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Kids and Community Violence: Costs, Consequences, and Solutions

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On Saturday, December 1, 2018, gunshots rang out in the Smoketown neighborhood in Louisville, Kentucky. From a vehicle outside, assailants sprayed three townhomes with AK-47 rounds. Unfortunately, that night wasn't an anomaly. In 2018 alone, 355 Louisville residents were shot non-fatally.[1] Thankfully, on the night of December 1, no one was hit.

Inside one of those three townhomes were the daughter and four young grandchildren of community activist Christopher 2X, who has been a mainstay in Louisville for almost 25 years, promoting peace in some of the city's toughest neighborhoods. He helps families navigate life after violence comes to their doorstep, and he helps children avoid the poor decisions that can lead to a life unfulfilled. 2X himself hasn't always followed the straight and narrow; in 2020, he was pardoned by President Donald Trump for a decades-old drug charge.

The families 2X works with could be discussed in many of the chapters in this book: They come from disadvantaged neighborhoods, have low educational attainment, and lack educational options and opportunities. The children also often live in single-parent homes. But the thing that brings each of these families into 2X's orbit is their shared experience of neighborhood or street violence. The families fall into a few categories: parents whose children have been murdered; children, sometimes as young as elementary school students, who find themselves on the path to gang membership and a violent lifestyle; and young kids who find themselves surrounded by—but not directly implicated in—violence.

An estimated 3.5 million kids in the US live in neighborhoods identified as "unsafe" by their parents.[2] These children's lives are cut short, fundamentally altered, or otherwise worsened by exposure to this violence.

Government at all levels should therefore protect public safety and preserve public order—not only as a necessary function for its own sake but also as a necessary precondition for prosperity.

Why Focus More on Public Safety and Public Order?

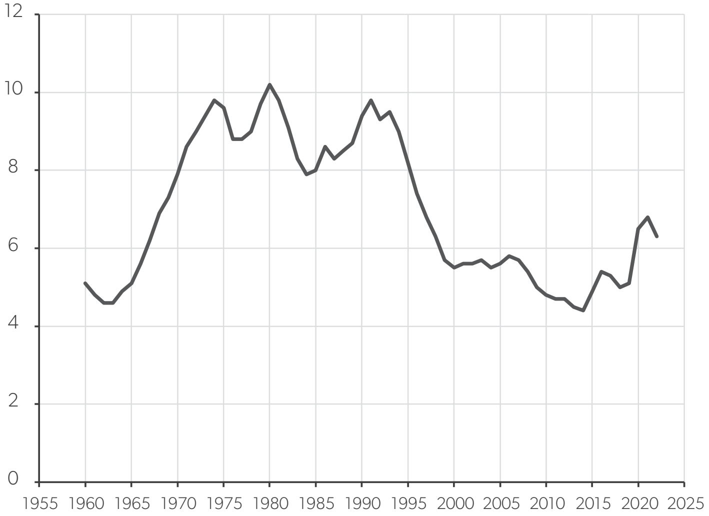
Walk into any suburban coffee shop in a low-crime neighborhood and look around. You'll quickly notice the tables are populated by tens of thousands of dollars' worth of laptops and smartphones, and designer purses sit on the floor. These items often go unguarded when patrons pick up their coffees or go to the bathroom. It's the normal course of business in these establishments. No one fears these items will be stolen. There is an unconscious presupposition of public safety. This is what happens when the public order is upheld.

When this presumption of safety falls apart, however, people change their behavior. Following the expansion of remote work during the coronavirus pandemic, workers in New York City cited violence and crime as the primary reasons for not wanting to return to the office.[3] Research on crime avoidance also finds that households will pay a premium to avoid violence. One 2011 study of families in the San Francisco Bay Area in California found that the average household was willing to pay $472 per year to avoid a 10 percent increase in violent crime.[4]

The United States has had varying degrees of success in public safety over the years.[5] In the modern context, violent crime peaked in the United States in 1991 with 758.1 instances per 100,000 people, an increase of more than 470 percent from 1960. Homicide, the most destructive and permanent of the violent offenses, peaked in 1980 with a rate of 10.2 per 100,000 residents and in 1991 with a rate of 9.8 per 100,000 residents; in 1960, the murder rate had been almost half that at 5.1 per 100,000 residents.

