

What Ails the City?

By AZIZ HUQ

Review of *GHETTOSIDE: A True Story of Murder in American*, by Jill Leovy
and *RENEGADE DREAMS: Living Through Injury in Gangland Chicago*, by Laurence
Ralph

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The violent urban crisis is a hardy perennial from America's last century. Riots sparked in Baltimore and Ferguson, Missouri, by the deaths of Freddie Grey and Michael Brown find precedent of a sort as early as 1919. In the late summer of that year, more than twenty-five cities across the United States, from Elaine, Arkansas to Chicago, Illinois, to Omaha, Nebraska, witnessed mob violence, lynchings, and arsons. The origins of these riots were surprisingly varied. In Elaine, black workers protested peonage-style employment relations in the cotton fields. In Chicago, a young black boy crossed an invisible line on a south-side beach—thus violating the city's unwritten racial protocols. In Omaha, news reports that a 19-year-old white girl had been raped proved the spark to the tinder of long-simmering labor unrest between white and black stockyard workers.

As today, it was largely African-Americans who bore the brunt of the damage in 1919. In Chicago, the poet Carl Sandburg reported, 23 of the 38 people who died were African-Americans. Most of the hundreds left homeless on the city's south side due to arson were also African-American. Yet unlike today, the violence of 1919 was not a self-inflicted wound from within the black community. Rather, it was white civic leaders and organizations that often organized the violence; it was white mobs that torched tenements of migrants newly arrived from the south; and it was whites who strung up the accused rapist Will Brown from a telegraph pole at the corner of Eighteenth and Harney in Omaha.

Of course, from the perspective of today's rioters, the difference is one of degree and not of kind: Rather than the 'old Jim Crow' of the lynch mob, they would point to, and condemn, the 'new Jim Crow' of police treatment of black men. Although national statistics on deaths resulting from police shootings or custodial action are startlingly exiguous, even the limited data collected by the federal Department of Justice might raise an eyebrow among those disinclined to endorse the Jim Crow analogy. The Bureau of Justice, for example, [reports](#) that 51.5 percent of arrest-related deaths in the United States between 2003 and 2009 involved African-Americans or Hispanics (who [make up](#) roughly 30 percent of the population).

No single cause explains the persistence of violent urban crisis, or the real shifts in the vectors and locus of urban violence across the American century. Perhaps the most important discontinuity is the absence of white residents in communities such as Ferguson and Mondawmin in Baltimore. Even by 1950—that is, before *Brown v. Board of Education* and its long-fused desegregation command—a quarter of Americans had

decamped from the city for the suburbs. By 1990, this migration was a solid majority. Suburbanization operated differently across racial lines. By [1980](#), 72 percent of blacks in metropolitan areas lived in central cities, as opposed to 33 percent of metropolitan whites. The same federal government that in November 1953 filed an amicus curiae brief in support of the NAACP in *Brown* subsidized this demographic transformation via the construction of the interstate highway system and the promulgation of racially discriminatory appraisal standards deployed by the Housing Ownership Loan Corporation.

This underlying demographic shift had a number of consequences: Political power at the state and federal level now tilts toward suburban concerns. A well-documented escalation of public punitiveness at both state and federal levels since the 1970s plausibly rests in part on this shift in the locus of effectual political power. (To be sure, this was also a period of sharply rising crime, but the thesis that public concern about crime merely reflected rises in the crime rate has been [falsified](#) by sociologist Katherine Beckett's empirical work). In contrast, those services that depend on localized funding streams—everything from education to policing—are distributed in increasingly uneven fashion between city and suburb. And as central city infrastructure has been further corroded by deindustrialization, the gap between core and periphery dilated. The result, as President Obama noted in one of his fitful bursts of eloquence, is a dearth of economic opportunity, an absence of ladders—let alone escalators—to higher, more stable socioeconomic sites.

The gap in educational and support services in central cities is a matter of longstanding public record. It needs no further comment here. But the cliché that predominantly black central cities are policed more intensely than suburban counterparts is not quite true. Even though the federal government has expended massive fiscal subsidies on local policing since the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, there are still striking fiscal disparities between local jurisdictions. As one recent econometric [analysis](#) found, the whitest cities comprising 5 percent of the population had ten times as many police per index crime as the least white cities comprising the 5 percent of the population. Further, within cities, the distribution of policing resources can exacerbate that inequality. In [Chicago](#), requests for police assistance are roughly negatively correlated across precincts with the number of police: Predominantly minority neighborhoods, that is, have the highest demand for police services, the lowest number of police per capita, and the longest wait times in relation to 911 calls.

Somewhat paradoxically, the substitute for an effective infrastructure of educational and economic opportunity—as well as robust protection of public order—is not the absence of a state presence, but a style of policing that aggressively penalizes the symptoms of urban decay without producing much by way of felt security among African-American residents. A familiar finding in urban sociologies from Elijah Anderson and Philippe Bourgois onward is that young African-American men cannot and do not turn to the police when victimized. Exclusion from equal protection of the laws rather breeds alternative systems of dispute resolution involving private violence. In this fashion, exclusion breeds violence, which in turn justifies the styles of policing that bred exclusion in the first instance.

