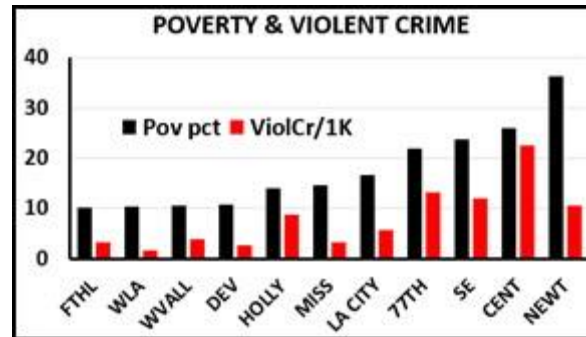


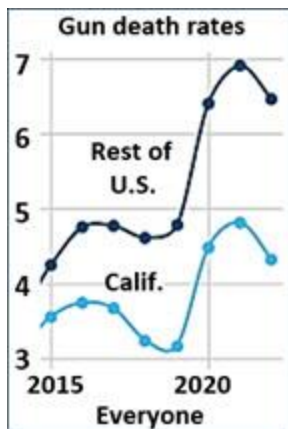
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## POLICING CAN'T FIX WHAT *REALLY* AILS

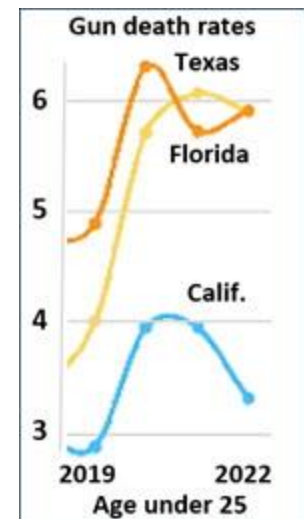
*California's posturing overlooks a chronic issue*



For *Police Issues* by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. two months ago Cal DOJ's Office of Gun Violent Prevention (OGVP) released "[The Impact of Gun Violence in California.](#)" A data-rich thirty-seven page report, it sings the praises of the Golden State's achievements in reducing gun violence since the bad-old days of the nineteen-nineties. As those of us who then labored in the trenches well remember, that's when the crack epidemic beset our nation's inner cities and transformed south Los Angeles and its equivalents elsewhere into virtual combat zones.



But OGVP's bragging doesn't end there. California's more recent gun violence statistics draw prominent, highly favorable) mention. Pointing to [CDC Wonder's](#) firearms-related death data for 2013-2022, the report boasts that "if the firearm mortality rate in the rest of the U.S. matched California's over this same period, there would have been nearly 140,000 fewer firearm-related deaths across the nation in that decade alone, and potentially *hundreds*



*of thousands* fewer gunshot injuries" (p. 13, emphasis ours). Those views are bolstered by graphs based on per/100,000 gun death rates; one (see left) contrasts California with the U.S. overall (p. 10); another (see right) with the two other most populous states, Texas and Florida, for persons under 25 (p. 12).

What's behind California's comparatively benign gun-violence score? According to OGVP, aggressive enforcement, "affirmative litigation" and lawmaking play key roles. Authorities have taken firm measures to combat the proliferation of ghost guns, those unserialized instruments of death that can readily fall into the hands of unsavory characters and the underaged. "[Red Flag Laws](#)" enable family members, caregivers and police to seize guns from risky persons, including family members, before they strike. And prohibitions on lethal implements such as assault weapons and large-capacity magazines, which are often used to commit mass murder, have supposedly made the state "a leader in efforts to help intervene and prevent shootings before they occur."

