. If you walk out of here and commit a crime, if you walk out of here and do something that is going to hurt someone, everybody on this side of the room is going to find you and stop you, because you haven't stopped yourself. We have to do that to protect you and protect the people of New Orleans.”

He then pointed to his right. “On this side of the room, you're going to see folks who can help you, on jobs, on substance abuse. If you choose well, I'll make a commitment to you that you're going to go to the front of the line: if you need a job, if you need mental-health, substance-abuse counseling, if you say you need something, the folks on this side of the room will listen to you, talk to you, help you.

“So if there’s a bad decision, there will be a bad consequence. A good decision, a good consequence.”

For more than an hour, two dozen speakers addressed the men. Most, including the highest-ranking law-enforcement officials, were African American, and some of these officials said explicitly what their presence signified—Angola did not have to be the inevitable, final stop for the prisoners and parolees. The young men sat in total silence. As the police chief, Michael Harrison, addressed them, surveillance photos of several members of his captive audience flashed on screens in the courtroom. The message from Harrison: “We know what you’re doing.” The U.S. attorney, Ken Polite, who was raised in public housing in New Orleans and whose half brother was killed in gang-related violence, warned the young men that his prosecutors were using powerful federal laws to dismantle entire gangs—and that those convicted could find themselves in prisons further afield than Angola. “You could end up in Minneapolis,” he said, in a tone suggesting that Minnesota was in another galaxy.

The last speaker finished, and the prisoners were removed from the courtroom. The young men on probation were told that they were free to go if they wished, but that they were invited to meet with social workers and counselors in a nearby room. Many chose to stay. Landrieu and other officials followed them in. I overheard the mayor speaking quietly to one man: “We’re here for you. We love you. We want you to change the circumstances of your life.”

I spoke with one participant, who said he had a drug-distribution charge but was “out of the game right now.” Only right now?, I asked. “If I need money, I’ll be back. No choice.” I asked him whether he would take advantage of what the mayor was offering. “I’ll go for job training, definitely.” Do you think the city cares about you? “Maybe,” he said warily, as if I were asking a trick question. “Maybe so.”

As we left the courthouse, Landrieu said, “We have to save these boys. They’re

our children.”

**L**ANDRIEU IS THE FIRST white person to serve as mayor of New Orleans since his father, Moon Landrieu, completed his second term, in 1978. Moon, beloved by African Americans for battling segregation, still lives in the majority-black, frayed-at-the-edges neighborhood where he and his wife, Verna, raised their nine children. The Landrieu family, driven by Catholic social teachings, tied their fate to that of their African American neighbors in a manner uncommon in the South, or elsewhere in America, for that matter. They embraced desegregation and civil rights as their white friends fled for the suburbs. Moon told me that for a time in the 1960s, he lost most of his white friends. “The whites were upset that I was standing for integration,” he said. “It got so that I decided I liked black people more than I liked white people. Now I just accept people as individuals, but you have to understand the atmosphere at the time.”

The Landrieus also tied their electoral fate to the African American community. Moon Landrieu received 90 percent of the African American vote in his first run for mayor, in 1970, and his oldest daughter, Mary, represented Louisiana in the U.S. Senate for three terms thanks mainly to the support of African Americans. (She lost her reelection attempt last year after receiving less than 20 percent of the white vote.) In his most recent race for reelection, Mitch Landrieu, running against two black candidates, received the majority of black votes.

The thick bond between the Landrieu family and the African American community of New Orleans may help explain why Mitch Landrieu has made the protection of black youth his top priority. It also may help explain why Landrieu is comfortable discussing the crisis of African American homicide in a manner that sometimes causes offense among both blacks and whites. He supplements his arguments about the importance of jobs and education with a critique of what he sees as the quick-trigger culture prevalent in some impoverished African

American communities. And he argues against what he sees as a bien-pensant double standard in mainstream liberal thought: black lives don't matter only when they're taken by police officers, he argues—they matter when they're taken by other blacks, too.

his father, Moon Landrieu, December 6, 2014 (Gerald Herbert/AP)

“This particular problem has to do with a lot of things,” Landrieu said to me as we drove to Angola. “Poor personal responsibility, family structures, a particular culture.”

Channeling the arguments I've heard made by several African American intellectuals (including my *Atlantic* colleague Ta-Nehisi Coates), I posited that character is hard to perfect when you've got no money and no prospects: “This isn't about pulling up your saggy pants. This is about ending housing segregation and ensuring equal access to services.”