After 1991, as a result of a number of changes in policing and sentencing and a wide array of other hotly debated factors, homicide and violent crime declined significantly in cities across the country (Figures 1 and 2). This decline continued until 2014, when the homicide rate reached 4.4 per 100,000 and the violent-crime rate was 379.4 per 100,000. While this was

Figure 1. US Homicide Rate per 100,000 People, 1960–2022



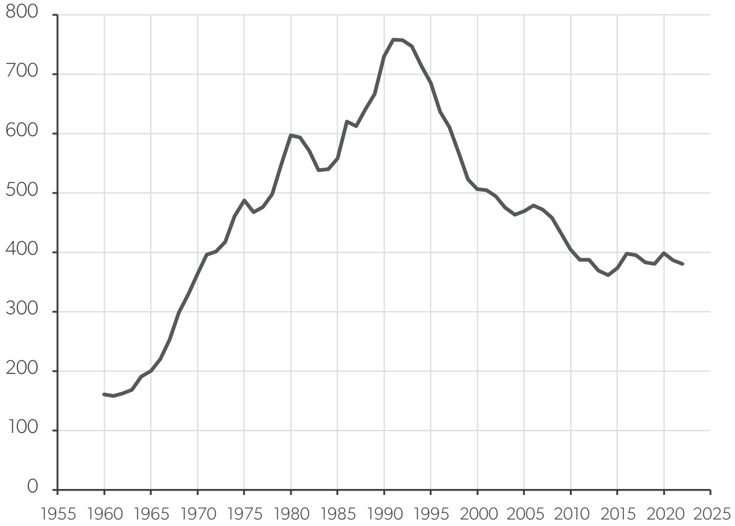
Source: Nathan James, *Recent Violent Crime Trends in the United States*, Congressional Research Service, June 20, 2018, https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R45236.pdf; and Federal Bureau of Investigation, Crime Data Explorer, https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend.

a huge improvement from the highs of 1991, the violent-crime rate in 2014 was still more than double the rate in 1960. It has trended in the wrong direction in recent years, with a jump in homicides in 2020.[6]

While the long-run decline in crime is important, it is ultimately not too reassuring because no one lives in "the nation." Aggregated data erase important variations from state to state, city to city, and neighborhood to neighborhood. People live in communities, not the whole nation.

Despite these declines in violent crime often being disproportionately experienced in disadvantaged neighborhoods,[7] violence continues to concentrate at the sub-city level. One study of gun violence in Boston, Massachusetts, for example, found that these crimes were concentrated in less than 5 percent of one-block street segments and intersections.[8] The "law of crime concentration" generally states that in large cities, about 50 percent of crime occurs in about 5 percent of street segments.[9] Crime

Figure 2. US Violent-Crime Rate per 100,000 People, 1960–2022



Source: Nathan James, *Recent Violent Crime Trends in the United States*, Congressional Research Service, June 20, 2018, https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R45236.pdf; and Federal Bureau of Investigation, Crime Data Explorer, https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend.

is even more concentrated in smaller cities, where, on average, between 2 percent and 4 percent of street segments are responsible for 50 percent of violence.[10] These micro-communities lack the minimum levels of safety and order that are precursors for human flourishing, and the effects of their violence propagate beyond these few hot zones.

Philosopher and political theorist James Burnham observed:

> Human beings must have at least a minimum security in life and property, must be able to move through the streets and between the cities, must accept certain common rules in their mutual intercourse, or civilization does not exist. If this necessary order is subverted, the civilization is destroyed, whether the subversion takes place from the best or worst of motives, whether or not it is in some supposedly moral sense

> justified, whether it is carried out by saints or devils. At some point the guardians of a civilization must be prepared to draw the line.[11]

For far too many children, this kind of order has been inconsistent at best and nonexistent at worst. For children in these neighborhoods, violence is pervasive and affects them both directly and indirectly. Those directly affected are the youth who join criminal street gangs and become perpetrators, as well as those who are either victimized themselves or kin to victims. Those indirectly affected are those who neither become perpetrators nor victims but who contend with the persistent fear, stress, and isolation that come with growing up in a community with high rates of violence.

The Directly Affected

The degrading of public order directly affects crime victims, their immediate families, and the offenders themselves. In fact, many offenders are previous victims themselves. This is the group most obviously influenced by changes to public safety in a neighborhood and most likely to be seen on the evening news related to a crime.

