



Transcript for “Why is Violence So Persistent in Some Areas of Chicago?”

Featuring Robert Vargas

Hosted by David Chancellor

Neighborhood violence is often talked about as being a result of poverty or random threat but, in this podcast, University of Wisconsin–Madison sociologist Robert Vargas says that those characterizations can be very inaccurate. Instead, based on his extensive ethnographic research in a Chicago neighborhood, Vargas explains we can’t understand problems of violence or disadvantage without understanding the political histories and structures of neighborhoods.

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[Chancellor] Hello, you’re listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I’m Dave Chancellor.

For this, our October 2015 podcast, I talked with Robert Vargas, a sociology professor at the University of Wisconsin and an IRP affiliate about research he did in a neighborhood in Chicago called Little Village. From his work there, he’s written a forthcoming book called *Wounded City: Violent Turf Wars in a Chicago Barrio* that is an ethnography of violence, relationships, and politics in Little Village, but also an attempt to change the way we think and talk about neighborhood violence.

Over the last few years, violent crime rates and especially murders in Chicago have often made national headlines. And, along with these headlines, many commentators have speculated about the nature of these spikes in violence. But as we turn to Professor Vargas, he says that a lot of the ways that people talk about violence in a city like Chicago tend to be very inaccurate.

[Vargas] The violence in Chicago is framed as this random threat, there are terms like “Chiraq” that are coined that emphasize how more people are killed in Chicago than service people are in Iraq. All of that is an incredible misperception because when you actually look at the overall rates of violence in the city, it’s actually been declining substantially since the 1990s. That’s not to say that it’s not still a problem, it has remained persistent and has increased in a handful of areas within. So the violence problem in Chicago isn’t this “Chiraq” random violence, it’s really a problem of concentrated violence, it’s really a problem of inequality, of a handful of mostly low-income minority neighborhoods that bear the most consequences of violence.

[Chancellor] Vargas says a big question he's tried to address through his research and in his book is why violence is concentrated in particular pockets of neighborhoods.

[Vargas] Answering that question, I feel like is the key to understanding the persistence of violence in Chicago because violence isn't an overall city problem, it isn't even an overall neighborhood problem. Because in neighborhoods like Little Village and other places, most of the blocks in these neighborhoods have crime rates that are lower than the city average, it's just a handful of blocks in these neighborhoods that account for the majority of violence. Part of what the book does is it tries to reorient people to the problem, to think differently about how we think violence happens, and how we think it's prevented to give people a better understanding of the problem.

[Chancellor] In Little Village, Vargas canvassed 60 randomly selected blocks, observed street activity, spoke to over 700 residents, and interviewed nonprofits, police, and city officials. But we should step back to talk more about the neighborhood itself.

[Vargas] It's a Mexican enclave in Chicago. It's the largest Mexican-American community in all of the Midwest. It is home to a thriving immigrant business center on 26th Street, home to several community organizations, it's a capital of independent Latino politics, you've had politicians like Jesus Garcia come out of that neighborhood who ran for mayor most recently. Because of the poverty, but also in part, the high level of undocumented folks, gangs have had a pretty strong hold over the neighborhood since the 1970s. The neighborhood has consistently had an aggravated battery rate that's nearly twice as high as the city average. The homicide rate has kind of dipped up and down, but some years it's higher than the city average and in other years it's not but when you zero in on Little Village and look at it on a tract by tract or a block by block level, the majority of the violence has been concentrated on the east side of the neighborhood, which also tends to be the most disadvantaged part of the neighborhood and also one of the most politically underrepresented parts of the city.

[Chancellor] Vargas says that when Chicago city leaders have responded to episodes of violence in the city, they've often questioned the motives of residents in disadvantaged neighborhoods like Little Village, assuming that poor communities don't have the will to prevent violence. And he says that, while neighborhood poverty is part of the equation, he argues that people need to rethink the relationship between neighborhood conditions and violence.

