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## GETTING OUT OF DODGE

***For families caught in dangerous neighborhoods, there is one option***

*By Julius (Jay) Wachtel.* Milwaukee's "[Sherman Park](#)" is one of the city's oldest residential districts. [Google it](#), plop down your pedestrian and amble down the lavishly tree-lined streets. Admire the finely crafted homes, built during the early 1900s by prosperous German immigrants. Most still stand, though in truth, some just barely. Really, things don't seem as well kept as one might wish. There sure is an awful lot of chain link! It turns out that in an area less than two miles square, [more than thirty homes are in foreclosure](#).

But forget Sherman Park. Sadly, the years haven't been kind to Milwaukee. Murder in 2015 soared to 152, [a 69 percent increase from 2014](#) when 94 homicides were tallied. Blacks suffer disproportionately. In a city that is [about forty percent black](#), [seventy percent of murder victims](#) in 2014 and eighty-four percent in 2015 were black. So far this year Milwaukee has recorded 76 murders. [Seventy-six percent of the victims](#) are black (13 percent were white, eight percent Hispanic and three percent of Asian descent.)

Milwaukee's residents [have many explanations](#) for the chaos engulfing their neighborhoods:

Ask anyone in Milwaukee and they'll have a different answer: Deep systemic problems of poverty, unemployment, segregation and education. Easy access to firearms. Lack of personal responsibility and the breakdown of the family. An ineffective criminal justice system. Lax sentencing. A pursuit policy critics say too often limits police chases. Too much policing. Not enough policing.

Edward Flynn, Milwaukee's somewhat controversial police chief, [explained the uptick in violence](#) more simply, as an increased willingness to settle differences with a bullet:

Maintaining one's status and credibility and honor, if you will, within that peer community is literally a matter of life and death. And that's coupled with a very harsh reality, which is the mental calculation of those who live in that strata that it is more dangerous to get caught without their gun than to get caught with their gun.

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Over the decades, [as Sherman Park transitioned](#) from upper-middle class, exclusively-white, to working class, majority-black, crime and disorder [has taken an increasing toll](#). Still, as Sherman Park is only one troubled place out of many, no one outside Milwaukee paid attention. That dramatically changed on Saturday, August 13, when a police officer patrolling in Sherman Park [shot and killed](#) an armed man who fled on foot from a traffic stop. Sylville Smith, 23, had prior arrests for drug possession, robbery, a shooting and witness intimidation. His only conviction, though, was for misdemeanor carrying a concealed weapon, and it seems that he later obtained a concealed-carry permit. (The gun he possessed when shot had been reported stolen.)

Over the next two days, demonstrations and rioting rocked Sherman Park, and [multiple businesses were looted and set on fire](#). Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett issued an impassioned plea for harmony:

We are asking every resident of this community to do everything they can to help us restore order. If you're a mother who is watching this right now, and your young son or daughter is not home, and you think they're in this area, get them home right now. This is a serious situation – and this is a neighborhood that has unfortunately been affected by violence in the past. There are a lot of really, really good people who live in this area, in the Sherman Park area, who can't stand, like any of us, can't stand this violence.

Sherman Park has an active community association. Two days after the shooting, a citizen [posted this plea on their Facebook page](#). It was addressed to the local Alderman:

...Long before this weekend, many of my neighbors were afraid of “that part” of Milwaukee. They miss out on great things like the Fondy Farmers Mkt because of the perception of danger. They won't stop for gas or groceries on their way home because they are afraid. I am asking you to condemn the criminals. The youth in that neighborhood are killing each other. They are robbing each other. They are burning down businesses that serve a neighborhood that is served by too few...Please stop burying the condemnation under a pile of misguided justification, or sadly, the families in your neighborhood will continue to bury Milwaukee's youth....

In this blog we've speculated plenty about the causes of crime and disorder. (Check out, for example, the “[Crime and Punishment](#)” topical area.) Most recently, in “[Location, Location, Location](#),” we suggested that instead of obsessing about city crime rates, one ought to look to where the roots of violence actually lie, meaning neighborhoods. But this isn't a post about the causes of crime, or how to fight it. It's about *equity*. Lower-income areas of Milwaukee (and Chicago, Detroit, Baltimore, Newark...) can resemble

the Wild West. Where does that leave law-abiding families who may be economically unable to leave?

