Strengthening Public Safety: The Cost of Crime and Deterrence (3/6/2023)
By James M Trutko

Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb recently stated that public safety is the first responsibility of government, ""If you can't feel safe to start a business, start a family and live, it's not good for the city." While many other political, community, and business leaders and the public would agree, Cleveland lacks a sound strategy and the political will to achieve public safety. Because of the city's importance to the region's economy and culture, this failure has consequences for Cleveland residents as well as for all who live in the area.

It does not need to be so. As data demonstrates, the cost of strengthening public safety and deterring crime is more than outweighed by the solution, to hire and properly train an adequate number of police.

A safety strategy should focus on deterring career criminals with an adequate number of professionally trained police. Once an adequate force is in place, there is room to debate their deployment along with social policies to reduce recidivism or discourage non-career criminals.

The focus on police deterrence is essential because a disproportionate amount of serious crime is committed by career criminals. Career criminals are smart, calculating, and indifferent to society's rules; they want to satisfy their own needs and don't care how they do so. Career criminals are deterred when the costs of getting caught and punished are seen as greater than the prospective gain.

In contrast, the policies being adopted in Cleveland seem to be based on a view of crime as a social phenomenon. Criminals are seen as victims driven by grievance, poverty, envy, racism, or passion to commit crimes. Criminal activity is seen not a personal moral failing but as a failure of society. While personal passions, poverty and social problems may contribute to creating criminal behavior on the margin, social policies without deterrence will fail.

Deterrence requires maintaining police staffing levels and the active recruitment of new police. Unfair criticism of police, budget cuts that reduce staffing levels, de-incarceration trends, and giving excessive authority to the Cleveland Community Police Commission (CCPC) to impose disciplinary action are all steps in the wrong direction.

A related cause of poor public safety policy in Cleveland is a failure to quantify the true cost of crime to victims and society. Because neither policymakers nor the public grasps the magnitude of the cost of crime and its frequency, public safety policies are driven by personal experience, political bias, or the latest sensational news story. Quantifying the costs of crime makes it possible to rationally compare and evaluate specific policies.

Despite the importance of crime and public safety, no Cleveland organization appears to have tried to quantify the extent of crime in Cleveland, estimate the costs imposed on victims and society and develop rational cost-benefit-based policies to improve public safety. For example, the data below shows the criminal activity in the city of Cleveland for the past four years. (One caveat: many people don't report crimes for various reasons, so the reported totals underestimate the problem.)

In an "average" year, Cleveland had a total of 26,098 major reported crimes. Over a four-year period, Cleveland averaged 6,600 violent crimes (murders, rapes, robberies and aggravated assaults) and 19,500 property crimes (burglaries, larcenies and motor vehicle thefts). There were many other crimes and illegal activities that also contributed to an unsafe environment.

Cleveland: Crime, Crime Rates and Other Police Activity					
	2018	2019	2020	2021	4-Yr Avg
Total Crime Rate/ 10K Pop	713.1	699.1	676.8	650.9	685.0
Total Reported Crime	**27,170**	**26,637**	**25,785**	**24,800**	26,098
Violent Crime Total	**6,290**	**6,078**	**7,094**	**7,050**	6,628
Murder	101	103	160	166	133
Rape	580	536	439	470	506
Robbery	2,227	2,003	1,909	1,669	1,952
Aggravated Assault	3,382	3,436	4,586	4,745	4,037
Property Crime Total	**20,880**	**20,559**	**18,691**	**17,750**	19,470
Burglary	4,921	4,562	4,056	3,502	4,260
Larceny/ Theft	12,678	12,916	11,351	10,696	11,910
Motor Vehicle Theft	3,281	3,081	3,284	3,552	3,300
Other Police Activity					
Drug Crimes	2,112	1,861	1,413	1,482	1,717
DUI- Alcohol, Drugs	442	428	452	566	472
Criminal Arrests	15,584	12,790	9,217	9,257	11,712
Prisoners	13,025	12,299	5,723	8,979	10,007
Traffic Citations	41,095	41,747	28,042	32,302	35,797
Parking Citations	26,970	24,017	17,075	20,777	22,210
Accident Reports	17,982	17,282	15,237	16,525	16,757

Sources: OIBRS. City of Cleveland 2021 audit. Population estimated at 381,000.

Another way to look at the data is to compare relative crime rates per 10,000 residents. In 2020, Cleveland's crime rate was 677 per 10,000 residents vs a crime rate of 157 per 10,000 for the rest of Cuyahoga County and approximately 300 for the state. In other words, Cleveland had 31% of the county's population and 66% of the major crime; it had 6% of the state's population and over 13% of the crime. The data show that Cleveland's crime rate is four times that of the rest of Cuyahoga County, twice the rate of Ohio's cities. Cleveland ranks in the top twenty most crime-ridden cities of the U.S. year after year.

Cleveland Crime Rate Vs Other Cuyahoga Co. Areas (2020 Est.)			
City/Agency	Pop (USCB)	2020 Total Crime	2020 Crime Rate/10K
Cleveland Total	381,000	25,785	677
Heights/NE Total	205,100	4,639	226
Southeast Total	92,900	2,101	226
Parma/SW Total	172,700	2,952	171
Lakewood Total	49,700	826	166
South/Cuya Valley Total	123,000	1,171	95
ChagrinValley Total	73,500	617	84
West Shore Total	137,000	1,112	81
Total Cuyahoga Co	1,234,900	39,203	317
Cuyahoga Co., Excl Cle	853,900	13,418	157
Ohio Total (n=357 cities)	6,343,300	192,143	303
Cle % of Cuyahoga	30.9%	65.8%	
Cle % of Ohio	6.0%	13.4%	

Source: CJS, OIBRS & Police reports. Ohio total includes 357 reporting cities.

