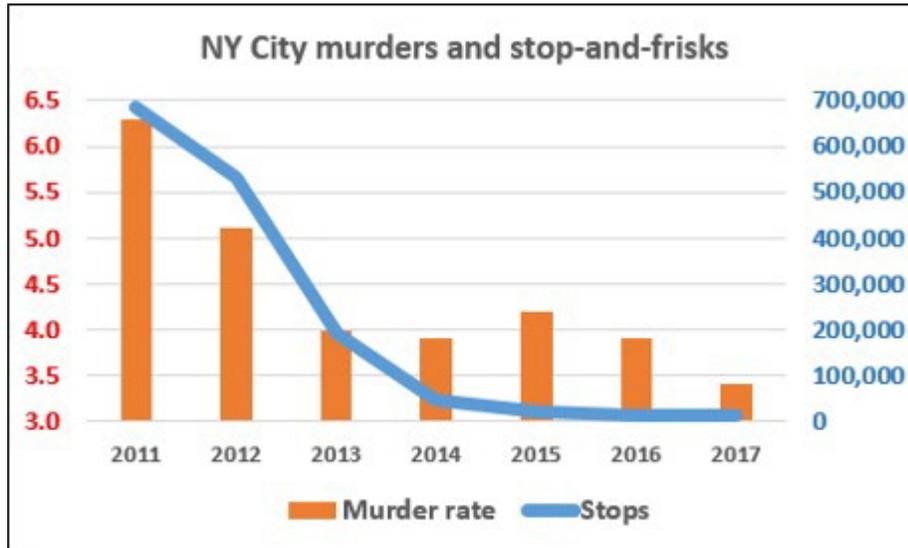


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POLICE SLOWDOWNS (PART II)

Cops can't fix what ails America's inner cities – and shouldn't try



By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. [Part I](#) concluded that sharp, purposeful reductions in discretionary police-citizen encounters probably increased violent crime in Baltimore, Chicago and Minneapolis. Here we'll start by considering the effects of work actions in two supposedly safer places: New York City and Los Angeles.

There are few better laboratories for assessing the effects of reducing officer activity than New York City, whose famous stop-and-frisk campaign [dates back to the early 2000's](#). As we reported in "[Location, Location, Location](#)" its lifespan coincided with a plunge in the city's murder rate, which fell from 7.3 in 2002 to 3.9 in 2014.

Glance at the chart, which displays data from [NYPD](#) and the UCR. Clearly, stop-and-frisk had become a *very* big part of being a cop. Officers made more than *six-hundred eight-five thousand* stops in 2011 (685,724, to be exact). We picked that year as a starting point because that's when adverse court decisions started coming in (for an in-depth account grab a coffee and click [here](#).) Still, the program continued, and there were a robust 532,911 stops in 2012. But in August 2013 a Federal judge ruled that NYPD's stop-and-frisk program [violated citizens' constitutional rights](#). Activity instantly plunged, and the year ended with "only" 191,851 stops. Then the bottom fell out. Stop-and-frisks receded to 45,787 in 2014, 22,563 in 2015, 12,404 in 2016 and 11,629 in 2017.

