

# Before all the Boys are Dead: Variation in Urban Violence

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# Before all the Boys are Dead: Variation in Urban Violence

## Abstract

Many urban phenomena can only be understood within a global context. For example, the reasons why Chicago homicide rate has stayed high while the rates in New York City have plummeted cannot be explained without linking local factors to global processes. While globalization has been found to reinforce marginalization and therefore produce violence, urban scholars have not addressed the wide global variation in urban rates of violence. The criminology literature in the United States has also been at a loss to explain the crime drop in some US cities, but not others. World-wide, social exclusion, societal disruption, ethno-religious conflict, and institutionalization of groups of armed young men are major factors related to high rates of violence. When local conditions are placed within this global context, the 1990s divergence in homicide rates between Chicago and New York City become more understandable.

Urban phenomena today are often perplexing unless viewed within a global context. For example, the rise of world cities and the decline of older industrial cities cannot be understood by looking only at dynamics within a single city, nor even within a single country (e.g. Sassen 2002). Urban violence may be another such issue that cannot be adequately explained by city-level or nation-level analysis.

Notably, the 1990s US “crime drop” has dumbfounded US criminologists (e.g. Blumstein and Walberg 1999) who have been unable to explain the sharp drop in crime in some cities but not others. More broadly, there are few studies that examine why Buenos Aires, Cairo, Tokyo, and New York have very low rates of homicide, and Rio de Janeiro, Cape Town, Karachi, and Detroit very high ones. While all of these metropolises are “dual cities” (Mollenkopf and Castells 1989) some have much higher rates of violence than others.

To explore this issue, I examine why Chicago’s homicide rate has not dropped like New York City’s. A word of warning: this essay is more of a method than a proof. Its main point is to show that only by looking at internal urban processes within a global context can variations in urban violence be understood.

### ***Two Literatures Barely on Speaking Terms***

A day trip through the library rows where criminology journals gather dust will find nary a mention of Castells, Marcuse, Sassen, Harvey, Lefebvre or any of the icons of contemporary urban sociology. The spatial insights of urban scholars appear lost in criminology. Even eminent criminologists like Jim Short (1997) and Alfred Blumstein (1999) continue to report variations in homicide on the basis of city size rather than on any characteristics of the new versus old economy, strength of global financial networks, extent of immigration, or other variables central to the global city literature. Criminologists have been left in the uncomfortable position of not being able to explain why a traditionally low-violence, medium-sized city like Milwaukee now has homicide rates more than twice as high as a traditionally high-violence megalopolis like Los Angeles. On an international level, the few comparative studies of violence, like Ted Gurr’s (1994; 2000) minorities at risk project, focus on the national not the city level.

Variation between cities in crime and violence is also seldom addressed in the urban and political economy literatures. Inequality, urbanists typically assume, spawns crime and violence. But they make few attempts to explain *why* rates of violence can