The Victims. On May 21, 2017, 7-year-old Dequante Hobbs Jr. was sitting at his kitchen table, eating a piece of cake and reading on his tablet. Across the street, a dice game was taking place behind an abandoned building. A dispute broke out, and a bullet flew through the window of Dequante's home, striking him. As he screamed out in pain, his mother, Micheshia Norment, ran to the kitchen to find her son crawling on the floor into the hallway. There was blood everywhere. Micheshia tried to perform CPR, but her son threw up in her mouth. She spit it out and kept going. He died several hours later at a children's hospital in Louisville.

The following day, 2X received a call from Dequante's great-aunt. He had already been working with her because her two teenage grandsons, Dequante's cousins, were murdered earlier that year. The family would have to deal with the violent loss of yet another child.

Dequante's death rocked Louisville, not just because of his innocence but because his murder was hardly anomalous. In 2021 alone, 123 children under age 18 were shot in Louisville; 24 of them died. But Louisville isn't an anomaly either. Some of the cases garner national headlines, like 8-year-old Secoriea Turner in Atlanta, Georgia, and 4-year-old Mychal Moultry Jr. in Chicago. From 1980 to 2008, 10 percent of all homicide victims in the United States were children under age 18.[12]

Homicides of young people are pervasive enough to reduce the life expectancy of entire city populations. In Los Angeles County, California, homicide reduced life expectancy by 0.4 years for all residents and by 2.1 years for black males from 2001 to 2006.[13] The impact on life expectancy was even higher in low-income neighborhoods. In some low-income urban neighborhoods, homicide was estimated to decrease the life expectancy of black males by nearly five years.[14] Nationwide, the decline in homicides from 1991 to 2014 is credited with a 10-month increase in black male life expectancy and a 17 percent reduction in the life expectancy gap between white and black males.[15]

It has also long been understood that violent-crime victimization, especially homicide victimization, has ripple effects in families and other close networks. Each homicide leaves behind, on average, seven to 10 close family members, friends, neighbors, or other associates.[16] These individuals, often referred to as "co-victims," are left to deal with the funeral, law enforcement, and court proceedings, all while trying to process loss and grieve.

For the victims and co-victims, the emotional and physical costs of violence are obvious, but violence has significant financial costs as well. A number of studies have attempted to calculate the total cost that a homicide exacts on its victims, the surrounding community, and society at large. Two separate studies found the total cost of a homicide to the victim and society was just under $9 million in 2008 and 2010 dollars, respectively.[17] This number considers both tangible and intangible costs including direct victim costs, criminal justice costs, opportunity costs associated with the offender's decision to engage in criminal behavior, and the loss of productivity and earning potential from a lost life.

Some researchers, however, have found a much larger cost associated with murder. Matt DeLisi, a professor of criminal justice and sociology, found that the average cost of a homicide exceeded $17.25 million per instance.[18] The study used a sample of 654 convicted and incarcerated murderers and found that the most prolific and violent of these individuals cost victims and society upward of $150 million each.[19]

Violence is costly. For the victims it affects, it is life ending or life altering, but they are not the only group affected.

The Offenders. In fall 2021, teachers and administrators at Engelhard Elementary School asked 2X to meet with a group of young boys who displayed troubling behaviors.

He spoke to an 8-year-old first. The child expressed his desire to go to Chicago because he could make something of himself there—not in business or family but on the street. He assured 2X that it would be OK if he died in Chicago because that would be "better than dying in Louisville."

A 9-year-old told 2X he was a member of the Bloods. While the notorious gang is best known for its activities in Los Angeles, there are gangs in cities all over the country that claim the "Blood" name with varying degrees of affiliation with the Los Angeles gangs. The 9-year-old wore this status like a badge of honor. In his mind, his future was certain: He was a Blood, which meant whatever the Bloods did, he would do. Their issues were his issues.

2X spent time with each boy, trying to explain to them the benefits of a more productive life path. The boys weren't immediately convinced, but 2X will keep working with them as he has with so many others.

For kids in neighborhoods with high levels of violence, learning how to navigate life comes with some unique challenges not faced by kids in neighborhoods with low levels of crime. One of the most difficult is how to navigate gang membership.

