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Why is crime rising in so many American cities? The answer implicates one of the most celebrated antipoverty programs of recent decades.

BY HANNA ROSIN

American Murder Mystery

Photographs by Robert King/Polaris Images

Video footage shot by Hanna Rosin



THE THIN BLUE LINE: Doug Barnes of the Memphis Police Department inside the Old Allen Station armory

To get to the Old Allen police station in North Memphis, you have to drive all the way to the end of a quiet suburban road until it turns country. Hidden by six acres of woods, the station seems to be the kind of place that might concern itself mainly with lost dogs, or maybe the misuse of hunting licenses. But it isn't. Not anymore. As Lieutenant Doug Barnes waited for me to arrive one night for a tour of his beat, he had a smoke and listened for shots. He counted eight, none meant for buck. "Nothing unusual for a Tuesday," he told me.

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Barnes is white, middle-aged, and, like many veteran cops, looks powerful without being fit. He grew up four miles from the station during the 1960s, he said, back when middle-class whites lived peacefully alongside both city elites and working-class African Americans. After the 1968 riots, Barnes's father taught him the word *curfew* and reminded him to lock the doors. Still, the place remained, until about 10 years ago, a pretty safe neighborhood where you could play outside with a ball or a dog. But as he considered more-recent times, his nostalgia gave way to something darker. "I have never been so disheartened," he said.

He remembers when the ground began to shift beneath him. He was working as an investigator throughout the city, looking into homicides and major crimes. Most of his work was downtown. One day in 1997, he got a call to check out a dead car that someone had rolled up onto the side of the interstate, on the way to the northern suburbs. The car "looked like Swiss cheese," he said, with 40 or 50 bullet holes in it and blood all over the seats. Barnes started investigating. He located one corpse in the woods nearby

and another, which had been shoved out a car door, in the parking lot of a hospital a few miles away. He found a neighborhood witness, who gave up everything but the killers' names. Two weeks later, he got another call about an abandoned car. This time the body was inside. "It was my witness," he recalled, "deader than a mackerel."

At this point, he still thought of the stretch of Memphis where he'd grown up as "quiet as all get-out"; the only place you'd see cruisers congregated was in the Safeway parking lot, where churchgoing cops held choir practice before going out for drinks. But by 2000, all of that had changed. Once-quiet apartment complexes full of young families "suddenly started turning hot on us." Instead of the occasional break-in, Barnes was getting calls about armed robberies, gunshots in the hallways, drug dealers roughing up their neighbors. A gang war ripped through the neighborhood. "We thought, *What the hell is going on here?*" *A gang war! In North Memphis! "All of a sudden it was a damn war zone,"* he said.

As we drove around his beat, this new suburban warfare was not so easy to make out. We passed by the city zoo and Rhodes College, a serene-looking campus on a hill. We passed by plenty of quiet streets lined with ranch houses, not fancy but not falling down, either. Then Barnes began to narrate, street by street, getting more animated and bitter by the block.

Here was the perfectly pleasant-looking Maplewood Avenue, where the old azaleas were just starting to bloom and the local cops were trying to weed out the Chicago drug connection. Farther down the avenue, two households flew American flags, and a third was known for manufacturing "cheese," a particularly potent form of powdered heroin. The Hollywood branch of the local library, long famous for its children's room, was now also renowned for the time thugs stole \$1,800 there from a Girl Scout who'd been collecting cookie funds. Finally we came to a tidy brick complex called Goodwill Village, where Barnes had recently chased down some gang members who'd been taking turns having sex with a new female recruit. As we closed in on midnight, Barnes's beat began to feel like the setting of a [David Lynch](#) movie, where every backyard and cul-de-sac could double as a place to hide a body. Or like a suburban remake of *Taxi Driver*, with Barnes as the new Travis Bickle. "I'm like a zookeeper now," said Barnes. "I hold the key, and my job right now is to protect the people from all the animals."

On September 27, 2007, a headline in *The Commercial Appeal*, the city's biggest newspaper, announced a dubious honor: "Memphis Leads U.S. in Violent Crime." Local precincts had been seeing their internal numbers for homicide, rape, aggravated assault, and robbery tick up since the late 1990s, starting around the time Barnes saw the first dead car. By 2005, a criminologist closely tracking those numbers was describing the pattern as a crime explosion. In May of 2007, a woman from upscale Chickasaw Gardens was raped by two men, at gunpoint; the assailants had followed her and her son home one afternoon. Outraged residents formed Citizens Against Crime and lobbied the statehouse for tougher gun laws. "People are concerned for their lives, frankly," said one county commissioner, summarizing the city's mood. This March, a man murdered six people, including two young children, in a house a few miles south of Old Allen Station.

Falling crime rates have been one of the great American success stories of the past 15 years. New York and Los Angeles, once the twin capitals of violent crime, have calmed down significantly, as have most other big cities. Criminologists still debate why: the crack war petered out, new policing tactics worked, the economy improved for a long spell. Whatever the alchemy, crime in New York, for instance, is now so low that local prison guards are worried about unemployment.

