Urban killings rise in clusters, even as cities grow safer

December 20 2017, by Sara Burnett And Larry Fenn

Members of the Ten Point Coalition pray with a family during a walk, Wednesday, Nov. 8, 2017, in Indianapolis. Four nights a week, they walk their streets, talking to young people and trying to point them away from trouble. (AP Photo/Darron Cummings)

When she started an urban farm in one of Indianapolis' roughest neighborhoods, retired chemist Aster Bekele wanted to teach at-risk kids how to garden, and maybe sneak in a little science.

Then the [city](#)'s [homicide rate](#) started soaring, with most of the killings happening around the community center where Bekele and the teens tended their vegetables, chickens and compost piles. After her own son was killed last summer, she found herself teaching a different lesson: how to deal with death.

A few miles away, another rough neighborhood was experiencing a change—equally dramatic but just the opposite. The Fountain Square section near downtown, which once saw nearly as many killings as Bekele's area, was transforming into one of the city's safer spots thanks to an influx of affluent people drawn to its hip restaurants, bicycle trails and art festivals.

The contrast illustrates an Associated Press analysis of homicide data that showed some large cities seem to be getting safer and more dangerous at the same time. Slayings in Chicago, St. Louis and Indianapolis are becoming concentrated into small areas where people are dying at a pace not seen in years, if ever. Around them, much of the rest of the city is growing more peaceful, even as the total number of [homicides](#) rises.

"There's two different worlds," said Anthony Beverly, who grew up in Indianapolis and now runs an organization called Stop The Violence. "Downtown is just popping. ... We struggle."

The AP collected 10 years of homicide data from the cities that had the highest homicide rates in 2016. Reporters used spatial analysis to identify clusters of killings and track the changing geographic patterns over time. The neighborhoods enduring the most violence were largely poor and African-American, as were the killers and the victims.

Researchers say the disparity may be linked to increased joblessness, segregation and the growth of the so-called wealth gap. Over the past

three decades, the wealthiest Americans have grown markedly richer while low earners lost jobs and struggled and some turned to violence.

Members of the Ten Point Coalition talk a walk through a neighborhood, Wednesday, Nov. 8, 2017, in Indianapolis. The coalition walks neighborhoods to help reduce violence and homicide through direct contact. (AP Photo/Darron Cummings)

The trend goes beyond the problem neighborhoods and trendy, low-crime enclaves that are found in almost every city. The inequality between the two realities deepened in recent years, allowing people in the same metropolis to live in one realm with little sense of the other and creating districts of despair where everyone has seen or had someone close to them shot or killed.

Daniel Hertz, a Chicago-based policy analyst, has argued for years that

citywide homicide statistics are "basically meaningless" because of the big differences. Looking at smaller geographic areas, he said, gives a far more accurate picture.

"The conversation we are used to hearing is 'Is a city safe?'" Hertz said. "But there's no citywide statistic that tells you the story of a city."

The Rev. Marshall Hatch, whose church is in a West Side Chicago neighborhood that has seen a disproportionate number of homicides, said the findings reinforce the need to deal with the root causes of violence in what he calls "pockets of intense desperation."

"We know these problems tend to compound when they're not addressed," he said. "It's going to be very problematic for cities, because people are not going to just stay in their neighborhoods and commit crimes."

Adding to the dilemma over what's going on and what to do about it is that the narrowing homicide pattern isn't happening everywhere.

"What we have is an epidemic, and epidemics often happen in ways that are unpredictable," said Charles Ransford, director of science and policy for Cure Violence, a Chicago-based group that works to stop the spread of violence by treating it as a public health issue.
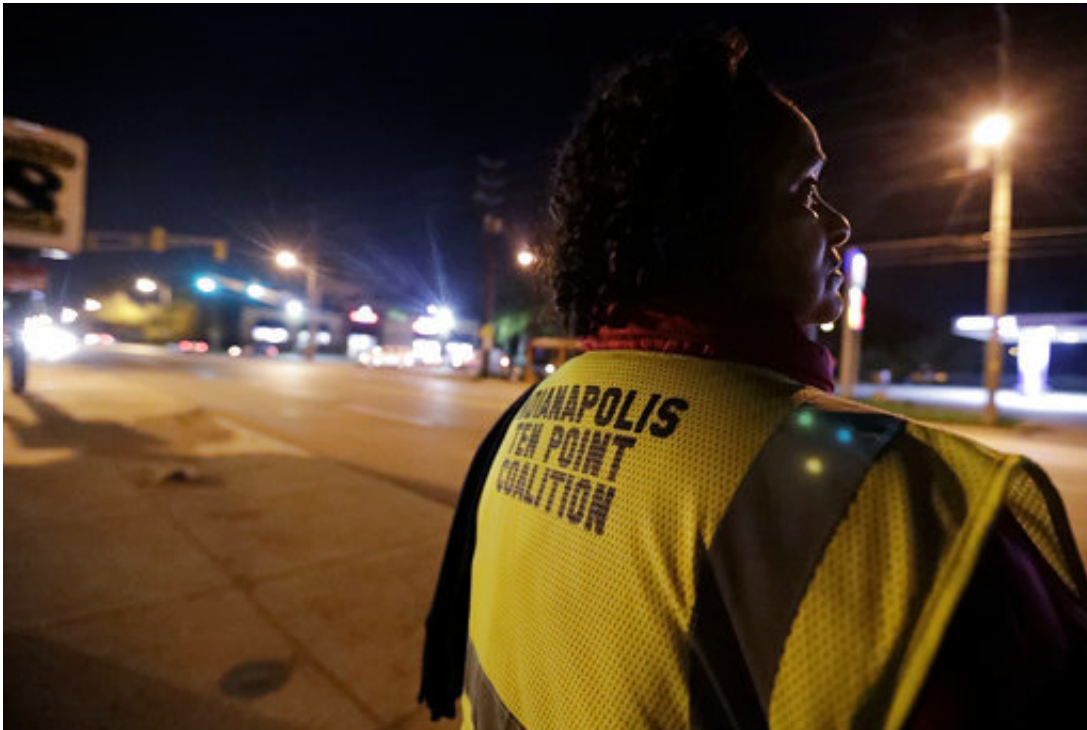
Stephanie Arnold waits along Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. before going out for a walk with Ten Point Coalition Wednesday, Nov. 8, 2017, in Indianapolis. Four nights a week, members of Ten Point Coalition walk their streets, talking to young people and trying to point them away from trouble. (AP Photo/Darron Cummings)

