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WORLDS APART...NOT!

Violence-wise, poor neighborhoods in Oakland and Houston aren't so different



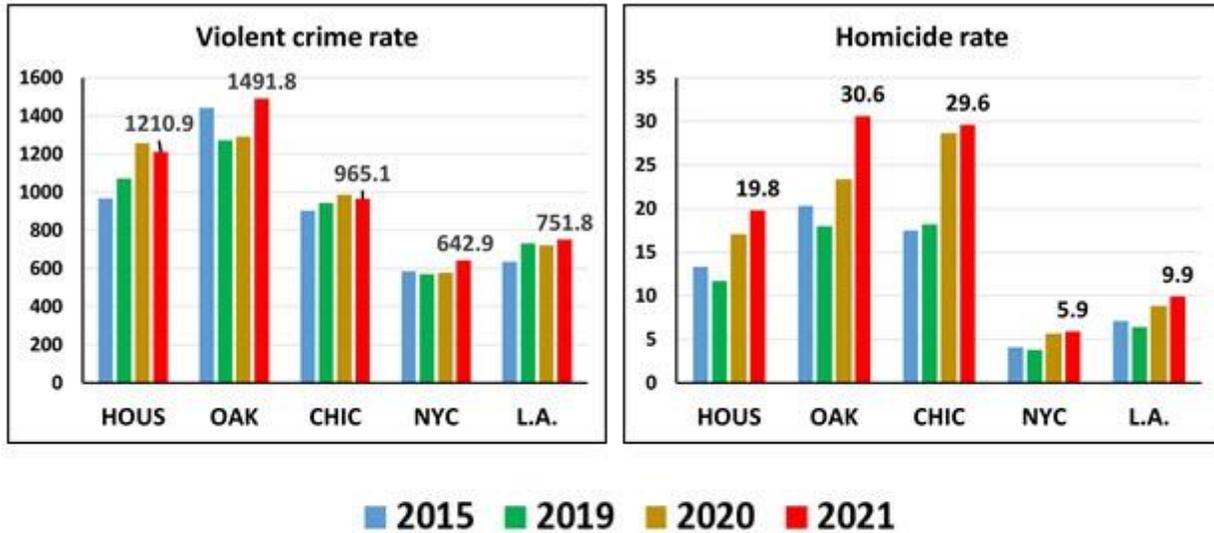
For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Oakland Police Chief LeRonne L. Armstrong's [September 27 news release](#) was seriously disquieting. "In the midst of the deadliest week this year with eight lives lost" he announced a major effort to deploy "all available resources" to fight the gun violence that threatened to consume his community. While the good Chief didn't mention it, [only a week had passed](#) since a shooting just outside City Hall claimed the fourth death by gunfire in less than a day. And what the Chief *couldn't* know was that on September 28 – one day after his comments – [two shooters would open fire inside a local high school complex](#), wounding six including a security guard, in what the beset city has called a gang-related attack.

We posted an update about the school shooting on the twenty-ninth. But what we couldn't predict was that on the same day the Department of Justice would issue [an elaborate news release](#) announcing a "surge of resources" to combat violence in Houston.

Houston?

In law enforcement circles, and likely elsewhere, Oakland's long carried a reputation for being a dangerous place. Not so much America's famed "Space City". Boasting nearly two and one-half million residents, the home of each U.S. person-on-the-moon mission ranks [fourth, population-wise](#), behind New York City, Los Angeles and Chicago. And other than for occasional slap-downs over the behavior of its cops (see, for example, "[Before Jet Blue](#)") it's mostly figured in our essays as the place where [George Floyd](#) earned his criminal stripes before relocating to Minneapolis.

Our bad. After reading about the AG’s intentions, we looked up Houston’s crime numbers. And while they’re not quite “up” to Oakland’s level, they’re also quite bad. Here’s a comparo that includes New York City, L.A. and Chicago as well:

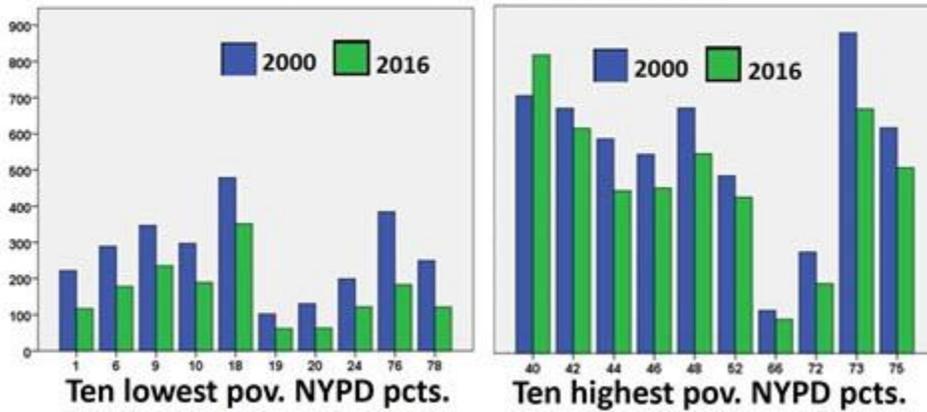


	2015		2019		2020		2021	
	Viol	Mur	Viol	Mur	Viol	Mur	Viol	Mur
HOUS	966.7	13.3	1072.2	11.7	1256.3	17.0	1210.9	19.8
OAK	1442.5	20.3	1271.8	18.0	1290.9	23.3	1491.8	30.6
CHIC	903.8	17.5	943.2	18.2	986.9	28.6	965.1	29.6
NYC	585.8	4.1	570.7	3.8	577.8	5.6	642.9	5.9
L.A.	634.8	7.1	732.2	6.4	721.9	8.8	751.8	9.9

(2015 and 2019 data is from the [UCR](#). 2020 data is from the [NIBRS](#). 2021 data for Houston is from the [NIBRS](#). 2021 data for the other cities is from their sites. Click [here](#) for LAPD, [here](#) for NYPD, [here](#) for Chicago, and [here](#) for Oakland).

Full stop. Municipal boundaries are artificial constructs. People live in *neighborhoods*. And as we’ve often reported, residents of economically better-off places endure less violence – often, far less – than their deprived cousins. Consider, say, New York City. Despite recent surges in violence, the crime rates that former Mayor Bloomberg [used to brag about](#) remain, comparatively speaking, a marvel. But even in the Big Apple, violence and affluence are undeniably linked. Here, for example, is the somewhat dated comparo in “[Be Careful What You Brag About \(Part II\)](#)”:

New York City felony assault rates



Our data forays indicate that neighborhood poverty continues to exert its unholy influence, in New York City and elsewhere:

- “[What’s up? Violence](#)” set out homicide, aggravated assault and robbery rates per 100,000 pop. For New York City’s wealthy Upper East Side (pop. 220,000) and its downtrodden Brownsville/Ocean Hill area (pop. 86,000).

NYPD	% Pov	Homicide		Agg Aslt		Robbery	
		2020	2021	2020	2021	2020	2021
19th	7.2	0.5	0.9	51	69.1	107.7	79.1
73rd	29.4	29.1	26.7	674	744.2	290.7	267.4

- It’s not just New York City. Here we use data from “What’s Up?” to compare LAPD’s advantaged West L.A. area (pop. 228,000) with the city’s chronically poor 77th. Street district (pop. 175,000):

LAPD	% Pov	Homicide		Agg Aslt		Robbery	
		2020	2021	2020	2021	2020	2021
WLA	11.3	1.8	0.0	96	96.9	64.5	69.7
77th St	30.7	32.0	35.4	1087	986.2	478.9	477.1

