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IS TRUMP RIGHT ABOUT THE INNER CITIES?

America's low-income communities desperately need a New Deal

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. On the evening before Thanksgiving, as residents of Southern California prepared to celebrate the forthcoming holiday with family and friends, [a 16-year old high school student](#) was on the way home from church, riding in the family car, her dog on her lap.

Danah Rojo-Rivas didn't survive the trip, and neither would the pooch. About 9:30 pm, as their vehicle drove through [Lynwood](#), a low-income, predominantly minority city with a substantial violent crime problem, gunfire erupted. A bullet fired by gang members riding in one vehicle at gangsters riding in another pierced the car, striking Danah and instantly killing her.

Her mother and brother, who were also in the vehicle, weren't hurt. Alas, the dog bolted and got run over.

Incredibly – or perhaps, not – this horrifying event received only modest attention. Other than an offer by the County Board of Supervisors of [a \\$20,000 reward](#) for information (later raised to \$30,000), the deplorable specter of an innocent girl being viciously gunned down was treated as just another murder in a murderous place. A GoFundMe memorial page was set up by the family to cover funeral costs, and so far there haven't been any arrests.

“You're the only one that can get you out of this ghetto.” [That was the message](#) that Regina Bejarano, a 47-year old single mother of five, prayed would get through to her kids. [With sixty-five homicides](#) so far this year, violence-ridden San Bernardino, an eastern Los Angeles County community of 216,000, was decidedly chancy, and life in her gang-infested neighborhood particularly so. On the last day of August unknown hooligans walked up to their apartment and opened fire, wounding her 19-year-old son, a goddaughter and a family friend.

Fortunately, no one died. Neither was anyone arrested. Desperate to escape the treacherous city where she was raised, Ms. Bejarano began frantically searching for a safe, affordable place far from the mayhem. She was still looking on October 30 when Joseph, her 17-year old, left on a brief walk to visit his cousin. He never got there. Police

later arrested Miguel Cordova, 18, for shooting and killing Joseph in what authorities say was a gang-inspired murder.

Ms. Bejarano still intends for the family to relocate. And although it's only a couple blocks away, she always drives to the spot where Joseph died. It's far too dangerous to walk.

Danah Rojo-Rivas and Joseph Bejarano died in gang shootings; one by accident, the other on purpose. Shamefully, while many of our nation's urban areas experience appalling levels of mayhem – St. Louis, Baltimore, Detroit, Newark, Cleveland, Oakland, Memphis and Chicago [are only a few examples](#) – President Obama has mostly kept mum.

Well, there is one exception. [Three years ago](#), when inner-city gang members shot and killed Hadiya Pendleton, a 15-year old high school student, Michelle Obama attended the young woman's funeral. Hadiya was special because she had performed, along with classmates, at the President's second inauguration, in Chicago, the city where he was raised. [President Obama later spoke](#) of the tragedy in a speech and in his [State of the Union address](#), both times while urging action on Federal gun laws. He's otherwise fastidiously avoided addressing – or dealing with – the disastrous cycle of poverty and violence that besets America's inner cities. That oversight has puzzled more than this observer. Here's a recent assessment of the President's legacy by someone whom your writer never thought he'd be quoting – [the redoubtable Louis Farrakhan](#):

...Mr. President, you're from Chicago, and so am I. I go out in the streets with the people. I visited the worst neighborhoods. I talked to the gangs. And while I was out there talking to them, they said "You know, Farrakhan, the president ain't never come. Could you get him to come and look after us?" There's your legacy, Mr. President. It's in the streets with your suffering people, Mr. President. And if you can't go and see about them, then don't worry about your legacy 'cause the white people that you served so well, they'll preserve your legacy...

