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LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Crime happens. To find out why, look to where.

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. A few weeks ago [we blogged about Chicago's ongoing struggle](#) with violent crime. And it's not just the Windy City that's been having a lousy year. [Data gathered](#) from sixty-three police departments and sheriff's offices by the Major Chiefs Association reveals that half (31) experienced more homicides in the first quarter of 2016 than during the equivalent period in 2015.   Some of the increases were substantial. Murders in Las Vegas went from 22 to 40, an 82 percent gain. Other winners (or, more properly, losers) include Dallas (26 to 45, +73 percent), Jacksonville (18 to 30, +67 percent), Newark (15 to 24, +60 percent), Memphis (31 to 48, +55 percent), Nashville (13 to 20, +54 percent), San Antonio (23 to 34, +48 percent), and Los Angeles (55 to 73, +33 percent).

Still, the trophy properly belongs to Chicago. Although its increase wasn't the greatest percentage-wise – the Windy City came in third, at +70 – it dwarfed its competitors in raw numbers, going from 83 homicides during 1Q 2015 to a stunning 141 for 1Q 2016. Overall, [more folks are meeting a violent demise](#) in the City of Broad Shoulders (509 in 2012; 422 in 2013; 427 in 2014; 465 in 2015) than anywhere else in the U.S. (We'll spare readers Chicago's other nicknames. Perhaps these sobering facts might suggest one that's more – um – *contemporary*.)

On the other hand, if we're interested in murder *rates* Chicago is a distant contender. This graph uses data from the [Brennan Center](#), [St. Louis police](#), [U.S. census](#) and the [UCR](#) to compare murders per 100,000 population for thirteen major cities since 2002. (Our focus is on murder because felonious assault data seems far less trustworthy. For more on this see "[Cooking the Books](#)" and "[Liars Figure](#)".)
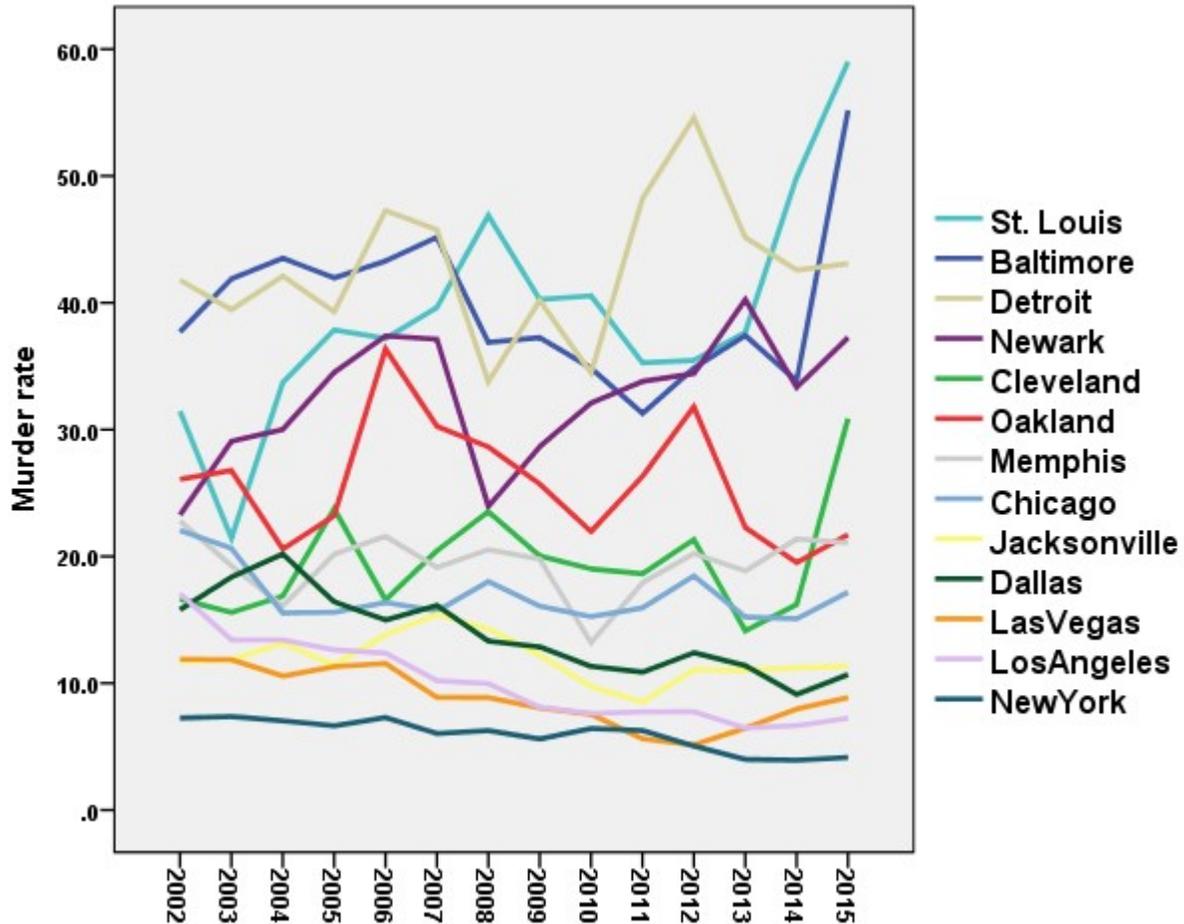
And the winner (meaning, loser) is St. Louis! It earns the gold for 188 killings, which yielded a breath-taking rate of 59.6 murders per 100,000 population. Baltimore, at 55.2, got the silver and Detroit, at 43.8, the bronze. Chicago – its comparatively measly rate was 17.0 – only came in eighth.

