

GETTING MUGGED IN ELECTRON ALLEY

MILWAUKEE'S GANG PROBLEMS JUST WON'T GO AWAY

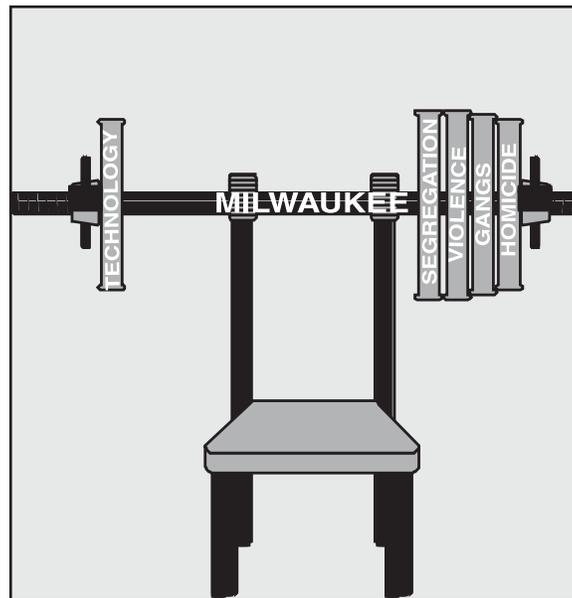
JOHN M. HAGEDORN

Along with many other people, I commute to work in Chicago by Amtrak. One afternoon this fall, Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist got on the train at Union Station with a group of business-types. Now the Mayor and I aren't exactly best of friends, so I kept to myself.

The Mayor was selling the city to what appeared to be high-tech executives from Chicago. As the train entered Milwaukee, the group stood up in the aisle to gape at a stretch of unsightly, rusting factories and debris. One of the Chicagoans turned to the Mayor and said, "You're going to have to do something about the front door."

This incident hits us right in our Achilles heel. As a rustbelt city, Milwaukee is experiencing a rough transition to the information era. While the Mayor and others are trying to give the city a makeover, the city's persisting gang problems and high rates of violence remain cause for concern.

Last summer, the Mayor vowed to lower crime by 50% and curtail gang violence. In this journal (Volume 9, Number 2), I predicted it wouldn't happen, no matter what kind of law



enforcement strategy the city implemented. Well, a year and a half and numerous task forces, symposia, and police reforms later, no change yet.

This essay explains why our gang problems and homicide rate are unlikely to significantly decline in the immediate future. First, I look at some disquieting characteristics of cities in the global era.

Second, I explore the relationship between de-industrialization and homicide. Finally, I argue that the first step in solving our problems is old-fashioned honesty.

"Winner Cities" and "Loser Cities"

Cities, according to Saskia Sassen and other leading scientists, have become key nodes in the global economy. Some urban scholars argue that uneven development divides the urban world into "winner cities" and "loser cities." It is useful, if uncomfortable, to review this literature.

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, and a Fellow of the Great Cities Institute. He has also authored several books, studies and articles on Milwaukee.

“Winner cities” are those that have integrated into the 21st century’s information economy. They have strong financial and high-tech sectors and spatially agglomerate many companies with similar interests. These cities are gaining population, especially in the city’s redeveloping central zones. Cultural amenities for those workers Robert Reich calls “symbolic analysts” are accessible and plentiful. Winner cities have at least one, but often several, world-class universities that provide intellectual capital for innovation and high-tech startups. A world-class airport allows for easy access to the global networks that dominate economic life. Winner cities are connected.

Winner cities are also dual, or divided cities. Gangs are a permanent feature of the post-industrial landscape. Poverty and discrimination coincide with great wealth. But within winner cities, prosperity has often brought declines in segregation and rates of violence, and improvements in the quality of life. There is no consensus among criminologists about the reasons for the 1990s drop in U.S. crime, but among the cities with the steepest declines are New York, Los Angeles, Boston, San Francisco, and Seattle — all cities with strong, new economies.

“Loser cities,” on the other hand, typically have had a historic over-reliance on manufacturing. These cities have weak information, export, and financial sectors. Loser cities have continued to lose population, especially among the better-off taxpayers, and have experienced a “brain drain” of educated youth. The suburbs continue to grow at the central city’s expense. Without a world-class university, there is little high-tech entrepreneurial activity. Under-funded research facilities are unable to attract high-profile corporations or top-rank academics. Loser cities are among the nation’s most segregated with vast areas of social exclusion.

Loser cities often try to create a “tourist bubble” of cultural and athletic attractions, as Dennis Judd and other scholars have explained. But with few high-paying jobs, which today mainly come from the informa-

tion economy, these gimmicks often turn into disaster, as occurred in Flint, Michigan. The tourist economy, where successful, works best as a supplement to or a by-product of a thriving information sector. Tourism is a very expensive and usually foolish stand-alone strategy. Cities like New Orleans can survive on tourism due to their unique history, but rustbelt cities are poor bets to seriously compete with their warm-weather, more exotic, cousins.

Of course cities are not “either/or,” but fall on a continuum — from global cities like Boston or New York to devastated urban areas like Gary or Detroit. The Midwest appears to have an over-representation of loser cities. As the “iron belt” of America rusted at the end of the 20th century, the benefits to a city of a strong manufacturing sector turned into a disadvantage. The choice location of the Midwest as a crossroads of national commerce also turned into a disadvantage as trade went global. Crime and violence today, as always, are closely related to the prospects of minority and marginal groups for economic and social success. One pretty good indicator of whether things are going well or badly is the level and trend in a city’s homicide rate.

Homicide, Gangs, and Loser Cities

When the Mayor pledged to cut crime by 50% he looked at cities like New York, Boston, and Los Angeles, and thought, well, they could do it, why can’t we? Since then, violence hasn’t dropped, the Mayor is looking for a scapegoat, and Police Chief Art Jones is on the hot seat.

Milwaukee had 95 homicides in the first nine months of this year, on track for 126 or a rate of about 22 per 100,000. That’s a little above last year and nearly as high as Chicago. Milwaukee’s homicide rate has plateaued at a level about three-times higher than New York City’s, and about half the rate of traditionally high-violence cities like Detroit or St. Louis.

Homicide may be a good proxy for the depth of a city’s urban problems. Violence, as historian Roger Lane explains, is most often

the result of the frustration of young men who are weakly attached to the labor market. Hopelessness, as Milwaukee's own noted geographer, Hal Rose, argues, is strongly correlated to violence. Where rates of segregation are high and good paying opportunities low, violence climbs. Gangs take root as social organizations of the disenchanting, the alienated, and the hopeless. Gangs provide a short-term future, which, many young men conclude, is better than no future at all.

Most homicides are no longer killings of passion between people who know each other, but what the police call "stranger homicides,"

Winner cities look quite different from loser cities in their homicide rates. Let's compare rust belt Milwaukee with comparatively sized high-tech Boston, to see how trends differ. The crack wars increased homicides in most cities in the late eighties and early nineties, but winner cities bounced back and loser cities didn't. Note how in the 1980s, Boston's number of homicides was higher than Milwaukee's, but in the 1990s Boston's murders dropped, and Milwaukee's stayed high. While Boston has experienced a small jump in homicides this year, their total is only half of Milwaukee's.

TABLE I ABSOLUTE NUMBER OF HOMICIDES 1985-2001 — BOSTON AND MILWAUKEE

	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991
Boston	87	105	76	93	99	143	113
Milwaukee	68	83	92	81	112	155	157
	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Boston	73	98	85	96	59	43	34
Milwaukee	146	157	139	138	130	122	111
	1999	2000	2001				
Boston	31	39	48				
Milwaukee	124	121	95*				

* First nine months

often tied to gangs and the drug game. In loser cities, the illicit economy includes many conventionally-oriented males who are unable to get regular jobs. By contrast, in winner cities a tight labor market attracts many of that same group into service and construction jobs. Illicit income, for men in cities like Milwaukee, is crucial for day-to-day survival and competition often turns violent. Since there are few licit alternatives and a large pool of frustrated unemployed young men, police tactics of any sort seldom make much difference. Removing one set of drug dealers in a loser city only brings a new set to the fore.

Some people attribute Boston's 1990s reduction in homicides to unique police-community collaboration, but similar sharp declines occurred in zero-tolerance New York City and community-policing San Diego. And why have homicides dropped in Los Angeles, where the police were in turmoil after the Rodney King incident and have little community credibility? Most criminologists, such as Carnegie-Mellon's Alfred Blumstein, scoff at a simplistic correlation between police tactics and the crime drop of the 1990s.

So a key question is why have some cities' homicide rates jumped up but not gone back down? We can see that East Coast and West Coast information cities weathered the crack epidemic and pushed homicide rates back to historic lows. But in the rustbelt, the pattern differs. Smaller industrial cities like Gary, Indiana and Flint, Michigan both became "murder capitals" of the U.S. as industry fled and desperation set in. While Milwaukee's homicide rate reached an all-time high in 1991 of 25.6 per 100,000, Gary's homicide rate peaked in 1995 at an astonishing 131 per 100,000!

with a comparatively healthy industrial economy, saw its murder rate only creep up slowly.

