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2005

Landscapes of Fear in Springfield

John Brigham, *University of Massachusetts - Amherst*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/john_brigham/3/

December 30, 2007

“Landscapes of Fear in Springfield”¹

John Brigham, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Springfield, Massachusetts began as an outpost in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in what would become the United States of America. The town, though part of Massachusetts was up the Connecticut River from Long Island Sound and New York and ultimately received important influences from that more cosmopolitan region.

During the Civil War, Springfield became a major Northern arms manufacturer and the armory from that period still sits in a dominant position at the center of the city but it has become a community college. In America the “Springfield Rifle” was the dominant firearm of the post-Civil War period and it was important in the western expansion of European Americans. Later, handguns succeeded this rifle as one of the most important products manufactured in the city. This would seem to make Springfield symbolic in respect to the violence in America that can be attributed to the widespread availability of handguns. However, that attribution is relatively rare.²

The name “Springfield” has a pastoral implication in English and it is a very common place name in the United States. As the mythical city in “The Simpsons” the name has gotten a great deal of international attention. Since the Second World War the flight of industrial jobs from the Northeast and the influx of Puerto Ricans from New York and the island colony in the Caribbean have changed the character of the city. It is now roughly fifty percent minority with that population nearly evenly divided between Black and Hispanic.

I first heard Springfield cleverly described by one of its local legislators, Representative Ben Swan, as “The City In the Country”. This seemed apt in that between Hartford, a half an hour to the south and Boston an hour and a half east there is very little population. To the north there is nothing for days. It is a medium sized city by American standards with 150,000 people in its geographical jurisdiction. Here are the main media, transportation, business and legal centers. However, the city is ringed by more prosperous towns that create a metropolitan area of nearly 500,000.

Because Springfield is in the United States the violent context is quite extraordinary by European standards. Scholars praised the drop in the number of US children killed in school shootings from 55 in 1992 to 40 in 2005 while the total number of children killed in the United States by firearms in 1995 was 5,300.³

¹ For the conference PAISAJE CIUDADANO, DELITO Y PERCEPCION DE LA INSEGURIDAD: INVESTIGACION INTERDISCIPLINARIA DEL MEDIO URBANO Oñati, 7 - 8 Abril 2005.

² Michael Moore’s movie on the Columbine Shootings is an exception in this regard.

³ Richard M. Haynes and Donald M. Chalker, A Nation of Violence, <http://www.asbj.com/security/index.html>.

Evidence of concern about crime in Springfield appears in discussions in all quarters. As the media center for the region with the major newspapers and television stations, the city gets considerable attention. In the same sense, some of this is sanitized because of the desire not to tarnish the image of the city.

I will suggest that there is evidence of professional and scholarly ideology in public comment about crime. There is also tolerance of public comment as conditioned by professional ideology. That is, some things that are said seem reasonable and some seem inappropriate or silly depending on the prevailing interpretations of how crime should be handled.

The source is "MassLive.com." This is a location for many internet "chat rooms" or forums. The site, which is sponsored by the local newspaper, has topics of interest like sports and there are forums devoted to each of the cities in the region. Each of the forums has its regulars and occasional users. The forums are easy to participate in requiring only internet access which is widely available in the United States.

The forum for Springfield is very active with 230 posts for March 17, 2005. The posts are organized in numbered strings or lines of conversation that run between three to ten exchanges on a single subject. Exchanges tend to be brief. Some are quite abrupt, in the style of messages or early telegraph exchanges where letters and words cost money. But, given the total output a good deal of information is exchanged. Some people are particularly active.

Participants do not go by their given names but rather internet monikers or aliases that are somewhat like those of the citizen band radio networks in the United States. Often colorful and loosely linked to character or personality they give the exchanges a somewhat mythical or childish character. Particularly active on the Springfield site are Samnite, MsLatina, NoPolitician, Controlbored, and midmike,

Because those who participate are not representative necessarily of the town I will stick to observations that can be made about the landscapes of fear. Just as one can describe a dark alley and give some information, give the time it was dark and add more and add repeat observations to fill out the picture I take the chat room material as aspects of the Springfield landscape to which more could always be added.

One exchange following a murder in the neighborhood of "Mason Square" in early March 2005 takes the form of criticism of community activists who often challenge the police and leads to a discussion of responsibility. From **ControlBored**, *They want an increase in Police presence, but do not want Police to hassle those engaging in these type of activities.* From **midmike**, *How many African Americans have been killed by police in the history of the city? How many have been killed by other African Americans?*⁴ Another line of discussion compares Springfield with a neighboring city, Holyoke that is also plagued with crime but according to the author of the post, not as much is heard about it. From **Samnite**, *All of inner city Holyoke looks like Springfield's "high crime areas." So the chief there has a better PR operation.*⁵ Corruption and the poor seeking out Massachusetts for social services become the concern of **MsLatina** in response to **Samnite**'s post about the crime problem.