“It’s about both,” the mayor said. “Many people need some help, and many people can pull themselves up. But here’s the thing. We can talk about slavery, we can talk about reparations, we can talk about the need for the nation to atone for its original sin. We in New Orleans have that obligation more than anyone because we sold more people into slavery than any other city. But reparations are not coming. So it’s almost an academic argument. Maybe we should give them, right? But I’ve got a certain amount of time in office to do what I need to do, and I’m going to spend my time fighting for something that has a possibility of happening.”

Though Landrieu tries to avoid using the term *black-on-black crime*—an expression that has fallen from favor for several sound reasons, not least of which is its popularity among people who would never think to describe violence committed by biker gangs as “white-on-white crime”—he does not hesitate to argue, particularly in front of black audiences, that black males are in the grip of a culture of violent retribution.

“Culture is a pattern of behavior that has been developed over time that makes it seem rational for kids who know each other to kill each other,” he told me.

“People get freaked out when I talk about it. In my opinion, people don’t know what culture means. They think I’m saying it’s hereditary, that this is the way things are supposed to be. Culture is learned over time: the way you cook, the way you play music, whatever. If you can learn one thing, then you can learn a different way. You can change it.”

It is politically (and intellectually) risky to attribute the weaknesses of a historically besieged group to the shortcomings of its culture. In the years after Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who was an assistant secretary in the Labor Department, released his seminal report on the fragile state of black families in 1965, many conservatives came to argue that what would save African Americans was not government programs but rather the development of a

culture of self-sufficiency and self-improvement. Some liberals, in contrast, came to believe that the near-exclusive conservative focus on bootstrapping (something also emphasized periodically by prominent African Americans, including President Obama and—now notoriously—Bill Cosby) was a way to absolve the country’s white majority of responsibility for the conditions that led to hardship in the first place. “Landrieu is a liberal making a conservative argument that was once a liberal argument—he’s trying to reappropriate it,” says Daryl Scott, a professor of African American history at Howard University. “He’s arguing for structural reforms and personal reforms all at the same time.”

Landrieu’s closest ally among American mayors is Philadelphia’s Michael Nutter, who is, if anything, far blunter on the subject of African American street culture than Landrieu. He argues that violence gives elected officials little choice but to confront it in a frank manner.

“No one really likes talking about race and violence, regardless of their ethnicity. I get criticized in Philadelphia from time to time for talking about black-on-black violence, and I’m African American,” Nutter told me when I spoke with him recently. “It’s going to be tougher for a white elected official to talk about it, especially in a majority-African American city, but the bottom line is—and I say this to all mayors—when young people are dying in the streets, you’ve got to take a forceful stand against the violence, or you’re going to be criticized for not fighting it and not caring about young African Americans.”

Landrieu told me he understands that he would be on safer ground if he limited his analysis to, say, the impact of discriminatory housing policies born out of white-supremacist ideology. “You know what? The culture developed out of a particular history. But I can’t reverse history. I can work on the problem right in front of me. So what I’m saying is, if I knock you off a chair, that’s on me. If you’re still on the ground a week later, that’s on you.”

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# Black lives don't matter only when they're taken by police, Landrieu argues. They matter when they're taken by other blacks, too.

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What preoccupies Landrieu is the moment of decision—the moment when rage, or peer pressure, or humiliation, or the cold logic of preemption—brings a young man, gun in hand, to pull the trigger. Landrieu says he favors “responsible” gun-control measures, but he seems uninterested in discussing such issues, in part, perhaps, because he may one day run for governor. “I don’t like spending a lot of time fighting fights that can’t be won, and in Louisiana this can’t be won,” he told me. Though his friend Michael Nutter is acerbic on the role of guns in violence (“It is really, really hard to shoot people when you don’t have a gun,” he says), Landrieu argued in favor of another sort of gun control—“the kind of control a parent has over a child.” He continued, “There’s nothing that stops people in the community from trying to stop those guns from being used. If your kids showed up with a gun in your house, what would you do?”

In a state where gun control is a lost cause, and in a city where the price of an illegal handgun can be less than the price of a tank of gas, the mayor wants to—and needs to—keep the focus on the men who hold the guns.

**T**HE ANGOLA PENITENTIARY sits on 18,000 acres surrounded on three sides by the Mississippi River. Most of the prison consists of cultivated fields, lakes, and woods. High fences ring the cellblocks and dormitories (the death-row complex, which currently houses 82 men, is nearly hermetically sealed), but in any case, the river, and the Tunica Hills to the east, serve to thwart easy escape.

a fashion, still a working plantation; the prisoners do the farming under the supervision of guards on horseback. Here, prisoners stack hay bales onto a flatbed truck, July 14, 2015.

