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SAN ANTONIO BLUES

Poverty – and what it brings – can impair the quality of policing



For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. It's a chilling scene. As bodycams grind on, three San Antonio, Texas police officers [open fire on a distraught, mentally disturbed woman](#) who aggressively approaches. With a *hammer*.

According to [a press briefing](#) by SAPD Chief William McManus, during the early morning hours of Friday, June 23 his officers responded to a report that a female resident of an apartment complex cut wires to its alarm system, setting it off and causing firefighters to respond. When police arrived and encountered her outside the complex, Melissa Perez, 46, ran back into her ground floor apartment and locked the door. And when an officer tried to speak with her through an open window, she threw a glass candle, striking him in the arm. A sergeant and two officers promptly relocated to the apartment's rear patio and removed a window screen. From inside, Ms. Perez reacted by shattering the window glass with a hammer. One officer responded with gunfire. But Ms. Perez wasn't struck, and she again went at the cops with the hammer. This time all three officers fired, inflicting mortal wounds.

What Ms. Perez *didn't* have was a gun. What's more, she and the officers remained on opposite sides of the apartment's exterior wall throughout the encounter. According to the investigating detective's [criminal complaint](#), the woman San Antonio's cops killed "did not pose an imminent threat of serious bodily injury or death when she was shot because the defendants had a wall, a window blocked by a television and a locked door between them."

Amplly corroborated by multiple bodycam videos (click [here](#) for SAPD's narrated compilation), the circumstances were sufficiently damning to lead to the three officers' arrest on murder charges that very same evening. And to their Chief's highly contrite

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statement on the very next day. Ms. Perez's killing added copious fuel to the long-troubled relationship between San Antonio's cops and the citizens they serve and ostensibly protect. Here's [an outtake from the website of ACT 4 SA](#), a local group that argues for "a truly accountable, compassionate and transparent public safety system that works for everyone":

These officers had been on the force ranging from 2-14 years...All are required to de-escalate according to SAPD policy, yet none acted accordingly. What kind of "training" is this? What type of "protection" is this? Why was the mental health unit not dispatched for this call? SAPD acted with neglect, foolishness, and violence that resulted in an unforgivable end to Melissa's life.

As one would expect, [a lawsuit's been filed](#). It accuses officers, among other things, of ignoring that Ms. Perez, who was being treated for schizophrenia, was in an obvious



"mental health crisis." And while the cops could clearly see that Ms. Perez was alone and didn't pose an immediate threat, they didn't even try to de-escalate. Neither did their sergeant do his job. He failed to step in when an officer needlessly fired at Ms. Perez (supposedly discharging five rounds) but, even worse, began shooting as well.

Ms. Perez wasn't an unknown quantity. SAPD had reportedly taken her into protective custody in the past. Unfortunately, the city didn't field a mental health team at night, and that's when the tragedy occurred. There's lots more in the civil complaint, and we'll refer to it shortly. But when we learned of the incident, SAPD Chief McManus had already released the videos and delivered an exceedingly grim account that directly faulted his officers. Indeed, they had already been charged. So our attention instantly fell on them.

Each of the accused ex-cops (they've already been fired) is Hispanic, as was their victim. So this couldn't be simply attributed to race or ethnicity. As your blogger can attest from personal experience, the personalities of law enforcement officers differ, sometimes dramatically, and some of these "differences" can profoundly affect – and, yes, even distort – how they respond to fraught situations. Here's some self-plagiarism from "[Working Scared](#)":

Prior posts have identified factors that can lead to the inappropriate use of lethal force. Some cops may be insufficiently risk-tolerant; others may be too impulsive. Poor tactics can leave little time to make an optimal decision. Less-than-lethal

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weapons may not be at hand, or officers may be unpracticed in their use. Cops may not know how to deal with the mentally ill, or may lack external supports for doing so. Dispatchers may fail to pass on crucial information, leaving cops guessing. And so on.

