

# Chicago records over 500 homicides in 2012

Shane Feratu, Alexander Fangmann  
22 January 2013

Chicago finished 2012 having recorded a grisly milestone—506 homicides for the year. This appalling total represented a spike of 17 percent over the previous year, even as overall crime declined by 8.5 percent. While the roots of this violence lie in the protracted decline of the American economy and cultural life, especially its industrial base, the Democratic Party has attempted to divert attention away from this by placing the blame on the availability of guns and on a lack of police. In other words, nothing in the way of alleviating the grinding poverty in which violence thrives, and instead more “law and order.”

With 506 murders, 2012 was the first year the city registered over 500 such deaths since 2008, when there were 513. The city’s homicide rate in general has been on a decline since its high point in 1974, when there were 970. High murder rates held steady until 1992, after which the number of homicides began dropping. From 2004 on, every year except 2008 and 2012 saw fewer than 500 homicides. By comparison, New York City had around 420 homicides in 2012, with a total population over three times that of Chicago.

According to data compiled by the site DNAinfo.com, the Chicago victims were overwhelmingly made up of youth, with 74.5 percent from ages 13 to 34. Just under 10 percent were 13 to 17 years old, and 35.8 percent were 18-24 years old. The vast majority were killed within a half mile of their homes.

Upon the death of Nathaniel Jackson, the 500th victim, Chicago Democratic Party mayor Rahm Emanuel issued a statement saying: “Chicago has reached an unfortunate and tragic milestone which not only marks a needless loss of life but serves as a reminder of the damage that illegal guns and conflicts between gangs cause our neighborhoods.” Police superintendent Gerry McCarthy, an Emanuel appointee, issued a separate statement to the same effect.

The sharp rise in homicides, especially in the earlier part of the year, has been attributed to factional warfare between gang members. According to the Chicago Police Department, one in four of all of those killed were members of a single gang—the Gangster Disciples—which is split into as many as 250 competing factions. According to CPD much of the violence has been the result of the incarceration of high-ranking gang leaders and the subsequent increase in influence of lower-level members based in small geographic areas.

While it is true that a good deal of the mayhem on Chicago’s streets is a result of gang members shooting each other and bystanders, the question remains as to why gang violence has increased and, indeed, why it seems to have such deep roots in the city.

It must be pointed out that the areas of the city in which most of the violence has occurred, the South and West sides, have for years suffered from a hollowing-out of their industrial and manufacturing base. Since the late 1960s, factory after factory has been closed in these parts of the city, including such icons of American industry as the Union Stockyards and U.S. Steel’s South Works. With these shutdowns and others have disappeared tens of thousands of relatively well-paying working class jobs that have never been replaced, leaving entire neighborhoods impoverished. Several generations of youth have grown up in these neighborhoods with few prospects, presenting an easy target for gang recruitment.

The Social IMPACT Research Center’s 2011 analysis of US Census data revealed one in four people in Chicago are living in poverty, defined as \$23,000 annually for a family of four. Thirty-five percent of those living in poverty are children, with 60 percent of black children living in poverty. Extreme poverty affects more than one in ten people (11.2 percent), and 17.8 percent (108,216) of Chicago children.

The official unemployment rate in Chicago for November was 9.7 percent, having increased from 5.8 percent in April 2008 as a result of the ongoing economic crisis. Specific neighborhoods, however, especially those with high rates of gang violence, have markedly higher unemployment rates. Englewood, the neighborhood with the highest murder rate, has an unemployment rate over 30 percent.

At the same time that youth face these conditions, they are exposed on a daily basis to the violence perpetrated by the police on the local community and to the murder and destruction rained down by American imperialism abroad, depicted in a glorified fashion in film and television. The violence on the streets of Chicago is a direct reflection of the violence and repression that the US government perpetrates in the Middle East, Asia and Africa. The Obama administration's use of drone strikes and assassinations without trial cannot but make an impact on the consciousness of a vulnerable layer of youth who see no way out of their declining situation aside from violence.

The increased homicide rate and the increased number of mass killings in the United States, such as the recent massacres in Connecticut and Colorado, are the expression of mounting social tensions within the United States and internationally. These tragedies cannot be taken out of the context of the larger political and economic system in which they occur.

The ease with which youth from impoverished neighborhoods are drawn into violent street gangs is also a result of the disappearance of any official social opposition to the attacks on the working class. The almost complete collapse of the trade unions and other organizations which once served to give working class youth some perspective for social improvement has led to a demoralized and individualistic "man against the world" attitude which finds resonance in the bunker mentality of the gangs.

The violence in Chicago is an indictment of the Democratic Party, which has dominated the city for almost 100 years. Democratic mayors presided over Chicago's deindustrialization, and since the 1990s with Richard M. Daley and now Rahm Emanuel, they have worked diligently to dismantle the city's public services and social welfare system. The city's population, which reached a high point in 1950 at 3.6

million, has since dropped to just under 2.7 million in 2010. Nearly 200,000 people left the city from 2000 to 2010 alone.

Former mayor Daley, a close friend of property developers, presided over the widespread dismantling and demolition of public housing in Chicago, as well as the gentrification of large parts of the city. This has had the effect of exacerbating certain tensions between gang factions by concentrating cheaper housing in the remaining areas, leading to more possibility for the factions to come in contact with each other.

It must also be pointed out that Democratic Party politicians actively utilize violent gangs for their political tasks. According to an investigative report published in *Chicago Magazine*, the use of gangs for this purpose has increased as the number of city workers, known as the patronage army, has declined due to layoffs and downsizing. In gangs, aldermen and ward politicians as well as corrupt police officers find elements that are eager to do business, rounding up supporters or intimidating voters.

Since the mass shooting in Newtown, Connecticut a month ago, Rahm Emanuel has been on the offensive, using that tragedy to argue for more restrictive gun laws in an attempt to divert attention away from the austerity policies that have been the hallmark of his administration. He has also proposed hiring 500 more police officers. Neither change will reduce the number of homicides in the city. Rather, they anticipate the outbreak of social conflicts that the ruling class knows will be the outcome of their policy of social counterrevolution.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**