

## **Crime in Kansas City, Missouri 2007-2011: A Tale of Two Cities**

Ernest Evans Ph.D.

Adjunct Professor of Political Science, KCKCC

Professor of Political Science, KCKCC, a graduate of Yale University, this erudite scholar has continued to advocate for social justice and human rights, through education, public speaking and community-building partnerships

### **Abstract:**

This essay is a comparative and personal reflection on the causes of the high crime surge in the Black Neighborhoods of the Kansas City Kansas, Missouri. Drawing from the Lessons from **The Battle of Algiers**, the author explains, why KCMO has had this four year old violence surge in the city's black neighborhoods. However, the city's political class has to face a painful reality: If they do not take steps to eradicate the underlying causes of this violence surge, then they are going to have to accept the consequences--which will probably be at best a continuation of this violence surge and at worst a major acceleration of it.

### **I) Crime Patterns in KCMO, 2007-2011**

*"With Malice Toward None, With Charity Toward All"*

In 2011 crime in Kansas City, Missouri unfortunately continued the patterns that had been characteristic since the spring of 2008. Specifically, homicides in the White/Asian/Hispanic neighborhoods of the city were slightly below the levels of 2007--while homicides in the black neighborhoods of the city were sharply above their 2007 totals: In 2007 there were 94 homicides, 62 black and 32 other races--in 2008 there were 126 homicides (95 black and 31 other races); in 2009 there were 110 homicides (81 black and 29 other races); in 2010 there were 106 homicides (81 black and 25 other races) and in 2011 there were 114 homicides (88 black and 26 other races.) Bad as these homicide statistics are with respect to the crime situation in the black neighborhoods of KCMO, I feel that by themselves, they do not reflect the full dimensions of the collapse of law and order in these neighborhoods. Criminologists have long noted that homicide statistics and other forms of violent crime have an inverse correlation: When homicides go up in certain neighborhoods other forms of violent crime "fall"--these crimes do not actually decrease, people simply stop reporting them because of the power of the gangs and the criminal elements in their communities. This inverse correlation appears to

have happened in KCMO's black neighborhoods since the spring of 2008. The converse is also true: When homicides fall, other forms of crime "rise" because people feel safer about reporting such crimes. For example, in Detroit in 2010 there was a 26% drop in homicides--and not surprisingly other forms of crime "increased" as a consequence.

## **II) What is Not Causing This Crime Surge in the Black Neighborhoods of KCMO: National Crime Problems**

It would be comforting to believe that the now nearly four year old violence surge in the black neighborhoods of KCMO is due to national problems like the recession, the lack of effective gun control, the increase in the youth demographic, etc. I say it would be comforting because it would disguise a painful truth: That this violence surge is due to mistakes made by the city's journalists, politicians and community leaders. The reality is that there is no reason to believe that this ongoing violence surge in KCMO is due to national problems. Homicides have been declining all over the United States since 2006: in 2006 there were 17,030 homicides nationally, in 2007 there were 16,967 homicides nationally, in 2008 there were 16,479 homicides nationally, in 2009 there were 15,399 homicides nationally, and in 2010 there were 14,767 homicides nationally--and preliminary figures from the FBI indicate that in 2011 there will be a further 6% drop in the national homicide totals. In 2011 Boston, Washington, DC, New York City, Chicago, Saint Louis, Los Angeles, etc. all recorded significant drops in homicide totals--KCMO is one of the very small numbers of US cities to have had an increase in homicide totals in 2011. If problems like the recession are not causing a homicide surge elsewhere in the country, and they clearly are not, there is no reason to believe that such national issues are responsible for the violence surge in KCMO black neighborhoods.

## **III) What Is Causing This Violence Surge in the City Black Neighborhoods: The Phenomenon of "De-Policing"**

Police officers in modern America are required on a daily basis to do a most politically incorrect thing: Use violence against racial minorities. This already serious problem is aggravated by the grim nature of police work: As a number of veterans cops have told me, there is no such thing as a nice takedown, they all look terrible on camera. Given this painful reality, if police officers are to have the morale and motivation to do their jobs in black neighborhoods they must be assured that if accused of racist misconduct they will get due process and fair media coverage. When this is not the case the result is the phenomenon of "de-policing"--out of sheer self-survival, cops stop doing their jobs in black neighborhoods. Nature abhors vacuum--so the gangs and the criminal elements move in and violence explodes. There are a number of recent examples of such "de-policing." In NYC in 1987-1989 there was the Tawana Brawly case--in 1989 a grand jury concluded that she had fabricated her story but by then the damage had been done: The NYPD, feeling that if accused of racism they would at best be summarily fired at worse brought up on federal civil rights charges, abandoned the black neighborhoods of NYC to the criminals--and violence in these neighborhoods absolutely exploded in the time period 1989-1993: In 1992 there were 2250 homicides in NYC, a massively disproportionate number of them in black neighborhoods. (In contrast, last year