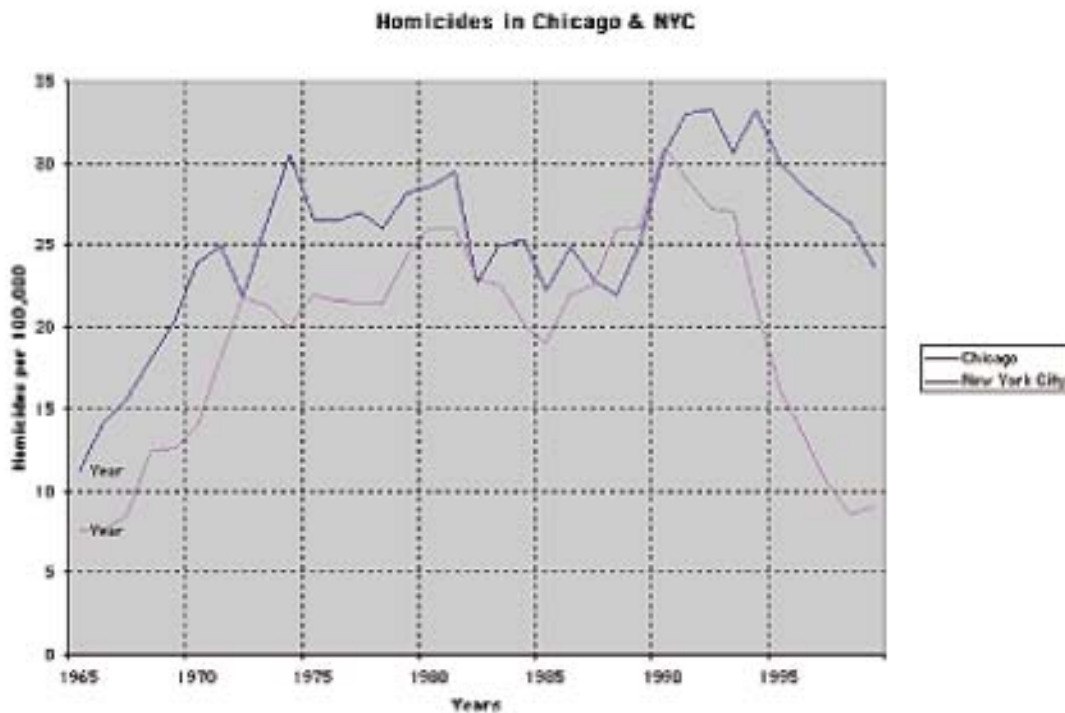
be so different. For example, violence is depicted as a dependent variable in both Castells’ third volume of *Information and Society* and in Sassen’s *Global Cities*.

While “globalization” in these and other urban texts entails “marginalization” and therefore assumed to cause crime, urbanists, like criminologists, fail to explain the vastly different rates and trends in violence in cities.

Social science needs to make sense of the startling fact that New York City’s homicide rate fell by 75% over the 1990s and Chicago went from parity with New York early in the decade to nearly four times higher by the end of millennium. This radical divergence in violence does not appear to be the result of differences in rates of poverty nor other standard criminological variables. Neither the criminology nor the urban literatures, by themselves, can provide much help to us in this matter. But by using both disciplines and focusing on cities globally as the level of analysis, we might begin to make sense out of these otherwise inexplicable patterns of violence.

### ***The Case of Chicago and New York City***

Chicago and New York City’s homicide rates have run parallel since the 1930s. But by the mid-1990s, the patterns diverged radically.



The standard explanations for New York City's crime drop, heavy-handed policing (or the "Bratton-Guiliani-Compstat-Broken Windows-Zero Tolerance" perspectives) have been found wanting for many reasons (e.g. Blumstein and Walberg 1999). For our purposes, if New York City's crime policies were responsible for a drop in homicide, why is it that violence also dropped in Boston, San Diego, Seattle, San Francisco, Houston, and a host of other cities that did not adopt Guiliani's and Bratton's policies? US criminologists have failed to discover the "magic bullet" that the mayors of high-violence cities like Chicago and Detroit could fire to spark their own crime drop. Consider: if Rudy Guiliani had moved to hyper-violent Detroit could he have lowered their homicide rate by 75%? The major factors that cause homicide go well beyond policing styles and mayoral hype.

### ***What factors are related to High Rates of Urban Homicide?***

Homicide also varies widely in cities around the globe, though there does not exist an international urban homicide data base. Most UN and other homicide statistics are reported by country or region and not by city. We know from studies in the US and India (Varshney 2003) that there are vast within-country urban differences in violence. There also are a host of comparability problems in homicide reporting. Data are often reported sporadically, and longitudinal data are very hard to come by.

