IS CRIME UP OR DOWN? ESSAYS

By

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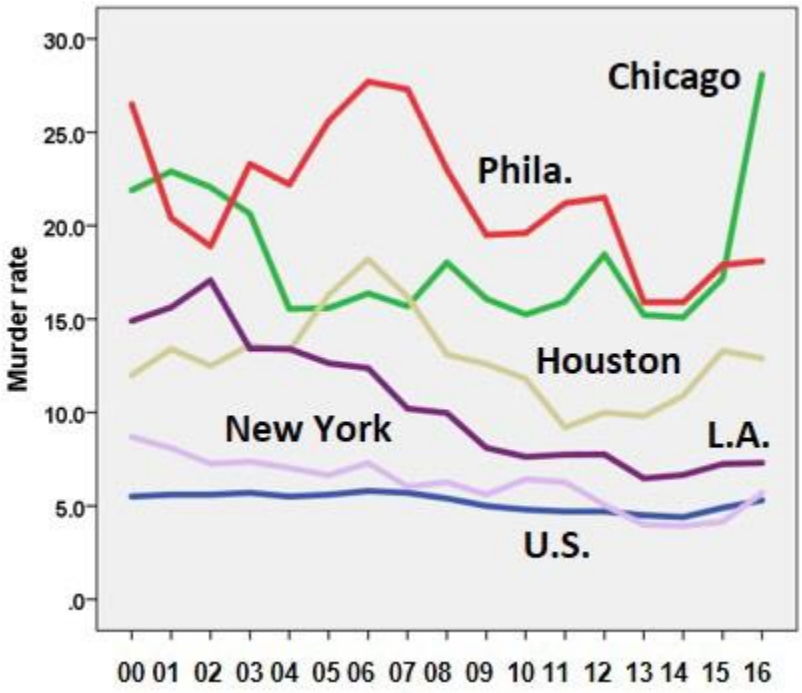
BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU BRAG ABOUT (PART I)

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 burgs (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

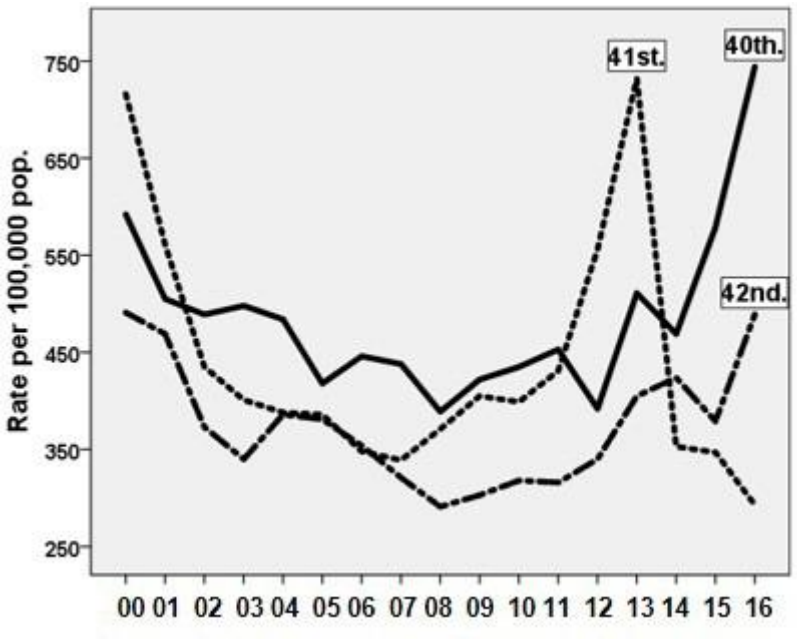
just a tick above the U.S. composite rate of 5.3. (Los Angeles was in second place at 7.3. Then came Houston, at 12.9 and Philadelphia, at 18.1. Chicago, with a deplorable 765 murders, brought up the end at 28.1.) Even better, it's not only killings that are down in the Big Apple: *every* major crime 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!

Posted 1/25/18

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU BRAG ABOUT (PART II)

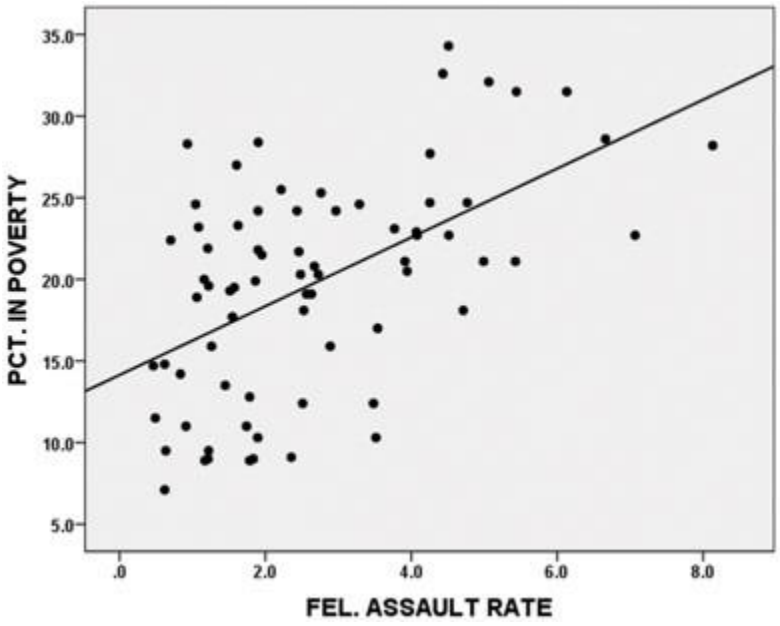
Citywide crime statistics are ripe for misuse

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Part I ended on a perhaps surprising note. Poverty and crime may be deeply interconnected, but our analysis of New York City crime data revealed that neither the city's 2016 total major crime rate nor its change since 2000 were significantly related to the proportion of residents living in poverty.

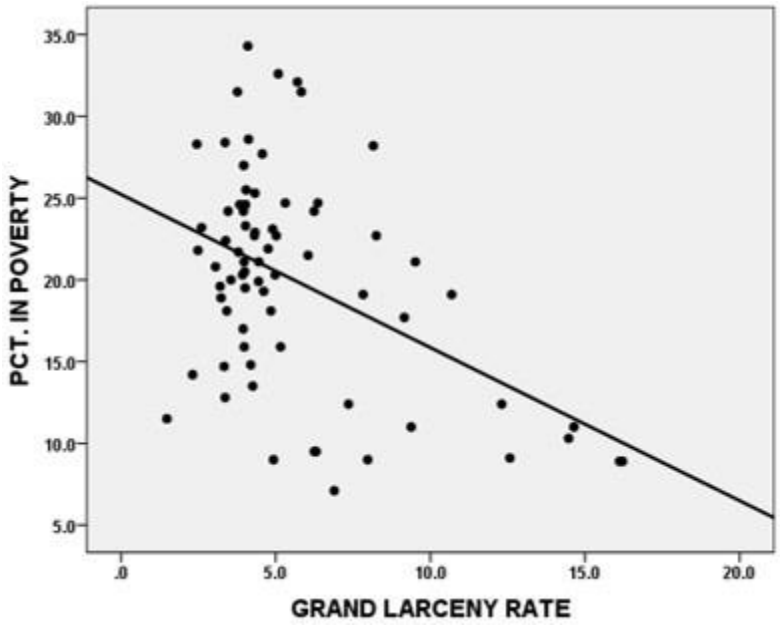
NYPD tracks seven categories of major crime: murder, rape, robbery, felony assault, grand larceny, and grand larceny of motor vehicle. Their sum yields an eight measure, "total major crime." (See table in Part I, below. NYPD reports yearly frequencies and percentage changes. Instead of raw numbers we used population data to generate rates per 100,000 residents.)

When total major crime didn't yield the anticipated results we turned to one of its components, felony assault. Its 2016 rate per 100,000 pop. ranged from 0.5 (112th. and 123rd. precincts) to 8.1 (40th. pct.) (Precincts 14, 22 and 41 were excluded from analysis. See Part I). As expected, the mean rates of the ten lowest-felony assault rate districts (0.7) and the ten highest-rate districts (5.8) were significantly different ($t=-4.9$, $p < .001$). They also differed markedly as to poverty. That difference was in the expected direction: persons living in poverty comprise 15.8 percent of the population in low felony assault districts and 26 percent in the high rate districts ($t=-3.7$, $p < .002$, statistically significant).

Correlation analysis was used to test the aggregate relationship between felony assault and poverty for all 73 precincts in this study. That revealed a statistically significant relationship in the "positive" direction, meaning that poverty and felony assault increased and decreased in unison ($r=.54$, $p < .000$). Here's the graph (each precinct is a dot):

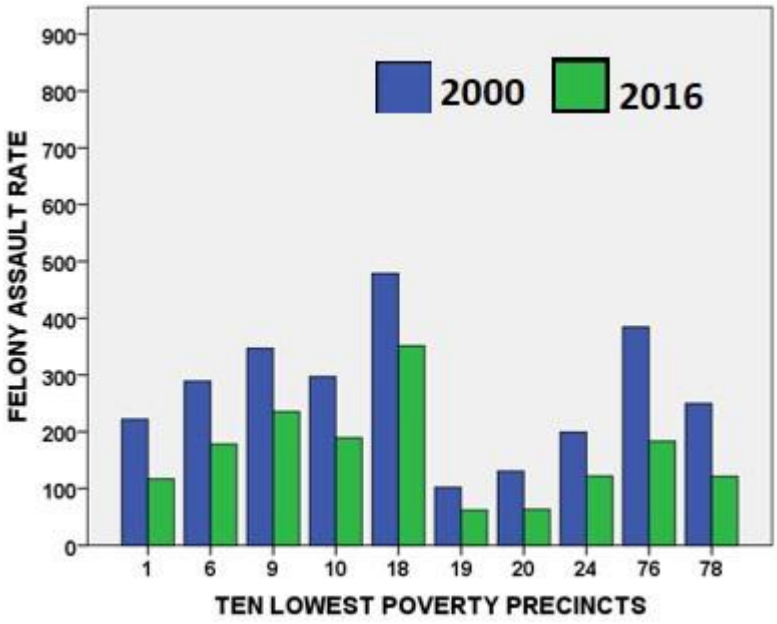


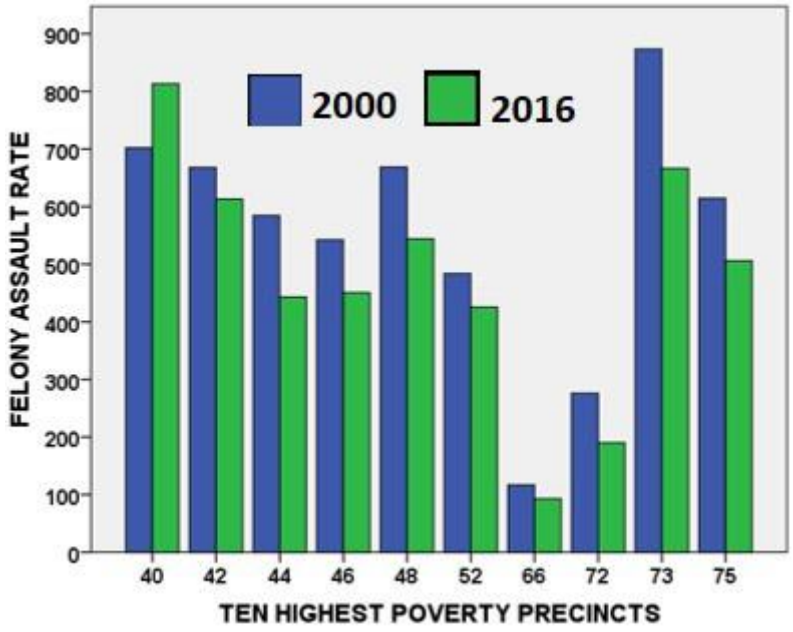
Statistically significant findings were also produced when we tested the relationships between poverty and the remaining violent crimes: robbery (r=.53, p <.000), rape (r=.46, p <.000) and murder (r=.48, p <.000). Poverty and all forms of violent crime went up and down together. There was also a significant positive relationship, of slightly lesser magnitude, between poverty and grand larceny of a motor vehicle (r=.31, p <.007; see comment below). In contrast, ordinary grand larceny (not of a vehicle) had a "negative" relationship with poverty: as one increased, the other decreased (r=-.43, p <.000, statistically significant). Here's that graph:



We concluded that this was the reason why there was no observable relationship between total major crime and poverty. In New York, larceny of the "grand" kind requires a loss exceeding $1,000. These are presumably more common in affluent areas. As by far the most common form of serious crime, grand larceny's strong negative relationship with poverty apparently countered the influence of the other factors. (Incidentally, the positive relationship between grand theft of a motor vehicle and poverty is likely caused by the fact that in New York, the theft of any vehicle valued at $100 or more – that's *two* zeroes – is "grand.")

