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Spiraling Violence in Chicago: Causes and Solutions

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The following is adapted from a lecture delivered on February 28, 2022, at the Allan P. Kirby, Jr. Center for Constitutional Studies and Citizenship on Hillsdale's Washington, D.C. campus, as part of the AWC Family Foundation Lecture Series.

FOR SEVERAL years prior to 2020, violent crime in America's major cities was on the decline. But since the riots that summer following the death of George Floyd, it is heading in the opposite direction.

Murders nationwide in 2020 rose a stunning 29.4 percent over the previous year, the largest annual increase since the FBI began tracking that data in the 1960s. The number of murders in Chicago climbed even more sharply, rising 55 percent. It was as if a switch had been flipped. At least ten major U.S. cities hit new murder highs in 2021, but Chicago led the way with 797, the city's highest number in 25 years.



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National Review, *Jewish World Review*, *American Greatness*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Denver Post*. He is the author of the recent book, *What Next, Chicago? Notes of a Pissed-Off Native Son*.

Chicago’s violent crime epidemic is not limited to murder. The city’s 3,561 shooting incidents in 2021 were up 63 percent over 2019. Expressway shootings in Chicago-Cook County rose even more dramatically, from 51 in 2019 to 130 in 2020 to 273 in 2021. These expressway shootings pushed Chicago’s actual 2021 murder total north of 800.

Expressway killings aren’t counted in the official city numbers because expressways are under state jurisdiction. But try telling that to Chicagoans. “It’s almost like a modern, 21st century form of dueling,” said Illinois State Police Director Brendan Kelly. “[People get into fights with] each other on social media, they threaten one another and they say... ‘Let’s take this out to the expressway.’”

One of Chicago’s expressway murder victims was a dearly loved wife, mother, grandmother, and special education teacher named Denise Huguelet. Sixty-seven years old, she was being driven home from a White Sox game last summer when she became collateral damage in a shootout on the Dan Ryan Expressway.

Then there are the carjackings, 1,836 of them in Chicago in 2021—a 204 percent increase over 2019. One victim was a Democratic state senator. Her husband had a gun and returned fire. In another incident, a Cook County judge had to pull her three-year-old son to safety before the carjackers drove off.

Will McGee was 18 and looking forward to joining the military after

graduating from Excel Academy on the South Side, where he’d been voted homecoming king. He had saved up to buy a new Chevy Equinox and was behind the wheel when he was carjacked last November. He surrendered the vehicle and tried to run away but was shot dead in the back. The SUV was found abandoned shortly afterward.

Gangs have stoked the carnage with a sub-genre of hip hop music called “Chicago Drill.” Rival gangs call each other out in Chicago Drill raps, and bullets often fly as a result. Chicago’s gang world used to be dominated by a small handful of gang leaders, and homicides were usually tied to drugs and territorial conflicts. But as the federal government took down the older generation of leaders, gangs fractured and multiplied on a block-by-block level. Today’s gangs are run by young knuckleheads who throw down angry words on little screens and use shooters who in some cases have barely reached puberty and struggle to hold and aim their weapons.

The fact that violent crime increasingly leads to the deaths of innocent citizens is a major reason for the exodus of Chicago’s black population, down one-third since 1980. It also explains why increasing numbers from the surrounding suburbs—and tourists in general—are shunning the city.

So there’s violent crime aplenty in Chicago. But punishment? Not so much.

The *Chicago Sun-Times* reported that in 2020, police made carjacking arrests in only eleven percent of cases. And Cook County prosecutors working for State’s Attorney Kim Foxx approved felony charges in less than half of that eleven percent.

Chicago reported a 53 percent rate of “clearing” or solving murders in 2019. But that number was inflated. A misleading technical term was applied to nearly six in ten “cleared” murders:

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“cleared, closed exceptionally.” The term “closed exceptionally” means that a murder has been declared solved, but without the filing of criminal charges—usually because prosecutors decide police evidence is insufficient.

Too many Chicagoans are dead due in part to a broken criminal justice system.

Denny Zheng was 24. He’d recently completed a master’s degree in statistics at the University of Chicago. Last November, as he walked near the campus in Hyde Park, he was robbed of his laptop computer and cell phone, then shot dead. The charged suspect was 18 years old and on probation for aggravated carjacking and armed robbery. Before his arrest, he sold the laptop and phone for \$100.

