

# MURDER IN MILWAUKEE

## *The Homicide Rate Is A Scandal; And Most Of The Ideas To Cut It Are Wrong*

JOHN M. HAGEDORN

Can Mayor Norquist “cut the city's crime rate by 50%” as he pledged election night? Surely we all hope he'll succeed. After all, if, under Rudy Giuliani, the homicide rate in New York City has fallen to half that of Milwaukee's, why can't we do the same here? For goodness sakes, this is Milwaukee, the home of *Gemuetlichkeit*, beer, and a relaxed quality of life. This isn't

Chicago or Boston, much less New York. Yet our 1999 homicide rate is within a percentage point of Chicago's, twice as high as New York's, and nearly four times as high as Boston's. Why?

Is the problem broken families and availability of firearms, as a recent study claimed? Maybe we haven't worked hard enough to build collaboration between the police and community, as happened in Boston and San Diego? Or maybe our police aren't as tough as they are in New York or Los Angeles? Maybe there aren't enough midnight basketball leagues? What is it?

The Mayor has appointed a task force which will deliver their report August 1, 2000, on what to do to drastically reduce crime. The



task force is likely to recommend something like the following: (1) stepped up community policing with more cooperation with clergy, community groups, and probation and parole agencies; (2) cracking down on gun possession; (3) more “quality of life” policing reforms; and (4) tougher sentences for a hodgepodge of crimes. There may be some lip service to “more jobs,” job training,

and youth diversion programs, to satisfy uneasy liberals.

I think that the above policies, fairly commonplace in cities across the US, are as likely to succeed as the Brewers are to win the World Series — possible, but a real long shot.

This article will compare how the homicide rate has changed in different cities. It will argue that the factors most responsible for variation in a city's murder rate don't appear to be what policies the police carry out, but other factors more tied to the nature of a city's economy.

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*John M. Hagedorn is an Associate Professor of Criminal Justice and Director of the Kenneth B. Clark Center for the Study of Violence in Communities at the University of Illinois-Chicago. He has also authored several books, studies and articles on Milwaukee.*

## Crime Rates and Statistics

First of all, let us be clear about the kinds of crime that could be reduced by changes in public safety policy. Burglaries or robberies, for example, can be reduced by “target-hardening,” like better locks or house alarms. Stepped up surveillance by police can reduce the number thefts in a given area. You can always stop crime in a specific place by putting a cop there.

Another way crime can be reduced is to simply re-categorize crime reports in ways that artificially reduce the prevalence of many kinds of crimes. Burglaries and robberies can be re-coded as thefts, and some crimes that have little chance of being cleared can not be recorded at all. In New York City, for example, computer geo-coding of crimes produced hard data for district commanders on where crimes were committed. Commanders were then put under extreme pressure to reduce crime. Just like a corporate executive, they were given goals and told to produce, one way or another. Some stepped up enforcement, but others, apparently succeeded by changing the way crimes were reported.

One easy way for Mayor Norquist and Chief Jones to reduce crime is to “order” its reduction by manipulation of the statistics. Surely, they wouldn't do such a thing. But while most crimes can be jacked up or down by reporting practices, one category isn't: homicide. You just have to account for all the bodies.

Not that homicide statistics can't be manipulated some. In New York City, there's evidence that as the homicide rate plunged, suicide rates shot up. When in doubt, New York police might code a death a suicide, so it doesn't add to a city's homicide rate. Police Departments can also code a discovered body “cause of death unknown,” thus keeping it from being added to the homicide count. But these practices affect only a small number of deaths. It is clear that crime has absolutely declined in New York City, and in many cities all across the US — but not in others. Let us look at the data.

## Variation in Rates of Homicide Between Cities

Homicide rates in the US the last twenty years have been on a steep decline, but that decline masks major differences in homicide trends in different cities. Most observers agree that homicide rates shot up in the mid to late 1980s as crack markets were violently contested by rival drug and gang organizations. Milwaukee District Attorney E. Michael McCann said that he thought that 80% of Milwaukee's 1999 homicides were related to drug turf battles.

The Mayor's Task Force will certainly consider the experience of New York City, where “get-tough” measures called “quality of life policing” were claimed to have “caused” sharp declines in homicide. At first glance, it seems that Rudy Giuliani has been successful. Look how far rates have dropped since their peak of 30 per 100,000 in 1990.

But are Rudy Giuliani and the NYPD the reason? How about Mayor Riordan and the LAPD? Los Angeles, with a different police culture, has pretty much the same pattern.

And then there's San Diego, where they pride themselves in a cooperative policing strategy very different than New York's or Los Angeles'. Their peak was never as high as NYC or LA, but homicide rates have fallen even lower.

