



Why Non-Violent Crime Matters

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In recent months there has been a great deal of discussion about violent crime rates. This discussion has revolved around whether violent crime is declining year over year and if the high crime rates in certain major cities continue to demand greater police actions. As we consider these issues as a society, and within the law enforcement profession, we need to make sure that we do not forget the importance of addressing non-violent offenses—particularly, property crimes and public disorder crimes.

As we will discuss in this article, non-violent crime has a major impact on the public's sense of safety and public attitudes toward the police. Many non-violent crimes also impact the local economy by affecting employment opportunities, tourism, housing prices, and much else. The available evidence clearly demonstrates that continuing to engage in enforcement efforts against property crimes and public order crimes, as well as enforcing local ordinances, can help reduce fear of crime, improve confidence in the police, and improve local economic conditions.

Non-Violent Crime and Fear of Crime

Ever since the 1980s, criminologists and social psychologists have realized that signs of social decay raise public fears about crime.¹ These researchers have revealed that non-violent public order crimes like loitering, vagrancy, and trespassing, do more to increase citizen fear of crime than do violent crime rates. This may seem counterintuitive until you stop and think about it. When you drive around any major city, you intuitively perceive that certain parts of the city are less safe than other parts based on signs of neighborhood decay, *not* by actually witnessing violent crimes. Some neighborhoods have mowed lawns, clean streets, occupied residences, families out walking, and the neighborhood looks cared for by the residents. Other neighborhoods are littered with graffiti, trash, abandoned or damaged cars, uncut lawns, and there are many abandoned houses and businesses. Even without witnessing a crime in progress, we instinctively feel that the first neighborhood is safer than the second neighborhood.

Many of these visible signs of urban decay are violations of criminal statutes and city ordinances that can be enforced by the police. Littering is a crime, as is making graffiti. Vehicle registration laws do not allow vehicles to be on public roadways without a valid registration, thus permitting the removal of abandoned vehicles. Local ordinances govern the maintenance of properties, allowing the city to fine property owners who do not maintain their properties to standard. In extreme cases, such as abandoned properties, the city can even seize the properties.²

Public responses to high levels of property crime further exacerbate the situation. Bars on windows, barbed-wire fences, an abundance of security cameras, and even low-cost items in stores under lock and key are all signs that visually convey that the area is plagued by crime. The enforcement of property crime laws can help remove these property-crime-related signs of social decay. **We should not overlook the fact that enforcing property crime and order-maintenance laws contributes to improved quality of life for citizens and reductions in fear of crime.**

It must also be remembered that, like violent crimes, property crime causes trauma to its victims. **Much research has demonstrated that victims of thefts and burglaries feel violated, unsafe, and suffer increased levels of depression. Property crime victimization increases mistrust among neighbors and decreases social cohesion within a neighborhood.**³ These facts further

prove that enforcing property crime laws and appropriately dealing with property offenders can reduce citizen fears and improve citizen quality of life.

Fear of Crime and Satisfaction with the Police

For the last decade, the law enforcement profession has struggled to maintain citizen support for the police. The “defund the police” movement, decreasing public opinion poll survey results, political attacks by activists, the news media, and politicians have made it difficult for law enforcement agencies to garner the public support they need and deserve.⁴ The law enforcement profession needs all the help it can get to counter these influences and increase public support for the police. **Many social science research studies have revealed a direct correlation between citizen fear of crime and citizen satisfaction with the police.⁵ When fear of crime is high, citizen satisfaction with the police tends to be low, and vice versa. Because fear of crime is linked to perceptions of neighborhood social decay, the more the police can do to clean up the appearance of neighborhoods and reduce non-violent crimes, the more the police can improve citizen satisfaction and increase support for the police within those neighborhoods.**

We should also always remember that within even the most crime-ridden neighborhoods in every city, a multitude of law-abiding citizens live between the crime hot spot addresses on the map. These residents live in fear and lack the financial ability to flee this environment. Over the last half century, criminologists have demonstrated that the overwhelming majority of crimes and calls for police services (about 80%) occur at a very small proportion of addresses (about 5%).⁶ Further research has revealed that these hot spot concentrations of crime and disorder are commonly frequented by the small number of individuals that generate the vast majority of crime.⁷ In other words, **the criminal element in any community is a relatively small, but very active, group of individuals, making it appear as though a whole neighborhood is crime-infested. We need to keep, and improve, support for the police among the individuals not involved in crime by addressing both violent *and non-violent* crime within these neighborhoods.**

