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WATCHING THE WATCHERS

Will sanctioning its cops bring Minneapolis back?



For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Not long before their Third District colleagues tangled with George Floyd, a couple of officers from Minneapolis PD’s Fourth District [festooned the Christmas tree that graced their precinct's lobby](#) with some unusual ornaments: “a pack of menthol cigarettes, a can of Steel Reserve malt liquor, police tape, a bag of Takis snacks and a cup from Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen.” [Described as “super racist stuff”](#) by Mayor Jacob Frey, these unusual decorations upset more than a few citizens. And ultimately led to the suspension of one of the cops, the retirement of his partner, and the demotion of two of their bosses.

As one might expect, the incident was juicy fodder for the media. But it didn’t hold a candle to the tragedy that came five months later. And one year after *that*, on the day following the conviction of ex-MPD cop Derek Chauvin for murdering Mr. Floyd, the Department of Justice launched a “patterns or practices” investigation of Minneapolis P.D. [Its recently released report](#) paints a grim picture of how MPD officers treated citizens, and particularly members of racial and ethnic minorities. [According to Attorney General Merrick Garland](#), MPD officers “routinely disregard the safety of people in their custody” and “fail to intervene to prevent unreasonable use of force by other officers.” They reportedly mistreat persons suffering from behavioral disorders, violate free-speech rights, and discriminate against Black and Native American persons. (And yes, those Christmas ornaments get prominent mention. See pg. 46.) Here’s an extract from the report’s opening page:



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For years, MPD used dangerous techniques and weapons against people who committed at most a petty offense and sometimes no offense at all. MPD used force to punish people who made officers angry or criticized the police. MPD patrolled neighborhoods differently based on their racial composition and discriminated based on race when searching, handcuffing, or using force against people during stops.

George Floyd was murdered on May 25, 2020. Our initial account, "[Punishment Isn't a Cop's Job](#)," was posted on June 3rd. Three weeks later we followed up with an [in-depth assessment](#) of poverty and crime in Minneapolis. Focused on the year preceding the tragic encounter, our analysis revealed a profound relationship between income, race and violence. A comparo between four neighborhoods at each end of the violent crime continuum reflected what we've found elsewhere: as prosperity increases, so does the proportion of White residents. Meanwhile violence goes down.

Of course, the link between poverty and violence is well known. Our [neighborhoods essays](#) frequently roll out data illustrating that relationship throughout urban America. And cops must deal with the consequences every day. Minneapolis' economic disparities were no secret to the authors of DOJ's report (pp. 3-4):

The metropolitan area that includes Minneapolis and neighboring St. Paul known as the Twin Cities has some of the nation's starkest racial disparities on economic measures, including income, homeownership, poverty, unemployment, and educational attainment... The median Black family in the Twin Cities earns just 44% as much as the median white family, and the poverty rate among Black households is nearly five times higher than the rate among white households...

According to DOJ, Black and Native Americans aren't simply poorer. They're also far more likely to be stopped by police. A graph shows that MPD makes proportionally fewer traffic enforcement stops as the proportion of White residents increases (pg. 34). Neighborhoods "with fewer white people" are reportedly beset by pretextual stops that MPD uses to find guns and combat violence. Searches of Black persons are disproportionately frequent. Race and ethnicity aside, the role of place doesn't come up until page 40, when it's reported that officers in two of the city's five police precincts use far more force against Blacks and Native Americans than against Whites during stops:

Compared to white people behaving similarly, Black people stopped by MPD are subjected to:

- 22% more searches
- 37% more vehicle searches
- 24% more uses of force

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For example, from May 25, 2020, to August 9, 2022, in the Third Precinct where many Native Americans live and where supervisors told us the cowboys want to work MPD used force 49% more often during stops involving Black people and 69% more often during stops involving Native American people than they did during similar stops involving white people. And during that same period, officers in the predominantly white Fifth Precinct used force against Black people 44% more often than against white people during similar stops.

Still, other than noting that “MPD has often used a strategy known as ‘pretext’ stops to address crime,” (p. 34), the report was mum about what that “crime” actually looks like. Offending and its distribution across the city get no mention. In a report that ostensibly seeks to assess why Minneapolis’ cops act as they do, the quantity and nature of the criminal incidents to which they respond would seem pertinent. But they’re ignored.

