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Reduce Gun Violence on Chicago’s Westside

    The simultaneous existence of poverty, inadequate education, gangs, and drugs is a recipe for disaster. Yet, these very ingredients have been brewing in a pot known as the city of Chicago for years. The overwhelming epidemic of senseless gun violence that is plaguing Westside neighborhoods has everyone who cares desperately seeking ways to put an end to the madness.

 I.             Causes of gun violence on Chicago’s Westside

Poverty

Although there seems to be some debate over the question, in quantitative studies it has been found that both poverty and income inequality are related to homicide (Hagedorn and Rauch). The exposure to violence by children is the foundation in which violence in impoverished inner city neighborhoods thrives. Children and adolescents that grow in these areas are ninety percent likely to repeat this cycle. Professors Spano, Rivera, and Bolland argue that successful violence prevention will include sheltering youth from violence in their communities and will include teaching alternative ways to cope with trauma and violence (Richard Spano).

Arthur Lurigio, a criminal justice and psychology professor at Loyola University in Chicago says that the generational, cyclical disenfranchisement and poverty must be addressed to truly achieve less violence. People living in poor communities determine risks based on everyday encounters instead of statistical data (Johnson, Keen and Welch).

Although I am not particularly sure that sheltering children from the violence that takes place in their very own neighborhoods is possible, I do agree that children should be provided with counseling, coping mechanisms in response to traumatic events and violence, and that poverty in these areas must be addressed. This, however, is a lot easier said than done. In an economy that has slashed these programs as well as funding for after school activities and unemployment benefits, I pose the question ‘how do we obtain what appears to be unobtainable?’

The only economically feasible solution I can come up with at this moment is *volunteers*. These volunteers can come in the form of parents, grandparents, ex- offenders, preachers, teachers, politicians, etc. Volunteers can come from any walk of life as long as they are dedicated, reliable, and willing to provide a positive alternative to violence and wrong doings.

“Housing, Gangs, Homicide” investigates a study on Chicago homicide. The study answers the question “What accounts for sharp differences in the patterns of urban homicide?” based on crime reports, interviews, and on data on the displacement of Chicago public housing tenants from the Chicago Housing Authority and by observing Chicago gangs and public housing policies (Hagedorn and Rauch).

When New York City’s homicide rate dropped in the 1990s people were surprised that Chicago’s rates remained high being that the two cities are very similar in their population and issues. Chicago finally witnessed a decrease in homicide rates in the 2000s.However, the rate did not imitate New York’s constant slow decline. Instead Chicago’s murder rates stayed steady at a rate three times higher than New York City’s (Hagedorn and Rauch).

The study concluded that the drug markets’ rise and fall alone does not satisfy the answer to the question posed by the study eve though many scholars believe that it does. In the 1990s Gangs who believed that truces would end fighting and create a better “business” atmosphere dominated the Chicago drug markets (Hagedorn and Rauch).

These notions did not produce the conclusions that gangs had expected. As a result, high levels of violence continued until recently. All U.S. cities experienced their peaks and declines in violence as it relates to the illegal drug markets. However, the cycles fail to provide an explanation as to why drops occurred in some locations and not others (Hagedorn and Rauch).

The study also found that the number of economically disadvantaged ethnic minorities living in high rise housing projects has created violent conditions. The 2005 riots witnessed in Paris is a rare example as violence in Europe is low. Displacement is one urban process that causes disorder in U.S. As urban populations grow, areas needed for low-income or impoverished residents grow as well. However, the increase in the number of more affluent residents calls for their territory to be expanded as well, resulting in gentrification (Hagedorn and Rauch).

Education

    Sander Williams, a Depaul University professor of economics provided an examination on housing location in the city versus its suburban areas from 1990-2000 public data and from Census records. His studies found that Non- Hispanic Whites tend to live in the city regardless of their education levels. This is due to the desire to be closer to the work place and to the amenities city mayors have been offering to bring more revenues to the city such as libraries, festivals, revamped schools, public parks, and a sense of greater safety. It must be noted that these individuals live in the better areas of the city (William Sanders).

     This trend does not hold true to Blacks and Hispanics however.  Blacks and Hispanics with less education often live in the worse areas of Chicago. While their affluent and higher educated counterparts relocate to the suburbs (William Sanders).

Chicago has become notorious for its high rise housing projects which have gained a bad reputation over the years. In an attempt to revive its image and to curb the violence that occurs in these units, the city has chosen to do away with them. However, this procedure has not gone as smoothly as authorities had expected.

Because housing projects were home to different gangs it became a breeding ground for gun violence. Yet, there were clearly established boundaries for these gangs even though they shared the same areas. In the Cabrini Greens Housing Projects it was a well known fact that those living in the ‘whites’ (white buildings) were not to go into the ‘reds’ when there was conflict amongst the rival gangs that called these units home. The same held true for Rockwell Gardens. On any given day you could approach a unit and be welcomed by a gun as I learned from a personal experience.

