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PLACE MATTERS

Desperate to avoid controversy, politicians avoid the obvious

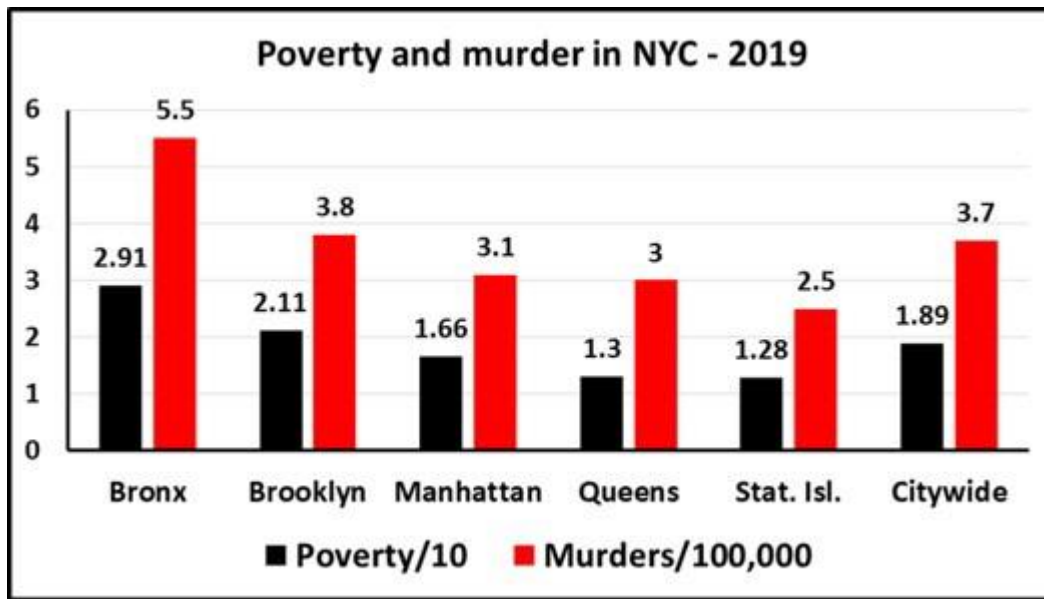
For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Let's begin with a memorable quote:

Ninety-five percent of your murders – murderers and murder victims – fit one M.O. You can just take the description, Xerox it and pass it out to all the cops. They are male; minorities 16 to 25. That's true in New York, that's true in virtually every city....

Mind you, that's not *Police Issues'* point of view. It is (*was?*) Michael Bloomberg's. [A video](#) of his speech at the [Aspen Institute's](#) 2015 annual get-together for the well-to-do and connected depicts the former Wall Street magnate, three-term NYC Mayor (2002-2013) and self-funded Presidential wannabe saying lots of things he would one day regret.