The prison was created from the remnants of three plantations, including one called Angola—named, it is believed, for the southern-African homeland of many of its slaves.

Today Angola is, in a fashion, still a working plantation; the prisoners do the farming under the supervision of shotgun-carrying guards on horseback. These prisoners grow food for all of Louisiana's prisons—Angola is also known as “The Farm”—and they raise cattle to be sold on the open market. The profits help defray the cost of running Angola, as does the gate revenue from the annual prisoner rodeos, which draw tens of thousands of spectators. The prison also grows cotton. Long lines of mainly African American inmates toil in the cotton fields where slaves once worked.

“This isn’t something people from the North can ever believe,” Landrieu said as we drove up.

An escort met us at the front gate, and we followed him down narrow roads, past “freemen” housing—*freemen* is an Angola term for guards—past lakes stocked with crappie, and past the Prison View golf course, maintained by prisoners and open to the public (convicted felons excepted) for a \$10 greens fee. We arrived at Angola’s “ranch house,” a low-slung building containing guest rooms and a kitchen. Peacocks, pets of the warden, scattered as we pulled up.

There is nothing in this corner of Louisiana but prison; the nearest town is 22 miles away, and so Burl Cain, the warden, decided early in his tenure to be hospitable to visitors. When we arrived, a delegation of Ugandan prison officials, there to learn about the benefits of what Cain calls “moral rehabilitation,” were seated at the dining-room table, silently eating fried catfish and corn bread. Convicted murderers do the cooking at the ranch house.

Cain is short and round, with snow-white hair and a drawl like syrup. He has ruled Angola since 1995 with something close to absolute power. A legend in Louisiana, and in national evangelical circles, he has transformed the prison, once one of the most dangerous in the country, into a semi-pacific hive of Christian fervor. (In 1992, there were 1,346 assaults—inmate-on-inmate and inmate-on-staff—at Angola; last year there were 343. No one has been murdered at Angola since 2004.)

He is an acutely religious person who asked me, shortly after we met, “Are you a God-fearing man?” Though Cain is a Republican, he and Landrieu get along well, in part because of a shared sense that something has gone awry in the way the country punishes criminals. “Don’t be fooled by the good-ol’-boy thing,” Landrieu instructed me when we arrived. “The warden has some very progressive ideas.”

Cain did not disappoint. In conversation, he is less Boss Hogg and more heterodox criminologist, a practitioner who has come to believe that society is only too happy to forsake a whole class of men as irredeemable. “Look, I wouldn’t let any of our sexual offenders out of here,” he said over lunch. “That’s too dangerous. But most of the murderers, they’ve hit criminal menopause. Once they hit 40, 50 years old, a lot of these guys, they’re never going to hurt another person as long as they live. I would let some of them sleep in my house. I would return them to their communities if I could. But I can’t. I’m not allowed to, even if the families of their victims no longer objected.”

warden, in a prison chapel, “Most of the murderers, they’ve hit criminal menopause,” he  
return them to their communities if I could.” (William Widmer)

Hundreds of men serving life sentences have been trained as “peer ministers” at a Southern Baptist-run seminary on the prison grounds, and these men —“morally rehabilitated men,” in Cain’s description—are of great use in the

cellblocks, cafeterias, and dormitories of Angola. “These are the guys who said I should stop using profanity,” he said, “and you know what? They were right. When I banned profanity in the prison, we became less oppressive.” He went on, “You know what’s crazy? I got more than 400 people in vocational programs here, with the peer ministers providing teaching and moral support. I got people training as auto mechanics, in horticulture. This is a bigger vocational school than what we have on the outside. Why do we as a society wait until a guy ends up here before we give him a decent vocational education?”

Prison ministers serve as role models for young prisoners, in particular those serving sentences shorter than life, and who grew up without the benefit of a father. “They’d be of more use to society out on the streets of New Orleans and Baton Rouge,” Cain said. “Can you imagine the impact some of these ministers would have with the young people? If these peer ministers were out in their communities, they could work with kids so we never have to see them here.” But as the law stands now, most of these men will die in prison. “Charles Manson in California gets a parole hearing,” Cain said. “In Louisiana, all you can get is a pardon hearing, and governors aren’t comfortable signing pardons.”

