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Reducing Violence in the United States: A New Agenda

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Living in Chicago, I am touched by violence almost every day, seeing it in the news and hearing stories from friends and acquaintances. This essay suggests a new policy agenda to reduce violence in the U.S. with hyperlinked text to sources of information and reality examples that can be used on the web as a teaching or policy tool. I can not claim to possess infallible truth but I am a retired economics professor in whose entire life have observed, thought about, and written about crime.   I welcome criticism and suggestions for adding or substituting strategies.

Although violence rates have decreased in major cities for decades, there has been a spike in murders during 2020 so far. Oddly, violence rates are down slightly in many U.S. major cities even though murder rates have increased.   In the recent July 4th weekend in Chicago, there were 80 shootings and 17 killed. To reduce violence in Chicago and in the U.S. requires a drastic reconfiguration of policies that involve the underlying frameworks in which criminal activity takes place. The focus is on ten strategies.

Decriminalize all street drugs
Police could then be redeployed towards community policing and focus on prevention of serious non-consensual crime such as burglary, robbery, aggravated assault, rape, DUI, and murder. Street drug use would still be against the law to sell or use, but would be funneled through the social service and health care systems, much like in Portugal. Strength of enforcement on the supply side could be made contingent on the rate of shootings in neighborhoods using this as leverage to encourage de-escalating street violence.

To make this work with less harm, a demand reduction strategy should also be implemented, not by incarcerating drug users but by improving the lives of the drug users. Strategies to do this should include periodic internet reports on the integrity of ingredients of current street drugs; readily accessible effective drug treatment programs, including drug maintenance and substitution; medically supervised safe injection centers such as Vancouver's InSite program; and affordable supportive housing for drug addicts.

Police Social Work Training
Social work training should be part of the curricula police training. Policing skills need to be a hybrid mix of social problem solving, intelligent enforcing of laws, and learning to use the least force possible when force must be used. Police need to be able to view their world through the eyes of social workers, learning resource referral and interpersonal skills, and be able to collaborate with full time social workers, drug counselors, mental health workers and educators as part of an overall community mobilization safety strategy. Requiring a one-year social work certificate or a two-year social work associate degree would seem a good place to start.

Resident neighborhood patrols that could observe crime and the police
Trust and cooperation between police and communities will occur more readily when community members are active in peace-keeping functions and making sure there are observational checks on all who perform a police function such as municipal police, private guards, and citizen watch programs. It is my

view that each effort at citizen patrol needs to be customized to the context of each neighborhood. Good case studies and evaluation research would help inform which efforts are likely to be the most effective at reducing person-to-person violence, cop-to-person violence, and person-to cop-violence.

Firearms awareness in middle school and high school
This training would include realistically showing what medically happens when someone is shot and teaching the laws regarding firearms. In these courses, students should be made aware of the "cradle to prison" trajectory, how to avoid it, the consequences of having a criminal record, and learning about due process rights as in the 4th 5th 6th and 14th Amendments of the U.S. Constitution, as well as various interpretations of the 2nd Amendment. While I support a ban on sales of assault weapons, many in the U.S. general population will still own hand guns and long guns as weapons for personal protection and tools of sport (about 40% of households). If people are to possess deadly weapons, they need to know the consequences of firing one. Similar to automobile driving, licenses with background checks and a written test should be required for all who seek firearms ownership, including passing a firearms use test and demonstrating knowledge and resources for storing guns.

Peaceful, non-violent, conflict resolution training
While effort needs to be applied to reduce the direct harm from gun usage, instructional energies need to also be placed on the importance of peaceful, non-violent, dispute resolution. This can be accomplished with a mandatory curriculum starting in elementary school and include ideas of the great thinkers of peace and protest including such people as: Martin Luther King Jr., James Lawson, Cesar Chavez, Saul Alinsky, M. K. Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Thich Nhat Hanh, Thomas Merton, and the Dalai Lama. Along with this, reading, exercises, and experiences should be provided on emotional awareness, managing anger, communication styles, examining assumptions in critical thinking, mediation, arbitration, negotiation, conflict management, restorative justice practices, and community organizing.