Non-Violent Crime and the Local Economy, Employment, and Housing

Criminologists, sociologists, and economists have documented the “doom loop” effects of neighborhood social decay.⁸ As we have mentioned, visible signs of neighborhood decay—trash, graffiti, bars on windows, abandoned cars and abandoned buildings—intuitively communicate that a neighborhood might be unsafe. When people believe the neighborhood is unsafe, the vast majority of law-abiding residents in the neighborhood begin to restrict their behavior. They keep their doors locked more often, do not go outside as often, and interact less with their neighbors. Residents who can afford to do so move elsewhere and abandon the neighborhood altogether. At the same time, people from outside the decaying neighborhood are less likely to come to the neighborhood to shop at its businesses, but others from outside the neighborhood may come looking for drugs or prostitutes. Tired of experiencing financial losses due to theft, vandalism, and a dwindling customer base from outside the neighborhood, the businesses that can afford to do so also leave. These businesses will relocate to neighborhoods that appear safer and are more likely to attract paying customers.

As law-abiding citizens and businesses leave the neighborhood, the area experiences further decay. Realizing that people will come to the neighborhood looking for drugs, prostitutes, or to buy stolen property, more of the criminal element will move in to service these customers of crime. New residents or outside property speculators will also enter the neighborhood with a tolerance for its current poor conditions. They cannot afford better locations and have no memory of when the neighborhood was cleaner, safer, and more orderly. Therefore, the new residents and landlords have the expectation that trash, graffiti, unkept landscaping, and run-down buildings are permitted in this neighborhood. These expectations make them uninterested in improving the community. The flight of businesses not only removes access to stores for the remaining residents, but also removes many job opportunities. This forces residents to travel greater distances to shop and work. Some of those unable or unwilling to travel these distances, may turn to crime as an illegitimate way of obtaining income and goods.⁹

As crime and decay increases, more people and businesses move out of the neighborhood, resulting in plummeting property rates. Seeing their property values declining quickly, even more people and business owners flee to better neighborhoods. This cycle continues to repeat as the

neighborhood spirals down in a doom loop of poverty, unemployment, and crime. Remember where it started—with the physical signs of neighborhood social decay that are non-violent crimes and nuisance ordinance violations. By continuing to enforce non-violent crimes and community standards ordinances, law enforcement agencies can prevent or stop this doom loop spiral.

Perceptions of Inequality

A constant contributor to hostility toward the police is the accusation that the police are biased against the poor and racial/ethnic minority groups. Most law enforcement officers resent such accusations and are diligent to be fair and impartial with everyone they contact. Nevertheless, the neighborhoods caught in the doom loop downward spiral described above are overwhelmingly poor, and disproportionately populated by members of racial/ethnic minority groups. Middle-class and upper-class neighborhood residents rarely tolerate a lowering of their community standards. They pick up the trash in their yards and streets. They contact the city or their homeowners' association (HOA) to complain if this becomes a growing problem. They call the police and demand action when neighbors block the street, park an inoperable vehicle on the street, fail to cut their grass, or play music too loudly. They report graffiti or other vandalism to the police and immediately repair the damage.

Middle-class and upper-class residents do these things because they have the financial means to do so, feel peer-pressure from their neighbors and HOA, and feel that their neighbors share these values. Many people in poorer neighborhoods—the many law-abiding people trapped living between the crime hot spots—hold the same values as middle-class and upper-class residents. However, these people in poorer neighborhoods have fewer resources to keep repairing repeated vandalism, lack an HOA for support, and may know fewer of their neighbors. They assume few neighbors share their values. They do not want to put themselves in danger and be seen as “snitches” by the criminal element in their neighborhood, so they rarely proactively reach out to the police or other city agencies for help. Many want the help of law enforcement, but because of the conditions of where they live, they are reluctant to ask for the help they need.¹⁰

As the poor neighborhood spirals down in decay, it is easy for the law-abiding residents to believe that the reason their neighborhood conditions do not receive the same police or city attention as they do in suburban neighborhoods is due to discrimination. They may perceive that the reason the police do not aggressively address the non-violent crime issues in their neighborhood is due to their being poor, or members of a racial/ethnic minority group.¹¹ This further erodes their confidence in the police and increases their fears about living in the neighborhood. Enforcing non-violent crime laws on those few individuals most contributing to crime in the neighborhood can help dissuade these beliefs.

Conclusion

Recently, much attention has been focused on violent crime and the need to reduce it. This, in itself, is good. However, we want to remind our readers that non-violent crime and disorder can be equally devastating for communities. Non-violent crime and disorder do more than violent crime to increase fear of crime, lower citizen satisfaction with the police, and perpetuate perceptions about inequality. Law enforcement agencies should work tirelessly to reduce violent crime, but should never forget that non-violent crime and social disorder are equally troublesome issues.

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