⁴ <http://www.masslive.com/forums/springfield/> 14494 March 11, 2005.

⁵ 14639 March 17, 2005.

Another exchange following the announcement in late March 2005 that state police will be brought in to perform local tasks⁶ had the chat room activists responding. The contributors are **Samnite**, again, **NoPolitician** and **Mrpaper**. In the United States, like in Spain, there are different levels of police. The national police are the FBI, state police usually are assigned to patrolling the highways between cities and local police handle most of the crime in America. Springfield's decision to turn to the state police to handle local crime is dramatic in institutional terms. Given the sense, in Springfield, of scarce resources, some of the concern about introduction of this new authority is offset by the sense that someone else is paying their salary.

Mrpaper posts a very intemperate response to the introduction of state police to the city and it is hard for me to know whether to describe it in Europe as based in the violence that is characteristic of America or as an anomaly. In general, this forum is reasonably civil as such things go in the US but there are few constraints on what is appropriate. The mechanism is to alert the managers to an inappropriate post and they may delete it and on repeated instances take away the right of the author to post in the forum.

The aspect of the forum that I would like to focus on is the role of ideological currents. In America some lines of thought are well established. Crime control and policing, for instance are linked while demographic considerations are understood but seem often to be soft or more academic (liberal is sometimes the notion). Racial and ethnic explanations are always close to the surface but references to race and ethnicity as a cause of crime is generally discouraged or met with shock.

Money for public business is understood to be scarce and private accumulation is accepted as normal, inevitable and often highly celebrated. People in authority are suspect while celebrities in sports or entertainment are revered. One of the institutions of which the city is most proud, the Basketball Hall of Fame, draws on the celebrity of the game itself, invented in Springfield, as a beacon of hope for an otherwise sad place to live.

Specifically, when it comes to crime the forum reveals a tension between fear of the police and hope that they can bring order to the city.

⁶ Peter Goonan, State troopers to work Springfield 'hot spots' *The Springfield Republican* Wednesday, March 16, 2005.

Appendix

Re: *State Cops will clean up Spfld* by **PitchPartner**, 3/23/05

14750.1.2. Look at NYC by **mrpaper**, 3/23/05 20:56 ET

it can be done. Throw a beating on the dirtbags and suddenly it's not so bad. Turn them loose. Yeah Rudy was so bad that property values went up 300 % and the families returned. No surrender, why play nice. JC some dirtbag gets pulled over with 14 k and an automatic weapon, let's take him in. Put a slug in his head, end of problem. They will move on, do it.

14750.3. People are more fearful by **Samnite**, 3/23/05 21:05 ET

of state police because they have better uniforms and have more power outside the local power plays. And thats why they may listen to them. The city police is controled by politicians who say one thing and do another {favors to certain groups}. The city police know the lay of the land, know the neighborhoods, and types of people within. The average dispatch car goes to 3 to 5 domestic calls aday!!The state police are really not that experianced to that degree. Remember:there is a practical approach and a by the book approach. Social problems are handled in another manner. The help is good...like more money, more stuff....but the SPD could have handled it...the question remains, what will happen when they leave? It will be like community policing, when its gone...nothing will change, it will be as it was. I do wish them good luck, and hope that they spread the word how the local have a harder job especially for the pay difference. I also hope the SPD will learn and expect the same treatment that the State police get from their higher ups....Smoke and mirrors, whips and chains.lol.lol.

4749. Proactive policing by **NoPolitician**, 3/23/05 16:57 ET

I did a little research on "proactive" vs. "reactive" policing on the web. I did this in response to a post that said there was a study about dividing up a town into thirds, doing reactive policing in one part, proactive in another, and nothing different in the third, with no change anywhere. I couldn't find that study online.

I did, however, find this article which may be relevant to Springfield, since it is about crime in Lowell:

The article concluded that a change in the way things were done at the police department -- in other words, a change in attitude -- helped bring the crime in Lowell down by 50%.

The other studies I read about proactive vs. reactive policing showed a definite split in philosophies. Some claim proactive policing works, others claim it doesn't. All claim that it is definitely harder, and requires strong leadership to pull it off.

It also mentions that when only a small number of people are assigned to "proactive policing" (also referenced as community policing) that it can split the department. Sounds like what happened in Springfield.

The other interesting concept is that there is some confusion about what is a "crime". If the police crack down on minor infractions, then yes, it can appear that "crime" has gone up because now is more reported. But at the same time the public's perception of "crime" might be less.

I think the latter is very important. I think that Paula Meara should be fired because she has deliberately made the public believe that crime was going to be out of control due to the 76 layoffs. She likely drove a fair number of people out of our city because they didn't feel safe due to her comments. In the end, driving out a number of law-abiding citizens and replacing them with people less concerned about crime is most likely going to cause your crime rates to increase. She fulfilled her own prophecy.

Re: *Where is the outrage from the from....* by **ControlBored**, 3/11/05

14494. Where is the outrage from the from.... by **ControlBored**, 3/11/05 16:53 ET

The Mason Square Community Leaders? Another murder in the Square. Yet, the only thing stated by these so called leaders is Police brutality. It is easy to lay the blame elsewhere then to do some soul searching for the root of the real problem.

They want an increase in Police presence, but do not want Police to hassle those engaging in these type of activities. The truth is all the Police resources are placed in these areas, leaving the surrounding areas with little or no coverage. People should be outraged to find out that almost every patrol car was out of service because of this shooting last night. Mind you the Patrolman that people state never do anything, are the ones who caught the suspect and were seconds removed from the line of fire.

This is an example of all talk and no action. Blame the Police for the communities problems while they sit idly by and do nothing. Yet, the Police continue to do their jobs without a contract and constant criticism from the public. The blame should lay upon the community leaders at large and the City leaders (especially the Chief) for their continued failures.

14494.1. How many african by **midmike**, 3/11/05 17:34 ET

...americans have been killed by police in the history of the city? How many have been killed by other african americans? Where is the most danger to african americans? Where are the efforts of african american leaders concentrated?

14494.1.1.1.1. Not a Black problem by **NoPolitician**, 3/11/05 19:05 ET

Oh, I realize it LOOKS like a Black problem, but looks can be deceiving misleading. Why isn't it a male problem? Why isn't the male community up in arms? How about an age problem? Most of these people are under 40. Why isn't the under-40 community up in arms?

I think the faulty assumption is that these people are part of a Black community, as if every Black person knows each other. I'm guessing that's not the case. How many black families are teaching their kids that drugs and guns are the answer? Does anyone think the majority are?

I also think it is foolish to simply lay this problem on the steps of the Black community and walk away. Guess what -- this is a city problem, a regional problem, a state problem. People may think that it isn't their problem because they've moved to the 'burbs. Guess what -- if the region's largest city implodes, it's most certainly their problem. As the county's 400,000 people become poorer, less educated, and more prone to violence, do you think that will a) encourage businesses to operate here, or b) discourage them? If the answer is b), then where will you work, where will your kids work?

Re: *I still think Holyoke is the pits.* by **Samnite**, 3/17/05

14639. I still think Holyoke is the pits by **Samnite**, 3/17/05 21:42 ET

All of inner city Holyoke looks like Springfield's "high crime areas". So the chief there has a better PR operation..they hired him, and want to look good...so the media plays along. In Springfield the mayor wants Paula out! And then he can grant favors to his own. Smoke and mirrors gang...believe me. All cities with many poor have higher crime than wealthier cities {at lease on the blue collar level}. But the poor came to Springfield because of government money....and the rich got their cut from it. By renting out their apartments, and all the rest....it's called the filter down effect! All payed for by the majority of working people. America brings poor into this country to create a large cheap labor polities people receive money from welfare and housing grants {paid for from workers taxes}these people spend that money ay stores....who owns these stores? What we have are poor people spending the working man's tax dollar buying the products of the rich. Pretty clever. Also jobs become fewer with lower pay....because their are so many that need work to get money.

14639.1. Alright, all of inner city Spfld. looks like "Holyoke's by **MsLatina**, 3/17/05 21:57 ET

high crime area" if that's your argument, it'll be mine too. Obviously, the better PR relations is working, there is less crime in Holyoke than Spfld. I don't think it would be posible for the mayor to give the chief's job to an old cronie of his, with all the crap happening around here. I think the people of Spfld. are watching every move he makes.

I do believe some folks come to Massachusetts for all the government benefits. Who's to blame? You got West Spfld. full of russians coming looking for the free handouts, such as SSI, Section 8 and so forth, without working a day of their life here in the USA. But that's America for you. I totally agree with your point on the poor living off our tax dollars, but once again, this is America. What was it like when we didn't have to pay taxes? How did the poor people get by? I'm young, so I'm just curious.

<http://www.masslive.com/forums/springfield/>

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