

Posted 11/14/23

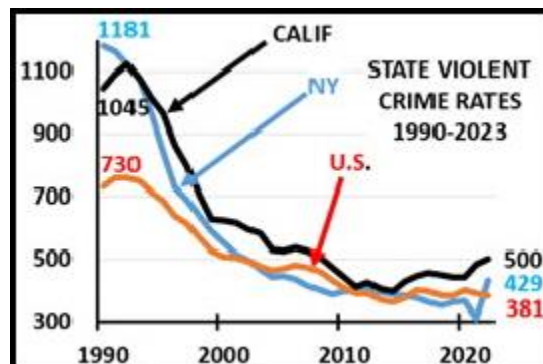
SEE NO EVIL – HEAR NO EVIL – SPEAK NO EVIL

Is the violent crime “problem” really all in our heads?



For *Police Issues* by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Cheekily entitled “This is Your Brain on Crime,” [a recent op-ed essay](#) by Nobel-prize winning economist and famous *New York Times* opinionizer Paul Krugman blasts self-serving politicians of the Red persuasion for promoting the fear that criminal violence is going up. Packed with charts and numbers, Dr. Krugman’s piece, which elaborates on his 2016 [“Inequality and the City”](#) essay, argues that except for a temporary, pandemic-related uptick, criminal violence has receded to historically low levels. Even better, his place of abode, New York City, “happens to have remarkably low crime, with a murder rate around half that of Republican-run cities like Miami and Fort Worth.”

On its face, Dr. Krugman’s contention that the trend in violent crime (homicide, rape, aggravated assault and robbery) is highly favorable seems well supported by data. This graph, and its accompanying table, are based on the latest numbers from the FBI’s [Crime Data Explorer](#).



	VIOLENT CRIME RATES								
	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2021	2022
CALIF	1045.2	966	621.6	526	439.6	428	442	481.2	499.5
N.Y.	1180.9	841.9	553.9	444.4	394.4	380.4	363.8	308.3	429.3
U.S.	729.6	684.5	506.5	469	404.5	373.7	398.5	387	380.7

On the opposite coast, veteran *L.A. Times* staff writer Libor Jany, who covers the police beat, mostly agrees. His [recent article](#), “Crime is down, but fear is up: Why is L.A. still perceived as dangerous?” grouses that T.V. news remains fixated on “grisly murders and wild police chases” even though violent crime has substantially declined. But unlike his east-coast counterpart, Mr. Jany points out that the benefits haven’t been equally dispersed:

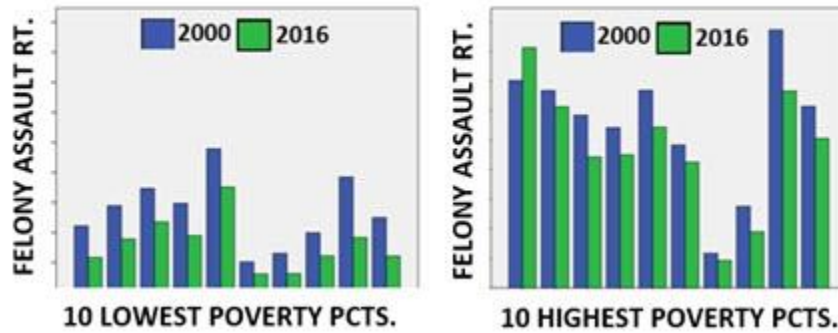
Places that have historically had the highest rates of violent crime, including South L.A., Watts and the northeast San Fernando Valley, remain hot spots. Black residents in the city’s poorest neighborhoods suffer the majority of the bloodshed, with Black children and adolescents in Los Angeles County killed by firearms at triple the rate of their proportion of the population, according to data from the Department of Public Health’s Office of Violence Prevention.

1/1/2023 – 9/30/2023		
	POV	VIOL
DIVISION	PCT	CR RT
LEAST VIOL		
West L.A.	10.3	165.5
Devonshire	10.8	275.5
Foothill	10.2	327.5
Mission	14.6	327.5
West Valley	10.5	395.3
AVG.	11.3	298.3
MOST VIOL		
Hollywood	14	868.7
Southeast	23.7	1207.5
Newton	36.3	1056.9
77th St.	21.9	1322.0
Central	25.9	2248.4
AVG.	24.4	1340.7
CITYWIDE	16.6	576.5

“[Good News/Bad News](#)” and “[Policing Can’t Fix What Really Ails](#)” recently addressed the burdens of economic deprivation in great detail. Check out the table on the left. According to present-year data (1/1 thru 9/30/23) LAPD’s five most violent divisions have violent crime rates nearly *four and one-half times* greater than their counterparts on the least violent end of the spectrum. What’s more, the violent divisions’ poverty rates are also more than twice as large. Compare their numbers to the preceding table. During the first nine months of 2023, four of the five high-violence divisions had violent crime rates that exceeded, several by substantial margins, the *full-year rates* that California, New York and the U.S. endured during the crack wars of the nineties.

