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Memo to Joe Biden: Focus on Neighborhood Safety

By **Julius Wachtel** | December 7, 2020

President-elect Joe Biden. Photo by Todd Jacobucci via Flickr

How does the administration of President-elect Joe Biden intend to assure that everyone gets their fair share of the nation's wealth?

Affordable housing and urban renewal are high on the "Blue" agenda. Suggestions range from reforming lending practices to providing loans and grants that help lower-income families find decent places to live.

And in oft-forgotten Middle America, eight mayors have suggested a "Marshall Plan" that would create hundreds of thousands of good-paying jobs by developing sources of renewable energy.

Actually, these initiatives sound much like what then-candidate Trump suggested four years ago.

His "New Deal for Black America" promised to help minority communities with major investments in infrastructure, job development and education.

He also pledged to fight the crime and disorder that beset the nation's inner cities and assure that justice was equally dispensed to all.

Well, what happens isn't always what's promised. But set ideology aside. During the decade preceding the pandemic, the Gross Domestic Product rose while unemployment went down.

There were improvements in crime control as well. According to the FBI, 2019 marked the third consecutive year of reductions in both violent and property crime.

Yet serious disparities remain.

In the economy, the distribution of income has hardly budged in the last three decades, with the top one-third enjoying about a third of the nation's wealth, while the bottom half is consigned to a measly two percent.

As for crime, according to the FBI's Uniform Crime Report, Detroit closed out 2019 with 492 murders, yielding a 41.4 rate. New York City's 319 homicides delivered a far, far gentler 3.8, even better than the nation's 5.0.

Considering its relatively benign numbers, it makes perfect sense that Mayor Bill de Blasio refers to New York City as the "safest big city in America."

The only problem is, "New York City" is a place name. People live, work and play in *districts* and *neighborhoods*. And after a career fighting crime and another pondering its roots, I have become convinced that focusing on tangible *places* illuminates in ways that yakking about "wholes" obscures.

Politicians know that. Mayor de Blasio depends on a profusion of prosperous neighborhoods to produce favorable citywide crime rates. Consider the Upper East Side in Manhattan, pop. 220,000. With about seven percent of its residents in poverty (versus the city's overall twenty) its police precinct— the 19th —boasted zero murders in 2019 and one through November 22, 2020.

Contrast that with the Brownsville district in Brooklyn, pop. 86,000, where nearly one in three live in poverty. Its precinct—the 73rd —

recorded *eleven* murders in 2019 (that's nearly *three and one-half times* the citywide rate) and a deplorable *twenty-five* through November 22.

Switch shores. The West L.A. station of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) covers an affluent area of 228,000 inhabitants, with about eleven percent in poverty. It reported *one* murder during 2019 and *four* murders through November 21, 2020. Compare that with LAPD's 77th. Street station, which covers an area where nearly one in three are poor. Although the 77th serves about a quarter fewer residents, it suffered 36 murders in 2019 and an astounding 50 as of November 21.

Similar within-city differences beset communities across the U.S.

Consider Minneapolis, where the death of George Floyd set off national waves of protest that have yet to subside. Coding its 85 neighborhoods for violent crimes per 100,000 pop., I recently compared the four least violent (mean rate 0.7) to the four most brutish (mean rate 35.6). No surprise: mean family income in the calm areas ($106,347) was *more than twice* that of the not-so-peaceful ($45,678).

Neither is there just "one" Portland. Our national capital of dissent has about 90 neighborhoods. Comparing the ten with the lowest violence rates (mean=1.5) against the ten with the highest (mean=9.0) revealed that nine percent of the former were in poverty versus 21.4 percent of the latter.

Essays in *Police Issues'* "neighborhoods" section reveal similar disparities in Baltimore, South Bend, Chicago and elsewhere. Of course, it's hardly a secret that poverty and violence are locked in an embrace.

My colleagues at the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) and I often trailed along as traffickers hauled freshly acquired handguns into distressed neighborhoods for resale to local peddlers. Alas, a gun from a load we didn't know about was used to murder a police officer.

That tragedy, which haunts me to this day, furnished the inspiration for "Sources of Crime Guns in Los Angeles, California," a journal article I wrote while transitioning to academia.

Policing is important, but it's not the ultimate solution.

Preventing violence is society's job. But what's usually on the menu – "urban renewal" – focuses on rehabilitating physical spaces and helping business and industries get a start. What your writer likes to call "human renewal" – job training, apprenticeships, child care, health services, tutoring and summer jobs for youths, and so on – gets short shrift.

While such things have been championed by the Urban Institute and others, they're federally addressed in only one initiative, Jobs-Plus, a HUD program that serves public housing residents in designated areas. Its budget? A measly $15 million – nationwide

If we're serious about creating a "Marshall Plan" for urban America, helping the residents of distressed places maximize their *human* potential seems a great place to start.

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