

Is a Mexican drug lord the cause of violence in Chicago?

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September 27, 2013

*Bloomberg's* [magazine piece](#) on the drug trade in Chicago is insightful and well reported as far as it goes. Here's how far it goes: it more or less blames the city's high murder rate on one man, the head of a Mexican cartel. A taste:

As far as the authorities can tell, 5-foot-6-inch (1.68-meter) [Joaquin] Guzman, a grade school dropout known as El Chapo (or Shorty), has never set foot in Chicago.

Yet during the past seven years, Guzman, who's now in his late 50s, has seized control of the supply and wholesale distribution of drugs in Chicago and much of the Midwest.

This steady flow of dangerous substances is sparking pitched and often deadly turf wars between Chicago's splintered, largely African-American and Latino gangs.

"Most of Chicago's violent crime comes from gangs trying to maintain control of drug-selling territories," Riley says. "Guzman supplies a majority of the narcotics that fuel this violence."

It's an important story. But it's just one story to tell about violence in Chicago. There's also [the social media story](#), a story of petty juvenile disputes that quickly blow up into public provocations. And there's [the public health story](#), the evidence that violence spreads through communities like a disease. (The organization formerly known as Ceasefire—which *Bloomberg* talked to for its article—changed its name to Cure Violence in order to emphasize this perspective.)

And then there are the stories about the problems behind the problem. *Bloomberg* references [Daniel Hertz's research](#) on the growing "inequality of violence in

Chicago”: a safer north side (which is whiter and more affluent) coinciding with more dangerous pockets of the south and west sides. The article also name-checks the city’s issues with public housing, education and the loss of factory jobs.

But these are just side notes, hints at the deeper issues. The article is about Guzman, whom Bloomberg presents as a major root cause of the bloodshed. That’s ultimately unhelpful, because violence isn’t created out of whole cloth by the drug trade. [As this \(older\) post at the Chicago Justice Project’s blog](#) puts it, a fundamental question is “*why* kids and adults turn to selling drugs to make a living” [emphasis mine]. CJP offers this as something “police are not the answer to.” Yet “police are forced to be the answer to control the effects of total social neglect in communities of color in Chicago.”

“Total social neglect.” The police aren’t the ultimate answer to violent crime, because other forms of crime aren’t the ultimate cause. People need jobs and education and opportunity. Poor communities need to be treated like they matter to the rest of us.

I get that a good article is typically about one thing, not everything. But even a pretty good article about the narcotics supply chain can serve to bolster a false narrative: *It’s the gangs. The problem is people who choose to lead a life of crime.* And those of us who don’t live in those neighborhoods don’t need any help believing this harmful, inadequate story.

Here’s the lowest point of the *Bloomberg* article:

The link between drugs and crime, including violent crime, would be hard to overstate in Chicago. [Eighty-six](#) percent of adult males arrested in Chicago last year tested positive for drug use.

Note that “crime, including violent crime” is a category that also includes small-time, nonviolent drug offenses—which lead so often to incarceration and decimated communities. Note that “adult males arrested in Chicago” is not the same thing as “crime,” [much less serious crime](#).

And note especially that as big as the link between drugs and violent crime is, it’s really pretty easy to overstate it. We overstate it every time we summarize urban violence as a problem caused by drug-dealing gangs. And it’s all too easy to get

from that oversimplification to the attitude that those lawbreakers deserve what they get—that it's not our problem. But it is.