Similar declines have been registered in San Francisco, Seattle, Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, Portland and other cities. No one claims that all these cities carried out the same police policies, yet they all witnessed dramatic declines. Something else must be at work. And not all cities have seen such precipitous declines. Chicago's homicide rate has fallen since 1995, but still is more than twice as high as New York City's. Again peaks are over 30/100,000, but the declines are not nearly as drastic, though the trend is downward.

Other cities, like Detroit, Washington DC, Philadelphia, and New Orleans have had much higher homicide rates. St. Louis, for example, reached a stratospheric peak of 65

homicides per 100,000 in 1991, and since has had some sharp declines. Still, St. Louis's lowest rate is roughly comparable to New York or Chicago's peak, about 30/100,000. St. Louis's current rate is more than three times New York City's and a third greater than Chicago's.

Boston, a city about the size of Milwaukee, initiated an innovative police/community/church/probation collaboration. They aggressively targeted guns and gang members. It too seems to have worked as Milwaukee-like high homicide rates were followed by historic lows.

Milwaukee has had comparable homicide trends to Boston's up to 1990, but instead of dropping after the "crack high," our rates have stayed up, and don't show signs of a major decline.

To put the charts on the following pages in further perspective, Milwaukee had 124 homicides last year compared to Boston's 31, Minneapolis' 47, Pittsburgh's 48, and Cleveland, yes Cleveland's, 76. Minneapolis and St. Paul combined have a population a bit higher than Milwaukee's, yet together they had only 61 homicides last year, less than half Milwaukee's total. Our homicide rate was four times greater than Austin, Texas, a city Milwaukee's size, which had only 27 homicides in 1999. Milwaukee's homicide rate rose to 22.7 per 100,000, for the first time in history — within reach of Chicago's 23.7. With major 1999 declines in homicide in Oakland, Atlanta, Indianapolis, Dallas, and Miami, it is likely that for the first time Milwaukee will crack into the elite top ten homicide cities in the United States. How can we explain this?

### **It's the (Information) Economy, Stupid**

One way to make sense of this data would be to look at what factors distinguish high homicide cities from low homicide cities. There

seem to be three factors that may differentiate those cities that have seen major declines versus those that have not. Please note, there have been no statistical tests of my hypothesis, or comparative fieldwork that would validate it. But this often is how we get new knowledge: a well-reasoned hunch that can be confirmed or disconfirmed by research.

**1. Cities which have experienced the sharpest declines in homicide are those which have transitioned to the new economy.** New York, Boston, LA and other cities have information-based economies. Detroit, Gary, St. Louis, and Milwaukee are old manufacturing cities that have deindustrialized somewhat, but haven't found a