SAPD's three supposedly trigger-happy cops include a fourteen-year veteran with the rank of Sergeant and two officers, one with five years on the job, the other with two. [Records obtained by KSAT](#) indicate that both the Sergeant and the five-year veteran (he's the one who opened fire when Ms. Perez smashed the window) had substantial disciplinary histories:

- Sergeant ____ was suspended four times during the past five years. One suspension, for ten days, alleged that he “yelled profanities” at a person involved in a domestic quarrel. Two others, one for eight days, another for ten, were caused by his alleged failure to provide timely backup. And the most recent, for ten days, related to mishandling evidence.
- Officer ____ was suspended three times during his brief career. Once, for two days, for using profanity and damaging an inside door when chasing a disorderly man. Another suspension, for fifteen days, was levied because he let the parties involved in a traffic accident “settle” things between themselves although one was unlicensed and had active warrants. He was also once smacked with a 25-day suspension for trying to give a similar “break” to a Walmart shoplifter.

But according to the [lawsuit](#), the Sergeant had suffered an additional suspension, in 2018, for failing to activate his body camera (p. 25). What went unpunished, though, was that during this episode he had pointed his gun at a distraught motorist, and supposedly without good reason. That, contend the plaintiffs, was par for the course:

The results of formal and informal policies have been that SAPD has created a culture of escalating mental health encounters that are unnecessary, objectively unreasonable and clearly excessive. This practice and culture is so common and well-settled as to constitute a custom that fairly represents municipal policy. (p. 12)

Former sergeant ____'s gun-pointing incident is apparently the only documented prior example of misuse of force by the three ex-cops. So to make the point that Ms. Perez's lamentable treatment was “normal” by SAPD standards, the lawsuit offered ten examples of grave misuses of force by other SAPD cops (pp. 12-24). We recently mentioned one in an update to “[When Must Cops Shoot? \(II\)](#)”:

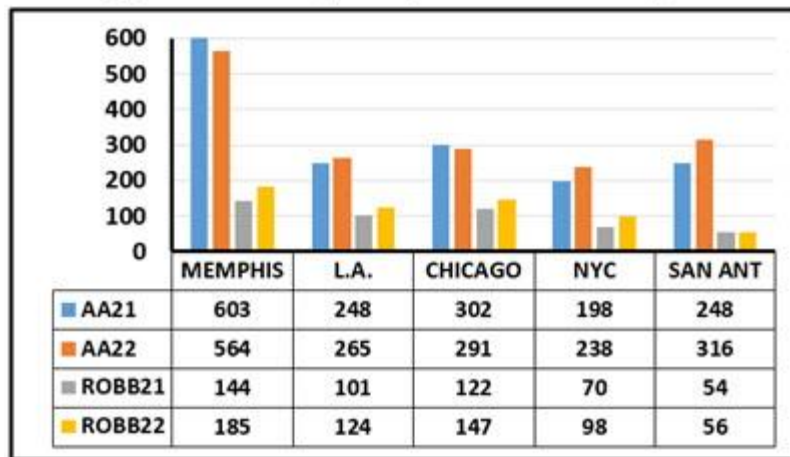
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[10/10/22](#) A San Antonio, Tx. police officer spotted a car that eluded him a day earlier parked at a MacDonald's. So he walked up, opened the driver's door and ordered its teen driver - he was munching a burger - to get out. But the youth promptly started the car and threw it into reverse. Its door bumped the cop, and he opened fire. Erik Cantu, 17, was badly wounded. And three days later, officer James Brennand, a rookie still on probation, was fired. [Video](#)

