

## A Closer Look at Chicago's Homicide Trends



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Police officials are getting sore arms patting themselves on the back on how *they* dropped homicide in Chicago. Why this claim is so foolish can be seen by looking more closely at the graphic from the Sun Times editorial of February 27. Chicago's homicide rate has been relatively flat since 2004. The "spike" of 2012, which was about the same as the "spike" of 2008, is a slight fluctuation as this year homicide has regressed back to the mean of the last decade. There is very little to explain because very little has happened. Superintendent McCarthy's ballyhooed "notifications" and threats to gang members are much ado about nothing. Look again at the graphic. What stands out are not recent blips and dips in homicide, but the much higher level of homicide in the 1990s followed by a sharp drop. What police tactics explained that? The answer is none: the gang wars of those years, which

shook Chicago, wound down and began the process of shattering the hold of gang leaders on their members. Bitter “civil wars” between allied gangs turned Chicago into killing fields. Hits were called from leaders in prison as gangs battled over power and control of drug markets. The violence of today is much lower and very different. Why?

First, in the late nineties gang members and community residents alike were aghast at a murder rate more than twice that of today. Youthful gang members were being used as expendable pawns by gang chiefs intent on amassing power and profits. Rank & file members became demoralized, refusing to kill or be killed for the benefit of power hungry prison-based leaders. Stateville, for example, had been known as “The White House” since that is where orders to do “hits” came from. The Richard Speck exposé set off a chain reaction that moved major gang leaders out of their Illinois prison command posts.

Battle fatigue and the removal of gang leaders to federal prisons, along with the impact of the demise of public housing, led to the shattering of gang structures in Chicago and were the principle causes of the 1990s decline in homicide. McCarthy’s current threats to gang leaders to stop the violence “or else” are empty bluffs since gang leaders no longer have authority over wild kids who are rapidly forming new gangs and listen more to rappers than “OGs.”

Look for a final time at the graphic. The current rate of homicide in Chicago has stabilized at about 15/100,000. That is three times higher than New York City and half the rate of Detroit. To understand this, we should turn to the 2011 UN Global Study of homicide.

The UN found homicide worldwide is correlated to lack of development, inequality, and the desperation of young men. Detroit is a classic example of desperation as is Chicago. Housing projects here were built to contain African Americans then torn down to scatter them. Schools were closed pushing kids into new and often hostile gang turfs. One in three African Americans live in poverty and half of Chicago’s black children are poor, the highest rate in the nation. Since Harold Washington, black political power has faded away, fueling hopelessness.

One reason Chicago’s homicide rate has stayed higher than New York City is surely our gangs. The UN Report points out large jumps in homicide are almost always related to gang wars that flare up and then come to an end. For example, Chicago today is on the other side of the 1990s gang wars — thus our decline — and Mexico now is in the midst of a war of cartels with more than 70,000 murders over the decade.

The Sun Times editorial does not recognize police are not just part of the solution, but also part of the problem. In Chicago the CPD has much to overcome from the Jon Burge torture years and deep resentment in the black community. The proposed Burge reparations ordinance is a start. The city also needs to more aggressively address

endemic corruption that tarnishes police reputation and undermines legitimacy.

What a serious study of homicide tells us is that police are not magicians. They predictably respond to variations in homicide with new tricks, like notifications. But the reasons for Chicago's medium to high homicide rate is not what police do, but what the city has not done. The problem isn't gangs so much as the desperation of young black men. We don't need magic policing tricks but real jobs, decent education, adequate housing, fair police, and other steps on the long, hard road of reducing inequality and violence.

John Hagedorn's new book on gangs, organized crime, and corruption in Chicago, *The In\$ane Chicago Way*, will be out next year from the University of Chicago Press.