IDEAS

The Crime Spike Is No Mystery

By zooming out and looking at the big picture, the question of what causes violence becomes quite answerable.

By Patrick Sharkey

View of Chicago's skyline as seen from the 11th floor of the 7321 S. Shore Drive Cooperative building (Jon Lowenstein / NOOR / Redux)

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In the more than two years since gun violence suddenly began to rise in cities all across the country, researchers have been asked repeatedly to explain what caused the rapid increase and what can be done to reverse it. The urgency behind the question is warranted: Gun homicides rose by 34 percent from 2019 to 2020, and then rose again in 2021. In Chicago alone, over 250 more people were murdered in 2020 than in 2019, and that heightened level of violence continued into 2021. Murders are down slightly this year in Chicago and many other cities, but young lives continue to be lost to gun violence at a much higher rate than just a few years ago.

The immediate crisis is clear. But these short-term trends can sometimes distract us from the question of how American cities got to this point, and how they can move toward a sustained period of low violence. To answer these questions, a long view can be useful.

David A. Graham: America is having a violence wave, not a crime wave

My colleague Alisabeth Marsteller and I recently analyzed data on violence in Chicago's neighborhoods over nearly six decades, from 1965 through 2020. Chicago is not close to the most violent city in the United States, but it is the only city with data available to track murder in individual neighborhoods over such a long time frame. This view reveals a remarkable pattern: The level of violence in the city has risen and fallen sharply over the past half century, but the distribution of violence has not changed significantly. The group of neighborhoods on the West and South Sides that had the highest level of violence in the late 1960s have continued to have the highest level of violence in every single period since.

This rigid geography of violence, which has persisted even as the city's economy has changed and new populations have moved into and out of these neighborhoods, raises a question that should be considered alongside the more immediate question of why violence is rising or falling in a particular place at a particular time: Why are some American neighborhoods so vulnerable to so much violence?

To answer this question requires thinking less in terms of months and years, and more in terms of decades. It requires thinking less about specific neighborhoods and cities where violence is common, and more about larger metropolitan areas where inequality is extreme and the affluent live separated from the poor. And it requires thinking less about individual criminals and victims, and more about bigger social forces, including demographic shifts, changes in urban labor markets, and social policies implemented by states and the federal government. All told, nearly six decades of data on violence in Chicago's neighborhoods point to an unmistakable conclusion: Producing a sustained reduction in violence may not be possible without addressing extreme, persistent segregation by race, ethnicity, and income.

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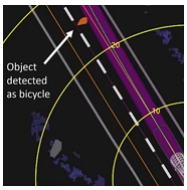

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If this all seems far removed from the people wielding guns in cities like Chicago; Portland, Oregon; and Philadelphia, it is. The forces that have left American neighborhoods vulnerable to rising violence are entirely distinct from the people who live in those neighborhoods.

The young men who are most likely to be the victims or perpetrators of gun violence weren't alive when the United States began to disinvest in central cities. In the decades during and after the Great Migration of Black Americans out of the rural South, federal dollars built our interstate highway system, insured home mortgages, and subsidized a large-scale movement of white people and other high-income segments of the population out of central cities. You needed money to buy a car in order to move to a house in the suburbs and commute into the city. And in many new housing developments, you needed to be white to be eligible to purchase a home or get a loan. New suburbs and exurbs outside Chicago and St. Louis quickly established zoning codes that would not allow for apartments or other forms of affordable housing to be

built, meaning local property taxes would fund services only for relatively well-off residents. As the most advantaged segments of the urban population moved elsewhere, the share of city budgets funded by the federal government dwindled and political influence in state legislatures shifted away from the cities.

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When residents fled and government support dropped, the institutions left behind started to crumble. Churches lost their members, schools fell apart, parks were not maintained, and poverty became concentrated. By the mid-'60s, a new set of social challenges—pollution, social unrest, fiscal crisis—became associated with city life in America. The federal government did not respond with massive investment in the people and communities of America's cities, as proposed in public documents such as the Kerner Commission Report. Instead, policy makers turned toward the institutions of punishment—police and prisons. Before the '70s, the rate of imprisonment in the United States was comparable to that of other nations in the developed world. But the imprisoned population grew to an unprecedented scale. On the streets, police departments were asked to deal with all of the problems that come with concentrated disadvantage, such as homelessness, mental illness, and addiction. This was remarkably unfair and unwise: Law enforcement is entirely ill-suited to solve the problems that come with extreme urban inequality.

This policy of abandonment and punishment left urban neighborhoods weakened. The government dominated public spaces by force rather than investing in institutions that strengthen neighborhoods; it removed residents from their communities rather than supporting them. The Harvard University professor Robert

Sampson's research in Chicago shows that when poverty is concentrated and institutions don't function, neighbors are less able to come together to solve common problems. Parents are less likely to know the parents of their children's friends; adults are more wary of stepping in when unsupervised young people are causing trouble; families are more likely to retreat to their homes instead of venturing out in public space. This is not what has driven the latest surge of violence. But this is what has made neighborhoods where disadvantage is concentrated vulnerable to every surge of violence since the 1960s.

Let me be clear: It is important to find out what is driving this latest rise in gun violence, and to develop targeted responses in the neighborhoods where violence is concentrated—I am, in fact, devoting the next several years of my research to this question. But it is equally important to ask why the same neighborhoods have had the highest level of violence.

Analyzing the short-term fluctuations along with the long-term vulnerability allows us to move beyond the simplistic idea that to deal with violence, we must choose between an approach that addresses "root causes" and one that attempts to "stop the bleeding." The long view tells us that disinvestment in communities, concentrated disadvantage, the disintegration of core community institutions of support, an overreliance on the institutions of punishment, and an unfathomable and unregulated supply of guns have created neighborhoods vulnerable to violence. In those vulnerable neighborhoods, a shorter-term perspective reveals how shifts in the local social order, policy tweaks, shocks such as crack cocaine and an influx of guns, and other micro changes—a new boys' and girls' club opens; a tenants'-rights group organizes an effort to mobilize against guns in a housing development; a violence-interruption

organization loses funding; an abandoned building is razed—can lead to declines and spikes in violence.

Jeff Asher and Rob Arthur: The data are pointing to one major driver of America's murder spike

When we take the long view, the discussion of why violence is rising and how to respond broadens considerably. We should still start with the immediate question of what is driving the rise in shootings, and push for investments in neighborhoods and cities that are designed to generate an immediate reduction in shootings. Researchers have accumulated lots of evidence showing that redesigning abandoned lots, providing high-quality summer jobs and extracurricular programs for students, and asking police to work with residents to solve localized problems can be extremely effective ways to reduce violence.

But we must also expand outward in time and space, and consider why American neighborhoods are vulnerable to violence. Zooming out can help reveal the truth about violence in our cities: This is a whole-society problem, not one isolated in the neighborhoods where it roars. Addressing it requires our whole society's concern, investment, and attention, and that attention must be sustained well beyond the periods when gun violence is surging.