

Statement of Principles on Violent Crime

INTRODUCTION

The past two years have seen a dramatic increase in several categories of violent crime, including homicides, aggravated assaults, and carjackings. This [tragic rash of violence is being experienced all across the United States](#) and has been highly concentrated in lower-socioeconomic and minority communities, leaving its residents in fear for their safety and the safety of their loved ones.

According to the most [recent crime data from the FBI](#), 2019 to 2020 was the single largest year-to-year increase in murders in United States history. 2021 homicide numbers [indicate a 5% increase from 2020 and a 44% increase from 2019](#). Aggravated assaults and carjackings continued to see significant increases in 2021 as compared to 2019. Philadelphia has seen reported incidents of carjackings quadruple from 2019-2021. Chicago, New Orleans, Washington DC, and other major cities across the US have seen similar jumps in carjackings, [mainly driven by teenagers](#).

Even though these rates of violent crime are generally lower than they have been in other recent periods of time (such as the 1990s) and other categories of crime, such as burglary, larceny, and drug offenses have seen decreases in the past two years, the rapid increase in death and violence is one of the most pressing issues our nation faces and cannot be ignored. Swift action by government actors and community leaders is paramount to curb this disturbing trend.

We believe in the following shared principles when it comes to combatting the threat violent crime has on our communities:

PRINCIPLE ONE: Properly Fund the Police

Calls to “defund the police” are misguided and fly in the face of research. Study after study shows that 1) [more officers](#), particularly focused in highly-criminalized neighborhoods [decreases crime](#); and 2) better trained and educated officers are much [less likely to use force](#) and [utilize more effective policing practices](#). By “defunding” or making significant cuts to police budgets, law enforcement agencies will be limited in hiring more officers or keep current staffing levels, will likely have to reduce or eliminate certain training or continuing education programs, and will not be able to attract better candidates or maintain these officers due to lack of financial incentives. We need more investments in areas that have proven to better the quality of officers. This will make our streets safer and our bonds between law enforcement and their communities stronger.

Additionally, polling has shown that regardless of age or race, US adults overwhelmingly want to see funding for police increase or stay about the same. In September 2021, [just 15% of US adults](#) said that spending on police should be decreased.

We also need to fund law enforcement like the core function of government they are. However, instead of clear and transparent appropriations, many police budgets across the country [rely significantly](#) on fines, fees, and forfeitures which are collected and enforced by law enforcement. This warps the core functions of police and can cause significant [tensions between them and the communities they serve](#). We must fund law enforcement through means that do not distort their objectives because every minute they spend on revenue-generating activities is a minute they are not spending on solving or preventing serious crime.

PRINCIPLE TWO: Focus Law Enforcement Time & Resources on Preventing and Solving Serious Crime

Rampant and unchecked criminal activity destroys economic opportunity in our communities and creates barriers to people realizing the American Dream. Policing that dedicates necessary resources to preventing and solving serious crime is critical for our neighborhoods to realize their full potential. However, we task law enforcement with far too many responsibilities that go beyond the core functions of protecting and serving the public, leaving less time to devote to these core missions.

Police spend [only a small percentage of their time](#) focusing on violent crimes while the vast majority of their work is spent on non-criminal calls and traffic-related incidents. Additionally, 13 percent of the estimated 10,085,207 arrests made in 2019 were [for simple drug possession](#).

Law enforcement lack alternatives for those suffering from mental health or substance use issues. This means police routinely become the first and only line of response for these individuals when their underlying issues lead to criminal behavior or a mental health crisis.

We have seen many jurisdictions refuse to enforce and prosecute crimes [such as shoplifting](#) and certain quality of life crimes and allow individuals to break the law with little to no consequences. While lengthy incarceration is not the appropriate remedy in most of these cases, ignoring these offenses undermines the quality of life for law-abiding residents and lowers property values in neighborhoods where these crimes go unabated. Additionally, a lack of enforcement means law breakers will face no accountability for their actions and our system misses a chance to address underlying causes of the person's criminal behavior, such as mental illness and substance use disorders.

Instead, proper investment in services that would help treat people with these issues would significantly reduce the time, energy, and resources currently required of law enforcement while providing more successful alternatives that solve the root causes of many individuals' criminal actions.

This mission creep from true public safety functions has hindered law enforcement's ability to focus on the most serious issues plaguing our communities. In 1976, the clearance rate (generally defined as either identifying or arresting a suspect) for homicides was 82%. [That rate had fallen to 50%](#) by 2020. [Non-fatal shooting clearance rates are about half](#) compared to homicides. In 2020, [only 41.7%](#) of reported violent offenses were "cleared" by an arrest.