These boundaries (unless they were crossed) prevented a lot of violence that could have otherwise taken place. However, the city’s recent plan to revive its image destroyed these borders and placed rival gang members in homes right next door to one another. With a long history of violence and animosity, it is impossible to make rival gangs members into neighbors. Hence the widespread violence that we are witnessing in Chicago’s Englewood community where most of these low- income residents have been placed.

Gangs

    In an analysis of Chicago’s four largest gangs’ illegal activities across time, neighborhood, and street gang affiliation, researchers concluded that the gangs were responsible for fifty- five percent of homicides from 1987 to 1990. Every neighborhood has fallen victim to gang violence, but the violence does not occur randomly; it occurs disproportionately among specific neighborhoods and populations for specific lengths of time. The two most dangerous communities in the city encountered seventy-six times more gang violence than the two safest communities (Carolyn Rebecca Block).

    The violence witnessed in neighborhoods, even those close in proximity varies. *Instrumental violence*, violence used to obtain money or property without the intention of causing harm, injury, death, is strongest and most violent in disorderly and declining areas. While *expressive violence*, violence with the goal of injury or death, is more prevalent in prosperous neighborhoods (Carolyn Rebecca Block).

Availability of Guns

         According to the contributing professors writing for the journal, *BioMed* *Central,* in the United States firearms are the most common weapons used to commit homicides. Majority of the firearms sold are done so through federal firearms licensees (FFL) which are stores or individuals who have been granted a license to sell firearms by the federal government. In 2001 there were over one hundred- thousand FFLs in the United States alone. Information gathered by the police on gun purchases, seizures, and on recovered guns concluded that millions of guns entered the US annually via FFLs.  Because of this, a study analyzing annual county gun homicide rates from 1993- 1999 was conducted. The study found that gun homicide rates in major cities were higher where a disproportionate number of FFLs were located. However, this relationship did not hold true for suburbs and smaller cities (Wiebe, Krafty and Koper).

The availability of guns is not the real problem here as United States citizens are granted the right to bear arms in the constitution regardless of where they live. The problem arises when individuals purchase guns for people who are not allowed to own or purchase guns themselves such as individuals who have been convicted of felonies. Sometimes FFLs know that firearm purchasers plan to do this and still sell the weapons knowing how dangerous the situation could be. It is extremely easy for criminals to get a hold of guns in this day and age even if they have a rap sheet as long as a football field.

II.           The effects of gun violence

    The United States’ homicide rates have dropped. According to the Justice Department, violent crime is at its lowest levels since 1973 even though we have encountered a recession. This change has been obvious in the nation’s largest cities; New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. From 1990-2009, New York’s homicide rate dropped 79%, followed by Chicago with a 46% drop.  Los Angeles’ homicide rate is down 68% for that time period (Johnson, Keen and Welch).

    Even with a shrinking police force, New York credits the drop in their homicide rate to its publically accessible ‘in- your- face’ surveillance system that maps crimes with continuously updated print outs that help target trouble areas. This allows law enforcement to frequently patrol and to quickly respond to more serious crimes (Johnson, Keen and Welch).

     Although fewer resources are available to the city, Chicago is experiencing its lowest homicide rate since 1965. “A 2009 analysis found that almost all of Chicago’s shootings and homicides occur in 8.5% of the city’s 227 square miles”. However, new tools aimed at targeting gangs that commit about 60% of homicides and predictive computer programs help police respond swiftly when violence breaks out (Johnson, Keen and Welch).

    Experiencing a slight rise in gang membership, Los Angeles has still managed to reach its lowest homicide rate since the 1960s. Police Chief Charlie Beck says this is due to repairing animosities in low- income neighborhoods, more police, gang intervention programs, more individuals being incarcerated, and due to better use of statistics and crime mapping. Analysts credit the combination of these initiatives along with the absence of the major crack cocaine drug epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s for the nation’s decrease in homicide rates (Johnson, Keen and Welch).

Although the nation is witnessing a time where the number of murders being committed are lower than normal, it is worth noting that the public is still very worried about personal safety and violent crimes. This coupled with the fact that the US is in a time of economic instability raises the question of whether homicide rates will rise again (Johnson, Keen and Welch). These are legitimate concerns, especially since not everyone feels the effects of the lower homicide rate.

To many people familiar with or living in Chicago areas where most of the remaining gun violence is occurring, feeling safe or protected is not an option. They are still witnesses to homicides, drive by shootings, and yellow police tape on a daily basis. I cannot imagine my child being shot on the way to school or my husband being shot while eating dinner at the kitchen table, but this is the reality that many are forced to live; one that is filled with fear, anxiety, and vulnerability.