That was the core dilemma addressed during President Bill Clinton's first term by [an adventurous Federal experiment](#). Four-thousand-plus low-income families living in poverty-stricken areas of Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles and New York were enrolled in the "Moving to Opportunity" program (MTO). They were randomly assigned to one of three groups: an experimental group that received the usual, unrestricted "Section 8" housing vouchers; an experimental group that got vouchers restricted for use in areas where the poverty rate was ten percent or less; and a control group that received assistance but no voucher.

[A study that compared](#) effects on the voucher and control groups ten to fifteen years later paints a somewhat mixed picture. Forty-eight percent of the restricted group and sixty-three percent of the unrestricted Section 8 group actually used their vouchers. Their reasons seemed basically the same: to escape gangs and drugs and find better schools for their children. Families that used restricted vouchers ultimately wound up in areas where poverty hovered around twenty percent. That was twice the intended limit, but still about half the poverty rate of where the no-voucher controls lived, where poverty hovered around forty percent. Participants with unrestricted vouchers fell somewhere in-between. As one might expect, the lower-poverty areas were also somewhat less segregated (75 percent minority for the experimental groups versus 88 percent for the controls.) While statistically significant, the difference doesn't seem all that compelling, leading one to wonder whether the subsidies were sufficiently large to create a pronounced effect.

Issues of dosage aside, how much of a difference was there between the subsidized and control groups? In several key areas, none. Economic self-sufficiency, employment/unemployment, youth "risky behavior" and youth educational achievement came out about the same. On the other hand, families with vouchers apparently did benefit in other ways. Adults in the voucher groups liked their neighbors better, were far less likely to see drugs being sold or used, and felt much safer. That's consistent with official data, which revealed that they faced substantially lower levels of violent crime than the controls. Measures of health, including body mass, diabetes and psychological state were significantly better for adults in the voucher groups. Their subjective well-being (SWB) scores, which reflect overall experiences, were also much higher.

Still, the main reasons for using the vouchers had to do with kids, and their outcomes didn't seem improved. (In fact, moving into "better" areas seemed to set boys back.) Two years after the official report, a team of Harvard researchers [took another, more](#)

[intensive look](#) at the MTO's effects on children. They discovered that age seemed crucial. Children in the subsidized "experimental" groups who relocated before age 13 enjoyed significantly higher incomes as adults than the unsubsidized controls. They were more likely to go to college, to a better college, and to live in better neighborhoods, and less likely to become single parents. Relocating, though, had negative consequences for older children.

Baltimore's participants in the MTO program got their own study, "[Living Here has Changed My Whole Perspective: How Escaping Inner-City Poverty Shapes Neighborhood and Housing Choice](#)" (*Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, Spring 2014.) According to its authors, relocating to better neighborhoods greatly raised families' expectations about what schools and neighborhoods should provide.

Unrestricted "Section 8" housing vouchers continue to be issued. However, funding is very limited. [HUD's fact sheet](#) cautions that waiting lists may be long. What's more, finances, work reasons, reluctance by landlords, a lack of preparedness, poor counseling and other factors can lead families who get vouchers [to wind up living](#) in areas that are far from desirable. According to the [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#), 343,000 children in Section 8 households resided in "extremely poor neighborhoods" in 2014. Changes, starting with far more robust funding, seem definitely called for.

It's been argued that the "[toxic stress](#)" of life in areas ridden by poverty and violence has grave effects on child development; even if families eventually relocate, improved life outcomes may be out of reach. What to do? With all due credit to the citizen-reformers who are hard at work in Sherman Park and like communities, their efforts won't change the circumstances that kids who live in poverty faced yesterday, and will face again today and tomorrow. Your family, kind reader, and mine presumably live in "respectable" areas with good schools and minimal strife. Doing so, we know, requires a certain income. So it's a matter of simple equity (not "charity") to give children who would otherwise suffer the disadvantages of growing up in poverty the same opportunities we provide our own. While we wait (and wait, and wait) for improvements in police-community relations and such to yield their promised gains, helping families "Get out of Dodge" today – not tomorrow – seems a pressing imperative.

Of course, some would say that encouraging "good people" to leave only accelerates decay. There's truth in that, all right. So here's a corrective. Ask the skeptics to trade places with impacted families in, say, Sherman Park. It's the least they could do.