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LET'S STOP PRETENDING

Cops can't correct what most needs fixing



Ma'Khia Bryant Adam Toledo Daunte Wright

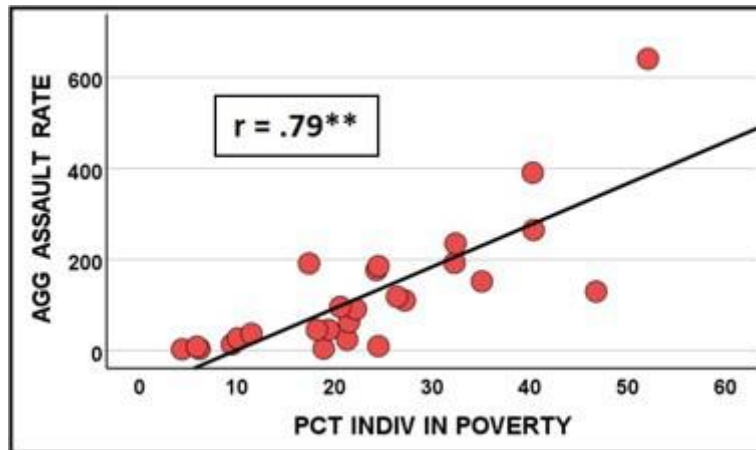
For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. It's a heartbreaking sight, and no less so because we know [how things turned out](#) for the sixteen-year old. Alas, little about Ma'Khia Bryant or her circumstances were likely known by the Columbus, Ohio officer who pulled up to the chaotic scene in response to a 9-1-1 call about someone aggressively wielding a knife. (For a video taken from across the street click [here](#). For a stop-motion bodycam video click [here](#).)

Clearly, the cop had only moments to act. But as one might expect, he was promptly condemned. No less a figure than [LeBron James quickly tweeted](#) a sarcastic "YOU'RE NEXT #ACCOUNTABILITY." Once body cam and bystander videos surfaced, though, their depiction of the speed at which events unfolded and the imminent threat to life somewhat muted the criticism. Taking the time to "de-escalate" could have been the same as doing nothing. Colleagues and citizens from across the racial spectrum have come to the star-crossed officer's defense. Yet regardless of their (admittedly belated) support, consider how killing a young person must feel.

However justifiable, the shooting reignited chronic discontent. Only six years after Columbus resolved [a DOJ patterns-and-practices inquiry](#) into alleged police misconduct, [its Mayor asked](#) (and activists demanded) that the Fed's launch another. We're well aware that the present tenor is to blame poor outcomes on the cops, and only the cops. And we agree that there's always something to gain by dispassionately analyzing their practices. We've done it ourselves. This time, though, let's focus on something that's beyond the power of even the most enlightened officers to change. We're talking, of course, about *place*.

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We'll start with Columbus. It has [twenty-six regular ZIP codes](#). We collected their population and poverty rates from the [Census](#), and computed the number of aggravated assaults using the [LexisNexis community crime map](#), to which Columbus PD contributes. (2019 was chosen to avoid the influences of the pandemic.)



Check out the scattergram. Each ZIP code is represented by a dot. Note how poverty and aggravated assault (rate per 100,000 pop.) increase in nearly lock-step fashion. Their association, which yields a robust .79 “r” coefficient, reflects the powerful relationship between crime and economic conditions that we harp about in our [Neighborhoods](#) essays.

