

Posted 10/19/08

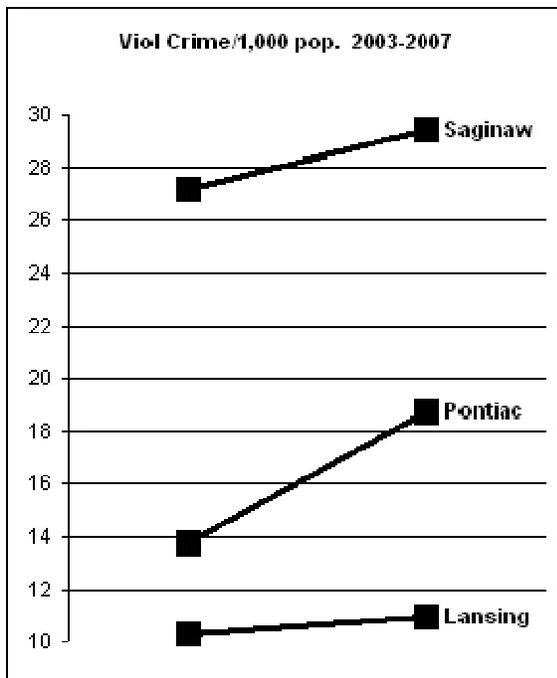
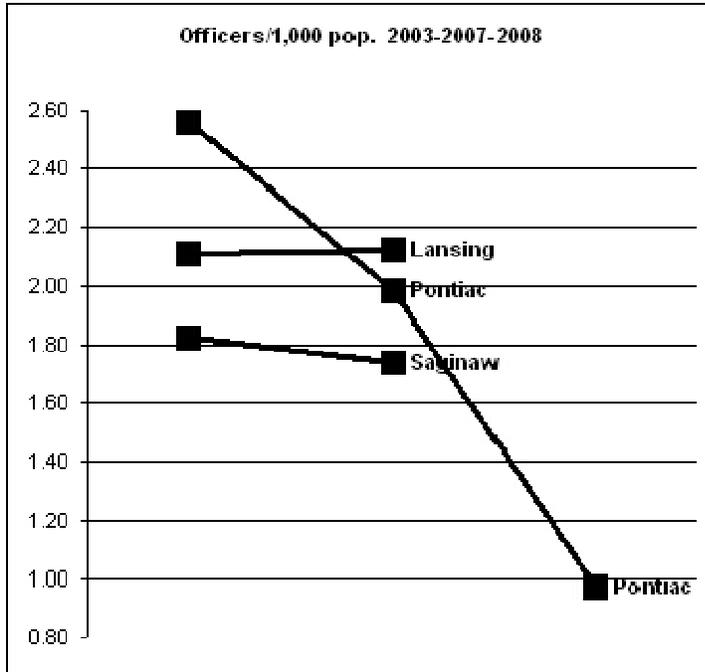
## COPS MATTER

### *Sharp cuts in police threaten community safety*

*By Julius (Jay) Wachtel.* Do cops really matter? Just ask Pontiac (Mich.) resident [Larry Trammell](#), who says that with choppers hovering and bullets flying living in the besieged city is like being in Iraq. Or ask police chief Valard Gross, who's trying to protect 66,000 citizens with a grand total of *sixty-five officers*. That comes out to 0.98 officers per 1,000 population, less than half the [national average](#) of 2.4/1000.

It wasn't always like that. As recently as four years ago the working class community fielded 170 sworn officers. But as industrial employment collapsed severe budgetary shortfalls beset cities across the Northeast. Pontiac responded with layoffs. By the end of 2007 police headcount had dropped to about 100, and when citizens refused to pass special levies dozens more were let go in the following months. This November voters will get a chance to raise taxes and bring back 15 officers. If that doesn't work, [it's been reported](#) that the Chief will resign.

It's usually difficult to isolate the impact of any individual factor on crime. Here, though, we have a "natural experiment." During the past few years, while population remained about the same, Pontiac's police force was slashed by *sixty-two percent*. While we can't know what crime would have looked like had these cops not vaporized, we can compare crime trends in Pontiac with communities that didn't experience large changes in population or police staffing. We chose two Michigan cities: the larger and more affluent Lansing, and the slightly smaller and less affluent Saginaw.