So what *about* New York City? Our past analyses – “[Woke Up, America!](#)”, “[Place Matters](#)”, and “[Be Careful What You Brag About \(II\)](#)” – reported that poverty and violence had a powerful connection in Gotham as well. Compare these graphs from “[Be Careful](#)”:

NEW YORK CITY PRECINCTS



Their “Y” (vertical) axes range from zero to 900 felony assaults per 100,000 pop. Clearly, the burden of poverty seems indisputable.

Now comes Dr. Krugman. His essay inspired us to update New York City’s crime numbers, and in a way that leaves (we hope) no doubt as to whether his “one-city” vision really holds up. Using data from [NYPD](#), the [UCR](#), the [FBI](#), the [Census](#), and [the City of New York](#), we collected violent crime numbers for 74 of New York City’s [77 police precincts](#) for the years 2000, 2010, 2015, 2020, 2021 and 2022. We skipped over the 14th. precinct (now “Midtown South”) because of its unique demographics (it’s home to office buildings, Times Square, Grand Central Terminal, Penn Station, Madison Square Garden and the Manhattan Mall). We also left out the “DOC” (Dept. of Corrections) precinct and the 121st. precinct, for which data was incomplete.

After calculating seventy-four precincts’ yearly violent crime rate (murders, felony assaults, rapes and robberies per 100,000 pop.), we identified the five precincts with the highest rates and the five precincts with the lowest rates each year. As it turns out, our “low” and “high” tables each wound up with eight precincts, but only the five “low” and five “high” yearly scores are displayed:

PRECINCTS WITH FIVE LOWEST VIOLENCE RATES

VIOLENT CRIMES		2000		2010		2015		2020		2021		2022		
PCT	POP	POV	#	RT	#	RT	#	RT	#	RT	#	RT	#	RT
123	100738	6.4	107	106.2	74	73.5	85	84.4	77	76.4	45	44.7	80	79.4
111	122211	9.0	246	201.3	139	113.7	119	97.4	106	86.7	115	94.1	189	154.7
122	144552	7.3	305	211.0					167	115.5	177	122.4	200	138.4
20	114575	8.4	310	270.6	158	137.9	132	115.2	148	129.2				
19	220261	7.1	607	275.6	257	116.7	241	109.4						
17	89367	7.7			118	132.0								
112	119739	10.6					109	91.0	114	95.2	136	113.6	190	158.7
68	136071	15.7									153	112.4	171	125.7
AVERAGE		9.0		212.9		114.8		99.5		100.6		97.4		131.4

PRECINCTS WITH FIVE HIGHEST VIOLENCE RATES

VIOLENT CRIMES		2000		2010		2015		2020		2021		2022		
PCT	POP	POV	#	RT	#	RT	#	RT	#	RT	#	RT	#	RT
28	49200	28.4	658	1337.4	460	935.0								
25	50996	32.8	696	1364.8	492	964.8	606	1188.3	557	1092.2	652	1278.5	697	1366.8
73	98506	31.4	1480	1502.4	1134	1151.2	1015	1030.4						
41	54454	38.5	1042	1913.5	707	1298.3	598	1098.2	500	918.2	558	1024.7	765	1404.9
81	68921	30	913	1324.7	721	1046.1								
48	89216	28.4					965	1081.6	805	902.3	880	986.4	1133	1270.0
40	100929	37.1					1139	1128.5	1205	1193.9	1185	1174.1	1455	1441.6
42	93755	38.5							923	984.5	1028	1096.5	1160	1237.3
AVERAGE	33.1	33.1	1488.6	1488.6	1079.1	1079.1	1105.4	1105.4	1018.2	1018.2	1112.0	1112.0	1344.1	1344.1

