

Major US cities report increased murder rates after years of decline

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After years of decline, the murder rates in many major US cities have risen substantially in the past year. The latest statistics were highlighted in a report in the *New York Times* last week. Half a dozen large cities, ranging from the West Coast to the South and Midwest, all reported double-digit increases in murder rates for the first eight months of 2015 compared to the same period of last year.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, an old industrial center on the shore of Lake Michigan with a current population of 600,000, reported 104 murders through August, compared to 59 in the 2014 period, an increase of 76 percent. Several other cities reported jumps almost as high.

St Louis, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland, where protests against police violence were met with brutal repression, have had increases of 60 and 56 percent respectively for 2015 so far. St. Louis has seen 136 murders, compared to 85 in the first eight months of 2014. For Baltimore the corresponding figures are 215 and 138.

The rise in violent crime is widespread, although some cities, including Los Angeles and Cincinnati, report relatively steady murder rates. In Philadelphia the rate has fallen thus far in 2015. In New York it has risen 9 percent, and in Chicago, the third-largest US city, after New York and Los Angeles, it is up about 20 percent.

Although these are the first significant increases after more than two decades of precipitous drops in the crime rate, law-and-order advocates and police spokesmen were quick to pounce on them to demand bigger crackdowns against the most impoverished sections of the working class. A main focus of this propaganda has been the so-called “Ferguson effect,” the phrase coined to claim that protests against police brutality and killings, as in the cases of Michael Brown, Eric Garner and Freddie Gray, are responsible for increases in crime.

The St. Louis police chief complained that “the criminal element is feeling empowered.” Heather MacDonald of

the right-wing Manhattan Institute, a “think-tank” specializing in urban policy which has pushed the combination of budget-cutting and law-and-order policies associated with figures like former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani, said that cities were “under the onslaught of anti-cop rhetoric.”

Giuliani himself recently blamed the increasingly visible crisis of homelessness in New York on the alleged “liberalism” of current mayor Bill de Blasio. And Raymond Kelly, police commissioner under Michael Bloomberg, declared that the growth of violent crime was caused by the halt in the notorious “stop-and-frisk” policy, which was declared unconstitutional by a Federal judge.

By this logic, millions of workers and youth must submit themselves to police-state measures, including police murders of their family and neighbors, in order to keep crime rates low.

Among the victims of the police in the latest statistics was Dontre D. Hamilton, a 31-year-old African-American in Milwaukee, who was shot to death in a downtown park last year by a white police officer, provoking angry demonstrations. Bethann Maclin, a resident of Milwaukee, told the *New York Times*, “Everybody’s struggling out here, trying to stay afloat, with no jobs no opportunities. The violence won’t end. Where do you start?”

On the other side, what passes for the liberal establishment calls for gun control as the solution, ignoring the appalling social conditions for which the system they represent is responsible. The social and economic conditions, while not mechanically reflected in the crime statistics, form the backdrop without which they cannot be understood.

The long decline in violent crime, beginning in the 1990s, was partly the result of the ebbing of the crack cocaine epidemic that had laid waste to working class

communities, and particularly to African-American families.

Changes in American capitalism in the last 40 years were also involved. The speculative boom and the impact of globalization led to a temporary stabilization in the poverty rate. There was also a shift in population out of the urban centers. Gentrification, while further isolating the poor, at the same time also made the central cities wealthier than before.

Today, however, more than seven years after the 2008 financial crash, vast sections of the working class face depression-like conditions. Foreclosures, homelessness and unemployment are endemic and permanent in the inner cities as well as other neighborhoods to which workers have been driven by gentrification. The tide of hopelessness that breeds aimless and murderous violence among the poorest sections of the population is rising again.

Another element, a political one, is also undoubtedly involved. It is almost seven years since Barack Obama, promising “hope” and “change,” took office as the first African-American president of the United States. Youth who have come of age during this past decade have seen the lies behind these words. At the same time, the state of permanent war, the defense of torture and drone assassinations also feeds a growing despair.

It is not surprising that, under conditions of complete political disenfranchisement and deepening inequality, youth turn to drugs, gang activity and gun violence.

Crime is a reflection of the violence and degradation in the decaying towns and cities across the US. Last month a report was released that revealed that 14 million Americans live in neighborhoods of extreme poverty, double the number living in such circumstances in 2000, when the total was 7.2 million. The concentration of poverty has spread especially in the aftermath of the 2008 crash. The crisis erupted under Bush, and its consequences have continued under Obama.



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