Lately, though, a new and unexpected pattern has emerged, taking criminologists by surprise. While crime rates in large cities stayed flat, homicide rates in many midsize cities (with populations of between 500,000 and 1 million) began increasing, sometimes by as much as 20percent a year. In 2006, the Police Executive Research Forum, a national police group surveying cities from coast to coast, concluded in a report called "A Gathering Storm" that this might represent "the front end ... of an epidemic of violence not seen for years." The leaders of the group, which is made up of police chiefs and sheriffs, theorized about what might be spurring the latest crime wave: the spread of gangs, the masses of offenders coming out of prison, methamphetamines. But mostly they puzzled over the bleak new landscape. According to FBI data, America's most dangerous spots are now places where Martin Scorsese would never think of staging a shoot-out—Florence, South Carolina; Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina; Kansas City, Missouri; Reading, Pennsylvania; Orlando, Florida; Memphis, Tennessee.

Memphis has always been associated with some amount of violence. But why has Elvis's hometown turned into America's new South Bronx? Barnes thinks he knows one big part of the answer, as does the city's chief of police. A handful of local criminologists and social scientists think they can explain it, too. But it's a dismal answer, one that city leaders have made clear they don't want to hear. It's an answer that offers up racial stereotypes to fearful whites in a city trying to move beyond racial tensions. Ultimately, it reaches beyond crime and implicates one of the most ambitious antipoverty programs of recent decades.

Early every Thursday, Richard Janikowski drives to Memphis's Airways Station for the morning meeting of police precinct commanders. Janikowski used to teach law and semiotics, and he still sometimes floats on a higher plane; he walks slowly, speaks in a nasal voice, and quotes from policy books. But at this point in his career, he is basically an honorary cop. A criminologist with the University of Memphis, Janikowski has established an unusually close relationship with the city police department. From the police chief to the beat cop, everyone knows him as "Dr. J," or "GQ" if he's wearing his nice suit. When his researchers are looking for him, they can often find him outside the building, having a smoke with someone in uniform.

One Thursday in March, I sat in on the morning meeting. About 100 people—commanders, beat cops, researchers, and a city councilman—gathered in a sterile conference room with a projector up front. The session had none of the raucous air of precinct meetings you see on cop shows. Nobody was making crude jokes or bragging about the latest run-in with the hood rats.

One by one, the precinct commanders presented crime and arrest statistics in their wards. They broke the information down into neat bar graphs—type of crime, four-week comparison, shifting hot spots. Thanks to Janikowski's influence, the commanders sounded more like policy wonks than police. "It used to be the criminal element was more confined," said Larry Godwin, the police chief. "Now it's all spread out. They might hit one area today and another tomorrow. We have to take a sophisticated look on a daily, hourly basis, or we might never get leverage on it." For a police department facing a volatile situation, the bar graphs imposed some semblance of order.

Janikowski began working with the police department in 1997, the same year that Barnes saw the car with the bullet holes. He initially consulted on a program to reduce sexual assaults citywide and quickly made himself useful. He mapped all the incidents and noticed a pattern: many assaults happened outside convenience stores, to women using pay phones that were hidden from view. The police asked store owners to move the phones inside, and the number of assaults fell significantly.

About five years ago, Janikowski embarked on a more ambitious project. He'd built up enough trust with the police to get them to send him daily crime and arrest reports, including addresses and types of crime. He began mapping all violent and property crimes, block by block, across the city. "These cops on the streets were saying that crime patterns are changing," he said, so he wanted to look into it.

When his map was complete, a clear if strangely shaped pattern emerged: *Wait a minute*, he recalled thinking. *I see this bunny rabbit coming up. People are going to accuse me of being on shrooms!* The inner city, where crime used to be concentrated, was now clean. But everywhere else looked much worse: arrests had skyrocketed along two corridors north and west of the central city (the bunny rabbit's ears) and along one in the southeast (the tail). Hot spots had proliferated since the mid-1990s, and little islands of crime had sprung up where none had existed before, dotting the map all around the city.

Janikowski might not have managed to pinpoint the cause of this pattern if he hadn't been married to Phyllis Betts, a housing expert at the University of Memphis. Betts and Janikowski have two dogs, three cats, and no kids; they both tend to bring their work home with them. Betts had been evaluating the impact of one of the city government's most ambitious initiatives: the demolition of the city's public-housing projects, as part of a nationwide experiment to free the poor from the destructive effects of concentrated poverty. Memphis demolished its first project in 1997. The city gave former residents federal "Section 8" rent-subsidy vouchers and encouraged them to move out to new neighborhoods. Two more waves of demolition followed over the next nine years, dispersing tens of thousands of poor people into the wider metro community.

If police departments are usually stingy with their information, housing departments are even more so. Getting addresses of Section 8 holders is difficult, because the departments want to protect the residents' privacy. Betts, however, helps the city track where the former residents of public housing have moved. Over time, she and Janikowski realized that they were doing their fieldwork in the same neighborhoods.

About six months ago, they decided to put a hunch to the test. Janikowski merged his computer map of crime patterns with Betts's map of Section 8 rentals. Where Janikowski saw a bunny rabbit, Betts saw a sideways horseshoe ("He has a better imagination," she said). Otherwise, the match was near-perfect. On the merged map, dense violent-crime areas are shaded dark blue, and Section 8 addresses are represented by little red dots. All of the dark-blue areas are covered in little red dots, like bursts of gunfire. The rest of the city has almost no dots.

