

Buffalo, New York: Law-and-order crackdown masks social decay

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The first six months of 2006 have seen a significant increase in violent deaths in Buffalo, a city of 280,000 in western New York state.

The number of homicides thus far this year stands at 41, up from 32 at the same time last year, 30 in 2004, and 28 in 2003. In nearby Rochester, eight murders were recorded in eight days.

Many of the Buffalo victims are youth aged 12 to 15 who were caught up in drug turf wars and gangs, while others are bystanders caught in their crossfire. This accounts for 70 percent of the homicides, according local police.

The figures in this area in western New York state are in line with similar trends nationwide. Violent crime in the US is up 2.5 percent for 2004-05, according to a recent FBI report, and the murder rate has risen in a number of major cities, including Washington, DC, Detroit and Houston.

US prisons now hold about 2 million individuals, and the legal system ensnares millions more, surpassing by far all other industrialized nations. Buffalo Mayor Byron W. Brown and local citizens groups advocate more of the same law-and-order policies that have already led to a vast growth in the prison population.

City authorities launched “Operation Shock and Awe”—borrowing the name given to the 2003 bombing campaign against Iraq. During a three-day period in April, Buffalo police launched 38 no-knock raids by heavily armed SWAT teams on alleged drug houses, netting 78 arrests. Many of the charges were later dismissed. While police proclaimed the operation a victory in the drug war, they netted just five guns and only a few ounces of drugs, after invading 40 dwellings in sometimes brutal fashion.

Appealing to fear of violent crime among sections of the population, Mayor Brown has announced a “zero-

tolerance” policy. This includes “clean sweep” operations, in which US marshals, county and local police agencies, and utility company personnel descend on neighborhoods looking for building code violations, immigration violations and virtually any other form of illegal activity.

The safety inspectors facilitate warrantless searches by the police. The number of such “clean sweep” operations will double to 15 by the end of 2006.

The neighboring city of Rochester has initiated a similar program, called “Operation Impact,” combining local police and state troopers. Rochester Mayor Bob Duffy declared recently, “I’ll never shy away from calling the National Guard if we need them.”

The principal target of these raids are alleged gang members. The alienation of these youth from society is exemplified by one group’s graffiti tag: FEB (F*** Everybody). Among the crimes attributed to gang members is the murder of a youth who was shot nine times.

What has generated such alienation from society and apparent indifference to life? For an answer, one must examine the economic and social decay that has taken place in the region.

Western New York has felt the full social impact of the “rust belt” decay of the last three decades, with tens of thousands of jobs lost in the steel, rubber, textile and auto industries. These jobs have been only partially replaced with low-paying service sector jobs and the proliferation of telemarketing and collection agency call centers. Temporary labor agencies flourish.

The loss of employment has led to a withering of the city. A state comptroller’s 2003 review showed that Buffalo lost 35,000 people from 1990 to 2000, the biggest population decrease for any city in the state.

The report also noted that 20 percent of

manufacturing jobs were lost in the same period. It has been estimated that the value of the property stock in the area has been reduced from \$8 billion to \$5 billion in recent years.

Thousands of homes have been left to decay as rental units are in surplus. The area's low wage level and the nationally frozen minimum wage mean that many cannot afford even a modest rent, unless subsidized. Rising fees, taxes and a doubling of the water rate cause many owners to abandon their properties. With corporate taxes reduced, local governments are confronting a deepening fiscal crisis.

Buffalo has a financial control board that has frozen city workers' wages for three years. This board recently denied raises for food service workers. The city work force has been reduced from 3,620 to 2,534 employees.

A financial control board also governs Erie County, of which Buffalo is a part. In 2004, the county government literally shut down. Offices closed and social service workers' pay was delayed, as well social service checks.

With both the city and county in constant budget deficit, Moody's, the rating firm, has threatened to downgrade their bond ratings, resulting in higher borrowing costs. Bankers are demanding more union concessions and the dismantling of social service programs. The public library system was scheduled for shutdown. Currently, out of 52 library branches in the county, 20 are slated for closure.

This fiscal crisis of local governments, both here and across the US, is a direct result of the massive shift of wealth to the top 1 percent through tax breaks for the rich and the decimation of wages and benefits for hundreds of thousands of workers.

The younger generation of workers is being relegated to the status of second-tier employees. The recent Delphi buy-out program, which affects several thousand workers in the Buffalo area, demonstrates this. New-hires will receive only \$14 per hour—only half what current workers make—and pay more for medical coverage.

The city police and inspection raids are routinely referred to by officials and the media alike as a “quality of life” initiative. In reality, the destruction of jobs, the slashing of health care and social services, the elimination of art and music programs from elementary

schools, the shutdown of recreation centers and the starving of arts organizations have all resulted in the wholesale destruction of the “quality of life” for Buffalo's working class and poor population. The rise in violent crime is merely a symptom of this overall social decay.



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