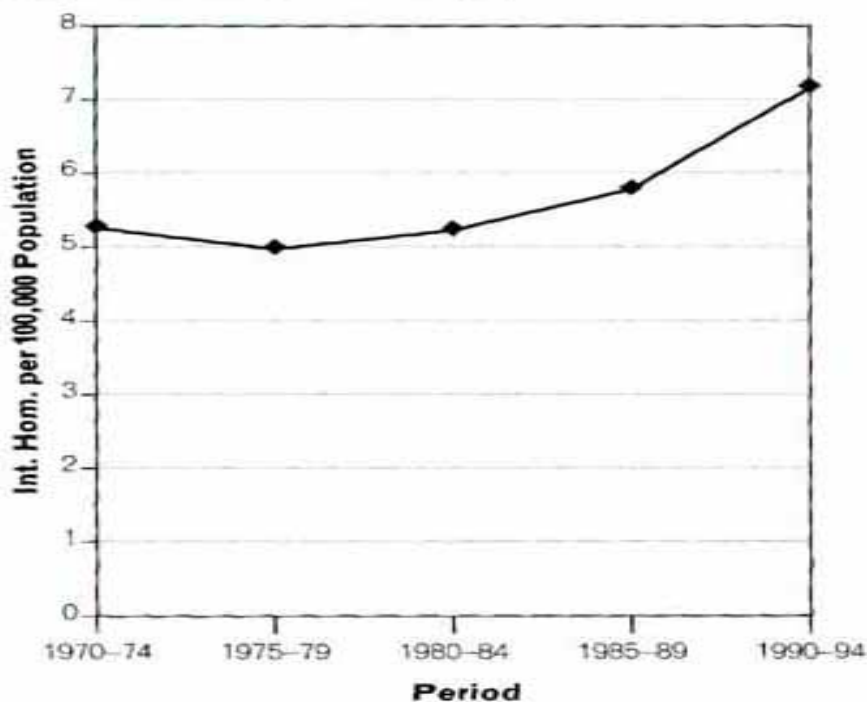
A review of extant crime data and various literatures suggest four factors that influence rates of urban violence:

1. high levels of social exclusion, extreme poverty, and lack of fit with the global economy;
2. societal disruption, as in conflict-torn societies or countries with abrupt changes in social systems or population transfers;
3. ethno-racial or religious, as opposed to class, conflict; and
4. armed young men, often regulating an underground economy or defending religious, nationalist, or other ideological beliefs.

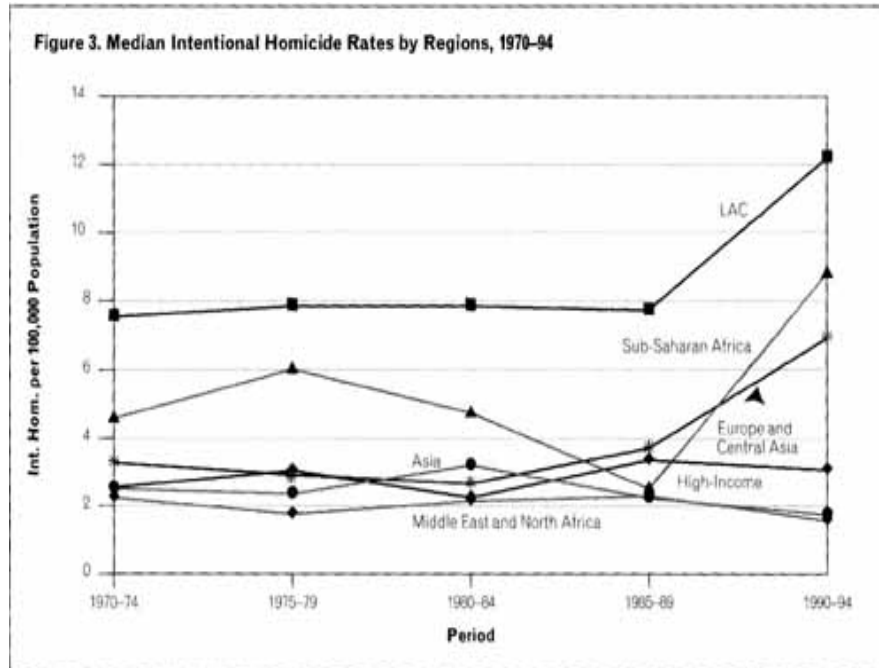
## 1. SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Global homicide is on the rise. By 2002, the World Health Organization

**Figure 1. The World: Intentional Homicide Rate**  
(population-weighted average)



reports that the average world rate of homicide rose to 8.8 per 100,000. Consistent with our perspective, homicide is highest in the most socially excluded regions of the world. In 2002, Africa and the Americas were still the leading homicide regions, with Eastern Europe a rising third.



