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U.S.

## Murder in America: What Makes Cities Safer

Killings fell in Los Angeles and Washington when police established closer ties with people living in the most violent neighborhoods; gentrification also played a role in Washington

*By Max Rust, Scott Calvert in Washington and  
Zusha Elinson in Los Angeles*

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This is the second of two articles on how murder in America is deeply local.

For the project, The Wall Street Journal analyzed the locations of thousands of homicides in four cities: Chicago and Baltimore, where violence has risen to or near 1990s levels in the past two years; and Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., where meaningful declines in violence have been sustained since the 1990s. The first article is [here](#).

A gang-intervention worker known as “Big” told a lie in March, but it was one he believes helped saved lives.

Craig “Big” Batiste, 50 years old, confronted an armed Crips gang member who was seeking revenge against men he suspected of stealing from him. Mr. Batiste wrestled the gun away and told the man he had a job for him. That lie was quickly made true when another gang-intervention worker, Skipp Townsend, found the man work in construction.

“It’s hard for us to determine how many people would’ve been affected if he went out on emotions and shot the wrong somebody or maybe the right somebody,” said Mr. Townsend, a former Blood who runs a nonprofit that offers counseling and job help to ex-cons.

Mr. Batiste’s West Park Terrace neighborhood, with its well-kept, one-story homes and a struggling retail corridor, has seen a steep decline in homicides, as has the rest of the city.

Violence in the city of Los Angeles has ebbed since a record 1,094 people were killed in 1992 amid gang wars, a booming crack trade and the riots following the acquittal of four white police officers in the beating of a black motorist, Rodney King. Murders have been on downward trend, with 294 homicides last year and 271 so far in 2017.

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## Part I: Murder in America — What Makes Cities More Dangerous



South Los Angeles, the birthplace of the Bloods and the Crips and the symbol of inner-city violence in the 1990s, has seen the biggest declines.

The reduction in violence hasn't, however, coincided with marked economic improvements. The unemployment rate has risen in the Los Angeles areas where killings dropped over the past 15

years. The poverty rate is at 25%. In West Park Terrace, median household income has dropped 23% since 2000.

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Instead, criminologists and social scientists credit the decline in violence to

a shift in the city's approach in its most dangerous neighborhoods.

The gang-intervention program, which started in 2007 and costs about \$30 million a year, has turned hundreds of former gang members—including Big—into neighborhood peacekeepers. The police department has increased its engagement with the community and taken a more targeted approach to violent crime, including using predictive-policing software to deploy officers to hot spots.

Nowhere are the results clearer than in the neighborhoods that encompass the city's most notorious housing projects, Jordan Downs and Nickerson Gardens in Watts. Median income for the people living in and around the rundown, two-story cinder block complexes is around \$13,000, with unemployment above 30%.

While poverty persists, it is absent the extreme danger that once accompanied it. In the past five years, nine homicides have occurred at Nickerson Gardens and one at Jordan Downs, which served as the setting for 1993 film "Menace II Society." That compares with 35 murders across both housing projects in the five years ending in 2006.

In 2011, the city began to deploy police officers who patrol the projects, work with residents to solve problems, walk children to school, and organize after-school activities. The community-

policing approach sharply contrasts with the department's old strategy of swarming the projects in response to crime.

There are now more than 70 officers in the program—in seven housing projects and one city park. The cost isn't broken down by the city, but it includes police salaries and another \$250,000 annually per site

The officers' constant presence alone is a deterrent against violence, police say. The homicide-resolution rate in the area jumped to 81% last year because the new relationship between these officers and residents "broke the power lever that the gangs had" in these neighborhoods, said Deputy Chief Phil Tingirides, who oversees the police bureau in South Los Angeles and started the community-policing program.

In West Park Terrace, also known as the 100s, a series of shootings in 2016 threatened to reignite violence between Crips there and Bloods from nearby Inglewood. Mr. Townsend, 54, the former Blood who runs the nonprofit 2nd Call, called for a sit-down. Rod Dog Jones, 45, brought Bloods from Inglewood, and Mr. Batiste brought Crips.