Betts remembers her discomfort as she looked at the map. The couple had been musing about the connection for months, but they were amazed—and deflated—to see how perfectly the two data sets fit together. She knew right away that this would be a "hard thing to say or write." Nobody in the antipoverty community and nobody in city leadership was going to welcome the news that the noble experiment that they'd been engaged in for the past decade had been bringing the city down, in ways they'd never expected. But the connection was too obvious to ignore, and Betts and Janikowski figured that the same thing must be happening all around the country. Eventually, they thought, they'd find other researchers who connected the dots the way they had, and then maybe they could get city leaders, and even national leaders, to listen.



VIDEO: Phyllis Betts explains why the major politicians are ignoring rising crime in Memphis

Betts's office is filled with books about knocking down the projects, an effort considered by fellow housing experts to be their great contribution to the civil-rights movement. The work grew out of a long history of white resistance to blacks' moving out of what used to be called the ghetto. During much of the 20th century, white people used bombs and mobs to keep black people out of their neighborhoods. In 1949 in Chicago, a rumor that a black family was moving onto a white block prompted a riot that grew to 10,000 people in four days. "Americans had been treating blacks seeking housing outside the ghetto not much better than ... [the] cook treated the dog who sought a crust of bread," wrote the ACLU lawyer and fair-housing advocate Alexander Polikoff in his book *Waiting for Gautreaux*.

Polikoff is a hero to Betts and many of her colleagues. In August 1966, he filed two related class-action suits against the Chicago

Housing Authority and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, on behalf of a woman named Dorothy Gautreaux and other tenants. Gautreaux wanted to leave the ghetto, but the CHA offered housing only in neighborhoods just like hers. Polikoff became notorious in the Chicago suburbs; one community group, he wrote, awarded him a gold-plated pooper-scooper “to clean up all the shit” he wanted to bring into the neighborhood. A decade later, he argued the case before the Supreme Court and won. Legal scholars today often compare the case’s significance to that of [*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*](#).

In 1976, letters went out to 200 randomly selected families among the 44,000 living in Chicago public housing, asking whether they wanted to move out to the suburbs. A counselor went around the projects explaining the new Section 8 program, in which tenants would pay 25 percent of their income for rent and the government would pay the rest, up to a certain limit. Many residents seemed dubious. They asked how far away these places were, how they would get there, whether the white people would let them in.

But the counselors persevered and eventually got people excited about the idea. The flyers they mailed out featured a few stanzas of a Gwendolyn Brooks poem, “The Ballad of Rudolph Reed.”

I am not hungry for berries
I am not hungry for bread
But hungry hungry for a house
Where at night a man in bed
May never hear the plaster
Stir as if in pain.
May never hear the roaches
Falling like fat rain.

(This was a risky decision. One later stanza, omitted from the flyers, reads:

By the time he had hurt his fourth white man
Rudolph Reed was dead.
His neighbors gathered and kicked his corpse
“Nigger—” his neighbors said.)

Starting in 1977, in what became known as the Gautreaux program, hundreds of families relocated to suburban neighborhoods—most of them about 25 miles from the ghetto, with very low poverty rates and good public schools. The authorities had screened the families carefully, inspecting their apartments and checking for good credit histories. They didn’t offer the vouchers to families with more than five children, or to those that were indifferent to leaving the projects. They were looking for families “seeking a healthy environment, good schools and an opportunity to live in a safe and decent home.”

A well-known Gautreaux study, released in 1991, showed spectacular results. The sociologist James Rosenbaum at Northwestern University had followed 114 families who had moved to the suburbs, although only 68 were still cooperating by the time he released the study. Compared to former public-housing residents who’d stayed within the city, the suburban dwellers were four times as likely to finish high school, twice as likely to attend college, and more likely to be employed. *Newsweek* called the program “stunning” and said the project renewed “one’s faith in the struggle.” In a glowing segment, a *60 Minutes* reporter asked one Gautreaux boy what he wanted to be when he grew up. “I haven’t really made up my mind,” the boy said. “Construction worker, architect, anesthesiologist.” Another child’s mother declared it “the end of poverty” for her family.

In 1992, 7-year-old Dantrell Davis from the Cabrini-Green project was walking to school, holding his mother’s hand, when a stray bullet killed him. The hand-holding detail seemed to stir the city in a way that none of the other murder stories coming out of the

high-rises ever had. “Tear down the high rises,” demanded an editorial in the *Chicago Tribune*, while that boy’s image “burns in our civic memory.”

HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros was receptive to the idea. He spent a few nights in Chicago’s infamous Robert Taylor Homes and subsequently spoke about “these enclaves of poverty,” where “drug dealers control the stairwells, where children can’t go outside to play, where mothers put their infants to bed in bathtubs.” If people could see beyond the graffitied hallways of these projects, they could get above that way of life, argued the researchers, and learn to live like their middle-class brothers and sisters. Cisneros floated the idea of knocking down the projects and moving the residents out into the metro area.