While Gurr's (2000) recent studies find global decreases in ethnic conflict, intentional homicide in sub Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe has not taken a holiday. Kano, Lagos, and other Nigerian cities have seen ethnic strife, but also wars over the underground economy and Christian-Muslim-animist violence (e.g. Casey 2002). South Africa rivals Colombia for the title of the "world's most violent country."

Eastern Europe, the other region where figure 3 shows increases in violence, changed from a low- to a medium- or high-homicide area after the break-up of the Soviet empire. Moscow now has murder rates in Chicago's range of about 20 per 100,000, while cities in the Balkans have become increasingly involved in arms, drugs, and human trafficking.

High levels of poverty, though, are necessary but not sufficient to produce high levels of violence. Consider India, where violence varies widely between cities, though poverty is endemic (Varshney 2003). New York City, as the US' largest city, certainly has the country's largest number of poor people, but it also has one of the country's lowest urban homicide rates. The Middle East, except for Palestine and Israel, is another low homicide region that is also extremely poor.

## 2. SOCIETAL DISRUPTION

Poverty and social exclusion often lead to violence when accompanied by a major disruption of a society. Eastern Europe is a clear example of the relationship between disruption and violence, as socialism was overturned and capitalist economic and social relations abruptly instituted. Before 1990, the rates of violence in Eastern European cities resembled their Western counterparts, but violence sky-rocketed in some — but not all — in the wake of the fall of Soviet power (Snyder 2000). Much of the violence is tied to the drug trade and underground economy, as in Albania where the World Bank found that a quarter of young men were engaged in the drug trade (La Cava and Nanetti 2000).

Migration and forceable displacement of populations also can be related to violence. The 1997 World Refugee Survey, looking at internal displacement of populations, argued that large scale forcible movement of people leads to families torn apart, communities dispersed, cultures suppressed, and normal support systems weakened — all background conditions for violence. In South Africa, the forced removal of African peoples by the apartheid regime to rural “homelands” can be contrasted to the displacement of coloured populations to crowded, and violent neighborhoods in the Cape Flats where old networks were disrupted. In Cape Town, a long history of displacement of the “coloured” population has resulted in the highest rates of violence in South Africa as well as persisting gangs (Pinnock 1984). Migration from North Africa and Turkey to European countries has led to racist violence and political instability.

In the US, homicide skyrocketed in the industrial Midwest in the late 1960s and early 1970s as factories closed and desperation increased. Detroit and Flint, Michigan, and Gary, Indiana, all manufacturing towns *par excellence*, took turns as America’s homicide capitol during the years of greatest torment of deindustrialization. Internationally, Mumbai, Belfast, and Rio de Janeiro were old industrial cities who were slow to transition to the new economy and have high rates of violence. Durkheim’s sociological methodology relating suicide rates to the break-up of the traditional order may also be relevant to the trauma of deindustrialization, especially in manufacturing centers.

