

**The
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Urban crime

Midsummer murder

Lack of trust in police forces is contributing to a spike in murder rates

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AT THE corner in West Baltimore where a burnt-out pharmacy sits as evidence of riots, Tay Wizzle, a 26-year-old student, explains why he thinks the murder rate has spiked. “It’s a decrease in police presence,” he says. “The police don’t patrol like they did before the riots. I think they’re purposely doing that to make themselves look innocent. They ain’t dumb, but they think everyone here’s stupid.” As he speaks, a police car arrives and two cops begin questioning a couple who were parked in a car with tinted windows. “I’ve been here an hour and that’s the first I’ve seen them,” says Mr Wizzle. “And they’re just fucking with people.”



Murders always increase in summer in America’s cities. The heat brings people—and guns—out into the streets, where arguments flare up. But this summer has been particularly bloody. In July 45 people were murdered in Baltimore. That was the worst month the city has experienced since August 1972, when the population was almost 50% larger than it is today. And Baltimore is not alone. Comprehensive statistics on murders across America in 2015 do not yet exist, and it is impossible to prove whether, nationally, the murder rate is up or down. But local figures suggest the number has jumped in a number of big cities, particularly those with the most entrenched histories of racial strife and high crime.

In Milwaukee, one of America's most segregated cities, twice as many people were killed in the first half of 2015 as in the same period last year. In St Louis, the centre of protests against police since last year, the figure climbed by 60%; in New Orleans, by 30%; in Washington, DC, by 18%; in New York by 11%. The trend is not uniform: Los Angeles, Phoenix and San Diego have seen declines in the number of murders in the first half of this year. But the trend is widespread enough to concern police chiefs, several of whom met in Washington to discuss rising gun crime on August 3rd.

The apparent uptick comes at a time when policing in America is troubled. On August 9th protests to mark the anniversary of the death of Michael Brown, a black teenager killed by police in Ferguson, a suburb of St Louis, ended with the shooting of another young black man during an apparent gunfight with cops. The *Washington Post* estimates that 24 unarmed black men have been killed by the police so far this year (out of a total of 585 killings by police). Polling by Gallup suggests that in June confidence in the police reached its lowest level since 1993, a year in which the national murder rate was double the rate it was in 2013 and when Congress was preparing to pass a punitive crime bill.

In Baltimore, few are sure what has caused the jump. Most link it to the riots sparked by the death of a young black man, Freddie Gray, after he was roughly arrested by the city's police. One possibility raised shortly after the riots is that drugs stolen from pharmacies disrupted the city's heroin market and set off gang wars. Another is that a slowdown of policing has indeed had an effect. Data from Baltimore's police department suggest that the number of arrests this year has been lower than last year or in 2013—and fell drastically in May, after Mr Gray's death (see chart). Another possible reason is disorganisation: the director of Baltimore's Operation Ceasefire, an anti-gun programme which is credited with reducing crime in cities like Boston, resigned in March.

Most cities have similar local concerns: in Milwaukee, the city's police chief points to Wisconsin's loose gun laws. But the fact that a number of cities have experienced jumps suggests a national effect may be at play. Police officers across America are upset by the political storm that has blown up since the protests in Ferguson last summer: they often say they feel under siege from local media and politicians. Baltimore's police union says that the decision by the city's chief prosecutor, Marilyn Mosby, to charge the six police officers who arrested Mr Gray demoralised police officers.

In New York City the police have conspicuously campaigned against Bill de Blasio, the city's leftish mayor since last year. In December and then again in January they turned their backs on him at the funerals of officers murdered by a man who claimed to be angered by police