The federal government encouraged the demolitions with a \$6.3billion program to redevelop the old project sites, called HOPE VI, or “Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere.” The program was launched in the same spirit as Bill Clinton’s national service initiative—communities working together to “rebuild lives.” One Chicago housing official mused about “architects and lawyers and bus drivers and people on welfare living together.” Wrecking balls began hitting the Chicago high-rises in the mid-1990s. Within a few years, tens of thousands of public-housing residents all over the country were leaving their apartments. In place of the projects, new developments arose, with fanciful names like “Jazz on the Boulevard” or “Centennial Place.” In Memphis, the Hurt Village project was razed to make way for “Uptown Square,” which the local developer Henry Turley declared would be proof that you could turn the inner city into a “nice place for poor people” to live. Robert Lipscomb, the dynamic director of the Memphis Housing Authority, announced, “Memphis is on the move.”



NEW RESIDENT: Leslie Shaw outside her Springdale Creek apartment in North Memphis

When the Dixie Homes housing project was demolished, in 2006, a group of residents moved to a place called Springdale Creek Apartments in North Memphis, on Doug Barnes’s beat. They were not handpicked, nor part of any study, and nobody told them to move to a low-poverty neighborhood. Like tens of thousands of others, they moved because they had to, into a place they could afford. Springdale Creek is not fancy, but the complex tries to enforce its own quiet order. A sliding black gate separates the row of brick buildings from busy Jackson Avenue, where kids hang out by the KFC. Leslie Shaw was sold when she heard the phrase *gated community* mentioned by the building manager.

When Shaw saw the newly painted white walls, “so fresh and clean,” with no old smudges from somebody else’s kids, she decided to give away all her furniture. “I didn’t want to move in here with any garbage from Dixie,” she said. “I said to myself, ‘Might as well start over.’” She bought a new brown velour couch and a matching loveseat. She bought a washer and dryer, and a dresser for her 8-year-old grandson, Gerrell, who lives with her. The only thing she kept was a bookshelf, to hold the paperbacks coming monthly from the book club she’d decided to join.

Shaw is 11 years crack-free and, at 47, eager to take advantage of every free program that comes her way—a leadership class, Windows Vista training, a citizen police course, a writing workshop. What drove her—“I got to be honest with you”—was proving

her middle-class sisters and brother, “who didn’t think I’d get above it,” wrong. Just after she moved in, one sister came over and said, “This is nice. I thought they would put you back in the projects or something.”



VIDEO: Leslie Shaw discusses the ineffectiveness of security guards

I visited Shaw in February, about a year and a half after she’d moved in. The view outside her first-floor window was still pretty nice—no junk littered the front lawn and few apartments stood vacant. But slowly, she told me, Springdale Creek has started to feel less like a suburban paradise and more like Dixie Homes. Neighborhood boys often kick open the gate or break the keypad. Many nights they just randomly press phone numbers until someone lets them in. The gate’s main use seems to be as a sort of low-thrills ride for younger kids whose parents aren’t paying attention. They hang from the gate as it slides open; a few have gotten their fingers caught and had to be taken to the emergency room.

When Shaw recounts all the bad things that have happened at Springdale Creek, she does it matter-of-factly (even as a grandma, she says, “I can jump those boys if I have to”). Car thefts were common at first—Shaw’s neighbor Laura Evans is one of about 10 victims in the past two years. Thieves have relieved the apartment management company of some of its computers, extra refrigerators, and spare stoves. A few Dixie boys—sons of one of Shaw’s friends—were suspected of breaking the windows in vacant apartments. Last year, somebody hit a pregnant woman in the head with a brick. In the summer, a neighborhood kid chased his girlfriend’s car, shooting at her as she drove toward the gate; the cops, who are called in regularly for one reason or another, collected the spent shells on the grass. “You know, you move from one place to another and you bring the element with you,” said Evans, who stopped by Shaw’s apartment while I was there. “You got some trying to make it just like the projects.”

In the afternoon, I visited an older resident from Dixie Homes who lives across the way from Shaw. Her apartment was dark, blinds drawn, and everyone was watching Maury Povich. A few minutes after I arrived, we heard a pounding at the door, and a neighbor rushed in, shouting.

“They just jumped my grandson! That’s my grandson!”

This was 64-year-old Nadine Clark, who’d left Dixie before it got knocked down. Clark was wearing her navy peacoat, but she had forgotten to put in her teeth. From her pocket she pulled a .38-caliber pistol, which was the only thing that glinted in the room besides the TV.

“There’s 10 of them! And I’m gonna go fuck them up! That’s my grandson! They took him away in an ambulance!”

Nobody in the house got excited. They kept their eyes on Maury Povich, where the audience was booing a kid who looked just like the thug who’d shot up his girlfriend’s car. “She’ll calm down,” someone said, and after a few minutes, Clark left. I drove down to Northside High, a few blocks away, where the grandson had gotten beaten up. TV crews and local reporters were already gathered outside the school, and a news chopper hovered overhead. There had been two school shootings in the neighborhood that month, and any fresh incidents made big news.

