

Posted 11/23/20

## FIX THOSE NEIGHBORHOODS!

*Creating safe places calls for a comprehensive, organic approach*



*For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel.* While campaigning in Charlotte four years ago, candidate Trump promised that he would place the nation's impoverished communities on the path to prosperity with major investments in infrastructure, job development and education. He would also fight the disorder that bedevils poor areas and [assure that justice was dispensed equally to all](#). While some Black voices were skeptical about the sincerity of Trump's "New Deal for Black America," others applauded his apparent enthusiasm for reform. Even after eight years of Democratic rule, poverty and crime still beset the inner cities. So give him a chance!

And for a single term, America did. According to the [Fed's most recent \(2019\) survey](#), the economy performed well, with the gross domestic product going up unemployment going down. And until the ravages of the pandemic and urban disorder, violence was also on the way down. According to [FBI figures](#), the violent crime rate dropped one percent during 2018-2019 and property crime fell four and one-half percent.

Yet not everyone benefited. As the Fed noted, income distribution has hardly budged in the last three decades, with the top one-third enjoying about a third of the nation's wealth while the bottom half seems consigned to a measly two percent. [Federal crime statistics](#) demonstrate marked disparities as to place. Detroit closed out 2015 with 295 murders; New York City had 319. Once their populations are taken into account, the Motor City's homicide rate – 43.8 per 100,000 pop. – was *more than ten times* the Big Apple's measly 4.1. Four years later the results proved much the same, with Detroit's 492 murders yielding a 41.4 rate while New York City's 319 homicides delivered a far gentler 3.8, even better than the nation's 5.0.

Considering New York City's seemingly benign crime numbers it seems to make perfect sense that Mayor Bill de Blasio calls it the "[safest big city in America](#)." Only

# POLICEISSUES.ORG

problem is, “New York City” is a place name. People live, work and play in *neighborhoods*. And during a career fighting crime, and another trying to figure out where it comes from, your blogger discovered that focusing on tangible places can prove illuminating in ways that yakking about wholes obscures.

Politicians know that. Mayor de Blasio counts on a profusion of prosperous neighborhoods to produce low citywide crime numbers. Consider the Upper East Side. With a population of 220,000 and a poverty rate of only 7.2 percent (versus the city’s twenty), [its police precinct, the 19th.](#), posted zero murders in 2017, one in 2018, and zero again in 2019. And while 2020 has supposedly brought everyone major grief crime-wise, as of November 15 [the 19th. has recorded just one killing](#).

Contrast that with the Big Apple’s downtrodden Brownsville district. Burdened with a 29.4 percent poverty rate, its 86,000 residents have historically endured an abysmal level of violence. Brownsville’s police precinct, the 73rd., logged nine murders in 2017, thirteen in 2018 and eleven in 2019. That produced a murder rate (per 100,000 pop.) *more than three times* New York City’s overall rate and about *thirteen times* that of the Upper East Side. Then consider what happened this year. As of November 15 [the poverty-stricken 73rd.](#) logged an astounding 25 murders, *more than twice* its merely deplorable 2019 figure.

Murders - NYPD precincts								
Pct.	Pop.	Pov. %	2018	Rate	2019	Rate	2020	Rate
19th.	220,000	7.2	1	0.5	0	0	1	0.5
73rd.	86,000	29.4	13	15.1	11	12.8	25	29.1

Upper East Siders managed to shake off the pandemic and George Floyd. Clearly not the Brownsvillians. Note to Hizzoner: they’re both your denizens.

Switch shores. Los Angeles Police Department’s West Los Angeles station serves an affluent area of 228,000 inhabitants. [Its primary ZIP, 90025](#), boasts a poverty rate of 11.25 percent. West L.A. Division reported two murders between January 1 and November 14, 2018, one between those dates in 2019, and four this year. In comparison, the 77th. Street station tends to a score of impoverished neighborhoods. [Its primary Zip code, 90003](#), suffers from a poverty rate of 30.7 percent. Although the 77th. serves a substantially smaller population of about 175,000, it endured far, far more murders (39,

## POLICEISSUES.ORG

35 and 48) than West L.A. Division during the same periods. And while murder did increase in both areas between 2019 and 2020, check out the leap in the 77th.