EASY PROBATION HAS BECOME A LICENSE TO KILL. WHY WON’T JUDGES PROPERLY ASSESS RISK, EVEN IN JUVENILE CASES? THE ANSWER IS ALL TOO CLEAR: CRIMINAL JUSTICE HAS MORPHED INTO WHAT ADVOCATES ON THE BENCH AND IN PROSECUTORS’ OFFICES DESCRIBE AS “SOCIAL JUSTICE.” BUT WHERE IS THE JUSTICE FOR THE VICTIMS AND THEIR FAMILIES? THE RUSH TO EMPTY OUT JAILS AND PRISONS IS COSTING LIVES.

Ella French was 29 and a Chicago police officer. She was killed during a traffic stop last August. The charged suspect was on probation for felony robbery.

In July, 73-year-old Keith Cooper, a grandfather and a veteran, died of a heart attack after being punched in the head during an attempted carjacking in Hyde Park. The charged suspect, by then an 18-year-old adult, had been on probation for juvenile carjacking.

In December 2020, retired Chicago firefighter Dwain Williams, 65, was slain during a carjacking attempt by a group of young men. One had five juvenile convictions and four pending cases, including one for an alleged

home invasion and kidnapping.

Another was out on bail before trial for stolen vehicle possession and aggravated unlawful use of a weapon.

In January of this year, eight-year-old Melissa Ortega was shopping with her mother on 26th Street, the main drag of Chicago’s Little Village neighborhood. She was shot and killed in a gang-related shooting gone awry. The charged suspect was a 16-year-old on probation for three armed carjackings within the previous year.

Easy probation has become a license to kill. Why won’t judges properly assess risk, even in juvenile cases? The answer is all too clear: criminal justice has morphed into what advocates on the bench and in prosecutors’ offices describe as “social justice.” But

where is the justice for the victims and their families? The rush to empty out jails and prisons is costing lives.

The movement for bail reform only compounds the problem. Since 2017, under Cook County Chief Judge Timothy Evans’ direction, suspects charged

with felony gun violations and overtly violent felonies are often released on low-cash or no-cash bail.

Evans has repeatedly argued that only a small percentage of released felony suspects have been charged again before trial. But he has not always been trustworthy in his use of data. In 2020, he released a report claiming there was no significant increase in crime after bail reform was enacted in Chicago. Only 147 felony defendants released before trial on low-cash or no-cash bail within the previous year and a quarter, he asserted, had been charged with new felony offenses. But the actual number was at least four times higher than that according to a *Chicago*

Tribune analysis, which it was able to complete only after winning a public records appeal to the Illinois Supreme Court. Evans’ office had failed to count at least six different felony crime categories as felonies.

What can be done to address Chicago’s violent crime epidemic? Here are some ideas for legal reform suggested by the cases cited above:

- Reapportion the county budget to build and operate more courtrooms with more judges for speedier trials.
- Stop releasing people charged with violent felony crimes—including juveniles charged with armed carjacking—on low-cash or no-cash bail.
- Repeal state legislation that will outlaw most cash bail by 2023.
- Repeal the 2016 statute that severely restricts the ability of county prosecutors to charge juveniles with felony armed vehicular hijacking.

go hand-in-hand with stronger political support for the police. Residents of black neighborhoods say they want better police and more of them—and contrary to what too many Chicago politicians seem to believe, improved police accountability isn’t incompatible with supporting police in their efforts to make the streets safer.

One way to improve policing is by returning to regular foot patrols in high-crime districts. In February 2013, under Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Police Chief Garry McCarthy, Chicago launched a foot patrol program called Operation Impact in the city’s 20 highest-crime hot zones. After 14 months, murders in those zones dropped by almost half, shootings by 43 percent, and overall crime by 25 percent. Police said targeted gang and narcotics interventions may also have helped.

But Operation Impact didn’t last. Today such a program might require three or four cops to walk a beat together, with back-up in nearby cars. This in turn would require *more* police funding, not defunding, and real support for the police by Chicago’s mayor and city council.

Chicago politicians, like city politicians elsewhere, too often blame “gun violence” for the city’s murder epidemic, as if guns shoot themselves. Chicago police, to their credit, took more than 12,000 illegal guns off the streets in 2021 alone. But the supply is endless, and now

includes “ghost guns”—guns without serial numbers made from mail-order parts. The vast majority of Chicago residents are law-abiding, and they should be able to defend themselves with legally obtained firearms.