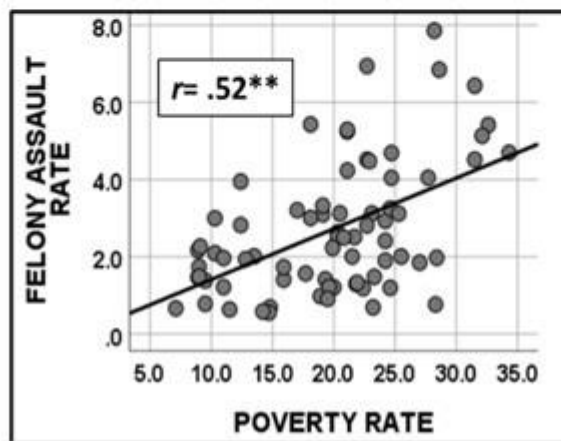
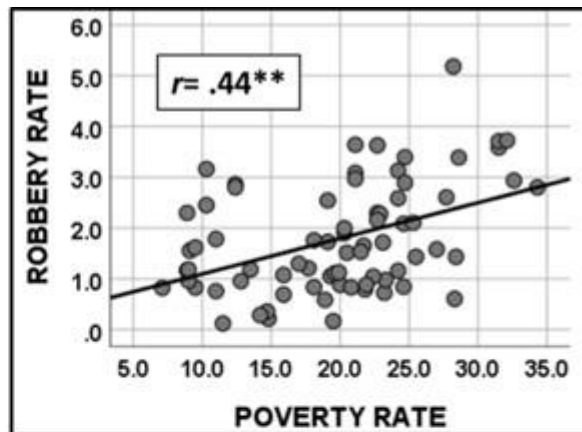
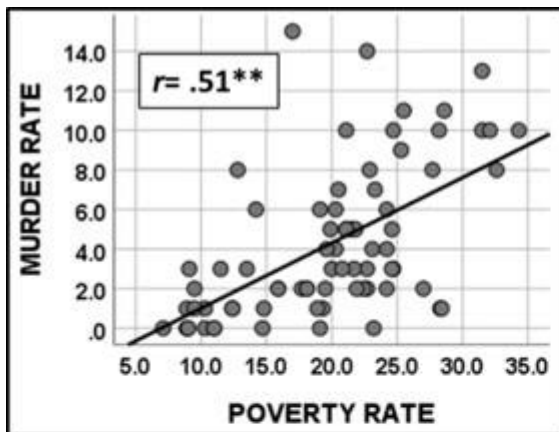
Well, that's politics! Still, are “ninety-five percent” of the Big Apple's murders – and *murderers* – *really* cut from the same cloth? We've looked into crime in Gotham in some detail. “[Be Careful What You Brag About](#)” (Part II) compared ten low-poverty and ten high-poverty NYPD precincts. As one might expect, their murder and robbery rates were very much different, and in the anticipated direction. New York City's high-crime areas, we concluded, “aren't in the Big Apple” – they're part of that other, disadvantaged America where our nation's minorities disproportionately reside.

Nothing's come up since then to change our minds. According to the most recent [Census estimate](#), New York City's poverty rate is 18.9%. But there are huge differences within. *Twenty-nine percent* of the residents of the Bronx, the least prosperous of the city's five boroughs, are poor. Might that affect murder?



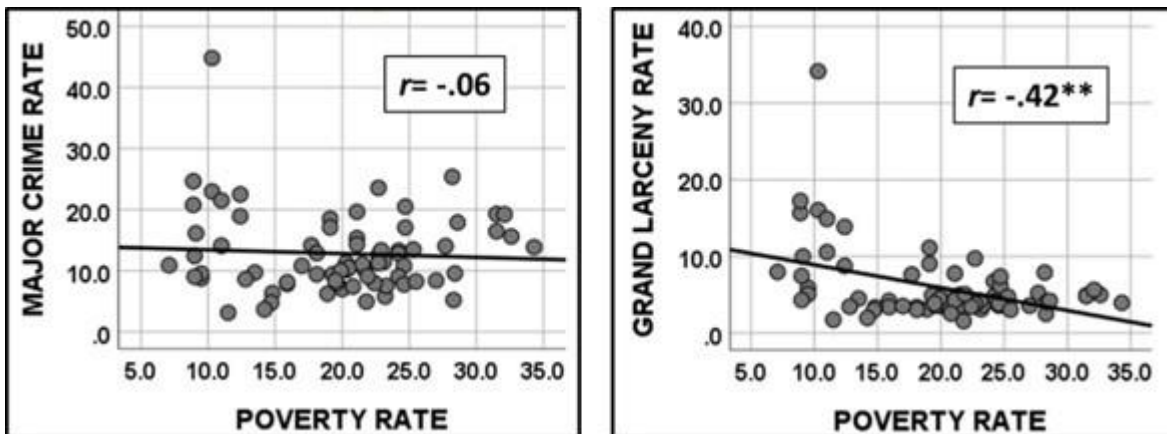
New York City [reported 310 murders](#) for 2019. Seventy-nine – about one in four – took place in the Bronx. With a population slightly over 1.4 million, the city’s most poverty-stricken area also posted its worst murder rate, 5.49 per 100,000. Every other borough – Brooklyn (pop. 2.6 million, 100 murders), Manhattan (pop. 1.6 million, 50 murders), Queens (pop. 2.3 million, 69 murders), and Staten Island (pop. 470,000, 12 murders) – followed in lock-step fashion. As poverty receded, so did homicide.

