

Why Isn't Public Safety Metro Cleveland's Top Issue?

By James M. Trutko

Most people are familiar with the famous line in the Declaration of Independence that reads all men are created equal and endowed with unalienable rights to "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." But many readers probably skim over the balance of the paragraph, which describes government as the means to secure man's God-given rights and to "effect their Safety and Happiness." Public safety has historically been one of the key responsibilities of city and national governments because personal safety is a precondition for most human activity.

The maintenance of public safety imposes heavy tangible and intangible costs on Metro Cleveland. Direct costs include taxes to fund safety services, courts, jails, and incarceration. The Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages shows justice, public order, and safety activities account for about 11,000 (57%) of Cuyahoga County's 19,100 public administration workers and about 64% 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.

The indirect costs of dealing with crime are harder to quantify, but also significant. They involve the long-lasting physical and psychological 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.

Despite the costs of crime and its impact on the community, no local community appears to compile and publicize data on crime. The FBI publishes local data on violent crime (homicides, rape, robberies, and aggravated assaults) and property crime (burglaries, larceny-thefts, and motor vehicles thefts) but it is not mandatory for police to provide the data. When the FBI data is combined with police data obtained by Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, a troubling picture on crime in Metro Cleveland emerges. Over the past five years, Cuyahoga County has averaged about 34,100 total crimes, including 7,600 violent crimes and 26,500 property crimes. Cleveland alone averaged 22,200 total crimes with 6,100 violent crimes.

From 2018 to 2022, the total number of violent and property crimes was about 167,000. The total doesn't include a host of other illegal activities, such as drug sales and use, vandalism, and prostitution, which seriously affect the public's perception of public safety. In addition, this total doesn't include all crimes, since experts often assume that as many as half of all crimes aren't even reported by victims. Crime is unreported in part because victims are skeptical about whether the crimes will be solved. In Cleveland, for example, FBI statistics show that only about 6% of reported crimes are "cleared."

The data reveals three other insights into local crime. Cuyahoga County averages about 160 homicides per year, primarily in the City of Cleveland and eastern/southeastern suburbs. The county averages about 4,400 motor vehicle thefts per year, and the number is rapidly increasing. Larcenies/theft comprise about half of all crimes and are concentrated in suburbs with many retail establishments. Because larcenies comprise a relatively large and volatile percentage of total crime, and because they affect businesses as well as individuals, it is possible that the public could perceive an increase in crime even while crime statistics are flat or decreasing.

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With the data showing that crime is a major factor in Metro Cleveland, one might wonder why crime reduction isn't a top policy concern for local political and community leaders. One simple reason is that the crime data is difficult and time-consuming to assemble, and no research organization exists to collect and analyze the data. Even if such an organization existed, there is no mechanism in Metro Cleveland to publicize their findings to civic leaders and the public.

Another reason is that crime rates vary considerably by community and leaders of communities with high crime rates don't want to talk about crime. What's a high crime rate? When looking at the data, it appears that communities with total crime rates over 200 per 10,000 population and violent crime rates of over 50 per 10,000 population could be regarded as having a "crime problem."

The attached chart shows communities with the most severe crime problem are the City of Cleveland and adjacent east/southeast suburbs. Thirteen communities with crime rate rates over 200 per 10,000 population represent 45% of Cuyahoga County's population, but account for 80% of total crimes. Leaders with high crime rates don't want to talk about it and leaders in safer communities don't want to appear complacent about their lower crime rates.

Another major reason that public safety is not a dominant policy concern in Metro Cleveland is that there is not a consensus on what to do to reduce crime. Political leaders and the public are divided on whether policing/court-based strategies or "root-causes" strategies are the most effective crime reduction strategies. The strategies reflect different assumptions about the nature of criminals, crime, and the incentives for criminal activity.

A policing/court-based strategy includes several components focusing on deterring career criminals with an adequate number of professionally trained police along with firm courts and adequate facilities for incarceration. Once an adequate force and proper facilities are in place, there is room to debate police deployment, punishments, and social policies to reduce recidivism or discourage non-career criminals.

The focus on 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, "root causes" approaches are based on a view of crime as a social phenomenon and the key to reducing criminal activities is to change social conditions that lead individuals to commit crimes. Criminals are seen as victims driven by grievance, poverty, envy, racism, or passion to commit crimes. Criminal activity is seen not as a personal moral failing, but as a failure of society.

