

## A brash proposal

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State Reps. John Fritchey and LaShawn Ford have called for the governor to send in the Illinois National Guard to help quell violence in Chicago. It's tempting to dismiss the Chicago [Democrats'](#) proposal as political grandstanding — and it is — but let's also recognize a sincere cry for help.

Chicago's homicide rate is roughly double that of Los Angeles and triple that of New York. Nearly 1,000 Chicagoans were slain over the last two years, including 129 before their 18th birthday. 2010 is shaping up as another deadly year, with 113 victims as of Monday morning, 16 of them children. The homicide rate here has been trending downward during this decade, and crime experts point out that it's far from the worst in the U.S. But to say it was worse before, or worse elsewhere, does not excuse the violence here and now.

City and community leaders are fighting to stop the bleeding. Under Superintendent Jody Weis, the [Chicago Police Department](#), a pioneer of community policing principles in the 1990s, is improving its information systems to target resources in the most dangerous neighborhoods. Likewise, [Chicago Public Schools](#) CEO [Ron Huberman](#) is using data analysis to identify those youths most at risk of violence — as victim or perpetrator.

"These two initiatives make a lot of sense," says Jens Ludwig, director of the Crime Lab policy institute at the [University of Chicago](#), "based on what the research tells us about what's promising." Time and again, criminologists have found that resources are best used when targeted at the highest-risk people and places.

But in a budget crisis, those resources are stretched thin. That makes a federally funded option like the National Guard appealing to local lawmakers. Harold Pollack, a colleague of Ludwig's at the Crime Lab, gets that. But a better solution, he says, would be another shot in the arm for local police forces, through boosted federal COPS grants to put more officers on streets. Research suggests that every dollar spent putting police on the street returns \$4 to \$8 in benefits to the public.

As for the National Guard? No serious public safety expert has backed that idea. ([Gov. Rod Blagojevich](#) suggested something similar in 2008 — but we did say "serious public safety expert.") The Guard plays vital and heroic roles in natural disasters and, recently, in overseas wars. Its record suppressing civil unrest ranges from spotty to — quoting Supt. Weis — "disastrous." And it is not a police force whose members are trained in the fine points of constitutional law as they play out in street settings.

Let us assume that Fritchey, a former assistant attorney general, and Ford, once a social studies teacher, know that the Guard is not the solution. Still, their brash proposal grabbed headlines and — for a moment, at least — shined a national spotlight on Chicago's failure to protect its own.