

GUEST ESSAY

The Root Cause of Violent Crime Is Not What We Think It Is

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By Phillip Atiba Goff

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There is a prevailing narrative about crime that positions bad people as the problem and toughness — in the form of police and prisons — as the solution. It's emotionally powerful, enough to make politicians allocate money for more cops and more prisons in order to avoid being labeled weak or, worse, pro-crime. The recent decision by Mayor Eric Adams of New York to get more homeless mentally ill people involuntarily committed — which shocked even the N.Y.P.D. — is just the latest example.

But policies like this have little, if any, effect on violent crime, in part because they do not address what causes the problem.

The 2022 midterm elections, in which the Republican Party poured considerable sums into a tough-on-crime message and did far worse than expected, offer hope that change is at last possible. Candidates with the courage to do so can run — and win — on a promise to reduce the causes of violence, addressing it before it occurs instead of just punishing it when the damage is already done.

If throwing money at police and prisons made us safer, we would probably already be the safest country in the history of the world. We are not, because insufficient punishment is not the root cause of violence. And if people are talking about how tough they are and how scared you should be, they care more about keeping you scared than keeping you safe.

The tough-on-crime narrative acts like a black hole. It subsumes new ideas and silences discussions of solutions that are already making a difference in people's lives. And it provides bottomless succor to politicians who are more interested in keeping themselves in power than keeping people safe.

I have seen the message of “strong communities keeping everyone safe” open the minds of Republican voters, Democratic voters and many in between. It is backed up by science. Academics, government commissions and even many police chiefs have agreed with the substance behind the message for decades. And there is evidence, including the results of last month's midterms, that it can work politically on a larger scale.

Local successes can be harder for national and statewide candidates to take credit for. But they are still better off telling a story about solutions than trying to outpunish their opponents. Senator-elect John Fetterman, Democrat of Pennsylvania, often advertised his efforts to eliminate shooting deaths as the mayor of Braddock.

In contrast, many New York State Democrats defaulted to a defensive posture. In the closing weeks of the midterms, Gov. Kathy Hochul cut an ad highlighting stricter bail terms and trumpeted increased police presence in New York City. The powerful Police Benevolent Association spent half a million dollars on ads attacking Representative Sean Patrick Maloney's opponent in the Democratic primary (though it later endorsed his Republican challenger). While Ms. Hochul survived an unexpectedly close race, Mr. Maloney lost his seat, as did other Democrats in the state.

Even in areas that have doubled down on punishment, the police are finding it exceedingly difficult to solve crimes. This is particularly true of homicides. In New York City, by contrast, the decision to end the unconstitutional tactic of stopping and frisking hundreds of thousands of mostly young Black and brown men did not lead to a spike in crime.

Local policies that get closer to the cause are showing results. Dozens of communities are demonstrating how to ensure safety and, in many cases, save money along the way. In Austin, Texas, a 911 call from a person reporting a mental health emergency used to get directed to the police. Now, if there is no immediate danger, dispatchers have the option to transfer the call to a mental health clinician. In the first eight months after the program's 2019 start, 82 percent of calls that were transferred were handled without police involvement, which resulted in savings to the taxpayer of \$1,642,213. By the 2021 fiscal year, the program was involved in almost 2,000 calls. In Brooklyn, young people who completed an alternative program for illegal gun possession had a 22 percent lower rearrest rate than peers who went

to prison. In Olympia, Wash., a new unit of the police department that, according to the Council of State Governments Justice Center, provides “free, confidential and voluntary crisis response assistance” has responded to 3,108 calls since 2019, all while minimizing arrests and with no injuries to responders.

Communities that have adopted these approaches have not done away with enforcement; they have just required less of it. In Denver, a five-year randomized control trial of a program that provides housing subsidies to those at risk of being unhoused found a 40 percent reduction in arrests among participants. These kinds of results are why localities from New Jersey to New Mexico are restructuring their local governments to invest in the social determinants of health and safety.

And yet, as I have learned over more than two decades of work in this field, the black hole narrative cannot be changed by statistics alone. If you want policies that actually work, you have to change the political conversation from “tough candidates punishing bad people” to “strong communities keeping everyone safe.” Candidates who care about solving a problem pay attention to what caused it. Imagine a plumber who tells you to get more absorbent flooring but does not look for the leak.

Because the old narrative is so ingrained, candidates often assume that voters agree with it. But common sense and recent polling show that a majority of voters are concerned about crime and also supportive of changes in how we keep communities safe. This has fueled thousands of local innovations across the country. City governments, community groups and nonprofits are comparing notes on what works. And organizations like One Million Experiments are tracking innovations aimed at producing scalable solutions that do not rely on punishment. Reducing crime and reducing reliance on punishment seem incompatible only if you accept, as the narrative black hole dictates, that police and prisons are the only solution.

Voters know the status quo does not work. In the run-up to 2024, for the sake of public safety, candidates need to give them real alternatives. That is the only way to get out of the black hole and into the light.

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A correction was made on Dec. 12, 2022: An earlier version of this article misstated a detail about Sean Patrick Maloney's congressional race. It is not the case that he was endorsed by the Police Benevolent Association.

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