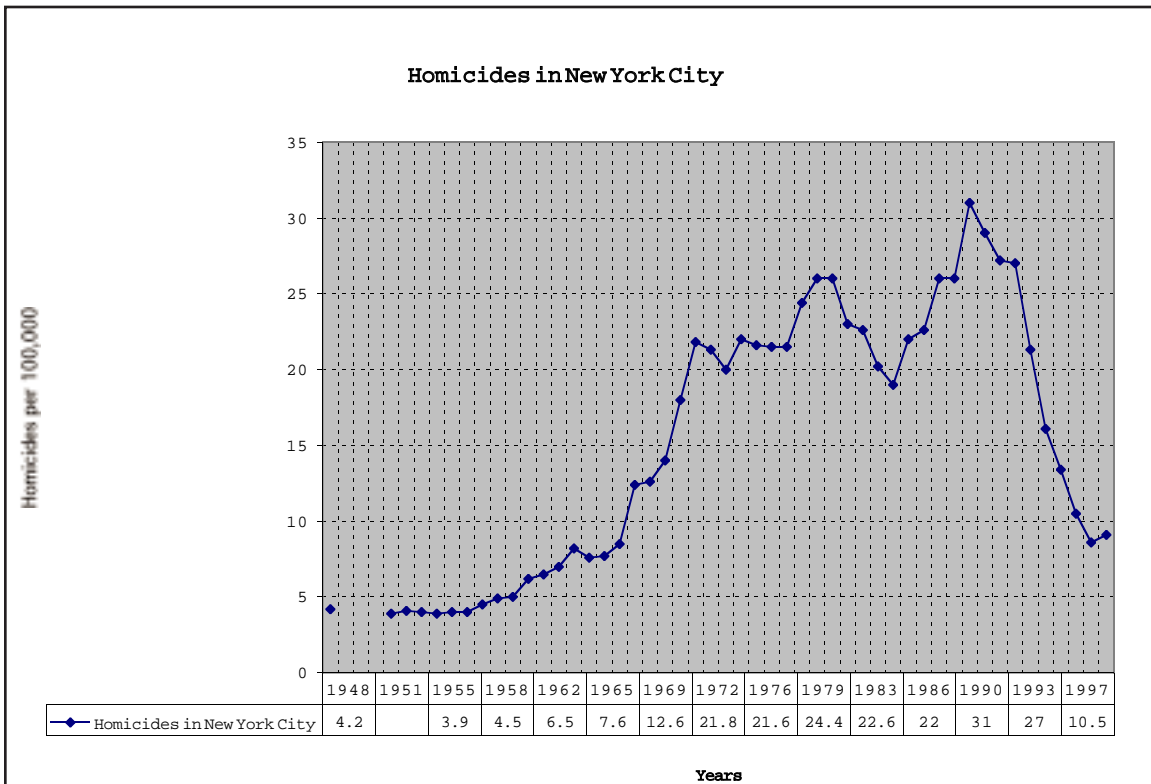
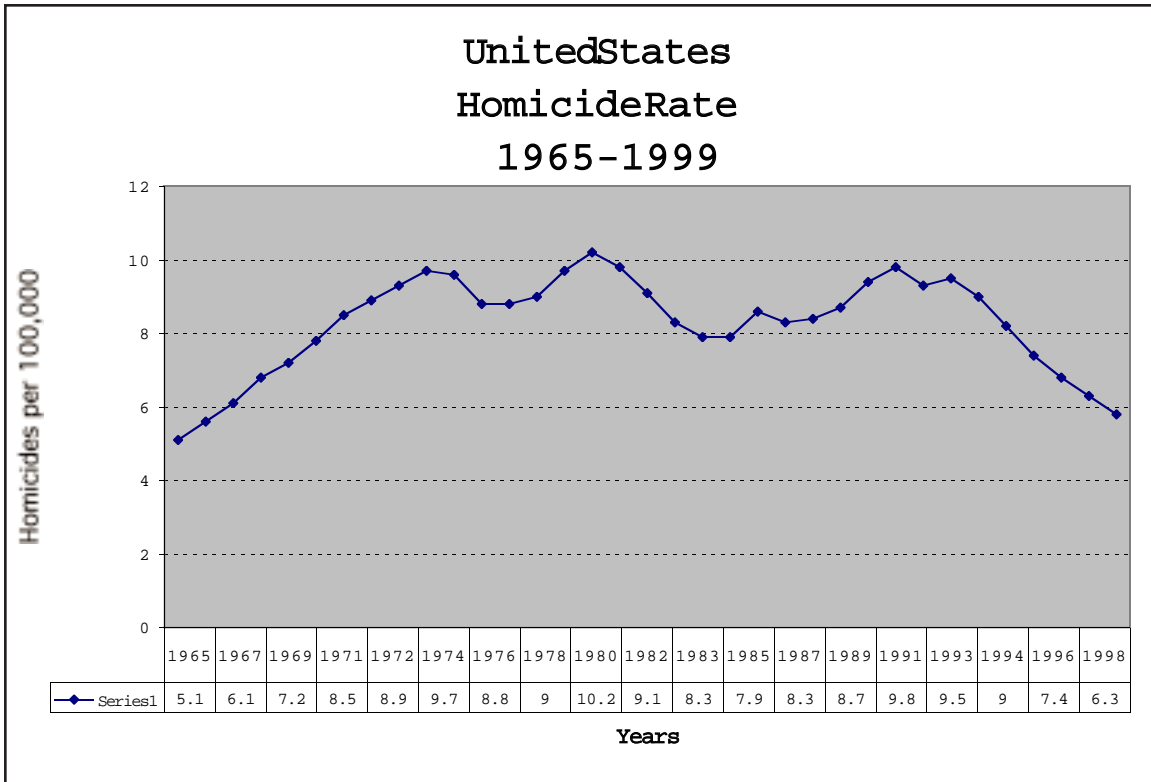
niche in the information era. Metropolitan Milwaukee (20.5%) is still second only to Detroit (23.8%) in proportion of its workforce still in manufacturing. Our city has virtually no software industry and a weak high-tech professional sector. For example, Madison has as many engineering services jobs as Milwaukee, and those Madison jobs have a higher total payroll than Milwaukee's. How might the nature of city's economy affect homicide?