Yet the news wasn't all bad. During 2002-2014 New York City's murder rate fell from 7.3 to 3.9. (It ticked up a bit in 2015, ending at 4.2.) Los Angeles wasn't too far behind. Although it started out far higher, at 17.1, by 2013 its rate had dropped to 6.5. Murder rates have rebounded in the last couple of years, but L.A.'s uptick was relatively marginal, to 6.7 in 2014 and 7.2 in 2015.

So, New York is very safe, and Los Angeles isn't far behind. Right?

Not so fast. Each release of the Uniform Crime Reports is accompanied by a prominent warning against using crime statistics to rank jurisdictions. Here's the most recent:

Each year when Crime in the United States is published, many entities—news media, tourism agencies, and other groups with an interest in crime in our nation—use reported figures to compile rankings of cities and counties. These rankings, however, are merely a quick choice made by the data user; they provide no insight into the many variables that mold the crime in a particular town, city, county, state, region, or other jurisdiction. Consequently, these rankings lead to simplistic and/or incomplete analyses that often create misleading perceptions adversely affecting cities and counties, along with their residents.

"Simplistic" or not, once the stat's come out there's no holding back the media. In late 2015, only days after release of the UCR's 2014 installment, the Detroit News prominently ranked the top ten murder cities, leaving any implications to the reader. Comparisons – essentially, rankings under another name – are commonplace. Two weeks ago, in an otherwise well-documented piece entitled "Homicide Rates Jump in Many Major U.S. Cities, New Data Shows," the *New York Times* gloated that the Big Apple was nothing like Chicago:

> Still, more than 50 people were shot in Chicago last weekend, making it among the most violent weekends in months. At the other end of the spectrum was New York City, where homicides fell in the first three months of the year to 68 from 85 in the same period last year.

Respectable police organizations also get in the game. True enough, the above-mentioned report published by the major cities police chiefs avoids direct comparisons by listing cities alphabetically and providing crime counts instead of rates. Except that the chiefs just couldn't help themselves: jurisdictions where crime increased are highlighted in red.

What gets lost in the discord about ranking is that cities are political constructs. Crime, on the other hand, is a social phenomenon, with its roots in neighborhoods. Commenting on the recent upswing in murder, Professor Richard Berk makes the point succinctly:

> Those homicides are not randomly distributed...Crime, like politics, is local. This stuff all occurs in neighborhoods on much more local levels....It's not about a city as a whole, it's about neighborhoods.

