

THE USUAL VICTIMS

Violent crime is reportedly way up. But do we all suffer equally?



For *Police Issues* by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, 2020 was “a year like no other.” Murder, it breathlessly reported, hit “a decade high after years of sustained reductions,” and shootings soared nearly forty percent. But L.A.’s hardly alone. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, the toll in perennially lethal Cook County hit a historic high, with “more gun-related homicides in 2020 than any other year, surpassing the previous record set in 1994.” Even New York City, which habitually boasts about its low crime numbers, feels cause for alarm. A recent *New York Times* opinion piece, “The Homicide Spike is Real,” calls killings and shootings “the city’s second-biggest challenge” next to the pandemic. But when it comes to gunplay “the way forward is less clear, and the prospects for a better 2021 are much dimmer.”



Check out the graph. Homicide in Chicago increased *fifty-six percent* in 2020, soaring from an already deplorable 492 killings to an eye-popping 769 (the per/100,000

rate jumped from 18.2 to 28.5). While perhaps less mind-bending, increases in Los Angeles (38 percent) and New York City (45 percent) were also pronounced. Indeed, violence surged in large cities and small.

So our first question is...*why*?

Two major reasons have been offered: the pandemic, and police killings. These dreadful events have led to economic chaos and social unrest, impairing the functioning of the state and fracturing its connection with the citizens it ostensibly serves. Not only has the pandemic taken cops off the street, but their deployment's been deeply affected as well. As the *Washington Post* noted, [this "thinning" of ranks](#) can have serious consequences:

In many departments, police ranks were thinned significantly by the combined effect of officers being out sick and being assigned to manage unrest on the streets. And given the concerns about spreading the coronavirus, officers were going to fewer places and interacting with fewer people, allowing more opportunities for people to settle disputes themselves.

Chicago's new police superintendent, David Brown, [was brought in by Mayor Lori Lightfoot](#) to deal with the chaos. [He attributes](#) much of the increase in violence, to "extended periods of heightened civil unrest and looting" that were sparked by [George Floyd's death](#) at the hands of Minneapolis police. It's not just about Mr. Floyd. [Noted criminologist Richard Rosenfeld](#) believes that our legacy of lethal police-citizen encounters has actually damaged the state's moral authority:

During a period of widespread intense protest against police violence, it's fair to suppose that police legitimacy deteriorates, especially in those communities that have always had a fraught relationship with police. That simply widens the space for so-called street justice to take hold, and my own view is that is a part of what we are seeing.

Considering just their reaction to COVID-19 constraints, it's clear that some citizens have become less willing to comply. Eager to avoid conflict, and with fewer officers to spare, many agencies have severely pared back on enforcement. [Aggressive, focused approaches](#) such as "hot spots policing" and "stop-and-frisk" seem threatened with extinction. LAPD Captain Paul Vernon, who runs his agency's Compstat unit, feels that this purposeful pulling back has reduced gang members' fear of being caught and [led to more shootings and killings](#). What's more, some cops may be reacting to the "new normal" by purposely slowing down. According to the *New York Times*, [that's exactly what happened](#) in the Big Apple. If so, it's not a new phenomenon. Three years ago in

“[Police Slowdowns](#)” we wrote about the protracted slowdown that followed the arrest and prosecution of a handful of Baltimore’s finest after the 2015 death of Freddie Gray. (Ditto, Chicago and Minneapolis.)

Whatever its causes, the decline in proactivity has serious implications. In his recent paper, “[Explaining the Recent Homicide Spikes in U.S. Cities](#),” Professor Paul G. Cassell proposed the “Minneapolis Effect”:

Specifically, law enforcement agencies have been forced to divert resources from normal policing to patrolling demonstrations. And even as the anti-police protests have abated, police officers have scaled back on proactive or officer-initiated law enforcement, such as street stops and other forms of policing designed to prevent firearms crimes.

