



Gangs, Not Drugs, Must Be Law Enforcement Focus in Addressing Homicide Problem

Joshua Crawford

In 2006, Louisville was named one of the top ten least violent cities with a population over 500,000 residents.ⁱ Ten short years later, Louisville recorded 124 criminal homicides, the most in city history.ⁱⁱ The trend

hasn't been gradual though; while Louisville had 50 murders in 2006, it had just 58 in 2014.ⁱⁱⁱ In the two years since we've seen

those numbers more than doubled.^{iv} The sharp and unprecedented rise in homicide specifically, and violent crime generally, has taken Louisville from being one of the safest

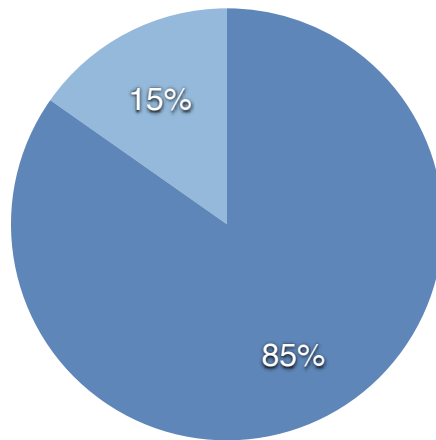
cities in America to being one of the least safe.

Unfortunately, over that same time period, Kentucky has been ravaged by the opioid epidemic.^v Data from the Louisville coroner's office shows that 324 individuals died from an accidental drug overdose in 2016.^{vi} According to the Kentucky Office of Drug Control Policy, that is a 47 percent increase from the 220 fatal overdoses in

2015,^{vii} which itself was a 31 percent increase from 2014.^{viii} Despite dramatic increases in drug overdoses, driven almost

entirely by heroin overdoses, data show no marked increase in the arrest of street-level dealers in Louisville.

- LMPD Gang Related Homicide Investigations, 2016
- LMPD Non-Gang Related Homicide Investigations, 2016



While the opioid epidemic and the spike in violence have occurred in the same sphere, our research indicates fighting the heroin crisis will not directly reduce violence and murder. Gangs and gang culture, not drugs, have been the main cause of our violent crime epidemic. Of the 124 homicides in Louisville in 2016, 118 were investigated by the Louisville Metro Police Department (LMPD). Of those, 100 were gang related and often driven by issues of respect and reputation. No reliable information about murders directly related to the illicit drug trade was available at the time of this report.

**THE ILLICIT DRUG MARKET,
GANGS, AND HONOR CULTURE**

The illicit drug market, by its very nature, lacks access to legitimate, legal ways to mediate disputes. Despite this, the illegal drug market is generally peaceful.^{ix} Despite an estimated \$100 billion is spent on illegal drugs in the United States every year, the

overwhelming majority of illegal drug transactions occur without violence.^x However, violence within the illicit drug market is naturally more prevalent than legitimate businesses, but varies greatly from locality to locality.^{xi} Boston, Providence, and Cincinnati, cities also in the midst of the opioid crisis, are among the one-third of American cities that had murders stagnate or drop in 2016.^{xii}

Attributing the increase in violence to the drug market, to drug dealing, or to drug use would be a mistake. A 2003 report by The Sentencing Project found that participation in the drug market is very fluid, and most dealers' careers are very short.^{xiii} Additionally, only 25% of those involved in the illicit drug trade had been arrested for a violent offense and only about one-sixth had been convicted of a violent offense.^{xiv}

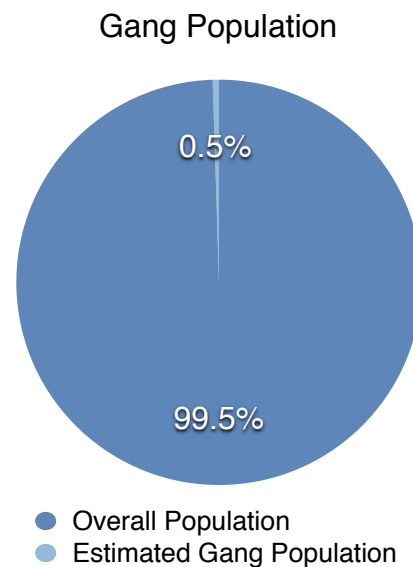
By contrast, the FBI's 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment report found that

gang activity accounts for an average of 48% of the violence in most jurisdictions.^{xv} According to that report, street gangs had about 1.4 million members during that period. That was approximately 0.5% of the total U.S. population, committing nearly 50% of the violence.

Not all gang members engage in drug dealing. In 2012, a study by Mathew Phillips, a research analyst with the Rochester Youth Development Study at the State University of New York at Albany, examined a panel of delinquent youth and found that the drug dealers within a gang are actually less likely to use weapons or commit certain violent acts than their non-drug dealing fellow gang members.^{xvi} Intuitively, this should make sense. The illicit drug market requires relative secrecy and individual drug dealers do not want any additional police attention. In many instances, gangs attempt to discourage this

kind of violence among their members because it doesn't make business sense.^{xvii}

However, this economic calculation goes out the window when the violence is personal. Other factors, including underlying issues of respect and reputation drive much of the urban violence associated with gang



subculture.^{xviii} Gang membership is often driven by youth looking for respect.^{xix} So

when disrespect is shown once they become gang affiliated, violence follows suit.^{xx} In street gang research, the “Three Rs; Respect, Reputation, and Retaliation” are both a primary function of gang membership and the impetus of much of the violence.^{xxi} Gang subculture is an honor based subculture, and like similar honor based cultures, it sanctions violence after insult or other perceived mistreatment.^{xxii}

This is why interventions aimed at disrupting the illicit drug markets, even when effective at doing so, have not meaningfully reduced violent crime in the target areas.