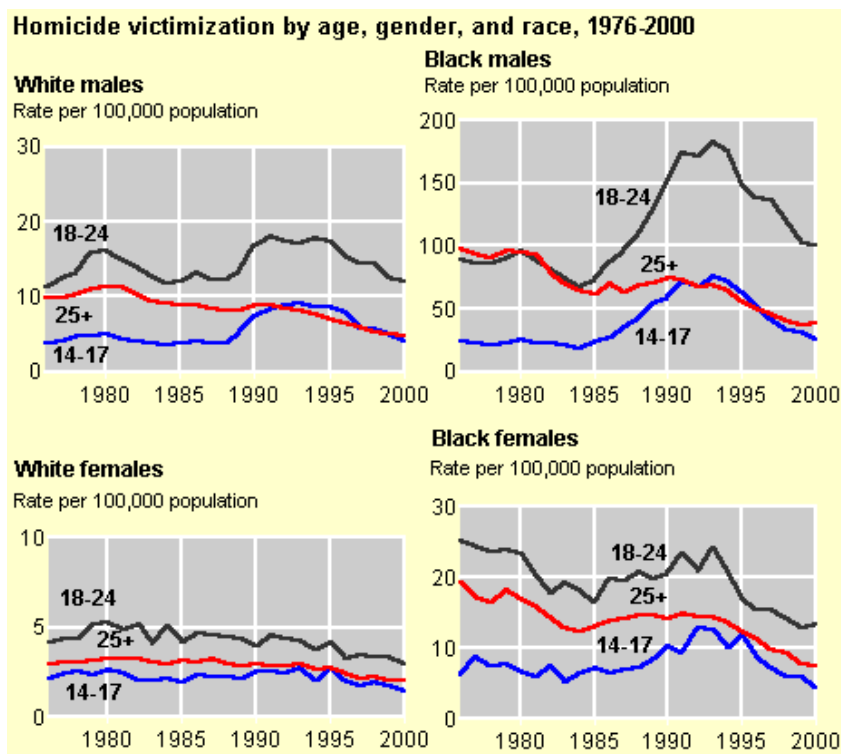
## 3. ETHNO-RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Disruptions of societies or cities, though, need not lead to violence, but are more likely to do so when ethno-religious conflict is endemic. Violence in South Africa, to take an obvious example, follows a history of racist oppression. But much of the violence in that country today is still racial, as well as the consequences of neo-liberal policies (Desai 2002). Continued tribal violence has been accompanied by African-“Coloured” conflict, including a terrifying mix of gangs and vigilantes (Dixon and Johns 2001). Ted Gurr’s international research has carefully documented the centrality of ethnicity to global conflict today.

Reynal-Querol (2001) finds that ethnic tensions are more violent when religious differences are intense. The salience of ethnic and religious identity for violence is

demonstrated in the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans and Rwanda. As socially excluded populations confront oppression, they are not reinforcing class identities, but adopting what Castells (1997), Touraine (1995) and others call ethnic or religious “resistance identities.” This search for tradition is seen as a defense against the unsettling liquidity of modernity (Bauman 2000) and often accompanies an ideology of armed struggle (Juergensmeyer 2001).

In the United States, while white Americans have homicide rates close to European rates in all cities, rates of violence among African Americans have been high since slavery, particularly in the south. Rates of homicide for African Americans are also at least double that of Latinos (Martinez 2002).



Violence in Central and South America and the Caribbean are also related to racial tensions. The favelas of Rio, for example, are largely (though not exclusively) Afro-Brazilian, while the ruling elite is white (da Silva 1997). Near-by Buenos Aires, with vast areas of poverty, is more racially homogenous and has much lower rates of homicide. Racial divisions are also sharp in Mexico, Haiti, and the United States. Low violence societies, like Japan, Australia, and China are, on the whole, less ethnically heterogeneous than high violence ones.

#### 4. ARMED YOUNG MEN

A final factor, which appears to be an over-looked, but necessary condition for persisting violence, is groups of armed young men. As Mary Kaldor (2002, 161) said in describing today's "new wars":

typical new phenomenon is armed networks of nonstate and state actors. They include: paramilitary groups organized around a charismatic leader, warlords who control particular areas, terrorist cells, fanatic volunteers like the Mujahedeen, organized criminal groups, units of regular forces or other security services, as well as mercenaries and private military companies.

While violence in South America is undoubtedly related to drug trafficking within and between countries, and in Africa the result of unresolved post-colonial conflict, it is armed young men of every sort who are filling a power vacuum caused by the state-crippling sweep of globalization. Rates of violence in Colombia are strongly related to the persistence of heavily armed cartels, para-militaries, and revolutionaries all militarily confronting the state. In Rio de Janeiro, the state has little control over favelas dominated by armed drug factions. Increasingly, as the state has been unable to maintain law and order, death squads, many linked to the government, have proliferated. Between 1998 and 2002 in Guatemala and Honduras, death squads executed more than 2000 street children, some, but not all, members of street gangs (COAV 2003) and in 1993, Cohen (1996) reports, death squads killed some 2200 kids in Colombia. In Brazil, Senator da Silva (1996) weeps over the 4 children per day murdered by death squads. Death squads and paramilitaries also plague Haiti, the Balkans, and the Phillipines among many other countries.