FBI officer data: [2003 2007](#)

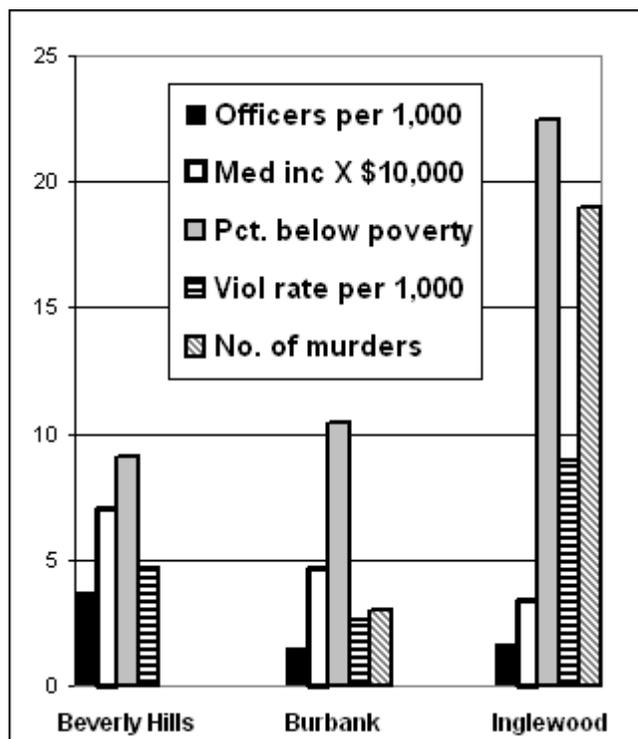
FBI crime data: [2003 2007](#)

Between 2003-2007 officer/population ratios in the most well-to-do community, Lansing, nudged up from 2.11 to 2.12 per 1,000. In Saginaw, the least prosperous, an already low ratio of 1.83 fell moderately, to 1.74. But in Pontiac it plunged, from a relatively healthy 2.56 in 2003 to 1.98 in 2007 and an abysmal 0.98 in 2008 (current data for the other cities is not available.) Violent crime tells a similar story, trending

up slightly in Lansing from 10.3 to 11 per 1,000, increasing somewhat more steeply in Saginaw, from 27.2 to 29.4, but rocketing from 13.8 to 18.8 in Pontiac. Homicides this year in Pontiac already exceed the 2007 total, so it's likely that this trend will continue.

In brief, the data support the conclusion that sharp cuts in police staffing in Pontiac contributed to a dramatic increase in violent crime. Keeping in mind that this is an extreme example, it does suggest that cops are a good thing. But affording them is something else again. During 2003-2007 the richest city, Lansing (1999 median income \$34,833, percent below poverty level 16.9) enjoyed the best police coverage, while the poorest, Saginaw (1999 median income \$26,485, percent below poverty level 28.5) had the worst.

You can thank decentralization. In America police are controlled and funded by municipalities, whose budgets for everything from street maintenance to schools, fire and police come almost exclusively from local sources such as sales, property and city income taxes. Consider the writer's home state of California. Using 2000 Census and 2007 FBI data, we compared police staffing and violent crime in the working class city of Inglewood (pop. 115,223, median income \$34,269, 22.5% below poverty level) with the middle to upper-middle class community of Burbank (pop. 104,871, median income \$47,467, 10.5% below poverty level) and, for fun, the disgustingly rich enclave of Beverly Hills (pop. 35,133, median income \$70,945, 9.1% below poverty level).



First the good news. Inglewood (190 officers, 1.65/1,000) actually enjoys a somewhat higher officer ratio than Burbank (154 officers, 1.47/1,000). Now for the bad news. In 2007 Inglewood had 1,036 violent crimes and 19 murders, while Burbank had 274 and 3. That's right, Inglewood had nearly *four times* more violent crime than Burbank. Correcting for population, Inglewood's violent crime ratio, 8.9/1,000 is *more than three times* Burbank's 2.6. Inglewood may have a few more cops, but its crime problem is far more severe.

With Beverly Hills the contrast is even starker. Inglewood has three times the population, twice the violent crime rate and infinitely more murders (it had nineteen, while Beverly Hills had zero.) But its officer/population ratio is *less than half* that of the city known as "90210," whose 130 cops yield a stratospheric ratio of 3.7 officers per 1,000.

Decentralized police and regressive funding have created terrible inequities in police services, with the impact falling most severely on the usual victim: the working-class American. One solution might be to create State-controlled pools to subsidize localities such as Pontiac and Inglewood that are beset by violent crime. No matter their station in life, citizens have a right to equal protection under the law. That should mean equal police protection as well.