THE NASHVILLE EXPERIMENT

Attempts to isolate and to disrupt the illicit drug market are typically a high priority amongst urban police departments. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, as of 2013 nearly every police department serving more than 100,000 residents participated in a drug-specific task force.^{xxiii} So do approximately

8 in 10 departments serving 25,000 to 99,999 residents and 7 in 10 departments serving 10,000 to 24,999 residents.^{xxiv}

A highly successful drug market disruption attempt occurred in East Nashville, TN. The program was a focused deterrence policing model designed to target the drug market rather than violent and gang affiliated individuals.^{xxv} The goal of the intervention was not to just disrupt, but shut down open air drug markets.^{xxvi} Officers first identified well know dealers and then used a combination of informal social controls, social service organizations, clearly outlined sanctions and direct law enforcement contact to disrupt the market.^{xxvii} The results were revealing. Researchers found the program resulted in a 55% reduction in illegal drug possession offenses, a 37% reduction in drug equipment offenses, and a 28% reduction in property crime.^{xxviii} However, despite suppressing the illicit drug market in East Nashville, Corsaro

and McGarrell found no corresponding reduction in violent crime.^{xxix}

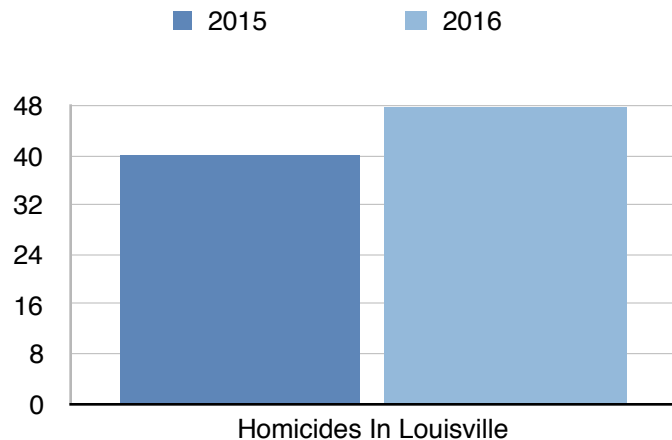
WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT

LOUISVILLE

Using the FBI’s Preliminary Uniform Crime Report data for the first half of 2016, Louisville is now the 22nd most violent city in the United States.^{xxx} As some community leaders and law enforcement have acknowledged, gang violence has overwhelmingly been the largest contributor to this upward trend. According to Louisville Metro Councilman David James, Louisville has a “gang problem.”^{xxxi} Louisville Police Chief Steve Conrad estimates there are between 20 and 30 active gangs operating within the city.^{xxxii} According to the FBI Special Agent in Charge for Louisville, these gangs are less affiliated with national gangs and more localized by neighborhood and blocks.^{xxxiii} Chief Conrad also noted in an interview on WDRB that contrary to popular

understanding, many of Louisville’s gang members are willing to cooperate in their criminal endeavors if there is money to be made.^{xxxiv}

This suggests that the economic incentives in the illicit drug market in Louisville outweigh gang loyalty. Drug dealing, heroin trafficking in particular, is among the many streams of revenue generated within Louisville gangs.^{xxxv}



Personal violence and feuding however, seems to outweigh any potential economic codependence.^{xxxvi} While carrying guns is often seen as a necessary tool of the drug trade, gang affiliates often do, “in case they run into people they have problems

with.”^{xxxvii} Sources inside Louisville Metro Police Department (LMPD) confirm that, while official numbers are not kept, the majority of the 2016 homicides were motivated by one of the “Three Rs.”

Much like the intervention in Nashville, Louisville Metro Police have made significant attempts and progress in disruption and suppression of the illicit drug market. From 2015-2016, LMPD seizures of cocaine were up 80%, as were seizures of methamphetamine, and seizures of heroin were up 30%. Additionally, LMPD’s reorganized narcotics unit has made more than 480 felony arrests, removed 250 guns from the street, and has made more than \$1 million in

Predictably, property crime is down as a result of these efforts.^{xxxix} The nexus between property crime and drugs is well documented, and drug-related property crime typically occurs within a short radius around the drug supply.^{xl} Disrupting the drug market thus expectantly reduces property crime. Despite there often being an expectation that the similar efforts would reduce homicides and violence, this is not the case. Homicides, by contrast, are up in the first five months of this year.^{xli}

About the Author

Josh Crawford is the co-Executive Director of Pegasus Institute. He holds a bachelors degree from Penn State University, and a juris doctorate from Suffolk University Law School.

seizures.^{xxxviii}

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Center for Justice

The Center for Justice works to defend the Aristotelian notion of justice, meaning that a just society must have a fair framework in which citizens can pursue their individual values and that each person must be afforded what they deserve. A system that is universally just is the minimum threshold for a civilized society.

Policy Advisors

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