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TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

Street gangs and officer cliques have a lot in common

For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. How and why street gangs form has long been a fertile stomping ground for social theorists. Over the years they have proposed a range of causes, from individual temperament to the hogging of resources by a selfish elite. Your blogger's past observations as a law enforcement officer make him particularly fond of the work of [Dr. Elijah Anderson](#), Sterling Professor of Sociology and African American Studies at Yale University. According to Dr. Anderson, gang violence is a cultural adaptation to declining circumstances. Poverty and a lack of legitimate opportunities help generate a "code of the streets," promoting toxic concepts such as "manhood" and "respect" and legitimizing violence as an appropriate response to perceived slights.

That gang violence is, first and foremost, about settling scores comes as no surprise to readers of the *L.A. Times*. For a noteworthy example there's the [March 31st. murder](#) of celebrated L.A. gangster-cum-rapper [Nipsey Hussle](#), shot "at least 10 times" by a gang member with whom he supposedly argued about "snitching" (just who "snitched" isn't clear.) As we write the *Times*' website features a [brand-new story](#) about the Federal indictment of twenty-two Los Angeles gang members who "hacked to death seven people in the last two years, including a rival gang member who was dismembered and had his heart cut out by six MS-13 soldiers in the Angeles National Forest for defacing the gang's graffiti."

Not all gang violence is expressive. Some has a decidedly utilitarian bent. Consider, for example, the March 10 slaying of University of Southern California student [Victor McElhaney](#), a perfectly innocent youth whom gang members gunned down during a robbery. His mother is active in gun violence prevention efforts in Oakland, where she serves on the city council. Here is her statement:

My husband and I want to express our gratitude to the public for their cooperation and to the LAPD for their diligent work to bring those responsible for Victor's death to justice. But this gratitude brings little comfort. The young man arrested also represents a loss of life and human potential.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, [which tracks](#) neighborhood crime, "[University Park](#)" (pop. 25,181), the disadvantaged area where the USC student was murdered, had 79 violent crimes (including one murder) during the past six months. Its violent crime

rate of 313.7 per 100,000 pop. was thirty-fifth highest of L.A.'s approx. 209 communities. Two years ago in "[Location, Location, Location](#)" we settled on L.A.'s affluent burg of [Westwood](#) (pop. 52,041) as our model of an acceptably safe place. According to the *Times*, Westwood suffered twenty-nine violent crimes (including one murder) during the past six months, yielding a violent crime rate of 55.7 per 100,000 pop., 133rd. in the sweepstakes. Bottom line: violence in University Park was nearly six times worse.

"[Location](#)" found that citizens living in L.A.'s economically better-off districts were, as one might expect, also far better-off, crime-wise. Last year "[Be Careful What You Brag About \(Part II\)](#)" reached the same conclusion about the relationship between crime and wealth in New York City. Indeed, as the current surge of gang shootings in [Northern Brooklyn](#) suggests, the Big Apple's disparity seems to be worsening. That would of course be no news to Chicagoans, where an astounding [sixty-six persons were shot](#), at least five fatally during the recent July 4th. weekend. Poor, violence-ridden neighborhoods including [Englewood](#), where thirteen fell to bullets, and historically gang infested [Austin](#) (meaning Austin, Chicago) took the brunt of it. Here's Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot's reaction:

Austin...it's got high unemployment rates, it's got high poverty rates, it's got high concentration of people that are on public assistance, and...there's not a lot of economic activity that's going on. That is something that as a city we have to take on...Because I can send 10,000 officers to the West Side, if we don't address those underlying challenges, which we must, we're not going to solve the problem.

As obvious as the roots of the scourge may be, some city leaders remain surprisingly tone deaf. Consider L.A. Mayor Eric Garcetti's [January comments](#) about L.A.'s supposedly successful fight against crime. His boasts neglected to mention that violence in poor areas continues to be unacceptably high, and that the benefits of the much-ballyhooed "great crime drop" following the crack-addled nineties haven't been equally shared by rich and poor. It's not even close.

Those who live in downtrodden areas aren't the only who suffer. Policing economically deprived neighborhoods is no picnic. Thanks to the relentless, [profit-driven churning out](#) of ever-more-lethal hardware, criminals [have ready access](#) to guns every bit the equal – if not superior – to what cops lug on patrol. That's had an unquestionable effect on officer tactics, propelling an unending stream of split-second decisions (click [here](#) and [here](#)) whose consequences seem all too predictable.

Of course, all cops aren't alike. One of our very first posts, "[When Cops Kill](#)," emphasized that personality traits were key to understanding why some act impulsively

or use excessive force. That concept was elaborated in “[Working Scared](#),” which emphasized the centrality of risk tolerance to police work. Among other things it cautioned that initial training can instill excessive apprehension about the uncertain environment that officers face:

What experienced cops well know, but for reasons of decorum rarely articulate, is that the real world isn't the academy: on the mean streets officers must accept risks that instructors warn against, and doing so occasionally gets cops hurt or killed. Your blogger is unaware of any tolerable approach to policing a democratic society that resolves this dilemma, but if he learns of such a thing he will certainly pass it on.