And so on and so forth. It's not until page 32 of the 37-page report that attention shifts to the possible *causes* of gun violence. The focus is on race and gangs:

...in 2020-2021, the modal patient hospitalized for nonfatal gun assault injuries in California was a Hispanic or Black male in his 20's, admitted to the hospital on a weekend, hospitalized for over one week, and publicly insured through Medi-Cal...(p. 33)

...Researchers with the National Network for Safe Communities examined data from nearly two dozen cities across the U.S. and found that on average, at least half of homicides and 55% of nonfatal shootings in those cities were perpetrated by and/or against people known by law enforcement to be affiliated with gangs, "street groups," or social networks engaged in violence...(p.36)

We've often written about the well-known, thoroughly documented relationship between poverty and violence (see, most recently, "[Good News/Bad News](#)"). But OGVP's report doesn't use the words "poor" or "poverty" – not even once. "Income" comes up twice. Once at the beginning, where it's mentioned in passing that U.S. residents "are 25 times more likely to be killed in a gun homicide than those living in other *high-income* countries" (p. 2, emphasis ours). And once near the end, where the authors note that "interpersonal gun violence disproportionately impacts people who have *lower income* and economic security" (p. 33, emphasis ours).

OGVP's report seems focused on praising California's response. Perhaps that's why it essentially ignores the socioeconomic factors that might actually "cause" firearms violence. We've emphasized poverty (POV), but other villains are likely involved. [Giffords](#), for example, ranks states according to gun law strength (GLS). [RAND](#) has collected data on rates of household firearms ownership (HFR), by state. Another possible influencer, law enforcement employee staffing (LEE), was one of the management measures gathered by the [UCR](#) (it's now transitioned to the [NIBRS](#)).

So we decided to run our own statewide analysis. Percent of persons in poverty by state (POV) is drawn from the [Census](#). Gifford’s GLS is on a scale of 1-50 (strongest to weakest). For simplicity, we inverted it so that higher numbers mean stronger state gun laws. RAND’s HFR [uses a scale](#) of zero (0) to one (1.0) to represent the proportion of adults in each state who reside in a household with at least one firearm. And LEE represents the ratio of law enforcement employees (sworn and non-sworn) per 1,000 population, by state, as reported by the UCR and NIBRS. (Note: Because the UCR-NIBRS transition remains a work in progress, our data for POV, GLS and LEE is for 2019, the UCR’s last year. HFR gun ownership data represents 2016, when it was apparently last collected.

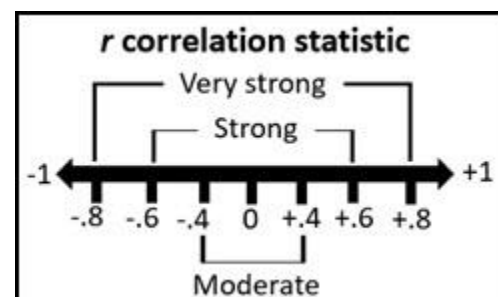
One possible influencer was left out. Unlike our other factors, which are on scales, “stand your ground” (SYG) laws are either in effect, or not. Their assessment is also complicated by the fact that they’ve come into play over time. But fear not – we recently addressed them in depth. For more on their possible role check out our recent piece, [“Fearful, Angry, Fuzzy-Headed. And Armed”](#).

	<i>r</i>	POV	GLS	HFR	LEE
Causes	POV		-0.39	0.31	0.14
	GLS	-0.39		<b>-0.84</b>	0.23
	HFR	0.31	<b>-0.84</b>		-0.34
	LEE	0.14	0.23	-0.34	
Effects	VIOL	<b>0.46</b>	-0.21	0.14	0.05
	HOM	<b>0.68</b>	-0.25	0.18	0.26
	ROB	0.22	0.35	<b>-0.45</b>	0.28
	AASLT	<b>0.50</b>	-0.30	0.24	0.04
	FADEATH	<b>0.63</b>	<b>-0.73</b>	<b>0.75</b>	-0.12
	FASUIC	0.30	<b>-0.75</b>	<b>0.84</b>	-0.38

This matrix displays data for all fifty states. Hypothesized “causes” are in the top box. There are four: POV (poverty), GLS (gun law strength), HFR (household firearms ownership) and LEE (law enforcement staffing). Six “effects” occupy the bottom box. Four are from the [2019 UCR](#): VIOL (violence rates), HOM (criminal homicide rates), ROB (robbery rates) and AASLT (aggravated assault rates). Each is a state rate per/100,000 pop.

and includes both gun and non-gun crimes. Two additional “effect” measures, FADEATH (gun deaths) and FASUIC (gun suicides) also denote state rates per/100,000 pop. Both are from [CDC Wonder](#).