Clearly, aggregate measures such as total major crime should be used with great caution. Fine. So, just how *were* the benefits of New York City's crime drop distributed? Let's compare crime rates for the ten poorest and ten most well-off precincts at two points in time: 2000 and 2016. (Precincts #14 and #22 were excluded for methodological reasons, and #41 for trustworthiness. See Part I.) We'll begin with felony assault:

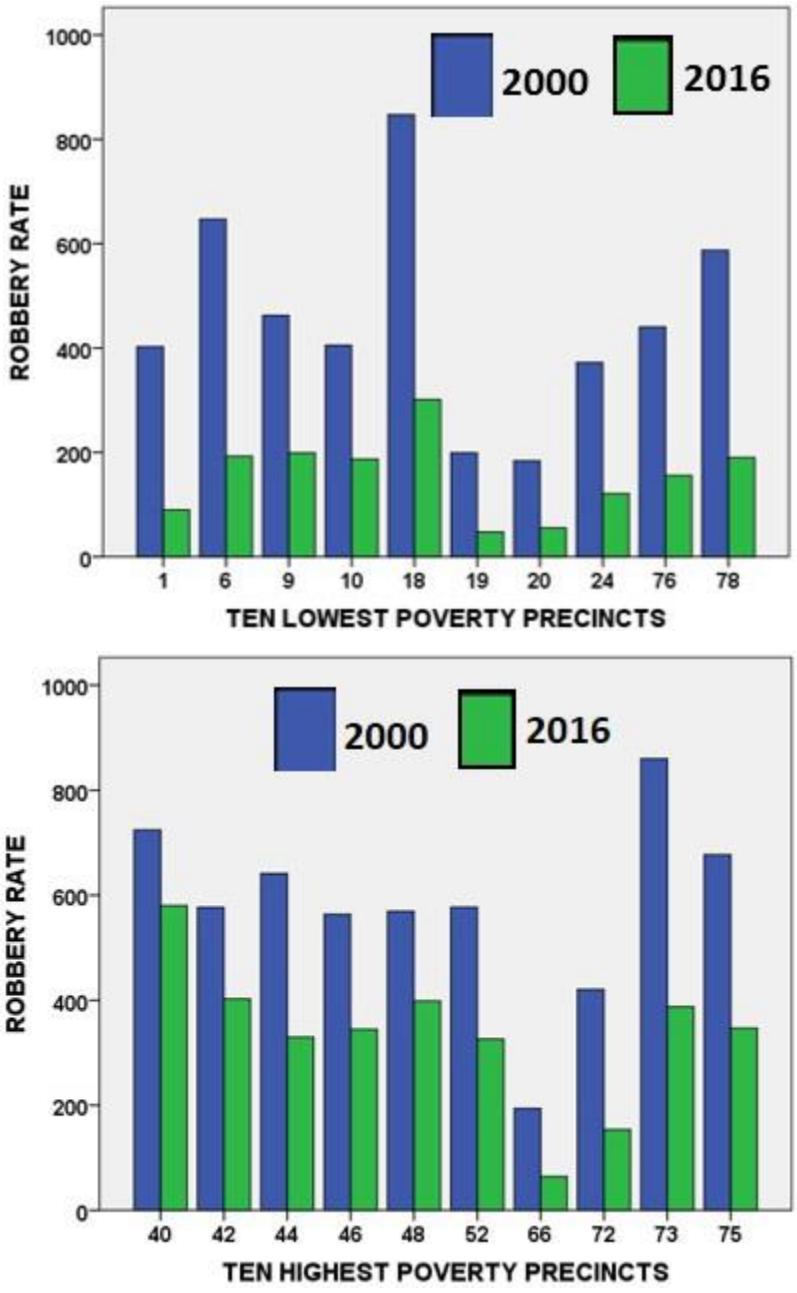




These graphs dramatically depict income's differential effects. In 2016 the mean felony assault rate in the high-poverty precincts was nearly *three times* that of their well-off counterparts (474.5 v. 162.4, t=4.3, p <.001, a statistically significant difference.) Noe that in both sets of precincts, scores clustered in observable groups. Felony assault rates in all but one of the low-poverty precincts topped out at 235.5. Add nearly *two-hundred* points to that and you'll reach the *lowest* score (425.7) in a group of eight high-poverty precincts.

Poverty-stricken precincts had more lousy news. Excluding the besieged 40th., where the felony assault rate *increased* 15.8 percent between 2000-2016, its group's mean decrease of 19.2 percent was *less than half* the 41.4 percent decrease enjoyed by the low-poverty group. That old saw about "the rich getting richer" seems to apply to felony assaults in the Big Apple.

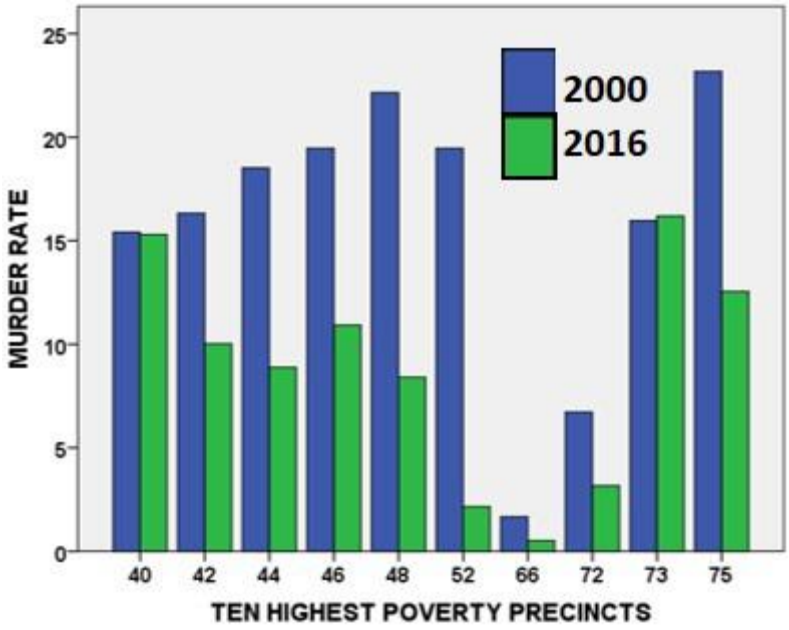
Let's look at the graphs for robbery:



In 2016 the mean robbery rate of the high-poverty precincts was slightly more than *twice* that of their low-poverty counterparts (333.4 v. 154.1, t=3.5, p <.003, difference statistically significant.) Except for the 18th. (rate=301.5) low-poverty precincts clustered at the lower end of the scale, topping out with the 9th.'s 198.8. One-hundred points later we encounter the trailing edge of a loose group of eight high-poverty precincts, with rates ranging from the 52nd.'s 325.9 to the 40th.'s skyscraper-worthy 580.3.

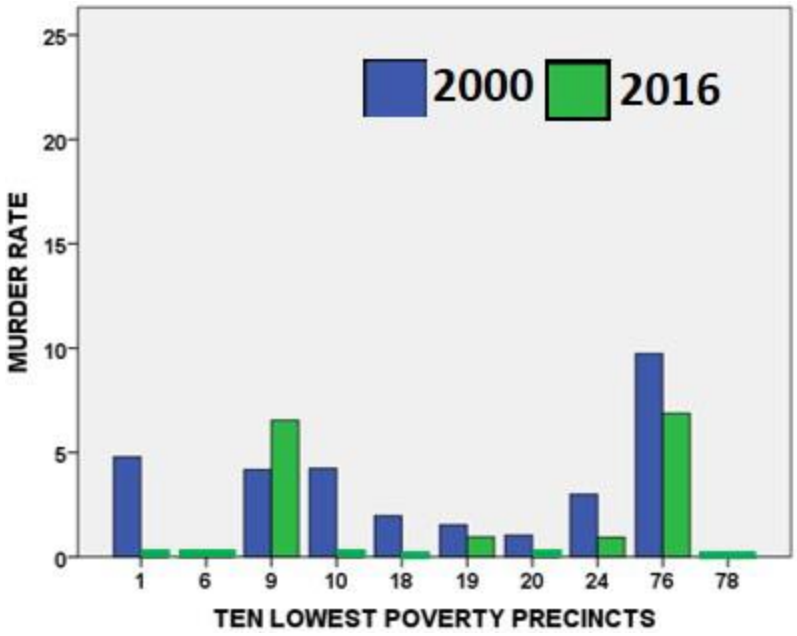
Between 2000-2016 robbery rates declined 66.9 percent overall in low-poverty precincts and 44.5 percent in the high-poverty group. While both trends seem substantial, so was their difference (t=-4.2, p <.001, statistically significant). Rates were also distinctly dispersed: narrowly within low poverty (range 53.8 to 77.6 percent) and broadly within high poverty (19.9 to 66.8 percent.) Why this difference between differences we don't know, but such volatility inevitably reminds us of tendencies at NYPD and elsewhere to fudge the numbers (see Part I).

And then we arrive at murder. This time we'll begin with the high-poverty precincts:



Let's skip rates and talk actual counts. In 2016 the range for the high-poverty group was from one murder in the 66th. to twenty-three in the 75th. These two precincts also had the extreme scores in 2000, when there were three killings in the 66th. and *forty* in the 75th. By 2016 murder receded in all high-poverty precincts but two, the 40th. and 73rd. In both killings ticked up a bit, going from thirteen to fourteen. Murders otherwise fell, most markedly in the 44th. (25-13), the 46th. (23-14), and especially, the 52nd., which plunged from twenty-five in 2000 to only three in 2016. (However, this precinct had twelve murders each in 2013 and 2015, so its numbers are volatile.)

We won't sweat the details: for lots (but not all) poor New Yorkers, the murder news seems at least somewhat favorable. Now consider the horrors the wealthier set faced:



Six of the ten low-poverty precincts had zero murders (thus, zero rates) in 2016. Scores for the other four ranged from one killing in the 24th. to five in the 9th. Only two precincts, the 6th. and 78th., scored zero murders in 2000. Others ranged from one killing in the 18th. to four in the 76th. (note that a relatively low population of 43,643 lends its rate an inflated appearance.) Murders during the 2000-2016 period increased in only one low poverty precinct, the 9th., which went from three to four.

Glancing at the charts, does it seem that the rich get to ride up front, crime-wise, while the poor are consigned to the caboose? If so, that's hardly unique to Gotham. Consider Los Angeles. In "Location, Location, Location" we mused about our hometown. Between 2002-2015 murders fell from 656 (rate=17.3 per 100,000) to 279 (rate=7.3), a stunning drop of *fifty-seven percent*. Now consider two of the dozens of communities that comprise the "City of Angels": poverty-stricken Florence, pop. 49001, and upscale Westwood, pop. 51485. During 2002-2015 murder in Florence dropped from an appalling *twenty-five* killings (rate=51.0/100,000) to a merely deplorable eighteen (rate=36.7). Kind of like...New York City's 44th.! Meanwhile murder in Westwood went up: from zero in 2002 to (yawn) one in 2015, a rate of 1.9. And that resembles...NYC's 24th!

Back to New York. Our chart in Part I indicates that between 2000-2016 murders in Gotham fell from 673 (rate 8.4/100,000 pop.) to 335 (rate 3.9.) But let's look *within*. In both the downtrodden 40th. (2016 pop. 79,762, poverty 28.2 percent) and the equally challenged 73rd. (pop. 86,468, poverty 28.6 pct.) killings ticked up from twelve to thirteen, yielding rates of 15.3 and 16.2, *four times* the citywide rate. Meanwhile, in the

affluent 18th. (pop. 54,066, poverty 10.3 pct.), murders declined from one to zero (rate of zero) while in the large and fabulously rich 19th. (pop. 208,259, poverty 7.1 pct.) they fell from three to two, generating a rate of, um, *one*.

That's our "point." New Yorks' citywide poverty rate is 19.9 percent. As long as it has a sufficient proportion of well-off residents, it can use summary statistics to brag about "great crime drops" until the cows come home. Except that unlike citywide numbers, people aren't composites. Can we assume that residents of the 40th. and 73rd. precincts feel – or truly are – as well served as those who live in the more fortunate 18th. and 19th.? What do poorer citizens think when they hear Mayor de Blasio boast that his administration has turned crime around? Are they as reassured about things as their wealthier cousins?

As we suggested in "Location," it really *is* about neighborhoods. Aggregating seventy-six precincts because they're located within a single political boundary, then acting as though the total truly reflects the sum of its parts, is intrinsically deceptive. Actually, when it comes to measuring crime and figuring out what to do about it, the 40th., the 73rd. and a host of other New York City precincts really aren't in the Big Apple. They're a part of that other America – you know, the one where the inhabitants of L.A.'s beleaguered Florence district also reside.

Posted 8/14/14

COOKING THE BOOKS

Has LAPD been using whiteout to fight crime?