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RISING KILLINGS, SINKING INCOME

Indianapolis, often called the "Crossroads of America," is best known as the home of auto racing's Indianapolis 500. The nation's 15th largest city saw a record 149 homicides in 2016 and just surpassed that total this year.

The most intense violence is happening in a relatively limited area. The city's three deadliest ZIP codes in 2016 accounted for 43 percent of all

homicides. More than 20 percent of the slayings occurred in a single ZIP code on the city's northeast side, where Bekele lives.

The predominantly African-American neighborhood grew steadily poorer in recent years. Lost working-class jobs, many from the shutdowns of plants run by Navistar and Carrier, were a possible factor. The city has 10,000 fewer manufacturing jobs today than in 2007.

"All those manufacturing jobs have left so those neighborhoods have really died," said Jim White, the former commander of a state police post in Indianapolis. "Folks without an education are just left out there."

The concentration of violence extends to Chicago, which ended 2016 with 762 homicides, the highest in two decades. The city has been described by President Donald Trump as resembling "a war zone." But in almost a third of ZIP codes that have reported a homicide in the last decade, the trend has been fewer killings. Now 60 percent of the killings were in only 10 of the city's roughly 58 ZIP codes.

Aster Bekele holds a photo of her son, Senteayehou Henry, Monday, Nov. 6, 2017, in Indianapolis. Bekele found her 40-year-old son face down on the floor in his next door home, dead. (AP Photo/Darron Cummings)

Chicago's violence is fueled by gang factions that splintered from the major gangs of years ago. More factions mean more rivalries and more potential for violence. Police estimate the city has some 80,000 gang members, up from about 68,000 five years ago.

They also point to gang competition to meet the growing demand for heroin and opioids. One ZIP code on Chicago's "Heroin Highway," so called because suburbanites use the expressway to drive into the city for drugs, had 54 homicides in 2016, up from 24 just a year earlier.

Similar forces are at work in St. Louis, which had a record number of

homicides in 2015, a spike that contributed to the overall U.S. homicide rate increasing more than 10 percent. But most of that increase came from just two ZIP codes, and in seven of the city's 17 ZIP codes, homicides fell.

The danger of the more concentrated violence, Hertz said, is that it can become easy for most people to ignore it, and that can intensify the problem.

"It can create this sense of 'Let's wall it off,'" he said. People who can leave start to move out if they don't feel safe, reducing a city's tax base and the number of students in its schools and increasing the number of vacant properties in a particular neighborhood. It becomes a vicious cycle.

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A ONCE-DANGEROUS NEIGHBORHOOD DRAWS NEW CROWDS

Richard Campi reflects about when bought his 1872 Italianate home in the Fountain Square neighborhood in 1983, Wednesday, Nov. 1, 2017, in Indianapolis. The home Campi bought for $23,000 is now worth about $500,000. (AP Photo/Darron Cummings)

Richard Campi bought his 1872 Italianate home in Fountain Square in 1983, when the neighborhood was one of the riskier ones.

"It was a redneck area," Campi says, recalling a streetscape of junked-out cars in yards, scrap metal businesses and rent-to-own stores. When he put ads in The Indianapolis Star advertising apartments to rent in the house, no one would even come take a look.

But things started to change when nearby Fletcher Place, one of the city's earliest neighborhoods, was designated a historic district and preservation buffs began moving in. A local couple bought the long-vacant Fountain Square Theatre, hoping to capitalize on the nostalgia of

an old vaudeville showplace. They reopened the duckpin bowling lanes, and soon hipsters and old-timers started coming to knock over pins and drink craft beers. Galleries and independent businesses followed.

