

The social crisis behind the rise in Chicago street violence

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The summer months in Chicago saw dramatic spikes in street violence, which claimed the lives of many young people. Over the July 4th holiday weekend alone 16 people were killed and another 82 wounded in shootings. All but two of the dead and wounded were between the ages of 14 and 35, with the violence centered in the city's poorest neighborhoods on the south and west sides.

The shootings were part of the city's long epidemic of youth violence. From 2008 to 2012, more than 1,100 of Chicago's 2,389 homicide victims were under the age of 25.

While the local and national media gave widespread coverage to the violent outbreaks, nowhere could one find a serious explanation of the social causes of this tragedy. Instead, various politicians, preachers and others have decried "senseless violence" while calling for the dispatch of the National Guard and an even greater crackdown by the police.

Any genuine examination of the violence would be a damning indictment of the capitalist system and the Chicago Democratic Party establishment in particular. This big business party, which has spawned the likes of Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Barack Obama, has overseen the dismantling of basic social protections while channeling ever more wealth into the hands of the corporate and financial elite.

Having long ago rejected any government-funded measures to alleviate chronic unemployment, poverty and deteriorating neighborhoods and schools, the only proposals emanating from either the Democrats or Republicans is for a militarized police response, à la Ferguson, Missouri.

The hopelessness that violence and gang activity ultimately reflect can only be understood in relationship to the enormous decline of the living standards of the

working class in Chicago over the last three decades. Formerly a city defined by industry and trade, the nation's third largest city has seen a sharp reduction in the number of stable, median wage blue-collar jobs and a social breakdown in many of its poorest neighborhoods.

After Deindustrialization, a study by Marc Doussard, Jamie Peck, and Nik Theodore of Northwestern University, describes the long-term transformation of the region's economy away from industrial jobs, which once provided so-called middle class living standards, to service jobs, which, in the main, pay far less.

In 1979 there were nearly 1 million manufacturing jobs in the region. By 1986, 37 percent of those jobs were eliminated, as major steel, consumer goods, and food manufacturing facilities shut down. Since then, even when the economy improved, there was no overall growth in manufacturing employment. Instead, with the collaboration of the trade unions, industry squeezed higher productivity out of the remaining workforce, while replacing many regular positions with low-wage, temporary workers.

What growth has occurred in the job market over the last decades has been polarized, the report notes: "[T]he net consequences of economic restructuring in the 1980s were unmistakable: growth sectors were primarily associated with white-collar occupations, while losses were heavily concentrated in the blue-collar workforce, with the result that 'new' jobs were paying 40 percent to 50 percent less per hour than those the economy was shedding."

Chicago's much touted economic growth in advanced corporate services, finance, real estate and tourism has resulted in a select amount of high-wage work, but this is the minority of job growth over the past several decades.

The study notes that “the employment rate of less well-educated African-American men, in particular, has fallen precipitously in central cities—and more sharply in Chicago than almost anywhere else in the country—in the period since the 1980s, ... as an entire demographic group has been ‘left behind’ by a restructuring labor market.”

US Steel’s South Works provides an example of how devastating the loss of a major employer can be to a region. The massive integrated steel mill on the shore of Lake Michigan employed nearly 20,000 employees at its peak, but it was hit by mass layoffs in the 1970s and 1980s as the American steel industry restructured. In 1992, the plant closed entirely. The huge area it occupied is still empty over 20 years later. The adjacent southeast neighborhoods of the city are among those that have suffered from blight, high poverty, and rising violence.

The destruction of manufacturing jobs has coincided with intense austerity and cuts to education and other basic social services by subsequent Democratic city administrations—from Jane Byrne and Harold Washington in the 1980s and Richard M. Daley (1989-2011) to Rahm Emanuel today. These measures have produced dire conditions for young people in particular.

A 2013 report from the Chicago Urban League found that the teen *employment* rate in Illinois dropped from just less than 50 percent in 2000 to 28 percent in 2012—the 22 percent fall is among the 10 highest in the country. Another Chicago Urban League study earlier this year found the *unemployment* rate of black male teenagers ages 16-19 in Chicago stands at a staggering 92 percent, compared to 83 percent of black males 16-19 unemployed nationally.

The new school year highlights the lack of two crucial necessities for youth: food and transit. Chicago Public Schools has such a high proportion of low-income students—nearly 90 percent—that it now qualifies for federal funding that allows *all* students to receive free breakfast and lunch. During the school year, students also qualify for reduced-price transit between 5:30 a.m. and 8:30 p.m.

Democratic Party administrations in Chicago have championed corporate tax breaks and other incentives to make the city a center for financial speculation and upscale development. This has led to the enrichment of

a tiny social layer, including such figures as Penny Pritzker, the billionaire financier and real estate mogul chosen by Obama to be his commerce secretary.

Meanwhile, last year Emanuel oversaw the closure of 50 Chicago public schools and imposed cuts to the wages and pensions of city workers. Neighborhoods and areas of the city decimated by deindustrialization, poverty, crime, and decaying infrastructure have been left to rot. Public housing has long been shuttered and bulldozed to make way for upscale housing. This has effectively driven out working class and low-income residents who are essentially told “be poor somewhere else.”

Meanwhile, a violent police crackdown has been organized. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, police have shot 34 people in the city so far this year. In 2011, Chicago had the most police shootings of any city in the United States.

In addition to the harassment, brutalization, and outright murder at the hands of police, youth who are arrested and convicted on inflated charges or for petty crimes such as drug use have their lives effectively ruined.

In wake of these experiences, and events such as the recent police murder of Michael Brown and the imposition of virtual martial law in Ferguson, Missouri, there is an increasing recognition among young people that the big business politicians and corrupt trade union and “civil rights” establishment—will do nothing to improve their miserable conditions.



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