Clark’s grandson is named Unique, although everyone calls him Neek. Outside school that day, Neek had been a victim of one of the many strange dynamics of the new urban suburbia. Neek is tall and quiet and doesn’t rush to change out of his white polo shirt and blue khakis after school. He spends most of his afternoons in the house, watching TV or doing his homework.

Neek’s middle-class habits have made him, unwittingly, a perfect target for homegrown gangs. Gang leaders, cut loose from the housing projects, have adapted their recruiting efforts and operations to their new setting. Lately, they’ve been going after “smart, intelligent, go-to-college-looking kid[s], without gold teeth and medallions,” said Sergeant Lambert Ross, an investigator with the Memphis Police. Clean-cut kids serve the same function as American recruits for al-Qaeda: they become the respectable front men. If a gang member gets pulled over with guns or drugs, he can hand them to the college boy, who has no prior record. The college boy, raised outside the projects, might be dreaming of being the next 50 Cent, or might be too intimidated not to join. Ross told me that his latest batch of arrests involved several kids from two-car-garage families.

Neek generally stayed away from gang types, so some older kids beat him with bats. No one is sure whether a gun was fired. As these things go, he got off easy. He was treated at the emergency room and went back to school after a few days.

In the most literal sense, the national effort to diffuse poverty has succeeded. Since 1990, the number of Americans living in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty—meaning that at least 40 percent of households are below the federal poverty level—has declined by 24 percent. But this doesn’t tell the whole story. Recently, the housing expert George Galster, of Wayne State University, analyzed the shifts in urban poverty and published his results in a paper called “A Cautionary Tale.” While fewer Americans live in high-poverty neighborhoods, increasing numbers now live in places with “moderate” poverty rates, meaning rates of 20 to 40 percent. This pattern is not necessarily better, either for poor people trying to break away from bad neighborhoods or for cities, Galster explains. His paper compares two scenarios: a city split into high-poverty and low-poverty areas, and a city dominated by median-poverty ones. The latter arrangement is likely to produce more bad neighborhoods and more total crime, he concludes, based on a computer model of how social dysfunction spreads.

Studies show that recipients of Section 8 vouchers have tended to choose moderately poor neighborhoods that were already on the decline, not low-poverty neighborhoods. One recent study publicized by HUD warned that policy makers should lower their expectations, because voucher recipients seemed not to be spreading out, as they had hoped, but clustering together. Galster theorizes that every neighborhood has its tipping point—a threshold well below a 40 percent poverty rate—beyond which crime explodes and other severe social problems set in. Pushing a greater number of neighborhoods past that tipping point is likely to produce more total crime. In 2003, the Brookings Institution published a list of the 15 cities where the number of high-poverty neighborhoods had declined the most. In recent years, most of those cities have also shown up as among the most violent in the U.S., according to FBI data.

The “Gathering Storm” report that worried over an upcoming epidemic of violence was inspired by a call from the police chief of Louisville, Kentucky, who’d seen crime rising regionally and wondered what was going on. Simultaneously, the University of Louisville criminologist Geetha Suresh was tracking local patterns of violent crime. She had begun her work years before, going blind into the research: she had just arrived from India, had never heard of a housing project, had no idea which were the bad parts of town, and was clueless about the finer points of American racial sensitivities. In her research, Suresh noticed a recurring pattern, one that emerged first in the late 1990s, then again around 2002. A particularly violent neighborhood would suddenly go

cold, and crime would heat up in several new neighborhoods. In each case, Suresh has now confirmed, the first hot spots were the neighborhoods around huge housing projects, and the later ones were places where people had moved when the projects were torn down. From that, she drew the obvious conclusion: "Crime is going along with them." Except for being hand-drawn, Suresh's map matching housing patterns with crime looks exactly like Janikowski and Betts's.

Nobody would claim vouchers, or any single factor, as the sole cause of rising crime. Crime did not rise in every city where housing projects came down. In cities where it did, many factors contributed: unemployment, gangs, rapid gentrification that dislocated tens of thousands of poor people not living in the projects. Still, researchers around the country are seeing the same basic pattern: projects coming down in inner cities and crime pushing outward, in many cases destabilizing cities or their surrounding areas. Dennis Rosenbaum, a criminologist at the University of Illinois at Chicago, told me that after the high-rises came down in Chicago, suburbs to the south and west—including formerly quiet ones—began to see spikes in crime; nearby Maywood's murder rate has nearly doubled in the past two years. In Atlanta, which almost always makes the top-10 crime list, crime is now scattered widely, just as it is in Memphis and Louisville.

In some places, the phenomenon is hard to detect, but there may be a simple reason: in cities with tight housing markets, Section 8 recipients generally can't afford to live within the city limits, and sometimes they even move to different states. New York, where the rate of violent crime has plummeted, appears to have pushed many of its poor out to New Jersey, where violent crime has increased in nearby cities and suburbs. Washington, D.C., has exported some of its crime to surrounding counties in Maryland and Virginia.