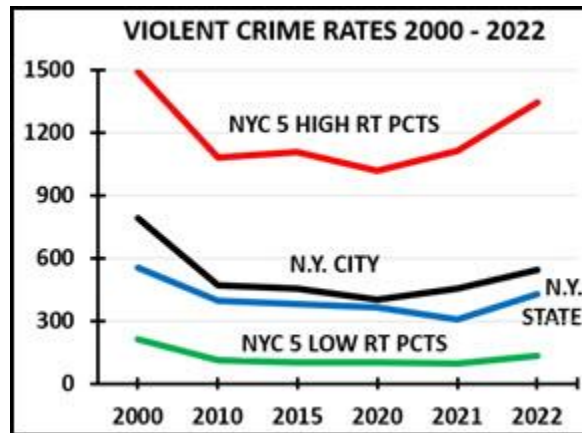
To clarify, # represents the actual number of violent crimes, and RT is the corresponding rate per 100,000 population. Mean rates (“AVERAGE”) were computed for two measures:

- Percent of residents in poverty across the eight districts in each table (2009-2013 est., with precinct boundaries based on comparisons between precinct and [council district maps](#))
- Mean of the five lowest and five highest precinct violence rates each year

More than six-hundred thousand persons (605,977) reside in the eight precincts that made it into our high-violence table. Their mean yearly violent crime rates were *seven to more than eleven times* worse than the corresponding yearly means of their low-violence counterparts. And the overall percentage of residents living in poverty was *3.7 times greater* in the high-violence precincts . Once again, the poverty/violent crime connection seems indisputable.

How does that fit historical trends? Here are New York City and New York state rates since 1990:

	VIOLENT CRIME RATES								
	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2021	2022
NY City	2045.6	1573.2	790.4	673.1	469.1	456.0	404.0	456.4	546.2
N.Y.	1180.9	841.9	553.9	444.4	394.4	380.4	363.8	308.3	429.3



We couldn't find reliable New York City precinct stat's that precede 2000. But since then, the yearly violent crime rates of high-violence precincts have consistently exceeded – usually, by a substantial margin – the corresponding rates of both New York City and New York state. In 2000, as the U.S. was recovering from the crack epidemic of the nineties, our high-rate precincts' mean violent crime rate (1488.6) was *nearly twice* the city's 790.4 and *2.7 times worse* than the state's 553.9. (In fact, the 41st. precinct's sky-high 2000 rate of 1913.5 was far worse than the state's 1990 rate and nearly equaled the city's). By 2022, our high-violence precincts' mean rates were *2.5 times worse* than the city's and *3.1 times worse* than the state's.

Bottom line: citywide rates seriously understate the impact of violent crime on less prosperous areas. Our [Neighborhood](#) posts consistently demonstrate a profound connection between local economic conditions and violent crime. That's not just in La-La land and the Big Apple. Check out New Orleans ("[Hard Times in the Big Easy](#)"). And San Antonio ("[San Antonio Blues](#)"). And South Bend, Indiana ("[Human Renewal](#)"). And Portland and Minneapolis ("[Don't Divest – Invest!](#)").

Most of our readers are well aware that poverty and violence are closely linked. So why would a top economist make sweeping conclusions about crime without addressing within-city differences? Perhaps he wished to avoid implying that poor people are evil. Yet poverty undoubtedly plays a major role in setting the stage for the violence that besets the good, law-abiding residents of lower-income areas. After recent shootings in South Los Angeles' violence-beset Watts neighborhood (it's in Southeast Division), [the leader of a local peace coalition observed](#) that citywide declines in shootings and murders "don't necessarily reflect our reality." According to an L.A.-area gang interventionist, this "reality" can make normal life in poor areas impossible. "It's time for our children to be able to play outside, be able to walk to and from school safely...Because we want to make sure that our kids grow up to be doctors and lawyers and police officers and firefighters...This isn't a color thing."

What to do? While cops *do* matter, the answer lies *way* beyond policing. Once again, let's self-plagiarize from "[Fix Those Neighborhoods!](#)":

Yet no matter how well it's done, policing is clearly not the ultimate solution. Preventing violence is a task for society. As we've repeatedly pitched, a concerted effort to provide poverty-stricken individuals and families with child care, tutoring, educational opportunities, language skills, job training, summer jobs, apprenticeships, health services and – yes – adequate housing could yield vast benefits.

Set aside all that ideological gibberish. For this Administration, and the one after that, fixing neighborhoods is Job #1. We're (still) waiting!