



The Link Between So-Called 'Murder Capitals' and Population Decline

Cities with high homicide rates share a major demographic trait. But we don't know nearly enough about how it works.

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July 16, 2014

The term "murder capital" deserves more than side-eye: It begs to be discarded for good. Simply chalking up the number of homicides, as the public does every fall when the FBI releases its Uniform Crime Reporting figures, leads to an explosion in meaningless conclusions about crime. Here's one: Chicago has reported the highest number of murders over the last few years, leading many to dub it the U.S. murder capital. Yet the per capita murder rate in Flint, Michigan, and about 20 other cities, ranks much higher.

Any comparison of so-called "murder capitals" deserves an asterisk given the notoriously unreliable and unevenly reported nature of homicide statistics. Earlier this year, *Chicago* magazine ran a two-part investigation that looked at how murders disappear from the books in Chicago. One example happened just last week: Chicago police won't count the July 9 slaying of Jasmine Curry toward its 2014 homicides tally because she was shot and killed on a state highway.

Crowning a "murder capital" puts eyeball-grabbing numbers before more meaningful statistics. It also elides the complex demographic factors shared by cities with high homicide rates, like Detroit and Baltimore but also St. Louis and Birmingham. One such factor: These cities tend to have shrinking populations.

Consider the six U.S. cities that have earned the dubious distinction of official "murder capital" over the last 30 years. (Specifically, these are the cities with the highest per capita homicide rates since 1985.) Of these cities—Flint, Detroit, New Orleans, Birmingham, Richmond, and Washington, D.C.—four were undergoing severe depopulation. One is holding steady. Only the population of D.C. has truly grown.

Of these six cities, D.C. is the only one whose murder rate has dropped significantly—well below 20 per 100,000 residents, in fact. In Washington, and to a lesser extent, in Richmond, the increase in population has corresponded roughly with a decrease in crime. Richmond's 20.2 murders per 100,000 residents in 2012 is well below that of Birmingham (31.4), New Orleans (53.2), Detroit (54.6), or poor Flint (62.0)—all cities suffering decline. The figures come from the FBI's crime data for 2012, and while caveats abound, the general trend is plain.

"The more violent a place is, the less attractive it is for residents who live there, the more they want to leave," says John Roman, senior fellow at the Urban Institute's Justice Policy Center. "The more the people with the means to leave do that, the more the people who are left behind tend to be victims and victimize others."

Large cities with high homicide rates that are also losing ground demographically include St. Louis, Montgomery, and Jackson. (All of which have higher homicide rates than Chicago, by the way). There are a few suffering cities whose populations are growing, such as Memphis and Newark. But by and large, the cities with the highest homicide rates are shedding residents.

"The cycle tends to be really bad," Roman says. "The challenge for cities is: How do you break that cycle?"

Some cities have. Nationwide, violent crime has dropped in two waves. Violence fell just about everywhere in the 1990s, with rates leveling off in the 2000s. Then, around 2007, violent crime dropped again—hugely—in several cities, among them D.C., New York, Dallas, and San Diego.

What's working for these cities? Immigration.

"It's immigration, desegregation, and gentrification," Roman says. "They all sort of work together [to reduce crime]."

He cites D.C. as a textbook example. In the 1990s, the city enjoyed a big immigration boom, mostly from Central America. The District was unprepared for it: Police hassled immigrants for things like drinking beer on front stoops, which is a fine pastime in El Salvador but was not okay in Adams Morgan. Hassling could turn into suppression, and sometimes riots ensued. But that was then. Nowadays, "you can transact any business you want to with the government of D.C. in Spanish," Roman notes.

"If you look at the economic status of immigrant communities, and this is true almost everywhere, the amount of violence is far lower than you would expect given the poverty there," he says. "Immigration and desegregation make poor places less violent. All of a sudden, they look really attractive to gentrifiers."

Roman figures that immigration leads to more diverse, more complex, and more tolerant neighborhoods. Immigration puts butts in vacant or abandoned residences. And there are other ways to explain how immigration dampens crime. "The arrival of low-skilled foreign-born workers in the labor force increases the incentive for young Americans to stay in school and for older workers to upgrade their skills," writes Daniel Griswold, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Trade Policy Studies.

Chicago's plenty diverse, but the city's homicide rate remains high (18.5 murders per 100,000 residents). As it happens, Chicago is a demographic outlier in a lot of ways. It's the only major U.S. city that lost residents between 2000 and 2010, and did it ever: nearly 7 percent of its population left. Still, foreign-born residents make up 21 percent of the population. But at the neighborhood level, Chicago communities are highly segregated. According to the Center for Healthcare Equity at Northwestern University, in 68 of 77 Chicago communities, "50 percent of the population identifies with a single racial/ethnic group."

"Look at a map of New York City and Chicago," Roman says, who adds that highway construction and redlining are major factors in the city's decline. "It's really striking how different they are in terms of segregation. There are bright lines that divide people in Chicago that don't exist in New York."

To a certain extent, the finding seems obvious: Like Roman says, people don't want to live where there's high crime. Another way to look at it might be to say that where people rush out of cities—taking with them tax dollars that pay for services and occupants who maintain houses and jobs and capital and so on—crime floods in to fill the gap.

Still another way to look at it: We don't know nearly enough about how depopulation works to say what happens, really, when residents leave a city. Hundreds of cities around the world saw their populations decline over the latter half of the 20th century, yet the phenomenon is still poorly understood. That was the banal but powerful foundation for a 2010 study of population decline in Flint.

Roman sees immigration as a powerful tool that can help to turn a "vicious cycle of violence driving people out" into a "virtuous cycle of decline in violence luring people in." Obviously, at the national level, legislators have proven unable to agree on federal immigration reform. Some cities have succeeded where nation and the states have not—but not all of them.

"That's the question for city leaders: Is it worth keeping your city on a declining cycle to force out new immigrants?" Roman says. "It's hard to imagine anyone would think that way, but lots of cities still do."