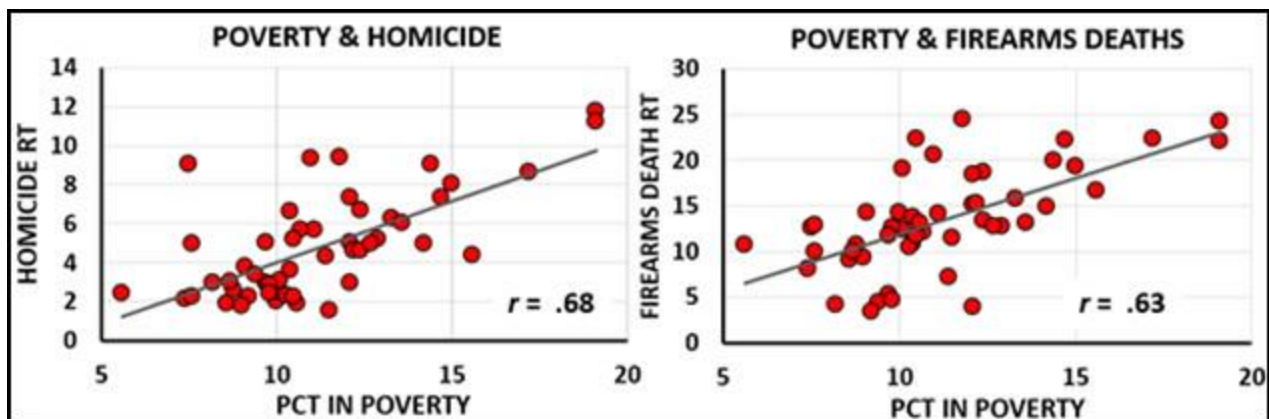
We use the “*r*” statistic to denote the relationships among the four causal variables, and between each causal variable and each effects variable. It’s on a scale of -1 to +1. Positive *r*’s indicate that variable scores increase and decrease together; negative *r*’s, that they move in opposite directions. An *r* of zero (there are none) denotes



absolutely no relationship, while a “perfect”  $r$  of  $-1$  or  $+1$  (there are none) indicates a relationship in perfect lockstep. Relationships that are moderate ( $r= 0.4-0.59$ ), strong ( $r= 0.6-0.79$ ) and *very* strong ( $r= 0.8$  & above) are in boldface. For example, go to the POV column. POV’s relationship with VIOL is a moderate  $0.46$ , and its  $r$  with HOM is a strong  $0.68$ . Shift to the HFR column. Grab a look at its very strong,  $0.84$  relationship with FASUIC. As one variable’s score increases or decreases so does the other’s, and in very close sync.