Much research has been done on the spread of gangs into the suburbs. Jeff Rojek, a criminologist at the University of South Carolina, issued a report in 2006 showing that serious gang activity had spread to eight suburban counties around the state, including Florence County, home to the city of Florence, which was ranked the most violent place in America the year after Memphis was. In his fieldwork, he said, the police complained of "migrant gangs" from the housing projects, and many departments seemed wholly unprepared to respond.

After the first wave of housing-project demolition in Memphis, in 1997, crime spread out, but did not immediately increase. (It takes time for criminals to make new connections and to develop "comfort zones," Janikowski told me.) But in 2005, another wave of project demolitions pushed the number of people displaced from public housing to well over 20,000, and crime skyrocketed. Janikowski felt there were deep structural issues behind the increase, ones that the city was not prepared to handle. Old gangs—the Gangster Disciples and the LeMoyné Gardens gang—had long since re-formed and gotten comfortable. Ex-convicts recently released from prison had taken up residence with girlfriends or wives or families who'd moved to the new neighborhoods. Working-class people had begun moving out to the suburbs farther east, and more recipients of Section 8 vouchers were taking their place. Now many neighborhoods were reaching their tipping points.

Chaotic new crime patterns in suburbia caught the police off guard. Gang members who'd moved to North Memphis might now have cousins southeast of the city, allowing them to target the whole vast area in between and hide out with relatives far from the scene of the crime. Memphis covers an area as large as New York City, but with one-seventeenth as many police officers, and a much lower cop-to-citizen ratio. And routine policing is more difficult in the semi-suburbs. Dealers sell out of fenced-in backyards, not on exposed street corners. They have cars to escape in, and a landscape to blend into. Shrubbery is a constant headache for the police; they've taken to asking that bushes be cut down so suspects can't duck behind them.

I began reporting this story because I came across a newspaper article that ranked cities by crime rate and I was surprised to see Memphis at the very top. At first I approached the story literally, the same way a cop on a murder case would: here's the body, now figure out what happened. But it didn't take long to realize that in Memphis, and in city after city, the bodies are just the most visible symptoms of a much deeper sickness.

If replacing housing projects with vouchers had achieved its main goal—infusing the poor with middle-class habits—then higher

crime rates might be a price worth paying. But today, social scientists looking back on the whole grand experiment are apt to use words like *baffling* and *disappointing*. A large federal-government study conducted over the past decade—a follow-up to the highly positive, highly publicized Gautreaux study of 1991—produced results that were “puzzling,” said Susan Popkin of the Urban Institute. In this study, volunteers were also moved into low-poverty neighborhoods, although they didn’t move nearly as far as the Gautreaux families. Women reported lower levels of obesity and depression. But they were no more likely to find jobs. The schools were not much better, and children were no more likely to stay in them. Girls were less likely to engage in risky behaviors, and they reported feeling more secure in their new neighborhoods. But boys were as likely to do drugs and act out, and more likely to get arrested for property crimes. The best Popkin can say is: “It has not lived up to its promise. It has not lifted people out of poverty, it has not made them self-sufficient, and it has left a lot of people behind.”

Researchers have started to look more critically at the Gautreaux results. The sample was tiny, and the circumstances were ideal. The families who moved to the suburbs were screened heavily and the vast majority of families who participated in the program didn’t end up moving, suggesting that those who did were particularly motivated. Even so, the results were not always sparkling. For instance, while Gautreaux study families who had moved to the suburbs were more likely to work than a control group who stayed in the city, they actually worked less than before they had moved. “People were really excited about it because it seemed to offer something new,” Popkin said. “But in my view, it was radically oversold.”

Ed Goetz, a housing expert at the University of Minnesota, is creating a database of the follow-up research at different sites across the country, “to make sense of these very limited positive outcomes.” On the whole, he says, people don’t consistently report any health, education, or employment benefits. They are certainly no closer to leaving poverty. They tend to “feel better about their environments,” meaning they see less graffiti on the walls and fewer dealers on the streets. But just as strongly, they feel “a sense of isolation in their new communities.” His most surprising finding, he says, “is that they miss the old community. For all of its faults, there was a tight network that existed. So what I’m trying to figure out is: Was this a bad theory of poverty? We were intending to help people climb out of poverty, but that hasn’t happened at all. Have we underestimated the role of support networks and overestimated the role of place?”

HOPE VI stands as a bitter footnote to this story. What began as an “I Have a Dream” social crusade has turned into an urban-redevelopment project. Cities fell so hard for the idea of a new, spiffed-up, gentrified downtown that this vision came to crowd out other goals. “People ask me if HOPE VI was successful, and I have to say, ‘You mean the buildings or the people?’” said Laura Harris, a HOPE VI evaluator in Memphis. “It became seen as a way to get rid of eyesores and attract rich people downtown.” Phyllis Betts told me that when she was interviewing residents leaving the housing projects, “they were under the impression they could move into the new developments on site.” Residents were asked to help name the new developments and consult on the architectural plans. Yet to move back in, residents had to meet strict criteria: if they were not seniors, they had to be working, or in school, or on disability. Their children could not be delinquent in school. Most public-housing residents were scared off by the criteria, or couldn’t meet them, or else they’d already moved and didn’t want to move again. The new HOPE VI developments aimed to balance Section 8 and market-rate residents, but this generally hasn’t happened. In Memphis, the rate of former public-housing residents moving back in is 5 percent.