In Western Europe, strong states have maintained a monopoly on violence except for Northern Ireland, which, at the height of "the troubles," rivaled the highest homicide cities in the world. As negotiations took center stage and violence has diminished, splinters from both Catholic and Protestant mainline groups have refused to give up their arms and bombs. Once an armed struggle ensues, many of

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1 Varshney's (2001) analysis of differences in levels of communal violence between Indian cities, while looking at cross-communal organization as the key mitigating factor, does not separately look at persisting groups of armed young men. Had Varshney added Mumbai, with their Hindu and Muslim armed groups, to his analysis, he may have come to different conclusions (see Eckert 2003; Zaidi (2002).

the armed men know little else but violence, and it is not necessarily in their interests or capacity to turn to other means of livelihood. Violence becomes “normalized,” armed groups institutionalized, and the cycle of violence is not easily broken (Morrissey and Smyth 2002).

### ***Another Look at Chicago and New York City***

By applying the above four factors, reasons for the 1990s divergence in homicide rates between Chicago and New York become a bit clearer.

#### **1. SOCIAL EXCLUSION**

Both New York and Chicago admittedly have high levels of social exclusion and extreme poverty. Both are global cities exercising international leadership, though New York’s pre-eminence is undisputed. But while levels of concentrated poverty and segregation are high in both cities, Chicago, Janet Abu-Lughod (1999) speculated, has paid a greater social penalty for its over-concentration on manufacturing. William Julius Wilson’s (1987) sober analysis of the consequences of economic restructuring on Chicago’s Black ghetto is less applicable to New York City, where manufacturing never dominated the economy. In that sense, the Midwest rustbelt, home to millions of African Americans who fled the south to seek salvation in the mills and factories, in many ways now exceeds the south as America’s highest homicide region. Thus, paradoxically, the reasons for Chicago’s rise to world status in the 20th century now may be an underlying condition for its stubbornly high homicide rates. But social exclusion, even when intensified by economic restructuring, is not sufficient to explain Chicago and New York’s radical divergence in trends of violence.

#### **2. SOCIETAL DISRUPTION**

Chicago and New York City have also differed sharply on housing policy, which, as in South Africa, is directly related to disruption of communities. In the 1990s, when homicide rates diverged, Chicago saw disinvestment and displacement for its Black poor and New York City saw investment and relative stability.

Chicago’s 1960’s policy of segregating its Black poor in high rise housing projects led to rapidly climbing rates of violence. Unlike New York City, public housing in Chicago has been at the center of racial politics, and has been used by elites as a way to warehouse the poorest sectors of the Black community (Hirsch 1983). As Chicago’s economy boomed and real estate around the Loop leapt in value, the housing projects suddenly became hot property. Though homicide in Chicago’s Robert Taylor Homes or Cabrini-Green housing projects was not appreciably higher than in other Black socially isolated neighborhoods, the location of those projects was coveted by realtors (Rast 1999). So, something had to be done about “crime” — and *incidentally* line the pockets of developers.

As a result, tens of thousands of families have been displaced (Smith 1998), pushing homicide west and south in a re-forming of what Hirsch (1983) might call a “third” ghetto.<sup>2</sup> In New York City, however, some studies have found, gentrification has not appreciably increased the rate of mobility of the poor (Freeman and Braconi 2002). Nothing in New York City approximates the physical dismantling of public housing in Chicago and the accompanying displacement of poor, Black people.

As Chicago focused its attention on the central business district in the Loop and its nearby neighborhoods, it paid little attention and invested less money in housing in Lawndale, Englewood, and other Black ghettos, occupying adjacent concentric circles. In New York City, on the contrary, devastated areas like the South Bronx were recipients of more than a billion dollars in housing investment in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Grogan and Proscio 2000). South Bronx housing projects were not appreciably renovated, but working class housing was scattered throughout the borough. While poverty rates did not fall, homicide did, even in the projects.