City political and non-profit leaders like the "root-causes" approach because it provides an additional rationale for social programs that they advocate. Unfortunately, even if successful, these programs are more of a long-term solution. Moreover, root-causes approaches deal with large populations, while the reality is that a smaller segment of career criminals commit most of the crime. It's another version of the 80/20 rule – 20% of the people commit 80 % of the crime. The 4,300 motor vehicles stolen in an average year are stolen by a small number of individuals with criminal expertise, not 4,300 different persons.

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A good community approach must recognize that while on the margin personal passions, poverty, and social problems may contribute to creating criminal behavior, the social policies approach without attention to deterrence will fail. Without adequate attention to deterrence, the short-term result is a sense of disorder and chaos that lowers the bar for more criminal behavior. Moreover, the absence of deterrence will make it more difficult to realize the potential long-term benefits of the social policies.

A community-wide plan to reduce crime in Metro Cleveland should start with a focused and coordinated effort by all local police forces, security personnel at local universities and hospitals, and the courts to compile and voluntarily and systematically share data. Having a clear sense of the magnitude of crime and public safety will allow the issue to be addressed. The emphasis should be on the historically proven approach of maintaining adequate, well-trained personnel with good facilities to deter and deal with crime. Over time, an effective plan 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 – voters must support leaders who prioritize crime reduction, and businesses and individual homeowners should take practical steps to harden targets of crime and to help police. All these activities would make Metro Cleveland a better place to live.

Metro Cleveland's Communities with High Crime Rates. (More than 200 Crimes per 10,000 population)

Municipality	Avg Crime Rate/10K Pop	Avg Viol Crime Rate/10K Pop	5-Yr Avg Total Crimes	Avg Violent Crimes	Avg Homeci des	Avg Rapes	Avg Robberies	Avg Aggrav Assault	Avg Property Crimes	Avg Burglaries	Avg Larcenies-Thefts	Avg Motor Veh Thefts	Larceny % of Total Crimes	Pop
Cuyahoga Co.	277	62	34,093	7,626	163	648	2,038	4,804	26,536	4,883	17,270	4,378	51%	1,231,671
Suburban Cuya	140	18	11,886	1,522	32	164	338	1,016	10,433	1,120	8,079	1,229	68%	850,662
Brooklyn	619	52	659	56	0	6	10	39	603	22	541	40	82%	10,646
Cleveland	583	160	22,207	6,104	132	483	1,701	3,788	16,103	3,763	9,191	3,149	41%	381,009
Woodmere	523	26	45	2	0	0	1	1	42	2	36	5	80%	853
Warrensville Hts	431	100	565	131	2	4	25	128	435	36	247	148	44%	13,108
Beachwood	342	15	396	17	0	3	4	10	378	16	342	20	86%	11,571
Bedford Hts	266	55	278	58	2	2	7	46	220	33	139	48	50%	10,430
Brooklyn Hts	264	15	40	2	0	0	0	2	37	2	31	4	79%	1,497
Garfield Hts	263	55	721	152	5	18	28	102	569	73	482	13	67%	27,448
S Euclid	259	18	552	39	1	6	9	23	513	38	441	34	80%	21,297
Euclid	259	42	1,205	195	4	19	51	122	1,009	142	696	171	58%	46,550
East Cleveland	217	62	362	103	4	6	32	62	259	70	102	87	28%	16,671
Independence	202	20	145	14	0	2	5	7	131	7	117	8	80%	7,175
Richmond Hts	201	22	208	23	1	2	7	13	185	24	125	36	60%	10,342
Data for Hunting Valley, Cuyahoga Hts, & North Randall was not available														
Source: FBI and local police departments. 5-Yr avg is 2018-22 or latest data available.														

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Metro Cleveland's Communities with Moderate Crime Rates. (100-199 Crimes per 10,000 Population)