A thorough reckoning of the environment in which Minneapolis cops labor was clearly not part of DOJ’s game plan. But it’s what we set out to do. Minneapolis’ five police precincts (“Districts”) service eighty-seven neighborhoods. Leaving aside the University of Minnesota and three industrial areas, we collected data on eighty-three. Demographics are from the city’s official “[demographics dashboard](#)”. Crime data is from the “[crime dashboard](#).” We downloaded data on all crimes between January 1, 2019 and June 15, 2023 that were coded as murder/non-negligent manslaughter, aggravated assault, robbery, and kidnapping. Our process produced unofficial violence rates per 10,000 population. This table summarizes the findings:

Precincts					Neighborhoods		
Precinct no.	Pop	Pct. poverty	Pct. non-White	Viol/10K 2022 rate	# per precinct	Poverty range	Viol rate 2022 range
1	43304	26	42	774	6	9-50	106.5-413.1
2	70014	26	30	418	17	4-47	8.7-240.1
3	126743	15	42	1395	26	1-38	0-356.3
4	71106	24	70	1439	14	3-33	27.6-466.5
5	106584	10	26	854	20	2-25	2.7-269

Minneapolis’ five precincts exhibit dramatic differences in economics and violent crime. The First, Second and Fourth have overall poverty rates that are more than twice those of the privileged Fifth. Yet the Fifth nonetheless sports a substantial violence rate. Looking within, it turns out that three of its neighborhoods (Lyndale, Steven’s Square and Whittier) are burdened with poverty scores in the twenties. These and other within-precinct differences led us to set them aside and focus on neighborhoods.

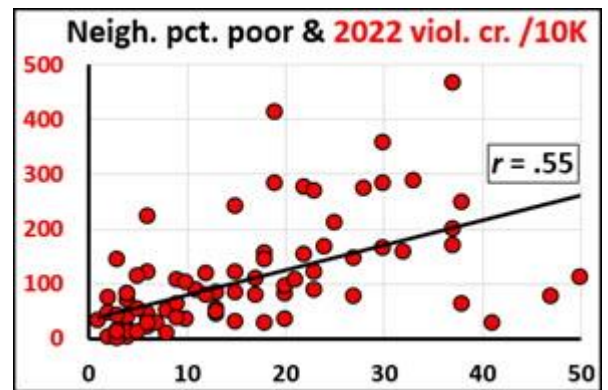
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Our present inquiry covers the period between 2019 and June, 2023. We begin with yearly comparisons of five neighborhoods at each end of the violence spectrum. (For 2023 that's a part-year rate). Lowest-violence neighborhoods are depicted in the top table, and highest-violence neighborhoods are in the bottom table. Each is coded for violence rate and percent of residents in poverty. Their differences - and its consistency - is truly astounding. Violence and poverty are literally locked in an embrace. (According to the [2021 ACS](#), Minneapolis' citywide poverty rate was 15%).

MPLS. NEIGHS WITH 5 LOWEST VIOL CR RATES/10K – PCT. IN POVERTY														
2019	Rate	Pov	2020	Rate	Pov	2021	Rate	Pov	2022	Rate	Pov	Part 2023	Rate	Pov
Page	5	3	Kenny	5	2	Kenny	5	2	Page	0	3	Beltrami	0	13
Hale	6	4	Lynnhurst	6	3	Lynnhurst	6	3	Kenny	3	2	Page	0	3
Lynnhurst	6	3	Fulton	10	4	Fulton	9	4	Fulton	3	4	Lynnhurst	2	3
Fulton	7	4	Armatage	11	4	Hale	12	4	Lynnhurst	3	3	Kenny	3	2
Field	8	6	St. Anth E	13	13	Linden Hil	14	3	Diamd Lk	6	4	Ericsson	3	4
Average	7	4		9	5		9	3		3	3		1	5

MPLS. NEIGHS WITH 5 HIGHEST VIOL CR RATES/10K – PCT. IN POVERTY														
2019	Rate	Pov	2020	Rate	Pov	2021	Rate	Pov	2022	Rate	Pov	Part 2023	Rate	Pov
McKinley	258	22	Downtn W	317	19	McKinley	336	22	Folwell	282	19	Downtn W	115	19
Folwell	270	19	E Phillips	344	30	Jordan	341	30	Near North	287	33	Stv Square	123	23
E Phillips	278	30	McKinley	350	22	Downtn W	403	19	E Phillips	356	30	Midtn Phill	136	28
Downtn W	467	19	Jordan	351	30	E Phillips	418	30	Downtn W	413	19	E Phillips	171	30
Hawthorn	476	37	Hawthorn	591	37	Hawthorn	518	37	Hawthorn	467	37	Hawthorn	175	37
Average	350	25		391	28		403	28		361	28		144	27

This scattergram depicts the relationship between percent in poverty (horiz. axis) and 2022 violent crime rate (vert. axis) for the 83 neighborhoods under study (each is represented with a red dot). The “r” statistic ranges from zero, meaning no relationship, to one, which means that the variables (percent poor and the violent crime rate) are in perfect sync. While there are outliers, that *r* of .55 reflects a pronounced tendency for poverty and violence to go up and down together.