there were only about 500 homicides in NYC.) In Cincinnati in the spring of 2001 there were several days of rioting after a white cop shot and killed a black teenager--for several days community meeting resonated with demands for "swift justice" with "no legal niceties". In response, the Cincinnati police, out of self-survival, abandoned their duties in the city's black neighborhoods--in 2000 there were 22 homicides in Cincinnati, in 2001 there were 40 and in 2002 there were 52, all of the increase taking place in the city's black neighborhoods. In Prince George's County, Maryland the controversy over the Stephanie Mohr case set in motion an explosion of violence in the county's black neighborhoods that has earned PG County the nickname "Gory Prince George's".

This brings us to the Sofia Salva case in KCMO. In Feb. 2006 two KCPD officers stopped Ms. Salva on a traffic violation--Ms. Salva was pregnant and had a miscarriage the next day. In response, she got a large financial settlement from the city and the two officers were fired. Before moving on to the impact of this case on crime in KCMO I feel that in the interest of full disclosure I should note my personal connection to this case. I am part of a Catholic prayer group that meets once a week. At our meeting after the Salva video was released we discussed what we should do about this case. One young woman spoke up and said: "Our duty as Christians is clear. We must reach out ministerially to all three people in the video. Let us follow the example of the Amish in Pennsylvania who reached out ministerially to the family of the man who killed their children." So, in the past five years we have prayed regularly for all three people in the video, had Masses celebrated for them, sent them "Thinking of You" cards, and we bought all three copies of the famous book "When Bad Things Happen to Good People." I make no apology for what I and my prayer group did--we feel it is what Jesus would have done. To me the saddest episode of the Salva tragedy was that I wrote to several of the ministers who had been "all over the media" about this case and asked them, Christian to Christian, to do what my prayer group has been doing. It greatly saddens me to report that, for reasons of their own, they have refused to do so.

One can debate whether the two officers should have been fired, but I do not want to deal with this issue in this memo. Rather, I want to discuss the way that this tragedy was handled by the city's journalists, politicians and community leaders. With a few honorable exceptions the local press did not cover this incident with even a pretense of fairness. Now, in human terms I understand why most of the city's journalists acted as they did: Dan Rather said it best when he said "Fear haunts every newsroom in America"--by which he meant fear of the Politically Correct Thought Police of the liberals and the Patriotism Thought Police of the conservatives. Accusations of "racism" or "lack of patriotism" are career-enders for journalists--and in recent years we have many examples of both of these scenarios. However, the lesson was not lost on the men and women of the KCPD: If accused of racism, you will be crucified by a local press terrified of being accused of being "soft on racism." The community leaders also acted irresponsibly, by openly threatening a convention boycott if the officers were not fired--and the fact that there was a convention boycott over the Frances Sempler affair showed that this was no idle threat. Finally, Police Board members Karl Zobrist, Mark Thompson and Terry Brady conducted the April 11, 2008 hearing on the Salva tragedy with an appalling lack of objectivity and fair-mindedness--terrified of the possibility of a convention boycott, these Board

members spent four hours falling all over themselves to attack the two officers. Again, in human terms I can understand why the Board members acted as they did--but that does not change the consequences of their behavior. After the April 11, 2008 Police Board meeting every cop in the KCPD was on notice: If accused of racism, forget about even a pretense of due process from a city political establishment terrified of a convention boycott. The men and women of the KCPD duly took notice and we have been living with an explosion of violence in the black neighborhoods of the city for nearly four years.

#### **IV) The "DoomsDay Scenario" New York City During the David Dinkins' Administration (1989-1993)**

On June 23, 2011 the Leavenworth Times published the following letter of mine:

"On Sunday, June 19 we had four homicides in KCMO. Analogies must always be used with caution but there are alarming signs that KCMO is caught up in the same sort of "homicide surge" that nearly destroyed New York City under Mayor David Dinkins. The parallels: A new, inexperienced mayor (Dinkins, Sly James); a police establishment that the cops on the beat deeply distrust (Dinkins' police commissioner, the KCMO Police Board); and a nationally publicized case (Tawana Brawley, Sofia Salva) that caused rank and file cops to abandon fighting black-on-black crime out of sheer self-survival because they know if accused of racism they will get neither due process nor fair media coverage. By 1992 the black neighborhood of NYC had become a war zone--in 1992 there were 2,250 homicides in NYC--a massively disproportionate share of them in black neighborhoods. (By contrast, in 2010 there were less than 500 homicides in NYC.) The same disaster that befell the black neighborhoods of NYC in 1989-1993 could be emerging in KCMO."

