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A TALE OF THREE CITIES

Declines in manufacturing are associated with crime

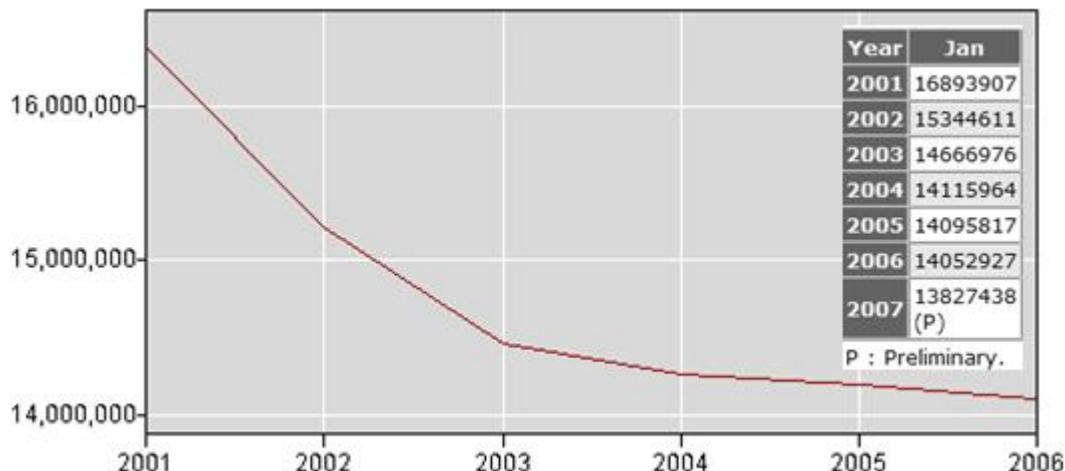
By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. “The drug economy *is* the economy.” So said New Jersey prosecutor [Joshua Ottenberg](#) as he bemoaned the sad state of affairs in **Camden**, where stretches of its once-thriving downtown resemble the hollowed, bombed-out cities of World War II. Bucking a national trend of decreasing violence, with America’s three leading metropolitan areas, New York, Chicago and Los Angeles enjoying record-low homicide rates, the city of less than 80,000 suffered forty-five murders in 2007, *thirteen* more than in the previous year. (If anyone’s counting, that’s a *forty-one percent* increase.) The surge came despite a declining population. Census figures reveal that between 1990-2006, Camden lost nearly [nine percent](#) of its residents, while a stunning [thirty-six percent](#) -- more than one-third -- lived below the poverty level.

It’s a similar story in **Baltimore**, where [murders soared](#) from 133 in 2006 to 155 in 2007, a gain of seventeen percent. Ohio’s capital has also lost residents in less dramatic ways. Between 1990-2006 it endured a [14 percent](#) population decline. Nearly [twenty percent](#) of its citizens live under the poverty level.

What about **Philadelphia**? Glad you asked. In the city made famous by cream cheese, [murders rose](#) from 185 to 203, a gain of “only” ten percent. Between 1990-2006 its population dropped nearly [nine percent](#), with a full [twenty-five percent](#) living below poverty level.

There seem to be as many explanations for the causes of crime as there are those studying it. Much of the attention has been focused on poverty and its correlates, including broken families, lousy public education, weak social and familial controls, deviant subcultures and the ready availability of guns and drugs. While most poor people are law-abiding, if poverty is a critical antecedent of crime and violence it seems reasonable to look for ways to increase income.

But it’s awfully hard to do it when the only jobs available are at McDonald’s. Good-paying manufacturing jobs, the one-time universal entrée to the middle class, have been disappearing at a rapid clip: more than 18 percent were lost between 2001-2007, *a span of only six years*.



Total number of U.S. manufacturing employees -- all company sizes

America's industrial belt took the biggest hit. Nine of the twelve States suffering a decline in manufacturing positions between 1992 and 1997 were in the Northeast. Among these were New Jersey (9.7 percent lost), Maryland (3.4 percent lost) and Pennsylvania (.8 percent lost). Note that statewide figures may significantly *understate* losses in hard-hit urban areas. During the four decades ending in 1990 Baltimore lost a whopping *sixty-six percent* of manufacturing jobs; Philadelphia, *seventy percent*, drops that according to [Fannie Mae](#) clearly "contributed to the cycle of decline in inner-city neighborhoods." Recent figures reveal that the crisis continues. As recently as 2007 manufacturing employment in the Northeast had the highest average monthly drop (.3 percent) and yearly drop (2.0 percent) of U.S. regions.

Can a shortage of decent-paying jobs be blamed for inner-city violence? When [reporters](#) asked Camden's police chief what could be done to curb his city's abysmal homicide rate he answered, "it would be great to get a manufacturing plant." He might be on to something. A recent study concluded that the industrial shift that stripped manufacturing jobs from America's inner cities significantly increased the homicide rate of black males ("Industrial Shift, Polarized Labor Markets and Urban Violence," *Criminology*, August 2004).

How do we defeat poverty? The fix isn't in more McJobs. Neither is it to improve academically-oriented education, as worthy as that goal may be for other reasons. We desperately need to create good-paying work for the majority of the male population that isn't -- and never will be -- interested in math, science and social studies, no matter how many Jaime Escalantes we throw at them. One step might be to immerse secondary-school students who eschew academics in intensive vocational programs.

Another might be to create incentives for keeping manufacturing at home -- or disincentives for sending it overseas.

A country that helped rebuild Europe after the war has no excuse for not instituting a Marshall Plan to pull its own beleaguered cities from what threatens to become an irreversible decline. If we don't stop bleeding jobs, our young men will keep bleeding buckets.

Count on it.