

Posted 6/20/24

## IS CRIME *REALLY* DOWN? IT DEPENDS...

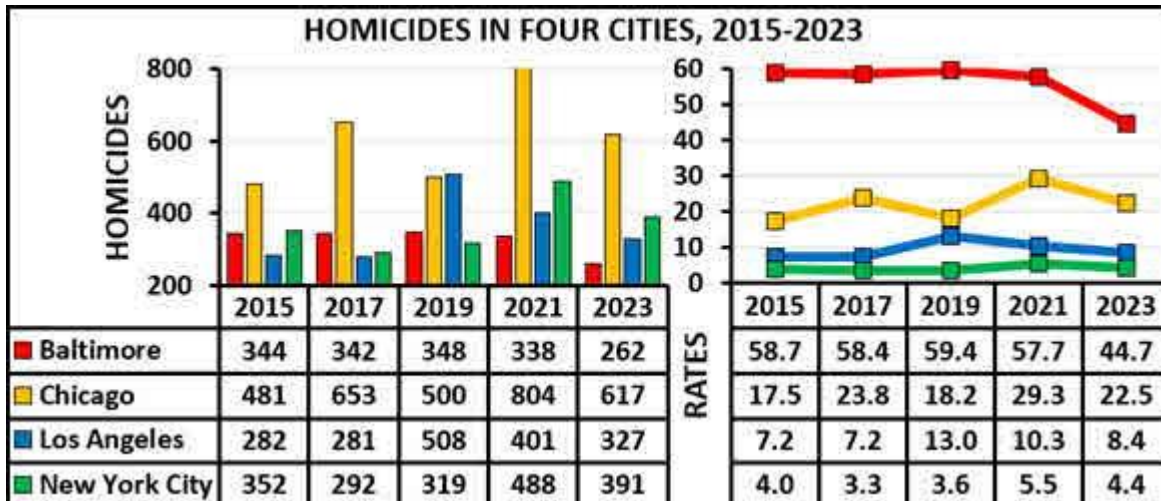
*Even when citywide numbers improve, place really, really matters*



For *Police Issues* by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Finally, some good news. And from our Chief's inner circle, no less! According to the deputy head of the spanking-new [White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention](#), Baltimore's drop in killings is "[the greatest success story](#)" in the land. Indeed, its 2023 murder count of 262 is the "Charm City's" lowest toll since 1970. Baltimore's most recent quarterly numbers are also supposedly very promising. (For more trumpeting about the city's comeback check out "[With Baltimore homicides dropping below 300, who gets to take credit?](#)").

We've often mentioned Baltimore's struggle with crime and violence (see, for example, "[Police Slowdowns, Part I.](#)") So the reported improvement was of great interest. Alas, the apparent turnaround came on the heels of some very bad news about our home burg. [During his recent interview](#) by the *Los Angeles Times*, LAPD interim Chief Dominic Choi observed that while his city's violent crime numbers are about the same as last year, murders did increase about eleven percent when compared to the first half of 2023.

Chief Choi's comments definitely got our attention. After all, if that spurt in killings continues, it could thrash L.A.'s reputation. But before bringing out the tinsel (for Baltimore) and the hankies (for L.A.) let's see how they compare with other major burg's. Say, Chicago and New York City. Cranking up our calculator (well, an Excel spreadsheet) we assembled 2015-2023 homicide counts for Baltimore, L.A., New York City and Chicago. Data came from the [UCR](#), the [Baltimore Sun](#), [Chicago P.D.](#), the [L.A. Almanac](#), and the [City of New York](#). And since the cities differ in size, rates were computed using population figures from the [Census](#). Here's the product:



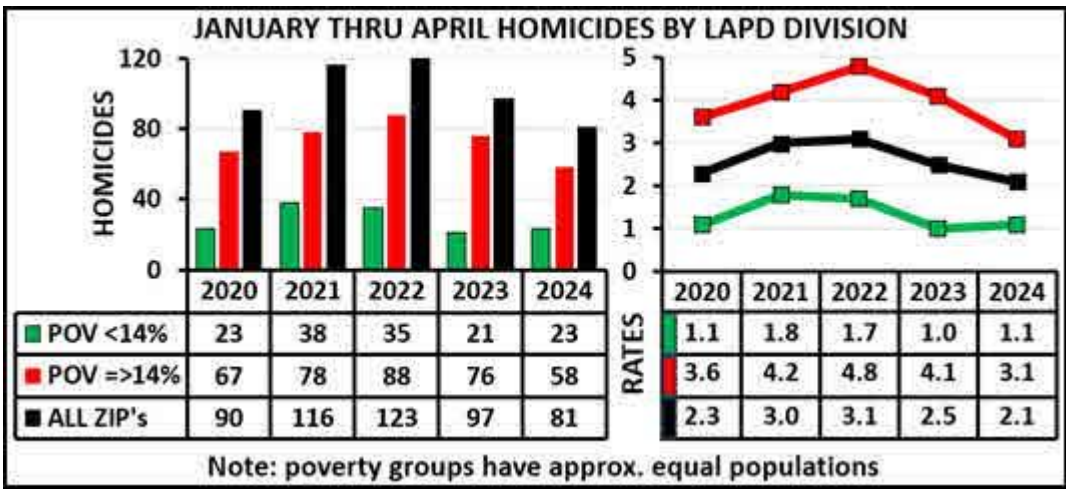
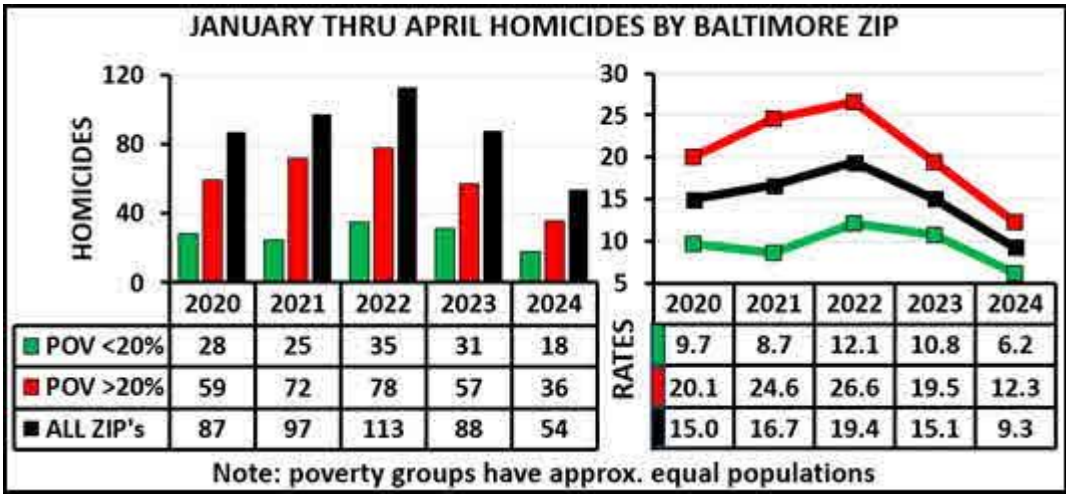
Each city *has* demonstrated substantial progress. Baltimore’s homicide numbers, for example, declined by 22.5 percent between 2021-2023. But disparities in population size can deceive. Switch to the graph on the right. Improvements notwithstanding, Baltimore wound up with a sky-high rate of 44.7 homicides per 100,000 residents. That’s twice that of bad-old Chicago. It’s also *more than five times* L.A.’s rate and *ten times* the Big Apple’s.

Yikes.

So is crime *really* on the mend? And if so, for *whom*? After a decade-and-a-half of poring through crime data, we’re convinced that (as our subtitle insists) place really, *really* matters. That, indeed, was the title of our 2020 post, “[Place Matters](#)”. To take in-depth looks within Baltimore and Los Angeles we compiled homicide counts for each city during the first four months of 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024. Each city’s population was split into high-poverty (red) and a low-poverty (green) groups of approximately equal size, and four-month (i.e., partial year) homicide rates were computed for each.