[Vargas] When people think about poverty, what comes to mind is this idea that people who live in poor neighborhoods tend to have a higher propensity to commit acts of violence. But when you look at the numbers, 99% of people who live in these neighborhoods don't commit acts of violence. Violence itself is an interaction between two people, it's brought on by conflict. And so when you think about violence as a relationship, then that causes you to be specific about which actors and which actions are creating the conflict or mediating the conflict to prevent it. So that's the turn that my book is trying to make, it's to not necessarily discount poverty, but to think

about a different way that it works, not just as the absence of resources, but a particular way that resources are administrated.

[Chancellor] Vargas says that fierce competition between the Chicago political machine and neighborhood independents impeded the community's ability to prevent violence. His main argument in the book then is that violence is persistent in certain parts of Chicago neighborhoods because the turf wars over blocks between, not just gangs and police, but also nonprofits and politicians, trigger acts of violence and diminish efforts to prevent it.

In Vargas's case study of Little Village, in which he is looking at two different geographic areas within the neighborhood, the outcome of political competition resulted in two areas of the neighborhood with very different capacities to prevent violence.

[Vargas] You have the west side of the neighborhood that has a rich history of political independence and fighting tooth and nail to get resources from and creating nonprofit organizations to help address violence. And these organizations are very successful at doing this. then you have the story of the east side where, since the 1970s, the east side of the neighborhood has routinely been gerrymandered by the Chicago City Council, in part because the west side had so much success as a politically independent neighborhood that the Democratic Party feared that they would lose another seat to another politically independent neighborhood. This had enormous consequences for the developmental trajectory of the east side. You have far fewer community organizations in the area, far less green space, and what you have is mainly the police in charge of dealing with the violence.

[Chancellor] Vargas emphasizes throughout the book the importance of understanding relationships within the community and, in particular, how we should be cautious of thinking of events in isolation. As an example, he sometimes found that police tactics for responding to violence, such as removing a known threat from the streets, can inadvertently lead to more, rather than less, violence within a neighborhood.

[Vargas] When I was canvassing one of the blocks on the east side, the residents were telling me stories about how their block was becoming the most violent they've seen in years. And it was because the gang leader in the block was arrested and gangs from both sides of the neighborhood were converging on their blocks to take it over. I went back and took a look at the violent crime statistics and did an interrupted time series and, sure enough, there's a spike in violence in the month after this gang member's arrest. And so, in these instances, the police, when they're suppressing gangs, their actions don't just have an effect on that one gang. They have an effect on an entire community. In this specific case, the elimination of one gang had the effect of igniting conflict amongst other gangs who saw this as an opportunity to gain more territory.

[Chancellor] Another example that Vargas identified is that police, perhaps because of the high volume of calls that officers are required to process during their shifts and their interest in addressing them quickly, may not always be cautious with the identities of residents who cooperate with them. While this may lead to less cooperation, it can also lead to increased violence.

[Vargas] In my fieldwork, going block to block, I encountered a residents who claimed that they don't cooperate with police because they don't trust the police to protect their identities. And when I tried to ask them why, they shared stories of reporting a crime and the police showing up to their door out on the front lawn asking them to identify a suspect. Or, they would be talking with a police officer and then a squad car would then pull up with a gang member in the backseat who would then see them. Or the police would be talking to each other on the CB radio communication and disclose the address of someone who called and the gang members, it turns out, also monitored police radio communication.

[Chancellor] Vargas says that when the gang members discovered the identities of informants, they often would violently retaliate.

[Vargas] In the case of these retaliations, it was mostly acts of arson, so throwing Molotov cocktails at the homes of these informants to send a message to the entire neighborhood to not cooperate with police. So again, it's like violence, the code of silence in the inner cities is thought of as being the product of poverty, but when you think about it from a relational standpoint, you see that people abide by this code based on the threat of retaliation. In some cases with the way that police conduct their work -- and the police are under a ton of constraints in their work too, in trying to do this work -- all it takes is one slip up for an incident like this to happen, where an informant's identity is revealed and that word spreads through the neighborhood like wildfire and then all of the sudden you have a hard time with people coming forward to cooperate with police.