Several months later it appears that there was a lot of truth in my concerns. Mayor James took office on May 1, 2011--in the four months before he became mayor we had approximately 6 homicides a month--in the eight months since he became mayor we have had 11 homicides a month. In the last 8 months of 2011 we have had 87 homicides compared to 27 in the first four months of 2011--if we had had the rate of homicides in the first four months of 2011 that we had in the last eight months 2011 would have been the third most violent year in KCMO history--only calendar years 1993 and 1994, during the terrible "crack wars" of the early 1990's, would have been more violent. The statistics on black homicides also give grounds for concern: We had seven more black homicides in 2011 than in 2010 (one more from other racial groups). Also, Ms. Betsy Webster of Channel 5 did a story in which she noted that in the past 15 years in KCMO there have been an average of 42 more black homicides than homicides of other races--but that after the Salva video was released this number jumped to 57 more black homicides than homicides of other races--in 2011 there were 62 more black homicides than homicides of other races. Now, we are in a preliminary stage of the James administration and there is more than adequate time to turn the situation around--but early trends are troubling.

## **V) What Needs to Be Done to End the Bloodbath in the Black Neighborhoods of KCMO**

I fully support money for groups like AIM4Peace, and I am impressed with the crime-fighting efforts of local individuals like William Kostar. I also think that Chief Forte has instituted some good ideas in his time in office. But, by themselves, these efforts are not going to stop the violence surge in the city's black neighborhoods because they do not address the reasons for that surge: The fact that the men and women of the KCPD feel that if accused of racism they will not get due process or fair media coverage. To address this underlying cause, I suggest the following steps: First, with respect to the two officers in the Salva case, they should be given financial compensation for the failure of the Police Board to give them due process, and the circumstances of their termination from the KCPD should be handled such that they can, if they so desire, pursue a career in law enforcement in some other city. (As a fact of life, there simply is no way that these two officers can stay on the KCPD after that video was endlessly replayed on the local news.) Second, once a settlement has been reached with the officers, I am pleased to report that Ms. Elizabeth Alex of Channel 41 has courageously offered to go a fair interview with Off. Melody Spencer to give her a chance to give her side of the story--the media and bloggers were particularly savage on her because they felt as a woman she should have been more sensitive to Ms. Salva's situation. (Ms. Alex's courage, in defying the Politically Correct Thought Police, makes her a journalist in the tradition of Edward R. Murrow who bravely defied Joe McCarthy in 1954). Such an interview would do an enormous amount to restore the morale and motivation of KCPD officers to fight black-on-black crime. Third, the KCMO Police Board has got to make a public statement that there will be no repeating of the April 11, 2008 meeting--that at all future hearings on such cases the Board members will conduct themselves with fairness and objectivity. Finally, the KC Star, as the city's newspaper of record, has got to do what I have urged them repeatedly to do since early 2008: Publish an editorial saying that in our nation everyone deserves due process, including white police officers accused of racism. The Star, commendably, had published a number of editorials calling for the KCPD to improve relations with the black community--so it is perfectly appropriate for them to publish an op-ed saying that police officers deserve due process as much as anyone else.

## **VI) Lessons from "The Battle of Algiers"**

One of the best movies ever made about violence was the 1965 film "The Battle of Algiers"--it chronicled the fighting in the city of Algiers in 1957 between the French military and the Algerian rebels. In the course of the film a French colonel gives a briefing to the press about the state of the fighting--a journalist asks him if it is true that the French military are using torture and death squads to defeat the rebels. The colonel pauses for a moment, and then simply says: "If you want France to stay in Algeria, you must accept the consequences." My analysis of why we have had this four year old violence surge in the city's black neighborhoods will be a bitter pill for many in the city to have to swallow, and my suggestions as to what has to be done to end this violence will be an even more bitter pill. However, the city's political class has to face a

painful reality: If they do not take steps to eradicate the underlying causes of this violence surge, then they are going to have to accept the consequences--which will probably be at best a continuation of this violence surge and at worst a major acceleration of it.