These concerns are necessary according to criminal justice analysts who are seeing several large cities such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Philadelphia reporting slight increases in homicides due in part to shootings involving multiple victims and to spikes in domestic killings. New York has recorded 15 more murders in May 2010 than May 2009 which included 13 domestic killings involving victims 9 years old or younger (Johnson, USA Today: Four cities report more murders in 2010).

The murder of a family of five pushed Chicago’s number of homicides up by 9 from April 2009 to April 2010. As of May 2010, 11% of the 2010 murders were domestic killings. Although overall violent crime was down 13%, murder was having a slight increase. According to police crime statistics, murder is the only crime that is not declining (Johnson, USA Today: Four cities report more murders in 2010).

III.          Ways to reduce gun violence

Argument for greater police presence

    Many seem to believe that a stronger police presence is the answer to combating violence. Though patrol methods might reduce certain criminal acts, criminologist, Andrew Karmen notes that in the 1990s crime rates fell in New York due to longer prison terms for offenders and due to a better economy. In fact thirteen to fifty-four percent of New York’s drop in crime had longer prison sentences to thank (Conklin).

Policing strategies and techniques cannot be credited alone with improving crime rates. Other variables, such as community action, employment trends, and demographic changes that accompany police actions must also be taken into consideration (Hagedorn and Rauch).

Police are seen by many as those who serve and protect citizens. However, that is not the perspective shared by many Chicagoans living in the areas experiencing the majority of the violence. The police are seen as ineffective and many times as a part of the problem because they treat some of the victims or innocent bystanders as if they were criminals or low lives. This distrust makes it difficult for law enforcement to be welcomed into the community and it makes residents less likely to call on them in case of an emergency.

Argument for tighter gun control

Gun control advocates believe that less guns and more severe punishments for firearm offenders will equal less crime. However, according to criminologists, crime rates are not sensitive to changes in the general population that own guns. In fact, gun ownership by everyday citizens reduces the likelihood of those citizens becoming victims. Instead offenders will not commit the crime or they will target a citizen that does not own a gun (Conklin).

            Because a study has revealed that major cities where FFLs are     prevalent tend to be victims of higher homicide rates the proposal of reducing the number of FFLs has been introduced. Although the federal government carries the responsibility of regulating which FFLs are issued licenses, the responsibility of where the FFLs can operate is left up to local municipalities or states. Modifications of FFL guidelines on federal, state, and local levels could e helpful. However, due to zoning and state laws it is believed that municipalities have more power to enact additional mandates, requirements, and inspections of gun dealers. This is seen as a major avenue to reduce the number of homicides in major cities especially (Wiebe, Krafty and Koper).

Tighter gun control is virtually impossible. If it were possible, our legislators would not be debating the issue right now. The problem with controlling firearms is that there are too many illegal ways to obtain weapons. Not all criminals are denied their right to own guns. However, those who are will find other means that goes around the government to get one. How do we stop the illegal sells of firearms?

Combating gangs

Areas with continuing high rates of violence are called home by armed groups, whether they be gangs, paramilitary “death squads,” drug cartels, or fundamentalist militias. When such groups were disarmed, violence dropped. In other places where weapons were not given up violence have continued (Hagedorn and Rauch).

A ten year study by university professors on 585 Pittsburgh youth (ages 11-15) revealed that boys predisposed to delinquent activity are more likely to join gangs. As gang members the youth are introduced to more criminal activities and are more likely to engage in an increased level of drug distribution, drug use, and in the damaging of private property. What must be noted about the study is that boys who exhibited less antisocial behaviors tended to stay away from gangs and that peers were the link between gangs and the youth. Needless to say, parents have to watch the company that their children keep and children need to be reared in positive social behaviors to decease the chances of becoming future gang members

I must commend Chicago for the approach that they have taken in cracking down on gangs. They have chosen to sit gang members and leaders down with families, victims, and law enforcement officials in an attempt to appeal to them as human beings of the earth. In these meetings everyone gets the opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns and the police make a vow to target the gang if it is discovered that the gang (present at the meeting) has committed a murder following the meeting.

The mediation Organization *Cease Fire* has also proven to be instrumental in helping to prevent minor infractions from escalating into ones that may cause injury or death with their campaign to stop shootings in Chicago communities. In 2000, the organization’s first year in operation, shootings were reduced by 67% in the West Garfield neighborhood. The US Department of Justice has also credited Cease Fire with reducing retaliatory killings in five of the eight communities examined (Campaign). These results were achieved through outreach and high conflict mediation staff, many who are ex-offenders of gang leaders who have changed their lives and who would like for others to do the same. It is important to note that this group does not aim at dismantling gangs, but at stopping senseless murders (workers).

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