Alas, the professor's enlightened comments were buried in an article that – you guessed it – was replete with rankings. Still, his concerns about place were echoed by Eddie Johnson, Chicago's weary police commissioner, who attributed the increased
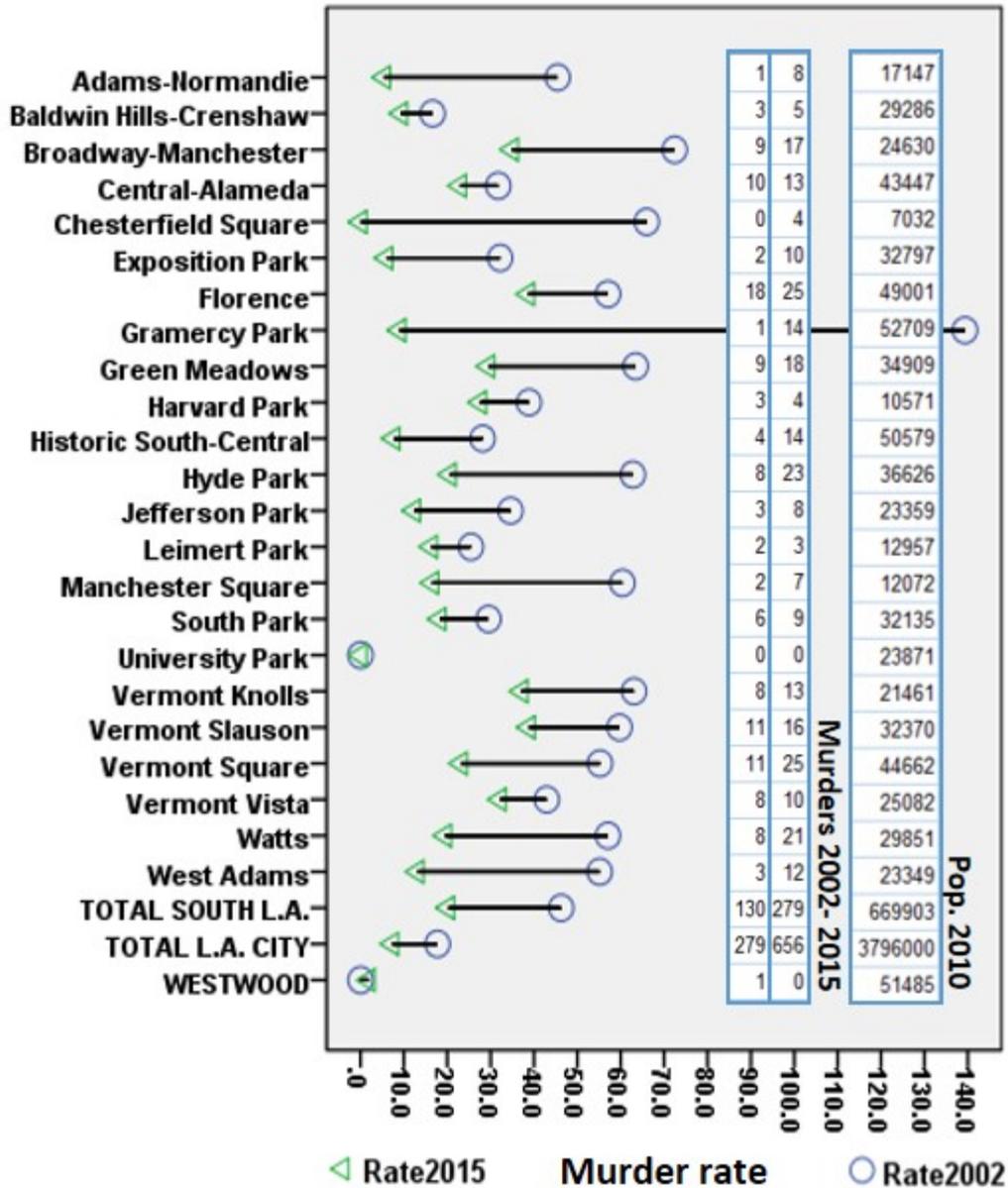
violence to a coterie of well-known criminals who were running amok in certain parts of the city.

That's what another top cop had to say about his burg a few days ago. Interviewed about Los Angeles's recent rebound in homicide, LAPD Chief Charlie Beck hastened to point out that only 427 Angelinos have been shot so far in 2016, while 1,400 were plugged during this period in…Chicago! But his analysis of L.A.'s increase seems much the same:

> We took some extreme steps to address the four most violent divisions earlier in the year, and those steps are starting to have some effect. Although it's not over 'til it's over, obviously.