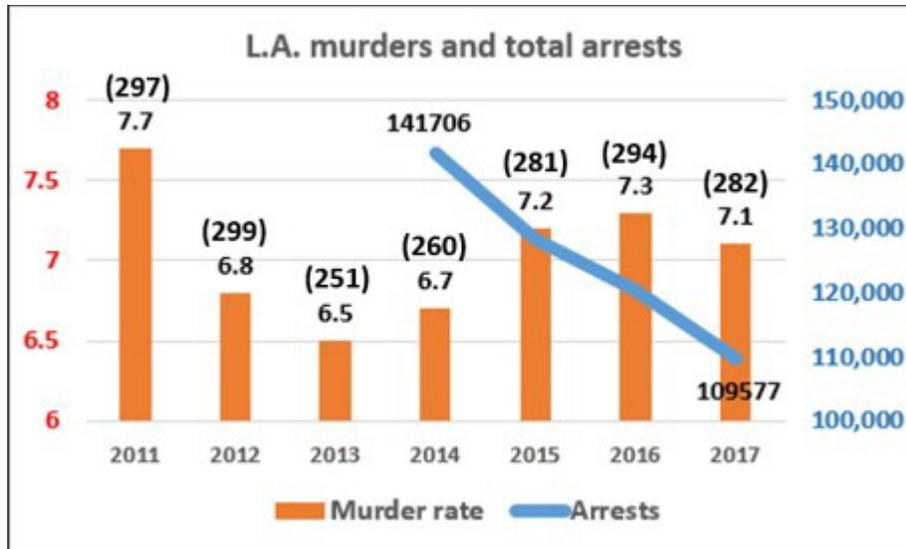
It wasn't just stop-and-frisks. Productivity was being impacted by other issues, most notably officer displeasure with Mayor Bill de Blasio, who openly blamed cops for the serious rift with the minority community caused by the tragic [July 2014 police killing of Eric Garner](#). Then things got worse. That December an angry ex-con [shot and killed](#) NYPD officers Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu as they sat in their patrol car. Officers quickly attributed his deranged act to the [hostile anti-cop atmosphere](#) supposedly being fostered by City Hall, then expressed their displeasure by going on a modified "strike". According to [NYPD statistics reviewed by the New York Post](#), arrests during December 2014 were down by sixty-six percent when compared to a year earlier, while tickets and the like plunged more than ninety percent. Although the magnitude of the slowdown soon receded, its effects reportedly persisted well into 2015.

On the whole, did less vigorous policing cause crime to increase? Look at the chart again. During 2011-2013 murders and stops declined at about the same rate. On its face that seems consistent with views expressed by some of the more "liberal" outlets, which concluded that doing less actually *reduced* crime – at least, of the reported kind (click [here](#) and [here](#)). But in 2014 the downtrend in killings markedly slowed, and in 2015, with stop-and-frisk on the ropes and officers angry at Hizzoner, murders increased. A study recently summarized on the NIJ [Crime Solutions](#) website concluded that, all in all, stop-and-frisk did play a role in reducing crime:

Overall, Weisburd and colleagues (2015)* found that Stop, Question, and Frisk (SQF) was associated with statistically significant decreases in the probability of nontraffic-related crime (including assault, drug-related crimes, weapon-related crimes, and theft) occurring at the street segment level in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Staten Island...SQFs did not have a statistically significant impact on nontraffic-related crime in Manhattan or Queens."

* David Weisburd, Alese Wooditch, Sarit Weisburd and Sue-Ming Yang, "Do Stop, Question, and Frisk Practices Deter Crime?" *Criminology and Public Policy*, 15(1):31-55 (2015).

Stop-and-frisk campaigns reportedly reduced crime in other places. For example, check out [Lowell, Mass.](#) and [Philadelphia](#). However, [our views on the practice](#) are mixed, and we'll have more to say about it later. For now let's move on to our last city, El Pueblo de Nuestra Senora, La Reina de Los Angeles:



L.A.'s murder rate initially followed the New York pattern, [plunging from 17.1 in 2002 to 6.5 in 2013](#). But L.A.'s tick-up has been considerably more substantial. That concerned the [Los Angeles Times](#), which reported that arrests paradoxically decreased by twenty-five percent between 2013 and 2015. "Field interviews" (the term includes stop-and-frisks) also supposedly dropped, and 154,000 fewer citations were written in 2015 than in 2014. Unfortunately, the *Times* didn't post its actual numbers on the web. Our tally, which uses data from the UCR and the [LAPD website](#), indicates that arrests declined 23 percent arrests between 2014-2017, a period during which murders increased about six percent.