In addition to legal reforms and improved policing, it’s time to stop making

IT’S TIME TO STOP MAKING EXCUSES FOR WHAT ONE BRAVE CHICAGO ALDERMAN, RAY LOPEZ, HAS CALLED “THE BORDERLINE COLLAPSE OF THE FAMILY UNIT IN MANY OF OUR NEIGHBORHOODS” AND THE EFFECTS OF “GENERATIONAL GANG LIFE.” POLITICAL LEADERS NEED TO STOP WALKING ON EGGSHHELLS WHEN IT COMES TO TALKING ABOUT THE BREAKDOWN OF THE NUCLEAR FAMILY IN LOW-INCOME BLACK COMMUNITIES. YOUNG MEN NEED FATHERS—WITHOUT FATHERS THEY FLOUNDER.

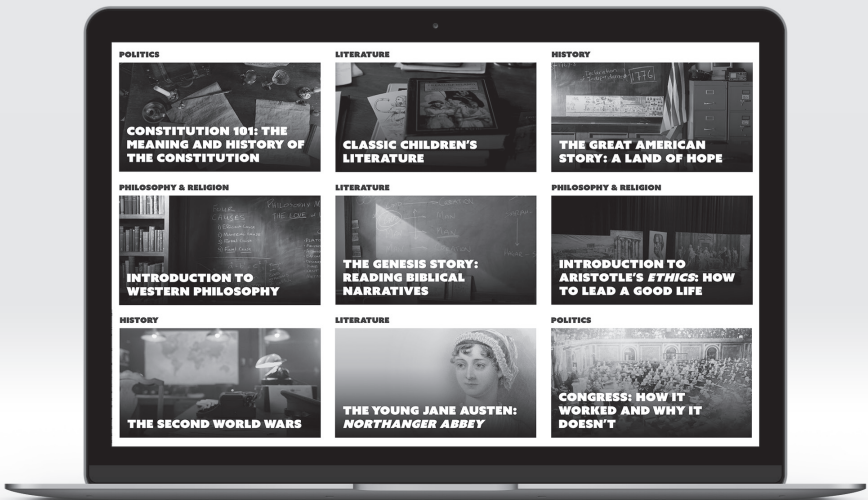
Unfortunately, the last two recommendations would require action by the Illinois Legislature, which has been under one-party (Democratic) rule for decades and has shown no serious interest in stopping crime.

Chicago should also employ smarter policing tactics, which would need to

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excuses for what one brave Chicago alderman, Ray Lopez, has called “the borderline collapse of the family unit in many of our neighborhoods” and the effects of “generational gang life.” Political leaders need to stop walking on eggshells when it comes to talking about the breakdown of the nuclear family in low-income black communities. Young men need fathers—without fathers they flounder.

According to City of Chicago data, in every year from 1999 to 2009, more than 80 percent of all black women who gave birth were single. Among Latinos, that

figure rose from 45 to 55 percent during that period, while for whites and Asians the numbers were dramatically lower.

More broken homes are directly correlated with more violent crime. Annual Chicago Police Department reports show that the neighborhoods with the highest murder rates are the same neighborhoods in which births to single mothers are highest. Among children raised in households headed by two biological parents, regardless of race, studies find greater educational attainment, higher adult income, and lower rates of incarceration.

Failing public schools also contribute to Chicago’s violent crime crisis. Fewer than two out of ten black fourth- and eighth-graders achieve the “proficient” level in reading and math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. High school SAT results are equally dismal.

A bright spot worth mentioning is the achievements being made by public charter schools. A University of Chicago study found that students at public charter high schools had better attendance and test scores than those at non-charter public high schools. More was required of them to advance to the next grade and to graduate. Teachers reported a higher level of trust and collaboration with their colleagues and a greater willingness to innovate. Classes were more academically demanding.

POLITICAL CHANGE IS ESSENTIAL. TWO-THIRDS OF REGISTERED VOTERS FAIL TO VOTE IN LOCAL ELECTIONS. THE MAIN GROUP THAT DOES VOTE CONSISTENTLY IS A GROUP THAT BENEFITS GREATLY FROM THE STATUS QUO: PUBLIC EMPLOYEE UNION MEMBERS. VOTING IS SUPPRESSED BY THE FACT THAT LOCAL ELECTIONS ARE HELD IN ODD YEARS DURING COLD WINTER MONTHS, BUT UNTIL THE MAJORITY OF CITIZENS—WHO ARE BEING SERIOUSLY HARMED BY THE STATUS QUO—SEIZES CONTROL OF THEIR OWN DESTINY, LITTLE WILL CHANGE.