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Six years ago, a post entitled "Why the Drop?" posed a question about Los Angeles' crime statistics: "Crime has been falling. Does anyone know why?" Thanks to some intrepid reporting by the Los Angeles Times, we might finally have our answer. And it's not pretty.

In 2001 the violent crime rate in the City of Angels reached a historic high of 756.5 per 100,000 population. By 2007, the tally had plunged to 398.2. This startling reduction of 47 percent meant that even as the population increased, there were 24,442 fewer violent crimes. True enough, crime had eased throughout the U.S. But even as the national trend line flattened, L.A.'s Part I crime crime rate (murder, forcible rape, robbery and aggravated assault) kept falling. In 2012 violent crime in the U.S. increased by seven-tenths of one percent. But L.A. reported yet another decline, in this case of nearly seven percent.

Considering its burgeoning population and thin police coverage, L.A.'s unbroken string of victories seemed remarkable. So we wondered. After considering possible causal factors such as demographics and harsh sentencing, our speculation took what may have been a prophetic turn:

National crime stats come from the police, the same agencies whose effectiveness the data supposedly measures. Many reporting problems have surfaced over the years. Bookkeeping errors (unsurprisingly, usually leading to undercounts), differences in categorization, even purposeful jiggling – they've all taken place. Suffice it to say that cooking the books is eminently possible, and no one's watching.

Each year the FBI publishes crime statistics, by city and state. According to the Times, the decline in L.A.'s crime rate is attributable, at least in part, to a practice of purposely downgrading incidents so they don't reach the Part I threshold. In fact, police departments throughout the U.S. have been cooking the books for years. Want to keep an aggravated assault – the most common Part I violent crime – off the FBI tally? Easy. Simply discourage reporting. Or if a victim refuses to play ball, downplay their account, minimize their injuries or ignore the use of a weapon. Presto! You now have a simple assault, which is not included in the FBI's report.

Don't believe it? Here are a few examples:

- In 1998 the U.S. Justice Department opened an inquiry into fudged crime statistics in Philadelphia. As a local reporter later said, “The phony stats were known for many years. Aggravated assaults were easily changed to simple assaults…Precinct commanders used to joke about this, but behind those statistics are real victims.”
- Detroit chief James Barren was fired in 2009 when his department and the medical examiner were caught misclassifying homicides as self-defense and suicide.
- In the same year a Dallas newspaper investigation revealed that police were reporting only half the crimes called for in FBI guidelines. Although use of a weapon (not just a gun) makes assaults “aggravated,” pipe beatings, to give one example, were being recorded as simple assaults.
- Also in 2009 the Florida Department of Law Enforcement attributed chronic under-reporting of serious crime by Miami police to “a self-imposed pressure that certain [officers] felt as a result of the implementation of Compstat.” One of the examples cited was a carjacking that police downgraded to an “information report.”
- Sometimes crimes can’t be easily downgraded. But Baltimore found an ingenious way to make it seem as though fewer citizens were being shot. How? By reporting shootings with multiple victims as a single crime.

For possibly the longest running and most systematic manipulation of crime data look to the Big Apple. NYPD officers have been accusing their agency of undercounting serious crime for years. As one cop said, “If it’s a robbery, they’ll make it a petty larceny…a civilian punched in the face, menaced with a gun, and his wallet was removed, and they wrote ‘lost property’.” Indeed, some cops got so angry that they secretly taped superiors telling them to downgrade reports. By 2010 the department had no choice but to formally investigate. It concluded that, yes, a few rogue managers were purposely downgrading crimes. Orders were duly issued banning the practice.

Yet the problem apparently persisted. In The Crime Numbers Game: Management by Manipulation, a stinging exposé published in 2012, two criminal justice professors (one, a retired NYPD captain) alleged that these unsavory practices have not only continued but are literally embedded in the troubled agency’s DNA.

Compstat, NYPD’s vaunted number-crunching tool, likely deserves much of the blame. Brought to Los Angeles by former (and current) NYPD Commissioner Bill Bratton, it measures officer performance by tallying enforcement activity – stops, tickets and arrests – and the agency’s success by counting crimes. Of course, once NYPD

started bragging about its success, crime rates had to keep going down. And even if crime really was falling, cops (at least those seeking good evaluations) remained under instructions to make as many stops and arrests as possible. (Thanks to the law of unintended consequences, high levels of police activity can have negative effects. New York's stop and frisk campaign seemed like a great idea – until it didn't.)

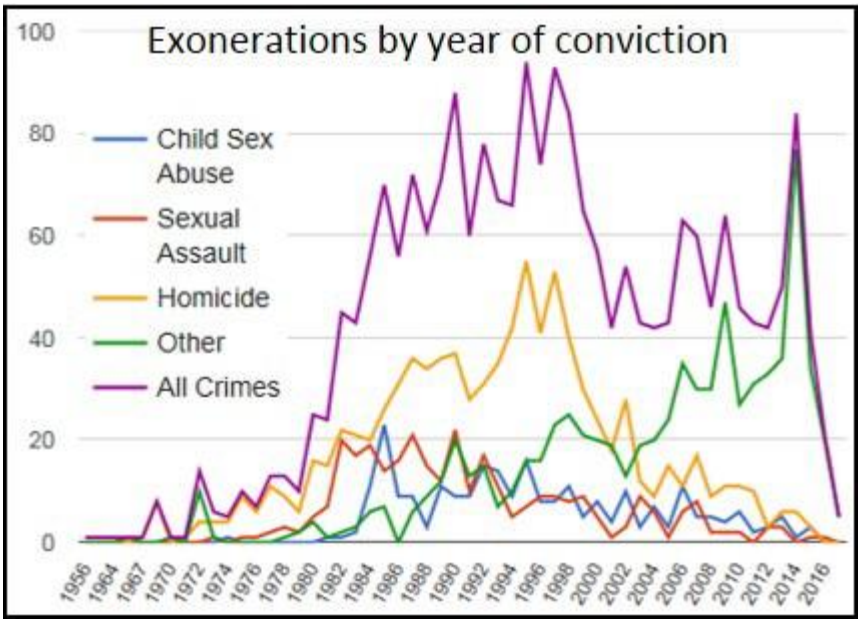
As we've repeatedly said, what really "counts" in policing can be impossible to adequately express with numbers. Police departments aren't factories, and officers aren't assembly-line workers. Adopting programs such as Compstat can push aside worthy objectives and distort what actually gets done. And while relying on numbers alone to form public policy is a bad idea, fudging them is unforgivable. It turns cops into liars. It misleads policymakers and the public. Granting offenders undeserved breaks also shortchanges victims and increases everyone's risk of becoming the next casualty.

Hopefully the Times' jaw-dropping findings will lead LAPD to reassess both the value and accuracy of its statistics. Coincidentally, just as this post was going to press, the California State Board of Equalization issued an alert warning that some businesses were gaming tax collectors with "illegal sales suppression software" that automatically understates sales volume. While there is no known application that does that for city crime statistics, one can only imagine the possibilities!

Posted 6/9/18

FEWER CAN BE BETTER

Murder clearances have declined. Should we worry?



www.law.umich.edu

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Murder has always been the most frequently cleared serious crime. In the mid-1970s police were reportedly solving an impressive eight out of ten homicides. But a downtrend apparently took hold. Clearances fell to 72 percent in 1980, 67 percent in 1991, and 63.1 percent in 2000.

In 2008, with clearances stuck in the mid-sixties, the Feds stepped in. Four years later BJA released "Homicide Process Mapping: Best Practices for Increasing Homicide Clearances." Produced by the IACP and the Institute for Intergovernmental Research, the 54-page report set out promising approaches to homicide investigation in seven jurisdictions of varying size: Baltimore County PD, Denver PD, Houston PD, Jacksonville S.O., Richmond PD, Sacramento County S.O. and San Diego PD. Why were these agencies chosen? In 2011, when the overall murder clearance rate was 64.8 percent, each enjoyed a rate exceeding 80 percent.

A sense of urgency permeates the report. Here's the BJS director's opening message:

> One homicide victim is one too many. Yet we also understand the challenging and quite complex nature of homicide investigations. Homicide, homicide investigations, clearance rates, and productive communication with the public are all critical concerns for law enforcement and communities nationwide. And despite recent across-the-board improvements in homicide clearance rates, we know that we can do better.

And here's the first paragraph of the executive summary:

> Since 1990, the number of homicides committed in the United States has dropped over 30 percent. While this is a positive trend, it is somewhat counterbalanced by another trend: in the mid-1970s, the average homicide clearance rate in the United States was around 80 percent. Today, that number has dropped to 65 percent—hence, more offenders are literally getting away with murder.

We won't belabor the findings. As one might expect, resources get prominent attention. There's an emphasis on technology and information. Agencies are strongly encouraged to include forensic specialists and crime analysts in homicide teams. Data is said to have reshaped the detective's task: "the investigator must be an information manager who can coordinate and integrate information from a wide range of sources to drive the investigation forward."

Then what happened? Clearances kept going down, falling to 59.4 in 2016. Of course, many homicides are "cleared" over time. Still, considering that the murder rate is presently about half that of the crack-addled nineties (1991=24,703 murders, rate 9.8; 1996=17,250 murders, rate 5.3) the persistent decline in solution rates seems puzzling.

During the early morning hours of April 17, 1994 a woman was stabbed to death in her Jacksonville County apartment. At the time the only other occupant was her brother-in-law, Chad Heins. He said he found her body when he awakened that morning. No physical or other evidence implicated Heins. However, he was convicted based on the testimony of two jailhouse informants who said he confessed. Heins drew a life term. In time the Innocence Project got involved. Between 2003-2006 a sequence of DNA tests confirmed that semen and skin residue from fingernail scrapings belonged to the same, unidentified third party. More damningly, it turned out that officers and prosecutors apparently kept quiet about a bloody fingerprint found at the scene that did not match Heins. He was exonerated in 2007 after serving thirteen years.

A happy ending? Not exactly. Eight years later Heins was convicted in a tax fraud scheme hatched by a former cellmate. Citing the time Heins did for a murder he didn't commit, the judge went easy and sentenced him to a year and a day.

Heins' investigation was conducted by the Jacksonville sheriff's office, one of the seven contributors to the BJA report. A glance through the National Registry of Exonerations turned up wrongful convictions for murder and other crimes of violence (alas, without a known ironic aftermath) involving each of the other six police agencies. For example, the 1991 conviction of Jeffrey Cox, a Richmond resident who got life plus fifty for murder. Although police had two suspects in mind, they added Cox to a photo lineup after one of the suspects brought up his name. And that's whom two neighbors identified. What police and prosecutors didn't let on was that one of the witnesses was a multi-convicted felon, while the other had charges that would be dropped in exchange for his testimony. And that a composite sketch of the killer didn't resemble Cox. And that a recovered hair didn't match. What finally set things right was when a witness came forward and said he was told by one of the two original suspects that they committed the killing and that Cox wasn't involved. That took eleven years, but hey, who's counting?

Your blogger, a retired ATF agent, spent a career pursuing gun traffickers. When he and his colleagues caught them in the act, the quantity and quality of evidence was terrific. And when investigations didn't work out, they turned their attention elsewhere. After all, there were always plenty of good leads to chase.

That pattern applies to all "victimless" crime, including narcotics offenses. Unproductive inquiries can be easily dropped. And when everything lines up and suspects get caught, say, illegally transferring a load of guns or drugs, the evidence is indisputable. Evildoers literally convict themselves.

That's something that homicide detectives can only dream about. Like most cops, they work reactively, collecting what evidence they can after the fact. While they enjoy high status and comparatively ample resources, their mission is inherently stressful. We mentioned that in 2016 the homicide clearance rate was a seemingly robust 59.4 percent. Of course, if six in ten murders are promptly solved, that means four in ten languish. Pursuing these "whodunits" can consume prodigious amounts of shoe leather and laboratory time, and all with no guarantee of success. Yet one can't simply give up. Most detectives wouldn't want to. And even if they did, their managers would likely balk. After all, what would the public think? The victim's family?