[Chancellor] If we think of gangs and police as organizations that are competing for power within a neighborhood, Vargas explains that gangs don't directly take on the police because they don't have the resources and because, even if they did, it would be bad for business. Instead, Vargas says, the gangs' main interaction with the community is through the residents. As we just heard, the gangs use violence or the threat of violence to limit the flow of information to the police, but they also embed themselves in the communities in other ways.

[Vargas] And so gangs' strategy is mainly one of survival, where the primary mechanisms that gangs rely on to survive is through their relationships with the community. A lot of the time, gangs emerge in the absence of an organizational infrastructure or political infrastructure that actually meets residents' needs. So, for example, there are gangs on the west side of Little Village, but they have nowhere near the amount of hold over the neighborhood that, say, the Latin Kings on the east side have. Because on the west side, you had community organizations providing services. You had green space, you had a whole bunch of different services for kids. On the east side you barely had any of that. And instead the gang actually served one of the primary functions for residents getting protection from robbers. Sometimes for even short term loans. There was a resident who was a day laborer, didn't have papers, injured himself on the job and was out of work for six months and had kids and a family to support. And he didn't ask help from anyone, but the gang members who were his neighbors came by and started doing some of the daily household chores for him, sweeping his front porch, mowing his lawn for him, and even offered him some cash assistance to help him cover his rent as he recovers. So, gangs actively provide these supports not just for purely economic reasons of wanting to get protection or something back, but in many ways, these gang members are from the communities too, these

are also their neighborhoods, gang members are also people with relationships with friends and family members, they also go to church and they're active members of the community. And by embedding themselves in the neighborhoods in these ways, they develop an informal social order with the other residents in the neighborhood and these forms of order emerge many times in the absence of resources and organizations and political structures.

[Chancellor] I asked Vargas how generalizable his findings really are. After all, he's focused on one neighborhood in one city. Does this idea that violence in some neighborhoods is the result of competition between competing groups – like politicians, gangs, and the police in this case, and that that competition can impede a community's ability to prevent violence – Does that idea hold up elsewhere?

[Vargas] In terms of generalizability, I feel like some of the lessons to be taken away that other cities can learn from this case study is the overall importance of studying relationships to understand the mechanisms triggering violence or impeding violence prevention efforts. In Chicago, the conflict that made it hard for the east side to prevent violence was political, it was this tension between political independents and the Democratic Party. In other cities, this political conflict might look differently. For example, I don't know if you've heard of the Boston Miracle. There was this dramatic decline in homicides in Boston as the result of a coalition of police officers, academics, and clergy. And that coalition disintegrated because of political infighting amongst the different community groups because certain groups wanted to take credit for everything that had been done while others didn't. So that's another example of the salience of political relationships for understanding communities' capacities to prevent violence that isn't exactly like the Chicago case, since it's not a duel between political parties, but just, more generally by studying the political relationships and how neighborhoods are embedded in these political relationships, it gives you a framework to understand why certain neighborhoods have the capacity to prevent violence while others don't.

[Chancellor] Vargas says that, when people hear terms like “Chiraq,” or they hear stories about violence happening in Chicago, he hopes that they'll think more critically about why violence is happening in the places it does.

[Vargas] It's not random. These are areas, that have their own rich political histories and you can't understand the problem of violence or disadvantage or other social problems in the city of Chicago without understanding how those neighborhoods are tied to the wider political structure of the city. So when you ask questions about violence or neighborhood inequality in Chicago, ask questions about who is representing these neighborhoods, what are their relationships with the key people brokering resources, and how are those relationships impacting what communities are trying to do to address the problem.

[Chancellor] Thanks to Robert Vargas for sharing his work with us. For more information on his book, *Wounded City* which is forthcoming from Oxford University Press, you can visit his website at robvargas.com.

Thanks for listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty.