

SNG-Tale of two or more cities-9-26-16

Chicago: A tale of two or more cities

By Jim Nowlan

I took the #20 Chicago CTA bus recently, starting from a canyon of towering office and residential buildings in the central Loop, exuding wealth.

The bus traveled along Madison Street straight west to the depleted Austin neighborhood on the far edge of the city, 60 blocks away but within the long shadow of the Sears Tower, still visible.

I was going to meet my friend Berto Aguayo, a former Latino gang member who went straight, recently graduated from college, probably headed to law school and city politics.

Berto is working for an anti-violence, non-profit group based in the Austin, where violence is part of the routine.

The bus ride was instructive. The prosperous professional class has pushed far west to Western Avenue, 24 blocks west of the Loop. Old brick buildings have been rehabbed into condos, iron balconies newly attached to each unit.

After Western, however, the rehabbing stops. You see chip board where plate glass used to let the sun in. Storefront churches and liquor stores operate where decades ago banks welcomed factory workers and their savings.

Many building are empty, abandoned. I smile ruefully to myself that I wouldn't be surprised to see tumbleweeds.

Berto ran some statistics by me about Austin and adjacent West Side neighborhoods.

Two-thirds of black high school dropouts do prison time. Sixty to 80 percent of the 16-24- year-olds are without jobs. There are precious few suitable marriage partners for young women, who nevertheless want to have children.

The major gangs have fragmented, almost atomized, into very small bands of out-of-control teens.

A National Institutes of Mental Health paper reports that the parts of the teen brain involved in keeping emotional, impulsive responses in check haven't reached maturity.

In other words, gang-banging teens don't think much about nor care about the consequences of their actions. Prison time is a rite of passage.

People who can, leave, taking with them leadership, role model and nurturing qualities.

Partly as a result of the forgoing, violence in these depleted neighborhoods on the South and West Sides has skyrocketed. There have been 3,000 shootings in Chicago thus far in 2016, with two or three murders a day the norm.

The specter of this violence has to hurt the city overall, and its future. The New York Times, National Public Radio, and international media outlets have been exposing this epidemic of violence, where Chicago stands out like a sore thumb.

This ripples out to the rest of Illinois, which is heavily dependent upon a metro-Chicago that pays more than its population's share of state taxes and is a magnet for many of us downstaters.

What to do about the violence?

First, return to community policing. The old cop on the beat who gets to know his or her people. Better than the police swooping in to handle a crime, then moving on, never touching the neighborhood, seeming aliens.

And the cops should be mostly of the same ethnicity as the neighborhood.

Ideally, the same police would even live in the neighborhood, yet who could you get to do so?

In return for government social services, I would require single mothers to wear long-term birth control patches, to reduce the number of children in the neighborhood who are inadequately nurtured.

Berto wants more youth centers in the neighborhoods. He yearns for more role models for the youngsters, yet is not sure how to provide them.

He understandably wants more jobs, but jobs require skills, which are lacking among the young people.

And make it harder to get guns. Chicago has tough gun laws, but suppliers simply buy the guns in Indiana and run them up to the 'hoods.

What really worries me is that few of us really care, deep down. The problems are out-of-sight, out-of-mind. We wish the problems would go away, yet just want to keep them penned in, away from us.

I would think Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel, top legislative leaders Mike Madigan and John Cullerton, both native Chicagoans, and Gov. Bruce Rauner, whose state takes such a beating, would all be closeted, pulling people, resources, ideas together to develop comprehensive short-term and long-term plans to address the problem.

Instead, they spend all their time pissing [spitting, if you wish, editors] on one another in campaigns of vitriolic ads filled with half-truths and worse. Sad.