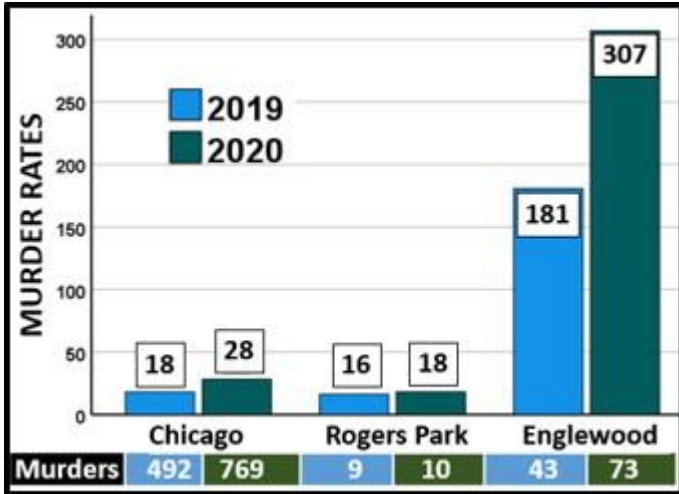
Of course, it’s not just about policing. Folks have suffered from the closing of schools, parks and libraries. Chicago P.D. Sgt. Jermain Harris, who works with youths, [offers his take on what happens](#) when community supports disappear:

You take away the businesses, all the pieces of society that generally have eyes out, and you are left with young people, and a lot of young people, who don’t have resources or that level of support if they are left on their own.

Well, it all seems plausible enough. Yet your blogger, and probably most who skim through our essays, lives in a middle-class area that seems just as peaceful as before the madness began. Other than the officer who lives a few houses down, cops are hardly ever around, and their absence is thought unremarkable. So that brings us to the second question: *who* suffers most?

LAPD Chief Michel Moore knows. He recently pointed out that in L.A., the increase of violence has mostly affected areas [long beset by gangs and gunplay](#):

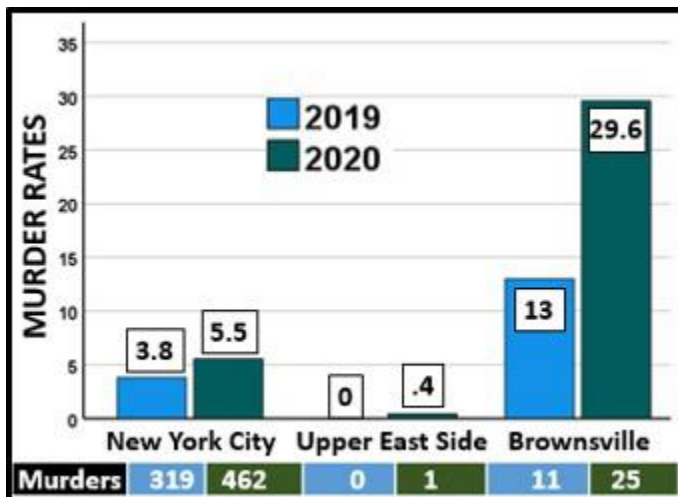
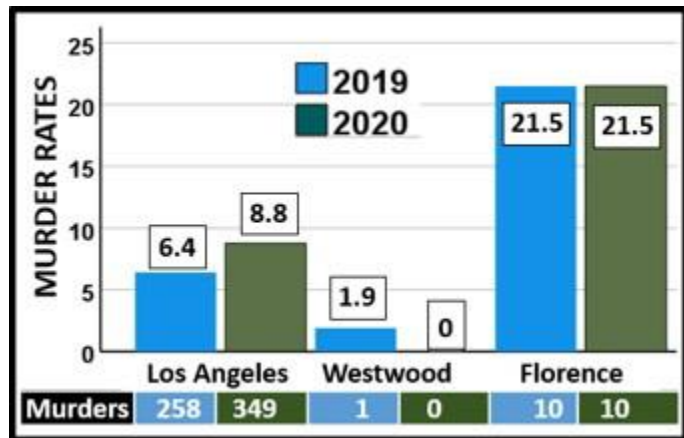
Nearly all of the loss of life and shooting victims are centered in the Black and brown communities. The lack of jobs and supportive services, a sense of hopelessness, easy access to firearms and ineffective parts of the criminal justice system have created a perfect storm to undermine public safety gains built over the last decade.