According to the *Times*, officers conceded that they had slowed down on purpose. Their reasons included public criticism of police overreach, lower staffing levels, and the enactment of [Proposition 47](#), which reduced many crimes to misdemeanors. And while the lessened activity led some public officials to fret, some observers thought that doing less might be a good thing:

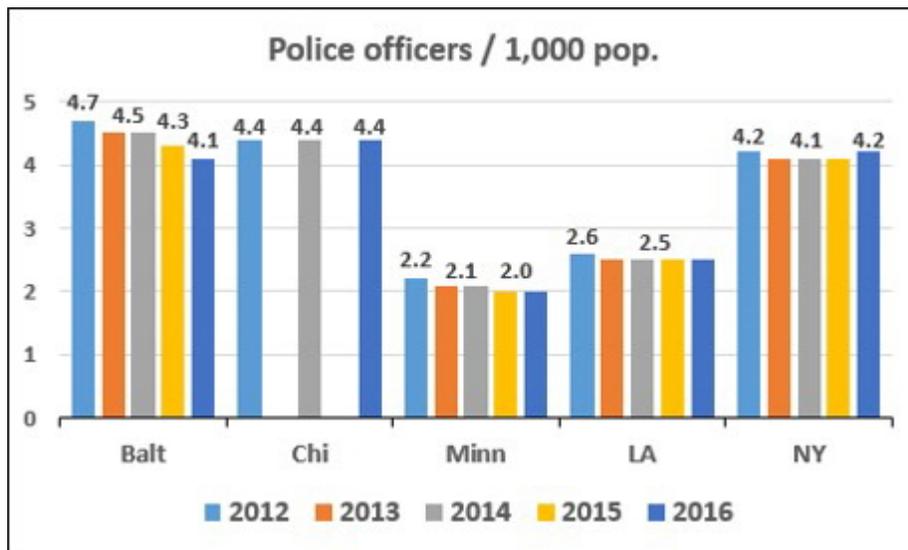
If police are more cautious about making arrests that might be controversial, making arrests that might elicit protests, then that is a victory. We want them to begin to check themselves.

Contrasting his vision of "modern policing" with the bad old days, when doing a good job was all about making lots of stops, searches and arrests, then-Chief Charlie Beck heartily agreed:

The only thing we cared about was how many arrests we made. I don't want them to care about that. I want them to care about how safe their community is and how healthy it is.

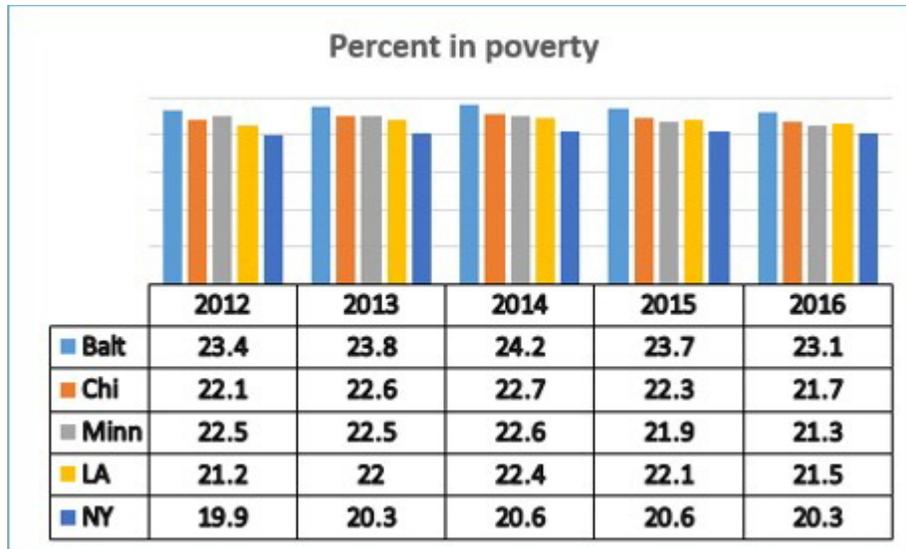
Well, that's fine. But it doesn't address the fact that twenty-one more human beings were murdered in 2015 than in 2014. Was the slowdown (or whatever one chooses to call it) responsible? While a definitive answer is out of reach, concerns that holding back might have cost innocent lives can't be easily dismissed.