Killers are seldom “in the act”. Yet the level of certainty required for conviction – beyond a reasonable doubt – is the same for all crimes. In reactive policing such as homicide investigation, where reaching this threshold depends on the availability of witnesses and physical evidence, pressures to produce results may drive officers to use illegitimate means, and particularly when the heat’s on. Here are some relevant extracts from prior posts:

- External and self-induced pressures to solve heinous crimes can lead even the best intentioned investigators to set aside doubts and interpret information in a light most favorable to a prompt resolution. (“Guilty Until Proven Innocent”)

- “Probable cause” can be an elastic concept, and all the more so when police are under pressure to solve a high-profile crime. (“Rush to Judgment, Part II”)

- Pressures to solve serious crimes can cause the theory of a crime to form prematurely, leading authorities to uncritically gather evidence that is consistent with that notion regardless of its merit or plausibility. (“House of Cards”)

- As cases move through the system subtle pressures from police and prosecutors can make witnesses overconfident, turning a tentative “maybe” into a definite “that’s the one!” (“Can We Outlaw Wrongful Convictions? Part II)

- …pressures to solve violent crimes can lead agencies and investigators to prematurely narrow their focus. Concentrating investigative resources on a single target inevitably produces a lot of information. As facts and circumstances accumulate, some can be used to construct a theory of the case that excludes other suspects, while what’s inconsistent is discarded or ignored. That’s how a “house of cards” gets built. (“The Ten Deadly Sins”)

We could go on, but the reader undoubtedly gets the picture. One would think that the mighty Feds are well aware of these issues. Yet clearance rates are the only measure of success that 54-page report mentions. Nothing is said about dreadful mistakes like convicting the innocent. Same for a “Morning Edition” piece that gave prominent play to the shallow musings of a self-anointed “expert”:

> Homicide detectives say the public doesn't realize that clearing murders has become harder in recent decades. Vernon Geberth, a retired, self-described NYPD "murder cop" who wrote the definitive manual on solving homicides, says

> standards for charging someone are higher now — too high, in his opinion. He thinks prosecutors nowadays demand that police deliver "open-and-shut cases" that will lead to quick plea bargains.

So what about that decline in clearance rates? Considering all the attention that's been given to the scourge of wrongful conviction, from Dallas County D.A.'s pioneering conviction integrity unit, since replicated in many other jurisdictions, to the Innocence Project and its numerous clones, to the near daily stream of headlines and breathless exposés about exonerations, the need for caution has apparently sunk in.

Our expectations (and apparently, NPR's) for solving murders were set too high. Being more careful likely lowered the numbers. No matter. Sometimes fewer really *is* better.

Posted 2/27/17

IS CRIME UP OR DOWN? WELL, IT DEPENDS…

It depends on where *one sits,* when *we compare, and on* who *counts*

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. While browsing The Crime Report's February 15 newsletter, its Top Story, "New Crime Stats Run Counter to Trump's Dystopian View," caught our attention. So we clicked on it. As promised, or perhaps over-promised, the brief, two-paragraph account pointed to falling crime rates in San Diego, Rocky Mount, N.C., Lowell, Mass. and Battle Creek, Michigan as proof positive that it's not crime but President Trump's evident obsession with it that's really out of control.

The Crime Report is not alone. Reassuring comments about crime pervade the media. San Diego police chief Shelley Zimmerman boasted to the local paper that the city's near five-percent drop in violent crime during 2015-2016 (actually, 4.5 percent) "isn't just a statistic or a random number" but "represents real people." Her boss, Mayor Kevin Faulconer, bragged that "our city is safe because of the incredible partnerships forged between our community and our San Diego Police Department." Natch, there's always a fly in the ointment. Later on the article mentioned that yes, some forms of violence did increase, with twelve more homicides, six more rapes and nine more robberies in 2016 (each victim was presumably a "real" person as well.) Here's the data from the SFPD website:

SAN DIEGO HISTORICAL CRIME ACTUALS

1950 - 2016

Year	Population	Murder	Rape	Robbery	Aggr. Assault	Violent Crime	Burglary	Larceny	Vehicle Theft	Property Crime
2016	1,391,676	49	572	1,387	3,323	5,331	4,743	18,042	5,839	28,624
2015	1,368,061	37	566	1,378	3,601	5,582	5,129	18,933	5,096	29,158

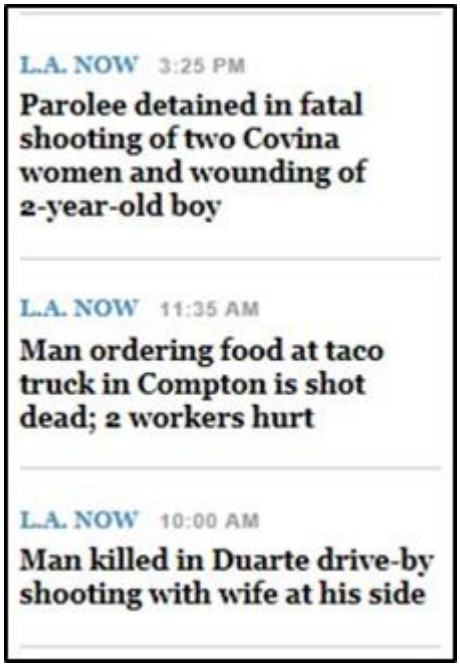
San Diego's decline in violence was driven by a 7.7 percent reduction in the number of aggravated assault reports – 278 fewer, to be exact. Without that, there would have been little to crow about. (We'll have more to say about counting issues later.)

So is crime up or down? Just below the "Dystopian" piece a "READ NEXT" prompt directs readers to "More Big-City Murders: A Blip or an Ominous Trend?". Although this brief article concedes that murder is going up in some places, it prominently features the reassuring comment of noted criminologist Alfred Blumstein, that "the national homicide rate is way below what it was in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s." That view is reinforced with a link to "Another Fact-Check of Crime Rates Find Trump is Wrong", a

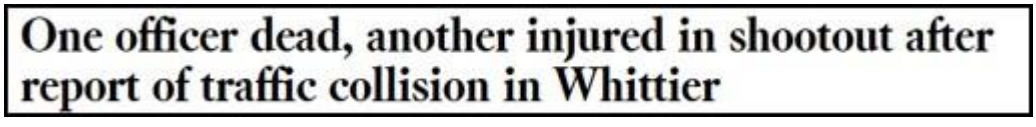
summary of a Minneapolis Star-Tribune article that soft-pedals recent jumps in Chicago and elsewhere with graphs that display a multi-decade national downtrend in violent crime.

So far so good. But the same page in *The Crime Report* also featured a link to "Chicago Police Boss: 'Enough is Enough' After 3 Kids Killed," a heart-rending piece that recapped a *Chicago Tribune* account about the shooting deaths of three Chicago children in four days. Indeed, even the most "liberal" media outlets are conceding that violent crime seems to be creeping up: "Though mostly far below their record levels in the 1980s and 1990s, homicides have jumped dramatically in some U.S. cities over the last two years, breaking from America's decades-long decline in violent crime…." (Los Angeles Times, 1/4/17). While that story focuses on the usual suspects – Chicago, Baltimore, Milwaukee, etc. – it eventually allows that things aren't perfect even at home: "Homicides also rose in Los Angeles in 2016, but by a much smaller amount: 5%. The city is still far less deadly than it was even a decade ago."

Fast-forward six weeks. Here's a sidebar from the February 19 *Los Angeles Times* website, just as it appeared at 4:38 pm:

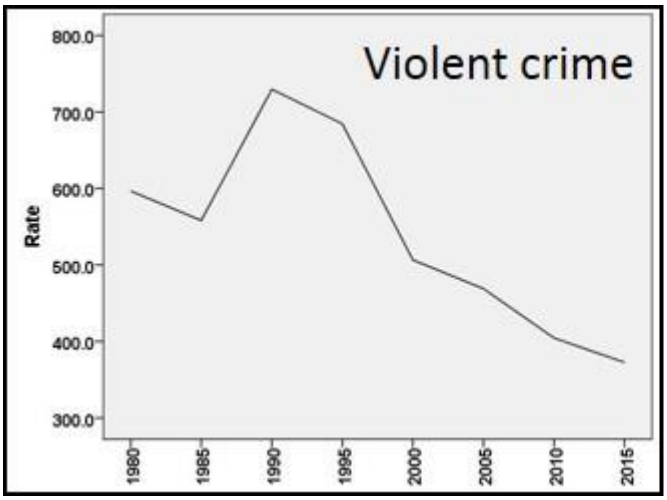


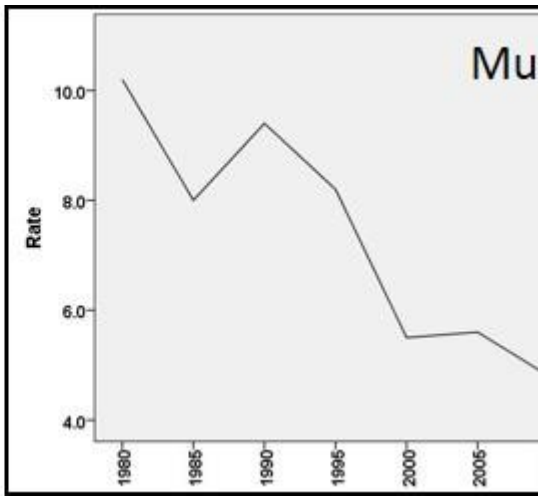
Here's the following day's lead story:



No “yes, but’s” there. After taking in the disturbing events of these successive and, believe it or not, randomly plucked days, would *Times* readers be more likely to agree that President Trump is “dystopian” or that the honorable Dr. Blumstein is a bit “Pollyannaish”?

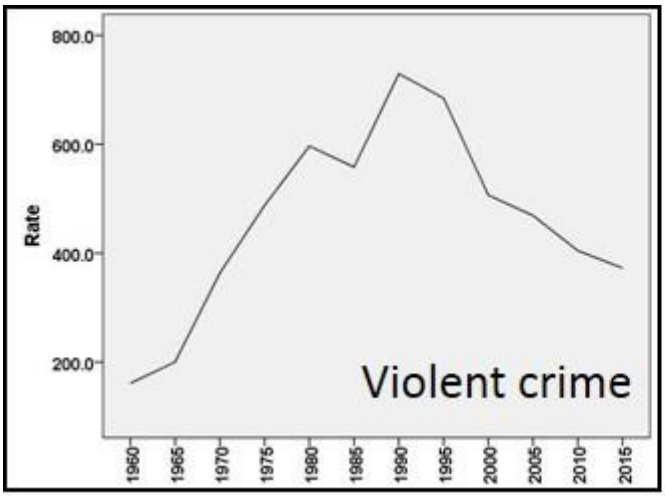
Police report four categories of violent crime to the FBI: murder and non-negligent manslaughter, rape, robbery and aggravated assault. These comprise the “violent crime index,” or number of offenses per 100,000 population. Below are graphs depicting two trends since 1980, one for violent crime, and the other for its murder and non-negligent manslaughter component. Each was built using the FBI’s online tools (click here and here).

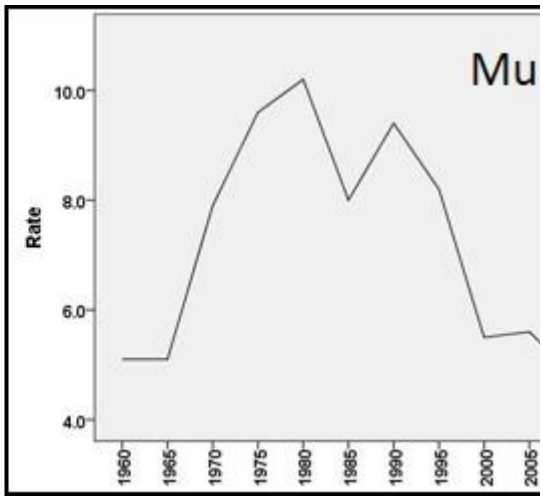




Both trends follow essentially the same pattern. If the data is correct, and excepting an uptick in the late 80’s and early 90’s that is often attributed to the crack cocaine epidemic, all forms of violence have been dropping since at least the eighties (1985 is often used as a start date since that’s as far back as the FBI reports crime trends for cities and counties).

If that’s as far back as we go – and most media accounts venture no earlier – the “Great Crime Drop” seems very real. But here’s the trend line going back to 1960:





At present, the U.S. murder rate is comparable to the sixties, while violent crime is substantially higher. Really, when compared with other supposedly modern societies, America's always been in dire straits. England and Wales (joint pop. about 58.2 million) had a combined 695 homicides during the 2015-2016 fiscal year. Their murder rate, 1.2, is *less than one-quarter* the 2015 U.S. rate (15,696 murders and non-negligent manslaughters, pop. 321,418,820, rate 4.9.) Meanwhile, neighborly Canada had 604 homicides *country-wide* in 2015, yielding a murder rate of 1.7. America's ten most murderous cities in 2016 had murder rates ranging from Atlanta's merely deplorable 23.9 to St. Louis' jaw-dropping 59.3. As for sheer number of killings, England and Wales and Canada are easily outpaced by the City of Chicago alone, which closed out 2016 with a record 762 murders.

Let's recap. Current violence rates seem a lot better when compared against 1980 than against 1960. Clearly, *when* is crucial. *Where* one sits is also important (and we don't just mean which *country*.) A measly twenty miles separate the Los Angeles-area communities of Westwood (pop. 51,485, one murder in 2015) and Florence (pop. 49,001, 18 murders in 2015). Where would you rather live?