Poverty influences crimes other than murder. Using [precinct populations](#) and NYPD’s [recently posted 2019 data](#) for seven major crimes (murder, manslaughter, rape, robbery, felony assault, burglary, grand larceny, and grand larceny of a motor vehicle) we computed murder, robbery and felony assault rates for 73 of the city’s 77 police districts (precincts 14, 22, 41 and 121 were omitted for methodological reasons.) Correlation analysis (the “*r*” statistic) was then applied to assess the relationship between each of these crimes and poverty.



Each dot represents a precinct. As one might expect, murder, robbery and felony assault had positive, statistically significant (i.e., meaningful) relationships with poverty. By “positive” we mean that the rates – say, poverty and murder – went up and down together. By “significant” we mean that the statistical procedure generated two asterisks, indicating a probability of less than one in one-hundred that a coefficient, such as .51, was produced by chance. As for the magnitude of the coefficients, r 's can range from zero (no relationship) to one (strongest relationship.) In practice, those produced are indeed substantial.

What about the other index offenses? Check out these graphs:



Perhaps surprisingly, there's virtually no relationship between poverty and the aggregate measure, the major crime rate. Here's why. Grand Larceny was by far the category's most frequent offense. Its relationship with poverty was also strongly negative, meaning that as poverty went up, grand larceny went down. That makes sense. "Grand" larcenies require [a loss of \\$1,000 or more](#), making them far more commonplace in economically better-off places. New York City's profusion of grand larcenies countered the effects of violent crime, making its rate a misleading indicator of the relationship between crime and place.

So what did we learn? Citywide scores can seriously mislead. New York City, whose leaders habitually brag about low crime, posted [a 2018 murder rate](#) of 3.5/100,000 pop., handily beating the nation's 5.0 and, by substantial margins, [virtually every other city](#) of size. Indeed, when one considers Detroit's jaw-popping murder rate of 38.9, or Chicago's merely miserable 20.7, even the Bronx looks good. "[Location, Location, Location](#)" offered Los Angeles as another example of self-proclaimed success in the war against crime. After all, its 2015 murder rate was "only" 7.3 (N=279). Yet there were some startling exceptions within. Such as the bedraggled Florence neighborhood (Zip 90003, poverty rate 33.1%). With a population of 49,001, its eighteen homicides that year produced a murder rate of 36.7, *five times* the citywide figure. Still, neither Florence nor the Bronx managed to spoil their parents' triumph. Los Angeles and New York simply have so many prosperous residents that their aggregate poverty rates remain fetchingly low.

Of course, protective factors likely matter. With nearly eight and one-half million residents and an astounding [28,069 persons per square mile](#), the "Big Apple" is by far the largest and most densely populated of the nation's fifty major cities. Los Angeles, the runner-up in population, has half as many residents. Its density of 8,360, while on the high end nationally, is but a fraction of [Manhattan's](#) astonishing 69,467 inhabitants per

