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## Oakland

### Killing for respect

Apr 8th 2009 | OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA  
 From The Economist print edition

#### A puzzling ground zero in America's struggle with crime and race

"AMBULANCE, not police; I saw the look in your eyes," says Phil Tagami, a native of Oakland and a property developer in the city, as another siren wails outside his downtown office. Mr Tagami, of Japanese, German and Jewish stock, knows his sirens and loves his town, which he calls "the working waterfront for the Bay Area". Many of the people who work in San Francisco and Silicon Valley (across the bridge to the west) or in Berkeley (just to the north) live here. Then he opens a folder in a big pile of crime statistics. The story that emerges is not quite what recent headlines have suggested.

Oakland is trying to return to normal after a horrendous and atypical bout of black-white racial tension. It began on New Year's Day, when a white officer shot and killed a young black man lying face down on a railway-station platform. Bystanders recorded the shooting on their mobile phones and riots broke out. Then, last month, two white policemen pulled over a young black man in a routine traffic check. The man, Lovelle Mixon, who was on parole from prison and suspected of rape, opened fire, killing both policemen. He ran to an apartment building where he barricaded himself in with an assault rifle and gunned down two more officers before being shot to death himself.

Such violence is by no means unique to Oakland. But the city presents a special puzzle. It is bursting with "signs of success everywhere, of flourishing urbanism", says Kevin Starr, a historian of California. Oakland has grown since 1852 from a wooded suburb of San Francisco into an industrial city with a port despatching wine from Napa and fruit from the Central Valley. One district, Piedmont, technically an autonomous city for the past century, is among the wealthiest in the country. Oakland boasts architectural gems, a zoo, several sports teams, a picturesque downtown lake and trendy gallery districts.

With about 150 languages, it is also among the most diverse cities in the world. The largest single group in the 2000 census was blacks; now they come a close second behind whites and not far ahead of Latinos. Oakland has a thriving black middle class. Three of its past four mayors have been black. The city has spawned many national trends in black culture, most recently "hyphy", a largely black rap, dance and fashion style. Adherents like to wear T-shirts down to their knees and have the motto "Go Dumb".

A favoured way of going dumb is to attend drag races at which cars are wrecked and fights often break out. For, despite all the city has to offer, Oakland's violent-crime rates are the highest in California and among the highest in the country. Whereas in most American cities murders and many other crimes have gone down or remained stable over the past decade, they have gone up in Oakland.

Poverty cannot be the primary reason, says Jack Levin, a criminologist at Northeastern University in Boston. Oakland has much less poverty than cities such as Hartford, Baltimore or Memphis, which also have high crime rates. Nor is it racial tension, since the overwhelming majority of Oakland's violent crime is black-on-black. In the late 1980s much of it could be blamed on the twin epidemics of crack cocaine and handguns. But today's shootings, often among men who were "crack babies", are more likely, says Mr Levin, to happen for "respect".

Respect killings defy reason. A wrong look, a casual gesture, can lead to a full-blown shoot-out. The murders, says Mr Tagami, tend to happen in the two or three areas where black former prisoners—by his estimate, about 7.5% of Oakland's population of 400,000—are to be found. Most of them go in and out of prison, getting more brutal as they go. "Three-time offenders are killing four-time offenders," he says, because younger criminals are fighting for the turf of older ones, and for the respect of their peer group.

Oakland's liberal politicians, at least as left-wing as their colleagues in Berkeley and San Francisco, do not know what to do about the problem or even, according to Mr Starr, how to talk about it. This "nihilist insurgency", he says, leaves them tongue-tied: at the ceremony for the fallen policemen, Ronald Dellums, Oakland's current mayor—a black hero of the anti-apartheid era—had nothing to say at all.