Well, we're still looking. One obstacle is that violent street gangs continue to exert an insidious effect on policing. Under relentless pressure to tamp down crime in the inexorably hostile environment of the inner city, some officers have formed their own version of that “code of the streets,” (and here we self-plagiarize) “promoting toxic concepts such as “manhood” and “respect” and legitimizing violence as an appropriate response to perceived slights.” For an excellent historical example of a lawless police clique we need to turn no farther than [LAPD Rampart Division's scandal](#) of the nineties, when members of its elite CRASH (“community resources against street hoodlums”) gang unit engaged in [every form of misconduct imaginable](#), from excessive force to out-and-out corruption. And while CRASH and the Federal oversight it brought on are long-gone, the toxic social conditions that helped spawn the crisis remain. During the past six months, Rampart's ground zero, the economically-deprived [Pico-Union](#) district (pop. 44,664) of central Los Angeles, suffered 176 violent crimes, including three murders. Its violent crime rate of 394.1, twenty-five percent higher than University Park and about seven times that of Westwood, earned Pico-Union 30th. place in the violence sweepstakes.

But things were even worse in L.A.'s chronically poverty-stricken South side. For example, the congenially-named “[Green Meadows](#)” area (pop. 30,558) suffered a staggering 344 violent crimes, including four murders. That sorry performance translates into a violent crime rate of 1,126, nearly three times Pico-Union's and more than twenty times Westwood's. (Green Meadows placed third in the violence sweepstakes. That's third *worst*, mind you. First went to “[Chesterfield Square](#),” pop. 6382, 109 violent crimes, rate 1,708.)

South L.A.'s crime problems are not new. As we discussed in “[Driven To Fail](#),” about a decade ago they led LAPD to devise data-driven programs (LASER and Predpol) to identify chronic offenders and select areas most impacted by violence for special

attention. Resources, including specialized anti-crime teams, were allocated accordingly (as one might expect, the Southside got much of the attention.) While LAPD touted the supposed benefits of this approach, [a recent review](#) was decidedly skeptical. Targeting strategies had proven grossly inexact. Like what happened in [New York City](#), aggressive policing produced lots of “false positives” and ultimately caused a public revolt. So things have supposedly been substantially toned down. And that’s not necessarily a bad thing.

LAPD isn’t the only police agency in the mix. For example, in [South Los Angeles](#) several unincorporated communities that adjoin LAPD areas are patrolled by Los Angeles sheriff’s deputies. These include Athens (violent crime rank 24 highest of 209), Florence-Firestone (65/209), Willowbrook (75/209) and Westmont (32/209). While LASD hasn’t suffered an exact duplicate of Rampart, [abusive deputy cliques in the jails](#) and on the streets have plagued it as far back as 1971, when East L.A. station deputies formed the “[Little Devils](#).” Over the next decades more such “secret societies” popped up in black and Hispanic areas. In 1996 the unholy tendency for cops to mimic street gangsters came to a head when L.A. County paid \$9 million to settle a Federal lawsuit that accused deputies who belonged to the Lynwood station’s “Vikings” clique of “racially motivated hostility.”

Still, the urge to form cliques persisted. In 2013 the LASD [fired seven members](#) of an elite anti-gang unit that branded itself “The Jump Out Boys,” wore matching tattoos, and rewarded its members for shootings. An in-house pamphlet succinctly conveyed their credo: “We are alpha dogs who think and act like the wolf, but never become the wolf.”

That problem has apparently persisted. In 2018 the Los Angeles Times [wrote about](#) “secretive cliques of deputies who bonded over aggressive, often violent police work and branded themselves with matching tattoos.” And only days ago [the Times revealed](#) that the FBI is presently investigating tattooed, “gang-like groups” of L.A. Sheriff’s deputies who violate citizen rights and harass colleagues who don’t go along. These badge-wearers include the East L.A. station’s “Banditoes,” the Century station’s “Spartans” and “Regulators” and the South L.A. station’s “Reapers.”

In “[Mission Impossible](#)” we cited examples in Chicago, New York City and Los Angeles to conclude that police are not the ultimate solution to the problems that beset America’s inner cities. Still, the urge to deploy cops to that end runs deep. As [a current NIJ effort](#) demonstrates, the urge to use increasingly sophisticated, data-driven techniques to redirect and fine-tune the police response will not be denied. Alas, as appealing as applying a “scientific” approach might seem, saddling officers with what

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are essentially “mission impossibles” will inevitably continue stirring up the same aspects of that old “human nature” that produce street gangs.

That, too, seems inevitable.