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AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH

For some inner cities, The Great Crime Drop is The Great Myth

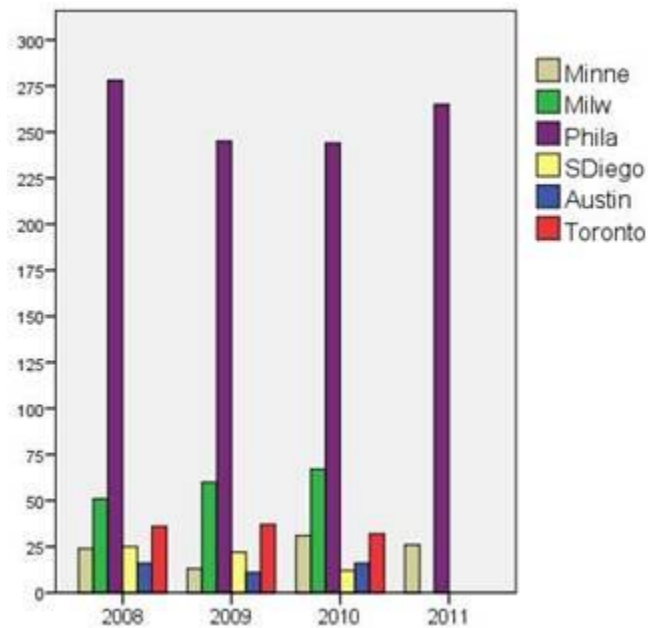
By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. More than two-hundred fifty police chiefs recently gathered in Washington for the annual conference of the [Police Executive Research Forum](#). Much of their meeting was devoted to what has become the most pressing topic in big-city policing: rising gun violence.

PERF used the occasion to present data from questionnaires sent to more than 1,000 police departments. About half were returned (N=588). Consistent with PERF's membership, responding agencies trended to medium and large size, with a mean of 579 officers and a service population of 553,119. Gun crimes reported by PERF cities dovetailed with like measures in the UCR (click [here](#) for PERF's slide show). Gun homicide rates aligned perfectly with national data, falling from 4.2/100,000 in 2008 to 3.8 in 2009 and 3.7 in 2010. Summary statistics for armed robbery with a gun and aggravated assault with a gun were also very close.

There are two caveats. First, even if one finds the numbers reassuring, they still leave the U.S. with a homicide rate more than twice Canada's and more than four times that of the U.K. and other industrialized nations. And there's a bigger problem. While the aggregate statistics from PERF suggest the same as the UCR – that crime and violence have been falling since the early 1990s – it's increasingly evident that the benefits of the so-called Great Crime Drop have not been evenly distributed.

PERF bored in on three cities with high rates of gun violence – Minneapolis, Milwaukee and Philadelphia – and three with low rates, San Diego, Austin, and Toronto.

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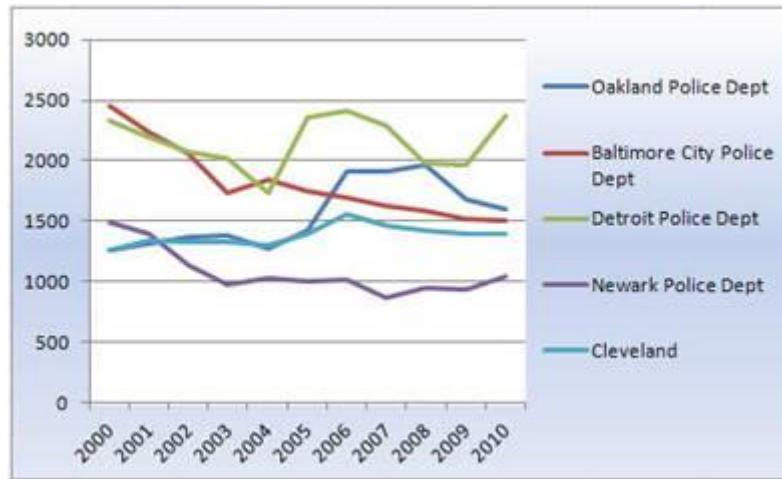


PERF gun homicide counts for six cities (2011 incomplete)

As the chart indicates, once the numbers are disaggregated the vaunted crime drop loses some of its luster. That's especially true for high gun violence cities. Milwaukee's three-year gun homicide trend is up (51, 60, 67). Minneapolis gun homicides rose in the third year but moderated somewhat in the fourth (24, 13, 31, 26). Gun homicides in Philadelphia, which dropped sharply in 2009, climbed back up in 2011 (278, 245, 244, 265).

For the three low gun-violence cities, only San Diego's count fell each year (25, 22, 12). Toronto's gun homicide count dropped in 2010 after being flat for two years (36, 37, 32). Austin's fell in 2009 then returned to its original level (16, 11, 16).

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UCR violent crime rates per 100,000, 2000-2010

UCR data for five of the most violent cities in the U.S. confirms that the plight of certain communities is being masked by large improvements elsewhere. Between 2000 and 2010 violence rates plunged in Baltimore (2458 to 1500) and Newark (1496 to 1041). But in Cleveland (1263 to 1393), Detroit (2325 to 2378) and Oakland (1261 to 1604) the numbers got worse, and for the latter, spectacularly so.

Clearly, the Great Crime Drop hasn't been so great everywhere. Still, as long as the more prosperous communities remain in good shape, does anyone really notice? Philadelphia police commissioner Charles Ramsay, who attended the conference, [thinks not](#). "It [gun violence] happens every single day in Philadelphia...It happens every single day in cities across the country, but if it's a black killing a black [no one cares]." Commissioner Ramsay's burden is particularly heavy. According to UCR preliminary statistics, between January and June 2011 Philadelphia, pop. 1,526,006, had 158 murders, twelve more than during the same period in 2010. That yields a rate of 10.4/100,000. By comparison, Los Angeles, pop. 3,792,621, had 148 murders (eight less than in 2010) for a rate of 3.9, while New York City, pop. 8,175,133, had 227 murders (two less than in 2010) for a rate of 2.8.

Philadelphia isn't suffering alone. Recent news reports indicate an upsurge in gun killings in [Camden](#), [Newark](#) and [Detroit](#) as well. Police chiefs know that they can't alter the fundamentals. They can't make jobs, keep kids in school or prevent teenage pregnancies. Poverty and hopelessness are beyond their ability to influence. Worse, thanks to the economic crisis, departments in less affluent areas are suffering the

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additional whammy of plunging tax collections, leading to layoffs and other diminished resources.

So what's left? Much of the discussion was about limiting the availability of firearms. And there the news is also bad. With limited resources and a neutered, shrinking ATF, going after straw buyers, street dealers and interstate traffickers is tougher than ever (click [here](#) for a discussion about illegal gun sources and investigative techniques.) What's more, legislators seem to have taken a fancy to weakening the few limits that do exist. Concealed carry has become a near-universal right, while “[stand your ground](#)” laws have vastly expanded the notion of self-defense, shielding even some out-and-out criminals from prosecution.

Well, there *is* one saving grace. As guns saturate our country, they will eventually endanger even the affluent. Of course, by then there could be way too many firearms to control. It's the same dilemma posed by climate change. By the time we strip off our ideological blinders and see the light, it may be too late to do anything but cry.