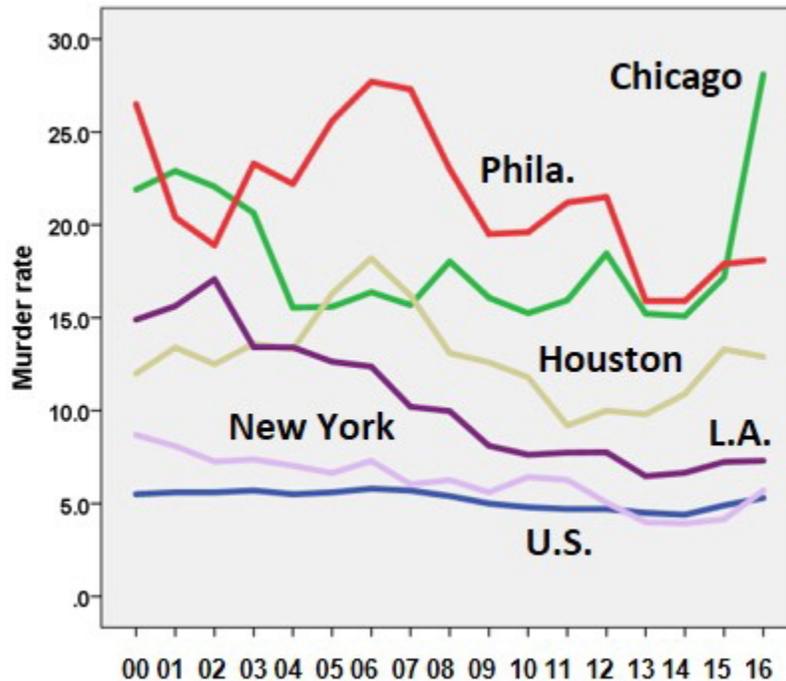


Posted 1/15/18

## BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU BRAG ABOUT (PART I)

*Is the Big Apple's extended crime drop all it seems to be?*



By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Remember the “Great Crime Drop” of the nineties? [Observers trace its origin](#) to the end of a decade-long crack epidemic that burdened America’s poverty-stricken inner cities with unprecedented levels of violence. Once the crack wars subsided the gunplay and body count eased. But the news didn’t remain positive everywhere. In “[Location, Location, Location](#)” we identified a number of less-prosperous burghs (e.g., Chicago, St. Louis, Baltimore, Detroit, Newark, Cleveland and Oakland) that have experienced recent increases in violence. [Murder in Chicago](#), for example, soared from 422 to 771 between 2013-2016 (it backed off a bit last year, but only to 650.)

In some lucky places, though, the crime drop continued. Few have crowed about it as much as [New York City](#), which happily reports that its streets keep getting safer even as [lawsuits and Federal intervention](#) have forced cops to curtail the use of aggressive crime-fighting strategies such as stop-and-frisk.

Indeed, [New York City’s numbers](#) look very good. As the above graph shows, its 2016 murder rate of 5.7 per 100,000 pop. was the lowest of America’s five largest cities and

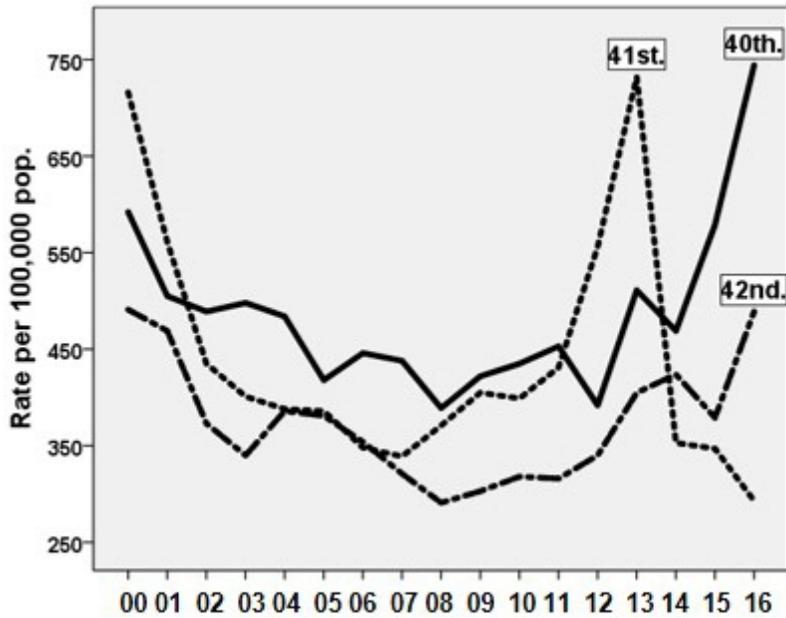
just a tick above the U.S. composite rate of 5.3. (Los Angeles was in second place at 7.3. Then came Houston, at 12.9 and Philadelphia, at 18.1. Chicago, with a deplorable 765 murders, brought up the end at 28.1.) Even better, it's not only killings that are down in the Big Apple: *every* major crime category has been on a downtrend, reaching **levels substantially lower** – some far lower – than at the turn of the century:

MAJOR CRIME IN NEW YORK CITY	2000	rate/100K	2016	rate/100K	% Chg
MURDER & NON-NEGL. MANSLAUGH.	673	8.4	335	3.9	-53
RAPE	2068	25.8	1438	16.8	-35
ROBBERY	32562	406.6	15500	181.5	-55
FELONY ASSAULT	25924	323.7	20847	244.2	-25
BURGLARY	38352	478.9	12990	152.1	-68
GRAND LARCENY	49631	619.7	44279	518.6	-16
GRAND LARCENY MOTOR VEH.	35442	442.6	6327	74.1	-83
TOTAL SEVEN	184652	2305.8	101716	1191.4	-48

Year 2016 precinct crime rates were computed using population estimates on the NYPD precinct map. Year 2000 crime rates were computed by adjusting for estimated population changes in each Borough. For population data sources click [here](#) and [here](#).

What's responsible for the persistent progress? New York City's freshly-reelected Mayor and his police commissioner [credit innovative law enforcement strategies and improved community relations](#). But in a recent interview, Franklin Zimring, [whose 2011 book](#) "The City That Became Safe" praised NYPD for reducing crime, called the reasons for its continued decline "utterly mysterious."

Causes aside, when it comes to measuring crime, complications abound. Even "winners" may not be all that they seem. As we discussed in "[Cooking the Books](#)" and "[Liars Figure](#)," lots of agencies – yes, including NYPD – managed to look good, or better than they should, by creating crime drops with tricks such as downgrading aggravated assaults (which appear in yearly FBI statistics) to simple assaults (which don't). That problem has apparently not gone away.



This graph uses the [NYPD's own data](#) to display 2000-2016 felony assault trends in three highly crime-impacted precincts, the 40th., 41st. and 42nd., all in the Bronx. Just look at that pronounced "U" curve. Soon after cops outed NYPD for fudging stat's ([that happened in 2010](#)) each precinct's trends reversed. But the 41st.'s return to presumably more accurate reporting was only brief. Between 2013 and 2014 felony assaults in "[Fort Apache](#)" plunged from 732 to 353, an inexplicable one-year drop of fifty-two percent. And the good news kept coming, with 347 felony assaults in 2015, 293 in 2016 and a measly [265 in 2017](#).

There is plenty of reason to be wary of NYPD's numbers. Still, assuming that the 41st.'s recent shenanigans are unusual – we couldn't find another example nearly as extreme – the city's post-2000 gains against crime seem compelling. But assuming that they're (mostly) true, how have they been distributed? Has every citizen of the Big Apple been a winner? Let the quest begin!

NYPD has seventy-six precincts. Our main data source was [NYPD's 2000-2016 online crime report](#). (We excluded precincts #14, Times Square and #22, Central Park, for methodological reasons, and #41 because its recent numbers seem untrustworthy.) We also coded each precinct for its official poverty rate by overlaying the [city's 2011-2015 poverty map](#) on [NYPD's precinct map](#). (For how NYC measures poverty click [here](#).)

We'll start with the total major crime category, which combines the seven major offenses. Its 2016 rate per 100,000 pop. ranged from 3.1 (123rd. pct.) to 45.6 (18th. pct., Broadway/show district.) Comparing the means for total major crime of the ten lowest-rate districts (6.25) with the means of the ten highest-rate districts (24.13) yields a

statistically significant difference ( $t=-7.36$ , sig .000). So these groups' total major crime levels *are* different. But their proportion of residents living in poverty is not substantially dissimilar. Actually, the raw results were opposite to what one might expect: the mean poverty rate was *higher* in the low major crime than the high major crime precincts (19.3 & 15.9, difference statistically non-significant.)

Similar results were obtained when comparing the 2000-2016 change in the major crime rate of the ten most improved precincts (mean reduction, 62.05%) with the ten least improved precincts (mean reduction, 14.69%). While the magnitude of these groups' crime decline *was* significantly different ( $t=14.37$ , sig .000), the difference between the proportion of their residents who lived in poverty was slight and statistically non-significant (poverty mean for most improved, 19.28 pct.; for least improved, 21.31 pct.)

We then (by this point, somewhat unsteadily) ran the numbers the other way, comparing total major crime and its improvement over time between the ten high and ten low poverty precincts. Our central finding didn't change: poverty wasn't a significant factor. With all seventy-three precincts in the mix we also tested for relationships between total major crime rate and poverty, and between 2000-2016 changes in the major crime rate and poverty, using the  $r$  coefficient. Again, neither total major crime nor its change over time seemed significantly related to poverty.

So poverty doesn't matter? New Yorkers are equally likely to benefit from the crime drop – or not – regardless of their place on the pecking order? As it turns out, not exactly. But that's enough for now. We'll deliver “the rest of the story” in Part II!