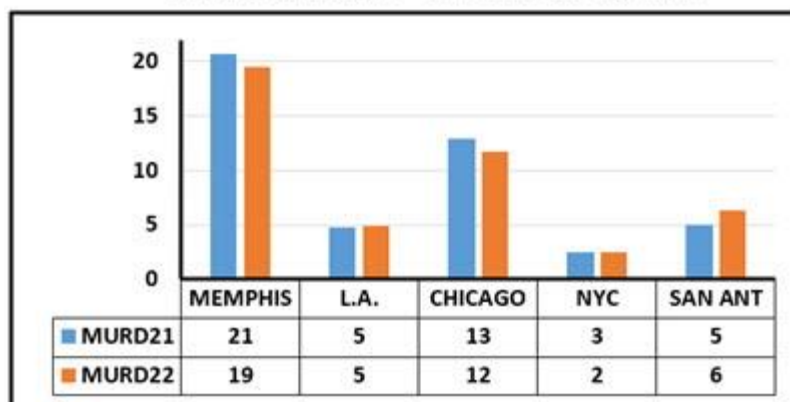


Most police officers manage to complete their careers without getting suspended even once. And certainly, without being charged with murder. But set individuals aside. Consider the environment in which they work. What is it that San Antonio officers actually *face*? Last September the [Major City Chiefs Association](#), which represents the largest police departments in the U.S., [released a report](#) with violent crime data for its constituent cities for the first six months of 2021 and 2022. In “[Punishment Isn't a Cop's Job \(II\)](#)” we used these numbers to compare violent crime in Memphis with our three “usual suspects” – L.A., Chicago and New York City. These charts extend that comparo to include San Antonio:

Agg Aslt & Robb /100K, 1st. 6 mos. 2021, 2022



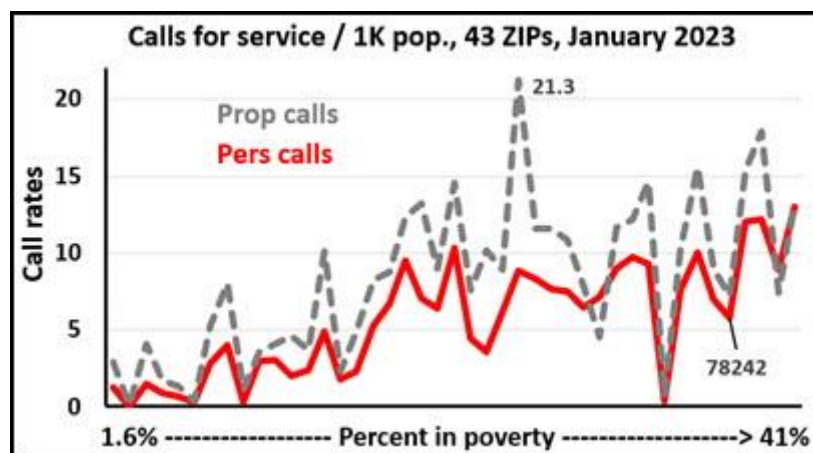
Murder /100K, 1st. 6 mos. 2021, 2022



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Note that the numbers are rates per 100,000 population, so they're directly comparable. San Antonio's rates are certainly not sterling, but nowhere near the abysmal numbers reported by Chicago and Memphis. As we've repeatedly cautioned, though, citywide statistics can obscure wide variances *within*. L.A.'s numbers look relatively favorable. But as "[Good News/Bad News](#)" recently reported, the January-June 2023 aggravated assault rate for its poverty-stricken Central area was *sixteen times* that of economically blessed Foothill Division.

Ditto San Antonio. While its neighborhood crime rates can't be readily compared (SAPD's online data lacks crime location ZIP's) the San Antonio city portal provides ZIP codes for police responses to [citizen calls for service](#). Using [Census ZIP poverty figures](#) we coded "crimes against person" and "property crime" calls for service during January 2023 for forty-three San Antonio ZIP's with populations over 10,000. This graph arranges ZIP's by percent of citizens living in poverty:



During that month the 33,927 residents of ZIP 78242, where Ms. Perez resided, placed 196 persons-related calls and 245 property-related calls, producing per-1,000 rates of 5.8 and 7.2, respectively. While there are exceptions (one or two may have been caused by a reporting lapse), economically burdened ZIP's tended to generate more calls for service, and especially for crimes against persons. For the statistically-minded, the "*r*" coefficient (it's on a scale of zero to one, from no association to a perfect relationship) between poverty and persons calls is a compelling .84, and between poverty and property calls a lesser but still robust .66.