Cain led us to the main prison complex, to an area populated mainly by “trustees,” prisoners who have earned, often through decades of compliant behavior, the ability to move more freely through the yard. (Prisoners who have not chosen “moral rehabilitation” are housed in more traditionally punitive ways.) Cain’s manner was easy with the large trustee population. He walked through all areas of the prison without protection. Inmates beseeched him with requests; he made note of each one. “Boss man,” one prisoner called out, “I want to get back into the Bible college.”

“Why did you leave?,” Cain asked.

The prisoner whispered his answer in Cain’s ear.

“All right, let me see what’s happening,” Cain said.

In another part of the yard, Landrieu was shaking hands like it was a Mardi Gras parade. “What are y’all in for?,” Landrieu asked a group of convicts.

“Murder.”

“Murder.”

“Murder.”

“If I could just understand why these guys did what they did ... ,” Landrieu said to me, trailing off.

“Hey, Mayor,” a prisoner called out. He was about 6 foot 5 with a diamond-encrusted gold grill gleaming from his mouth and a cross tattooed in the space between his eyes. This turned out to be Corey Miller, better known outside Angola as C-Murder, the rapper whose brother is Master P, the hip-hop impresario. C-Murder is in Angola for murder. “I’m trying to get a new trial,” he told Landrieu.

We worked our way to the central yard’s Catholic chapel—the “nondenominational Catholic chapel,” said Cain, who is wary of Church-state separationists. Last year, at Landrieu’s request, Cain had assembled a panel of inmates, each of them a New Orleanian, to talk with Landrieu about their lives, crimes, and regrets. Now Cain had gathered the men again in this chapel, so that Landrieu could test his ideas about reducing New Orleans’s murder rate against their bitter experience.

The men who constitute Landrieu’s dialogue group were waiting inside. They smiled when the mayor entered, and he greeted each one personally. They were a diverse assortment of killers. James Camper executed a neighbor; Jackie Green murdered his ex-wife and a man with whom she was keeping company; Dennis

Hugle killed his business partner; Burtell Thomas killed a man he thought had threatened his girlfriend; Marion Taylor shot a friend to death in an argument; Ausbia Taylor shot a man in what was believed to be a drug-related altercation; Christopher Collins murdered a man in an attempted robbery; Alvin Williams shot a man he thought owed him money from a drug deal.

Over the next hour, Landrieu moderated a discussion about the causes and effects of violence; about personal responsibility and society's shortcomings; and about how, in certain neighborhoods, shooting is sometimes not a manifestation of wickedness or psychosis but a necessity for physical self-preservation. This is an argument Landrieu has found fascinating. He told me earlier, "In the context of the culture of certain neighborhoods, it's kill or be killed. That's the cycle that has to be broken."

"I got a sad story to start off with," Landrieu said to the assembled murderers. "I went to the juvenile-justice center once in the city, and there was this one kid who wouldn't meet me. We went into the gym. I said, 'Come on, how many times does the mayor come visit you?' So he talked about how many times he'd been arrested—16. 'And you're 16 years old,' I said. 'You understand the next time you hurt somebody, you're going to spend the rest of your life in Angola?' Well, he got out. A judge let him out. And he killed a pizza-delivery guy. You all are going to see him up here. I want somebody to mentor him. The reason I came here last time, I'm trying to understand why everybody is doing what they're doing, to get into the heads of the young people who are shooting and being shot."

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**“We see this so often,” Landrieu says.  
“Today’s shooter is tomorrow’s  
victim.”**

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The inmate seated next to me, Ausbia Taylor, said quietly, “He’ll change when he gets here.”

“So let’s pick up where we left off,” Landrieu said. “What don’t I understand? Tell me. What don’t I see?”

“The things we care about are different. At least I know that’s for me,” Burtell Thomas said. “If I had known then what I know now ...”

Landrieu asked: “What do you know now?”

“I know that you have to pick and choose. The most precious things can be lost or taken from you very easily. I know now that what you call being a man is not necessarily being a man.”

“What does that mean, to be a man?”

Dennis Huggle answered: “Being a man is doing the one thing you really don’t want to do.”

“What made you guys shoot people?,” Landrieu asked. “Are you afraid for your life? Did you feel disrespected? It used to be that you got into a fight, you hoped someone would break it up. But now it’s about shooting, and mostly about shooting them in the head.”

“It’s too hard to walk away,” said Alvin Williams. “You know what you’re up against. You don’t think about what you’re doing, you don’t think about this place, you just come to make a decision quickly. It’s just the circumstance that you find yourself in at the moment.”

“Why can’t you walk away?,” Landrieu asked. “Why can’t you just walk away?”