Who counts is also crucial. Prior posts - "Cooking the Books", "The Numbers Game," "Liars Figure" and "Is the UCR Being Mugged?" - described alleged schemes by police in Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, Dallas, Miami, Baltimore, Nashville, New Orleans, St. Louis and elsewhere to exaggerate their effectiveness against crime by discouraging victims from filing reports and by furtively downgrading what went on the books. Aggravated assault, normally the most substantial contributor to the violent crime index, was a principal target, but not even homicides were spared. Suffice it to say that in these halcyon days of Compstat, there has indeed been "a whole lot of cheatin' going on." So when San Diego reports that aggravated assaults are down while other forms of violence, including murder, are up, we say..."really?".

Posted 2/15/10

LIARS FIGURE

Pressured by Compstat, police commanders cook the books

By Julius Wachtel, (c) 2010

Who would have thought? In response to a questionnaire more than one-hundred retired NYPD officers with ranks of captain and above said that crime reports were routinely fudged to minimize the number of Part I offenses that had to be reported to the FBI. Dodges ranged from tweaking thefts so that losses fell under $1,000 to encouraging victims of violence to minimize what took place, thus holding down the number of aggravated assaults.

Conducted with the assistance of the command officers' union, the survey forms the basis of "Unveiling Compstat: The Naked Truth." A forthcoming book by criminal justice professors John Eterno and Eli B. Silverman, it asserts that the deception was driven by weekly Compstat sessions where headquarters staff mercilessly grilled precinct commanders over crime in their districts.

As might be expected, NYPD reacted angrily. Pointing to other studies that affirmed the accuracy of the department's stats, officials suggested that those surveyed either weren't in a position to know whether the books were being cooked or were simply passing on rumors about the same incident. Professor Eterno, who retired from NYPD's crime analysis section before becoming an academic, poo-poohed that notion. "Those people in the Compstat era felt enormous pressure to downgrade index crime, which determines the crime rate, and at the same time they felt less pressure to maintain the integrity of the crime statistics."

It's not the first time that NYPD has found itself in the cross-hairs of a crime reporting controversy. In 2005 it successfully fought off attempts by a city investigative commission to look into alleged tinkering with the stats. More recently, the department admitted that such "manipulation" led to the removal of three district commanders. What's more, an NYPD officer on suspension for other reasons recently accused his precinct, including a Lieutenant known as "The Shredder" of systematically reducing felonies to misdemeanors and refusing to take crime reports.

Several victims backed up his account. One told reporters that he was bloodied in a street robbery but all officers did was take a "lost property" report. Another, an elderly

man, complained that police refused to believe his home was burglarized because of a lack of "evidence."

There's no doubt that Compstat sessions can unnerve police commanders, placing them on the hot seat over deep-rooted social problems that cops can't hope to influence. And while the steep downward trend in crime that got underway in the nineties has seemingly leveled off, Compstat brooks no such excuses. Crime must keep going down, or else.

Exaggerating accomplishments isn't a problem only in the Big Apple. A 2009 report by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement attributed chronic under-reporting by Miami police to "a self-imposed pressure that certain [officers] felt as a result of the implementation of Compstat." One of the examples cited was a carjacking that police downgraded to an "information report."

Miami police chief (and Compstat booster) John Timoney rejected the findings out of hand. That impolitic response probably cost him his job. Timoney joined ex-Detroit police chief James Barren, who was fired last year after DPD and the medical examiner got caught classifying homicides as self-defense and suicide. A Dallas newspaper investigation revealed that police were reporting only half the crimes called for by FBI guidelines. Dallas hasn't counted being beat with a pipe as an aggravated assault since 2007; to keep from counting unfounded vehicle break-ins it's also supposedly stopped reporting real ones. Meanwhile Baltimore police have been classifying shootings with multiple victims as a single crime. Just like NYPD, they've also jiggled the value of stolen property to keep incidents from reaching the felony threshold.

Lying about stats to look good is nothing new. Speaking at a 2009 conference of criminal justice journalists a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* described a scandal uncovered by his paper more than a decade ago. "The phony stats were known for many years. Aggravated assaults were easily changed to simple assaults…Precinct commanders used to joke about this, but behind those statistics are real victims."

Of course, there have always been pressures to show improvement. Yet in the charged, accusatory atmosphere of Compstat, where numbers are king, officers may feel that they have little choice but to dissemble. Indeed, complaints by commanders that they were being ridiculed in public led NYPD to bar outsiders from attending Compstat meetings. (Of course, the meetings didn't stop.)

Camden's abysmal finances and sky-high crime rate led the State to place the Attorney General in charge of the police. Compstat was promptly installed. During one

of the tense meetings that the police union called "nightmares", the AG's representative challenged a 25-year police veteran to explain why an undercover squad arrested only one person in four days:

> "Let me ask you this. You've been a police officer for quite some time. Does that [only one arrest] sound right?"
>
> "No, sir."
>
> "No, it doesn't. It doesn't," the AG's man self-righteously concluded.

What the inquisitor didn't ask, probably because he didn't know any better, was the obvious: Was it a major arrest? Did it require intensive investigation? Was the suspect a particularly desirable target?

Amplified by the widespread embrace of Compstat, pressures to reach numerical objectives have displaced worthy goals and turned cops into liars. Cooking the books has also brought assumptions about crime trends into question. Long considered the world's premier source of crime data, the UCR can't be any more trustworthy than its weakest link, the police. Considering what's been happening around the U.S., that's not a reassuring notion.

Posted 5/26/16

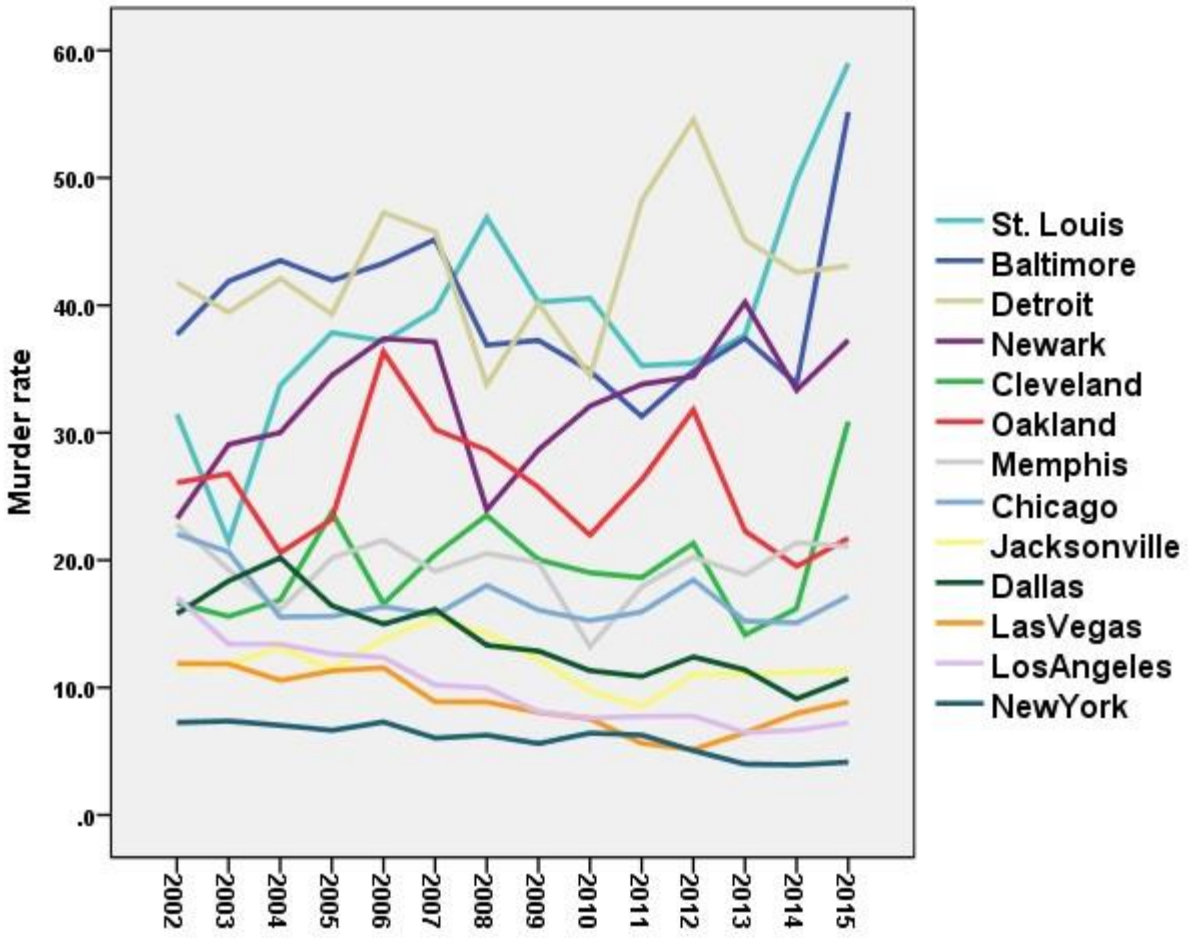
LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

***Crime happens. To find out* why, *look to* where.**

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. A few weeks ago we blogged about Chicago's ongoing struggle with violent crime. And it's not just the Windy City that's been having a lousy year. Data gathered from sixty-three police departments and sheriff's offices by the Major Chiefs Association reveals that half (31) experienced more homicides in the first quarter of 2016 than during the equivalent period in 2015. Some of the increases were substantial. Murders in Las Vegas went from 22 to 40, an 82 percent gain. Other winners (or, more properly, losers) include Dallas (26 to 45, +73 percent), Jacksonville (18 to 30, +67 percent), Newark (15 to 24, +60 percent), Memphis (31 to 48, +55 percent), Nashville (13 to 20, +54 percent), San Antonio (23 to 34, +48 percent), and Los Angeles (55 to 73, +33 percent).

Still, the trophy properly belongs to Chicago. Although its increase wasn't the greatest percentage-wise – the Windy City came in third, at +70 – it dwarfed its competitors in raw numbers, going from 83 homicides during 1Q 2015 to a stunning 141 for 1Q 2016. Overall, more folks are meeting a violent demise in the City of Broad Shoulders (509 in 2012; 422 in 2013; 427 in 2014; 465 in 2015) than anywhere else in the U.S. (We'll spare readers Chicago's other nicknames. Perhaps these sobering facts might suggest one that's more – um – *contemporary*.)

On the other hand, if we're interested in murder *rates* Chicago is a distant contender. This graph uses data from the Brennan Center, St. Louis police, U.S. census and the UCR to compare murders per 100,000 population for thirteen major cities since 2002. (Our focus is on murder because felonious assault data seems far less trustworthy. For more on this see "Cooking the Books" and "Liars Figure".)



And the winner (meaning, loser) is St. Louis! It earns the gold for 188 killings, which yielded a breath-taking rate of 59.6 murders per 100,000 population. Baltimore, at 55.2, got the silver and Detroit, at 43.8, the bronze. Chicago – its comparatively measly rate was 17.0 – only came in eighth.

Yet the news wasn't all bad. During 2002-2014 New York City's murder rate fell from 7.3 to 3.9. (It ticked up a bit in 2015, ending at 4.2.) Los Angeles wasn't too far behind. Although it started out far higher, at 17.1, by 2013 its rate had dropped to 6.5. Murder rates have rebounded in the last couple of years, but L.A.'s uptick was relatively marginal, to 6.7 in 2014 and 7.2 in 2015.

So, New York is very safe, and Los Angeles isn't far behind. Right?

Not so fast. Each release of the Uniform Crime Reports is accompanied by a prominent warning against using crime statistics to rank jurisdictions. Here's the most recent:

> Each year when Crime in the United States is published, many entities—news media, tourism agencies, and other groups with an interest in crime in our nation—use reported figures to compile rankings of cities and counties. These rankings, however, are merely a quick choice made by the data user; they provide no insight into the many variables that mold the crime in a particular town, city, county, state, region, or other jurisdiction. Consequently, these rankings lead to simplistic and/or incomplete analyses that often create misleading perceptions adversely affecting cities and counties, along with their residents.

"Simplistic" or not, once the stat's come out there's no holding back the media. In late 2015, only days after release of the UCR's 2014 installment, the Detroit News prominently ranked the top ten murder cities, leaving any implications to the reader. Comparisons – essentially, rankings under another name – are commonplace. Two weeks ago, in an otherwise well-documented piece entitled "Homicide Rates Jump in Many Major U.S. Cities, New Data Shows," the *New York Times* gloated that the Big Apple was nothing like Chicago:

> Still, more than 50 people were shot in Chicago last weekend, making it among the most violent weekends in months. At the other end of the spectrum was New York City, where homicides fell in the first three months of the year to 68 from 85 in the same period last year.

Respectable police organizations also get in the game. True enough, the above-mentioned report published by the major cities police chiefs avoids direct comparisons by listing cities alphabetically and providing crime counts instead of rates. Except that the chiefs just couldn't help themselves: jurisdictions where crime increased are highlighted in red.

What gets lost in the discord about ranking is that cities are political constructs. Crime, on the other hand, is a social phenomenon, with its roots in neighborhoods. Commenting on the recent upswing in murder, Professor Richard Berk makes the point succinctly:

> Those homicides are not randomly distributed…Crime, like politics, is local. This stuff all occurs in neighborhoods on much more local levels….It's not about a city as a whole, it's about neighborhoods.

