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The deadly mixture of guns and class in Toronto

Mapping Toronto's gun deaths reveals the same convergence of poverty and violence we associate with U.S. cities

By: Richard Florida Published on Sun Mar 03 2013

Just two months into the New Year, four people [under the age of 16 have been shot and killed](#) in Greater Toronto. This comes on the heels of a 22-per-cent rise in gun murders last year, when [gun deaths](#) surged from 27 in 2011 to 33 in 2012. The rising rate of gun violence is especially disturbing given that gun murders had been declining steadily since 2007.

Torontonians like to think of their city as being safe and relatively free of the violent crime that plagues its American counterparts. It is certainly true that even with the recent uptick, gun murders here pale in [comparison to Chicago](#) — a city of similar size to Toronto — where a record 500 people were killed in 2012, 435 in total by gun. Chicago's rate of 15 gun murders per 100,000 people is 10 times Toronto's 2012 rate of 1.3 gun murders per 100,000 people. And Toronto's peak rate of 1.5 gun murders per 100,000 Torontonians back in 2007 seems minuscule [in comparison](#) to the rate of roughly 62 gun murders per 100,000 in New Orleans, 35 in Detroit, 25ish in Baltimore and Oakland; and 20ish in Miami, St. Louis and Philadelphia during the same period.

But before we pat ourselves too hard on the back, we need to recognize that Toronto's gun murder rate is about on par with large U.S. cities like Austin (1.5) and just a little better than San Jose (1.9) or Portland (2.2). And it is not all that much better than New York City's record low of 3.8 murders per 100,000 recorded last year.

More worrisome, the recent uptick in gun violence in Toronto mirrors the same fault-lines of economic and social disadvantage that exist in U.S. cities.

A [detailed New York Times report](#) on gun violence in Chicago showed the stark concentration of murder in the disadvantaged neighbourhoods of the city's south and west sides, noting that: "Residents living near homicides in the last 12 years were much more likely to be black, earn less money and lack a college degree." The murder rate was much lower in more affluent, professional and college-educated neighbourhoods such as Lincoln Park and Hyde Park near the University of Chicago, which saw less than one murder per year.

The map accompanying this article bears an eerie similarity to one that accompanied the Times story on Chicago. A joint effort of my research team at the University of Toronto's Martin Prosperity Institute and the Star's library, web team and crime reporter Jennifer Pagliaro, it overlays the gun murders that have occurred since 2000 on a map of the city's three major socio-economic classes: the green areas denote neighbourhoods where the affluent, highly educated, knowledge, professional and creative classes live; the yellow areas are the neighbourhoods populated by the low-skill, low-wage service class workers in fields like food preparation, home health care, retail and administration; and the red clusters are the few remaining neighbourhoods that are home to what's left of Toronto's mid-wage, blue-collar working class.

The vast majority of gun murders from 2000 to the present have occurred in the city's service class areas, and that figure rises to nearly 400 gun murders, almost 90 per cent, when we include the red working class clusters.

The city's affluent knowledge, professional and creative districts have seen less than 50 gun murders since 2000 — fewer than 4 per year and just slightly more than 10 per cent of the total. A large share of these have occurred in two distinct clusters — the drug and gang violence spilling over from the economically distressed corridor around Regent Park, Moss Park and Cabbagetown, and the nightclub shootings in and around the Entertainment District.

Detailed research by Harvard University sociologist [Robert Sampson](#) documents the connection between economic isolation and gun violence. The concentration of murder in Chicago, a city he has studied extensively, he told me via email, "has been remarkably stable over time" in neighbourhoods of extreme economic and social disadvantage. The neighbourhoods with the highest rates of gun violence across America's cities, he adds, suffer from the same pattern of poverty, urban distress, disinvestment and "cumulative disadvantage" that underpins growing social isolation and alienation, especially of young people. These are the areas of concentrated economic and social distress that [Grist's Susie Cagle](#) poignantly dubbed America's urban "sacrifice zones." Toronto unfortunately seems to fall into a similar pattern.

And this can be a recipe for a vicious cycle. The [criminologist John Roman of the Urban Institute](#) notes that when the poor are segregated in separate neighbourhoods, violence intensifies and spreads like a contagion from one vulnerable neighbourhood to another.

My own research on the [geographic variation in gun murders](#) across U.S. cities, metropolitan regions and states documents the same kind of connection between gun violence and socio-

economic conditions. Gun murders are highest in regions with greater poverty, higher inequality and less advantaged blue-collar working class economies. Gun murders are substantially lower in areas with higher levels of college graduates, more knowledge-based economies, and greater concentrations of high-tech industry.

In Toronto, as in the United States, poorer, less advantaged urban neighbourhoods have become sacrifice zones. And, just as in America, the concentrated nature of gun violence in Toronto makes it easier for those in more affluent and sheltered places to ignore its grave and growing consequences.

Richard Florida is director of the [Martin Prosperity Institute](#) at the University of Toronto's [Rotman School of Management](#). He will participate in a Twitter chat at 1 p.m. on Monday.