

Can Cleveland Become One of America's Safest Big Cities?

By James M. Trutko

Next month community leaders will convene the Cleveland Rising Summit, an event intended to develop a consensus on what is needed to move the area forward. The meeting's agenda will hopefully include a discussion about reducing crime and violence to improve the area's potential for growth in jobs and investment.

In 2017, Cuyahoga County had about 7,100 violent crimes (murders, rapes, robberies and aggravated assaults), over 20% of the state's total. The City of Cleveland alone accounted for about 6,000 violent crimes, 84% of the county's total. In addition, Cuyahoga County had about 29,700 property crimes (burglaries, larcenies and motor vehicle thefts) and about 300 cases of arson.

Crime in Cuyahoga County and Cleveland (2017)

	Cuyahoga Co.	Cleveland	Bal of Cuyahoga Co.	Ohio	Cuyahoga % of Ohio	Cleveland % of Cuyahoga
Total Crime	36,850	24,943	11,907	292,030	13%	68%
Violent Crime	7,142	5,999	1,143	32,872	22%	84%
Murder (V)	132	107	25	686	19%	81%
Rape (V)	640	497	143	5,271	12%	78%
Robbery (V)	3,209	2,697	512	11,129	29%	84%
Aggrav Assault (V)	3,161	2,698	463	15,786	20%	85%
Property Crime	29,708	18,944	10,764	259,158	12%	64%
Burglary (P)	7,604	5,853	1,751	54,716	14%	77%
Larceny (P)	17,807	9,696	8,111	185,087	10%	55%
Mtr Veh Theft (P)	4,297	3,395	902	19,355	22%	79%
Arson (P)	278	253	25	1,783	16%	91%
2017 Population	1,121,251	385,351	735,900	10,829,974	10%	34%

Source: State of Ohio, Office of Criminal Justice Statistics (OCJS)

Crime Rate Per 1,000 Population (2017)

	Cuyahoga Co.	Cleveland	Bal of Cuyahoga	Ohio
Crime Rate	33	65	16	27
Violent Crime	6	16	2	3
Property Crime	27	49	15	24

Source: State of Ohio, Office of Criminal Justice Statistics (OCJS)

Cleveland isn't one of the nation's notoriously violent cities and the area hasn't suffered from recent horrific mass shootings, but crime and violence nevertheless impose heavy tangible and intangible costs on the community. Direct costs include taxes to fund expenditures for safety services, courts and incarceration. The Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages shows justice, public order and safety activities account for about 11,600 of Cuyahoga County's 20,000 public administration workers and about 63% of total wages. Other direct costs include losses to victims of crime, costs of insurance and crime prevention efforts, public services to families of criminals and rehabilitation services.

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The indirect costs of crime and violence are also significant, but harder to quantify. They involve the long-lasting after-effects of crime as well as what people can't or don't do because of real or perceived threats of harm. Among the indirect results of high crime and violence are the extensive geographical areas effectively rendered off-limits for investment, the resentments and racism fueled by crime, the lingering scars of crime victims, and the inability of rehabilitated felons to get real jobs and participate in society. These indirect costs of crime are an especially heavy burden on the poor who are unable to escape them.

The participants of the Cleveland Rising Summit—and indeed all political and community leaders—should focus on reducing crime and violence and creating greater community safety because it is a precondition for achieving so many other community goals. Persistent levels of crime make it more difficult to increase economic opportunity and reduce poverty and they compromise the delivery of educational and community services.

Suppose, for example, the vision was to make Cleveland and Cuyahoga County one of the safest big cities in America by reducing violent crimes (murder, rape, robbery and aggravated assault) by 3%-5% per year for five years. This simple goal would amount to a reduction of 1,000-1,600 violent crimes per year in Cuyahoga County by year five. Imagine the cost savings and community resources freed up to devote to other problems.

A community-wide plan to reduce violent crime would start with a focused and coordinated effort by all local police forces, security personal at local universities and hospitals, and the courts. It would also enlist community service institutions to develop alternatives for the most crime-prone populations and to provide more effective rehabilitation services. Finally, public involvement is crucial -- Businesses and individual homeowners can take practical steps to harden targets of crime and to help police.

The second element of a community effort to reduce violent crime is the adoption of what some experts call a Group Violence Reduction Strategy. A recent book by Thomas Abt, [Bleeding Out](#), provides a good outline based on current research about the nature of violent crime. Abt points out that an effective response is possible because most violent crime in cities is not randomly distributed throughout population and the city. In every city, there are a few "hot" people that commit serious crimes and a few "hot spots" that account for the majority of violence. Most urban violence is carried out by young men with prior criminal backgrounds, and the guns used in violent criminal acts are often carried illegally by felons.

Abt believes that long-term success must involve more than just making lots of citations and arrests, but that success doesn't depend on dealing with the root causes of crime. He says the best approach is to focus on the illegal behavior of specific people in targeted areas. His method is designed to prevent violence in a fair and balanced way by altering the decisions of current and potential criminals through a carrot-and-stick approach. He advises letting criminals know directly that law enforcement is aware of their activities, while simultaneously having community organizations offer them alternatives to a life of crime.

In Cuyahoga County, a successful strategy must also include a realistic plan to reform the justice center. Incompetent management of the justice center undermines the legitimacy of law enforcement and contributes to cynicism about police. The County Executive and Council need to develop a practical plan for the justice center that guarantees competent, safe, humane treatment to prisoners and includes real metrics about operating efficiency, such as prisoner cell-nights and costs per prisoner.

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Finally, an independent organization is needed to monitor progress and ensure accountability. The organization should provide detailed analysis on when and where violent crimes occur, measure progress toward stated goals, and research best practices and applicable technologies. In addition to providing crime data in visual format, online and in real-time, the organization should monitor the effectiveness of judges and courts by developing and disclosing metrics that measure how hard the judge is working and how well the judge manages a caseload. The goal is to improve public accountability and to reduce the time and related cost from crime to sentencing.

If participants in the Cleveland Rising Summit can prod political and community leaders to adopt a strategy to reduce violent crime by 3% to 5% per year, they will have strengthened the area's potential for economic growth and improved the quality of life of its citizens.

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