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CAN THE URBAN SHIP *BE* STEERED?

Seasoned police leadership. Yet the violence continues.



For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. One can empathize with Charlie Beck. On February 10, only two weeks after announcing a comprehensive reorganization of the perennially troubled agency, Chicago's interim top cop faced two epidemics. Only one was new: coronavirus ([the city's first case was confirmed two weeks earlier](#)). As for the other, it was really more of the same. According to the *Sun-Times*, the homicide-beset city had just experienced its "[deadliest February weekend in 18 years](#)," with nine shot dead and fourteen wounded in less than two days.

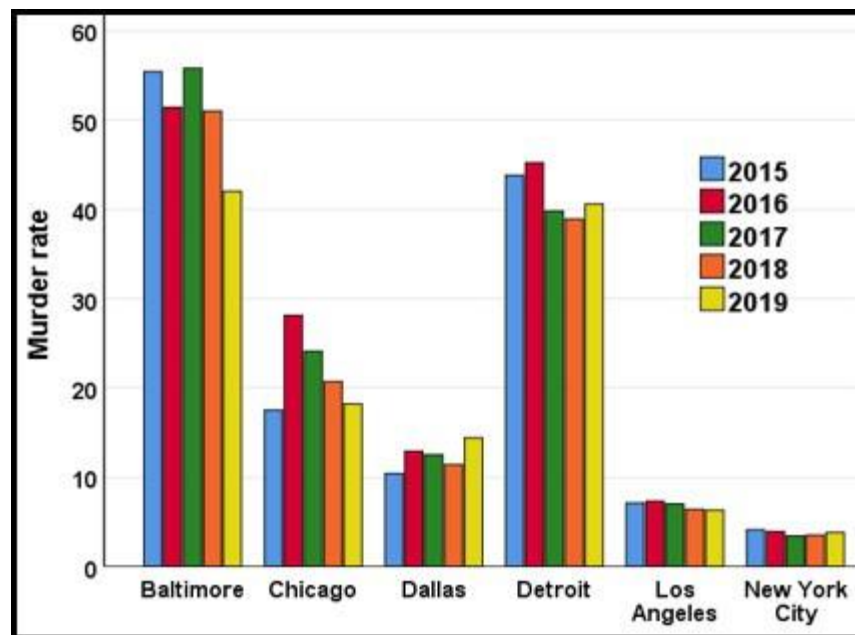
As one might expect, Mayor Lori Lightfoot wasn't pleased. So Chief Beck devised an "intermediate strategy" to promptly "put more resources into the areas most affected." In other words, more cops patrolling Chicago's violence-prone inner-city neighborhoods. That, one supposes, is how police responded after that other weekend, August 2-4, 2019, when [seven died and fifty-two were wounded](#) in a staggering *thirty-two* separate shootings.

Chief Beck can't be blamed for those. That burden falls on the shoulders of then-chief [Garry McCarthy](#). After rising through NYPD's ranks, then spending five years as Newark's chief, McCarthy became Chicago's top cop in 2011. That's the good news. The bad is that he was in charge on October 20, 2014. That's the fateful day when officer Jason Van Dyke barged in on a situation that colleagues seemed to have under control and inexplicably shot and killed [Laquan McDonald](#), a 17-year old youth who was reportedly trying to break into parked cars while waving a knife.

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McDonald's killing set off waves of demonstrations. Nothing, though, happened to officer Van Dyke until late 2015, when a dash-cam video that sharply contradicted his and his colleagues' accounts of the episode was ordered released by a judge. That stunning development led Mayor Rahm Emanuel, who proudly hired McCarthy, to [promptly fire him](#). It also led to the arrest of officer Van Dyke, who was ultimately convicted convicted of 2nd degree murder and [sentenced to nearly seven years imprisonment](#). And it opened the floodgates to Federal intervention. A [damning DOJ report](#) was followed by a [consent decree and Federal monitoring](#), which continues through the present day.

Former Chief McCarthy missed most of the blowback. That fell, instead, on the shoulders of his replacement, Eddie Johnson, whom Mayor Emanuel appointed in March 2016. A veteran Chicago cop who grew up in Cabrini-Green, widely considered the city's "most notorious public housing project," [Johnson was considered](#) to be someone who would be respected by cops and citizens alike.



Chief Johnson knew he had a mountain to climb. His beloved city [had reported 478 homicides in 2015](#). Although its murder rate of 17.5 per 100,000 pop. was far better than Baltimore's abysmal 55.4 and Detroit's merely awful 43.8, it was nonetheless more than twice L.A.'s (7.0) and five times the Big Apple's (3.4). And during the new chief's first year, things turned worse. Chicago closed out 2016 with an appalling 765 murders (rate 28.1), a one-year leap of sixty percent. (Dallas, a distant runner-up, went from 136 to 171 murders, a 26 percent increase.)

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Why the surge? Some observers attributed it to an officer “[slowdown](#)” supposedly spurred by the intense public criticism that followed McDonald’s killing. Thankfully, murder soon began a gratifying descent. By 2019 killings had receded to 492, a four-year plunge of thirty-six percent. Yet in both raw numbers and rate (18.2) Chicago’s homicide problem remained worse than in 2015. Bottom line: however “new and improved,” the Windy City remained much more a “killing field” than either Los Angeles (253 murders in 2019, rate 6.3) or New York City (318 murders, rate 3.8).

Yes, *killing field*. [Here’s a news update](#) we posted on August 8, 2019:

Seven dead and fifty-two wounded, including seventeen shot in a two-hour period. That was the toll last weekend in Chicago’s infamous West Side, a gang-ridden area “devastated by drugs and violence.”

