

Chicago police prepare to crack down on youth after “law and order” mayoral election

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Over the last weekend in Chicago three teenage boys were shot at two separate public gatherings involving large numbers of young people. A 14-year-old was shot at the lakefront on Friday, and the other two, 16 and 17 years old, were shot outside of Millennium Park, a large downtown public space, on Saturday night. All three are expected to recover from their wounds.

The shootings took place during social events that were organized online, referred to ominously in the media as “takeovers” of public spaces. The two locations, 31st Street Beach where about 300 gathered and Millennium Park where a few hundred more got together, are popular places for picnics, festivals and dance events, especially in warmer weather. Reports indicate nine adults and six children were arrested in total.

Videos shared online and on local media from the weekend showed large groups of youth, mostly teenagers milling about Chicago’s downtown along Michigan Avenue outside of Millennium Park.

The vast majority were playing music, dancing, and wandering around outside the park looking for a way in. There were also outbreaks of fighting and vandalism that have been highly publicized and are being used to justify an authoritarian crackdown, including increased surveillance, on young people.

A young couple visiting from out of state who were robbed and beaten by a group in one of the large gatherings told several news media stations that they tried to flag down police for help but were ignored.

These events follow on an extended city election season in which Democrats and the media, backed by wealthy business interests, relentlessly campaigned for a law-and-order crackdown and hiring thousands more police officers, as budget cuts to schools and transit loom.

Since the weekend, media reports indicate police attempted to shut down public transit access into downtown, as was done by Mayor Lightfoot during the 2020 anti-police violence protests, but this reportedly failed due to breakdown in the police chain of command and its communication with city agencies.

Last summer, following a similar incident that led to a 16-year-old boy being shot and killed, Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot imposed a curfew banning anyone under age 18 from Millennium Park after 6:00 p.m. on weekends. There is a city-wide 10:00 p.m. curfew for those aged 17 and under.

The Chicago Police Department issued a statement announcing additional resources would be allocated to increase searches and monitoring of young people. “The reckless, disruptive and violent behavior that was seen downtown this past weekend will not be tolerated,” the statement read. “We actively and continuously review open source social media and additional resources will be available to protect those who are visiting, living or working in the areas of large gatherings. Resources include an increased police and command staff presence at these gatherings citywide.”

In her own statement, Mayor Lightfoot echoed this sentiment, “The city cannot and will not allow any of our public spaces to become a platform for criminal conduct.” She went on to blame the parents of the young people at the event for not “instilling the important values of respect for people and property.”

Police Superintendent David Brown stated, “The problem is no one is actually asking the youth why they’re coming downtown and what they need.”

Mayor-elect Brandon Johnson, a Cook County Commissioner and Chicago Teachers Union legislative official who will be sworn into office on May 15th, struck a similar tone saying, “in no way do I condone

the destructive activity we saw in the Loop and lakefront this weekend. It is unacceptable and has no place in our city. However, it is not constructive to demonize youth who have otherwise been starved of opportunities in their own communities.”

Speaking to the tourism business interests behind the loudest calls for law and order, Johnson said, “Our city must work together to create spaces for youth to gather safely and responsibly, under adult guidance and supervision, to ensure that every part of our city remains welcome for both residents and visitors.”

Chicago’s business interests like the Illinois Restaurant Association and the Chicago Loop Alliance have led a campaign to increase police presence downtown and demanded that youth not be permitted to gather at all.

In interviews with local press, downtown business owners complain that young people will scare away their customers and claim that they are investing in their own private security forces. Michael Edwards, president of the Chicago Loop Alliance, said the group plans to hire “security ambassadors” to patrol the business district and to monitor young people on social media planning future meet-ups.

Former Chicago Police superintendent Eddie Johnson told the press that the issue is that the police are not free enough to use force in suppressing teenagers. He explained the position of the police in the following way, “What I’m hearing from cops is that these young folks are taunting them you know ‘ha ha ha you can’t chase me.’” He added that cops want to “do something about it” but are worried that if they chase down and beat teenagers who laugh at them, they might “get in trouble.”

Chicago is frequently portrayed in corporate media as a violent and lawless place. While the homicide rate has fallen from a recent high of 802 in 2021, there were still 688 recorded in 2022. Last year saw a total of over 2,832 shooting incidents.

These statistics, and the violent outbursts over the weekend, point to the immense social crisis affecting young people. Recent studies have found that the median age of a homicide victim is just 27 years old and that black youth, who are overwhelmingly working class and poor in large cities like Chicago, aged 18-19

are at highest risk of being killed, with a homicide rate of 182.7 per 100,000 residents.

The violence in Chicago is but a single indicator of a broader social crisis which weighs especially heavily on young people, the product of decades of economic devastation and class inequality in a city of enormous wealth which is expropriated from workers and controlled by the capitalist class, who the ruling Democratic Party dutifully serves.

The areas of Chicago that see the most violence are those where deindustrialization and disinvestment has been most devastating. Neighborhoods like West Garfield Park and North Lawndale, with the highest homicide rates, once housed workers in the city’s large industrial manufacturing facilities like International Harvester and Western Electric. With these industries long moved out of Chicago, the average income for both neighborhoods teeters at the poverty line.

The result has been decades of deep poverty and unemployment for large swaths of Chicago’s working class, especially for young black adults who at ages 20-24 face an unemployment rate of nearly 40 percent.

When the symptoms of this crisis occasionally spill out of the South and West side neighborhoods that have been devastated by these policies and into the wealthy downtown area, political and business leaders can only meet the youth with fear, hatred and denunciations. They have no answer to the crisis capitalism has created except for further police repression and attacks on democratic rights.



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