

SNG-Nowlan-Guns of July-7-2-12

The guns of July

By Jim Nowlan

Gun violence in Chicago presents Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel with his first crisis since entering office more than a year ago. The city's murder rate is up 35 percent from this time last year. No mayor wants to wear the collar for leading a city noted for violent crime.

More Chicagoans have been murdered in the first five months of 2012 (228) than Americans have died in Afghanistan (144) in the same period, according to David Knowles writing in thedaily.com. This is quadruple the rate of homicides in New York City.

The violence struck near home for me this past weekend. I sit on the board of the Mikva Challenge, which provides civics and politics training to hundreds of inner-city high schoolers in Chicago. Over a recent weekend, Shakika Asphy, one of our students, was shot and killed while she sat on a friend's porch on the south side of the city, apparently by a random bullet.

The murder rate in Chicago and most major cities has actually been coming down sharply from high points in the early 1990s; in 1992, Chicago logged 943 murders. At this year's pace, the city will register about 500 in 2012.

But why the spike in Chicago homicides this spring and early summer? Murders tend to go up with the warming of the weather. We have enjoyed an unusually warm spring.

Gang warfare could be another factor, yet gangs expert John Hagedorn of the University of Illinois at Chicago dismisses that possibility. "What all my street contacts tell me is that the string of murders results from kids out of control, and not of organized gang violence. . . .In

Chicago, the gang leaders, who are all behind bars, no longer exercise meaningful control on the streets.”

Hagedorn predicts the murder rate will revert to the mean, “two to three times the rate of NYC and half that of Detroit.”

In 2005, 75 percent of murders in Chicago involved a firearm. Sixty percent of the murderers were between 17 and 25, and 76 percent of the victims were African American.

[The mean streets on the south and west sides of Chicago, where most of the violence occurs, are light years away from where you and I live. The poverty grinds people down; jobs are scarce, and desperation reigns. Parenting is often poor or nonexistent. After school, many of the young people, having no one at home to greet them, roam undisciplined.]

Often with resistance from the city’s strong police union, Chicago has been scrambling to impose tactics that are standard in other departments. Recent police superintendent Jody Weiss required evaluation reports on all officers, to hold them accountable. Present chief Garry McCarthy has imposed a data-heavy COMPSTAT system to target hotspots. McCarthy has also changed the 911 response policy to divert many calls away from police units to other responders, to focus police efforts on crime.

Clyde Cronkhite is a professor of law enforcement at Western Illinois University and a former police chief who once headed the juvenile division in the Los Angeles Police Department. He calls for thinking outside the box in dealing with juveniles.

Most gang members are not hard-core. There are “beginners” who are savable and “apprentices” who can also, with effort, be pulled away from hard-core gangsters.

In LA, Cronkhite recalls that kids flirting with trouble had no one at home after school, so he and his staff would assign a youngster after school to a firefighter at the local station house, who had agreed to serve as a “big brother.” Sometimes the fire house would become the youngster’s “gang.”

Cronkhite believes in holding officers accountable for results and in giving officers discretion to use creative ways to achieve results, rather than “bean counting” the number of arrests. He says that, for example, promoting positive role models for gang members from sports, music, and movies as well as former gang members has proved productive.

Another tactic is to target “quality of life” minor crimes such as drugs, prostitution, and graffiti, which provides a reason to stop people and then question them to learn about possibly more serious infractions.

Trust and leadership from the community is critical, says Cronkhite, if police are to generate the information and leads they need. Support from churches, social service agencies, schools and political leaders is also needed; police alone cannot solve the problem.

I don’t know if the Chicago police generally have trust from the neighborhoods with the most violence. I do know that the intense, action-oriented Emanuel confronts a key test to his leadership in efforts to keep murder in the streets off the front pages.