

Friday, July 25, 2008

Chicago: Murder rate sparks political spats

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It's been one long, bloody year for the Windy City.

Murders are up 13 percent. During the past school year, 29 Chicago-area youths were killed by gunfire. On one April weekend, 40 people were shot. Over the July Fourth weekend, nine people were gunned down - with three more killed this past weekend.

The press is dubbing Chicago "Beirut by the Lake."

The inner-city crime wave has sparked political spats. Illinois Gov. Rod R. Blagojevich told fellow Democrat Mayor Richard M. Daley he might send in National Guard helicopters and the Illinois State Police as an elite tactical team to help Chicago cops. Some observers consider the offer an embarrassment to the mayor and his new police superintendent as well as a political power move, arriving just as the city enjoys a singular honor. Chicago is among the finalists to host the 2016 Olympic Games.

"It's fair to say that violent crime in Chicago is out of control," Mr. Blagojevich said recently. "In certain communities in the city of Chicago, it is reaching epidemic proportions."

John M. Hagedorn, a professor of criminal justice at the University of Illinois at Chicago, said some of the killings were over drugs, others involved gang activity with victims in the crossfire. There also are turf battles. Minority communities now seek to replace old neighborhoods, lost to urban renewal.

"There is still a lot of movement of people. The black community is very unsettled," said Mr. Hagedorn, the author of "A World of Gangs: Armed Young Men and Gangsta Culture."

"Schools are closing and kids are being shipped to different schools, so you have that kind of instability that goes along with the historic treatment of the black community as something to be pushed around into one place and treated as a second-class citizens."

Mr. Hagedorn thinks police are not blameless in fueling local outrage. He calls the governor's offer to send extra law enforcement a political ploy, rather than a serious solution.

"There has been a large string of shootings by police - at one point, seven over the course of 10 days. It's really added to the hostility and alienation of the community," he said. "One of the factors that fuels violence is hostility. The

nihilism is there for a reason.

"The other thing that is related to that is the method that this new chief is trying to use to get tough on the gangs - arming a unit with assault weapons and high-tech artillery and creating a military unit to attack the gangs," Mr. Hagedorn added. "It's the whole notion of war ... Chicago declared war on gangs in 1969, and we've had 40 years of war now. Do you think maybe we could figure out something else? I don't know how war solves violence."

Tio Hardiman, director of gang mediation at CeaseFire, an initiative of the Chicago Project for Violence Prevention, agrees that constructive intervention rather than force alone is critical. He doesn't think the gang problem has become worse and calls it mainly "factional."

"The Chicago police are doing the best they can," he said. "But people need resources. They need to be educated about how to deal with a conflict. You definitely have gangs, but 60 percent of violence is interpersonal."

Many urban youths are raised to think violence and anger is the normal way to handle problems, he said, calling for more funding for programs such as CeaseFire, which uses outreach workers to identify high-risk residents with criminal backgrounds and "violence interrupters," who monitor roiling street conflicts to stop likely crimes before they start.

"There is a culture of violence in the inner city," Mr. Hadiman said. "Most people come from violent thinking and violent lifestyles and they think it's OK to kill somebody. We have to get them thinking on a higher level."

"Education is key," he added. "We can't change their circumstances, so the main thing we have to stress is the education factor. The more education you receive, the more tools you will have to think about your actions before you act. That's important. Some of these guys never leave the block. It's their whole world."

City police and state law-enforcement officials met this week to discuss the governor's offer. Recently, the mayor defended police superintendent Jody P. Weis, saying he did "a tremendous job."

Other officials have written the governor in support of Mr. Weis and his department. DuPage County State's Attorney Joseph E. Birkett, a Republican, praised the officers and asked Mr. Blagojevich to consider reinstatement of a statewide anti-gang unit once run by the state police.

"I urge you to stop disparaging the Chicago Police Department, who, in my opinion, have done an outstanding job in their fight against street gangs," Mr. Birkett wrote.

Mr. Weis, a former FBI agent on the job as police superintendent for just six months, has taken the criticism quietly and has said he does not think crime in Chicago is out of control. He predicted the crime statistics will go down by year's end.

"Quite frankly, we need to get back to the mission and important job of fighting crime instead of fighting misconceptions," Mr. Weis said.

Nonetheless, he has been chastised by city aldermen and the council's Police and Fire Committee, particularly after a fatal gang shooting during the city's popular "Taste of Chicago" festival.

While some said the police chief was under scrutiny because he came from outside the department's ranks, the committee's chairman, Isaac Carothers, who represents the city's 29th Ward, called Mr. Weis "inexperienced," and demanded he respond to "unprecedented" violence.

Added Ward 14 Alderman Edward M. Burke: "Being superintendent of the CPD is like sitting on top of a keg of dynamite with the fuse getting shorter everyday."