Alas, the professor's enlightened comments were buried in an article that – you guessed it – was replete with rankings. Still, his concerns about place were echoed by Eddie Johnson, Chicago's weary police commissioner, who attributed the increased

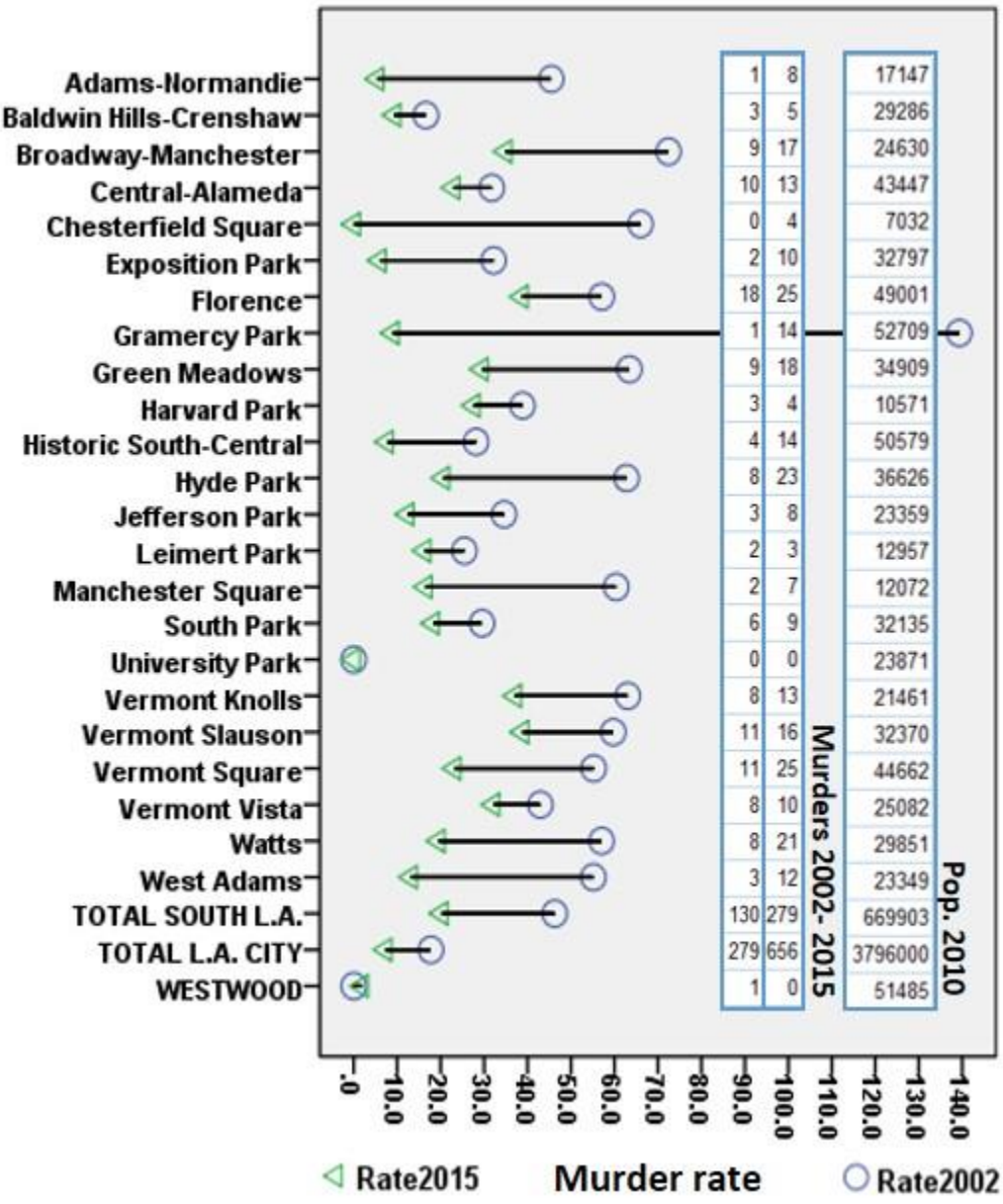
violence to a coterie of well-known criminals who were running amok in certain parts of the city.

That's what another top cop had to say about his burg a few days ago. Interviewed about Los Angeles's recent rebound in homicide, LAPD Chief Charlie Beck hastened to point out that only 427 Angelinos have been shot so far in 2016, while 1,400 were plugged during this period in…Chicago! But his analysis of L.A.'s increase seems much the same:

> We took some extreme steps to address the four most violent divisions earlier in the year, and those steps are starting to have some effect. Although it's not over 'til it's over, obviously.

Your blogger spent his teens in a middle-class neighborhood on Los Angeles' west side. His only experience with violence was what he heard on the radio or saw on T.V. Of course, he and his friends steered clear of notoriously violent areas such as South L.A. Two decades later, when your blogger returned to L.A. as an ATF supervisor, he got to experience South L.A.'s crime problems first-hand. He'll always remember that early morning when one of the fed-up local residents walked up and thanked him as agents led a notorious evil-doer away.

What can we learn from neighborhoods? The Los Angeles Times has been mapping murders in the L.A. metropolitan area since 2000. This graph compares rates for neighborhoods in the incorporated areas of South Los Angeles during 2002-2015:



During 2002-2015, the aggregate neighborhood murder rate ("Total South L.A.") plunged 56 percent, from 46.2 to 20.2, while the rate for the City of Los Angeles fell 59 percent, from 17.8 to 7.3. L.A.'s starting rate was more than two points lower than South L.A.'s ending rate, and wound up being less than one-third South L.A.'s. Westwood, a trendy area where your blogger's family occasionally shopped and dined, had zero murders in 2012 and one in 2015. Your blogger's neighborhood, West Hollywood (2010 pop. 34,426), went from 2 murders in 2002 to one in 2015.

Many L.A. neighborhoods have always been safe, others not so much. Although homicide seems to be on the decline, places such as Broadway-Manchester, Central-

Alameda, Florence, Vermont Knolls, Vermont Slauson, and Vermont Square are stubbornly resisting the trend. Each is likely to have counterparts elsewhere, and for the same reasons. Say, Chicago.

Cops and criminologists know that place matters. "Hot-spots" policing, the popular strategy that targets locations in need of special attention, is a computerized version of last century's old-fashioned pin maps. Sociological interest in neighborhoods dates back to at least the "Chicago School." And inquiries into place continue. In a compelling new study, researchers sampled census blocks in ten cities to investigate the effects of voluntary organizations on neighborhood crime rates. Their report appears in the current issue of *Criminology*.

What's important is to escape the trap of the usual suspect: poverty. Really, most poor people aren't crooks. Geographically coding crimes and potentially enlightening variables – for example, the presence of violent cliques – might help explain why some disadvantaged neighborhoods fare worse than others. Unfortunately, that's where movement lags. At present, thirty-tree states participate in the National Incident-Based Reporting System. A joint effort of the FBI and Bureau of Justice Statistics, it supplants the stodgy old UCR, which mostly aggregates numbers of offenses and arrests. Unfortunately, while the NIBRS captures information about place, crime locations are only coded by type (e.g., residence, bar, office building).

To help agencies take the next step, the National Institute of Justice offers a comprehensive set of mapping and analytical tools. Some departments have been geocoding incidents, publishing maps and even making data available online (click here for Philadelphia PD's version.) Geocoded crime data is also offered by private firms and public organizations (the *L.A. Times* "Homicide Report" was used for this piece.) And while its coverage is somewhat dated, the National Archive of Criminal Justice Data offers data that can be drilled down to ZIP codes, census tracts and block groups.

Hopefully one day all crime will be geocoded. Until then, we should keep in mind that political subdivisions like Los Angeles and Chicago are mostly creatures of the imagination. Just like in real estate, it really *is* all about location.

Posted 8/2/19

REPEAT AFTER US: "CITY" IS MEANINGLESS

When it comes to crime, it's neighborhoods that count

For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. There we were, wondering what to spout off about when our sleep-deprived Prez came to the rescue with yet another tweetstorm.

What set him on the warpath? Ten days earlier, Rep. Elijah Cummings (D – Md.), chair of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform, had berated DHS Acting Chief Kevin McAleenan about the unconscionable treatment of illegal immigrants. After repeatedly interrupting McAleenan, the good Rep. blasted him with this:

> I'm talking about human beings. I'm not talking about people that come from, as the president said, shitholes. These are human beings. Human beings. Just trying to live a better life.

Natch, the President noticed. Displayed above is his second rapid-fire tweet. Here's the first:

> Rep. Elijah Cummings has been a brutal bully, shouting and screaming at the great men & women of Border Patrol about conditions at the Southern Border, when actually his Baltimore district is FAR WORSE and more dangerous. His district is considered the Worst in the USA.

Here's the third, (temporarily) ending the salvo:

> Why is so much money sent to the Elijah Cummings district when it is considered the worst run and most dangerous anywhere in the United States. No human

> being would want to live there. Where is all this money going? How much is stolen? Investigate this corrupt mess immediately!

Rep. Cummings, who's based in Baltimore, promptly swiped back. And as one might expect, the "fake media" took his side. In a news piece defiantly entitled "Baltimore to Trump: Knocking Our City Is Our Job, Not Yours" the liberally-inclined *New York Times* proclaimed that despite the city's reputation for violence, "it so happens that many human beings do want to live in Baltimore." That lukewarm endorsement was the story's exact title in the paper's July 29th. National edition, which lands somewhere on our driveway each morning.

We'll let the antagonists fight it out. Their squabble proved useful, though, as it illustrates one of our pet peeves: mindlessly comparing crime rates. "Location, Location, Location" tracked murders for thirteen major cities during 2002-2015. St. Louis, the indisputable champ, closed things out with a mind-boggling 59.6 killings per 100,000 pop. Nipping on its heels, Baltimore posted a deplorable 55.2. At the other, far safer end, our burg. of Los Angeles (7.2) and the Trumpster's New York City (4.2) returned the lowest scores.

We've since used the latest full UCR release to assess murder rates in 2017. St. Louis (66.1) and Baltimore (55.8) managed to get worse. Los Angeles (7.0) held steady, while New York City (3.4) improved. Baltimore's homicide rate turned out *sixteen times worse* than the Big Apple's. The raw numbers are stunning. New York City had 292 murders; Baltimore, whose population is *one fourteenth*the size, suffered 342. Even the *Times* had to concede that Rep. Cummings' constituents aren't in a happy place, crime-wise:

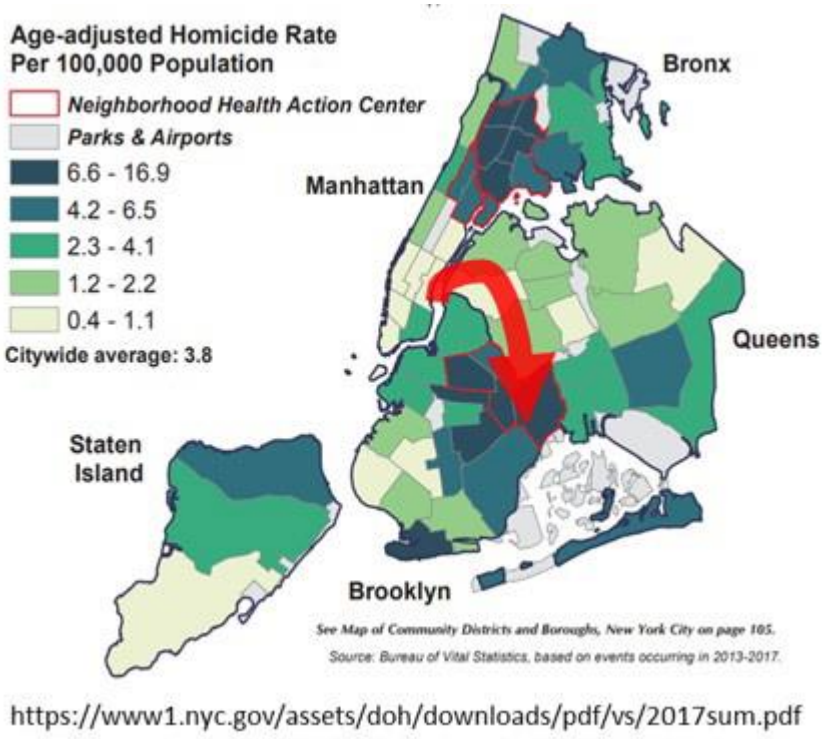
> Few denied that Baltimore is struggling, especially with violent crime — the city has recorded 32 more murders this year than New York, despite being about one-fourteenth the size.

Mayor Bill de Blasio's boast that New York City is "the safest big city in America" seems right on the money. Meanwhile, Baltimore is still in the doghouse. Trump's no paragon of accuracy, but this time he nailed it.

