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THE NEW NORMAL

In the industrial belt, poverty and violence are no joke



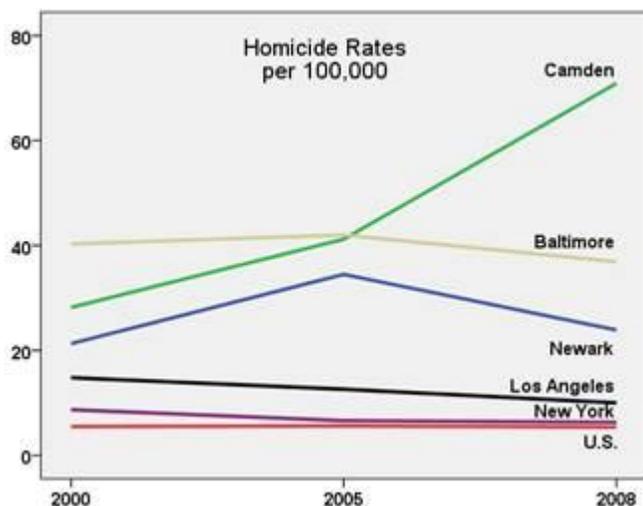
“The Mayor of Newark, New Jersey wants to set up a citywide program to improve residents’ health. The health care program would consist of a bus ticket out of Newark.”

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. NBC Tonight Show host Conan O’Brien’s little joke brought on a You-Tube scolding by Newark Mayor Cory Booker, who [banned the talk show host](#) from the Newark airport. His move precipitated a series of back-and-forths that culminated in the mayor’s October 16 appearance on O’Brien’s show. More on that later.

Booker, then 37, was elected in 2006 over an obscure rival after the boss of the local Democratic machine, mayor Sharpe James announced his departure from politics. (One year later James stood convicted of corruption.) Their earlier match-up in 2002, which Booker lost by a hair, was depicted in “[Street Fight](#)”, an acclaimed documentary about the youngish Stanford grad’s passionate though unsuccessful campaign.

Quickly moving to improve city services, Booker brought in a new police director to rejuvenate what many considered a moribund department. A renewed [emphasis on fighting crime](#) and reducing the city’s appalling murder rate have earned plaudits from residents and business owners.

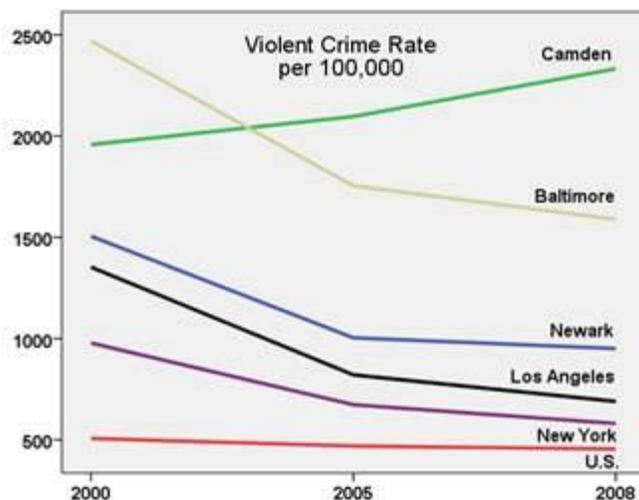
Yet not everything is well. Historical declines in manufacturing and now, the recession have devastated the old cities of the Northeast, with unemployment reaching 14.7 percent in Newark, an eye-popping 17 percent in Camden and 11.1 percent in Baltimore.



Does unemployment breed violent crime? Judging by these communities one might think so. According to the Uniform Crime Reports Newark, pop. 279,788, had 67 homicides in 2008, yielding a rate of 23.9, nearly *four times* New York City's (pop. 8,345,075, 523 homicides, rate 6.3). Camden, pop. 76,182, had a startling 54 homicides. Its rate, 70.9, was *three*

times Newark's and *more than eleven times* New York City's. Baltimore's homicide rate, 36.9, was one and one-half times Newark's and an appalling *six times* New York City's.

Differences in how localities count aggravated assault, robbery and rape make those figures less comparable. Keeping that limitation in mind, in 2008 Newark's violent rate of 950.7 (an amalgam of homicide plus the other three) was *sixty-four percent greater* than New York City's 580.3, while Camden's 2332.6 was *four times* its size. Baltimore fell in the middle of the pack; at 1588.5 its rate was *two and three-quarters* larger than the Big Apple's.



Back to Newark. As Mayor Booker likes to claim, crime *has* dropped during his tenure. Now it's merely terrible. And there are disturbing signs that violence may be on the upswing. According to statistics just posted on the [Newark PD](#) website three of four violent crime categories are up from 2008: robbery, by thirteen percent; homicide, eleven percent; and rape, two percent. Aggravated assaults are down five percent.



Newark (and Camden, and Baltimore) have suffered for a long time. But no matter how bad their problems are, we -- meaning those of us who don't live there -- accept them with hardly a shrug. Conditions that should sicken and move us to act become "the new normal," to be set aside until

they're dragged out as comedic fodder, to be laughed about and forgotten about all over again..

Left, the Jokester's \$10.5 million Brentwood Paradise. Right, Newark public housing.



Your blogger originally intended to write some really nasty things about rich white guys with no social conscience. Then the redoubtable Bob Herbert came to the rescue. In an excellent [column](#) he set out all the right reasons why we should care about places like Newark. He even held out hope that by bringing the situation to everyone's attention Conan the Jokester's nasty little quip might actually prove beneficial.

That's not quite the end of the story. As we mentioned earlier [Mayor Booker appeared as a guest](#) on the Tonight Show. By all accounts O'Brien behaved well. He even set himself up to take one on the chin:

"Many jokes are made about Newark by comedians. You honed in on me like a cruise missile. Why me, Mayor Booker?"

"When there's a herd going after you, you have to sort of look at the weakest gazelle."

O'Brien then did what comes natural to a rich guy caught with his jammies down: he paid his way out, in this case by pledging \$100,000 to a Newark charity. Hmm, let's see. One-hundred G's is about seven-tenths of one percent of O'Brien's yearly [\\$14 million](#) hosting salary. Actually, if Conan itemizes his deductions, as one assumes

he must, he's out chump change: \$65,000, or *one-half of one percent* of his annual take for smirking on TV. By way of comparison, it's also twice [Newark's median 2007 household income](#) of \$34,452, and four times its per capita income of \$16,782.

That, if you didn't realize, was the punch line.