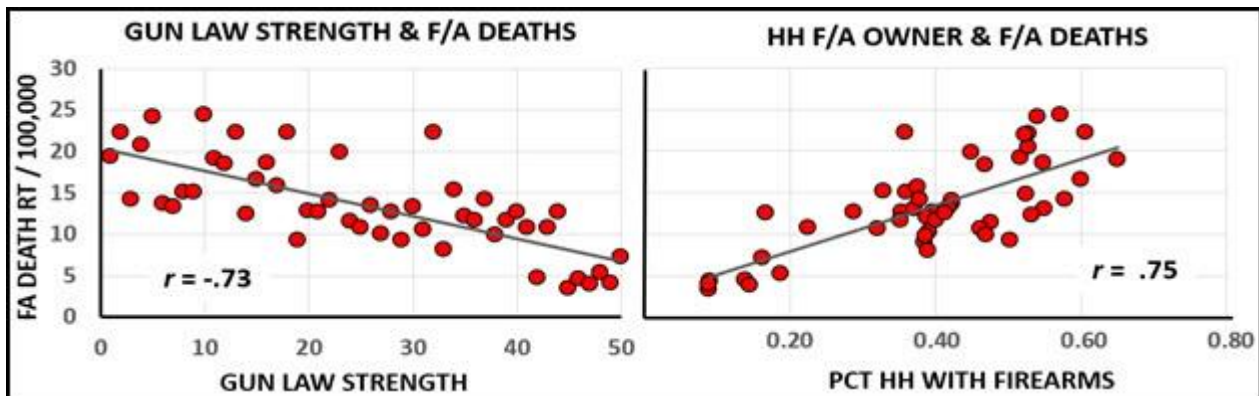
Let’s begin. We’ll take it one “effect” at a time.

- State violent crime rates (VIOL): Poverty has the only effect of note, an  $r$  of  $0.46$ . Its sign is positive and the relationship is moderate, meaning that as percent of residents in poverty increases, violence rates also tend to get worse. Only “glitch” is that “violent crimes”, as defined by the UCR, include non-gun incidents. But the implication is clear: more poverty = more violence.
- State aggravated assault rates (AASLT): Poverty is the only causal variable with at least a moderate relationship. Again, it’s positive, meaning that aggravated assaults - which also include non-gun incidents - are more likely in poorer areas.
- State criminal homicide rates (HOM): Poverty is again the only causal variable of note. Its influence is evident in the left graph. The correlation, a strong  $r$  of  $0.68$ , is “positive”, meaning that as the proportion of a state’s poor residents goes up, so do its homicide rates. Since guns are the most common way to accomplish murder, their role in the relationship seems assured.



- Firearm death rates (FADEATH): This effect variable, which specifically addresses gun deaths, has a strong relationship with poverty ( $r=0.63$ , above right) and two other “causes”: state gun law strength and state household firearms ownership (see below). Note that the direction of the relationship

between GLS and FADEATH is “negative”: as gun laws get *stronger*, gun death rates *decrease*.



There is a little “glitch”. Our introductory matrix revealed that GLS and HFR are strongly correlated (-0.84). So we recomputed their individual relationships with FADEATH while “controlling” (removing) their partner’s possibly additive effects (below left). Sure enough, check out the  $r$ ’s circled in red. Once the counterpart’s influence is removed, those strong relationships that GLS (-0.73) and HFR (0.75) enjoyed with FADEATH now fall below the .40 threshold of moderate strength. On the other hand, poverty’s strong  $r$  of 0.63 with FADEATH is unaffected when HFR is removed from the picture, and remains a considerable 0.55 when the influence of GLS is taken out. Bottom line: poverty wields a big stick on its own, while GLS and HFR seem far more influential as a team.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH FADEATH				
	ORIG $r$	CONTROLLING FOR:		
		POV	GLS	HFR
POV	0.63		0.55	0.63
GLS	-0.73	-0.68		-0.28
HFR	0.75	0.75	0.37	

RELATIONSHIPS WITH FASUIC				
	ORIG $r$	CONTROLLING FOR:		
		POV	GLS	HFR
POV	0.30		0.01	0.08
GLS	-0.75	-0.72		-0.15
HFR	0.84	0.82	0.59	

- Firearm suicide rates (FASUIC):** Firearms suicide rates can’t be attributed to poverty. Their correlation literally drops to zero when either GLS or HFR are taken into account. Nor, as our “controlling for” exercise demonstrates, are firearm suicides substantially driven by gun law strength (above right). Check out those red circles. Note how the  $r$  between GLS and FASUIC (-0.75) plunges to a measly -0.15 once HFR, with which GLS is closely linked (-0.84), comes into the picture. Reversing that, HFR retains a heady relationship with FASUIC ( $r=0.59$ ) even after we remove GLS’s contribution. In the end, the real driver of firearms suicide seems to be gun availability. And that makes perfect sense.



