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MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?

***Inner-city violence calls for a lot more than cops.
Is America up to the task?***

For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. On April 3 the *Chicago Sun-Times* [trumpeted some very good news](#) for residents of the city's embattled Tenth precinct. Officially known as the [Ogden District](#), the area comprises two neighborhoods, [North Lawndale](#) and [South Lawndale](#) (aka "Little Village"), which have suffered from far more than their share of violence. But things may be getting better in the dangerous Tenth. Compared to the [forty-three shootings and eight deaths](#) that its denizens endured during the first quarter of 2018, this year's toll of twenty-one shootings and three fatalities, an improvement of over fifty percent, is substantially steeper than [Chicago's citywide decline](#), from 461 shootings and 117 deaths in FQ 2018 to 391 shootings and 93 deaths this year.

What's behind the Tenth's improvement? Most of the comments in the *Sun-Times* news piece credit the cops. According to a police captain, the gains are a product of "partnerships between police and community leaders, predictive analytics, the operational strategy...and the execution of that plan by the district's officers." A local alderman happily concurred. "They [officers] are out here with outdoor roll calls in the summer. They're at block clubs. They're doing the things that the community wants to see and the reason that the numbers are down is because of them."

Time to celebrate? Maybe not, cautioned the [Los Angeles Times](#). On the one hand, violence in Chicago has abated somewhat, with murders falling from 770 in 2016 to 660 in 2017 and 561 in 2018 (FBI counts are 765 in [2016](#) and 653 in [2017](#)). More cops, a sharp increase in gun seizures, and the use of gunshot-detection sensors and data-driven analytics that predict where crime is likely to occur may have contributed to the drop. Chicago's inner-city neighborhoods, though, experienced proportionately few benefits. In 2017, even as violence was down citywide, [the Tenth](#) nonetheless posted an appalling 44 homicides. Its murder rate of 28.3/100,000 pop. (see note below) was considerably higher than [Chicago's](#) (653 murders, pop. 2,706,171, rate 24.1), which was (and remains) in far worse shape than the relatively peaceful burg's of Los Angeles (281 murders, pop. 4,007,147, rate 7.0) and New York City (292 murders, pop. 8,616,333, rate 3.4).

And the Tenth wasn't the worst example. Consider Chicago's notorious [Seventh police district](#), aka "[Englewood](#)." In 2017 its homicide rate (48 murders, pop. 42,969, rate 111.7) was *four times* the Tenth's. (In 2016, at the peak of the violence, the Seventh's 86 homicides yielded a truly astronomical rate of 200.1.) At present the Seventh [is again heading in the wrong direction](#), with ten killings during the first quarter of 2019 in comparison with eight last year.

Of course, not all of Chicago is in dire straits. Consider, for example, its wealthy [North Center](#) area, pop. 30,493, [with zero homicides](#) in 2016 and 2017. (For the ten best neighborhoods in Chicago, click [here](#)).

In "[Location, Location, Location](#)" we argued that it really *is* all about neighborhoods. Thanks to a surfeit of the poor, high-violence kind, the Windy City regularly produces more killings than Los Angeles and New York City combined. That's not to say that Hollywoodland and Gotham should be popping corks. While their overall crime rates are consistently lower than Chicago's, each has its own intractably violent areas as well. (For more about that click [here](#) and [here](#).)

So where does one go from here? First, we must abandon the notion that fine-tuning the police response or "cranking things up" can solve the problems created by crime and violence. Even the most sophisticated law enforcement strategies can only go so far. LAPD's "[Chronic Offender](#)" program massaged data to identify supposedly dangerous characters, then placed officers on their tail. Unfortunately, the real world intruded, and seventy percent of the time the allegedly active evil-doers were nowhere to be found (p. 18). And there was another problem. As our posts (most recently, "[Driven to Fail](#)") have warned, the interplay between poverty, race and ethnicity means that aggressive strategies such as stop-and-frisk inevitably produce buckets-full of "false positives" in minority-rich areas. That, as LAPD learned, can lead to a lot of anger and discord. It's why the program [recently collapsed](#).

Well, how does one truly "fix" places like the Tenth, the Seventh, South L.A. and the Bronx? That's what the renowned [Urban Institute](#) addressed in a landmark study, "[Tackling Persistent Poverty in Distressed Urban Neighborhoods](#)." Its authors issued recommendations in five areas:

- Education and child care: quality education, quality child care, enrichment opportunities, summertime activities
- Crime and violence: less of both!

- Personal and environmental health: physical and mental health services, affordable, quality food, safe play areas and public spaces
- Neighborhood efficacy: supportive neighborhood environment, including caring for each other's children, collective ability to lobby and secure external resources
- Expanded economic opportunities: job training, apprenticeships, adult education, summer jobs, transportation to opportunities elsewhere

Let's focus on our favorite: economic opportunities. What would it take to improve the poor's access to legitimate sources of income? In brief, an awful lot. [Jobs-Plus](#) is perhaps the best known national example. A partnership between the Feds and major private foundations, the program provides employment opportunities, job training and financial incentives to residents of public housing projects in thirteen States. Its goal: to create "a culture of work." Its cost: since 2015, [\\$63 million from HUD](#). (Jobs-Plus initiatives are funded by multiple public and private sources. Click [here](#) for a current list.)



We could go on, but the point's been made. Truly reforming Chicago's Tenth, or the Seventh, or South Los Angeles or the Bronx would require massive infusions of time, labor and capital. Such as our President "trump-eted" during his campaign (remember his promise of a "[New Deal for black America?](#)"). That nothing happened is no surprise. In addition to their cost and complexity, programs that seek to substantially improve the quality of life in our afflicted inner cities carry a lot of ideological baggage. Where, for example, should one draw the line between "help" and "handout"? It's no surprise that despite well-meaning efforts such as LBJ's "[Great Society](#)" the promises of urban renewal have always far outweighed their reality.

As our [Strategy and Tactics](#) posts demonstrate, *Police Issues* is definitely not of the mind that law enforcement can't (or shouldn't be) improved. Really, when compared to initiatives such as Jobs-Plus, fine-tuning the police seems like a cakewalk. That may explain why we habitually dump society's problems on the cops. And why our grandkids' grandkids will still be dealing with the poverty and violence of our inner cities.

Unless, of course, climate change gets us first. Oops, sorry. Wrong pulpit!