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Op-Ed Columnist

Behind the Laughter

By **BOB HERBERT**

Conan O'Brien has been making some pretty rough jokes about Newark, which has led to a (mostly) mock feud between the late-night host and Newark Mayor Cory Booker.

O'Brien joked that the mayor was establishing a program to improve the health of the city's residents, then deadpanned: "The health care program would consist of a bus ticket out of Newark."

He did a video bit in which he praised the city's "thriving arts scene" (while showing a graffiti-scarred wall); its "four-star lodging" (shots of abandoned, gutted, rusting vehicles); and its "world-class live theater" (a peep show).

He threatened to form an alliance with the mayors of nearby municipalities, thus "creating a geographic toilet seat around the city of Newark," making it possible to flush the city down the figurative bowl.

The mayor came up with his own YouTube videos in response and, believe it or not, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton weighed in at one point as a mock peace negotiator.

Conan seems like a nice fellow, and I doubt that he harbors any malice toward Newark. But he and his audience are having fun taunting a city that, like many others across the U.S., is in a desperately tragic situation: poverty-stricken, run down, often unsafe, its children and teenagers in too many instances going nowhere fast.

Whether it's Newark, Detroit, parts of Chicago, South-Central Los Angeles, Camden, N.J. — take your pick — we've looked the other way for decades as the residents of hard-core inner-city neighborhoods struggled with overwhelming, life-threatening problems and a chronic shortage of resources, financial and otherwise.

We're having an intense national debate over whether to move ahead with nation-building in Afghanistan and to continue protecting the population in places like Kabul and Kandahar while all but ignoring the violence that is consuming the lives of boys and girls in Chicago, America's third-largest city.

Dozens of boys and girls of school-age and younger are murdered in Chicago every year. One hundred were killed there last year, according to the police. The blood of the young is spattered daily on the stoops, sidewalks

and streets of American cities from coast to coast, and we won't even take notice unless, for example, we can engage in the ghoulish delight of watching the murder played over and over again on video.

In Newark, where some of the streets do look as bad as the scenes that were part of Conan's comedy bit, the unemployment rate is 14.7 percent. Keeping kids in high school long enough to graduate is difficult. Drug dealing is a fallback employment option for men and boys who can't find legitimate work.

Other cities have the same problems, some to a greater degree. So what are we doing? While mulling the prospect of sending up to 40,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, we've stood idly by, mute as a stone, as school districts across the nation have bounced 40,000 teachers out of their jobs over the past year.

That should tell you all you need to know about twisted national priorities.

Even as teachers by the tens of thousands are walking the plank to unemployment, we're learning, as [The Times reported last week](#), that one in every 10 young male dropouts is locked up in jail or juvenile detention. As if that weren't gruesome enough, we find that the figure for blacks is one in four. What would it take to get the perpetual crisis facing these young people onto the radar screens of the rest of America?

Conan was just trying to be funny, but the reality behind his late-night humor is horrifying. In Detroit, the median sale price of a house has hovered around \$8,000. Seventy percent of all murders in the Motor City go unsolved. Joblessness is off the charts. The school system is a catastrophe.

I remember driving around Camden, which is right outside of Philadelphia, on a rainy afternoon. Young people with nothing to do — they had dropped out of school and had little or no chance of finding a job — were gathered on porches, saying little, staring the hours away. I had on a suit and was driving a nice car. More than one person that I approached thought I was either buying or selling drugs.

The inner cities have been in a recession for decades. They're in a depression now. Myriad issues desperately need to be addressed: employment, education, the foreclosure crisis, crime, alcohol and drug abuse, health care (including mental health treatment and counseling), child care for working parents and on and on and on.

Conan's jokes would carry a silver lining if they could somehow prompt more people to think more seriously about what's really going on in cities like Newark.