Chief Johnson was still in charge. Should we blame him? Well, no. As we’ve repeatedly emphasized (see, for example, “[Place Matters](#),” “[Repeat After Us](#)” and “[Location, Location, Location](#)”) crime’s roots lie in poverty and the social disorganization that accompanies poverty, factors that are ultimately beyond the power of law enforcers to fix. To be sure, passive policing can encourage hooliganism, and forceful responses such as stop-and-frisk might for a time reduce violence. But the imprecision that inevitably accompanies aggressive crime-fighting measures often backfires. [Just ask NYPD and LAPD](#).

Mayor Lightfoot seems to be of like mind. Poverty was her focus some weeks ago, on February 14, when in a [near-40 minute address](#) she beseeched a “standing-room only crowd” at the City Club to help turn their community around. “Poverty is killing us,” she implored. “Literally and figuratively killing us. All of us.” While “epidemic” gun violence was mentioned, her [highly detailed prescriptions](#) focused on economic conditions. There were only a few substantive recommendations as to crime and justice, and all but one were economically centered. She touted an [ongoing program](#) to forgive unpaid fines and parking tickets so that poor persons didn’t needlessly lose their driver licenses. To help the formerly incarcerated find housing she suggested prohibiting landlords from running criminal checks on potential tenants until after they were otherwise approved. She also called for increased opportunities for the poor to land jobs in emergency services:

When a graduate of one of our police or fire academies walks across the stage they are walking into a middle-class life. That life and all the benefits of middle-class life that those jobs bring must be open to all of us.

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And in a passing mention of the opioid crisis, Mayor Lightfoot defined it as primarily a public health issue, not a law enforcement problem.

In truth, the mayor was likely reluctant to revisit the chronically fraught area of policing. For one thing, only three days had passed since she upbraided Charlie Beck and his staff over that “deadliest February weekend” mentioned above. As for Chief Johnson, [she had fired him a couple months earlier](#) for lying about [an October 2019 incident](#) in which he apparently fell asleep, while drunk, at the wheel of his car.

Two months later there was another kid on the block. On April 15 Charlie Beck [passed the mantle](#) to Chicago P.D.’s new permanent chief, David Brown. Dallas’ former top cop took the opportunity to praise his predecessor for implementing a massive restructuring that, among other things, supposedly gave patrol commanders additional resources: “The policing mind of Charlie Beck is deep, it’s wide and it’s quick, and I will ensure that what he’s begun to set in place, in motion, here in Chicago, flourishes and reaches its full potential.”

That’s a tall order, and we hope that after thirty-three years as a Dallas cop, six as its chief, he’s the one to fulfill it. Chief Brown is perhaps best known for what [Governing called](#) his “masterful handling” of [the murder of five Dallas police officers](#) and the wounding of seven on July 7, 2016 by a sniper who was [upset over police killings](#). Yet over the years his reformist zeal and alleged favoritism in promoting friends reportedly caused morale problems. So much so that in September 2015 a host of police groups including the National Black Police Association took the extraordinary step of [publicly calling for his ouster](#). Well, that didn’t happen. But in late 2016, only weeks after his officers were murdered, Chief Brown retired. Why? Maybe it was the lousy morale. Maybe it was the surge in homicide: 2016 ended with 171 murders, a 26 percent increase over the 136 killings in 2015. Indeed, that depressing statistic [drew skepticism over his abilities years later](#), when he applied for the job in Chicago.

Who took over Dallas P.D. when Chief Brown left? That would be [Reneé Hall](#), a veteran Detroit officer. And yes, she still leads the Dallas force. As of late, though, her tenure’s proving a bit rocky. In what seems a re-run of what happened three years earlier, Dallas suffered 200 killings in 2019, twenty-nine percent more than the 155 murders recorded in 2018. Calling the surge “[patently unacceptable](#),” Dallas Mayor Eric Johnson complained that Chief Hall’s approach, “increasing the number of investigators working for the Dallas Police Department, adding civilian analysts and establishing a 100-member violent crime reduction team” [left him dissatisfied](#).

Reneé, meet David.

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It would be impolite to close without making some observations. Our first relates to Chicago Mayor Lightfoot's desire to employ minorities in policing. We're fully onboard with that. But her speech lacked suggestions for improving literacy in low-income areas, an essential element for positions such as with the police, where the ability to express oneself on paper is critical.

And we're skeptical about [Dallas Mayor Johnson's](#) wish for "data-driven solutions for communities disproportionately affected by violent crime." Actually, that sounds like...Compstat! But as "[Driven to Fail](#)" and other posts in our "[Quantity and Quality](#)" section have pointed out, policing doesn't happen on an assembly line. Cops and citizens are imperfect, and the environment of the streets can lead both to act in unpredictable, sometimes unfortunate ways. Using numbers, whether they're from Compstat or old-fashioned pin maps, will inevitably lead to more police activity in high-crime areas. Mistakes (including "[false positives](#)") *will* happen. And if there's a lot of policing, there will be *lots* of mistakes. Perhaps Mayor Johnson could ask LAPD's new chief, Michel Moore (he took over after Charlie Beck) about the consequences of his agency's [stop-and-frisk campaign](#). It was motivated by the best of intentions. But then "stuff" happened.

So what can Chiefs do? Instead of falling prey to managerial rhetoric, why not transform a naughty obstacle – the imprecision of policing – into a positive? While the media, academics and other "outsiders" obsess over mistakes, officers soldier on, making miracles every day. How do they get unpredictable, occasionally hostile citizens to do the right thing without using force? In "[Fair but Firm](#)" we mentioned a way, but your writer is a couple decades removed from fieldwork. So, as he recently suggested to a national police organization (he's waiting to see if they'll publish his brilliant essay), why not ask cops about how *they* succeed?

Well, that's enough for now. Stay healthy!