The complex interaction of social and political forces that produces the violent urban crisis, in short, cannot be reduced to a single causal factor. Jill Leovy's reportage from the homicide unit of the South Central precinct in Los Angeles in *Ghettoside* is intended both to be a gripping story and a counterintuitive morality tale. On her telling, if only police would take the murders of young black men seriously—or as seriously as her seraphic main character, a homicide detective called John Skaggs—then the tide of violence would turn.

As a journalist for the *Los Angeles Times*, Leovy is concerned primarily with capturing the echt detail of Skaggs's investigation into one particular murder. She's good at that, and the central investigation of the book is gripping (although its propulsive force weirdly peters out early, leaving the last part of the book to limp to the finish line). Perhaps Leovy's most important contribution, as a result, is her insights into the distinctive methods of urban policing, ranging from the strategies that police employ to negate the effect of *Miranda* warnings to the way in which hearsay evidence can be not just useful, but necessary, in many serious crime prosecutions. (And as an added bonus to the legally inclined, a crucial turning point in her narrative exploits a kind of search that is currently before the Supreme Court this year in *City of Los Angeles v. Patel*). Leovy's work nicely illustrates the barriers faced by police during serious crime investigations in communities characterized by pervasive mistrust of police, an unwillingness to 'snitch' on peers, and a thick social network of gangs ready to mete out alternative forms of justice. Her account provides a powerful argument against scholars (including [me](#)) who have claimed that trust and confidence in the police are built by manifest respect for constitutional rights.

Echoing the legal scholar Randall Kennedy, Leovy comes firmly down on the side of more policing as the solution to the urban crisis. Although Leovy's ample solicitude for the young black men who are the victims in her story, and the compassionate thumbnail sketches of their families, are commendable, the narrowness of her remedy is implausible. Leovy's tantalizingly brief sketches of the demographic origins of South Central and the famously complex bureaucratic politics of the Los Angeles Police Department give short shrift to causes that cannot be personified in graspable narrative form. By focusing so closely on policing, Leovy trims from view the myriad of other factors that shape patterns of urban violence. In President Obama's words, "if we think that we're just going to send the police to do the dirty work of containing the problems that arise [in urban communities] without as a nation and as a society saying what can we do to change those communities," then the widest blue tide imaginable won't elicit change we can believe in, let alone change that will endure.

The Harvard anthropologist Laurence Ralph, in contrast, to Leovy, is concerned with endogenous, almost autochthonic responses to urban violence. So far as I can tell he is skeptical of external responses such as additional policing or intermeddling do-gooders. In a series of vignettes that never quite congeal into a firm theoretical arc, Ralph conjures up the perspective of both gang members and mere bystanders who have been injured, whether visibly or not, by urban crime. At best, this yields nicely penned character sketches of stock figures that reveal contradictions and complexity. Hence, there is Tosh, the aspiring gangster-turned rap producer-turned stash-house-manager, who ultimately finds his voice as a poet, as candid and plain spoken as Philip Levine, when his stash house is busted and he is jailed. There is Kemo, the muscled gang leader who facilitates

outreach to gang-members by anti-violence advocacy groups. And there is Tamara, the respectable petty bourgeois shop owner in her 40s who wants to open a museum to celebrate the history of local gangs. Sapping readers' expectations and flipping the perspective offered by authors such as Leovy, Ralph offers a rare glimpse of the complex, contradictory aspirations of those who reside in neighborhoods of concentrated deprivation. (Along the way, he has a rather terrific riff on the social meaning of different kinds of gym shoes, ranging from the mundane Timberland to the aetherial Air Jordans). The result is a rich ethnographic account, from the inside out, of lives under social, economic, legal, and often physical constraint.

President Obama has picked up the theme of empathy. Speaking after the Baltimore riots again, he urged Americans to "consider those kids [in Baltimore] our kids," and to believe that "they're important." At the same time, he acknowledged that the politics were "tough," with Congress unlikely to do anything useful soon. It's hard, I think, to be even as optimistic as Obama, or to hope that popular pressure can generate imminent structural change.

Introducing Sandburg's book on the 1919 Chicago riots, the journalist Walter Lippmann spied the invisible hand of "our planless, disorganized, bedraggled democracy" at work behind the smoldering ruins of south Chicago. Lippmann, I think, was quite right. In the later part of the twentieth century, apologists for the Supreme Court as led by Earl Warren turned Lippmann's point on its head, arguing that the Justices could step in to correct democratic blockages and deficiencies as a way to remedy racial discrimination. As a result of the appointments to the Court made by presidents elected partly in opposition to the Court's liberal agenda, however, the resulting jurisprudence has not weathered well. The antisubordination ambitions of the Warren Court no longer serve as a lodestar for either Equal Protection or constitutional criminal procedural law. Even in the courtroom, the democratic pressures on judicial appointments mean that "bedraggled democracy" has had its constitutional way.

There is, in short, no little irony in an appeal to democracy to resolve a pathological situation that is the fruit of almost one hundred years' of effectual democratic action. The emergent movement against mass incarceration would beg to differ, but [I have elsewhere argued that](#) they are likely to fail. To urge our democracy to address Mondawmin and Ferguson, is to press for a rather profound change in the economy of public empathy—not an impossible one, to be sure, but one that presses against the headwinds of one hundred-plus years of democratic policy choice at both national and local levels. To this cause, contributions such as Leovy's and Ralph's can easily be conscripted, even if the arc of that cause's success remains long and its terminus far out of sight.

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