We came to near-identical conclusions two-and-a-half years ago when a string of massacres befell our tortured land (“[Four Weeks, Six Massacres](#)”). And despite [Giffords’](#) and OGVP’s bountiful praise of California’s supposedly stern approach to regulating firearms, nothing’s really changed. Its assault weapons “ban”, for example, continues to be mostly an effort in pretending to regulate. Here’s some self-plagiarism from “[An American Tragedy](#)”:

But don’t California’s “strong” gun laws prohibit “assault weapons”? Technically yes, but the devil is in the details. For example, if a gun has a removable magazine, it can’t sport features such as a protruding pistol grip. Wily manufacturers have adapted with a host of legal variants.



Our essay depicted the “California-legal” rifles used in the 2015 San Bernardino

massacre. So have things changed? Grab a look at the [AP photo](#) of a gun display in a Los Angeles-area gun store. According to the accompanying *L.A. Times* piece (it’s niftily entitled “A troubling California trend: More violent crimes with guns even as restrictions tighten”) *gun violence has* changed. It’s gotten *worse*.

Reacting to the crisis, [California Governor Kevin Newsom just signed](#) a cluster of bills, from [SB 2](#), which “strengthens California’s restrictions regarding public carry laws by enhancing the existing licensing system”, to [AB 732](#), which “strengthens the process for removing firearms from people who are prohibited from owning them due to a criminal conviction.” However well-intentioned, these laws fail to address the socioeconomic problems that, as our “[Neighborhoods](#)” posts regularly point out, underlie violent crime (see, for example, “[What’s Up. Violence. Where? Where Else?](#)”). As the below table demonstrates, this consequence is readily apparent at the level of police precincts.

Our recent essay about violence in Los Angeles, “[Good News/Bad News](#)” compared LAPD Divisions at each end of the homicide, aggravated assault and robbery spectrum during the first five months of 2021, 2022 and 2023. This time we used [LAPD data](#) to compare violent crime rates and shooting victim rates per/100,000 pop. during the January 1-September 30 periods in 2021 and 2023 for the five LAPD Divisions at each extreme of the violent crime spectrum:

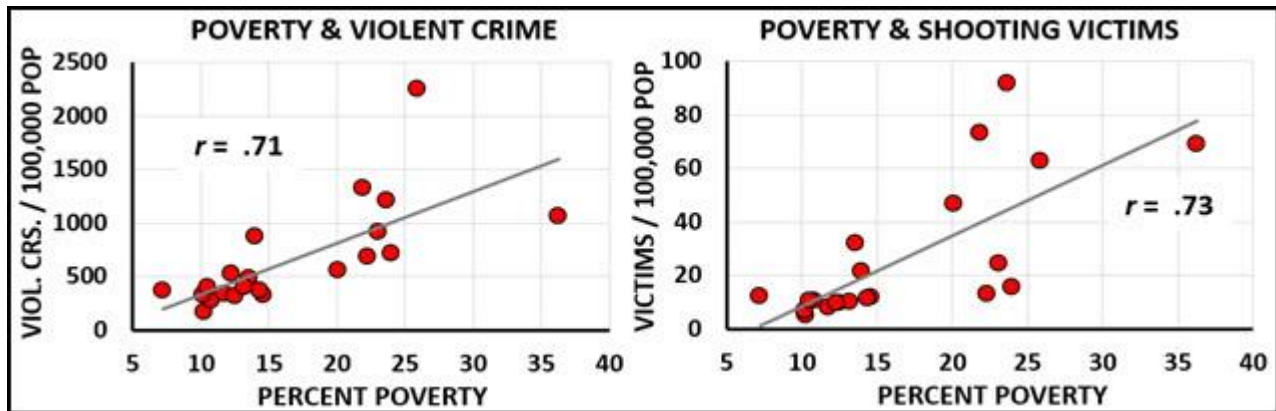
			1/1/2023 - 9/30/2023				1/1/2021 - 9/30/2021				
LEAST VIOL	DIVISION	POP	POV PCT	VIOL CRIMES	VIOL CR RT	SHTG VICTS	SHTG VICT RT	VIOL CRIMES	VIOL CR RT	SHTG VICTS	SHTG VICT RT
		West L.A	242928	10.3	402	165.5	12	4.9	397	163.4	8
	Devonshire	230518	10.8	635	275.5	24	10.4	570	247.3	16	6.9
	Foothill	196318	10.2	643	327.5	13	6.6	652	332.1	26	13.2
	Mission	249755	14.6	818	327.5	29	11.6	884	353.9	32	12.8
	West Valley	201893	10.5	798	395.3	21	10.4	684	338.8	18	8.9
	AVG.		11.3		298.3		8.8		287.1		9.0
MOST VIOL	Hollywood	131236	14	1140	868.7	28	21.3	1344	1024.1	24	18.3
	Southeast	150720	23.7	1820	1207.5	138	91.6	1812	1202.2	184	122.1
	Newton	149495	36.3	1580	1056.9	103	68.9	1487	994.7	124	82.9
	77th St.	187292	21.9	2476	1322.0	137	73.1	2597	1386.6	228	121.7
	Central	81747	25.9	1838	2248.4	51	62.4	1709	2090.6	38	46.5
	AVG.		24.4		1340.7		63.5		1339.6		78.3
CITYWIDE	3908705	16.6	22533	576.5	906	23.2	22823	583.9	1100	28.1	

- Violent crime. Citywide, LAPD reported a January 1-September 30 drop from 22,823 in 2021 to 22,533 in 2023. That’s only one-point-three percent. And as one would expect, the benefits weren’t equally dispersed. Two Divisions in the “least violent” group (West Valley and Devonshire) experienced substantial upticks. As for the “most violent” group, ups and downs among its members produced virtually the same average rates for both periods.
- Shooting victims. Similar ups and downs led to virtually no change in the average number of shooting victims of the five “least violent” Divisions. However, the mean score of the “most violent” group materially improved. That was due to substantial drops in the number of victims in Southeast, Newton and, especially, 77th. St. Division. But rates in Hollywood and, particularly, Central Division worsened.

We don’t discount that whatever improvements took place – again, note the substantial decline in shooting victims in 77th. St. Division – may have been produced by more attention to local needs. Or, say, more vigorous policing. But differences between Divisions remained pronounced. In 2023 LAPD’s five most violent Divisions had a violent crime rate *four and one-half times* worse, and its citizens were being shot *more than seven times more frequently*, than residents of the five least violent Divisions.

What underlies these dramatic between-group differences? Grab a look at our introductory bar graph. Then glance at the above table’s “POV PCT” column. High-violence divisions had *more than twice* the percentage of residents living in poverty (see

“[Good News/Bad News](#)” for how Division poverty rates were calculated.) And that unholy alliance between poverty and violence extends far beyond our ten-Division sample. These scattergrams, which represent all 21 LAPD Field Divisions (each is a “dot”) demonstrate the strong association between poverty and 2023 violent crime, and between poverty and 2023 shooting victims, throughout the “City of Angels”:



That’s why “feel good” pieces such as a recent [L.A. Times article](#) that boasts of a substantial drop in “overall” violence leave us a bit cold. What to do? Vigorously address the underlying issue. As our [Neighborhoods](#) posts frequently point out, crime, and particularly *violent* crime, reflects the consequences of living in deprivation. And that’s not something that even the best policing can hope to correct.