Sadly, however, the Chicago Teachers Union has used its broad powers to strike—powers granted by state lawmakers—to restrict competition, insisting on a charter school growth cap in their last two contracts. When the current cap expires in 2024, it should not be renewed by Chicago’s mayor and school board.

What Chicago ultimately needs are school vouchers, which must be enacted by state legislation—an unlikely prospect—or by a voter-approved constitutional amendment.

Another means of curtailing violence in Chicago is through poverty remediation and neighborhood economic development—which doesn’t simply mean government dispensations.

In Woodlawn, at 63rd and Martin Luther King Jr., is a fast-food dive where men step up to passing cars and collect cash in return for drugs. Walking south on MLK, I passed a woman with a thousand-yard glassy-eyed stare. Other pedestrians were loping around in little circles, looking lost.

Investment in such neighborhoods is a wager, and no one likes long odds. But just down the street on MLK, Pastor Corey Brooks is placing his bet. Brooks heads New Beginnings Church and its non-profit arm, Project

H.O.O.D., which offers parenting classes, remote learning co-ops, online financial education lessons, and a popular construction industry training program. Eighteen black female electricians graduated from a certification course last summer. Brooks is in the midst of raising millions of dollars for a state-of-the-art com-

munity center equipped for career and technical training.

Trade skills are important, but so is meeting workplace expectations. On Halloween in 2020, Brooks’ church organized a Harvest Party for parents and children. I came across Brooks there counseling an agitated young man who was in the Project H.O.O.D. construction training program. The man was upset because his Latino job site supervisor confronted him about being late to work and not filling out timecards. It was a heated

conversation, but Brooks held his ground, telling the young man that to keep a good construction job you've got to be on time and do what the boss says. He also told him he'd better get used to Latinos, because they're skilled in the building trades.

In November 2020, I visited Chicago's Roseland district, southeast of Woodlawn. The same Michigan Avenue that's home to the Magnificent Mile shopping district downtown looks a lot different on the city's South Side. Much of it looks like a war-torn city in Syria.

Dutch settlers in the 1840s referred to Roseland as High Prairie. In the 1850s it became an important stop on the Underground Railroad for slaves escaping to freedom in Canada. As recently as the early 1970s, Michigan Ave. in Roseland was a robust marketplace with distinctive architecture. Subsequently, however, as gang violence increased, the area came to be known as the Wild One Hundreds. During my visit, nearly every building on Michigan Ave. was trashed or empty.

Antoine Dobine lives in neighboring West Pullman. Interviewed by NBC News, he recalled that Roseland was

a beautiful area in the 70s. It was like a family atmosphere. But . . . a lot of families left, and a lot of families moved in and didn't have those same values. . . . We need all these parents who got these gun toters and gangbangers on their couches . . . to say, "Hey, child, get out of my house and put that gun down." . . . I know there's people living in these homes that's sick and tired of things going on like I'm sick and tired, [but they] won't . . . speak up.

Political change in Chicago is essential. Year after year, two-thirds of the

city's registered voters fail to vote in local elections. The main group that does vote consistently is a group that benefits greatly from the status quo: public employee union members. Voting is suppressed by the fact that local elections are held in odd years during cold winter months, but until the majority of citizens—who are being harmed by the status quo—seizes control of their own destiny, little will change.

Change at the family and individual levels is equally essential. Malik Tiger made such a change, and in doing so came to understand the true meaning of self-determination. He grew up in Roseland, and his father served ten years in jail. By age 17, Malik was charged in his first gun case, and a spiraling pattern of crime, gunshot wounds, and jail time followed. Then he decided he had had enough.

"I feel like at the end of the day, change has to come from within. You have to get tired," Malik said. "You have to look at yourself in the mirror and be disgusted with who you are." Through a violence prevention program, he turned things around and landed a job at the Greater Chicago Food Depository.

"I just had a newborn son," Malik said. "I have my own apartment. I'm doing good for myself." Bumping into the judge who sentenced him in 2013 on juvenile gun charges, he received encouragement for the changes he'd made. "The judge looked at me as an individual, as a strong black man who was trying to go forward and trying to do the right thing to take care of his family."

The Left today has badly misappropriated the word "equity," using it to mean equality of outcome—something to be achieved through affirmative action and economic redistribution. But real equity, in the old sense, cannot be given. Real equity requires the old fashioned virtues. It is inextricable from full ownership of your own course in life. ■