A city under siege: 5 beliefs about homicides in Chicago
By: Arthur J. Lurigio
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There are five commonly held beliefs about what's causing homicide rates to rise in Chicago. But are they valid?

The first belief, that Chicago is dangerous, is half true. Homicide rates in Chicago have been lower recently than those in other cities in the United States and in the world. Rates of homicide have declined steadily since the 1990s and recently have been as low as they were in the 1960s. Murders in the city are concentrated in six districts (the murder corridor), all of which are plagued by intergenerational poverty, gang infestation, single-parent households, social disorder and economic blight. In 2010, 52 percent of the city's murders were committed in these six police districts. The remaining 19 are relatively safe.

The second belief is that the police should be solely responsible for lowering the city's murder rate; this is mostly false. Despite advancements in law enforcement, the police alone can do little to prevent homicides. Policing is a reactive enterprise. The police can no more prevent murders than firefighters can prevent fires or paramedics can prevent heart attacks. Yet the mayor and police superintendent are criticized each time another young life is senselessly and needlessly lost to homicide.

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The third belief is that gangs fuel Chicago's murder rate; this is mostly true. Gang-related homicides account annually for 60 percent of the murders with a known motive and often involve shootings to gain control of outdoor drug-selling markets or to enhance a gang's reputation or power. Gang members also kill for reasons that have nothing to do with the gang's interests (personal insults, relationship conflicts, etc.). The warmest winter and spring in the city's history and one of the hottest summers so far have increased the number of street interactions among gang disputants. More loosely connected local gang allegiances and fewer mature leaders to keep the younger, more violent members in check also escalate violence. In addition, gangs in Chicago have been forced out of high-rises and into unfamiliar neighborhoods where they are confronted by rival gangs or by rival factions within the same gang.

The fourth belief is that murders are predictable, which is mostly false. "Heat of the moment" homicides generally take place suddenly and indoors — where they are virtually impossible to prevent but easier to solve. They are between spouses, partners, family members, or neighbors, and the offender usually leaves behind abundant forensic evidence. In contrast, instrumental (cold-blooded) homicides are committed to accomplish a goal. They are easier to prevent; the police can gather information when the murder is being planned or when conflicts are brewing. Unfortunately, this information rarely comes to police attention until the murder has been committed.
Even instrumental violence can culminate in death from happenstance, turning a shooting into a homicide. The trajectory and caliber of the bullet, where it enters the body and how it tracks after entry, the size and body composition of the victim, and the proximity of the shooting to the nearest trauma center are all in the homicide equation. In some years, these factors favor the survival of the victims; in others, they do not, and homicide rates go down or up accordingly.

The fifth belief is that handguns contribute greatly to the high homicide rate in Chicago, which is mostly true. Handguns are used in 80 percent of the city's murders. Thus, fewer guns might, but not necessarily, translate into fewer homicides. Chicago's homicide rates soared when the handgun ordinance was enforced. Most people own guns for sport or self-protection, not for the perpetration of felonies. The impact of gun buyback programs on homicides is nugatory; usually law-abiding citizens turn in their weapons for cash.

So, what to do?

The city must come to understand that violence is both a public health and criminal justice problem. Multipronged strategies are needed to tackle the complex pathogenesis of homicidal behavior, which is an expression of a highly disturbed individual living in a highly distressed community. The causes of violence can be addressed most effectively through the social, political and economic revitalization of distressed neighborhoods. As contained in the original CAPS model, the police should leverage city services to tear down or board up abandoned properties — especially those that gangs use for clandestine activities — and remove graffiti, garbage and abandoned vehicles from the streets. Reductions in physical disorder increase community solidarity and lower rates of crime and violence.

The CPD should return to other defining elements in the original CAPS model, such as the long-term (permanent) assignment of police officers to the same beats, especially in the murder corridor. Drug sweeps, saturation patrols and gang audits are somewhat useful, but their effects are transitory. Hot spots eventually cool off and re-emerge on other street corners after the police leave. Recent police hiring will only maintain the current level of staffing.

The Violence Reduction Overtime Initiative is another short-lived and short-sighted solution to the under-presence of cops in the most dangerous neighborhoods. Chicagoans are likely to support budgetary restructuring, even the imposition of a safety tax, if the funds are used to hire the additional police officers necessary to make neighborhoods truly safer. The New York Miracle — substantial reductions in all categories of serious crime in the past 20 years — was launched by the city’s hiring of 8,000 new police officers.

The second element is the resumption of regular beat meetings, particularly where the risk for homicide is greatest. Beat meetings underscore police-citizen partnerships in the co-production of neighborhood safety. Through the establishment of closer and more trusting relationships with police officers, more residents could be enlisted to help solve gang-related homicides, which have a low clearance rate. In conjunction with beat meetings, the most violent districts should establish an anti-homicide task force, consisting of police officers; church, city, and school officials; community organizers; and researchers. The task forces should meet monthly with the mayor and superintendent to discuss the latest data on shootings and the adoption of district-specific measures to enhance safety.
The city should continue its cooperation with the CeaseFire Program, a promising approach that employs former gang members as violence interrupters who gather information about impending gang-related homicides and broker face-saving solutions to avoid retaliatory gang warfare. Violence interrupters also can teach young men better conflict-resolution skills. CeaseFire and other community organizations and institutions must focus on changing the culture of violence that permeates the lives of young African-American men, the most likely victims and perpetrators of homicide in the city.

The criminals who use guns rarely own them legally and never purchase them in Chicago, which has no gun shops. The ATF claims that Chicago's gangs obtain their guns from outside of Illinois. Furthermore, most chronic offenders are prohibited from lawful gun ownership because they have a felony record or are on probation or parole supervision. To ensure that guns do not come into the possession of these individuals, the CPD should reestablish its specialized gun units in each of the troubled districts in the murder corridor, working with beat officers and ATF agents in complementary styles of policing. The longer-term assignment of specialty officers to districts would minimize the likelihood of the abuses that were attributed to the “jump-out boys.” In addition, using the RICO statute, holding gang leaders accountable for every gang-related murder committed by their members, could compel gang leaders to control the shooters among their ranks.

The CPD must shut down the open-air drug markets, ending the systemic violence that stems from conflicts over territory. In New York, outdoor drug sales were driven indoors, where conflicts between rival sellers were minimized if not prevented altogether. A positive byproduct of closing down the open-air drug markets is the increased inconvenience of making purchases. The ramps of the Eisenhower Expressway would no longer provide easy ingress and egress for suburbanites buying heroin, cocaine and marijuana from street gang members.

Homicides end lives senselessly, damaging families and communities for generations. The complexity of the problem calls for a multifarious solution in which police, residents and community leaders create orderly environments where shooting is never considered a viable solution to a problem. The city needs more officers engaging in more “gangs-drugs-guns” policing in the districts where the risk of becoming another horrific homicide statistic is greatest. The benefits of reducing homicides will devolve to all residents in ensuring that Chicago remains a world-class city.