Other than police activity, what enforcement-related variables can affect the incidence of crime? A frequently mentioned factor is police staffing, usually measured as number of officers per 1,000 population. Here is a chart based on data from the UCR:



LAPD staffing has always been on the low end. Its officer rate per thousand, though, held steady during the period in question. So did the rate for every other community in our example except Baltimore, where the officer rate steadily declined while homicides went way up (see [Part I](#)).

Forget cops. What about the economy?

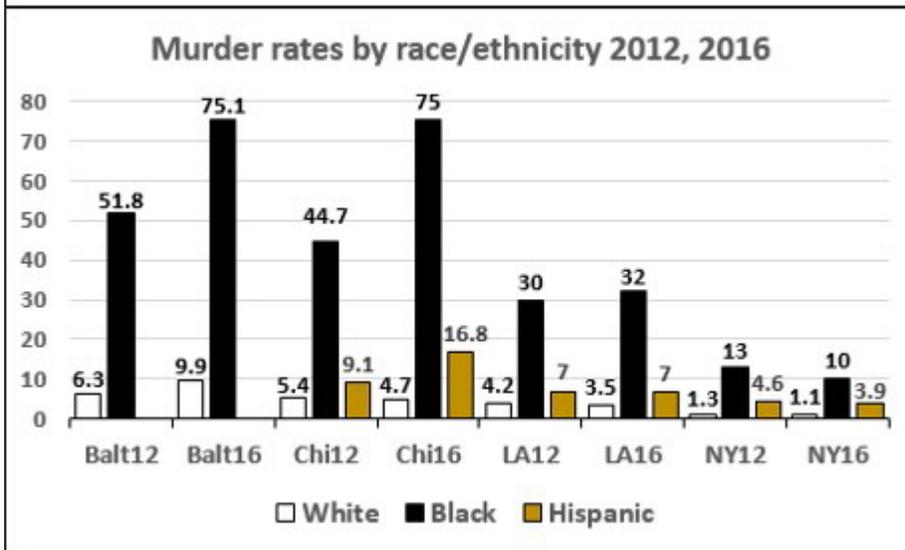
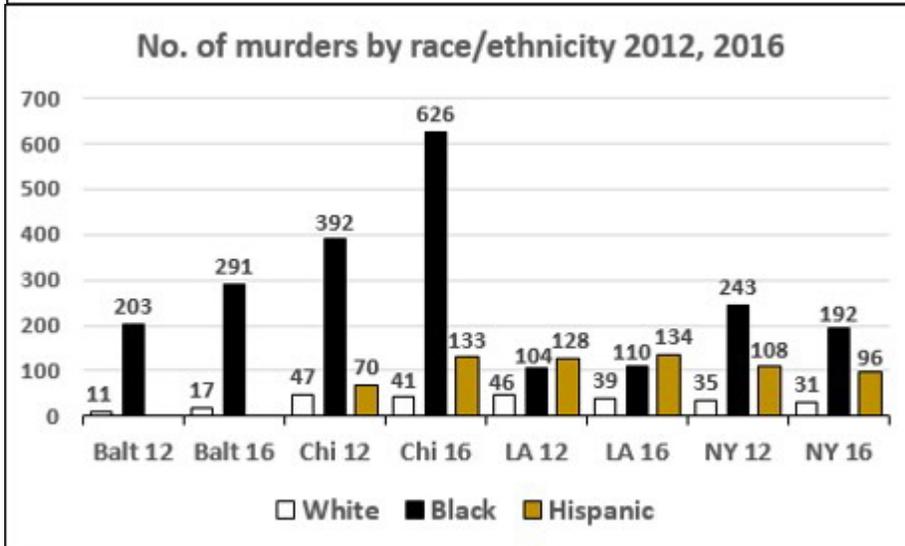
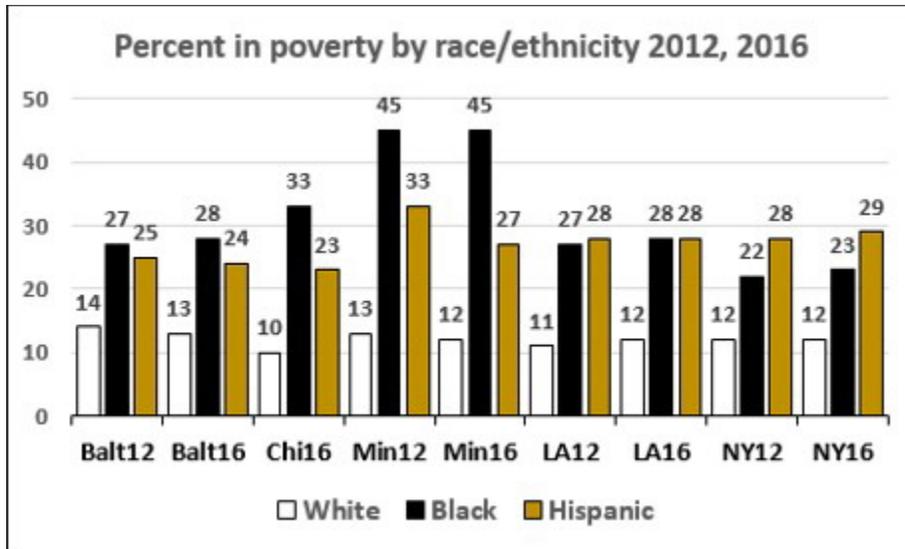