Right?

Well, not exactly. Our President's most recent domicile in the Big Apple was an ultra-lux apartment in Manhattan's fashionable Upper East Side (pop. 226,000, poverty ratio 7%, lowest in the city.) But there's a lot more to New York than Fifth Avenue. It's a really, *really* big place, with more than one-hundred distinct communities. Mayor de

Blasio aside, the city's own data reveals that these neighborhoods are by no means uniformly prosperous. Some are phenomenally (absurdly?) wealthy' others are chronically poor.



https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/vs/2017sum.pdf

Just follow the arrow. Jump across the East river. Venture deep into Brooklyn and you'll find the Brownsville area (pop. 86,000, poverty ratio 28%, one of the worst in the city.) That's where a few days ago, on July 27th, a gang member opened fire as folks gathered for an annual celebration. Twelve were shot, one fatally.

While such extreme events are rare, Brownsville is indeed a very tough place:

- Its police precinct, the 73rd., recorded thirteen murdersduring 2018. (Far larger Manhattan had but one.)

- Brownsville's 2013-2017 homicide rate, 16.9, was worst in the city. To compare, the Upper East Side was tied for best at 0.4. Yes, that's *zero point four*. (For a detailed view of major crimes by precinct, click here.)

What's our point? Neighborhoods in Los Angeles and New York (above and in "Be Careful What You Brag About") vary considerably as to violence. Where economic indicators are favorable, violent crime is low. Where they're not: fasten seat belts! Both cities, though, are blessed with a lot of affluence, keeping their overall homicide numbers at bay. If we wish to *meaningfully* compare murder across geographic space, we must go beyond abstract political boundaries. To that end, there really is no "Los Angeles" or "New York." What there is, is *neighborhoods*. Crime is about the conditions

under which people live. Control for factors such as poverty, unemployment rates and educational attainment and you're all set!

In our measly opinion, that caveat applies everywhere. Still, as data compiled by the *Baltimore Sun* demonstrates (see table), nearly every area in the struggling city is bedeviled by violence, some more than others. Rep. Cummings clearly has his work cut out.

But if our Prez wants to rattle cages, we suggest he pick on New York City's de Blasio. Here's a recommended broadside: "How does it make you feel, your honor, that your city's Brownsville neighborhood is saddled with a murder rate more than *forty times* worse than the Upper East Side? And how do you intend to improve things?"

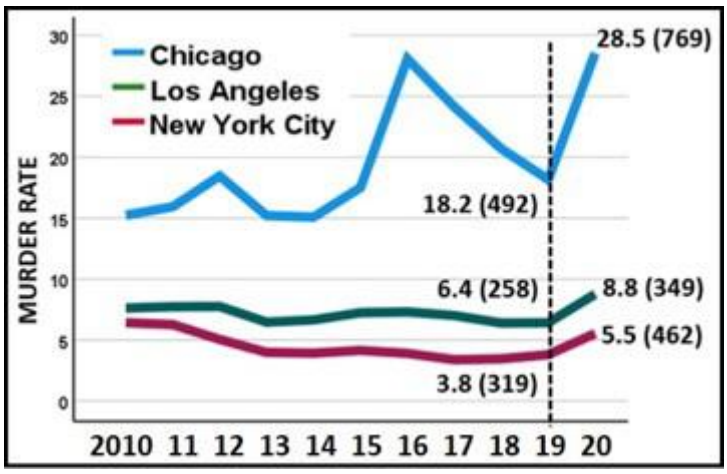
Um, we're waiting!

Posted 2/22/21

THE USUAL VICTIMS

Violent crime is reportedly <u>way</u> up. But do we all suffer equally?

For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. According to the the *Los Angeles Times*, 2020 was "a year like no other." Murder, it breathlessly reported, hit "a decade high after years of sustained reductions," and shootings soared nearly forty percent. But L.A.'s hardly alone. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, the toll in perennially lethal Cook County hit a historic high, with "more gun-related homicides in 2020 than any other year, surpassing the previous record set in 1994." Even New York City, which habitually boasts about its low crime numbers, feels cause for alarm. A recent *New York Times* opinion piece, "The Homicide Spike is Real," calls killings and shootings "the city's second-biggest challenge" next to the pandemic. But when it comes to gunplay "the way forward is less clear, and the prospects for a better 2021 are much dimmer."



Check out the graph. Homicide in Chicago increased *fifty-six percent* in 2020, soaring from an already deplorable 492 killings to an eye-popping 769 (the per/100,000

rate jumped from 18.2 to 28.5). While perhaps less mind-bending, increases in Los Angeles (38 percent) and New York City (45 percent) were also pronounced. Indeed, violence surged in large cities and small.

So our first question is…*why*?

Two major reasons have been offered: the pandemic, and police killings. These dreadful events have led to economic chaos and social unrest, impairing the functioning of the state and fracturing its connection with the citizens it ostensibly serves. Not only has the pandemic taken cops off the street, but their deployment's been deeply affected as well. As the *Washington Post* noted, this "thinning" of ranks can have serious consequences:

> In many departments, police ranks were thinned significantly by the combined effect of officers being out sick and being assigned to manage unrest on the streets. And given the concerns about spreading the coronavirus, officers were going to fewer places and interacting with fewer people, allowing more opportunities for people to settle disputes themselves.

Chicago's new police superintendent, David Brown, was brought in by Mayor Lori Lightfoot to deal with the chaos. He attributes much of the increase in violence, to "extended periods of heightened civil unrest and looting" that were sparked by George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police. It's not just about Mr. Floyd. Noted criminologist Richard Rosenfeld believes that our legacy of lethal police-citizen encounters has actually damaged the state's moral authority:

> During a period of widespread intense protest against police violence, it's fair to suppose that police legitimacy deteriorates, especially in those communities that have always had a fraught relationship with police. That simply widens the space for so-called street justice to take hold, and my own view is that is a part of what we are seeing.

Considering just their reaction to COVID-19 constraints, it's clear that some citizens have become less willing to comply. Eager to avoid conflict, and with fewer officers to spare, many agencies have severely pared back on enforcement. Aggressive, focused approaches such as "hot spots policing" and "stop-and-frisk" seem threatened with extinction. LAPD Captain Paul Vernon, who runs his agency's Compstat unit, feels that this purposeful pulling back has reduced gang members' fear of being caught and led to more shootings and killings. What's more, some cops may be reacting to the "new normal" by purposely slowing down. According to the *New York Times*, that's exactly what happened in the Big Apple. If so, it's not a new phenomenon. Three years ago in

"Police Slowdowns" we wrote about the protracted slowdown that followed the arrest and prosecution of a handful of Baltimore's finest after the 2015 death of Freddie Gray. (Ditto, Chicago and Minneapolis.)

Whatever its causes, the decline in proactivity has serious implications. In his recent paper, "Explaining the Recent Homicide Spikes in U.S. Cities," Professor Paul G. Cassell proposed the "Minneapolis Effect":

> Specifically, law enforcement agencies have been forced to divert resources from normal policing to patrolling demonstrations. And even as the anti-police protests have abated, police officers have scaled back on proactive or officer-initiated law enforcement, such as street stops and other forms of policing designed to prevent firearms crimes.

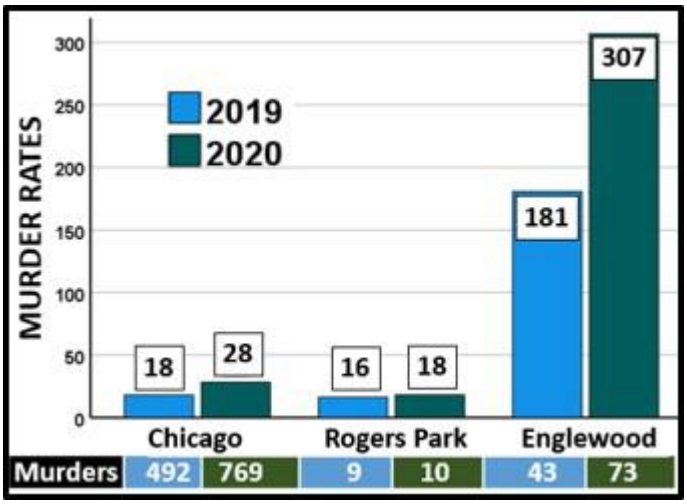
Of course, it's not just about policing. Folks have suffered from the closing of schools, parks and libraries. Chicago P.D. Sgt. Jermain Harris, who works with youths, offers his take on what happens when community supports disappear:

> You take away the businesses, all the pieces of society that generally have eyes out, and you are left with young people, and a lot of young people, who don't have resources or that level of support if they are left on their own.

Well, it all seems plausible enough. Yet your blogger, and probably most who skim through our essays, lives in a middle-class area that seems just as peaceful as before the madness began. Other than the officer who lives a few houses down, cops are hardly ever around, and their absence is thought unremarkable. So that brings us to the second question: *who* suffers most?

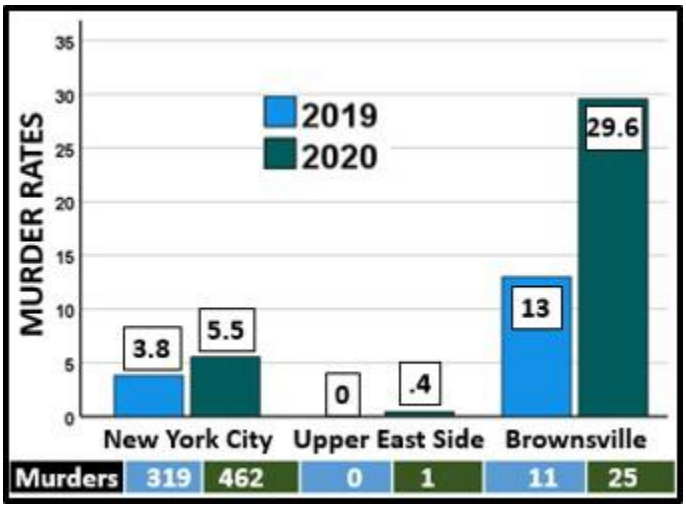
LAPD Chief Michel Moore knows. He recently pointed out that in L.A., the increase of violence has mostly affected areas long beset by gangs and gunplay:

> Nearly all of the loss of life and shooting victims are centered in the Black and brown communities. The lack of jobs and supportive services, a sense of hopelessness, easy access to firearms and ineffective parts of the criminal justice system have created a perfect storm to undermine public safety gains built over the last decade.



Chief Moore is referring to the same poor neighborhoods whose chronic problems with crime and violence are the stock-in-trade of our Neighborhoods special section. Bottom line: it's not about *cities* but about the places within cities where people live. This graph proves that (as we suggested in "Mission Impossible?") there are even some relatively safe spots in…Chicago! For instance, Rogers Park, Chicago PD District 24. Its 2020 murder rate (thru 12/27) was more than a third lower than the Windy City's overall. Yet in downtrodden Englewood, Chicago's P.D.'s 7th. District, the already sky-high 2019 rate soared *seventy percent*.

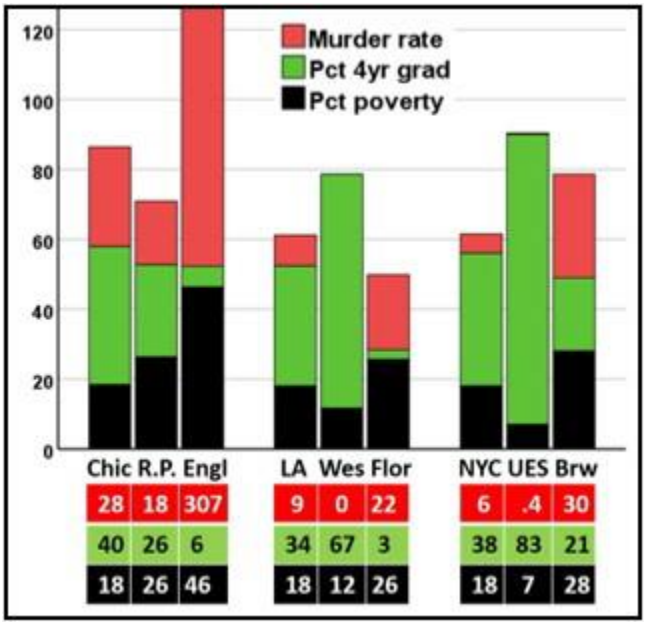
In "Location, Location, Location" we mentioned that Los Angeles has a number of relatively safe spaces. Say, Westwood. Populated by about fifty thousand of the (mostly) well-to-do, the prosperous community suffered one murder in 2019 and none in 2020. Alas, most L.A. residents aren't nearly as fortunate. Consider the chronically troubled Florence area (pop. 46,610) of South L.A. With ten killings in 2019 and ten in 2020, its murder rate wound up more than twice that of the city as a whole.