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Many progressives consider the term "inner city" a needlessly cruel way to denote lower-income urban neighborhoods. Yet whatever one wishes to call these places – for Mr. Farrakhan, it's "the streets" – that's where violence takes its most shocking toll. Click on "[Location, Location, Location](#)" and look up "Vermont Square" on the Murder Rate graph. This was the place called home by the senior citizen who convinced city

fathers [to help destigmatize notorious South-Central Los Angeles](#) by dropping “Central” from its place name. Well, good luck with that. Crime in Southern California may have receded from its crack-fueled peak in the early 90s, but gross inequities in personal risk persist. Note, for example, that Vermont Square’s 2015 ghastly murder rate of 24.62 per 100,000 (44,662 residents, 11 homicides) is *thirteen times* that of Westwood, an upper-middle class area where the price of an ordinary home easily tops a million bucks (1 homicide/51,485 residents/rate 1.94).

It’s not just un La-La land. Life in poor areas anywhere can prove dangerous. That includes the President’s hometown. (For a new assessment of violence in inner-city Chicago, click [here](#).)

What’s being done to address the pressing needs of inner cities? Considering their lamentable state, far from enough. Government funding for housing assistance, job training, education, child care and drug and alcohol treatment is grossly inadequate, constraining both direct action and heroic efforts by citizen groups and non-profits. (For the sobering experiences of a major public-private effort click [here](#).) Meanwhile overtaxed, wary police and social workers provide what fleeting, temporary relief they can. And as we know, occasionally make things worse.

Really, for all the jawboning about “urban renewal” and such it seems that most of what gets renewed every four years is disinterest and neglect. So when then-candidate Donald Trump – a Republican – got on the soapbox about fighting urban blight and disorder, even a few Democrats found something to like. In an article published shortly before the election, award-winning *New York Times* reporter Nikole Hannah-Jones [concluded, to her evident surprise](#), that Trump “was speaking more directly about the particular struggles of working-class black Americans and describing how the government should help them more than any presidential candidate in years.”

Was she exaggerating? Consider Trump’s expansive view about his responsibility to the denizens of inner-city Milwaukee:

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.

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Still, other than, say, paying for more cops, what would Trump actually do? A hint of his approach came during a Charlotte speech [where he offered a “New Deal for Black America”](#) that used tax holidays and other incentives to spur investment in the inner cities. His message resonated with the host of a local radio program, who complained that the black community had been ignored by the present Administration: “As an African-American, I haven’t seen anything that Obama has actually done.”

Well, one thing that the current President and his predecessors *have* done is build up America’s defense arsenal, creating lots of middle-class jobs and, not incidentally, helping make a gaggle of industrialists filthy rich. Consider, for example, [Lockheed’s F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program](#). So far, it has cost taxpayers \$100 *billion*, a stunning amount that’s raised a lot of eyebrows, from Senator John McCain (he called the situation a “scandal and a tragedy”) to the President-elect’s. Here’s his Tweet on point: “The F-35 program and cost is out of control. Billions of dollars can and will be saved on military (and other) purchases after January 20th.” He didn’t say, but there’s a special place where “billions” might do some good...

Alas, in his final end-of-year press conference on December 16, which your blogger listened to in its near-entirety (our local NPR station eventually cut away), President Obama was silent about urban America. Other than for briefly reassuring his flock that, yes, he worried every night about their economic well-being, it was all about the election and foreign policy. To be sure, the cities are in large part the responsibility of local and State officials, so it’s likely inevitable that the President would be preoccupied by matters that fall within his exclusive purview, such as the tragedy besetting the innocent citizens of Aleppo and Sudan. Yet one wonders whether our nation’s top elected official shouldn’t be equally determined to keep vulnerable residents of the U.S. from suffering a similar fate. The late Danah Rojo-Rivas, Joseph Bejarano and Hadiya Pendleton would have probably agreed.

Parsing campaign rhetoric is a fraught enterprise, and we’ll leave it for the reader to intuit the President-elect’s real intentions. His emphasis on the inner city, though, is refreshing. As long as it’s not all about bricks and mortar, his “New Deal” seems appealing. One-hundred *billion* bucks would be a good start.