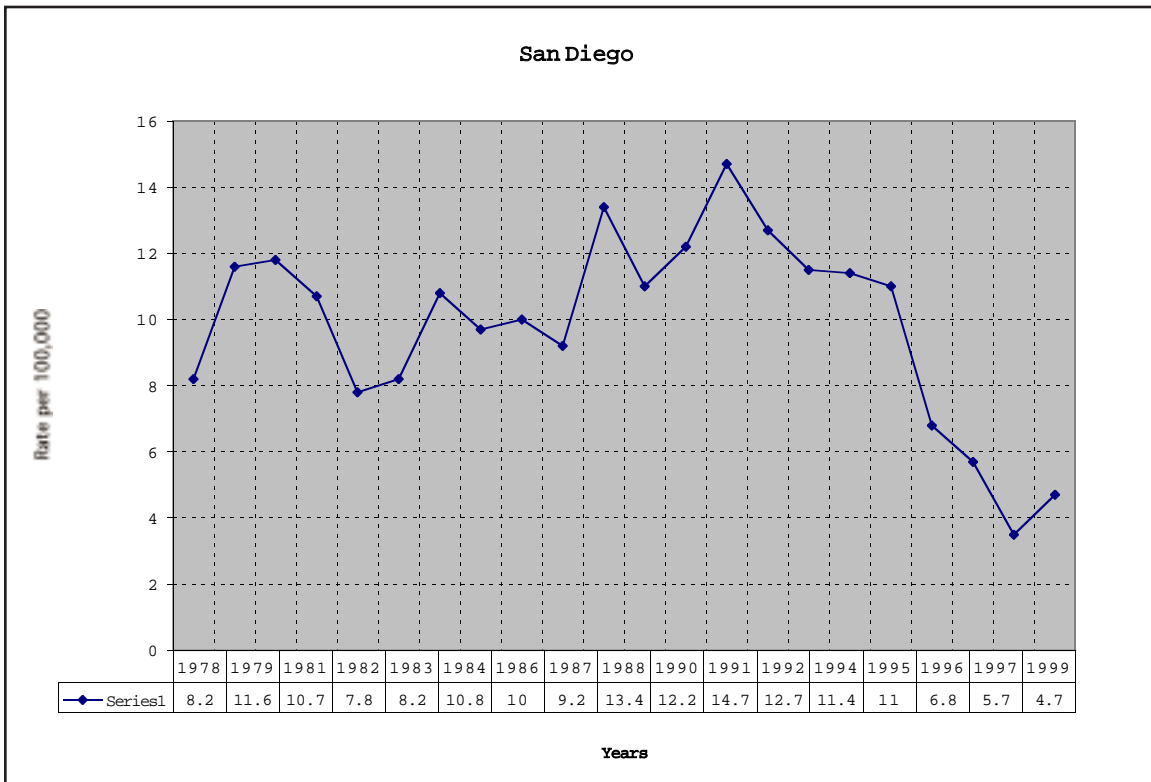
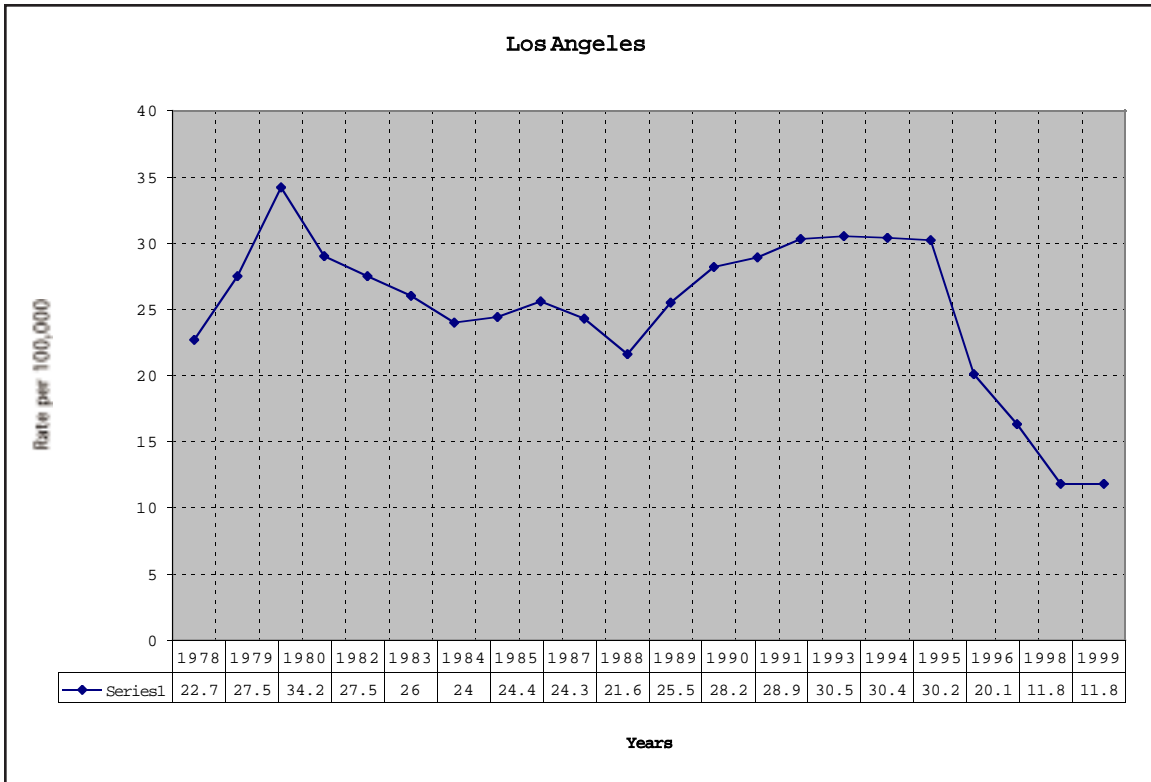
The fading smokestack economy of a city like Milwaukee may influence the homicide rate by the comparative lure of the drug game to younger people who don't see a good job in their future. The line from hopelessness to homicide is short, and often passes through gangs and drugs. If good jobs with a future aren't there, then young minority males, who see few decent life-chances, are more likely to give up on formal jobs and try their luck at the drug game. The continual influx of new, young, impulsive males hawking drugs keeps crack markets unstable and homicide rates high. Murder has always been predominately a crime of desperate men with weak ties to the labor market.