Youth gang members typically range in age from 12 to 24,[20] but some as young as 5 find themselves recruited into gangs.[21] Kids join gangs for a variety of reasons: perceived economic benefit, reputation and prestige, and a desire for structure.[22] One of the most widely cited reasons youth join gangs, though, is for protection.[23]

Unfortunately, this calculation ends up being misguided. Far from providing safety, gang membership significantly increases the likelihood of victimization. Gang-affiliated youth are nearly 50 percent more likely to be victimized compared to youth who aren't affiliated with gangs.[24] Gang members are three times as likely as those unaffiliated to be victims of robbery and nearly five times more likely to be victims of aggravated assault.[25]

Gang members also criminally offend at higher rates relative to their unaffiliated counterparts.[26] According to the National Gang Intelligence Center, in 2011, gangs were responsible for 48 percent of violent crime in most states and upward of 90 percent of violence in some states.[27] Gang members are also more likely than unaffiliated at-risk youth to commit acts of serious violence, such as drive-by shootings and homicides. A comparison of gang-affiliated youth with unaffiliated at-risk youth in Cleveland, Ohio, found that 40 percent of the gang members had participated in a drive-by shooting, while only 2 percent of the unaffiliated at-risk cohort had.[28] That study also found that 64 percent of gang members surveyed in Colorado and Florida said that members of their gang had committed homicide, while only 6–7 percent of unaffiliated at-risk youth in those states said that their friends had done so.[29]

For those who become gang members or otherwise violent offenders, criminal conviction becomes likely, and lifetime career earnings decrease considerably. Convicted felons who do not serve jail time see an average decrease in lifetime wages of 22 percent.[30] For convicted felons who do serve time in prison, lifetime earnings fall by 52 percent.[31] High rates of offending in communities with high rates of violence lead to high rates of incarceration. Communities with high rates of parent-aged men cycling in and out of prison have weaker informal social controls and weaker social networks.[32]

Decreased earnings keep communities with high rates of violence poorer, while weaker social bonds inhibit efforts to reduce violence. This keeps these communities more socially isolated and continues the cycle of violent offending and victimization.

The Indirectly Affected

For every victim or offender in these communities, there are dozens of people who are not directly involved in the violence. Their actual interaction with the violence varies in degree, from general fear to the kinds of turmoil that 2X's daughter and grandchildren endured.

Heaven, 2X's 26-year-old daughter, says she remembers that day in 2018 like it was yesterday. She first heard a series of loud bangs. Those bangs quickly sounded closer. Ironically, or perhaps as fate would have it, Heaven had recently completed training for an active shooting at work. Instinctively, she grabbed her kids, and they all lay flat on the floor as bullets ripped into their home.

She and the kids stayed on the floor until they heard police sirens. Slowly, they got up and saw the damage done to their home. They gradually made their way outside, as did their neighbors. Thankfully no one was hit, but that moment instantly changed Heaven's perception of her surroundings.

She'll tell you she felt less safe after the trauma of that day. Why did this come to her door? Why her? Why the kids? She found herself sitting up in bed late at night, knowing they weren't safe. If it happened once, it could happen again. How do you move on knowing it could happen again?

She sought professional help for herself and her kids. Her oldest son, who had never had behavioral problems in school before, began acting out. Her other children had night terrors and had to leave their neighborhood entirely when they wanted to play outside. They, too, no longer felt safe in their immediate surroundings.

Fortunately, Heaven and her children have a strong support system and have been able to navigate the trauma of that day. Thankfully, because of that same support system, they were able to move out of their home temporarily. Many are not so fortunate.

Fear, Isolation, Attitudes, and Academic Performance. Violence need not come as close to home as it did for Heaven and her children to make residents in these communities regularly fear for their safety. Central to James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling's "broken windows" thesis was the idea that neighborhood violence and disorder create fear.[33] That fear leads to changes in behavior and weakens informal social controls in neighborhoods. This in turn produces more crime.

Perception of neighborhood disorder is strongly associated with fear of crime.[34] Black Americans are also significantly more fearful of crime than white Americans are.[35] This may help explain the results of a Gallup poll taken in summer 2020, in the midst of civil unrest and social movements to "defund the police": 81 percent of black respondents said they wanted the same amount of or a greater police presence in their neighborhoods.[36] Twenty percent said they wanted police to spend more time in their neighborhood, compared to 17 percent of white respondents.

Living in a neighborhood with high rates of violence can also lead to increased social isolation. In 2018, a team of researchers conducted in-person interviews with 504 adults in Chicago's South Side and West Side communities.[37] They found that "prior exposure to community violence was associated with a 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."[38] Social isolation can also result in adverse health effects ranging from cognitive decline to depression.