There *were* complications. About a dozen of these ZIP's aren't wholly within San Antonio, and calls for service to other agencies (say, the Sheriff) aren't included. Considering only the twenty-two ZIP's with populations over 10,000 that appear to be

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wholly within the city, the r for persons calls leaps to .93, and for property calls moves up to .68.

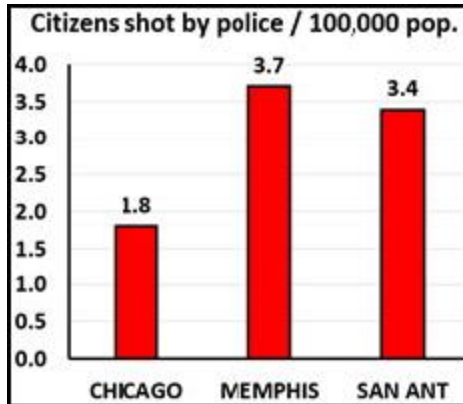
This table compares San Antonio's five poorest and five wealthiest ZIP's (78242, where Ms. Perez was killed, is the fifth poorest). It sets out percent of citizens who live in poverty, raw numbers and rates per 1,000 pop. for calls to police about crime against persons and property crimes during January 2023, and, using data from the [Gun Violence Archive](#) (GVA), the number of citizens struck by police gunfire and wounded or killed between January 2021 and July 2023.

POVERTY EXTREMES				CALLS AND OFFICER SHOOTINGS			
ZIP	Pop	Pct.pov	Pers	Pers/1K	Prop	Prop/1K	Shtgs
78248	13779	1.6	17	1.2	40	2.9	0
78261	23992	2.4	0	0.0	1	0.0	1
78259	25663	3.1	37	1.4	105	4.1	0
78254	73837	3.5	65	0.9	128	1.7	0
78255	17469	3.6	12	0.7	23	1.3	0
Average		2.84	26.2	0.8	59.4	2.0	0.2
78242	33927	28.3	196	5.8	245	7.2	1
78202	10327	29.7	124	12.0	159	15.4	1
78220	15654	29.8	191	12.2	280	17.9	1
78237	38642	30.3	344	8.9	287	7.4	1
78207	47341	41	616	13.0	624	13.2	3
Average		31.8	294	10.4	319	12.2	1.4

Contrasts between poor and wealthy ZIP's are pronounced. For example, check out that thirteen-fold difference between person call rates and the six-fold difference between property call rates.

Ms. Perez's killing took place in the highly impacted 78242, where more than one in four persons (28.3 percent) reside in poverty. Could that have influenced the officers' response? Cops *are* human. Their work product can be distorted by personal quirks, the foibles of coworkers and superiors, and, particularly, by the circumstances they encounter on the streets. As our essays have repeatedly pointed out, neighborhoods that are burdened by violence and gunplay can breed officer attitudes and behaviors that cops assigned to more privileged venues might find disgusting. (For a classic work about such things check out James Q. Wilson's "[Varieties of Police Behavior](#)," with which your author regularly burdened his students.)

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Our first two tables set out violent crime rates for San Antonio and four other cities during the first six months of 2021 and 2022. Chicago and Memphis seemed particularly stricken. Yet according to GVA data, San Antonio PD's rate of shooting citizens was *nearly twice* Chicago's and nearly matched Memphis, whose violent crime rates are *almost twice* as high. And grab another look at the "shtgs" column in the above table. San Antonio police shootings seemed substantially more likely in the

poorest areas. Bottom line: concerns that some San Antonio officers might have let the workplace distort lethal-force decisions can't be simply brushed aside.

Does this let the three ex-cops "off the hook"? Certainly not. But to prevent endless replays, we must openly acknowledge that the disorder and lack of compliance common in poverty-stricken areas can poison officer decision-making and distort their response. However, the ultimate "fix" lies outside of policing. As we habitually preach in our [Neighborhoods essays](#), a concerted effort to improve the socioeconomics of poor places is Job #1. Not-so-incidentally, that could also improve the dodgy behavior of some citizens. And *good* cops would find that most welcome!