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REDUCING CRIME IN COLUMBUS

Safer Communities Through Policy

The protection of public safety and the preservation of public order are the first responsibility of government. “For a state is a collective body, composed of a multitude of individuals, united for their safety and convenience...,” declared William Blackstone in his 18th century treatise *Commentaries on the Laws of England*. To Roman Senator Marcus Tullius Cicero, who lived centuries earlier, this meant “*salus populi suprema lex esto*—the safety of the people should be the supreme law.” The promise of safe streets and the freedom to move about the community as one pleases is not only the most basic desire of most people, but is also a precondition to human flourishing. In its absence, communities are trapped in what feels like an endless cycle of crime and poverty. Or, as author Ta-Nehisi Coates once put it, “...when you live around violence, there is no opting out [emphasis added].”

Public safety is a promise that governments have kept with varying levels of success over time. In Black communities in particular, the United States has historically and notoriously under-protected residents (Kennedy, 1997). More recently, in 2020, nearly four million children nationwide found themselves living in communities their parents deemed unsafe (Kids Count, 2022). While rates of violent crime in the United States remain below the historic highs of the early 1990s, homicides have dramatically increased in recent years, while violent crime rates have leveled out after decades of decline (Grawert & Kim, 2022).

Recommendations:

Address Community Disrepair

Expand efforts to clean up & repair communities, tear down or renovate abandoned buildings, and address a lack of street lighting.

Build Trust By Protecting Victims

Protect victims’ rights with the ongoing implementation of Marsy’s Law, this will instill trust within communities suffering from high crime.

Remove Egregious Offenders

Implement gang-enhancement provisions like SB44 (2023) that keep particularly heinous criminal actors behind bars.

Focus Enforcement

Map out high-risk blocks and implement deterrence policing strategies that focus services and enforcement in these areas.

Pre-Entry Services

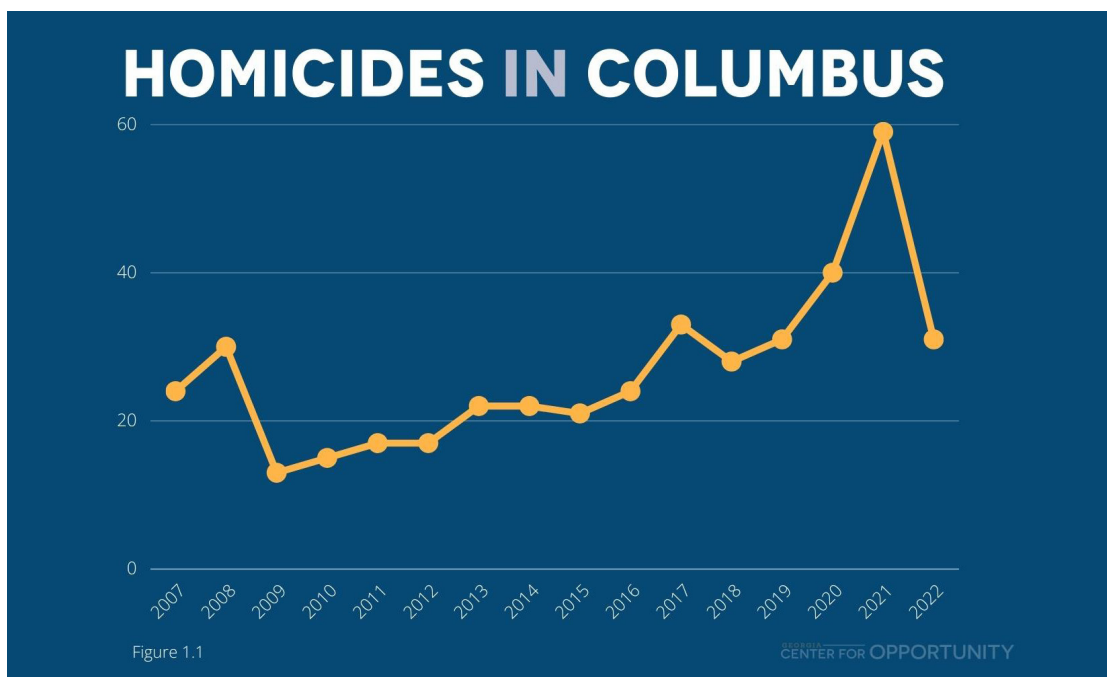
Implement cognitive-behavioral therapy services for all gang-involved juvenile offenders, even those that are non-violent and non-serious convictions

Reevaluate Re-Entry

Conduct an external evaluation of all re-entry programs examine the impact on release revocation, rearrest, and reconviction. Funding should be allocated to successful programs and the lowest performing should be phased out.

Local differences matter a great deal, though. In Columbus, both homicide and violent crime rates began rising in 2017, with a dramatic increase in homicides in 2021. From 2007 to 2016, Columbus had fewer than 25 homicides every year, with one exception: 2008 (30). The average annual number of homicides over the 10 years preceding the increases was 20.5. Since you cannot have a partial homicide, however, we will call this 21. Since 2017, no year has had fewer than 28. That means, since 2017, an excess of 96 Columbus residents have been murdered over and above the preceding 10-year average.¹ The human cost of this violence is dramatic, cutting lives short and leaving behind grieving families and fractured communities. The toll of violent crime goes beyond the physical cost to those directly impacted and includes financial costs to victims and taxpayers, the loss of productive years, and decreased economic mobility and growth in communities afflicted with high rates of crime. Figure 1.1 shows the total number of homicides in Columbus since 2007.

This brief details some of those costs and impacts and then examines data from Columbus and Georgia



to propose reforms to improve public safety and reduce violent crime in the city of Columbus. We do so by examining the technical literature around several key areas of policy: policing, sentencing, the city's built environment, victim services, and re-entry services, as well as pre-entry interventions. We have also collected, documented, and analyzed large sets of data on those topics for Columbus and Georgia, which included running logistical regressions with a large data set of former Georgia inmates to examine which facts had major impacts on recidivism. The recommendations in this brief are designed to create a basic level of public safety and order. They are not designed to replace or oppose other community and educational investments. Rather, they aim to stop the bleeding so those types of efforts can be more fruitful.

¹ 2017 (33 homicides +12), 2018 (28 homicides +7), 2019 (31 homicides +10), 2020 (40 homicides +19), 2021 (59 homicides +38), 2022 (31 homicides +10).