This exposure to community violence can have immediate deleterious effects on kids in terms of behavior and academic performance. An examination of an ethnically diverse sample of 4,458 children living in urban Chicago neighborhoods found that exposure to community violence had a significant effect on increasing aggressive behaviors and normative beliefs about aggression in first through sixth graders.[39]

Separately, exposure to community violence has been found to impede a child's academic performance. Exposure to community violence at age 5 is negatively associated with academic performance at age 9.[40] In fact, that negative association is far greater than the negative association between academic performance and having experienced physical abuse.[41] This impact is also swift. Living in the immediate vicinity of a homicide lowers standardized reading and vocabulary scores within a matter of days.[42]

Exposure to high rates of community violence leads to higher levels of fear in residents, increased social isolation among those residents, and poorer behavioral and academic outcomes in children. But community violence also leaves neighborhoods poorer and hinders opportunities for economic advancement for those within them.

Economic Opportunity and Poverty in "High Crime" Neighborhoods. It is well-known that high rates of poverty and violence coincide in many neighborhoods in US cities. There is a robust, diverse body of literature examining the impact that high rates of poverty can have on community violence and crime more broadly.[43] What is sometimes less appreciated, though robustly documented, is the negative effect that community violence can have on upward mobility, business growth and employment, and property values in neighborhoods.

Community violence contributes to keeping our poorest residents poor. One study found that the level of violent crime in a county impedes the level of upward economic mobility among individuals raised in families at the 25th percentile of the income distribution.[44] Importantly, those authors found that a decline in violent crime experienced during age 14–17 increases a teen's expected income rank in adulthood. The inverse was also true. Increased exposure to violent crime in the teenage years was associated with a reduction in expected income rank in adulthood.

This decline in economic mobility among residents in communities with higher rates of violence may be due in part to the negative impact community violence has on private business. "Surges" in violence have been negatively associated with business activity, resulting in downsizing and discouraging new business from entering the marketplace.[45]

One large analysis looked at the impact of gun violence on the economic health of neighborhoods in six cities: Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Oakland, California; Rochester, New York; San Francisco, California; and Washington, DC.[46] 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 4 percent in Minneapolis, Oakland, San Francisco, and Washington, DC.[47] 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.[48]

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.[49] This is consistent with other research findings:

Increases in violent crime in a neighborhood in a given year result in decreases in property values in that neighborhood the following year.[50]

Taken together, elevated levels of violent crime in a neighborhood reduce economic opportunities by harming private businesses and reducing home values. This leads to continued poverty and less economic mobility among young adults. These data suggest that reducing violent crime in neighborhoods not only will improve social outcomes for children in terms of aggression and academic achievement; it also is a necessary precondition to sustainable poverty alleviation in the most dangerous neighborhoods in American cities.

Righting the Ship

In the United States, the protection of public safety and the preservation of public order are largely the responsibility of local police departments enforcing state laws. That means that many solutions to the problem of community violence will come from state and local governments. However, the federal government has an important role to play.

Thankfully, there is a straightforward way to improve public safety and restore public order in cities. For as long as there have been cities, there has been community violence, and through trial, error, and evaluation, we have a good sense of what works and what doesn't. By focusing resources—criminal justice and otherwise—on problem actors and places with high crime, cities can meaningfully reduce street violence and improve the environments in which millions of children grow up. Doing so requires both the financial resources and the political will to do the right thing by constituencies that hold little political power, but it would mean safer neighborhoods, more prosperous communities, and better social and economic outcomes for disadvantaged kids.

Policing. Police are the element of the criminal justice system most visible to the public and the arm with which citizens are most likely to interact. As criminologist Gary Potter put it, "The American system of criminal justice is predicated on an assumption of effective policing. After all, in order to deter criminals and punish the evil-doers you have to catch them."[51]

This is more than theoretical. Research on policing and crime has repeatedly found that having more well-managed police officers leads to less crime. A 2018 study looked at police and crime data from 1960 through 2010 and concluded that every dollar spent on policing generates about $1.63 in social benefits, mostly through reductions in homicides.[52] An examination of data from 122 cities around the US from 1975 to 1995 found that increased police numbers brought down violent crime by 12 percent.[53] In the midst of efforts to "defund the police," it behooves local policymakers to adequately fund their police departments.

Local policymakers shouldn't have to do this alone, though. Since the 1990s, there have been two major injections of federal dollars into local policing.

On September 13, 1994, President Bill Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act,[54] which—along with many other provisions—established the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) inside the Department of Justice. The aim of this provision of the law was to infuse federal dollars into state and local policing with the goal of hiring 100,000 new officers. It authorized $8.8 billion in spending between 1994 and 2000.

The funding of new officers was distributed through the new Community Oriented Policing Services Universal Hiring Program (CHP), which covered 75 percent of the cost of each new police hire. These CHP grants typically lasted for three years. CHP funding exceeded $1 billion from 1995 through 1999 but dropped considerably in the early 2000s. Less than $200 million was allocated for the program in both 2003 and 2004, and less than $20 million was allocated in each year from 2005 to 2008.

In the wake of the 2008 recession, President Barack Obama signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act,[55] which increased funding for the COPS hiring program, bringing it back up to $1 billion. This increase is often referred to as COPS 2.0. The COPS grants awarded between fiscal years 2009 and 2011 covered 100 percent of the hiring costs of new officers rather than the previous 75 percent.

Both programs have been extensively evaluated, and those evaluations have routinely found meaningful reductions in violence and other crimes. A 2007 study evaluating the first injection of COPS money in more than 2,000 cities with populations greater than 10,000 found that additional police hired with COPS funding resulted in statistically significant reductions in aggravated assaults, robberies, burglaries, and auto thefts.[56] Additionally, a 2019 study analyzing COPS 2.0 found that departments that received COPS grant money saw a 3.2 percent increase in police staffing and a 3.5 percent reduction in crime as compared to similar departments that did not receive the grant money.[57]

Simply increasing the number of police would be a step in a positive direction, but strategy matters; what those police do can be the difference between moderate and significant reductions in violence. The gold standard of policing strategies for meaningfully reducing violence is focused deterrence policing, sometimes known as Group Violence Intervention. Pioneered in Boston in the 1990s, focused deterrence strategies rely first and foremost on the assumption that violence is concentrated among a small group of active offenders and, second, that those offenders' undesirable behaviors can be deterred, not just prosecuted and punished.[58] The strategy was the result of the efforts of the Boston Gun Project Working Group, a collaborative effort among law enforcement, academics, social service providers, and community partners.[59]

The group first set out to identify the most active and dangerous individuals and gangs operating in the city. Once it identified those groups and individuals, the working group delivered messages simultaneously warning of consequences if violent behaviors continued and expressing a desire to see these young men live. The organization provided resources to those who wanted to change their lifestyle, while law enforcement communicated a set of meaningful, predictable consequences for any groups that continued to engage in violence. After a homicide, those consequences were swiftly carried out.

The results were remarkable. Boston saw a 63 percent reduction in youth homicides, a 25 percent reduction in gun assaults, a 32 percent reduction in shots-fired calls for service, and a 44 percent reduction in youth gun assaults in one high-risk district.[60] The team then took the strategy to other cities.

As of 2011, more than 60 cities across the country have implemented some form of focused deterrence policing practices. While they have not been universally successful,[61] many evaluations found statistically significant reductions in gang-related violence in areas implementing the approach. A 2019 meta-analysis found that focused deterrence strategies are associated with a moderate reduction in crime.[62]

A focused deterrence strategy in Cincinnati, Ohio, resulted in a 37.7 percent reduction in group-member-involved homicide after 24 months and a 58.6 percent decline after 42 months—a 41.4 percent reduction three and a half years after implementation.[63] Similarly, in Indianapolis, Indiana, the 27-month post-intervention evaluation period of a focused deterrence strategy saw a 34 percent reduction in total homicides.[64] In Stockton, California, over a 65-month post-intervention period, there was a 42 percent reduction in gun homicide due to a focused deterrence strategy,[65] while in Lowell, Massachusetts, over the 39-month post-intervention period, there was a 44 percent reduction in gun assault incidents.[66]

Focused deterrence strategies have even been successful in reducing homicides in some of the nation's most violent environments. Over the 12-month evaluation period, a focused deterrence strategy in New Orleans, Louisiana, resulted in a 23 percent reduction in total homicides.[67]

Cities should work to adopt these strategies as swiftly and efficiently as they can. This is another area where federal dollars could be leveraged effectively. Federal grants to police departments can be structured to incentivize the adoption of these kinds of strategies by local law enforcement.

If cities can adequately fund policing and optimally allocate law enforcement resources, they can expect meaningful reductions in violence—reductions that would improve the opportunities for children and the lives of all community residents.

State Laws, Criminal Sentencing, and Federal Partnerships. Lowering crime reduces the need for punishment, but it is important that the small minority striking fear into their communities is held accountable. Holding criminals accountable will also further reduce crime. Most commonly, this means sentencing convicted criminals to sufficiently punitive, proportional prison terms. A 2004 study of the crime decline from 1991 to 2001 found that about a third of that decline resulted from increased prison populations.[68] This is because imprisonment plays two important roles in crime reduction: incapacitation and deterrence.

When criminals are removed from the streets, they are incapacitated and prevented from committing further crimes because they are in prison. Professor Alfred Blumstein observed that "incapacitation through imprisonment is probably the only effective means of restraining the violent crimes committed by some individuals otherwise out of social control."[69] Incapacitation in some cases has the additional benefit of criminals aging out of their prime crime-committing years while incarcerated, further reducing crime.

Doing so may directly benefit kids, too, even if their parent ends up incarcerated. While having an incarcerated parent is undoubtedly tough for a child, for certain populations, children of single mothers have lower dropout rates than children with a mother and a crime-committing father. For all populations, it appears children of single mothers do no worse than children who live with a mother and a crime-committing father.[70]

Equally important is the deterrent effect of criminal sanctions. Deterrence theory has its roots in the work of classical criminologist Cesare Beccaria,[71] who argued that individuals seek to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. Government policy that alters costs and benefits can change behavior. Several centuries later, economist Gary Becker would posit that crime was a rational act and forge the way for modern deterrence theory. He argued that criminals, like all humans, are rational, and crimes occur when the perceived benefits outweigh the perceived costs.[72] Those perceived costs are heightened if meaningful punishment is a real and perceived possibility.

But imprisonment comes with its own costs. The average cost to incarcerate an inmate in the United States for a year in 2015 was $33,274. In New York, the state with the highest annual per-inmate cost, it was $69,355.[73] There are also social costs to incarceration. As we have already observed, convicted felons who serve time in prison have significantly reduced lifetime earnings, and communities with high rates of parent-aged men who have served time have weaker social bonds and institutions.

These costs mean that prison sentences, especially long ones, ought to be reserved for the most problematic actors. In the context of community violence in American cities, this policy should focus on gangs through narrowly tailored "sentence enhancements"—enhanced punishments if certain specific conditions are met—and greater collaboration between local and federal law enforcement.

This approach does not mean criminalizing someone for being in a gang or excessively punishing someone who commits a crime simply because they are in a gang. Instead, these narrowly tailored policies specifically address gang-*motivated* crimes, such as retaliatory violence and disputes over turf, organized drug dealing, and in some cases human trafficking. As already noted, gang members disproportionately commit acts of violence and crimes generally. By focusing sentencing enhancement on gang-motivated activities, prison resources can more effectively be deployed where they are needed. Several sentence-enhancement structures have been evaluated and have been found to have deterred both a targeted population (prior felons) and specific types of offenses (gun-use crimes).[74] These enhancements can also be meaningfully used as a part of the focused deterrence policing strategies discussed earlier.

These laws should also clearly define what a criminal street gang is, and the definitions should be in line with federal ones. This consistency can allow greater collaboration among local, state, and federal law enforcement on gang-related suppression efforts. Federal law enforcement can be an essential partner in these kinds of joint efforts and provide needed tools like wiretaps. The existing Project Safe Neighborhoods program in the Department of Justice can be reworked to better foster such increased collaboration.

Built Environment and Physical Disorder. 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 "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.

Unfortunately, abandoned buildings and vacant lots have become a regular part of urban life, especially in low-income communities. These properties can have a significant criminogenic impact on a neighborhood, especially when they are easily accessible. In Austin, Texas, a study found that blocks with open abandoned buildings had twice the crime rate of control blocks that did not have such buildings.[75] Researchers also found that 83 percent of abandoned buildings surveyed showed evidence of illegal use. Unkempt vacant lots likewise attract crime and reduce community perceptions of safety.[76]

Addressing these properties can reduce crime. Simply structurally shoring up these buildings can meaningfully influence serious offending. One study in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, found that enforcement of a city code that required abandoned houses to have working windows and doors reduced assaults by 20 percent and firearm assaults by 39 percent.[77] Tearing down abandoned properties can also reduce crime in the surrounding area. In Detroit, Michigan, destroying five abandoned buildings in a block group reduced firearm assaults in the next 14 months by 11 percent.[78] Crucially, these studies did not find any evidence that firearm assaults were displaced to other locations.

Similar results have been found following efforts to “clean, green, and maintain” vacant lots. Another program in Philadelphia, run by the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, cleans, greens, and maintains vacant lots. In a quasi-experimental analysis of those efforts from 1999 to 2008, researchers found that they resulted in a 10 percent reduction in total assaults and an 8 percent reduction in firearm assaults per square mile in the treated areas.[79]

Inadequate street lighting also increases community fear of crime. To most people, there is a basic relationship between crime and lighting: The better the lighting, the less crime.[80] With respect to urban disorder and 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.[81]

Additional lighting, according to Jacobs, not only provides needed light but—by making people feel safer—also contributes more feet on the pavement and eyes on the street, deterring crime.

Modern research suggests that Jacobs's assessment may be right. A randomized controlled trial of nearly 40 public housing developments in New York City was conducted in which half the developments received new lights while half did not. Before the experiment, all the housing developments had above-average levels of index crime: homicide, rape, robbery, burglary, aggravated assault, larceny over $50, motor vehicle theft, and arson. The study concluded that increased levels of lighting led to a "36% reduction in index crimes—including murder, robbery, and aggravated assault, as well as certain property crimes—that took place outdoors at night."[82]

By reducing physical disorder, policymakers can reduce both fear and violence in communities without having to expend additional criminal justice resources.

Victim Services. In 1981, President Ronald Reagan proclaimed the first National Crime Victims' Rights Week. In issuing his proclamation, 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.[83]

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, as retaliatory violence is a common feature of gang life.[84] However, one does not need to be a member of a criminal street gang to experience the desire for revenge and retaliation.

The desire for justice and retribution for perceived injustice—not only the homicide or shooting but also the end result of a criminal investigation—can be a powerful driver in the desire for revenge. Researchers have noted that while “revenge does not undo the harm . . . it can restore the balance of suffering between the victim and the transgressor.”[85] This is exacerbated, according to additional research, when the outcome of a criminal investigation is another perceived injustice to the survivor, as survivors often have a “fear that no rescuer can be trusted” when this happens.[86]

Simple policy changes can ease these fears and help prevent retaliatory violence. While one of the major policy victories of the victims’ rights movement of the 1980s was the addition of victims’ advocates to prosecutors’ offices, this has turned out to be insufficient. The reason is that there must be an arrest made for a case to make it to a prosecutor’s office. In 2020, the national clearance rate—that is, the percentage of cases that result in arrest—for murder was 54.4 percent.[87] This means nearly half of all murder victims’ families would not have the opportunity to take advantage of victim services offered by a prosecutor’s office. Placing these kinds of advocates and resources in police departments is a straightforward way to fix this problem and fill this gap.

Police-based victim services should be the cornerstone of any effort in this space, but other efforts—such as simply ensuring that victims have the right to be heard through victim-impact statements and that victims are kept informed as the case progresses—can make a difference. In addition, resources for victims displaced by violence occurring in or outside their home can provide much-needed stability for an already difficult healing process. Adequate support for violent-crime survivors can not only provide better outcomes for those families but also reduce violence.

Conclusion

The unfortunate truth is that too many children find themselves exposed to community violence, in fear for their safety, and in disordered neighborhoods. There are plenty of good reasons to want to reduce community violence, but in addition to reducing the pain and suffering that come with violent crime, ensuring a minimum level of public safety is a crucial precondition to prosperity.

Not only do children do worse behaviorally and academically in communities with high rates of violence, but elevated levels of crime also stifle business and reduce upward mobility in adulthood. The status quo is failing the children in these circumstances.

Fortunately, while not easy, restoring public order and improving public safety are straightforward. We know what works. It is now about having the courage and moral clarity to do it. By adequately funding law enforcement and getting the strategy right, and by building cases against the most serious offenders and putting them in prison to let the majority of the community thrive, we can address those criminals driving the violence. By improving the built environment of a community, we can reduce opportunities for serious offending and reduce fear in law-abiding citizens. And by improving the treatment of crime victims, we can help break the cycle of violence and improve police-community relations.

All of this would then mean less crime and healthier communities for kids to grow up in. For the 3.5 million children living in communities deemed unsafe by their own parents, it would mean opportunities they otherwise may never have and life trajectories shifted upward.

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