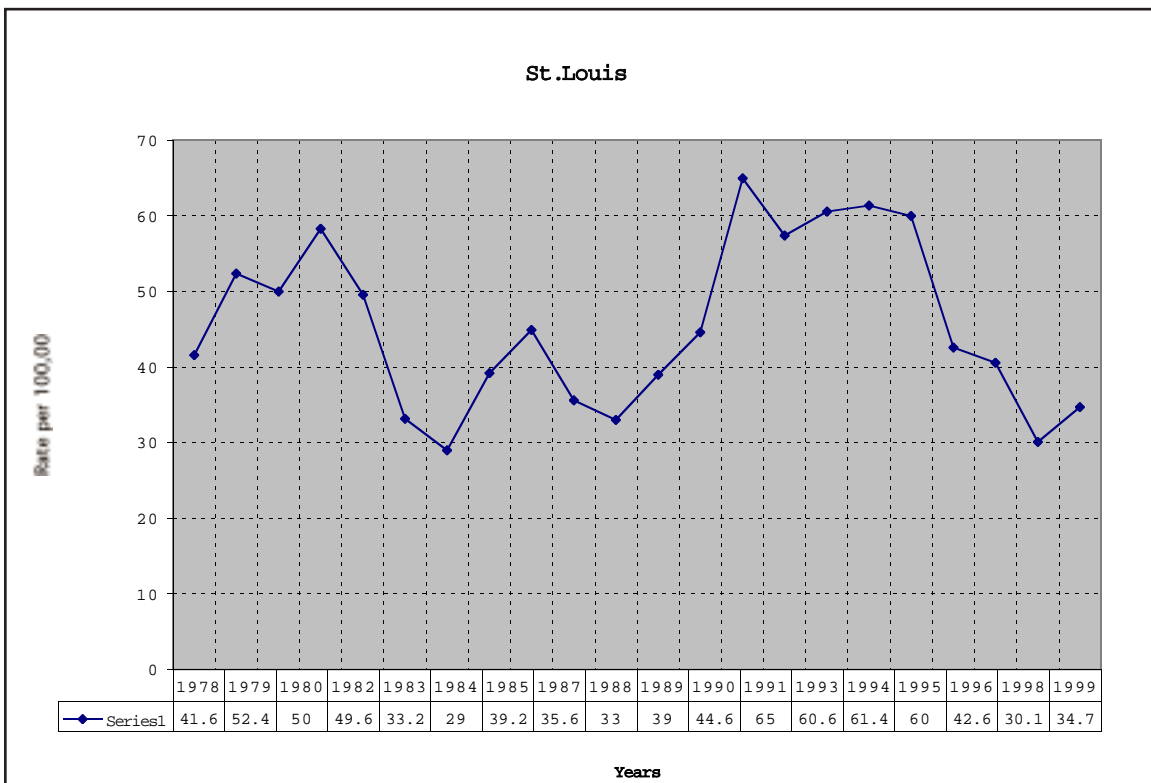
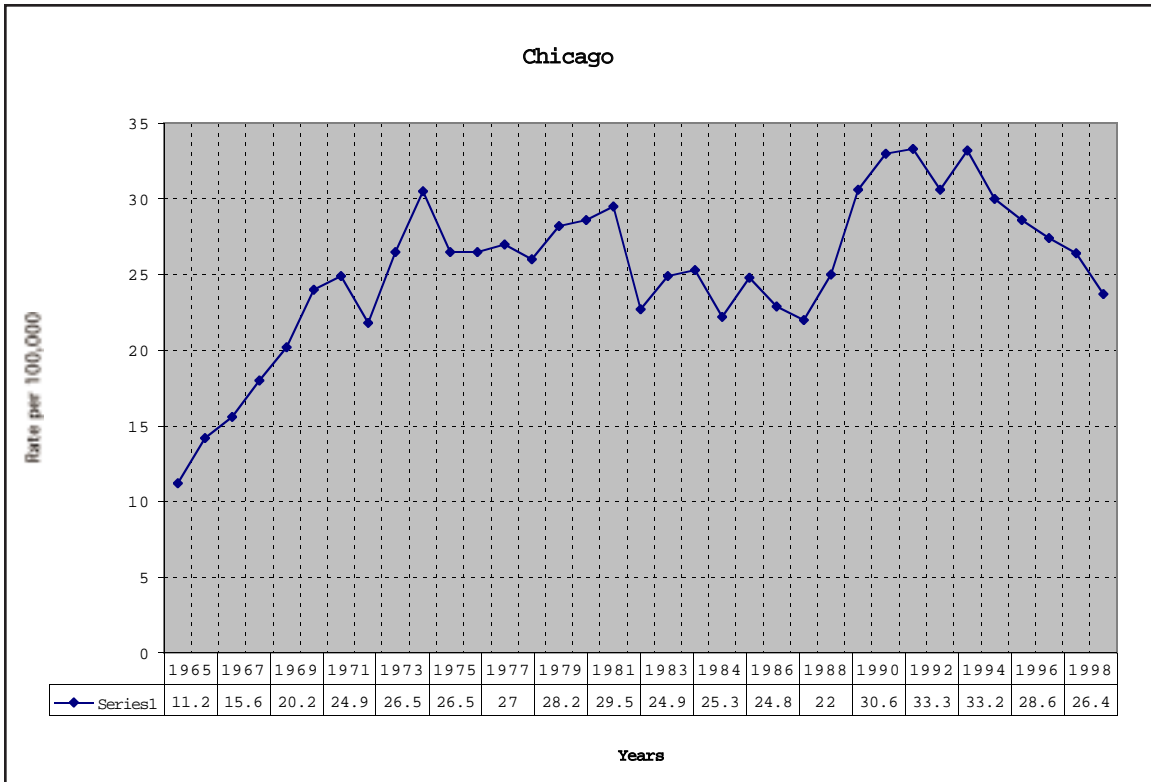
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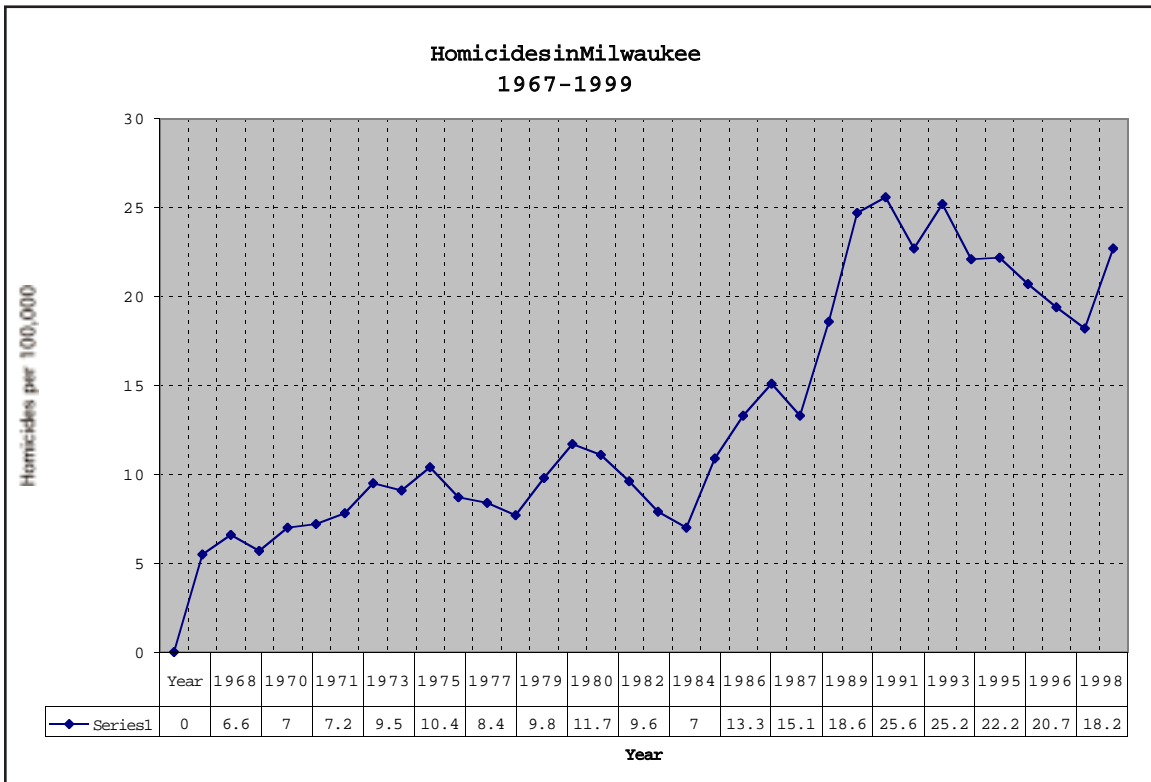
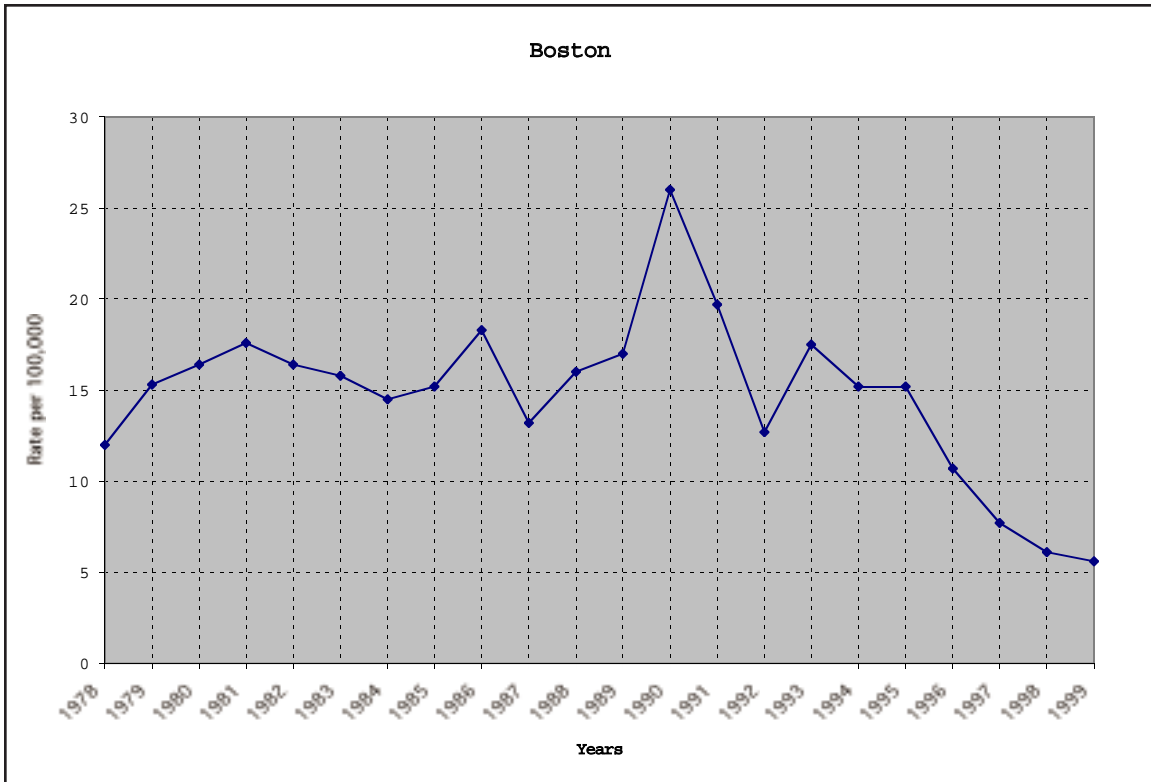
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The difference between high tech and low tech jobs is not just salary. It lies in the intangible feeling of hope, of seeing a future, that many commentators have said has been lost by many poor youth. "It's all about hope," University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Hal Rose said in an interview about a recent homicide study. "If people don't have hope, they become desperate and willing to do things they may not have before. Their children feed off of that desperation and follow in their footsteps."