Municipality	Avg Crime Rate/10K Pop	Avg Viol Crime Rate/10K Pop	5-Yr Avg Total Crimes	Avg Violent Crimes	Avg Homeci des	Avg Rapes	Avg Robberies	Avg Aggrav Assault	Avg Property Crimes	Avg Burglaries	Avg Larcenies-Thefts	Avg Motor Veh Thefts	Larceny % of Total Crimes	Pop
Cuyahoga Co.	277	62	34,093	7,626	163	648	2,038	4,804	26,536	4,883	17,270	4,378	51%	1,231,671
University Hts	185	40	237	52	0	4	9	39	185	14	152	19	64%	12,797
Cleveland Hts	163	25	706	110	3	11	33	63	596	75	443	78	63%	43,262
Brook Park	151	7	278	12	0	5	3	4	266	22	207	36	75%	18,382
Bedford	150	13	187	17	1	1	6	9	170	21	105	44	56%	12,457
Lakewood	145	12	722	62	1	5	29	27	660	79	510	71	71%	49,678
Orange Village	144	6	47	2	0	0	0	1	45	2	41	3	86%	3,290
Parma Hts	142	19	281	38	0	4	2	33	243	21	205	16	73%	19,790
N Olmsted	130	8	407	24	0	3	5	16	383	27	332	24	81%	31,341
Strongsville	124	6	552	27	1	3	5	19	525	29	479	18	87%	44,660
Lyndhurst	122	12	163	16	0	1	3	12	146	10	128	8	79%	13,366
Parma	107	16	839	122	2	26	15	79	717	115	518	84	62%	78,103
Highland Hts	106	4	89	3	0	0	1	2	86	6	78	2	88%	8,373
Shaker Hts	102	8	275	23	1	5	4	12	252	48	179	26	65%	27,027
Mayfield Hts	102	8	188	14	0	2	4	9	174	7	161	6	86%	18,487
Maple Hts	101	35	223	77	2	5	19	52	146	39	57	51	26%	22,078
Data for Hunting Valley, Cuyahoga Hts, & North Randall was not available														
Source: FBI and local police departments. 5-Yr avg is 2018-22 or latest data available.														

Metro Cleveland's Communities with Lower Crime Rates. (Less than 100 Crimes per 10,000 Population)

Municipality	Avg Crime Rate/10K Pop	Avg Viol Crime Rate/10K Pop	5-Yr Avg Total Crimes	Avg Violent Crimes	Avg Homeci des	Avg Rapes	Avg Robberies	Avg Aggrav Assault	Avg Property Crimes	Avg Burglaries	Avg Larcenies-Thefts	Avg Motor Veh Thefts	Larceny % of Total Crimes	Pop
Cuyahoga Co.	277	62	34,093	7,626	163	648	2,038	4,804	26,536	4,883	17,270	4,378	51%	1,231,671
Mayfield Village	92	1	31	0	0	0	0	0	30	2	26	2	86%	3,337
Bratenahl	92	26	11	3	0	0	0	3	8	2	4	1	42%	1,153
Chagrin Falls	91	5	35	2	0	0	0	1	34	5	25	4	69%	3,903
Solon	87	6	198	14	0	3	2	9	184	16	162	6	82%	22,779
Valley View	86	2	17	0	0	0	0	0	17	2	12	3	72%	1,997
Westlake	78	4	251	13	0	3	4	7	238	24	189	24	75%	32,032
Fairview Park	74	7	120	12	0	2	2	8	108	8	93	8	78%	16,161
Oakwood	68	28	25	10	0	1	1	8	15	2	6	6	26%	3,624
Berea	60	6	111	11	0	1	3	7	100	12	80	8	72%	18,522
Pepper Pike	59	4	37	3	0	0	0	2	35	4	27	3	73%	6,330
Walton Hills	58	11	13	2	0	0	0	2	11	1	8	1	62%	2,269
Seven Hills	57	5	66	6	1	1	1	4	60	7	45	8	68%	11,590
Bay Village	55	4	84	6	0	1	0	5	78	6	62	10	74%	15,194
Rocky River	49	5	98	10	0	1	1	7	88	8	74	7	75%	19,986
Middleburg Hts	49	3	75	4	0	2	2	0	71	3	57	12	76%	15,432
Linndale	47	12	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	50%	169
Brecksville	42	3	58	4	0	1	0	3	54	9	43	2	75%	13,617
N Royalton	41	4	125	11	0	4	1	6	113	15	91	7	73%	30,068
Glenwillow	41	4	4	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	3	0	79%	919
Highland Hills	34	8	3	1	0	0	0	0	3	1	1	1	24%	960
Olmsted Falls	32	3	28	3	0	0	0	2	25	4	19	3	66%	8,828
Gates Mills	29	2	6	0	0	0	0	0	6	1	4	0	69%	2,217
Moreland Hills	25	0	8	0	0	0	0	0	8	1	7	0	85%	3,303
Olmsted Tnsp	24	1	32	1	0	0	0	1	31	4	22	5	70%	13,432
Bentleyville	24	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	0.5	1.5	0	75%	846
Broadview Hts	12	2	24	3	0	0	0	3	21	1	18	1	76%	19,265
Newburgh Hts	5	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	100%	2,049
Data for Hunting Valley, Cuyahoga Hts, & North Randall was not available														
Source: FBI and local police departments. 5-Yr avg is 2018-22 or latest data available.														

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