With [thousands of vacancies in police departments across the country](#), it is critical now more than ever that we focus the limited resources of police on public safety and strengthening community trust in their profession. Victims deserve justice and our hard-working law enforcement officers should be provided the bandwidth they need to achieve a passing grade in their community's public safety.

PRINCIPLE THREE: Focus on Evidence-Based Policies That Reduce Violent Crime

Violent crime is highly concentrated amongst a [very small network of people](#) within each city. Because of this, strategies that target specific geographic locations and social networks combined with increased support services have shown to be effective at addressing violent crime without seeing a "spill-over" effect into other communities and building trust between police and communities. One strategy, "focused deterrence," made famous by the city of [Boston's "Operation Ceasefire"](#), focuses on

1. Identifying the individuals at high risk of being involved in violent crime by conducting audits with leaders in the community and local law enforcement
2. Holding "intervention meetings" with these individuals where law enforcement and members of the community relay messages that continued criminal activity will be met with swift and severe consequences while those that stop their criminal activities will be offered services and support from the community
3. Providing those services to those that want to change
4. Having community members maintain this support system
5. Cracking down with swift enforcement for those who continue in criminogenic behavior

Cities that have properly implemented this model achieved significant reductions in violent crime.

Non-law enforcement interventions designed to change the environment in local communities have also been found to reduce crime. Small investments such as [increased street lighting](#) have been shown to have positive effects on crime, including violent crime. Community-wide coordinated efforts to ["clean and green"](#) vacant lots in cities have also been shown to reduce violent crime without any "spillover" into nearby neighborhoods.

The city of Dallas, Texas has recently [implemented many of these strategies](#), including "hot spot" policing, focused deterrence, "clean and green" strategies, increased social services, and violence interrupters. While most American cities saw increased rates of homicides in 2021, [Dallas was able to decrease their homicide rate by 13% from 2020-2021](#). Additionally, arrests went down 11% during that time period; showing that focusing on the highest risk individuals, rather than strategies casting a wide net amounting to more arrests is a more effective route.

An approach [combining targeted law enforcement efforts, with programming, services, community support, and environmental changes](#) is a proven mechanism for cities to reduce violent crime. Federal, state, and local leaders should learn from these evidence-based policies to tackle violent crime effectively.

PRINCIPLE FOUR: Continue to Enact Smart on Crime Policies that Increase Public Safety and Criminal Justice System Success

For nearly 15 years, states such as Texas, Georgia, Oklahoma, and North Carolina have shown that smarter criminal justice investments can improve public safety while respecting human dignity and easing burdens on taxpayers. The experience of these states and [more than 30 others](#) reveal that reducing incarceration and in turn investing in treatment, alternatives to incarceration, and programming for certain individuals in the criminal justice system can both reduce prison and jail populations while increasing public safety and reentry success.

“Smart on crime” policies also allow law enforcement to focus bandwidth and resources on high-risk individuals, while limiting unnecessary contact with the criminal justice system for those who pose little to no threat to public safety. For example, when a person is charged with a crime, their freedom prior to trial routinely rests on whether they have the means to pay financial bail, rather than their risk to society. This allows those who are a public safety threat to buy their way out of jail, while low-risk defendants stay incarcerated prior to trial simply due to lack of ability to pay even a small amount of bail.

Current policies that allow individuals to be released who are a danger to the community have resulted in serious risks to public safety. In November 2021, Isus Thompson walked up to a NYPD officer and struck him from behind with a metal safe inside a backpack, [sending the officer to the hospital](#). Despite security and police body camera footage of the heinous attack, and the fact that Thompson was convicted of stabbing an NYPD officer in 2008, he was still released shortly after the attack without a request for bail by prosecutors.

States should look to change their constitutions and statutes to provide judges greater discretion to detain pre-trial defendants who pose a serious threat to our communities. Additionally, courts should limit unnecessary pre-trial detention for those who pose little to no threat to public safety and simply cannot afford to pay bail. [Recent data](#) shows that the median annual income for people in jail who are unable to afford bail is \$15,598, while the median bail amount nationally is nearly a full year’s salary for these individuals. Even a short period of time incarcerated pre-trial [can lead to a greater chance of criminal activity](#) in the future and reduce the chances of a person subsequently contributing to society in a positive manner.

While those who pose a risk to public safety should be detained, policymakers cannot simply incarcerate their way out of the concerning upticks in violent crime. The approaches laid out in earlier principles should be implemented, and policymakers should not waiver from continuing the positive reforms to the criminal justice system that have shown to be effective at reducing crime and taxpayer costs. Having achieved monumental gains in public safety over the past two decades, America must continue its pursuit of smart on crime policies.