Chief Moore is referring to the same poor neighborhoods whose chronic problems with crime and violence are the stock-in-trade of our [Neighborhoods special section](#). Bottom line: it's not about *cities* but about the [places within cities](#) where people live. This graph proves that (as we suggested in "[Mission Impossible?](#)") there are even some relatively safe spots in...Chicago! For instance, Rogers Park, Chicago PD District 24. [Its 2020 murder rate](#) (thru 12/27) was more than a third lower than

the Windy City's overall. Yet [in downtrodden Englewood](#), Chicago's P.D.'s 7th. District, the already sky-high 2019 rate soared *seventy percent*.

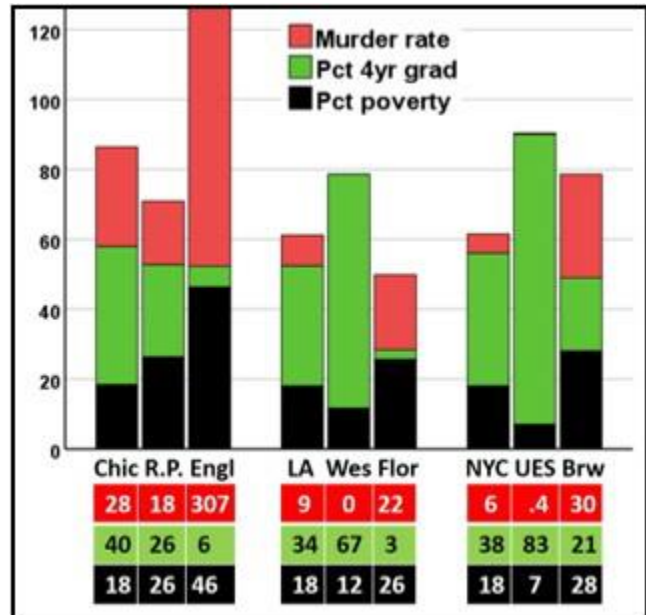
In "[Location, Location, Location](#)" we mentioned that Los Angeles has a number of relatively safe spaces. Say, Westwood. Populated by about fifty thousand of the (mostly) well-to-do, the prosperous community suffered one murder in [2019](#) and none in [2020](#). Alas, most L.A. residents aren't nearly as fortunate. Consider the chronically troubled Florence area (pop. 46,610) of South L.A. With ten killings in [2019](#) and ten in [2020](#), its murder rate wound up more than twice that of the city as a whole.



Conditions in New York city also "depend." Contrast, for example, the affluent Upper East Side's (pop. 225,914) zero murders in [2019](#) and one in [2020](#) with bedraggled Brownsville's (pop. 84, 525) eleven killings in [2019](#) and twenty-five in [2020](#). To be sure, Brownsville seems a less threatening place than L.A.'s Florence district or Chicago's

Englewood. Yet its contrast to the rest of the city within which its borders lie seems equally pronounced. It's as though there are two cities: one comprises Rogers Park, Westwood and the Upper East Side, and the other is made up of Englewood, Florence and Brownsville.

This graph brings it all together using 2020 data. (To save space, Englewood's sky-high murder rate runs off the top.) It's no news to our readers that economic conditions and their correlates – here we use number of residents with four-year degrees – are deeply related to crime and violence. So what can be done? Prior posts in our “[Neighborhoods](#)” section have rooted for comprehensive approaches that offer residents of low-income communities job training, tutoring, child care and other critical services.



Grab a quick look at “[Place Matters](#).” Whether it comes from “neighborhood revitalization” programs such as promoted by Birmingham Mayor Randall Woodfin, or from that “Marshall Plan” we ceaselessly harp about, there’s no question – none – that a concerted effort to give needy neighborhoods a boost would greatly improve their socioeconomic health and reap fabulous human benefits. And, not-so-incidentally, keep inhabitants from becoming the “usual victims” whose demise our posts persistently quantify.

Violence is not an equal-opportunity threat. But of course we all knew that.