Five best (lowest) rates					Five worst (highest) rates				
ZIP	POP	PCT INDIV IN POVERTY	2019 AGG ASLTS	AGG ASLT RATE	ZIP	POP	PCT INDIV IN POVERTY	2019 AGG ASLTS	AGG ASLT RATE
43221	33360	4.4	1	3.0	43205	12455	32.3	24	192.7
43220	27265	6.2	1	3.7	43223	24222	32.4	57	235.3
43231	22122	18.9	1	4.5	43203	7924	40.4	21	265
43230	58540	5.9	5	8.5	43211	23030	40.3	90	390.8
43202	20491	24.5	2	9.8	43222	4056	52.1	26	641
Mean =		12.0	2	5.9	Mean =		39.5	43.6	345

To make the connection between poverty and violence even more evident we

ZIP	POP	PCT INDIV IN POVERTY	2019 AGG ASLTS	AGG ASLT RATE
43232	46879	20.6	45	96.0

compared the five ZIP’s with the lowest aggravated assault rates with the five ZIP’s at the other end. Look at the their rates. Their contrast

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could hardly be greater. Ma'Khia Bryant lost her life in a different neighborhood, [ZIP 43232](#). Its poverty and aggravated assault rates, which seem sizeable from an outsider's perspective, fall about midway through the city's distribution. But Ms. Bryant wasn't raised there. Her mother lost custody of her four children long ago. About two years ago, after a stint with grandma didn't work out, social services assigned Ms. Bryant and a younger sister to be fostered by a White couple. That's where they were living when the tragedy happened.

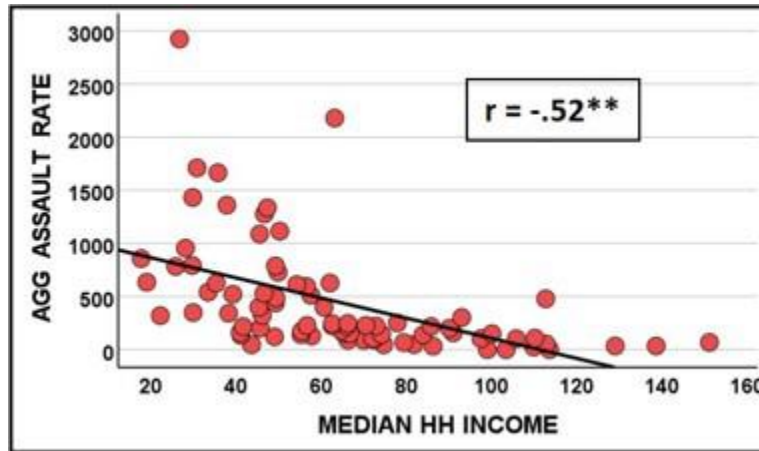
Minneapolis is another place that's been long battered by poverty and episodes of policing gone wrong. [Derek Chauvin](#) isn't the only MPD cop who's been convicted of murder. Only two years ago then-MPD officer [Mohammed Noor](#) was found guilty of murdering a 9-1-1 caller whom he impulsively mistook as a threat. And there's been some recent local competition. On Friday, April 11, as Chauvin's trial closed its second week, a police officer employed by Brooklyn Center, an incorporated Minneapolis suburb of about 30,000, [accidentally drew the wrong weapon](#). Although Kim Potter yelled "Taser" three times, the trigger she squeezed was that of her pistol. Daunte Wright, a Black 20-year old man, fell dead.

Mr. Wright had been stopped for a license plate issue. But when officers tried to arrest him on a gun-related warrant, he bolted for his car. That's when the 26-year year police veteran committed that rare but [not unheard-of](#) blunder. Honest mistake or not, the tragedy led Minnesota Senator Amy Klobuchar to insist that her colleagues pass the "[George Floyd Justice in Policing Act](#)." (It seeks, among other things, to ban chokeholds and end qualified immunity for police.) Senator Klobuchar also offered some pointed remarks at Mr. Wright's funeral. "True justice is not done as long as having expired tags means losing your life during a traffic stop," she said.

Ms. Potter and her chief [both resigned](#). They were soon joined by the city manager. Instead of murder, though, the former cop was charged with 2nd. degree manslaughter. If convicted she faces "only" ten years.

