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ROLE REVERSAL

Chicago's falling apart. Who can make the violence stop?

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Tyshawn Lee was only nine years old when he was viciously gunned down. It wasn't a stray round. Several weeks ago police arrested Dwright Boone-Doty, a member of the Black P-Stones. He was identified as the triggerman for a three-hoodlum team that lured the child into a South Side alley and executed him last November. One of the killer's alleged helpmates, Corey Morgan, was previously arrested, and the other is being sought. Boone-Doty was also charged in the unrelated October killing of a woman and the wounding of her companion.

In the mean streets of Chicago, arrests often mark the beginning of another cycle of violence. Soon after learning of Boone-Doty's arrest, the dead boy's father, Pierre Stokes, reportedly tracked down Corey Morgan's girlfriend and her two nephews. He unleashed a barrage of gunfire; fortunately his aim was poor and no one was struck. Stokes, a member of the rival Gangster Disciples gang and a convicted robber, is now also in jail.

Why was the child murdered? That, too was reportedly in retaliation, for the gunning down of Corey Morgan's brother and the wounding of his grandmother a month earlier. In our brave new world of smartphones, robots and space exploration, Chicago seems determined to hang on to the code of the homies. This year, the Windy City recorded 161 murders by April 17, a 64% increase over the comparable period in 2015 and 115% more than in 2014. Shootings have also soared, from 482 to 803, an increase of sixty-seven percent. Days with multiple victims are common, and three or four slain is unexceptional. So far the record was on February 4, when a staggering ten persons were killed, four by bullets and six with knives.

It's not a new problem. Last year Chicago topped the thirty largest cities in violent crime. Its rate, 2,377.3 violent crimes per 100,000 population, is more than 50% higher than its closest competitors, Baltimore (1550.6) and Detroit (1508.8). Chicago seems well on track to shatter more records this year.

Chicago PD has long struggled to earn the confidence of the minority community. Things sank to a new low last November when police were ordered to release a video depicting, in graphic detail, the apparently needless gunning down of Laquan McDonald, a black youth, by officer Jason Van Dyke more than a year earlier. That was the "tipping point" that led to the firing of chief Garry McCarthy and the appointment,

by Mayor Rahm Emanuel, of a citizen commission, the “Police Accountability Task Force,” that was charged with studying the troubled agency in depth.

Its report was just released. In a scathing, no-holds-barred account, it offers four reasons to explain why trust was lost:

We arrived at this point in part because of racism.

We arrived at this point because of a mentality in CPD that the ends justify the means.

We arrived at this point because of a failure to make accountability a core value and imperative within CPD.

We arrived at this point because of a significant underinvestment in human capital.

According to the task force, the department’s own data “gives validity” to “the widely held belief the police have no regard for the sanctity of life when it comes to people of color.” What are the numbers? In a city with approximately equal proportions of whites, blacks and Hispanics, 74% of the 404 persons shot by police between 2008-2015 were black, 14% were Hispanic and 8% were white. “Significant racial disparities” were also found for lesser uses of force, car stops and field interviews. (Nothing was said about the distribution of violent crime, but it is known to be far higher in minority areas.)

There was other bad news. Reviewers discovered that complaints against officers are perfunctorily investigated by employees who are “under-resourced, lack true independence and are not held accountable for their work.” Even when they recommend discipline, in nearly three out of every four cases arbitrators reverse the decision or mitigate its severity. That’s no surprise. Years ago, in a review of Chicago PD’s disciplinary practices, we reported that the Chicago Police Board – nine citizens who to this day hold the final say on who gets punished – upheld the termination of only twenty-one out of eighty cops recommended for firing by the Superintendent between 2003-2007. Then-chief Jody Weis, a retired FBI executive who had been brought in to clean up the department, lamented that his cops were in effect answerable to no one.

Apparently the struggle over accountability has continued. A database of complaints against Chicago’s finest paints a distressing picture. Investigators seldom recommend discipline, while officers are rarely punished despite amassing dozens of citizen complaints. One cop accumulated sixty-eight in eighteen years; none were sustained. Scrolling through the entries reveals that this was the norm.

What can be done? As one might expect, the task force recommended that supervision be greatly enhanced. Reviewers called for the early identification of problem officers, prompt intervention and effective discipline, meaning a process with real teeth. There were suggestions for improvements in community relations and officer training in de-escalation, and a recommendation that external oversight be provided by independent panels that are not dominated, as has been the practice, by former cops. Naturally, taking such steps will require the cooperation of the police union, whose contractual demands have supposedly “turned the code of silence into official policy.”

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Even if labor climbs on board, there’s a huge fly in the ointment. Revamping the social compact between cops and citizens doesn’t address flaws in the compact among the citizens, who are gunning each other down with abandon. As we’ve repeatedly pointed out, police behavior is inextricably linked to the environment. Violence, and the threat of violence, inevitably beget the police use of force, justifiable and otherwise. Improvements in hiring, training and supervision are great, but when communities are as violent and socially disorganized as Chicago’s South Side, or Los Angeles’ Rampart Division, simply “fixing the cops” is no solution:

So-called “aggressive” policing could not have taken place in New York City in the absence of a demand to stem street crime. Abuses at Rampart did not start with a conspiracy between rogue officers. They began with a problem of crime and violence that beset Pico-Union. Into this web of fear and disorder we dispatched officers – members of the ineptly named CRASH – whose mission it was to reclaim the streets for the good folks.

Did we supply officers with special tools to help them accomplish their task? Of course not, since none exist. Yet our expectations remained high. Police officers gain satisfaction from success. Their work is also judged by superiors, who are more interested in numbers of arrests than in narrative expositions, the latter being difficult to pass up the chain of command and virtually impossible to use in budget fights at City Hall.

Officers aren’t interested in being occupiers. Most enjoy exercising discretion and making distinctions between the naughty and the nice. But when gangsters rule the streets, restraint – that valuable commodity that cops in more favorable climes exercise every day – goes out patrol car windows. We can threaten, train and reorganize until the cows come home, but reform can’t take hold in an atmosphere of unrequited violence. When officers are enveloped by disorder, the craft of policing is a lost cause.

Ironically, Chicago's long-standing crime problems have made the city a laboratory for innovation. Over the years its police have experimented with various of initiatives, from predictive policing to the well-known Project Ceasefire. Four years ago the city announced an extensive set of violence-reduction strategies. Some were cops-only, others involved partnerships with citizens (for the most recent incarnation [click here](#).) Naturally, not everything has worked out. One promising approach, which used former gang members to "interrupt" violence, was reportedly dropped because a few "interrupters" apparently returned to their bad old ways.

Despite its many efforts, Chicago faces levels of violence not seen since the crack epidemic of the eighties and early nineties. It's obvious that police are an imperfect solution. Perhaps they shouldn't try to do it all. What the South Side (and reportedly, the West Side) need is a homegrown remedy, organized and run by residents, that could tamp down the violence wrecking their communities. Something peaceful yet emphatic, perhaps along the lines of Black Lives Matter but aimed within. Recommending what amounts to a role reversal might seem odd, but until Chicago's embattled residents help secure their own streets, they'll be safe for no one, including the police.