

## Left behind

### Article Summary: **Prof. Jens Ludwig on Chicago public schools' response to gun violence**

by Greg Hinz, *Crain's Chicago Business*

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It's graduation time in America. From Notre Dame, where President Barack Obama faces protests, to here in Chicago, the kids are moving on to the next part of their lives.

But not one classroom-sized group of kids that I'm thinking of — the 36 Chicago Public Schools students who, so far this school year, have been gunned down, murdered in the mean streets of the Windy City.

The figures, which bounce up and down a bit but overall have been fairly stable this decade, are both a disgrace and a disaster. You can't run a city, you can't build a business or plan a future when the future regularly disappears in pools of blood. It accomplishes little to spend millions chasing the Olympics to build Chicago's image if CNN's Anderson Cooper spends a full hour reporting on the city's murder wave, as he did a few days ago.

"We're not serious about the problem," says the Rev. Michael Pfleger of St. Sabina, who, at least this time, is guilty only of understatement. "We're doing Band-Aid stuff."

Ironically, the experts I talked to believe that the public agencies most directly involved in the problem, police and schools, mostly are doing the right stuff.

The schools "have been trying many of the sorts of educational reforms that one would want," says Jens Ludwig, a **University of Chicago** professor who heads the school's Crime Lab project. And police properly are focusing on big items, such as gangs and the related drug and gun issues, which tend to be worse here than in most other large cities, excepting only Los Angeles, he adds.

Police Superintendent Jody Weis confirms that gang issues top his list. That's why the department now concentrates on improving intelligence and community relations, boosting manpower in neighborhoods that become murder hot spots and seizing illegal firearms.

Indeed, tighter gun laws get mentioned just about every week by Mr. Weis or by Mayor Richard M. Daley. Though gun-rights groups howl about tighter laws, police here have confiscated an average of more than 10,000 firearms in each of the past eight years. "The availability of guns is extraordinary in this city," Mr. Weis says.

But ultimately, he concludes, law enforcement alone can do only so much. Many others concur.

Jack Wuest, executive director of the Alternative Schools Network, a Chicago civic group that works with dropouts, pegs much of the problem to the lack of funds for youth jobs and training programs. "I call this the (Ronald) Reagan legacy," he adds, saying that Chicago used to get twice as much federal aid for such programs before Mr. Reagan slashed spending, aid that helped deal with an 85% to 90% unemployment rate among urban black teenagers.

There's likely something to that theory. A report last week by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University in Boston said that 16% of African-Americans and Hispanics ages 16 to 24 are high school dropouts, with sharply limited career prospects.

Mr. Weis says he sees a severe decline in conflict-resolution skills among today's youngsters. Combined with the breakdown of gang leadership — many leaders are behind bars — too many freelancing young men with too little self-control get into too many fights with too easily available guns, he says.

The **U of C's** Mr. Ludwig reports "extremely high rates of mental health problems among juveniles in Cook County detention facilities" and super-low academic test results among many urban youth. "We don't normally think about how to provide schooling to a 16-year-old kid who reads at, say, a third- or fourth-grade level," he says. I think that may suggest problems with Chicago Public Schools reform, which tends to discard lots of low-end achievers.

Rev. Pfleger includes many of the same things on his list and throws in one more: religion. "Churches do not talk about shootings at all. It's like it doesn't exist," he says.

I don't have the answer(s). I do know more needs to be done. If Mr. Daley is to really turn around this town for good, he can't afford to lose a classroom full of kids to gun violence every year.

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