Let's subject Minneapolis to the same looking-glass we used for Columbus. Minneapolis also contributes to the [LexisNexis crime map](#). However, in 2019 it identified crime locations by neighborhood instead of ZIP code. There are eighty regular neighborhoods in the city. For each we obtained population and median household income data from the [Statistical Atlas of the United States](#). We used the latter (/1000) instead of poverty rates. Here's the scattergram:

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Once again, the association between economic conditions and violence is crystal clear. As income increases aggravated assault rates literally plunge. (Thus the correlation statistic is negative, meaning that the “variables” move in opposite directions.) We also compared the five Minneapolis neighborhoods at both extremes of the aggravated-assault scale. Here are the results, with place names abbreviated:

Five best (lowest) rates					Five worst (highest) rates				
NEIGH	POP	MEDIAN INCOME	2019 AGG ASLTS	AGG ASLT RATE	NEIGH	POP	MEDIAN INCOME	2019 AGG ASLTS	AGG ASLT RATE
FIELD	2366	99.1	0	0	WEBC	5097	30	73	1432.2
HALE	3176	113.7	0	0	FOLWL	5344	35.9	89	1665.4
KENNY	3559	103.5	0	0	NEARN	5962	31	102	1710.8
TANGLT	4351	110	1	23	DWW	5781	63.3	126	2179.6
KEEWY	3096	86.4	1	32.3	HAWT	4207	26.9	123	2923.7
Mean =		102.5	0.4	11.1	Mean =		37.4	102.6	1982.3

Again, the link between poverty and violence is readily apparent. As we harped about in “[Repeat After Us](#),” when it comes to assessing crime city names *are* meaningless. It’s really *places* that count.

So what’s the takeaway? Given the vagaries of both officer and citizen temperament, counting on cops to de-escalate and do all the “right” things while working under the uncertain, often threatening conditions of the “real world” is a tall order. Think you can do better? Start off with inadequate resources and a lack of information. Add a heady portion of citizen non-compliance, substance abuse and personal issues. And by all means stir in some inappropriate behavior by colleagues and [superiors](#) who want to do

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things “their” way (remember, um, Chauvin?) *Voila!* You’ve cooked up the toxic brew that even well-meaning cops (and these are in the vast majority) consume each day. Enjoy!

Law-abiding citizens who endure the everyday violence and gangsterism that accompanies poverty have been speaking out. In the aftermath of the [police killing of Adam Toledo](#), a thirteen-year old resident of Chicago’s impoverished “[Little Village](#)” neighborhood (household median income \$31.5K), a deeply-researched story [in the Tribune](#) featured the sentiments of residents who were fed up, and not just with the police:

- Seventy-four year old sidewalk vendor: “We are tired of gang violence; it’s sad what happened with the young boy, but he had a gun with him and his friend had been shooting, so the officer responded to the threat.”
- Thirty-eight year old man doing his laundry: “We can’t even go out safely because there are random shootings everywhere and you never know if a stray bullet might hit you.”
- Fifty-nine year old grandmother (she tries to keep away from gang members *and* cops): “The only reason people are talking about (killings) now is that it was a police officer who shot and killed the kid.”

To be sure, the craft of policing can always improve. But poverty and the things that come with poverty can make even “routine” policing exasperating. As we recently noted in “[Fix Those Neighborhoods!](#)” and “[Human Renewal](#),” making a *real* difference would require a concerted effort to provide needy areas with resources and services that might prevent the next Adam Toledo from running around with an armed gang-member at one in the morning. That calls for major investments in child care, tutoring, job training, apprenticeships, health care and housing. And yes, it would be expensive, and yes, residents of better-off areas might complain.

But look at those faces. Ma’Khia Bryant, Adam Toledo and Daunte Wright were clearly troubled souls. Each could have used some quality social, educational and health supports far earlier in life. But here we are, in the supposedly enlightened twenty-first century, and we still ignore the profound, life-shattering consequences of being raised in poverty. And when cops dealing with these intractable issues misstep, as they sooner or later will, it’s once again time to levy discipline, crank up the rules and turn out those massive studies and reports.

Sound familiar?