Murders - LAPD stations								
Area	Pop.	Pov. %	2018	Rate	2019	Rate	2020	Rate
West L.A.	228,000	11.3	2	0.9	1	0.4	4	1.8
77th. St.	175,000	30.7	39	22.3	35	20	48	27.4

Indeed, things in the poor parts of L.A. have deteriorated so markedly this year that four killings last night in South Los Angeles [caused the city to reach that 300-murder milestone](#) it successfully avoided for a decade. Shades of Brownsville!

So, crime-wise, is there really a “New York City”? An “L.A.”? During the last decade posts in our [“Neighborhoods”](#) special section reported similar disparities within cities across the U.S. For example, consider Minneapolis, that usually tranquil place where the death at the hands of police of [Mr. George Floyd](#) set off national waves of protest that have yet to subside. Coding its eighty-five neighborhoods for violent crimes per 100,000 pop., [we recently compared](#) the four least violent (mean rate 0.7) with the four most brutish (mean rate 35.6). That exposed a huge disparity in mean family income: \$106,347 for the calm areas, \$45,678 in the not-so-peaceful.

So is there only one Minneapolis? No more so than one Portland! Our national capital of dissent has at least 87 neighborhoods. [Comparing the ten neighborhoods](#) with the lowest violence rates (mean=1.5) against the ten with the highest (mean=9.0) revealed that only nine percent of the former were in poverty versus 21.4 percent of the latter. Ditto Baltimore, South Bend, Chicago and elsewhere. (Click [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).)

It’s hardly a secret that poverty and violence are locked in an embrace. Years ago your blogger and his ATF colleagues discreetly trailed along as traffickers hauled freshly-bought handguns into distressed neighborhoods for resale to local peddlers. Alas, a gun from one of the loads we missed was used to murder a police officer. That tragedy, which haunts me to this day, furnished the inspiration for [“Sources of Crime Guns in Los Angeles, California,”](#) a journal article I wrote while transitioning into academia.

When yours truly arrived on campus he found that the criminal justice educational community was not much interested in neighborhoods. That lack of attention has apparently continued. But ignoring place can easily lead us astray. [A recent study](#) of Chicago’s move to facilitate pre-trial release approvingly notes that defendants let go

## POLICEISSUES.ORG

after the relaxation were no more apt to reoffend (17 percent) than those released under the older guidelines. To be sure, more crimes *did* happen. ([A news account](#) estimated 200-300 more per year.) But as the authors emphasized, a six-month increase in releases from 8,700 under the old guidelines to 9,200 under the new (5.7 percent) didn't significantly affect crime citywide. Given Chicagoland's formidable crime problem, that's hardly surprising. But set the whole aside. What about the poverty-stricken Chicago neighborhoods where most releasees inevitably wind up? Did *their* residents notice a change? Was it for the better or worse?

Yet no matter how well it's done, policing is clearly not the ultimate solution. Preventing violence is a task for society. As we've repeatedly pitched, a concerted effort to provide poverty-stricken individuals and families with child care, tutoring, educational opportunities, language skills, job training, summer jobs, apprenticeships, health services and – yes – adequate housing could yield vast benefits.

That notion, which the [Urban Institute](#) and others have long championed, is nothing new. And while there are some promising nonprofit initiatives – say, [Habitat for Humanity's neighborhood revitalization program](#) – most efforts at urban renewal focus on rehabilitating physical space and helping industries and businesses grow. In today's [Washington Post](#), mayors representing cities in Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia and Kentucky peddled a “Marshall Plan” for Middle America that would create jobs through major investments in renewable power. While that could ostensibly yield great benefits, it hardly addresses the needs of the scores of unskilled, under-educated, poorly-served denizens of our inner cities. That, however, is the goal of [Jobs-Plus](#), a long-standing HUD program that offers employment and educational services to the residents of public housing in designated areas. Its budget? A measly \$15 million. Nationwide.

Meanwhile impoverished communities continue to reel from crime and disorder. So here's a hint for Mr. Biden, who absent a coup, will assume the throne in January. Your predecessor talked up a good idea. Alas, it was just that: “talk.” America urgently needs to invest in its impoverished neighborhoods. A comprehensive “Marshall Plan” that would raise the educational and skill levels and improve the job prospects, lives and health of the inhabitants of these chronically distressed places seems the logical place to start.