

17,000 violent deaths in Detroit—the social meaning of a horrifying statistic

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One incident that occurred during the October 26 Democratic presidential debate in Detroit starkly illuminated the grim social reality of America in 2003. It came in the course of remarks by Dennis Kucinich, the congressman from Cleveland, Ohio.

Kucinich had met with a group of Detroit mothers of young homicide victims, and in one of his first comments during the debate he pointed to the number of violent deaths in the city as an indication of the wider social crisis in America. He misspoke, however, saying that Detroit had seen 300 violent deaths in the month of September, when the actual number was 35—300 being the total projected for the entire year.

This error led to the following exchange between Kucinich, Huel Perkins, an anchorman for WJBK television, the local Fox television station, and moderator Gwen Ifill of the Public Broadcasting System. (The quotes are from the verbatim transcript).

Perkins: If I may, before we move on from Congressman Kucinich, you said something earlier in this debate that I think is important that we correct for you to know and for the nation to know. You mentioned that there were...

(Applause)

... 300 people dead in the streets of Detroit in September. That is absolutely untrue.

(Applause)

There has actually been, actually been...

Kucinich: I'm sorry, I didn't hear you.

Perkins: You said that there were 300 people dead in the streets of Detroit in September...

Kucinich: No, it's 35. I misspoke.

Perkins: Yes, please. Let's consider, there's actually been a 30 percent reduction in the homicide rate in Detroit. I think you need to be clear on that.

(Applause)

Kucinich: The numbers were 17,000, I think, since 1972 and 35 in September. And I appreciate...

Ifill: I'm glad we cleared that up.

Kucinich: ... the chance to correct the record. Thank you. Thank you.

(Applause)

Perkins intervened out of concern that something had been said that would spoil the image of a thriving and resurgent Detroit, concocted by the local Chamber of Commerce and the local Democratic Party political establishment, headed by Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick. The national television audience would get the wrong impression, he feared, a picture of carnage in the streets of Detroit, when the death toll was “only” 35 in September.

The audience revealed that it shared the same concerns, repeatedly interrupting with applause for Perkins' criticism and Kucinich's quick self-correction. They, too, regard the murder rate in Detroit primarily from the standpoint of unfavorable public relations, not as an alarming symptom of a deeply sick society.

As an article published on October 21 in the *Detroit Free Press* revealed, the audience had been carefully vetted. “To get one of the 3,000 tickets, you had to be on a list supplied by politicians, civic leaders, educators and organizations to debate organizers,” the newspaper reported, citing a partner at the public relations firm of Berg Muirhead & Associates, a company with strong Democratic Party connections that helped plan the event.

The purported reason for this selection process was security: a debate last month sponsored by the Congressional Black Caucus in Baltimore was interrupted repeatedly by supporters of ultra-right candidate Lyndon LaRouche. But the result was an

audience that, like the well-heeled television anchorman, was largely comprised of the comfortable black middle class, who live quite apart from the black working people, youth and unemployed who make up the bulk of the population in a city with one of the highest poverty rates in the country.

Consider the significance of the larger figure noted by Kucinich, quite accurately, and passed over in silence by Perkins and everyone else who participated in the debate, both candidates and press commentators. The city of Detroit has seen 17,000 violent deaths over the past three decades, with working class youth representing a disproportionate number of the victims. What is the meaning of this staggering statistic?

The violent death rate in Detroit over this period—17,000 killed out of a population of one million—is greater than that of Lebanon during its civil war, when 44,000 died out of a population of nearly four million. The rate is higher than in the 20-year civil war in Sri Lanka, in which an estimated 64,000 have died out of a population of 19 million. The death toll in Detroit is five times the number killed in Northern Ireland during the same period of time—3,300 people out of a population half again as large as Detroit's.

While Perkins hails the current year's projected murder toll of 300 as a "30 percent reduction in the homicide rate," this total is larger than the number killed in all but one year of "the troubles" in Northern Ireland. And similar figures could be produced for other large American cities—New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Philadelphia.

This carnage is not merely the byproduct of the prevalence and easy availability of handguns and other firearms in the United States, although that is certainly a contributing factor. Violent deaths in American cities are on the scale of those caused elsewhere by civil war because America is wracked by acute social tensions. In other circumstances, such tensions find expression in organized civil combat, but in the peculiar conditions of the United States, the outcome is primarily individualized mayhem.

The United States is the most socially polarized of the major industrialized countries, with the widest economic gap between the elite at the top—billionaires, millionaires and the most privileged layers of the upper middle class—and the vast majority of middle class and working class people, struggling to survive from

paycheck to paycheck.

The existing political system, with two parties controlled and manipulated by the wealthy, affords no avenue for the expression of the needs and interests of the oppressed majority. The social institutions active in a city like Detroit—trade unions, civil rights organizations, churches—function as instruments of social control on behalf of the ruling elite, not as outlets for self-assertion from below.

The lack of any genuine political alternative for the masses is not simply an absence, a nullity. It has real and tremendously pernicious consequences. Social tensions in America erupt in the form of individual violence and brutalization that, from a class standpoint, are completely self-destructive.

Reformists and other apologists for the capitalist system invariably cite as one of their principal objections to socialism the prospect that a revolutionary overturn of the existing order would be accompanied by violence. They are silent, however, on the massive toll of human lives violently destroyed by the profit system itself, in the course of its everyday workings.



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