Drug related homicides rose in all cities when crack markets began and declined as markets matured. *However, in old manufacturing cities like Milwaukee, markets stayed unstable and high rates of violence persisted.*

**2. Where the new economy is based seems to matter.** Segregation has consistently been related to homicide in academic studies, and Milwaukee, by every indicator, is one of the most segregated cities in the country. According to a 1998 UWM study, Milwaukee was last among "Frostbelt" cities surveyed with an astounding 46.7% of its Black population living in segregated, high poverty neighborhoods. Boston, by comparison, had only 6.3% of its Black population living in such socially isolated areas. Milwaukee's rate was twice as high as Minneapolis (21.5), Chicago (21.2), or Cleveland (21.0).

What is occurring in information cities is that the location of new businesses and gentrifying housing has spilled out of the downtown zone and into areas with lower property values. For example, the *New York Times* has carried several articles on development and gentrification in the South Bronx, Brooklyn, and Newark. The existence of large segregated areas on Chicago's south and west sides may be one reason why homicide rates there have stayed relatively high.

The new economy impacts those who live around it in two ways. First, as Saskia Sassen and others have pointed out, the majority of jobs created in the information economy are low-tech, not high tech. New buildings need janitors and superintendents; professionals need specialty shops and, yes, Starbucks. New

or rehabbed houses need carpenters, electricians, and other workmen. While craft unions and ethnic loyalties often deny African American and Latinos a chance at these jobs, minority contractors mainly hire their own. Studies in New York City have also found that a large percentage of construction jobs are off-the-books, jobs more open to minority youth. As the new economy expands to poor areas, it apparently "trickles down" to some of the minority poor.

Secondly, even the more sophisticated jobs, like web design, don't always require advanced degrees, or any degree for that matter. Homeboyz Interactive, on Milwaukee's South Side, has placed 128 people in professional jobs in the last three years. Most of these men and women do not have a high school degree and many are former gang members. Yet their average starting pay is \$39,500 per year. Significantly, most find work in Chicago, not Milwaukee.

*The new economy's jobs may be the best hope for our central cities, and our central cities may be the best hope for the new economy, as academics like Michael Porter of the Harvard Business School argue.*

**3. Cooperation with our universities and suburbs is crucial.** Cities who have been able to work with their universities and suburbs to confront their problems, like Cleveland, appear to be doing well. Other cities, like Milwaukee, which haven't linked economic development to their universities or metropolitan areas, are struggling.

Pessimism on Milwaukee's future impacts the wealthy, as well as the poor. Milwaukee's population has been dropping since 1970, when it reached a high of 741,324 to an estimated 1996 population of 590,503. Those who are moving out of Milwaukee are the highly educated and wealthy. A UWM study found that the number of taxpayers earning more than \$100,000 fell by 19% during the first seven years of the 1990s, despite a city focus on luring the affluent downtown.

Conversely, those who are staying are poorer with more social problems. Only 14.8%



of Milwaukee's population has a bachelor's degree, less than half the rate in Minneapolis (30.3%) or Boston (30.0%). Milwaukee's infant mortality rate of 12 per 1000 has actually been rising — unlike national trends — and is almost twice as high as New York City's, which reached an all-time low in 1998 of 6.8:1000.

If our city's future depends on trolleys, circus parades, and motorcycle museums we're in deep trouble. *The way to change our city's downward momentum is a high profile, joint planning effort of the city, county, and universities to create information jobs.*

### **Lessons for the Mayor's Task Force**

What would I have told the Mayor and his Task Force if I had been asked?

**1. Don't waste time proposing changes in laws, policing strategies, or social programs.** Changes in laws and policing style probably will not have much of an effect, especially on homicide. If you want to drop the crime rate quickly, you'll have to cook the books. If you are going to learn from the experience of other cities, don't look at how Police Departments in Boston or New York work, but at how former manufacturing cities like Pittsburgh, Cleveland, or Germany's Ruhr valley have reinvented themselves and given their residents hope.

**2. Work with UWM's "Milwaukee Idea" to create a city technology policy.** There is no future in a manufacturing economy. "Generic" manufacturing jobs are "here today, gone tomorrow." Milwaukee needs to find its niche in the new economy, and the only way to do

that is to work with universities to promote entrepreneurship and spin off new information businesses. Medical technology is as good a place to start as any, but the key is to find those sectors of the new economy that will "make Milwaukee famous." People will move here for good professional jobs, not the Riverwalk. UWM's new Chancellor seems to have the spirit and the ideas to make something happen. Work with her and involve the suburbs.

**3. Pay attention to the "Digital Divide."** Make sure that as the new economy develops, it reaches out and touches all areas of the city. Educational reforms, like the new "wired" charter school in Parklawn, need to be matched by private and public sector investment in "unwired" neighborhoods and increased minority entrepreneurship. The best way to create a pool of information workers is to develop the human capital in the central city, with companies like Homeboyz Interactive, not import professionals from overseas. Economic development in poor areas will, by itself, reduce segregation and rates of violence.

Can we cut crime by 50%? My sober conclusion is that Milwaukee has more in common with high-crime cities like Detroit, St. Louis, or Gary, than with low-crime cities like Pittsburgh, Minneapolis, or Cleveland. It does not have to be that way.