A few months ago, Harris went to a Sunday-afternoon picnic at Uptown Square, the development built on the site of the old Hurt Village project, to conduct a survey. The picnic’s theme was chili cook-off. The white people, mostly young couples, including little kids and pregnant wives, sat around on Eddie Bauer chairs with beer holders, chatting. The black people, mostly women with children, were standing awkwardly around the edges. Harris began asking some of the white people the questions on her survey: Do you lack health insurance? Have you ever not had enough money to buy medication? One said to her, “This is so sad. Does anyone ever answer ‘yes’ to these questions?”—Harris’s first clue that neighbors didn’t talk much across color lines. One of the developers was there that day surveying the ideal community he’d built, and he was beaming. “Isn’t this great?” he asked Harris, and she remembers thinking, *Are you kidding me? They’re all sitting 20 feet away from each other!*

In my visits with former Dixie Homes tenants who'd moved around the city, I came across the same mix of reactions that researchers had found. The residents who had always been intent on moving out of Dixie Homes anyway seemed to be thriving; those who'd been pushed out against their will, which was the vast majority, seemed dislocated and ill at ease.

I met 30-year-old Sheniqua Woodard, a single mother of three who'd been getting her four-year degree while living at Dixie. She was now working at a city mental-health clinic and about to start studying toward a master's degree in special education. She'd moved as far out of the city as she could, to a house with a big backyard. She said, "The fact of being in my own home? Priceless."

But I also met La Sasha Rodgers, who was 19 when Dixie was torn down (now she's 21). "A lot of people thought it was bad, because they didn't live there," she told me. "But it was like one big family. It felt like home. If I could move back now, the way it was, I would." She moved out to a house in South Memphis with her mother, and all the little cousins and nieces and nephews who drift in during the day. She doesn't know anyone else on the block. "It's just here," she said about her new house. Rodgers may not see them right out her window, but she knows that the "same dope dealers, the same junkies" are just down the block. The threats are no less real, but now they seem distant and dull, as if she were watching neighborhood life on TV. At Dixie, when there were shots at the corner store, everyone ran out to see what was happening. Now, "if somebody got shot, we wouldn't get up to see."

Rodgers didn't finish high school, although she did get her GED, and she's never had a job. Still, "I know I have to venture out in the world," she said, running through her options: Go back to school? Get a job? Get married? Have a baby? "I want more. I'm so ready to have my own. I just don't know how to get it."

It's difficult to contemplate solutions to this problem when so few politicians, civil servants, and academics seem willing to talk about it—or even to admit that it exists. Janikowski and Betts are in an awkward position. They are both white academics in a city with many African American political leaders. Neither of them is a Memphis native. And they know that their research will fuel the usual NIMBY paranoia about poor people destroying the suburbs. "We don't want Memphis to be seen as the armpit of the nation," Betts said. "And we don't want to be the ones responsible for framing these issues in the wrong way."

The city's deep pride about the downtown renaissance makes the issue more sensitive still. CITY, COOL, CHIC read downtown billboards, beckoning young couples to new apartments. Developers have built a new eight-block mall and a downtown stadium for the Grizzlies, the city's NBA team. In 2003, *The Commercial Appeal* likened downtown Memphis to a grizzly bear "rumbling back into the sun." The city is applying to the federal government for more funds to knock down the last two housing projects and build more mixed-income developments, and wouldn't want to advertise any problems.

Earlier this year, Betts presented her findings to city leaders, including Robert Lipscomb, the head of the Memphis Housing Authority. From what Lipscomb said to me, he's still not moved. "You've already marginalized people and told them they have to move out," he told me irritably, just as he's told Betts. "Now you're saying they moved somewhere else and created all these problems? That's a really, really unfair assessment. You're putting a big burden on people who have been too burdened already, and to me that's, quote-unquote, criminal." To Lipscomb, what matters is sending people who lived in public housing the message that "they can be successful, they can go to work and have kids who go to school. They can be self-sufficient and reach for the middle class."

But Betts doesn't think this message, alone, will stick, and she gets frustrated when she sees sensitivity about race or class blocking debate. "You can't begin to problem-solve until you lay it out," she said. "Most of us are not living in these high-crime neighborhoods. And I'm out there listening to the people who are not committing the crimes, who expected something better." The victims, she notes, are seldom white. "There are decent African American neighborhoods—neighborhoods of choice—that are going down," she said.

In truth, the victims are constantly shifting. Hardly any Section8 families moved into wealthy white suburbs. In the early phases,

most of the victims were working-class African Americans who saw their neighborhoods destroyed and had to leave. Now most of them are poor people like Leslie Shaw, who are trying to do what Lipscomb asks of them and be more self-sufficient. Which makes sorting out the blame even trickier. Sometimes the victim and the perpetrator live under the same roof; Shaw's friend at Springdale Creek wanted a better life for herself and her family, but she couldn't keep her sons from getting into trouble. Sometimes they may be the same person, with conflicting impulses about whether to move forward or go back. In any case, more than a decade's worth of experience proves that crossing your fingers and praying for self-sufficiency is foolish.

