

Chicago-A tale of two cities

By Jim Nowlan

When outsiders think of Illinois, if they do at all, they think first of Chicago, our most visible representative. That is why the violence in the city, compared recently to that in Syria by late-night host Stephen Colbert, hurts all of us.

Chicago is really two cities—one predominantly white with good jobs; the other basically black and Hispanic, with precious few jobs, where the violence occurs.

Amtrak whisks me past the rough sections of town and into the glistening city on the lake, where buildings soar into the clouds. I am as safe in the central city along the lake and up the North Side as in any place in the nation.

The violence occurs largely on the West and South sides of the city, which are out of sight and out of mind to most people.

Gangs are the focus of attention when we talk of violence in the city. But the gangs aren't what they used to be.

[Decades ago, I was walking with friends in a gentrifying neighborhood in Chicago when we came upon a gang pow-wow between Bobby Rush's gang and that of a Latin gang. They were sitting on the broad stoop of the Armitage Avenue Methodist Church, drinking beer from quart bottles, which they offered us.

[Bobby Rush is now an old man and a veteran member of Congress from the South Side. For him, a gang was a social group, as it is today, like a fraternity for the poor and jobless.]

I have seen estimates that there are as many as 70,000 gang members in a city of 3 million, ranging from children to middle age adults.

Gangs are so pervasive in many urban centers around the world that sociology has a sub-discipline that studies them academically.

John Hagedorn is one of them, a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago and an acquaintance of mine. “The present gangs are institutions, around for more than half a century,” he says, “and they aren’t going away.”

If you drive them out of one neighborhood, as Chicago police superintendent Garry McCarthy wants to do, they will pop up somewhere else, he says, like kudzu.

Violence in Chicago is way down, as Mayor Emanuel keeps saying, from 970 homicides in 1974 to about half that, 507, in 2012. In the earlier period, there were big gang wars, as between coalitions of the People and the Folks, the gang coalitions hierarchical and with strong leadership.

Today, says Hagedorn, there are no major wars going on between gangs. Instead, the leaders have lost control of their members, and the gangs have fragmented into often small cells.

Murders and mayhem--like the recent spraying of a park basketball game with assault weapon fire--occur not so much over drug territory as over insults, girls, and fancy sneakers. The same things teens have always struggled over, though generally not with lethal force.

The professor also notes that the demolition of the high-rise housing projects in the city has dispersed the residents throughout the poor parts of the city and nearby suburbs. This has put gang members onto new turf, which already had its gangs, spurring conflict.

Most important, thinks Hagedorn, is the sense of desperation and hopelessness in the lives of the boys and young men. With little or no useful education, they have no chances of work other than maybe selling drugs.

Life is cheap for them, and many expect to spend parts of their lives in prison. Time behind bars is kind a badge of honor in a world turned upside-down, where successful drug dealers are role models.

What to do? There are no jobs for these people, and the education system in the ghetto is plagued by a culture among the kids that says doing well in school is not cool.

[I am amazed that any youngsters come out of this hell's kitchen whole, but some do. I have had very good students at university whose biggest challenge each day in the ghetto was to make it to school safely.]

Some problems are intractable, lacking solutions, but maybe the situation can be ameliorated. Until the youngsters are smothered in good education and provided hope, the best practical short-term policy might be to bring back the old-fashioned cops-on-the-beat foot patrols. The cops would have regular beats and get to know the neighborhoods.

The Economist magazine reported (August 24) on just such an experiment in Philadelphia, another violent city. The patrolmen are meeting the non-violent people of their beats, building trust, sharing information, lowering crime.

We have to try new (old) approaches. Chicago is too important to all of Illinois. We must try to limit unbridled violence.