- Baltimore crime data came from its [city website](#). We coded each homicide location’s ZIP code and obtained its poverty rate from the [Census](#). To correct for ZIP’s that cross city boundaries, their percentage of Baltimore’s population was obtained from [US Zip Codes](#). Baltimore residents were assigned to two groups of approximately equal size: those living within ZIP’s with poverty rates between 5.4% and 19.1%, and those residing in ZIP’s with poverty rates between 21.5% and 40.8%.
- Los Angeles crime data was also pulled from the [city website](#). Homicide locations were coded for a police Division, and rates were computed rates using LAPD

Division population and poverty figures from our 2023 post, “[Does Race Drive Policing?](#)”. As in Baltimore, L.A. residents were split into two groups of about the same size: residents of LAPD Divisions with poverty rates between 7.2% and 13.6%, and residents of Divisions with poverty rates between 14% and 36.3%. Here are the products:



What’s the uptake? Despite a small, recent increase in homicide rates in L.A.’s lower-poverty zone, January thru April murder rates have improved for both cities since 2022. Still, poverty matters. *A lot*. Residents of Baltimore’s higher-poverty ZIP’s have consistently suffered from homicide rates that are at least *twice* as high as those endured by their more fortunate peers. Meanwhile, in comparatively tony Los Angeles, the proportionate disadvantage between affluent and not-so-affluent Divisions is about *three-fold*.

And as far as comparing Baltimore and Los Angeles...fuhgeddaboutit!

Residents of economically-deprived areas are well aware of their vulnerability. Say, the residents of Baltimore’s “Brooklyn Homes” neighborhood, where [more than one in four](#) live in poverty. That’s where on July 2, 2023 as many as ten shooters [opened fire during a yearly celebration](#), killing two and wounding twenty-eight. [According to the AP](#), the carnage – reportedly Baltimore’s worst-ever mass shooting – took place during the same week that the Feds bragged about reducing violence in the beset city. Their “success” was clearly lost on the war-weary sixty-six year old who bandaged the leg of a wounded teen. “They don’t even know what life is, they don’t,” she lamented. “All they know is guns.”

Her son and grandson were killed in prior shootings.



Violence and hooliganism don’t just plague Baltimore. “The safety numbers that are reflected citywide don’t necessarily reflect our reality.” Last year, after a shooting that

wounded nine and killed two, that’s how the executive director of L.A.’s Urban Peace Institute [described the gap](#) between the city’s favorable overall numbers and life in violence-beset Watts. Burdened with a poverty rate of 21.9%, residents of LAPD’s 77th Street area endure [one of the five highest homicide rates](#) out of 21 LAPD Divisions. Switch to another member of the murderous “bottom five”, the adjoining Southeast area (poverty 23.7%). Click on the image to check out what happened [at a local auto parts store this June](#).

Of course, it’s not just poor areas. [As we recently reported](#), violent crime has a way of intruding into assumedly “safe” places. Say, the upscale L.A. suburb of Tustin ([poverty, 10.1%](#)) where an off-duty member of the President’s Secret Service detail [was accosted by an armed robber](#). (He’s still on the lam). Or, say, L.A.’s affluent Venice neighborhood ([poverty 9.8%](#)), which features miles of canals lined with “multimillion dollar homes.” That’s where [a brutal attack](#) on two middle-aged residents by a homeless man left the “shaken community” struggling with how to respond to the unhoused in their midst.

Crime and violence have a way of intruding just about anywhere. But the profound advantages that prosperous areas enjoy – not only in Baltimore and L.A., but *everywhere* – offers an obvious path for improvement. Here’s a closing shot from the closing shot in [“Fix Those Neighborhoods!”](#) (November, 2020):

...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.

If you come up with a better solution, be sure to let us know!