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Crime estimates and crime rates do not fully reveal the true burden of crime on victims and society. Over the past 25 years, several social scientists have studied and tried to quantify the cost of crime. Approaches vary, but estimates of the tangible and intangible costs of crime have been developed for the different types of crime. The estimates include the costs to victims (medical, property and productivity losses}, police, court and incarceration costs, loss of perpetrator income due to a life of crime, and community quality-of-life impacts.

Rather than trying to pick the single best method, it's possible to approximate the cost of crime to Cleveland victims and the community simply by using the average cost per crime from the top 13 studies repeatedly cited by experts. Based on the four-year average number of crimes in Cleveland, the average annual cost of crime to Cleveland is $1.6 billion or $4,322 per capita.

Cleveland Cost of Crime ($2020)				
	Cleveland Crime- 2018-21 Avg	Avg Cost Per Crime- 13 Studies	Total Cost of Crime ($Mil)	Cost of Crime Per Capita
Violent Crime Total	6,628			
Murder	133	$ 7,246,950	$ 963.8	$ 2,530
Rape	506	$ 198,142	$ 100.3	$ 263
Robbery	1,952	$ 75,686	$ 147.7	$ 388
Aggravated Assault	4,037	$ 86,153	$ 347.8	$ 913
Property Crime Total	19,470			
Burglary	4,260	$ 5,859	$ 25.0	$ 66
Larceny/ Theft	11,910	$ 2,206	$ 26.3	$ 69
Motor Vehicle Theft	3,300	$ 10,809	$ 35.7	$ 94
Total Reported Crime	26,098		$ 1,646.5	$ 4,322

Source: Average cost per crime based on average of 13 major studies in $2020.

Note: Cleveland Population estimated at 381,000.

With better quantitative data on the number of crimes and the cost of crimes, it's possible to examine the alternatives to reduce crime and improve public safety using rational, cost-benefit analysis. The most direct and historically proven way of increasing crime deterrence and improving public safety is to increase the number of properly trained police.

Social scientists have studied the relationship between police levels and crime. Rand Corporation constructed an initial model a decade ago which can be updated by using a recent meta-study compiling data from hundreds of cities over 50 years on "elasticity" (sensitivity) of crime to a 1% increase in police. The results show that increasing Cleveland police staff by 130 officers (10%) reduces crime by about 480 incidents and the net cost of crime by $63 million after adjusting for the cost of additional officers. If the number of officers were increased to the full police staffing level, 325 officers (25%), the number of crimes would go down by 1,200 and the net cost of crime would be reduced by an estimated $157 million. Each additional officer results in nearly one-half million dollars in net crime cost savings.

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Cleveland Crime Cost Savings: 10% & 25% Increase in Police		
	Crimes/Yr	Crime Chg/1%
Murder	133	-0.666%
Rape	506	-0.255%
Robbery	1,952	-0.559%
Aggrav Assault	4,037	-0.099%
Burglary	4,260	-0.225%
Larceny	11,910	-0.083%
Motor Veh Theft	3,300	-0.343%
Total	26,098	
	Incr Police = 10%	Incr Police = 25%
ASSUME: Increase in Police	130	325
% Increase	10.0%	25.0%
Cle Police 2021 Audit / Officer	$ 135,000	$ 135,000
RESULTS		
Current Crime Cost	$1,646,545,000	$1,646,545,000
Chg in Number of Major Crimes	**(479)**	**(1,197)**
Crime Savings from Police Incr	($80,455,000)	($201,139,000)
Cost of Addl Officers	$17,550,000	$43,875,000
NET CRIME REDUCTION SAVINGS	**($62,905,000)**	**($157,264,000)**
Net Savings Per Addl Officer	**($483,885)**	**($483,889)**
Source for crime elasticity: Chalkin and McCrary, Are US Cities Underpoliced (2018)		
Source for Cle police avg cost: 2021 Cle Fin Audit		

The precise savings from additional police can be debated, but adding more officers as a deterrent to career criminals is the most direct and historically proven way of reducing crime. In contrast, the mixture of adopted social programs has no historical proof of success and their adoption is driven largely by ideologically driven critiques of police, political agendas, and academic studies.

All political and community leaders should focus on reducing crime and violence because community safety is a precondition for achieving so many other community goals. A high rate of crime and violence results in extensive geographical areas effectively rendered off-limits for investment, fuels community resentments and racism, scars crime victims, and makes it difficult for rehabilitated felons to get real jobs and participate in society. Persistent levels of crime compromises the delivery of educational and community services which further reduces economic opportunity and increases poverty.

These intangible costs of crime are an especially heavy burden on the poor who are unable to escape them. For the vast majority of Cleveland residents, the most direct and immediate approach to improving their lives is to reduce crime by adopting policies that make it easier and faster to hire and properly train police.

After more police are hired, other social programs directed at crime reduction should be evaluated with a cost-benefit and crime impact analysis. Because public safety is so important to the community, an independent organization should be created to develop quantitative metrics, monitor progress, and ensure accountability of police and other social programs. The organization should conduct surveys on community perceptions of safety, analyze when and where violent crimes occur, measure progress toward stated goals, and research best practices and applicable technologies.

Such a program will increase public awareness of crime and allow Cleveland to make steady progress toward a safer environment for all residents. To rephrase Mayor Bibb, "It'll be good for the city if people feel safe to start a business, start a family and live", but Cleveland won't reach that goal unless public safety policies are substantially changed.

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