By the mid-eighties, de-industrialization was beginning to affect Milwaukee and by the early nineties our homicide rate was five times its early sixties' lows. Detroit's homicide rate plateaued in the eighties at three to four times Milwaukee's rate and twice that of New York City's or Chicago's.

The economic boom of the 1990s in "winner cities" resulted in a sharp drop in their homicide rates, but in Midwest "loser cities," rates stayed high.

**TABLE IIA HOMICIDES PER 100,000 1960-1980
DETROIT, MILWAUKEE AND GARY**

	1960-4	1967	1970	1973	1980
Detroit	<9	21.4	37.4	52.3	45.7
Milwaukee	5*	5.5	7.0	9.5	11.7
Gary	<13	20.4	29.6	43.4	55.9

* approximate

However, we need to account for Chicago, a "global city" with a booming high tech economy, where homicides didn't drop as they did in New York or Los Angeles. One particularity of Chicago's economic recovery, as Janet

The relationship between de-industrialization and homicide can be more clearly seen if we look at Detroit and Gary, where we have good historical data. The decline in the auto industry began in the 1960s and reached catastrophic proportions by the 1970s. In the early sixties, Detroit had homicide rates only slightly higher than Milwaukee's. By 1967, however, as auto plants shut down, homicide jumped up in Detroit — and kept on climbing. Milwaukee,

Abu-Lughod has shown, is that the ghetto in Chicago has not fragmented or dissolved, but has moved intact, south and west. Vast areas of segregation have been *reinforced* by Loop-focused developments, not attenuated. Chicago's gangs have been displaced from old haunts only to be re-concentrated in peripheral areas of the city and suburbs. Homicide rates in Chicago today are not as high as the early nineties, but still higher than during the Capone era. The key term here is *social exclu -*

**TABLE IIB HOMICIDES PER 100,000 1985-1991
DETROIT, MILWAUKEE AND GARY**

	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991
Detroit	58.2	59.0	62.8	57.9	60.0	56.6	59.3
Milwaukee	10.9	13.3	15.1	13.3	18.6	24.7	25.6
Gary	45.4	35.2	34.6	42.0	37.4	55.7	50.6

**TABLE IIC HOMICIDES PER 100,000 1992-2000
DETROIT, MILWAUKEE AND GARY**

	1992	1993	1995	1997	1999	2000
Detroit	57.0	56.7	55.1	45.9	40.1	41.6
Milwaukee	22.7	25.2	22.2	19.4	22.3	20.3
Gary	70.4	90.3	79.2	84.1	68.5	65.2

sion: racial hostility and inaccessible economic opportunities mean high rates of violence.

The good news is that things in Milwaukee aren't as bad as in Detroit or Gary. The bad news is that the pattern of homicide in Milwaukee is more similar to trends in Detroit and Gary than to patterns in Boston or Seattle.

Looking Frankly at Milwaukee Today

One thing has changed in Milwaukee in the last years: rhetoric about technology. According to our Mayor, Milwaukee is becoming known as "electron alley" because of our abundance of engineers. Milwaukee, he told us, has been identified by the *Utne Reader* as America's most under-rated city! A briefing paper for the Second Wisconsin Economic Summit complains, "The common and negative misperception that we're already 'well behind' may be the single biggest hurdle Wisconsin faces."

The City of Milwaukee web page now has a 57-frame slide show, highlighting Milwaukee's "high-tech" economy. The Milwaukee Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce just issued a report assuring Milwaukeeans that we're better off here than in most cities. The Mayor confidently announced in his 2001 State of the City Address: "Milwaukee is well-positioned for the new century and the new economy."

But just saying it doesn't make it so. A lot more than hopeful words or catchy phrases are needed to turn Milwaukee around.

It is a welcome change that the Mayor and other leaders have recognized that our city needs information industries to flourish. And

pointing to our city's strengths, like the Calatrava addition to the art museum, Miller Park, and GE Medical Systems, is a good thing. But to delude ourselves that what's mainly wrong is our image — and not our backward economy, high rates of segregation, and near-sighted political leaders — is dangerous.

