

Chicago mayor uses rise in social distress, violent crime to advance “law and order” policing

Kristina Betinis
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As the public health and social disaster triggered by the coronavirus pandemic has taken an ever-greater toll on the jobs, lives and physical and mental health of millions across the United States, a number of cities have seen a surge in violent crime and shootings.

A grim spate of gun violence in Chicago in recent weeks has taken the lives of more than 140 people, including several young children, after several years of declining homicides since 2016. Seventy-nine people were shot in Chicago over the July 4th holiday weekend, with reports indicating that 15 were killed and 64 wounded.

Twelve of the victims were children under 18, including seven-year-old Natalia Wallace, shot and killed in a drive-by shooting at a July 4th celebration in the west side neighborhood of Austin, and 14-year-old Vernado Jones Jr. in Englewood.

The last weekend in June saw 65 people shot, 18 of whom were killed. Three young children were killed in the last 10 days of June, including 20-month-old Sincere Gaston in Englewood, three-year-old Mekhi James in Austin, and ten-year-old Lena Nunez Anaya in Logan Square.

Already in the first half of 2020, more than 300 people have been killed in Chicago, many from the gang-related gun violence that plagues the African American neighborhoods hit hardest by deindustrialization and cuts to basic social services. The New York Times reports the city is on track to reach roughly the same number of murders as in 2016, when 776 were killed. The neighborhoods suffering the highest rates of coronavirus infection and death are the areas suffering the highest levels of gun violence.

The pandemic has worsened every measure of

poverty and social distress, which were already at epidemic levels in the poorest communities in US cities such as Chicago. Many workers have been unable to file for unemployment benefits with state agencies overwhelmed by the flood of claims. Some families receiving the \$600 weekly federal unemployment bonus have received a cut in their Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (food stamp) benefit due to their very temporary rise in income.

Under these conditions, the Trump administration and both Republican and Democratic officials at the state and local level are using the spurt in violent crime, coinciding with the ongoing protests against police violence, to justify a heightening of police repression.

In Chicago, Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot has responded to the pandemic and the anti-police violence protests with substantial increases in the numbers of police on the streets and more aggressive policies, while rejecting calls to “defund” police and divert a portion of the \$1.8 billion dollars allotted to the Chicago Police Department in 2020 to increase funding for social services.

While the political right wing has long attempted to portray the city of Chicago as chaotic and lawless, the violence tends to be centered in deeply impoverished neighborhoods that have the most gang activity. These are neighborhoods that have been hit hardest by deindustrialization and the closure of schools, mental health facilities and other social services—policies carried out by the city’s Democratic Party machine in the service of corporate interests.

Now, Mayor Lightfoot is criticizing the press for reporting statements made by recently appointed Chicago Police Superintendent David Brown. On June

29, Brown announced that preemptive arrests of youth would be made ahead of the July Fourth holiday weekend.

Brown told reporters that the Chicago Police Department would round up teenagers who are hanging around what he called “drug corners.” To carry out the arrests, the city announced that an additional 1,200 officers would be deployed to the poorest sections of the city on Chicago’s south and west sides.

In response to critics of the plan for the sweeps, including the American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois and the Chicago Community Bond Fund, Mayor Lightfoot said, “You need to have your attitude adjusted.”

Lightfoot later complained that the local press had taken Brown’s statements out of context. “That is not what he said,” Lightfoot said last Thursday afternoon, insisting that the preemptive arrests were aimed at adults and not minor children.

Local public radio station WBEZ answered Lightfoot’s criticism by publishing a transcript of Brown’s remarks in their entirety, in which he clearly named “kids” and identified the ages of minor children to be picked up by police. He also implored the courts and the jails to agree to hold the youth for the duration of the weekend.

Referring to “these evil bastards behind those guns,” Brown demanded longer sentences, higher bond amounts and more electronic monitoring.

Brown said, “We are tapping every resource at our disposal to ensure these killers never have a chance to get their hands on another gun and take another life. But make no mistake. As I said last week, and as I continue to repeat, we cannot do this alone. We need the help of the entire criminal justice system, our city partners and, most importantly, our community members, to step up and not only help us identify these perpetrators of violence, but to keep them off our streets until they get their day in court and to keep these violent offenders locked up and off our streets. The street corner, open-air drug market is the pipeline to shootings and murders in Chicago...”

Brown acknowledged the desperate social conditions underlying petty crime and gang activity, pointing to “the failures in many social services” and lack of jobs, but then complained that despite “cops arresting these young people—15, 16, 17, 18 years old,” the youth were

too quickly released from custody.

Even before the pandemic, Lightfoot had been a “law and order” candidate. A corporate lawyer and former federal prosecutor, she was appointed by her predecessor Rahm Emanuel to whitewash rampant violence and murder by the Chicago Police Department and ran her election campaign for mayor in part on promises to bring corruption under control.

Meanwhile, Georgia Governor Brian Kemp on Monday declared a state of emergency and ordered 1,000 National Guard troops to Atlanta, citing as justification a series of shootings over the July 4th weekend. Thirty-one people were shot and five killed in 11 separate shooting incidents across the city. Among the victims was an eight-year-old girl who was shot and killed in a parking lot in the same area where Atlanta police killed Rayshard Brooks last month.

In a deliberate effort to conflate the random acts of violence in a city reeling from both the health and economic impacts of the pandemic crisis with ongoing protests against police killings, Kemp, a Republican, said that “city officials have failed to quell ongoing violence, with armed individuals threatening citizens, shooting at passersby, blocking streets, destroying local businesses and defying orders to disperse.” He continued, “This lawlessness must be stopped, and order restored in our capital city.”

The Democratic mayor of Atlanta, Keisha Lance Bottoms, who backed the deployment of the National Guard when protests first erupted against the May 25 police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, denounced the new deployment, which is in line with Trump’s repeated threats to mobilize troops to restore “law and order” in Democratic-controlled states and cities.



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