These findings cast a new light on the Harvard University- run Project in Human Development’s study of violence and social control in Chicago. Robert Sampson and his co-workers argue that crime, including homicide, is inversely related to “collective efficacy” in carefully drawn neighborhoods (e.g Sampson et al 1997; Morenoff and Sampson 1997; Morenoff et al 2001). While the analysis is elegant, one suspects that “collective efficacy” may be confounded with gentrification, wealth, and other indicators of political, economic, and social power. More importantly for this essay, Sampson’s findings have problems in the comparative dimension: Why did New York City’s high poverty, socially disorganized areas see drops in homicide, while Chicago’s did not? Did “collective efficacy” skyrocket in New York City and not in Chicago? Sampson and his colleagues have a major job on their hands to explain differences between cities.

“Collective efficacy” may be one by-product of spatial processes little discussed by Sampson et al.<sup>3</sup> What criminology is well suited to address, but has not adequately explained, is how spatial processes, like gentrification, displacement, and housing demolitions, differ between cities and in what ways they influence violence. In terms of population displacement, Chicago looks much more like Cape Town than New York City.

### 3. ETHNO-RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Black people make up more than half of all homicide victims and offenders in New York City and three quarters in Chicago. Janet Abu-Lughod (2000), however, has argued that Chicago’s unique history of racial policies, of the construction of walls of public housing and highways to segregate Black people differs from the experience of Black people in New York and Los Angeles. She takes issue with Wacquant’s (1997) brilliant

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2 See the homicide charts on <http://gangresearch.net/gugpage.html>.

3 Neither does their study dwell on the dark side of collective efficacy, social exclusion of “outsiders” (e.g. Harvey 1991). Racism, after all, has a long Chicago tradition.

analysis of the contemporary ghetto by going back to the particularities of cities and their unique processes. Indeed, a look at urban planning policy from the two cities in this study finds more differences than similarities.

In New York City, the “Power Broker” Robert Moses, dominated planning for decades. While he ran roughshod over everyone in his way, it is hard to argue that race drove his policy (Caro 1974). In Chicago, on the other hand, Richard J. Daley’s loved his city no less than Moses loved his, but Daley’s decisions on where to place housing projects and highways were the epitome of racism (e.g. Cohen and Taylor 2000). The *raison d’être* of public housing in Chicago was segregation and the erection of high-rise projects was fundamentally intended to contain the Black population. This spatial policy inadvertently led to the consolidation of already existing gangs with the crack economy later providing them an unprecedented, and lucrative, economic base (Venkatesh 2000).

Both Chicago and New York have long histories of racial oppression. But, while we can look for universal patterns of ghettoization, as Wacquant, we might also pay attention to city level differences, like Abu-Lughod. It appears that in Chicago the erection of policy walls of segregation, the dislocation of the African American poor as a consequence of demolition, and disruption of “receiving” communities have exacerbated, not attenuated, violence.

#### 4. ARMED YOUNG MEN

A final clear cut difference between our two comparison cities is their different kinds of gangs. While the “Gangs of New York” predated their Chicago cousins by half a century, by the mid 1960s, major differences had emerged. In Chicago, the gangs that began about that time are still around at the turn of the millennium, whereas in New York gangs have come and gone. In Chicago, gangs have *institutionalized* and for half a century have been powerful actors in Black and Latino communities (Hagedorn forthcoming).

In New York City, drug organizations replaced gangs in the beginning of the crack years, and many grew into violent corporate structures. Unlike Chicago, it was these newer, less established organizations that ran neighborhood drug businesses. As the violence mounted, the NYPD and other law enforcement agencies took aim at these powerful, but newly established drug empires. The harassment and arrests finally broke the back of the drug bosses.

Since the businesses had few neighborhood ties or enduring loyalties to its employees, they were generally unconcerned about the war of attrition waged by NYPD on their work force, so long as they were not prevented from making a profit. Over time, however, as the NYPD ratcheted up pressure on the block through more frequent undercover operations

and a greater uniformed presence, the quality of the workforce steadily deteriorated and the businesses incurred daily losses from employee theft and police seizures. (Curtis and Wendel 2002, 5)

Ironically, it appears that the NYPD success in rooting out the drug organizations as the crack market cycle aged may have played a more significant role in violence reduction than Giuliani's highly touted "zero tolerance" policy.

