

Show your
face!

I Do Mind Dying

The city's homicide rate is high because its economy is stuck in the past.

Milwaukee is a city in serious decline. I know such ideas are heresy, and some important people will get angry reading this. But I'll bet those same types were bullish on Gary, Indiana in the 1950s, right before the steel mills died.

There are lots of reasons I'm worried. Milwaukee's infant mortality rate has actually *increased* since 1978 and is now higher than New York City's. Since 1960, Milwaukee has lost more than 20 percent of its population, and we're still losing people, especially the wealthy. Our city has the Midwest's highest level of black poverty.

But the most telling indicator of our city's troubles is homicide. Tell me: Why is Milwaukee's homicide rate *twice as high* as New York City's? Why have murders fallen precipitously in Los Angeles, Seattle and even Cleveland, but stayed high here? Why is New York's homicide rate lower today than it was before the crack epidemic, while Milwaukee's is *three times* higher? If getting tough on crime worked in New York, why hasn't it worked here?

As a criminologist who cares deeply about our future, I'm worried that it's mainly the old rustbelt cities, like Milwaukee,

St. Louis and Detroit, which have the highest levels of homicide. Urban areas with high levels of segregation, like Milwaukee or Chicago, have also seen their murder rate stay high. My research has led me to an unsettling analysis.

Homicides rose in nearly all U.S. cities with the introduction of crack in the late 1980s. But when crack markets stabilized in New York, Boston and other high-tech cities, the number of killings fell drastically. In these cities the new wealth apparently "trickled down" — to use an old-fashioned Republican term — and created a variety of service and

construction jobs, many of them off-the-books. These jobs pulled minority youth into the construction boom and into a relatively high-wage service economy... and away from selling drugs. But in declining manufacturing centers, like Milwaukee, dead-end service jobs in devastated communities gave kids less incentive to leave the dope game. No matter what kind of policing strategy rustbelt cities tried, drug markets didn't stabilize and violence stayed high.

Compare Boston and Milwaukee. Ten years ago Boston's murder rate was higher than Milwaukee's. But today our homicide rate is *three times* higher than Boston's. Why? For one thing, Boston's booming information industry has spread out, so that today only 6 percent of its black residents

live in segregated, high poverty areas. In low-tech Milwaukee, a shocking 46 percent of our African American "neighbors" live in segregated, high poverty neighborhoods. You do the math. All across the U.S. we find the equation: declining manufacturing economies plus high levels of segregation equal high rates of homicide.

Milwaukee flourished in the early part of this century as an incubator of manufacturing innovation, giving our city an edge on others. Factories sprouted up in the Central City and were surrounded by working-class housing. But that was yesterday... and yesterday's gone. Today, the information industry drives the global economy while here we seem to be still chasing smokestacks. Our city has the Midwest's second highest percentage of workers in manufacturing, behind Detroit. While Milwaukee has a strong insurance and medical technology sector, we have weak transportation and communication sectors and no software industry.

But don't pack your bags for Seattle. We're not doomed. Look at Cleveland — what was once the "Mistake by the Lake," is now brimming with economic activity and a plummeting homicide rate. Look at Boston or New York building commercial enterprises and condominiums in Roxbury and the South Bronx. We can do that here, too.

But to turn things around means understanding that it's jobs in the new information industry that create wealth, not gimmicks like Downtown gambling, nor "investing" public funds in dying industries and companies, like Steeltch. If we create the new information jobs, Downtown's bright lights will turn on, professionals will move in and the construction and service sectors will boom.

We need to build on the synergy of University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's "Milwaukee Idea," using our universities to start-up dozens of new information enterprises. We need to reduce segregation by concentrating professionals and their jobs throughout the city, not just in gentrified ghettos. We need to understand that the main issue is creating wealth in the city, not light rail to ship our workers out. And we need city leadership that is more tolerant of different ideas and not so afraid to admit uncomfortable truths.

But I fear our city's elite are timidly choosing to stay the course, moaning as Grand Avenue shuts down, denying our convention center is too small, whining as manufacturing jobs leave for Mexico and wasting political capital on a choo-choo system to cart tourists around a deserted Downtown. Meanwhile homicide and infant mortality rates stay high, as the rich move away and the poor are trapped.

Like many of you, I love this city. I grew up here. My children and I have played in our parks and gone to our schools. I've worked in our factories and protested on our streets. But we need to face the facts if we're to reverse the decline of the past decades.

Or we can visit East St. Louis and see our future. ■



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