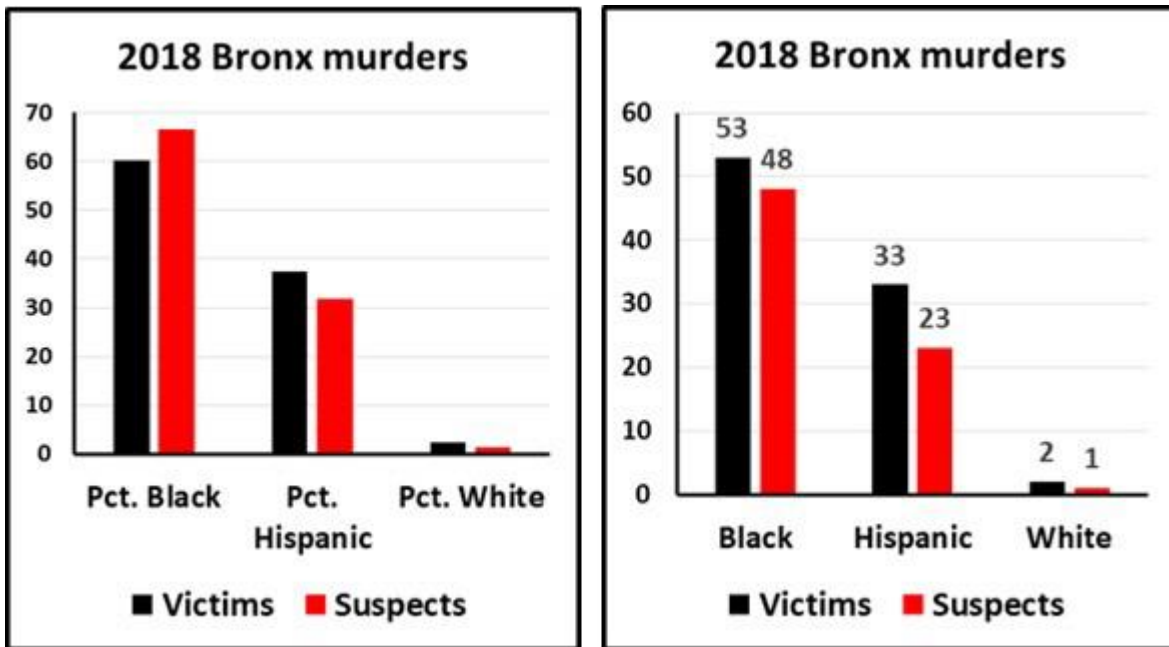
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square mile. How did the prosperous burg get there? By ensconcing its well-to-do residents in pricey, access-controlled high-rises. Bingo! Instant security, and likely one of the reasons why the borough's crime rates are low.

When it comes to crime, place isn't just critical for New York and Los Angeles. In "[Human Renewal](#)" we wrote about the far smaller community of South Bend, Indiana (pop. 103,869). Coincidentally, its former mayor, Pete Buttigieg, is also a Presidential candidate. South Bend police [posted data](#) for 346 "criminally assaulted shootings" between 2015-2018. (If the link isn't working we'll happily share our copy.) Using Census population and poverty figures, we computed a shooting rate for each of South Bend's ten Zip codes, then ran correlation analysis. Sure enough, the relationship between poverty and shootings was strong and positive ($r=.68^*$). More poverty, more violence.

No matter. None of the Presidential candidates – nor, with a single exception (see below) any other politician of note – is talking about neighborhoods. Our favorite remedy, a "Marshall Plan" for America's downtrodden places, isn't on the radar. (We've been pushing for it since, um, 2008. Click [here](#).) Perhaps they worry that focusing on place would bring in potentially controversial issues like race and ethnicity.

But we're not running for office. Let's return to the loser in New York City's poverty/murder sweepstakes: the Bronx. According to the [most recent Census estimate](#), blacks comprise thirty-six percent of its residents. Lamentably, more than one in four (26.7%) blacks who reside in the downtrodden borough live in poverty. And the consequences seem all too predictable.



According to NYPD’s [“Supplementary Homicide Report”](#) for 1998, ninety-one of that year’s 295 murders took place in the Bronx. Race and ethnicity were known for 88 victims and 72 assailants. These graphs (frequencies on the left, percentages on the right) depict the grim racial and ethnic distribution. Citywide, about one-third of New York City’s residents are white. Yet according to the 2018 report, whites figured as either victim or suspect in *less than one in ten* homicides.

Place, and the money it takes to live in a nice place, really, *really* matter.

For a breath of fresh air, let’s consider the views of a political figure who tells it like it *really* is. We’re talking about the [Hon. Randall Woodfin](#), Mayor of Birmingham, Alabama. Conveying the view that a community “is only as strong as its lowest quality-of-life neighborhood,” his recent [“State of the City”](#) speech described Birmingham’s obstacles in a memorable (and remarkably candid) fashion:

In a city of 99 neighborhoods, 88 of them are majority black and 11 are majority white. Those 11 neighborhoods are the safest. Those 11 neighborhoods have the highest income, highest home property value. And in those other 88 neighborhoods that make up the fourth-blackest city in America, there’s a 29% poverty rate. You dig deeper into that for single families, it’s 43%. They don’t have vehicles. The property value hasn’t increased, unemployment is higher, and there’s too much crime.

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Mayor Woodfin's solution, a multifaceted "neighborhood revitalization program," seems highly promising. Grab a ballot. We're writing him in!