This graph, which uses [poverty data from the Census](#), indicate that the three high-crime burg’s from [Part I](#) – Baltimore, Chicago and Minneapolis – have more poverty than the lower-crime communities of Los Angeles and New York. That’s consistent with the poverty > crime hypothesis. On the other hand, within-city differences during the observed period seem slight. So blaming these fluctuations for observable changes in crime is probably out of reach.

Back to stop-and-frisk. Is aggressive policing a good thing? Not even *Crime Solutions* would go that far. After all, it’s well known that New York City’s stop-and-frisk debacle, which we explored in [“Too Much of a Good Thing?”](#) and [“Good Guy, Bad Guy, Black Guy \(Part II\)”](#), was brought on by a wildly overzealous program that wound up generating [massive numbers of “false positives”](#):

[During 2003-2013] NYPD stopped nearly six times as many blacks (2,885,857) as whites (492,391). Officers frisked 1,644,938 blacks (57 percent) and 211,728 whites (43 percent). About 49,348 blacks (3 percent) and 8,469 whites (4 percent) were caught with weapons or contraband. In other words, more than one and one-half million blacks were searched and caught with...nothing.

Keep in mind that aggressive policing doesn’t happen in Beverly Hills. It happens in poor areas, because that’s where violent crime takes its worst toll. NYPD officers most often frisked persons of color because they tended to reside in the economically deprived, high-crime areas that the well-intentioned but ill-fated policing campaign was meant to transform. These graphs illustrate the conundrum:



In the end, turning to police for solutions to festering social problems is lose-lose. There are legal, practical and moral limits to what cops can or should be asked to accomplish. Saying that it's a "matter of balance" is too glib. Given the uncertainties of street encounters and variabilities in resources, skills and officer and citizen temperament, calibrating aggressive practices so that they avoid causing offense or serious harm is out of reach. It can't be done.

Correcting fundamental social problems isn't up to the police: it's a job for society. *Police Issues* is neither Red nor Blue, but when President Trump offered Charlotte's denizens a "[New Deal for Black America](#)" that would sharply increase public investment in the inner cities, [we cheered](#). Here's an extract from his speech:

Our job is to make life more comfortable for the African-American parent who wants their kids to be able to safely walk the streets. Or the senior citizen waiting for a bus, or the young child walking home from school. For every one violent protester, there are a hundred moms and dads and kids on the same city block who just want to be able to sleep safely at night.

Those beautiful sentiments – that *promise* – was conveyed nearly two years ago. America's neglected inner-city residents are still waiting. And so are we.