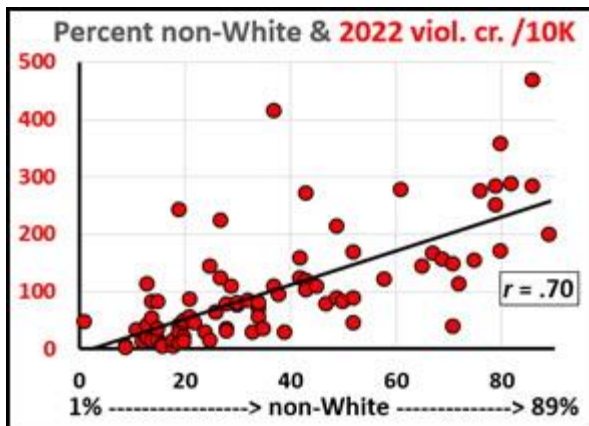


DOJ's report complains that MPD officers unjustly pick on non-Whites. But could other factors be contributing? Say, higher rates of violence in lower-income neighborhoods? Below are repeat comparos between low and high-violence neighborhoods, but with percentage of non-White residents instead of poverty rates.

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MPLS. NEIGHS WITH 5 LOWEST VIOL CR RATES/10K – PCT. NON-WHITE (NW)														
2019	Rate	NW	2020	Rate	NW	2021	Rate	NW	2022	Rate	NW	Part 2023	Rate	NW
Page	5	9	Kenny	5	18	Kenny	5	18	Page	0	9	Beltrami	0	52
Hale	6	14	Lynnhurst	6	16	Lynnhurst	6	16	Kenny	3	18	Page	0	9
Lynnhurst	6	16	Fulton	10	9	Fulton	9	9	Fulton	3	9	Lynnhurst	2	16
Fulton	7	9	Armatage	11	15	Hale	12	14	Lynnhurst	3	16	Kenny	3	18
Field	8	22	St. Anth E	13	34	Linden Hil	14	18	Diamd Lk	6	16	Ericsson	3	13
Average	7	14		9	18		9	15		3	14		1	22

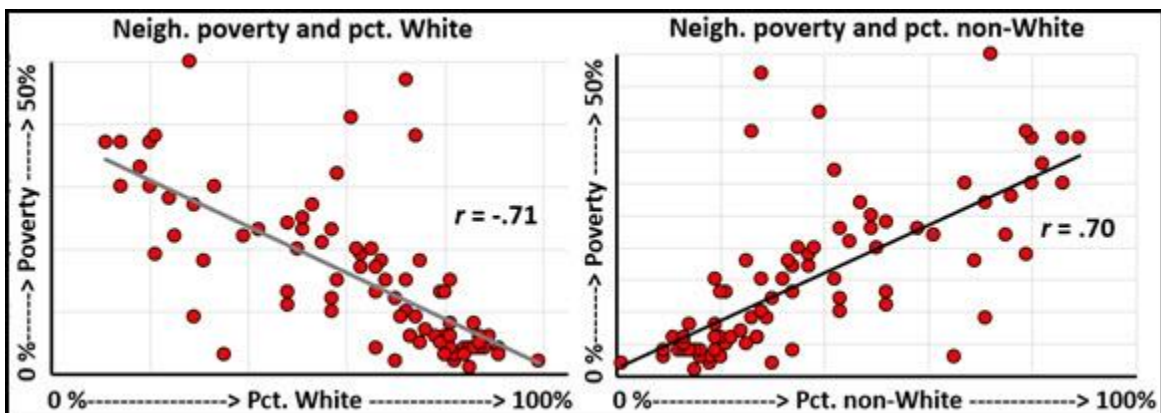
MPLS. NEIGHS WITH 5 HIGHEST VIOL CR RATES/10K – PCT. NON-WHITE (NW)														
2019	Rate	NW	2020	Rate	NW	2021	Rate	NW	2022	Rate	NW	Part 2023	Rate	NW
McKinley	258	61	Downtn W	317	37	McKinley	336	61	Folwell	282	79	Downtn W	115	37
Folwell	270	79	E Phillips	344	80	Jordan	341	86	Near North	287	82	Stv Square	123	43
E Phillips	278	80	McKinley	350	61	Downtn W	403	37	E Phillips	356	80	Midtn Phill	136	76
Downtn W	467	37	Jordan	351	86	E Phillips	418	80	Downtn W	413	37	E Phillips	171	80
Hawthorn	476	86	Hawthorn	591	86	Hawthorn	518	86	Hawthorn	467	86	Hawthorn	175	86
Average	350	69		391	70		403	70		361	73		144	64



Again, there are exceptions. Note, for example, Beltrami’s zero violence score in 2023. But violent crime rates clearly trend high where non-Whites abound. Check out the scattergram. At $r = .70$ the relationship between violence and percent non-White is undeniably pronounced.