“You really can’t understand,” Thomas said.

“If you walk away, you’re going to walk away with holes,” Christopher Collins said.

“So you’re talking about self-defense.”

“If you tell me you’re going to kill me, I have to kill you first because I have to take you at your word,” Collins said. “I don’t want to die.”

“Shooting the guy in the legs is not going to do it, Mayor,” Thomas said. “Person that gets shot in the legs, he can still find a phone and call his partners.”

“You can’t get caught slipping, as we say,” James Camper, who killed his neighbor, said. “I’m sitting on my porch with my family and here comes my past coming back to haunt me. Here comes my past with a gun.”

“Shoot or be shot. When did this start? Was it that way when y’all grew up?”

“We see it happen,” Alvin Williams said. “That’s what you learn.”

“Was it always that way?”

“I’m 63 now,” Camper, the oldest of the prisoners, said. “It wasn’t like that in the ’70s. Right around the ’80s, it changed.”

“Do you guys know anybody who didn’t have a gun?”

“Everybody had a gun,” Thomas said. “It’s cheaper to buy a gun than to buy books.”

“There’s a big fight in the country,” Landrieu said to the prisoners, perhaps mindful of my questions to him about gun control. “Is it the guns? Should we seize all the guns from everybody? That’s what people say.”

“It’s not a gun problem,” Thomas said. “We’ve got a communication problem. If I can’t talk to you without feeling played, I’ve got to go for the gun.”

“What if you don’t have a gun?,” I asked.

“People will find some way to kill people they don’t like,” Thomas said.

The mayor moved on. “Answer this as truthfully as you can: Do you guys feel like you’re here because you’re bad? Or do you feel forsaken? Did someone else contribute to what you did?”

“I did everything with my own hand,” said Jackie Green, the man who killed his ex-wife and her alleged lover. “I left my own children behind. I did this to myself.”

“You think society cares about you?”

“Society is afraid of us,” Williams said.

“What could I have done if I were mayor when you guys did what you did? What could I have done to grab you guys before you got where you got?”

“Get kids out of the neighborhoods,” Burtell Thomas said. “You got to expose them to different things. Learn new things. Get them somewhere where they can find a role model.”

“Do you think the young guys coming up now are more dangerous?”

Unanimous agreement: “Yeah.”

“They’re colder,” said one inmate.

“But they can’t take ass whuppings anymore,” Camper said. “They can’t fight. It’s too easy to get guns, and nobody knows how to fight.”

“Hey, if I beat you severely in front of people, you’re going to come back and shoot me,” Landrieu said.

“Let’s be real,” Thomas said. “A lot of people who have missing moms, missing dads, they make it. I can’t blame the dysfunctional family. I read stories about dudes who made it.”

“It’s about critical decision making,” Alvin Williams added. “I think we need more critical-thinking classes. We should have them in the community centers. One decision you make is going to change your whole life. We all know that.”

“You’ve got to find them something they’re interested in,” Jackie Green said. “Certain things grab your interest. We all have negativity, but I started learning in prison. I got a new attitude. I started writing. I started arts and crafts. I started law. I’m going to read law for the rest of my life. I enjoy doing it.”

Landrieu, who is a lawyer, laughed. “That’s a lie,” he said.

“I get high on it.”

“You don’t get a headache from it?”

The prisoners began to talk about their various arts-and-crafts projects.

“It’s a prison, so it’s safe here, in a strange kind of way,” Thomas said.

**A**FTER AN HOUR, Landrieu and I walked outside onto a bright concrete walkway. A deputy warden approached. “Here’s the inmate you were asking for,” he told Landrieu. The mayor shook hands with Joseph Norfleet, the man who killed young James Darby in 1994.

Norfleet is stocky, with a thin beard, a full face, and mournful eyes. He was wearing jeans and a white T-shirt. He didn’t seem particularly surprised to see the mayor of New Orleans in Angola.

Joseph Norfleet reflects on his experience serving more than 20 years of a life sentence in Angola.

“I talk about you all the time when I’m giving speeches, you know that?,”  
Landrieu said.

“I appreciate that,” Norfleet said quietly.

They made small talk about the old neighborhood, and then Landrieu asked,  
“Can you recount what happened that day?”

“Well, I came home from work, had a little bit to drink, smoked a little weed. I was already feeling bad because the days weren’t going well. I was on lawn maintenance. Dealing with the hot sun. So my little sister and my brother come in, they told me they were up at A. L. Davis playground and they got into this fight with another family. There were two adults there that should have broken up the fight, but they got involved in it. One of the guys that was supposed to be an adult, he hit my sister.”