In 2011, the Cultural Trail, an 8-mile bike and walking path that links downtown to cultural districts and entertainment hot spots, made its way to Fountain Square, and more college-educated young people with higher incomes streamed in. Bon Appetit magazine came to write about the restaurants.

There's still crime, but it's not the same. In the Fountain Square ZIP code, homicides fell from nine in 2011 to four last year.

The home Richard Campi bought for $23,000 is now worth about $500,000.

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Aster Bekele, the current Executive Director at the Felege Hiywot Center, walks into the center, Monday, Oct. 30, 2017, in Indianapolis. Bekele wanted to teach at-risk kids how to garden, and maybe sneak in a little science. Then the city's homicide rate started soaring, with most of the killings happening around the community center where Bekele and the teens tended their vegetables, chickens and compost piles. After her own son was killed last summer, she found herself teaching a different lesson: how to deal with death. (AP Photo/Darron Cummings)

A TRANQUIL NEIGHBORHOOD TURNS DEADLY

The area of northeast Indianapolis where Aster Bekele and her husband bought their home almost 40 years ago used to be so peaceful they sometimes slept in the backyard with their kids. That's hard to imagine that now, with all the shootings. The neighborhood is roughly 9 square miles of apartments, small homes, vacant storefronts, gas stations and liquor marts that double as grocery stores.

"We're right in the middle of it," says Bekele, 64, who came to the U.S. from Ethiopia as a college student.

Her son, Senteayehou Henry, got into trouble as a young man. In 2002, he went to prison for selling drugs. After he was released, he moved into the home next door and made a living flipping houses, she said.

On Aug. 1, 2016, Bekele found her 40-year-old son dead on the floor of his house after his girlfriend arrived and saw the back door standing open. No one has been arrested.

These days, Bekele doesn't take meetings at night so she won't have to walk from her car to her house in the dark. She can easily distinguish

between the sound of gunshots and firecrackers. Twice in a recent three-week span she skipped gardening to take the teens to funerals for people close to them who were killed.

While the city's median household income has increased slightly, this area's fell by 3.5 percent per year. More than a third of its residents have household incomes below the federal poverty level.

Aster Bekele helps students cut up a tree that will later be used as mulch in the gardens, Saturday, Nov. 11, 2017, in Indianapolis. Bekele wanted to teach at-risk kids how to garden, and maybe sneak in a little science. Then the city's homicide rate started soaring, with most of the killings happening around the community center where Bekele and the teens tended their vegetables, chickens and compost piles. After her own son was killed last summer, she found herself teaching a different lesson: how to deal with death. (AP Photo/Darron Cummings)

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THE SEARCH FOR ANSWERS

The shrinking geographic scope of the problem has made some crime-fighting approaches more feasible. With less ground to cover, authorities are better able to flood a zone with officers. High-tech tools can be effective on a small scale.

Take Chicago, where police began using "ShotSpotter" technology, or sensors that monitor for the sound of gunfire and alert police. They say it's contributed to a drop in shootings this year in some of their previous hot spots because officers can respond more quickly.

The Cure Violence group in Chicago employs "interrupters"—often former gang members—who seek out people likely to commit a violent crime and intervene, potentially also stopping a string of retaliations.

Indianapolis Mayor Joe Hogsett says he wants to put 150 more police officers on the street by the end of 2019, many on foot patrols in small areas. Police Chief Bryan Roach is aiming to have 80 such beats next year, up from 19 now.

On the city's troubled northwest side, a group of ministers and former gang members known as the Ten Point Coalition has earned national recognition for its efforts. Four nights a week, they walk their streets, talking to young people and trying to point them away from trouble. Sometimes that's through a basketball league. Other times it's introducing them to the Job Corps, where they can learn trades and later get work.

Motorist drive through the Fountain Square area, Tuesday, Dec. 19, 2017, in Indianapolis. The area is one of the city's safer spots thanks to an influx of affluent people drawn to its hip restaurants, bicycle trails and art festivals.(AP Photo/Darron Cummings)

In 2015, the ZIP code where they are focusing their efforts saw 24 homicides. Last year there were nine.

"We can't stop them from doing wrong," says team leader Wallace Nash. "But we can encourage them to do something else."

John Hagedorn, a criminology professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, said the crime is driven by poverty, chronic joblessness and hopelessness, especially in black communities in the Rust Belt.

Cities along the coasts with less violence have seen more investment citywide, not just in the downtowns. In those places, wealth is more widely distributed and there is less racial isolation, he said.

"There's a degree of hope that takes place in these communities where

[violence](#) is low," he said. "There's a sense that life isn't over."

A Fountain Square sign is displayed on the outside of a building, Tuesday, Dec. 19, 2017, in Indianapolis. The area is one of the city's safer spots thanks to an influx of affluent people drawn to its hip restaurants, bicycle trails and art festivals.(AP Photo/Darron Cummings)