Let's talk bluntly here. The Milken Index of states ranks Wisconsin as 31st on their "New Economy" scale. The Progressive Policy Institute ranks Milwaukee 40th among the 50 largest U.S. cities on their "New Economy" Index. City and state leaders complain these indices fail to measure the extent of high-tech employees in traditional companies. That may be so, but such words ring hollow in a state whose largest high-tech employer, according to those same experts, is the State Division of Motor Vehicles.

Wisconsin, as a Midwest state, has a very low level of exports (21st), hamstringing us in global competition. Wisconsin ranks 35th among states in number of residents with an advanced degree. Less than half of the University of Wisconsin's Business and Engineering graduates stay in Wisconsin. Milwaukee still ranks second, behind Detroit, in percentage of jobs in the manufacturing sector. The economic downturn has affected manufacturing more than other sectors and welfare caseloads are again rising.

The Lewis Mumford Center, which analyzes census data, ranks Milwaukee's degree of segregation third highest in the nation, just behind #1 Detroit, and #2 Gary. The Chamber of Commerce study reports that among comparable cities, only Sacramento, with a small

Black population, has a higher Black unemployment rate.

Milwaukee's future depends, in part, on the allocation of scarce resources in the University of Wisconsin system. For Milwaukee to take off, UWM has to fulfill the promise of the "Milwaukee Idea." Chancellor Nancy Zimpher has had some success leveraging private and public resources, but it's not clear there are enough resources for the State of Wisconsin to fund two world-class universities. Unfortunately, the current Milwaukee Mayor shows little understanding of how crucial a top-notch university is to the city's future.

It has been only in the last few years that politicians have begun to give some thought to how to go about transforming our city. In Chicago, *in the 1950s (!)*, Richard J. Daley, the current mayor's father, rejected the idea that Chicago's future was linked to manufacturing. Instead, he went on a massive building campaign in the Loop aimed at cementing Chicago's financial leadership in the Midwest, building a world-class airport at O'Hare, and investing in universities.

Henry Maier had none of Daley's far-sightedness. Milwaukee in the 1960s and 1970s was among the most segregated and heavily industrialized cities in the country, but unlike Chicago, no plans were made for change. Mayor John Norquist, who took over for Maier, had a vast supply of good-will and political capital for reform. But instead of pushing for change, he watched as the city's industry left, its Black population became hyper-segregated, and its homicide rate soared. It was not more than three years ago when I was told by a high official of the Mayor's administration (understandably nameless) that Milwaukee would be better off without a strong information sector, which, s/he thought, was too volatile.

What Is To Be Done?

Our gang problems, and our high rates of violence, are related to the bleak prospects for our city. As long as our city stumbles in reviv-

talization, no police reorganizations or model programs will turn things around.

The centuries-long and worldwide decline in violence brought about by modernization, was interrupted in the Western world by increases in violence from the 1960s into the 1990s. According to Ted Gurr and Roger Lane, the decay of industry, coupled with historic discrimination toward African-Americans and cultural changes, created a "U" curve in trends of violence: high medieval rates, low rates in the modern era, and high rates once again in the post-industrial era. The new economy may be returning us to the path of a more civilized, less violent, world.

Conservative thinkers like James Q. Wilson believe recent high rates of violence are related to a breakdown in the family and the country's social fabric. However, Wilson, like his liberal counterparts, can't easily explain the sharp declines in violence in the nineties, nor why they happen in some cities and not others. It's unreasonable to think that family values have fallen apart in Milwaukee and Chicago while they have been re-discovered in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

A better police chief won't stop Milwaukee's drug game, and our spectacular art museum won't make gang members less desperate. What is called for, as Jordi Borja and Manuel Castells point out in their review of how cities transform is, first of all, the recognition we are in awful straights. What we need is not puffed-up words about how well Milwaukee is "positioned" in the new economy, but a leader, commission, or business group who will have the intestinal fortitude to say the emperor has no clothes.

Milwaukee's main problems are there for anyone to see:

1. No "niche" in the world economy comparable to our machine-tool and brewery sectors in the industrial era;
2. Hyper-segregation of the city's African-American population;
3. No world-class university or airport; and

4. Lack of cooperation and weak leadership in the city and metropolitan area.

We can do something about all of these. Minneapolis is a midwestern city, which had a strong manufacturing economy, and also had a sharp rise in homicides. But homicides there dropped sharply, just like in Boston and other “winner cities.” Good things have happened in some rustbelt cities, and they can here too.

We can pretend everything is okay while secretly worrying that we may *really* be a “loser city.” Or we can unblinkingly face our problems. While it may seem a bit naïve, I believe that in politics, as in life, honesty is still the best policy.