So what's the alternative? Is a strained hope better than no hope at all? "We can't send people back to those barricaded institutions, like *Escape From New York*," said Betts. "That's not a scenario anyone wants to embrace." Physically redistributing the poor was probably necessary; generations of them were floundering in the high-rises. But instead of coaching them and then carefully spreading them out among many more-affluent neighborhoods, most cities gave them vouchers and told them to move in a rush, with no support.

"People were moved too quickly, without any planning, and without any thought about where they would live, and how it would affect the families or the places," complains James Rosenbaum, the author of the original Gautreaux study. By contrast, years of public debate preceded welfare reform. States were forced to acknowledge that if they wanted to cut off benefits, they had to think about job training, child care, broken families. Housing never became a high-profile issue, so cities skipped that phase.

Not every project was like Cabrini-Green. Dixie Homes was a complex of two- and three-story brick buildings on grassy plots. It was, by all accounts, claustrophobic, sometimes badly maintained, and occasionally violent. But to its residents, it was, above all, a community. Every former resident I spoke to mentioned one thing: the annual Easter-egg hunt. Demonizing the high-rises has blinded some city officials to what was good and necessary about the projects, and what they ultimately have to find a way to replace: the sense of belonging, the informal economy, the easy access to social services. And for better or worse, the fact that the police had the address.

Better policing, better-connected to new residential patterns, is a step in the right direction. Janikowski believes the chaos can be controlled with information and technology, and he's been helping the department improve both for several years. This spring he helped launch a "real-time crime center," in the hope of making the department more nimble. Twenty-four hours a day, technicians plot arrests on giant screens representing the city's geography, in a newly built studio reminiscent of CNN's newsroom. *Cops on the dots* is the national buzzword for this kind of information-driven, rapid-response policing, and it has an alluring certainty about it. The changes seem to be making a difference; recent data show violent-crime rates in the city beginning to inch down.

In the long view—both Betts and Janikowski agree—better policing is of course not the only answer. The more fundamental question is the one this social experiment was designed to address in the first place: What to do about deep poverty and persistent social dysfunction?

Betts's latest crusade is something called "site-based resident services." When the projects came down, the residents lost their public-support system—health clinics, child care, job training. Memphis's infant-mortality rate is rising, for example, and Betts is convinced that has something to do with poor people's having lost easy access to prenatal care. The services remained downtown while the clients scattered all over the city, many of them with no convenient transportation. Along with other nonprofit leaders, Betts is trying to get outreach centers opened in the outlying neighborhoods, and especially in some of the new, troubled apartment buildings. She says she's beginning to hear supportive voices within the city government. But not enough leaders have acknowledged the new landscape—or admitted that the projects are gone in name only, and that the city's middle-class dreams never came true.

And beyond this, what? The social services Betts is recommending did not lift masses of people out of poverty in the projects. Perhaps, outside the projects, they will help people a little more. But perhaps not. The problems of poverty run so

deep that we're unlikely to know the answer for a generation. Social scientists tracking people who are trying to improve their lives often talk about a "weathering effect," the wearing-down that happens as a lifetime of baggage accumulates. With poor people, the drag is strong, even if they haven't lived in poverty for long. Kids who leave poor neighborhoods at a young age still have trouble keeping up with their peers, studies show. They catch up for a while and then, after a few years, slip back. Truly escaping poverty seems to require a will as strong as a spy's: you have to disappear to a strange land, forget where you came from, and ignore the suspicions of everyone around you. Otherwise, you can easily find yourself right back where you started.

Leslie Shaw is writing a memoir, and it contains more weather than most of us can imagine. At 15, she left home with a boy named Fat, who turned out to be a pimp. She spent the next seven years being dragged from state to state as a street hooker, robbing johns and eventually getting addicted to crack. Once, a pimp locked her in his car trunk. Another time, her water broke in a crack house. This covers only the first few chapters. She works on the memoir endlessly—revising, dividing the material into different files (one is labeled, simply, "Shit"). She still has two big sections to go, and many years of her life left to record. Her next big project is to get this memoir under control, finish it, have it published, and "hope something good can come out of it," for herself and the people who read it.

When I last saw Shaw, in March, she had her plan laid out. About seven months earlier, she had taken in her 2-year-old granddaughter, Casha Mona, for what was supposed to be a temporary stay. The little girl's mother was getting her act together in Albuquerque, where Casha's father (Shaw's son) was in prison. Shaw's plan was to take Casha Mona back to Albuquerque, then begin a writing workshop at the Renaissance Center in Memphis to get her memoir into shape. And just before Easter, she'd dropped Casha off, come home, and signed up for the class. Two days later, she got a call from an aunt in Albuquerque. Casha had swallowed a few crack rocks at her mother's house; state officials had put her in foster care. More weather. Last I spoke to Shaw, she'd bought another round-trip bus ticket to Albuquerque and was going to get the little girl back.

The writing class would have to wait, or she could do it at night, or ... "I'm just going to get on that bus," she said, "and pray."



VIDEO: Leslie Shaw demonstrates the elaborate process of styling Casha Mona's hair

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