The Chicago Police in the 1990s were no less aggressive, but military-style sweeps, gang loitering ordinances, and suppression tactics did not work in a city where the gangs had been firmly ensconced for decades in their neighborhoods. Unlike the new corporate entities in New York City, when the crack economy was booming in Chicago, it was the institutionalized gangs who ran the show. As Dixon and Johns (2001, 45) point out about a similar persisting gang situation in Cape Town: "the symbiotic relationship between gang and community cannot be broken by force."

As we've seen, once firmly established, gangs or other armed groups are difficult to uproot. As good jobs require different skills than physical prowess or ability to use weapons, young, unskilled, warriors can't change careers easily. Thus even more political militants, like the Protestants in Northern Ireland or the guerrillas in South Africa, are forced to consider gangs and drug trafficking as a way to use the "skills" they honed in their youth (Jamieson and Grounds 2002; Dixon and Johns 2001).

Compounding the problem of Chicago's gang institutionalization is the disruption of African American communities and displacement of their residents over the past decade. Where gangs are driven from long-time neighborhoods and drug markets, they are forced to stake out new turf. However, in Chicago there are no unclaimed turfs and any venture into a new drug market is likely to be met by force. High rates of violence are one unintended by-product of the tearing down of Chicago's public housing.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Discussion***

Skeptics will say I have presented no proof, provided no statistical tests, and have not considered all the alternative explanations for variation in homicide between Chicago and New York City. I plead guilty, but argue, in turn, that my critics have indicted me in the wrong court.

My argument is not that I have it all right and criminology texts can now list the four reasons why Chicago has more murders than New York. I want to show that it is only by

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<sup>4</sup> The long term impact of the eradication of Chicago's high rise public housing on rates of violence is less clear.

looking globally, by going beyond what appeared at first to be a simple comparison between two cities, that we can make sense of patterns of urban violence.

Clearly we need a variety of studies to look at the relationship between different types of cities, violence, and the geography of armed young men. We need a comparative investigation of “collective efficacy” of civil society and the impact of gentrification and displacement on violence. Criminology needs to return to its ecological roots and look at how spatial processes influence gang behavior and violence. Urban sociology needs to pay more attention to variations in violence and different kinds of organizations of the socially excluded. Most importantly, we need to understand the relationship between the crisis of the state and the proliferation of groups of armed young men.

My fundamental argument is for a marriage — or least some steady dating — between criminology and urban political economy. Indeed, such a relationship is long overdue. Any study of violence must intertwine an analysis of globalization with local factors. Thus Chicago, as a former manufacturing center, with massive population disruption to its poor Black population, a history of racial policy walls, and home to institutionalized gangs, has a different recent pattern of homicide than the just as poor, more demographically stable, less spatially racist, institutionalized-gang-free New York City.

An international analysis also points to some practical lessons. Decommissioning is at the center of debate in Northern Ireland and South Africa, and has had a measure of success in Lebanon and elsewhere (Brown and Karim 1995). It is hard to see how violence can be reduced without some sort of agreement between states and persisting armed groups to lay down their arms. Total victory, like the case of the NYPD over the drug barons, appears to be a response favored by elites, but our analysis suggests such a result is unlikely where gangs or other groups of armed young men have institutionalized.

Negotiation with gangs may be distasteful to police and politicians, but so was negotiation between Israelis and Palestinians, Northern Irish Catholic and Ulster Protestants, and South African Blacks and whites. Negotiation must be accompanied by less repressive policies, investment in ghetto areas, and recognition of multiple actors — including non-state actors like groups of armed young men (see Touraine 2000).

What we want to avoid in the United States is both another up-turn in violence as well as temporary declines due only to exhaustion and attrition. “Eventually, the people became sick of all the killings,” a Sikh militant told Juergensmeyer (2001, 94) as a reason for India’s declines in violence. “And,” he added gravely, “all the boys are dead.” This essay simply argues that to stop the killing “before all the boys are dead” US urban policy needs both a local and a global perspective.

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