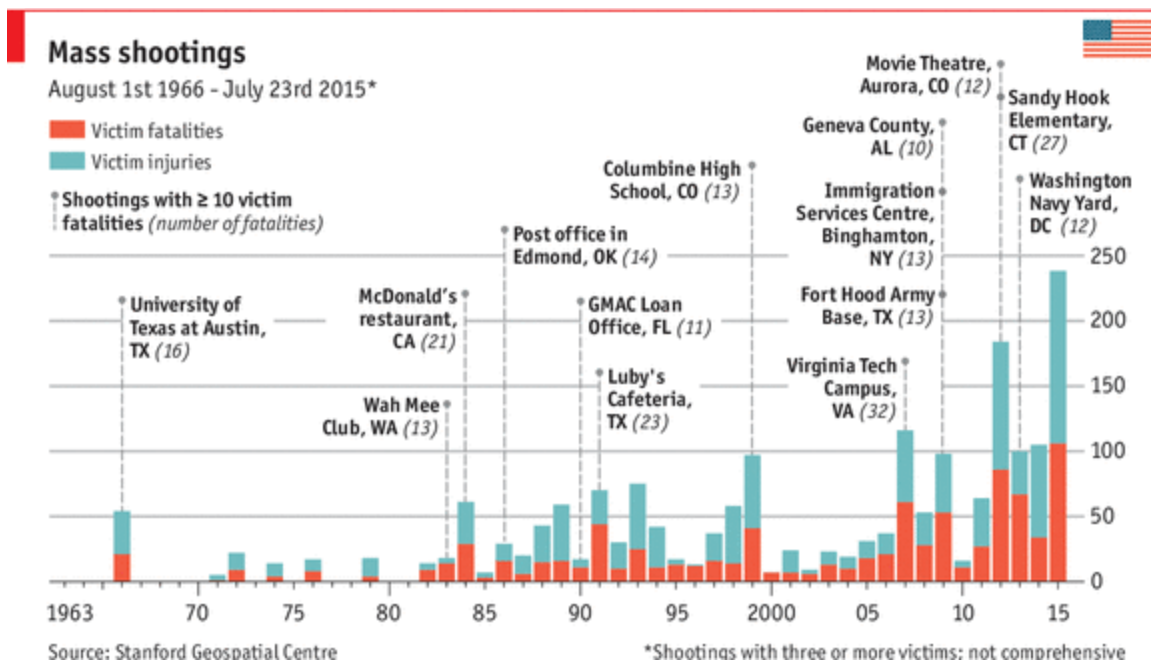


violence. Since then, supporters of the police—such as the *New York Post*, a scrappy tabloid—have alleged that Mr de Blasio’s reduction of the use of stop-and-frisk tactics has contributed to an increase in the murder rate so far this year. That is a stretch: although the number of murders in New York has increased, the number of shootings so far this year has remained the same.

Police anger could be a factor in crime spikes, says Eugene O’Donnell, an academic at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Cops who feel they have less political support may become inclined to do the bare minimum. But another, more subtle, effect may also be at play, he says. Most inner-city murders are not sophisticated—they often take place in crowded streets. Yet clearance rates remain stunningly low. In Baltimore, just 36% of

murders have been solved this year, compared with two-thirds nationally. Cops who are distrusted struggle to find co-operative witnesses, many of whom fear retaliation if they are deemed to be “snitches”. The message that cops are sometimes racist or too violent, even when accurate, may be making it harder for them to do their jobs properly.

Once the killings start they are hard to stop. In a city such as Baltimore, where graffiti on the walls of abandoned houses commemorate dead young men, murders lead to retaliatory murders. Much violent crime is spontaneous: according to analysis by the city’s police department given to the *Baltimore Sun*, only 14% of murder victims in 2014, and only 11% of suspects, were gang members. More detailed analysis by Milwaukee’s Homicide Review Commission, an advisory board, suggests that in that city arguments are by far the biggest known cause of murders. When the chance of getting caught is low, and the law is not trusted, violence reigns.



[In graphics: America's guns](http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2015/08/graphics-americas-guns) (<http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2015/08/graphics-americas-guns>)

Such cities have remained intensely violent even as crime in general has declined. Last year, before the spike, more than one in 100 black men aged 15 to 24 in Milwaukee got shot; roughly one in ten of those was killed. Studies of homicide victims suggest that most murder victims (and perpetrators) come from a tiny number of young men, almost all with criminal convictions, who tend to know each other. One study of a high-crime community in Boston found that 85% of gunshot victims came from a network of just 763 young men—or less than 2% of the local population. Murder, it seems, is a disease that spreads through social

interaction.

If the leap in violence proves lasting, that ought to worry reformers. Since the protests in Ferguson began, improving America's policing and prison systems has united most Democrats and some Republicans. Hillary Clinton used one of her first speeches as a presidential candidate to call for prison and police reform. Congress is expected to consider sentencing reform in the autumn. That cause, however, has been helped by low and falling crime. The case may be harder to make if cities are no longer seen to be improving.

The rhetoric of some politicians is already shifting. In April Elijah Cummings, who represents part of Baltimore in Congress, said that police reform "is the civil rights cause of this generation". On August 3rd, announcing a new partnership between the city's police and federal agencies, he took a different tone. "I hear over and over and over again, black lives matter, black lives matter. And they do matter. But black lives also have to matter to black people." He had a simpler message for killers: "You're not going to get away with it."

From the print edition: United States