We don’t argue that some Minneapolis officers shouldn’t be wearing a badge. There’s a reason why our original post about

George Floyd, which came out one week after the incident, was entitled “[Punishment Isn’t a Cop’s Job.](#)” Yet considering poverty’s relationship with violence, ignoring its role does no one any favors. And in Minneapolis, the economic circumstances of many non-Whites are indeed bleak:



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Not-so-incidentally, that intimate connection between poverty and violence, which the Feds ignored, is no secret to Minneapolis' residents. We regularly update "[Don't Divest – Invest!](#)", our follow-on essay about George Floyd, with relevant news clips about the troubled city. Here's a sampling (most recent first):

- **5/5/23** Violence-ridden Minneapolis [is beset by three street gangs](#): the "Lows," the "Highs", and the "Bloods". On May 3 DOJ unsealed indictments charging thirty members of the "Highs" and the "Bloods" with a RICO conspiracy to commit murder and robbery and to traffic in drugs. Fifteen additional members are charged with Federal gun and drug violations. A like indictment naming the "Lows" is anticipated
- **12/22/22** Residents of a subsidized apartment complex in Minneapolis' working-class Cedar-Riverside neighborhood [blame an "explosion of Fentanyl"](#) and a profusion of homeless encampments for break-ins and shootings that have made life unpleasant and all-too-often, treacherous. Despite hiring a security guard and adding more cameras, "I'm just not sure we're making up any ground," says a property manager. "Every night there's something new."
- **8/27/22** Black people account for about 19 percent of Minneapolis residents. [Yet 83 percent of shooting victims so far this year](#) have been Black, as have 89 percent of known shooters. "That makes sense," said City Council member LaTrisha Vetaw, who is Black, as the shootings are taking place in "underserved communities" predominantly inhabited by Black persons.
- **8/5/22** Minneapolis' "Downtown West," a busy district with concert venues and official buildings, enjoyed a reprieve from crime as activity decreased during the pandemic. But as things get back to "normal," [crime and violence have returned](#) with a vengeance. So far this year violent crime is 25 percent higher than in 2021, gunfire is up 40 percent, and property crimes have soared 65 percent. Police staffing, though, is way down; the downtown precinct has 49 only cops on patrol versus 81 in 2020.

Full stop. As that May 5, 2023 update suggests, not everyone in DOJ has focused their angst on the cops. Check out its [recent announcement](#) about the Federal indictment of dozens of Minneapolis gang members who wreaked havoc in the city's impoverished neighborhoods: "The most vulnerable in our communities are often those most impacted by gun violence and criminal gang activity. Our most vulnerable residents are entitled to the same protections and safety as everyone else in society."

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Still, whether it's police or the Feds, law enforcement is inevitably after-the-fact. Even when well done it's often too little, too late. What's really necessary is what we've called on for the last decade-and-a-half. Here's our favorite outtake from "[Fix Those Neighborhoods!](#)":

Yet no matter how well it's done, policing is clearly not the ultimate solution. Preventing violence is a task for society. As we've repeatedly pitched, a concerted effort to provide poverty-stricken individuals and families with child care, tutoring, educational opportunities, language skills, job training, summer jobs, apprenticeships, health services and – yes – adequate housing could yield vast benefits.

That's an issue that cuts across national boundaries. Consider the current turmoil in France, which is beset by riots and looting that were sparked by the [July 27 police shooting death](#) of a 17-year old who tried to drive off after a traffic stop. His killing, in a poverty-stricken area of the Paris suburb of Nanterre, was "the lighter that ignited the gas. Hopeless young people were waiting for it. We lack housing and jobs, and when we have (jobs), our wages are too low." Those were the words of a resident of nearby Clichy, where [a notorious 2005 police encounter](#) led to the deaths of two poor youths and set off weeks of rioting. A decade-plus later, France would break out in riots sparked by the murder of George Floyd. [According to the New York Times](#), "France is fractured between its affluent metropolitan elites...and low-income communities in blighted, racially mixed suburbs where schools tend to be poor and prospects dim." French police killed 13 motorists in 2022 and three including the youth this year; the officer who shot him was promptly arrested and charged with homicide.

To be sure, cops differ. "[Third, Fourth and Fifth Chances](#)" emphasized that troubled officers require prompt attention. (Derek Chauvin isn't the first MPD officer whose dodgy conduct was overlooked until it was too late. Check out "[A Risky and Informed Decision](#)", our 2021 piece about ex-cop Mohamed Noor.) So by all means, don't abandon sincere efforts at police reform. But keep in mind that they're no substitute for the funding and hard work that are urgently needed to restore sanity to low-income neighborhoods.

And we don't just mean in Minneapolis.