“You got mad?”

“I was raised up so as to not abuse women. I just couldn’t seem to let that go.”

“Someone was in the house with you?,” Landrieu asked.

“James is the guy that drove the car,” Norfleet answered, referring to James Walker, the son of his mother’s boyfriend, who was in the house.

“I had a temper on me, and [Walker’s] exact words were ‘Get the gun.’ I grabbed it and we jumped in the car. We took my brother Michael with us.”

“He was 14 at the time?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Why did you bring Michael?”

“Michael saw what had happened. I didn’t know the people I was supposed to shoot.”

“And then what?”

“I fired the gun. I was pointing it at the guy, that’s the only person I really saw. I didn’t know I hit James [Darby] until I heard it on the radio the next morning. That’s the first time I shot a gun.”

“You killed a 9-year-old,” Landrieu said.

“Truthfully, when I found out, man, personally, I knew it was messed up. I was making plans to turn myself in when I got caught.”

“How did you make the decision to get in that car with a shotgun?”

“I play that back in my mind.”

“I bet you play it back often.”

“I wish I could go back and do something different, because I know I wouldn’t be here and James wouldn’t be dead.”

“I just—” Landrieu sputtered. “Why did you get in the car?”

“Anger. Anger actually blinds you. That’s what I found out that day. I’ve lived with this every day.”

“You got Michael arrested. He spent some time in juvenile.”

“I pulled the trigger. This was my burden. I told Michael, ‘Do whatever you have to do, say whatever you have to say. Make a deal.’ He didn’t deserve to be in jail.”

ick and do something different, because I know I wouldn’t be here and James wouldn’t be  
eet, who shot and killed a 9-year-old boy in 1994, has spent the past two decades in  
re he is serving a life sentence. (William Widmer)

I asked Norfleet a question: “Could you have walked away from that situation

and survived?”

“Yes. I know that now. I didn’t know that back then. I was filled with anger over what they did to my sister. I did what I thought I had to do at the time. I wish I didn’t do it now.”

“What’s this place been like for you?,” Landrieu asked.

“First 10 years was rough,” Norfleet said. “Basically, I was trying not to be somebody’s bitch for 10 years. Facing guys wanting to murder me. Facing guys who thought my time should be hard. That’s penitentiary life. They know I killed a kid. They did everything they could to degrade you ... But I came here a man, I’ll die a man, that’s for sure. Over time, I wouldn’t say it got easier, but as people get to know you for who you are, you know ...”

Does your family visit?

“Not too often. I’m kind of just out here, you know?”

The mayor told Norfleet he hoped to talk with him again. “I can learn something from you,” he said. After Landrieu left, Norfleet took a photograph from his pocket and showed it to me. “I make tables in arts and crafts. This is one of my tables.”

A few weeks later, I went back to Angola, where I met a young New Orleanian man serving a life sentence for first-degree murder. He had been in a gang, and he had done all the things that gang members do. His body was a canvas of threatening tattoos, and he was dour and forbidding in affect. I asked him where in Angola he worked. On the farm, he said, but added, “A lot of the time I’m doing arts and crafts.” What do you make at arts and crafts?, I asked. His face lit up. “Wait here,” he said. He left for a moment, and came back with a large shopping bag filled with pink and magenta hair bows. “I make these. Girls’ hair bows,” he said.

“You make hair bows?”

Yes, he confirmed, and he added that he sells them at the arts-and-crafts festival that Burl Cain runs outside the prison rodeo each fall. “I made \$1,900 last rodeo,” he said. The young prisoner got to keep a large portion of the proceeds.

An obvious thought soon occurred to me: What if our society ensured that a creative and entrepreneurial young man could discover his talents, and be shepherded toward success, before he killed someone, rather than after? What if our society designed a gun-free haven for education, job training, and moral instruction that wasn't also a maximum-security prison costing taxpayers more than \$30,000 a year per inmate?

“What a waste,” Landrieu said to me after our visit with Norfleet. “Every time a person is killed on the streets, we lose two lives. I understand he killed a kid and he deserves to spend the rest of his life suffering the consequences. But think of what it could have been for him if he didn't pull the trigger. Think about what it could have been for us.”

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**JEFFREY GOLDBERG** is a national correspondent for *The Atlantic* and a recipient of the National Magazine Award for Reporting. He is the author of *Prisoners: A Story of Friendship and Terror*.

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