Over sandwiches at a deli in the nearby oceanfront city of Marina del Rey, the rival sides came to an understanding to leave each other alone.

Mr. Batiste, a former Crip, said that by keeping the peace in the neighborhood, he is trying to make up for his past crimes.

"I've been a drug dealer, I've been thug, a hustler," he said. "Now, I'd rather be in my community trying to prevent some bad shit from happening."

Anwar Saleem operated a hair salon in a neighborhood blocks from the U.S. Capitol when Washington, D.C., was known as the nation's murder capital in the 1990s.

But over the past decade and a half, poverty, violence and trash-ridden streets lined by abandoned properties have given way to bars, restaurants, shops and condos along the 15-block corridor in Northeast Washington. That resurgence has led to further drops in crime that followed the winding down of the 1990s crack-cocaine epidemic.

"You cannot commit the crimes because it's too many eyes on the street," said Mr. Saleem, 63 years old, who owns property on H Street, a main thoroughfare in Northeast Washington, and heads a nonprofit that promotes the corridor.

Washington's homicide rate fell 73% between 1996 and 2016, and murders fell over that time in a majority of neighborhoods, according to a Wall Street Journal analysis of homicide locations. H Street has had some of the steepest declines.

Besides the end of the crack scourge, other factors behind the transformation include community policing and economic rebirth, particularly in gentrifying parts of Northeast Washington.

Along H Street, an improving citywide safety climate in the early 2000s attracted new investment, which helped deter violence, said John Roman, former executive director of the nonpartisan District of Columbia Crime Policy Institute.

“It has created a virtuous cycle that has allowed violence to decline in that part of the city that I think is unparalleled elsewhere,” Mr. Roman said.

In row house neighborhoods north of H Street, property values have soared, outpacing even the considerable citywide increases. In several blocks around the junction of H Street and Florida Avenue, the median sales price since 2000 has jumped to \$715,000 from \$179,000 in inflation-adjusted terms as of April, according to Zillow.

The area is changing in many ways. In an adjacent Census tract stretching west to North Capitol Street, the share of white residents jumped from 4% in 2000 to 58% in 2015, and median household income more than doubled to \$106,000. H Street now has a Whole Foods, as well as services like veterinarians and banks. High-end condos are sprouting.

“It’s like Rip van Winkle. If you went to sleep and woke up, it’s a whole different look,” said Mr. Saleem.

As a boy in the 1960s, he remembers patronizing music shops, bakeries and clothing stores that welcomed African-Americans like him. But rioting after the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination in 1968 turned the street into a wasteland.

By the 1990s, when the nation’s capital was also the U.S. murder capital, H Street resembled a no-go zone. “You really got to the point where you didn’t walk through H Street, you ran,” said Mr. Saleem, who opened a hair salon there in 1989.

About a dozen years ago, businessman Joe Englert began buying empty buildings on the east end of H Street and transforming the properties to become popular bars and restaurants. Now, Mr. Englert says he can count the vacant buildings on one hand.

A sleek streetcar glides up and down H Street, thanks to a \$220 million investment by the city. Public money also has restored facades, improved trash collection and upgraded lighting, curbs and sidewalks.

Cathy Lanier, chief of Washington’s Metropolitan Police Department from 2007 to 2016, agreed that gentrification has helped reduce violent crime, but she said she thinks the most important factor in driving down violent crime has been better community relations.

“It really is about having a community that is engaged with the police department. I mean, really engaged,” she said. “They trust you, they trust the cop on the beat.”

Ms. Lanier, now the National Football League’s head of security, also said the kind of revitalization that turned H Street around doesn’t happen in a vacuum. As chief, she said she worked hard to gauge where development was headed next so police were ready to modify deployments to help nurture it.

“You don’t just throw seeds in a garden and hope everything will grow,” she said. “You have to till the garden, make sure it gets plenty of water, put up protective fencing so the deer don’t eat the plants.”

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