Conditions in New York city also "depend." Contrast, for example, the affluent Upper East Side's (pop. 225,914) zero murders in 2019 and one in 2020 with bedraggled Brownsville's (pop. 84, 525) eleven killings in 2019 and twenty-five in 2020. To be sure, Brownsville seems a less threatening place than L.A.'s Florence district or Chicago's

Englewood. Yet its contrast to the rest of the city within which its borders lie seems equally pronounced. It's as though there are two cities: one comprises Rogers Park, Westwood and the Upper East Side, and the other is made up of Englewood, Florence and Brownsville.

This graph brings it all together using 2020 data. (To save space, Englewood's sky-high murder rate runs off the top.) It's no news to our readers that economic conditions and their correlates – here we use number of residents with four-year degrees – are deeply related to crime and violence. So what can be done? Prior posts in our "Neighborhoods" section have rooted for comprehensive approaches that offer residents of low-income communities job training, tutoring, child care and other critical services.



Grab a quick look at "Place Matters." Whether it comes from "neighborhood revitalization" programs such as promoted by Birmingham Mayor Randall Woodfin, or from that "Marshall Plan" we ceaselessly harp about, there's no question – none – that a concerted effort to give needy neighborhoods a boost would greatly improve their socioeconomic health and reap fabulous human benefits. And, not-so-incidentally, keep inhabitants from becoming the "usual victims" whose demise our posts persistently quantify.

Violence is not an equal-opportunity threat. But of course we all knew that.

Posted 6/16/08

WHY THE DROP?

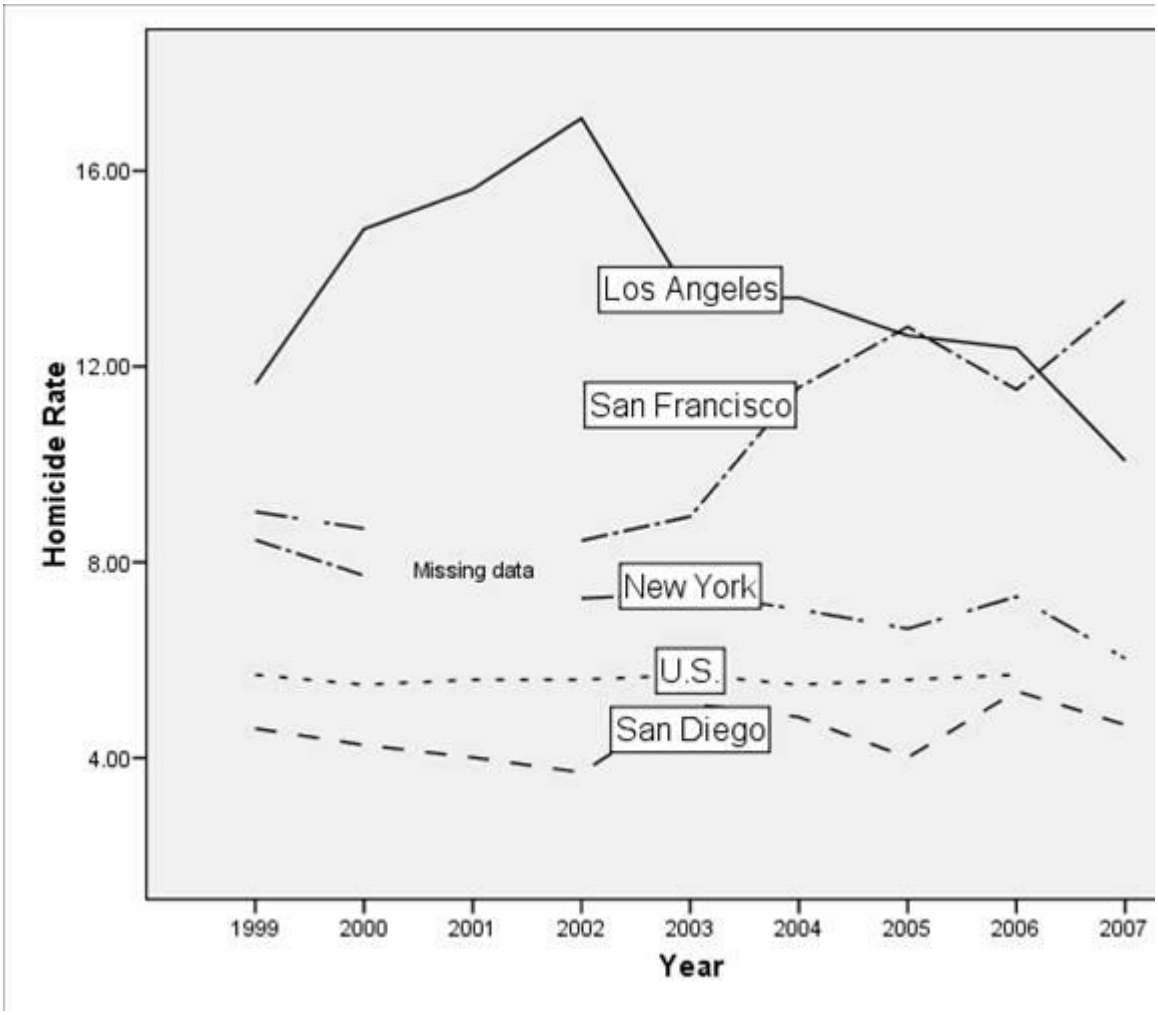
> "...There will continue to be crimes of passion and anger. And it is important
> to note that crime in Los Angeles has dropped precipitously in the last decade.
> Even with the increase in homicides, management of violent crime is moving
> in the right direction..."

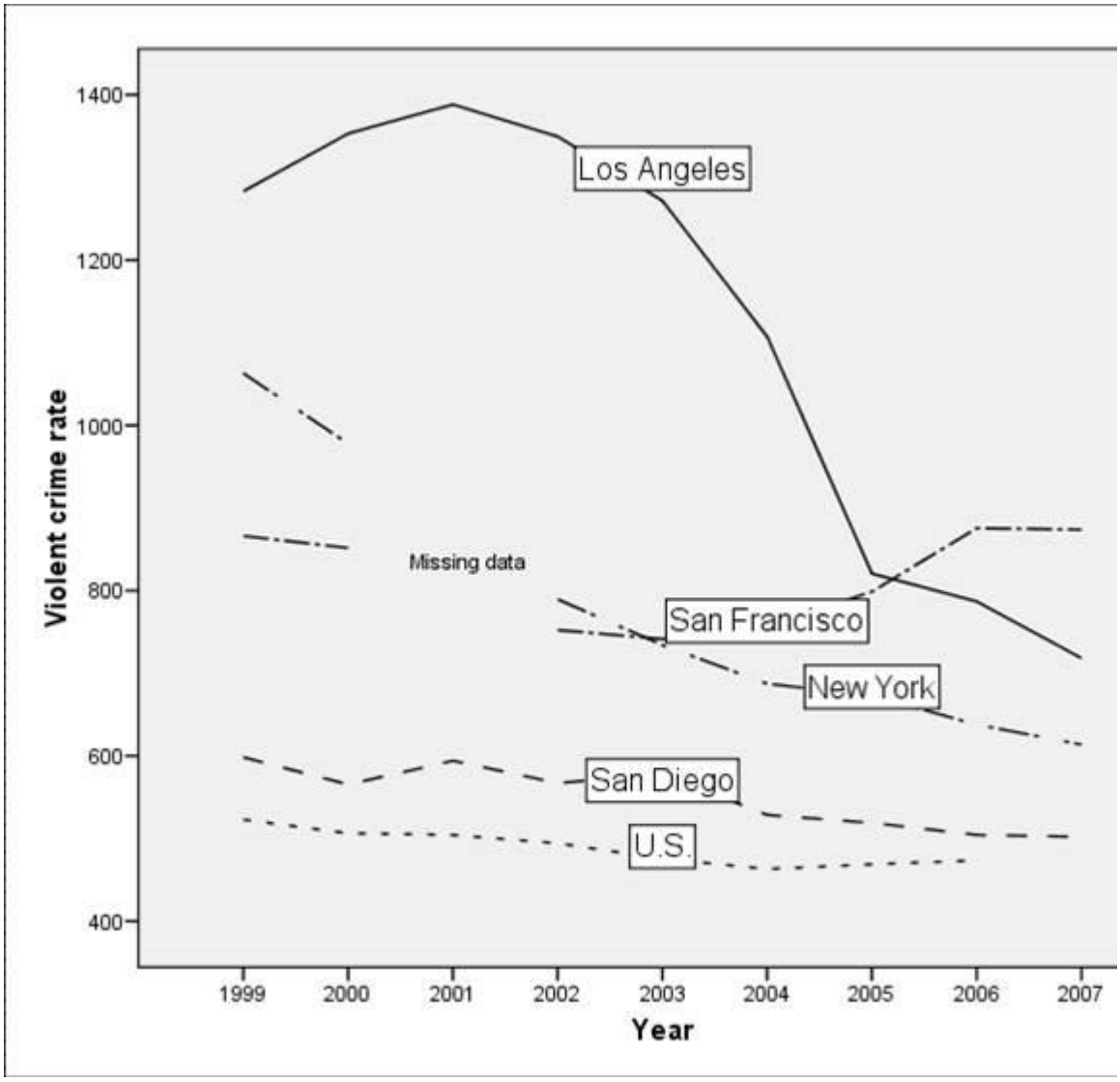
Continuing its love-fest with LAPD Chief "Hollywood" Bill Bratton, that's how the L.A. Times explained away the murders of eleven persons over a single weekend, with nine shot dead, at least six in gang-related incidents. And remember last month's six shootings in six hours?

Recent events aside, homicide does seem to be on a downward trajectory. Preliminary FBI data indicates that in 2007 Los Angeles had 390 murders, a 19 percent reduction from 2006 when 480 were recorded. If this figure holds up there were 40 percent fewer murders in 2007 than in 2000, when killings reached a decade-high peak of 654 (statistics derived from UCR Table 8.)

And wait, there's more! Between 1999 and 2007, a period when L.A.'s population increased by more than two-hundred thousand, the number of violent crimes fell by 41 percent, from 46840 to 27801. Using the 2001 peak of 52243 as a base, that works out to a stunning reduction of 47 percent.

Now if only we knew *why*. The following charts compare changes in homicide and violent crime rates per 100,000 population for the three largest California cities -- Los Angeles, San Diego and San Francisco -- with rates in New York City and the U.S. as a whole.


Homicide Rate
16.00
12.00
8.00
4.00
Los Angeles
San Francisco
Missing data
New York
U.S.
San Diego
1999
2000
2001
2002
2003
2004
2005
2006
2007
Year



As America's gang capital, L.A.'s been beset by criminality, but in the last decade its murder and violent crime rates have plunged, actually landing below San Francisco's. What's the reason? The *Times* knows: it's that we're doing a better job "managing" crime. Unfortunately their explanation stops there, but it's safe to say that the miracle is largely attributed to Chief Bratton, and particularly his much-ballyhooed Compstat program, a computerized pin-map that uses current data to alert commanders to crime trends and hot spots.

Bratton was appointed in October 2002, replacing Bernard Parks, a man who was viewed as so heavy-handed in administering discipline that many officers reportedly gave up interacting with thugs for fear of being punished. A cop's cop, the new chief is far more popular among the rank and file. Could it be that a renewed sense of mission invigorated officers and got them working again?

It's an appealing thought. But while the fall in murder coincided with the change in leadership, the violent crime rate was already going down when Bratton came on the job. In truth, L.A. may simply have too few cops to proactively battle violence. As these pages have reported, compared to New York, the city is dramatically under-policed, with half the ratio of officers to population and, given the much higher population density in the Big Apple, a far smaller visible presence.

Other than Compstat and better leadership, what else could account for L.A.'s "success"?

- Crime's been on a prolonged downtrend in most areas, with a recent moderate leveling. Check out New York, whose overall drop in violent crime is nearly the same as L.A.'s, though perhaps not as dramatic.

- Although there is controversy about the long-range benefits of harsh sentencing, there's no question but that California's mandatory minimums and three-strikes laws have incapacitated offenders for longer periods. If that was the main reason for the disparity, though, we would expect drops in San Diego and San Francisco as well.

- During the past decades the racial composition of South Los Angeles has dramatically changed, from predominantly African-American to mostly Hispanic. It's reported that many Black gang members have moved to Antelope Valley and parts East (Riverside, San Bernardino). If it's true, as some claim, that they are the more violent, their absence may account for some of the drop.

- FBI and DEA have been applying racketeering statutes against L.A. gangs, sending many top "shot-callers" to long stays in the Federal big house. But without conducting a study, whether that's had an effect on homicides and violence is impossible to say.

- National crime stats come from the police, the same agencies whose effectiveness the data supposedly measures. Many reporting problems have surfaced over the years. Bookkeeping errors (unsurprisingly, usually leading to undercounts), differences in categorization, even purposeful jiggling -- they've all taken place. Suffice it to say that cooking the books is eminently possible, and no one's watching.