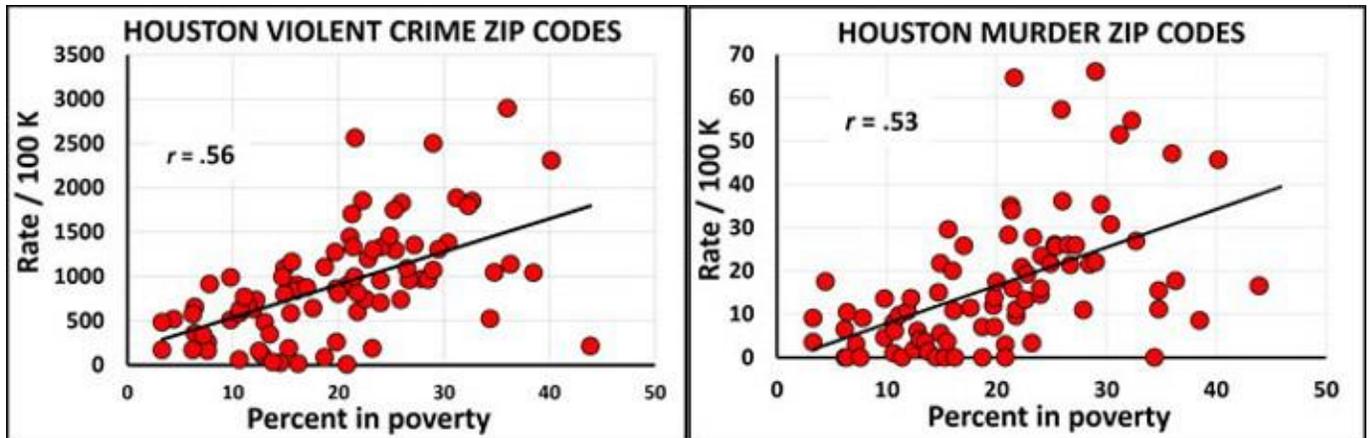
- Data from Chicago PD’s [2021 Annual Report](#) and the city’s [community poverty level report](#) was used to compare homicide, violent crime and poverty rates between CPD’s 20th. District (its primary constituent neighborhood is [Lincoln Park](#), pop. 70,492, pov. 12.3%) and its 7th. District, which serves the chronically troubled [Englewood area](#) (pop. 24,369, pov. 46.6%). These are rates, so they're directly comparable. Once again, poverty’s influence seems indisputable:

Chicago area	CPD Dist.	% Pov	Homicide		Viol. crime	
			2020	2021	2020	2021
Lincoln Pk	20	12.3	7.6	3.3	314.8	378.8
Englewood	7	46.6	126	97	3246.3	3001.2

Houston

So what about our new places of interest? Do neighborhood economic conditions exert a like influence on the personal safety of Houston’s inhabitants? There’s been a “tweak” in our approach. We’ve grown fond of the Census’ ability to specify income and poverty by ZIP. [Houston has ninety-six ZIP codes](#). Eliminating those that are clearly non-residential or include adjacent cities, we wound up with eighty-five. Turning to the [Census](#), we recorded each Zip’s percent of residents in poverty (i.e., “below 100 percent of the poverty level”).

[Houston PD’s crime data portal](#) provides a street address for each crime incident, and the ZIP codes of most. Filling in those that were missing, we coded full-year 2021 data for aggravated assaults, robberies and murders (not simply “homicides,” but unlawful, intentional killings.)



Do Houston’s neighborhoods experience a connection between economic conditions and violence? According to our scattergrams – each dot is a Zip – the answer seems “yes”. As Zip’s get poorer, murder and violent crime rates consistently increase. While the relationship isn’t perfect – some poor places had no murders – the correlations are substantial.

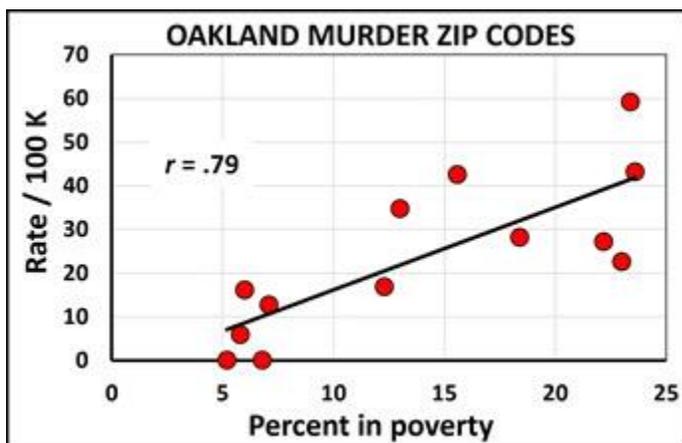
Searching for another way to visualize the relationship, we fell back on our earlier effort in “[Don’t Divest – Invest!](#)”, which contrasted Portland’s ten most “peaceful” neighborhoods with the ten most racked by crime and violence. This table, which sets

out Zip codes in order of poverty, compares Houston’s five wealthiest Zip’s with the five most disadvantaged:

Houston’s five most prosperous ZIP’s								
ZIP	Pop.	Pov.	Murd	Rate	Viol Cr	Rate	White	Black
77005	29022	3.3	1	3.4	49	168.8	78.9	2.4
77094	11022	3.3	1	9.1	53	480.9	57	4.8
77007	40112	4.4	7	17.5	208	518.5	74	5.6
77062	25568	6.2	0	0.0	43	168.2	68.8	9.2
77098	15487	6.2	1	6.5	89	574.7	73.3	3.1
Houston’s five poorest								
ZIP	Pop.	Pov.	Murd	Rate	Viol Cr	Rate	White	Black
77026	21269	36	10	47.0	616	2896.2	27.7	50.5
77060	45376	36.3	8	17.6	516	1137.2	61.9	18
77093	46985	38.5	4	8.5	488	1038.6	74	11.1
77051	17547	40.2	8	45.6	405	2308.1	15	75
77050	6052	43.9	1	16.5	13	214.8	38.1	25.3

“Disadvantage” clearly carries some violent baggage. While the uncertainties of data (and the vagaries of human nature) create exceptions, the trend is nonetheless clear: more bucks, less violence. In addition to rates, which are comparable across jurisdictions, we also included actual murder and violent crime counts. Proportion of White and Black residents is from the Census. Its [2021 estimates](#) indicate that about thirty percent of Houston’s residents are White and about twenty-two percent are Black. Note that the latter are substantially under-represented in the most prosperous Zip’s. And that under-representation carries some potentially lethal baggage. According to DOJ’s just-released [national criminal victimization data for 2021](#), Black persons endure a substantially higher rate of serious violent victimization (7.4 per 1,000) than either Whites or Hispanics (each was 5.4).

Oakland



[Oakland’s crime data](#) includes street address but not Zip codes. Limiting events to those classified as “murder”, we entered the address of each incident into Google for the Zip. Oakland has [thirteen regular Zip’s](#). Excluding one murder in a Zip it shares with another city, it reported 100 murders in 2021. (We ignored

two dozen “homicides” not classified as murders.)

Here’s the scattergram. As in Houston, each dot is a Zip. Although Oakland’s number of “cases” is limited, the relationship between poverty and murder seems well supported. That connection, as well as the disadvantage suffered by Black persons, is evident in a five wealthiest/five poorest comparo (again, Zip’s are in order of poverty):

Oakland’s five most prosperous ZIP’s						
ZIP	Pop.	Pov.	Murd	Rate	White	Black
94611	39042	5.2	0	0	66.3	6.7
94618	17110	5.8	1	5.8	69.3	4.4
94619	24833	6	4	16.1	36.9	22.9
94602	29593	6.8	0	0.0	45.8	15.4
94610	31553	7.1	4	12.7	54.6	16.9
Oakland’s five poorest						
ZIP	Pop.	Pov.	Murd	Rate	White	Black
94603	35486	18.4	10	28.2	15.5	28.9
94607	25723	22.2	7	27.2	28.5	30.4
94601	53104	23	12	22.6	20.7	16.2
94621	33820	23.4	20	59.1	12.8	30.5
94612	16203	23.6	7	43.2	36.6	26

So what’s the takeaway? Houston and Oakland follow the same pattern that we’ve repeatedly observed within cities. [“Don’t “Divest” – Invest!”](#) examined twenty Portland neighborhoods. Its “ten most/least peaceful” comparo essentially duplicates our findings here, and literally everywhere else we’ve looked. And it’s not just “within” cities. That same pattern: more poverty, more crime is also evident in between-city comparisons. Check out [“But is it Really Satan?”](#), which looked at poverty and crime in twenty-one Louisiana cities.

Fine, you say, but what to do? No matter how well done, policing cannot itself “fix” neighborhoods. To be sure, attempts to do so continue. Some are couched under the umbrella of DOJ’s [“Project Safe Neighborhoods.”](#) To its credit, that well-known strategy’s current incarnation goes beyond tough-nosed enforcement. It now articulates a need for “fostering trust and legitimacy in our communities, supporting community-based organizations that help prevent violence from occurring in the first place.”

Yet cops can’t defeat poverty. For *that* conundrum we turn to the [Urban Institute](#). Its landmark study, [“Tackling Persistent Poverty in Distressed Urban Neighborhoods,”](#) offers a splendid approach for developing and instituting “place-conscious strategies” that can rebuild the *human* infrastructure. Their bucketful of to-do’s, which we

discussed in "[Mission Impossible?](#)" includes educational opportunities, job training and apprenticeships, summer jobs for youth, transportation, child care, and physical and mental health resources. And yes, safety is important. So police *do* have a role to play. But the solution clearly calls for a lot more than policing.