No person under 24 does nothing
For youth who do not go immediately on to post-secondary education or training nor have a full time job, programs should be created that have as their objective: providing meaningful and useful activities until age 24, most criminogenic age range. This compensatory boost would include: tuition-free undergraduate college with strong tutoring/mentoring relationships; allowing people with criminal records to enter the military; paid apprenticeship programs; entrepreneurship training programs including having a relevant mentor; paid community service within the U.S.; junior peace corps programs targeted to Africa, Latin America, and South Asia; and getting youth jobs in places outside of one's neighborhood where the environment may be more education and career oriented, using high school graduation and college attendance rates as indicators to identify these places.

Gang transformation
Encourage gangs to transform from criminal organizations to social clubs such as fraternities, motorcycle clubs, sport clubs, and political associations. We have historical examples of this, and these should be examined for replication. Examples in Chicago include: the Hamburg Athletic Club, the Young Lords, and the Conservative Vice Lords. A short video about the historical Conservative Vice Lords is here. In the non-profit sector, there needs to be an agency for Gang Management and Negotiation which is part think tank and part diplomatic center. Police gang enforcement units have not been too successful. The new mission would be to directly work with gangs or people likely to join gangs, facilitate gang summits,

organize a system of inter-gang juris prudence to reduce acts of [revenge, retribution, and retaliation](#) , create [economic alternatives](#), and [consider the best structure](#) and optimal degree of organization of gangs. The goal would be to create win-win situations for gangs and neighborhoods, and to [internalize the cost of violence to gangs](#), thereby creating incentives to deescalate the violence.

Encourage those who work outside to observe and dampen crime
Increase the number of businesses that operate outside on the street, such as newsstands, convenience kiosks, produce peddlers, and street vendors, to generate [crime-reducing and fear-reducing pedestrian activity](#). This could also be a source of [job creation for at-risk youth](#) and ex-prisoners. I studied the [old Maxwell Street Market](#) in Chicago for many years. This public street market, and many like it, function as a business incubator, source of jobs, economic safety net, social capital creator, and safe meeting place for people across different ethnicities, classes, and gang affiliations. [Markets like this should be created](#) in all neighborhoods but first priority should be to generate them in lower income urban neighborhoods. Existing neighborhood business can be included through partnership arrangements with low income people who want to start a business in the local street market.

Supportive urban development and real estate development
These are policies that reduce (not increase) class and race segregation and that [maintain (not destroy) longstanding neighborhoods](#) and their [mutual aid and social surveillance connections](#). There is little understanding in most city halls of the increase in crime caused by [real estate development and neighborhood turnover](#). Mayors seem to salivate at every opportunity for pushing low income people out of neighborhoods where the real estate tax base can be increased by [gentrification](#) of higher income people who demand fewer social services. Longstanding neighborhoods with longstanding residents are, in general, safer because of the greater concern about safety and knowledge of how to maintain that safety. Longtime residents know better who belongs and who doesn't and have an incentive to protect each other. Communities where residents feel a sense of connection to and responsibility for one another (sometimes called [collective efficacy and social cohesion](#)) are safer communities. Low income communities with old housing stock may need [improvements](#) but [not population replacement](#) nor destruction, which has a secondary effect of pushing outsider-gangs into existing other-gang territory that results in violence escalation.

Supportive economic policy to create high employment, high wage rates, and reduce inequality
Increases in government spending not only stimulate overall economic activity but provide the resources to carry out many of the new policies suggested above. However, reducing violence will likely involve more than just macroeconomic stimulation because a large part of the economic stress in low income neighborhoods is in the realm of [structural unemployment](#), a mismatch between the people who live in these [neighborhoods and skill requirements](#) of available good jobs in that location. Providing training for jobs that exist or will exist is important to do. But even with tax breaks and subsidies, for profit businesses will be [very reluctant to move into or even remain in neighborhoods](#) with [widespread violence](#). However, [non-profit organizations](#) may have a role to play here. A [federal basic minimum income](#) may be needed at least until the job destroying local violence is overcome. Secure public and private transportation routes between high violence neighborhoods and areas where good jobs are would to be a good place to start to bring employment to residents of violent neighborhoods. In the longer term, neighborhood resident patrols, can also take on the added function, with assistance from government and foundations, of becoming neighborhood chambers of commerce. These chambers can act not only to try

to lure new businesses to the community but also to help [protect the businesses](#) and their employees from harm using their liaison power from having lines of communications to all elements of the community, above-ground and underground.

Making urban neighborhoods safer will require widespread contributions of effort and creative policy thinking to get better results different from the past.

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