The Cost of Violent Crime and Its Impact on Communities

While the old adage may be about whether or not crime pays, the truth is that crime costs—and it costs a tremendous amount. These are the monetary costs associated with public and private protection, and the costs associated with lost earnings and loss of quality of life. To an even greater degree, they are the costs borne by communities plagued by high rates of violence: losses in property value and upward mobility, social isolation, and increased behavioral problems in children while academic performance slips.

THE COST OF CRIME IN DOLLARS

Researchers have long tried to quantify the total monetary cost of crime. These estimates typically include the direct costs to law enforcement, the criminal justice system, and victims, as well as loss of productivity and quality of life, and sometimes others. Recent estimates for the total annual cost of crime in the United States range from \$2.6 trillion (Miller et al., 2021) to \$5.76 trillion (Anderson, 2021), depending on exactly what is included. Importantly, according to Miller et al., violent crime accounts for 85 percent of the costs.

Homicide is by far the most expensive crime, in large part because of the lost potential earnings of victims, as well as the official resources devoted to these investigations, prosecutions, and incarcerations. Estimates for the cost of a homicide are typically around \$9 million per murder (McCollister et al., 2010; Heaton, 2010). The estimated costs of a robbery are between \$40,000 and \$70,000, a serious assault is estimated to cost about \$100,000, and a burglary runs between \$6,000 and \$13,000 per incident (McCollister et al., 2010; Heaton, 2010). The more frequent these types of crimes are in a given community, the greater the cost borne by taxpayers and victims.

THE IMPACT ON QUALITY OF LIFE

A community with a high rate of violence suffers in other ways as well. Researchers who conducted a survey of adults in Chicago, IL, found prior exposure to community violence was associated with a statistically significant “3.3-point reduction – on a 100-point

scale – in the frequency of interaction with network confidantes, a 7.3-point reduction in perceived social support from friends, and a 7.8-point increase in loneliness” (Tung et al., 2019).

Direct victimization is also associated with increased unemployment and nonproductivity. A study of violent trauma patients found a positive association between victimization and unemployment (Yancey et al., 1994), while another study found that, following the homicide of a family member, surviving family members’ rates of employment decreased by 27 percent (Mezey et al., 2002). In a sample of parents whose child was murdered, more than 50 percent of the parents perceived themselves as nonproductive at their jobs in the four months after the murder (Murphy et al., 1999).

THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN’S BEHAVIOR AND EDUCATION

The impact on children is even more well-documented. Exposure to community violence has a significant effect on increasing both aggressive behaviors and normative beliefs about aggression in first through sixth graders (Guerra et al., 2003). There is also robust documentation on the deleterious mental health implications of exposure to community violence. One study of youth growing up in public house projects and a low-income housing apartment complex found that community violence victimization, witnessing community violence, perceived neighborhood risk, and exposure to delinquent peers were associated with worse depressive symptoms among the youth in these environments (Foell et al., 2021).

Oftentimes these impacts extend to the academic performance of children in communities with high rates of violence. Exposure to community violence at age five is negatively associated with academic performance at age nine (Schneider, 2020), and living in the immediate vicinity of a homicide lowers standardized reading and vocabulary scores within a matter of days (Sharkey, 2010). An earlier review of the existing research found evidence of negative impacts on both cognitive development and academic achievement in children exposed to community violence (Coolsey-Strickland et al., 2009).

THE IMPACT ON UPWARD MOBILITY AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Increases in violent crime in a neighborhood also have substantial negative effects on the business environment and job growth in that community. While many factors contribute to upward mobility and prosperity, increased violence and a lack of feeling safe seem to have major influence on the economic opportunities of the residents of those communities.

Increases in violent crime have been negatively associated with business activity, resulting in downsizing and discouraging new businesses from entering the marketplace (Greenbaum & Tita, 2004). One large analysis looked at the impact of gun violence on the economic health of neighborhoods in six cities: Baton Rouge, LA; Minneapolis, MN; Oakland, CA; Rochester, NY; San Francisco, CA; and Washington, DC. The findings were remarkably consistent. An increase in gun violence in a census tract reduced the growth rate of new retail and service establishments by four percent in Minneapolis, Oakland, San Francisco, and Washington, DC (Irvin-Erickson et al., 2017). In Minneapolis, each additional gun homicide in a census tract in a given year was associated with 80 fewer jobs the next year; in Oakland, a gun homicide was associated with 10 fewer jobs the next year. That same analysis found that increases in gun violence hurt property values. Each additional gun homicide resulted in a \$22,000 decrease in average home values in Minneapolis census tracts and a \$24,621 decrease in Oakland census tracts. Another study of Los Angeles found that increases in violent crime in a neighborhood in a given year yielded decreases in property values in that neighborhood the following year (Hipp et al., 2009). Finally, those who can leave communities with high rates of violence, do. One estimate found that, for every homicide, 70 residents move out of a neighborhood (Cook & Ludwig, 2005).

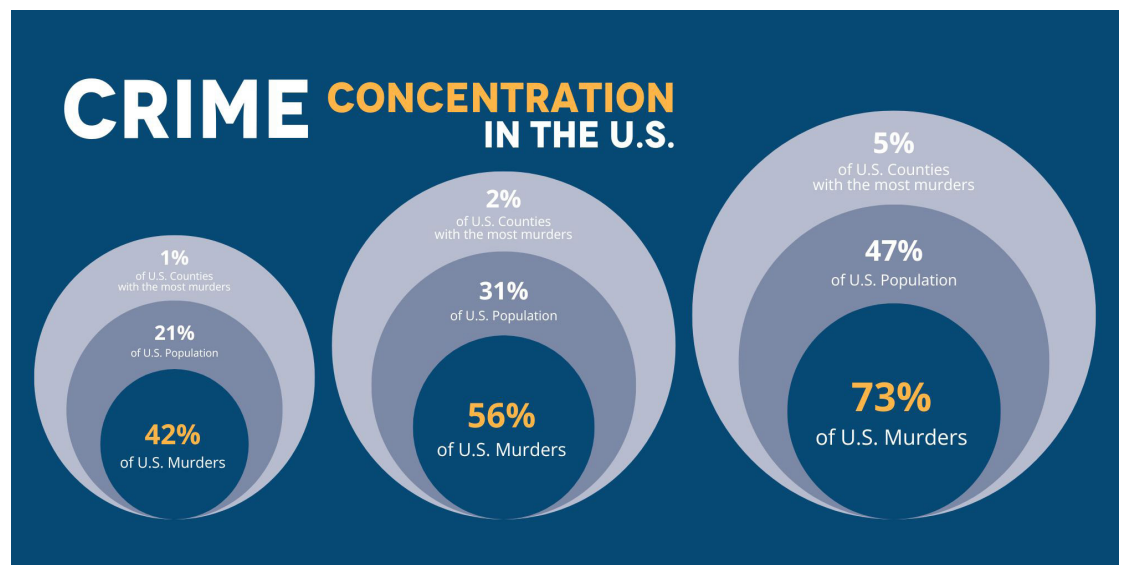
It should be no surprise then to find out that the level of violent crime in a county negatively affects the level of upward economic mobility among individuals raised in families in the 25th percentile of the income distribution (Sharkey & Torrats-Espinosa, 2017). Reducing violent crime not only has the benefit of fewer victims and safer streets, but is also a foundational building block for prosperity in high-poverty, high-crime communities.

Understanding How Crime Concentrates

The impact of violent crime, especially homicide, is not uniformly felt in the United States.

THE LAW OF CRIME CONCENTRATION

The one percent of counties – 31 – with the most murders have 21 percent of the U.S. population and 42 percent of the murders (Lott, 2023). The two percent of counties – 62 – with the most murders contain 31 percent of the population and 56 percent of the murders, and the five percent of counties with



the most murders contain 47 percent of the population and account for 73 percent of the country's murders.

But even this breakdown neglects important differences within counties. In Los Angeles in 2020, the 10 percent of the zip codes with the most murders

accounted for 41 percent of the murders in the country. The worst 20 percent had 67 percent of the murders, and the worst 30 percent had 82 percent of the murders (Lott, 2023). Similarly, in 2020 and 2021, young adult males from zip codes with the most violence in Chicago and Philadelphia had a notably higher risk of firearm-related death than U.S. military personnel who served during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (del Pozo et al., 2022).

In communities with high rates of violence, this exposure can be pervasive. In a survey of residents of six low-income, high-crime neighborhoods in New Haven, CT, 73 percent had heard gunshots, while many had family members or close friends hurt (29 percent) or killed (18 percent) by violent acts (Santilli et al., 2017).

Still, this does not adequately describe the concentration of violent crime, especially homicides, in the United States. There is no county or zip code in the U.S. filled with violent criminals. In every community, even those ravaged by violence, a relatively small number of people and places are responsible for most of that crime.

According to a meta-analysis by Martinez et al. (2017), five percent, 10 percent, and 20 percent of offenders are responsible for a disproportionate amount of violence and crime. Suppression efforts focused on the most active offenders yielded fewer arrests but greater crime reduction in Washington, DC (Martin & Sherman, 1986). The truism also applies to crime location. The “law of crime concentration” generally states that in large cities, about 50 percent of crime is found to concentrate in about five percent of street segments (Weisburd, 2015). Crime is even more concentrated in smaller cities where, on average, between two percent and 3.55 percent of street segments are responsible for 50 percent of violence. In a study of Boston, MA, gun violence was concentrated in less than five percent of street segments and intersections (Braga et al., 2009).

GANGS, CLIQUES, AND STREET GROUPS

The concentration of crime would be of only moderate value, though, if it concentrated in ways that were unknowable across the population. Thankfully, it does not, and a large portion of the concentration manifests itself in members of gangs, cliques, and street groups. As a practical matter, these distinctions do not matter much, but rather are reflective of academic and governmental definitions and largely represent varying levels of hierarchy and cohesion among criminally involved groups (Spaulding, 1948; Pyrooz et al., 2011). Gangs can also range dramatically in their organizational structure, size, and level of engagement in various criminal activities (Skarbek & Sobel, 2012). Therefore, all kinds of criminally involved street groups will hereinafter be referred to as gangs.

While some gang violence stems from drug and other criminal activity, most gang violence, especially drive-by shootings and homicides, stem from interpersonal disputes. This is typically because of perceived disrespect, attempts to build reputation, and retaliatory violence (Anderson, 2001; Brezina et al., 2004).

Gang members have a higher rate of offending when compared with the other groups, including above and beyond merely having delinquent friends (Battin et al., 1998). A study comparing the criminal behavior of gang members with non-gang affiliated at-risk youth found that 64.2 percent of gang members in Colorado and Florida

said that members of their gang had committed homicide, while only 6.5 percent of non-gang affiliated at-risk youth said that their friends had done so (Huff, 1998). That same study found that 40 percent of the gang members in Cleveland, OH, had participated in a drive-by shooting while only two percent of the non-gang affiliated cohort had. Importantly, gang membership is highly correlated to the probability of both self-reported offending and officially recorded prior offending (Battin et al., 1998; Curry, 2006). More recent and complex analyses on the impact of gang



membership on criminal offending found that even when controlling for a number of pre-existing risk factors, becoming a gang member increases violent offending among individuals and over time (Barnes et al., 2010). In the data set of former Georgia inmates, gang affiliation significantly increased the likelihood of rearrest at one, two, and three years after release ($p < 0.01$).

According to the National Gang Intelligence Center (2011), gang members are responsible for an average of 48 percent of violent crime in most jurisdictions and a much higher percentage in others. Some jurisdictions in Arizona, California, Colorado, Illinois, Massachusetts, Oklahoma, and Texas report that gangs are responsible for at least 90 percent of crime. These gangs represent a remarkably small percentage of the population, though. According to the National Network for Safe Communities (2015), all street-group members typically account for less than half a percent of a city's population but contribute to as much as 70 percent of its homicide and gun violence. Gang members commit crimes in one of two categories: gang-affiliated homicides, which involve gang members but do not result from gang activity, and gang-motivated homicides, which result from gang activity (Rosenfeld, 1999). Gang members also have substantially higher rates of violent crime victimization than do nongang members in the same community (Peterson et al., 2004).

Thankfully, law enforcement efforts focused on gang members produce outsized public safety gains as well. Gang suppression efforts in New York City, NY, resulted in a reduction in gun violence in and around public housing communities by about one-third in the first year after a gang takedown (Chalfin et al., 2021). Other efforts, known as “focused deterrence” policing strategies that focus law enforcement and social service resources on gang members, have reduced shootings and homicides all over the country (Braga et al., 2019). They will be more fully discussed in a subsequent section on policing.

According to the Georgia Attorney General's Office, there are currently 71,000 validated gang affiliates and over 1,500 suspected gang networks across the state. According to the recent report prepared by

Jensen Hughes, it was revealed that the CPD Gang Analysis and Investigation Unit has 446 validated gang member profiles, representing about 0.22% of the city's population. That same report contends that there are about 1,800 gang members in total in Columbus. That represents about 0.87% of the city's population. This would be in line with what we expect from a city the size of Columbus and is a very manageable population of high-rate offenders.

Analysis and Recommended Reforms

Turning to Columbus, an examination of available data shows several areas for improvement in local and state public safety infrastructure. Some previous progress has also been noted.

The criminal justice system is the institution through which civil society deems conduct not only objectionable but illegal. It is in some ways the most fundamental expression of our values about right and wrong. As former New York State Supreme Court Justice Harold Rothwax once put it in discussing the shortcomings of the criminal justice system:

[W]e are dealing with the most important thing in a democratic society: we're dealing with the location where the government acts upon the individual with the intent, often, to deprive him of liberty and sometimes of life. Nothing should be more sacred, more important, more deserving of our respect, more expressive of our values than the criminal justice system.

While debates about crime and criminal justice seem to rage at exceedingly high levels, these are almost exclusively the domain of dedicated academics and advocates. Among the general population there is a broad consensus across time and cultures about the essential need for punishment in society, what conduct is deserving of punishment, and the proportionality of punishment (Robinson, 2022). That means the system is not free to be redesigned wholesale, but rather policy must be informed by both broadly held principles of wrongdoing and punishment and best practice. The recommendations below are designed to do that.

POLICING

Policing is the essential entry point to the criminal justice system. In fact, all subsequent elements of the criminal justice system depend on competent policing. Prosecution, punishment, incapacitation, and rehabilitation all presuppose the apprehension of criminal offenders. For many years sociological and public health scholarship doubted the impact policing had on crime, but subsequent research has demonstrated that good policing can substantially reduce crime and violence (Braga & Cook, 2023). This includes addressing both the number of police on the streets and what those officers are doing day in and day out. Increasing the number of police on the streets, implementing police tactics that target gangs, and appropriately resourcing homicide detectives can all impact and reduce levels of homicide.

It is a common misconception that America is somehow overpoliced relative to other developed nations. However, research suggests that, relative to the level of serious crime in the United States, police departments are dramatically understaffed. In fact, “if denominated by the level of serious crime, America is not normally policed but rather under-policed. America has about one-ninth the number of police officers, per homicide, than does the median developed country” (Lewis & Usmani, 2022).

Under-policing has considerable consequences including increased vulnerability to violence (Crowther, 2013), decreased willingness to call on the police when in need (Carr et al., 2007; Kane, 2005), and an increase in self-help justice, that is the tendency to handle crime problems oneself (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003a, 2003b).

Number of Police

Research has continuously demonstrated that police reduce crime and that, broadly speaking, more police mean less crime. This is true both in specific regions and nationwide. A county-level analysis of police staffing levels and crime in Florida from 1980-1998 found that increasing police levels reduced overall crime (Kovandzic & Sloan, 2002), as did an analysis of data from New York City from 1970 to 1996 (Corman

& Mocan, 2000). In a subsequent examination of data from 122 cities around the U.S. from 1975 to 1995, Levitt (2004) found that increased police numbers reduced violent crime by 12 percent. Most recently, according to Chalfin et al. (2022), each additional police officer prevents approximately 0.1 homicides. Importantly, the effects are twice as large for Black victims compared to White victims.

It is also true that increased funding to law enforcement both increases the number of police on the streets and decreases crime. In the era of calls to reduce, repurpose, or “de-fund” police departments, this is an important point. Perhaps the most thorough study on the subject comes from Chalfin & McCrary (2018) who analyzed data from medium to large U.S. cities from 1960 to 2010. They concluded that every \$1 spent on policing generates about \$1.63 in social benefits, mostly through reductions in homicides. This finding is in line with studies that looked at injections of federal dollars into local police departments through the COPS hiring program. The COPS program has seen two major injections of cash, the first beginning in 1994 and then the second in 2008—often referred to as COPS 2.0 (Crawford, 2020). Studies examining both found that the departments that hired more officers through the program reduced crime. According to Evans & Owens (2007), police added to the force by the first COPS hiring program generated statistically significant reductions in auto thefts, burglaries, robberies, and aggravated assaults. A subsequent analysis by Melo (2019) of the COPS 2.0 grants found a statistically significant effect of increased police on robbery, larceny, and auto theft, as well as suggestive evidence that police reduce murders.

Merely increasing the presence of officers has been shown to reduce crime in a given area (Klick & Tabarrok, 2005; MacDonald et al., 2015), while a decrease in police presence in a location is associated with increases in crime (Weisburd, 2021). Decreases in police stops have been associated with spikes in homicide in Chicago (Cassell & Fowles, 2018) and New York City (Kim, 2023).

This does not bode well for Columbus, which has seen both a drop in total uniformed officers and officers per 10,000 residents since peaks since at least 2012. Figure 4.1 shows the total number of uniformed officers in Columbus since 2012 while Figure 4.2 shows the number of uniformed officers per 10,000 residents since 2012.

rently playing out across the country.

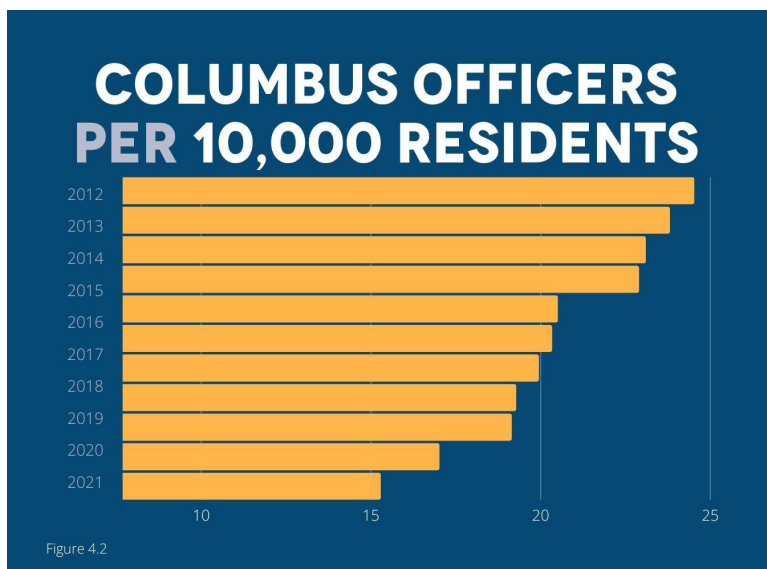
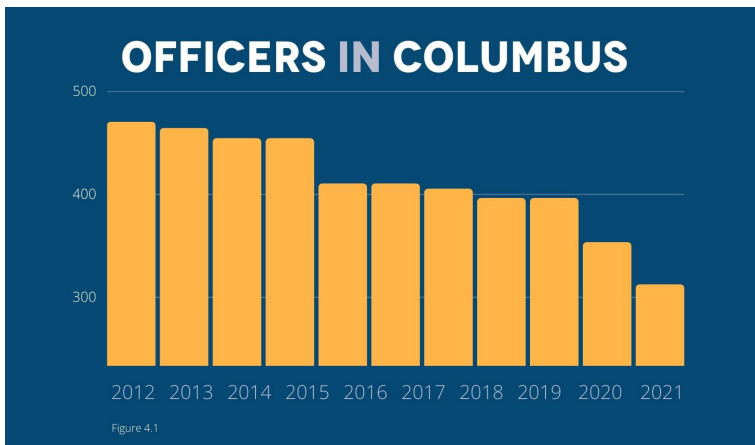
Focused Deterrence

Simply adding more officers will likely reduce serious crime in Columbus, but adopting an evidence-based strategy can have an even greater impact on homicides and shootings. As has already been discussed, gang members perpetrate a disproportionate percentage of this kind of violence. When it comes to reducing gang violence, “focused deterrence” or “group violence intervention” strategies are unequalled in their effectiveness. While these terms are used interchangeably, I will use exclusively “focused deterrence” going forward.

Focused deterrence strategies rely on the idea that serious gang violence can be deterred by the appropriate mix of enforcement, moral opposition from the community, and social services focused on the small number of gangs driving violence in a given city (Kennedy, 2011). The cornerstone of these strategies is one referred to as “call-ins” in which multiple messages are delivered with one overarching theme: the shooting stops now. These come from a combination of law enforcement, mothers of homicide victims, religious leaders, and social service nonprofits. Gang members are given opportunities to pursue legitimate employment and given help acquiring needed resources, but they are warned that if shootings persist, swift and severe enforcement will follow. That enforcement comes down on the whole group, not just individual shooters. These efforts are most effective when governing bodies then make good on both promises—the resources and the enforcement—when groups do not stop.

A meta-analysis of 24 studies published from 2001 through 2015 from Braga et al. (2019)

found that the “available evidence suggests an overall reduction in crime when focused deterrence strategies are used. The largest reductions are generated by focused deterrence strategies that target criminally active gangs or groups.” Successful efforts have been implemented all over the country in cities of varying sizes. Results include a 63 percent reduction in youth homicide in Boston, MA (Braga et al., 2001); a 42 percent reduction in gun homicides in



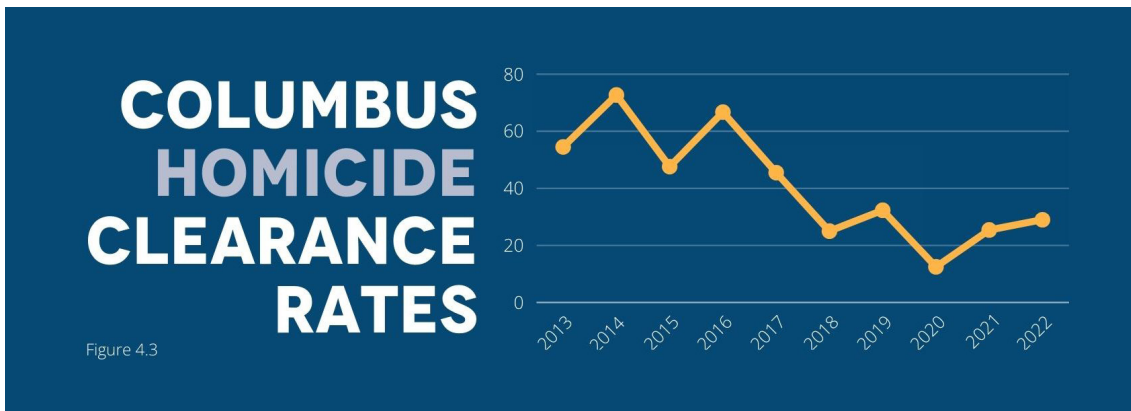
This means any public safety improvement plan in Columbus will need to begin with a robust recruitment and retention plan for the Columbus Police Department. A full discussion of recruitment and retention best practices is not included here, but as many large city police departments are currently struggling with similar problems, Columbus ought to both rely on traditional recruitment methods like signing bonuses, as well as innovative strategies cur-

Stockton, CA (Braga, 2008); a 34 percent reduction in total homicides in Indianapolis, IN (Corsano & McGarrell, 2010); a 41 percent reduction in group member-involved homicides in Cincinnati, OH (Engel et al., 2011); a 32 percent reduction in group member-involved homicides in New Orleans, LA (Corsano & Engel, 2015); a 73 percent monthly average reduction in shootings in New Haven, CT (Sierra-Arevalo et al., 2016); and a 44 percent reduction in gun assault incidents in Lowell, MA (Braga et al., 2008).

ularly acute in high-poverty, high-crime, majority-minority neighborhoods.

Over the last decade from 2013 to 2022, Columbus has had an annual homicide clearance rate of just over 41% and it has been noticeably lower beginning in 2018.

Figure 4.3 shows the homicide clearance rates for the Columbus Police Department from 2013 through 2022.



Low clearance rates are not a foregone conclusion, though. In Boston, MA, in the mid-2000s, after years of below-national average homicide clearance rates, several recommendations for improving homicide clearance rates were adopted. These included increasing the size

Focused deterrence strategies have also been shown to improve community-police relations (Brunson, 2015) — in part because these strategies are regarded as both procedurally just and capable of improving communities. The importance of strong community-police relations from a crime-fighting perspective is discussed below.

Columbus should pursue the adoption of a focused deterrence policing strategy and services model. A governance structure should be established that includes local law enforcement leadership, state corrections officials, non-law enforcement public safety entities in the city, and social service nonprofits.

Homicide Detectives and Clearance Rates

Nationally, less than 50 percent of murders were solved in 2020 (Kaplan, 2023). When homicides go unsolved, especially in socially isolated and economically vulnerable communities, police-community relations deteriorate and impulses toward self-help justice increase (Leovy, 2015). This problem is partic-

ularly acute in high-poverty, high-crime, majority-minority neighborhoods. Over the last decade from 2013 to 2022, Columbus has had an annual homicide clearance rate of just over 41% and it has been noticeably lower beginning in 2018. Figure 4.3 shows the homicide clearance rates for the Columbus Police Department from 2013 through 2022.

While many things contribute to successful homicide investigations, two factors seem to be key: strong community relationships and small case-loads. A Bureau of Justice Assistance report on homicide investigation best practices stressed the importance of a strong foundation of trust with the community (Carter, 2013). This creates a bit of a chicken-and-egg problem, though, as low clearance rates erode trust between law enforcement and the community. In some ways, then, community trust must be the second step in the process. The first step is to reduce homicide detective caseloads. A Federal Bureau of Investigation report found that the average homicide caseload for a detective to handle as the primary in-

investigator should be five cases annually (Keel, 2011). Departments with detectives who handled fewer than five cases per year as the primary investigator had a clearance rate 5.4 percent higher than those departments whose detectives had higher caseloads.

The numbers change with the number of homicides in the jurisdiction. The report suggests that:

[I]n departments with less than 49 homicides per year (HPY), the homicide detective should have no more than four homicide cases per year as the primary. In departments that experience between 50 and 99 HPY, a detective should have no more than five homicide cases per year as the primary, and in those departments with over 100 HPY, a detective should have no more than six homicide cases per year as the primary.

For Columbus, this means homicide detectives should be the primary investigator in no more than four homicides per year. According to the Columbus Police Department, over the last four years, homicide detectives have been the primary investigator of about four murder cases a year. When other death investigations are included, including manslaughter and justifiable homicide, investigators average closer to six cases a year as the primary. Providing additional resources to CPD so they could get that total number to four and further assist investigations could both improve clearance rates and overall public safety.

SENTENCING

Perhaps one of the most widely misunderstood relationships in the criminal justice system is the relationship between sentence length and crime. Some argue that longer sentences are criminogenic—that is, they result in more criminal offending than do shorter sentences or non-carceral punishments. Others argue that longer sentences reduce crime through a number of factors, including incapacitation, aging-out, and deterrence. The balance of the literature supports the latter proposition.²

A recent review of the existing literature on sentence length and recidivism found that “a conclusion that

longer sentences have a substantial criminogenic effect, large enough to offset incapacitative effects, cannot be justified by the existing literature” (Berger & Scheidegger, 2020). The literature suggesting a crime-reducing effect by contrast is substantial.

An early review of both general and specific incapacitation approaches in the 1970s and 1980s found that greater use of incarceration reduced both crime generally and specific crimes like robbery (Vischer, 1987). Then, in examining the crime drop of the 1990s, Levitt (2004) concluded that increased incarceration accounted for about one-third of the observed decline during that period. The decline was greater for violent crime and homicide than it was for property crime. Subsequent analyses have found similar results. An examination of parolees in Ohio found that offenders confined for longer periods of time had lower odds of recidivism (Meade et al., 2012). Trying to measure the full extent of this

Increased incarceration of violent offenders results in an **increase in community safety** during the time of incarceration.

impact has been difficult, but Wermink et al. (2012) estimate that one year of incarceration prevents between 0.17 and 0.21 convictions per year, which corresponds to between 2.0 and 2.5 criminal offenses recorded by the police per year. This number is even higher when dealing with high-rate offenders. According to Johnson & Raphael (2012), incarcerating just one of these offenders prevents an average of 9.4 serious felonies. Reductions in punishment have the opposite impact. Examining a change in Maryland law that reduced the sentence guidelines for 23, 24, and 25-year-olds with juvenile records, Owens (2009)

found that “offenders were, on average, arrested for 2.8 criminal acts and were involved in 1.4–1.6 serious crimes per person during the period when they would have otherwise been incarcerated.”

GEORGIA'S SENTENCING RATES

Attempted Murder	served 35.78% of their sentence	averaging 7.91 years
Aggravated Assault	served 29.57% of their sentence	averaging 4.03 years
Felon w/ Firearm	served 27.29% of their sentence	averaging 2.83 years

Two recent studies of released federal inmates further illuminate these realities. According to a study of offenders released in 2005, those incarcerated for more than 120 months were less likely to recidivate eight years after release than a comparison group receiving less incarceration (Cotter, 2020). A second study of offenders released in 2008 found that the odds of recidivism were approximately 29 percent lower for federal offenders sentenced to more than 120 months incarceration compared to a matched group of federal offenders receiving shorter sentences and the odds of recidivism were approximately 18 percent lower for offenders sentenced to more than 60 months up to 120 months incarceration compared to a matched group of federal offenders receiving shorter sentences (Cotter, 2022).

In the analysis of released former Georgia inmates, we find that longer sentences reduced recidivism relative to those who received shorter sentences at one, two, and three years after release ($p < 0.01$). This trend is true across age groups, suggesting this is not simply a function of inmates aging out of prime-age offending.

Incarceration is not a panacea, though. It has substantial financial costs, and higher rates of parent-aged men being incarcerated can have severely negative impacts on communities (Clear, 2008). Policy change ought to focus on serious crime and frequent offenders.

For example, Georgia attempted murder convicts released in 2022 had served only 35.78 percent of their sentence, a mere 7.91 years. Georgia aggravated assault convicts released in 2022 served just 29.57 percent of their sentence, amounting to a mere 4.03 years. The average felon in possession of a firearm convict released in 2022 in Georgia served just 27.29 percent of their sentence amounting to an average of 2.83 years.

One way to remedy this without significantly impacting a large number of defendants is circumstance-specific sentence enhancements. Sentence enhancements for those who use guns in the commission of crimes (Abrams, 2012) and certain criminal histories (Helland & Tabarrok, 2007; Kessler & Levitt, 1999) have been shown to reduce subsequent criminal activity.

In order to narrowly tailor sentence enhancements, states have adopted several provisions that increase penalties for offenses committed in furtherance of gang objectives. Currently, Georgia has a gang-enhancement law that was recently strengthened with the passage of SB 44 (2023), which created a five-year mandatory minimum for gang-related crimes and criminalized the recruitment of children into gangs. Implementation of this bill will be critical in determining whether additional sentencing tools are required. As of now, we make no additional sentence enhancement recommendations for Georgia.

BUILT ENVIRONMENT

A city's built environment is its man-made environment: its buildings, streets, sidewalks, and open spaces. These features can be a point of great pride for a neighborhood, but they can also fall into disorder. Physical disorder includes a wide array of problems, such as abandoned and dilapidated properties, litter, graffiti, and inadequate street lighting. While this physical disorder can have significant fear-induc-

ing and “criminogenic”—or crime-promoting—effects in a neighborhood, restoring order can significantly reduce crime in those same neighborhoods without the deployment of law enforcement or corrections resources. We focus on three types of physical disorder: abandoned buildings, overgrown vacant lots, and inadequate street lighting.

Abandoned Buildings

Unfortunately, abandoned buildings have long been and continue to be a regular part of the urban American infrastructure. In addition to being an eyesore, these structures can quickly degrade a neighborhood and increase crime with their presence. A landmark study in Austin, TX, found that in one low-income neighborhood, 41 percent of abandoned buildings could be entered without use of force, and of these open buildings, 83 percent showed evidence of illegal use by prostitutes, drug dealers, and other criminals (Spelman, 1993). Blocks with open abandoned buildings had twice the crime rate as matched blocks without open buildings. Decades later, a study of abandoned buildings in 1,816 block groups in Philadelphia, PA, found that 84 percent had at least one vacant property, 89 percent at least one aggravated assault, and 64 percent at least one gun assault (Branas et al., 2012). Between the block groups, the risk of aggravated assault increased 18 percent for every categorical increase in the number of abandoned buildings in the block group.³

Structurally shoring up or tearing down these buildings can reduce serious violence in the surrounding area without evidence of crime displacement. In 2011, Philadelphia, PA, began enforcing a doors and windows ordinance that required owners of abandoned properties to install working windows and doors on all openings or be subject to significant fines. Pre- and post-treatment comparisons showed significant reductions in overall crime, total assaults, gun assaults, and nuisance crimes (Kondo et al., 2015). In Detroit, MI, an effort to demolish the city's large stock of abandoned buildings was associated with an 11 percent reduction in gun assaults in U.S. Census block groups that have more than five demolitions compared to control locations (Jay et al., 2019).

Columbus, like most large metro areas, has significant abandoned building issues. Since 2022, the Columbus city government has led a robust effort to address blighted properties. That year the inspections and codes department set a goal of abandoning 45 structures. To increase the crime reduction benefits of these efforts, city official could overlay crime maps with maps of abandoned buildings can provide the city with priority properties for demolition, structural support, or revitalization.

Vacant Lots

Like abandoned buildings, vacant lots have become commonplace in urban life in America. About 15 percent of the land in U.S. cities is deemed vacant or abandoned—an area roughly the size of Switzerland (Branas et al, 2018). In Philadelphia, PA, residents associated unkept vacant land with disorder, crime, and a lack of well-being (Garvin et al., 2012). However, efforts to “clean and green” or otherwise improve the state of these lots is associated with both reduced fear and reduced crime, including gun violence (Branas et al., 2011; Branas et al., 2018).

The same application of mapping crime and violence with abandoned buildings applies to vacant lots. Once lots are identified, cleaning and greening or other rehabilitative efforts should be deployed in order of priority based on the level of serious violent crime.

Street Lighting

The relationship between lighting and crime seems relatively obvious to most people. Crime lurks in the dark. It thrives in secret. The solution seems equally obvious: More light means less crime. Journalist Jane Jacobs theorized in her 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*:

The value of bright streetlights for dispirited gray areas rises from the reassurance they offer to some people who need to go out on the sidewalk, or would like to, but lacking the good light would not do so. Thus, the lights induce these people to contribute their own eyes to the upkeep of the street. Moreover, as is obvious, good lighting augments every pair of eyes, makes the eyes count for more because their

range is greater. Each additional pair of eyes, and every increase in their range, is that much to the good for dull gray areas. But unless eyes are there, and unless in the brains behind those eyes is the almost unconscious reassurance of general street support in upholding civilization, lights can do no good.

Modern research supports Jacobs' theory. An analysis of street light density in Detroit, MI, found an inverse relationship between street light density and crime, including weapons offenses (Xu et al., 2018). An experiment in the New York City public housing developments allocated improved street lighting to some areas and not others, and it yielded a 36 percent reduction in index crimes in the treatment areas in the six months after the new lights were put in place (Chalfin et al., 2022). A follow-up study examining the three years post-intervention found that the effects persisted over time (Mitre-Becerril et al., 2022).

Improved street lighting is a text book case for public-private partnerships. In 2014, Detroit, MI became the first city in the country to do just that and has had significant LED lighting upgrades as a result (Marques & Geddes, 2018). To increase the crime reducing benefits of increased and improved street lighting, like the two previous physical disorder recommendations, mapping should be used to identify the highest-need areas of the city for increased and upgraded lighting.

VICTIM SERVICES

In 1981, President Ronald Reagan proclaimed the first National Crime Victims' Rights Week. In issuing his proclamation, President Reagan said:

We need a renewed emphasis on, and an enhanced sensitivity to, the rights of victims. These rights should be a central concern of those who participate in the criminal justice system, and it is time all of us paid greater heed to the plight of victims.

The criminal justice system often overlooks the plight of crime victims, especially the surviving family members of homicide victims. Inadequate assistance to this population can lead to additional crime through

retaliatory violence, a common feature of gang life (Jacobs & Wright, 2006). Many crimes in high-poverty, high-crime neighborhoods "evade criminal sanction..." and can lead to "legal cynicism—a cultural orientation in which the law and the agents of its enforcement are viewed as illegitimate, unresponsive, and ill-equipped to ensure public safety" (Kirk & Matsuda, 2011). These residents are the primary beneficiaries of improved public safety, improved homicide clearance rates, and better policing discussed earlier. But in addition to outcome favorability, perceptions of procedural justice can be important factors in victims' willingness to cooperate with law enforcement and the criminal justice process and reduce impulses toward retaliatory violence (Murphy & Barworth, 2014). This is because impulses toward revenge are oftentimes not merely a response to victimization by perceived injustice (Orth et al., 2006). One of the things that can mitigate the feeling of injustice is the "presence of external systems that can restore justice on behalf of victims" (Schumann & Ross, 2010).

To provide that external system that can restore justice, numerous responses have been implemented. The first has been the establishment of victim and witness advocates and units within prosecutors' offices. This approach has led to more procedural justice for some victims and homicide victims' family members. But, as was discussed earlier, low clearance rates mean a growing number of victims do not receive these services because they never make it into the jurisdiction of a prosecutor's office.

One potential solution has been the adoption of police-based victim services, which ensure more crime victims can receive support and services. Still somewhat in their infancy, these units often begin by focusing on a small number of crimes, most commonly Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) crimes, homicides, and other crimes of serious violence (Maryfield et al., 2021). The Columbus Police Department currently does not have a dedicated victim services unit or personnel. Allocating additional resources to police-based victim services within the Columbus PD could assist in ensuring as smooth a process as possible and improve communication between the department and victims.

The other major change on behalf of victims has been to constitutionalize victims' rights at the state level. This effort began in the 1980s and has required some states to go back and further amend their constitutions with new rights (Cassell & Garvin, 2020), partly because many states had rights at-law but not in practice (Holder et al, 2021). In recent years, the "Marsy's Law" effort in Florida and other states has sought to remedy this (Cassell & Garvin, 2020). Georgia voters passed a version of "Marsy's Law" in 2018. It contained many of the standard rights included in the modern era of these constitutional amendments, including the right to timely notice of proceedings, the right to be heard, the right to restitution, and the right to proceedings free from unreasonable delay, among others. We recommend no other action on this front at this time, and successful implementation and vigilance will be critical to Marsy's Law's success in Georgia.

PRE-ENTRY AND RE-ENTRY

Two other areas warrant consideration in this analysis. These are the frontmost and back-end of the criminal justice system: what can be done to divert early offenders from becoming more serious ones, and what can be done to help former offenders successfully re-enter civil society after serving time.

Pre-entry

In regards to "pre-entry" we focus on a very specific group. Here we are not concerned with "at-risk youth" broadly, but rather with the group of young people—sometimes juveniles, sometimes young adults—who have taken affirmative steps into street life and have begun criminally offending. These individuals are primarily young men and boys who have either been recruited into or are being recruited into gangs whose criminal conduct has not risen to the level requiring punishment, incarceration, and incapacitation as the primary goals of the outcome of their interactions with the criminal justice system. Getting this cohort to desist from criminal behavior ahead of aging out or long prison sentences can have dramatic medium- and long-term implications for crime reduction.

For this group, perhaps the most effective intervention is cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) programs both inside and outside of detention centers. A

meta-analysis of CBT programs found an average reduction of recidivism of 25 percent among participants and the most robust programs resulting in an average reduction of 52 percent (Abt & Winship, 2016). An analysis of 24 programs targeting juveniles showed that programs using CBT as a primary feature received more "effective" ratings than those using CBT as a secondary feature. CBT also "appears to be more effective with juveniles. This is consistent with the conceptual basis of CBT: Adults may have developed more deeply rooted maladaptive cognitive processes that may be more difficult to change" (Feucht & Holt, 2016). Not all CBT programs are created equal, a meta-analysis of 58 studies found the "factors independently associated with larger recidivism reductions were treatment of higher risk offenders, high-quality treatment implementation, and a CBT program that included anger control and interpersonal problem solving" (Landenberger & Lipsey, 2005).

The Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) currently offers a program called "A New Freedom" that utilizes CBT as a partial component. The DJJ should order a review of the program to examine its impact on recidivism and explore the possibility of implementing additional programming in which CBT is the primary feature. This should uniquely target gang-involved juvenile offenders with non-violent and non-serious convictions.

Re-entry

Last, but certainly not least, is the process by which former offenders re-enter civil society. Unfortunately, the status quo is not promising. Five in six (83 percent) state prisoners released in 2005 across 30 states were arrested at least once during the nine years following their release (Alper et al., 2018). Those released in 2008 fared no better: Among persons released from state prisons in 2008 across 24 states, 82 percent were arrested at least once during the 10 years following release (Antenangeli & Dunrose, 2021). In both cohorts, re-arrest was most common in the first few years after release. The reality is successful re-entry programming is rare and difficult. However, there are some effective programs that warrant replication and some general principles worthy of exploration.

Within the Georgia former inmate recidivism data, two important re-entry scenarios have key impacts on recidivism. First, the greater the percentage of days employed upon release, the more recidivism was reduced ($p < 0.01$). This outcome is in line with what we know to be true about employment and recidivism. Broadly speaking, having a job reduces recidivism relative to not having a job. We also found that the number of jobs someone had per year upon release had a negative impact on recidivism. The more jobs a person had in a given year, the more likely they were to recidivate ($p < 0.01$). This suggests that the benefits of having a job and its impact on recidivism come not just from the income gained from employment but also from the stability, community, and discipline that come from work. That conclusion would be consistent with the findings of Apel & Horney (2017) that “employment significantly reduces self-reported crime but only when employed men report strong commitment to their jobs, whereas other work characteristics are unrelated to crime,” such as level of income. This is to say that the “subjective experience of work takes priority over its objective characteristics” (Apel & Horney, 2017). Building community at work also potentially exposes former offenders to the pro-social behaviors of colleagues in contrast to the anti-social behaviors that led to the former offender’s criminal past (Wright & Cullen, 2004). Employment-based re-entry programs, though, have been notoriously fickle, do not work, or have not been meaningfully evaluated (Muhlhausen, 2018). Some programs showing promise (Redcross et al., 2012), and others do not (Visser et al., 2005).

Several comprehensive re-entry programs have been evaluated and deserve experimental replication. In Milwaukee, WI, one work-based program that also provided social services before release is especially promising for our purposes. It focused on 236 high-risk offenders with a history of violence or gang involvement. The intervention had a significant effect on reducing the likelihood of rearrest (Cook et al., 2015). Another high-risk intervention, this time in Minnesota, provided the treatment group with supplemental case planning, housing, employment, mentoring, cognitive-behavioral programming, and transportation assistance services. After 1-2 years of post-release follow-up, there was a significantly lowered the risk of supervised release revocations and reconvictions by 28 percent and 43 percent, respectively (Clark, 2015).

The Georgia Department of Corrections (DOC) operates several re-entry programs. To ensure taxpayers are getting the most for their money and inmates are being set up for success, the DOC should order an external evaluation of all DOC re-entry programs to examine their impact on release revocation, rearrest, and reconviction. Successful programs should continue to receive additional funding, and unsuccessful programming should be phased out and ended. DOC should then attempt to develop additional programming focused on high-risk, gang-affiliated inmates in line with best practices and promising programs.



Conclusion

Columbus finds itself at a public safety crossroads. While there has been positive movement in some areas, successful implementation of reforms at the city and state levels will be essential to actual crime reduction. Recruitment, retention, and additional resources for the Columbus Police Department is perhaps the most glaring crisis in need of immediate attention. This solution, coupled with successful implementation of a focused deterrence strategy and a focus on physical disorder in high-crime micro-locations could go a long way in improving public safety.

While many factors contribute to public safety, homicide trends and disorder are ultimately policy choices, and the encouraging truth is that these issues can be fixed through deliberate policy reform and best practice.



REPORT AUTHOR

Josh Crawford

Director of Criminal Justice Initiatives
joshc@foropportunity.org

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The Georgia Center for Opportunity is a Georgia-based nonprofit committed to removing barriers to ensure that every person — no matter their race, past mistakes, or the circumstances of their birth — has access to a safe community, quality education, fulfilling work, and a healthy family life.

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