Your blogger spent his teens in a middle-class neighborhood on Los Angeles' west side. His only experience with violence was what he heard on the radio or saw on T.V. Of course, he and his friends steered clear of notoriously violent areas such as South L.A. Two decades later, when your blogger returned to L.A. as an ATF supervisor, he got to experience South L.A.'s crime problems first-hand. He'll always remember that early morning when one of the fed-up local residents walked up and thanked him as agents led a notorious evil-doer away.

What can we learn from neighborhoods? The Los Angeles Times has been mapping murders in the L.A. metropolitan area since 2000. This graph compares rates for neighborhoods in the incorporated areas of South Los Angeles during 2002-2015:

Neighborhood	Rate2015	Rate2002	Murders 2002	Murders 2015	Pop. 2010
Adams-Normandie			1	8	17147
Baldwin Hills-Crenshaw			3	5	29286
Broadway-Manchester			9	17	24630
Central-Alameda			10	13	43447
Chesterfield Square			0	4	7032
Exposition Park			2	10	32797
Florence			18	25	49001
Gramercy Park			1	14	52709
Green Meadows			9	18	34909
Harvard Park			3	4	10571
Historic South-Central			4	14	50579
Hyde Park			8	23	36626
Jefferson Park			3	8	23359
Leimert Park			2	3	12957
Manchester Square			2	7	12072
South Park			6	9	32135
University Park			0	0	23871
Vermont Knolls			8	13	21461
Vermont Slauson			11	16	32370
Vermont Square			11	25	44662
Vermont Vista			8	10	25082
Watts			8	21	29851
West Adams			3	12	23349
TOTAL SOUTH L.A.			130	279	669903
TOTAL L.A. CITY			279	656	3796000
WESTWOOD			1	0	51485

During 2002-2015, the aggregate neighborhood murder rate ("Total South L.A.") plunged 56 percent, from 46.2 to 20.2, while the rate for the City of Los Angeles fell 59 percent, from 17.8 to 7.3. L.A.'s starting rate was more than two points lower than South L.A.'s ending rate, and wound up being less than one-third South L.A.'s. Westwood, a trendy area where your blogger's family occasionally shopped and dined, had zero murders in 2012 and one in 2015. Your blogger's neighborhood, West Hollywood (2010 pop. 34,426), went from 2 murders in 2002 to one in 2015.

Many L.A. neighborhoods have always been safe, others not so much. Although homicide seems to be on the decline, places such as Broadway-Manchester, Central-

Alameda, Florence, Vermont Knolls, Vermont Slauson, and Vermont Square are stubbornly resisting the trend. Each is likely to have counterparts elsewhere, and for the same reasons. Say, Chicago.

Cops and criminologists know that place matters. "Hot-spots" policing, the popular strategy that targets locations in need of special attention, is a computerized version of last century's old-fashioned pin maps. Sociological interest in neighborhoods dates back to at least the "Chicago School." And inquiries into place continue. In a compelling new study, researchers sampled census blocks in ten cities to investigate the effects of voluntary organizations on neighborhood crime rates. Their report appears in the current issue of *Criminology*.

What's important is to escape the trap of the usual suspect: poverty. Really, most poor people aren't crooks. Geographically coding crimes and potentially enlightening variables – for example, the presence of violent cliques – might help explain why some disadvantaged neighborhoods fare worse than others. Unfortunately, that's where movement lags. At present, thirty-tree states participate in the National Incident-Based Reporting System. A joint effort of the FBI and Bureau of Justice Statistics, it supplants the stodgy old UCR, which mostly aggregates numbers of offenses and arrests. Unfortunately, while the NIBRS captures information about place, crime locations are only coded by type (e.g., residence, bar, office building).

To help agencies take the next step, the National Institute of Justice offers a comprehensive set of mapping and analytical tools. Some departments have been geocoding incidents, publishing maps and even making data available online (click here for Philadelphia PD's version.) Geocoded crime data is also offered by private firms and public organizations (the *L.A. Times* "Homicide Report" was used for this piece.) And while its coverage is somewhat dated, the National Archive of Criminal Justice Data offers data that can be drilled down to ZIP codes, census tracts and block groups.

Hopefully one day all crime will be geocoded. Until then, we should keep in mind that political subdivisions like Los Angeles and Chicago are mostly creatures of the imagination. Just like in real estate, it really *is* all about location.