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The ultimate crime fighting weapon: You

Law enforcement does its part; how can the rest of us prevent crime?

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Special to the Observer

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Chief Darrel Stephens wrote last week, "Let's be clear -- if we could arrest our way out of the crime problem, we would have done it already" (April 13 Feedback, "The facts about crime").

I assert that we can indeed do just that. Just not in the way you might think.

Webster defines "arrest" as "an act of stopping, or state of being stopped." Are we actually stopping criminals from committing break-ins, car-jackings and assaults? Or are we only jailing the ones who have already committed these crimes? We spend much of our time reacting to crime that has already occurred.

Are we interested in arresting crime through prevention and proactive strategies, or would we like to continue relying on the short-term solution: locking folks up at a taxpayer cost approaching \$30,000 per year, per person? (This figure doesn't include costs associated with court fees, attorney fees, etc.)

In no way am I proposing a "soft" approach to people who commit crimes. I am currently involved with a group of concerned citizens advocating decisive punishment for offenders. I support placing as many police officers on the street as necessary, and I firmly believe people who make poor choices and violate the law should be punished swiftly and appropriately. Being responsible for one's actions is a core value of a functional society, although many folks seem to have missed that lesson somewhere along the way.

What I am saying is we don't have to choose between punitive and preventative strategies. And, that a long-term approach using preventive and proactive strategies merits a closer look.

Mired in hopelessness

First, let's examine why many of the individuals who commit these crimes do so. In the conversations I have had with people who have committed crimes, these three factors are common:

- Lack of money

- Desire for drugs/alcohol
- Lack of survival needs (food, and shelter)

But what appears to be the central theme is this:

They see the world and themselves through a lens of "hopelessness." They believe they don't matter. There is no "promising future" for them to strive for. They just don't see it.

Have you ever seen someone going to jail, looking like they couldn't care less? Often this is because their filter is "It doesn't matter; nothing makes a difference." In fact, for some folks, three meals a day, a bed and a few peers around them in prison is an upgrade from their current situation.

For those of us who live a fairly comfortable existence, this may sound hard to believe. But spend time with folks who live a different kind of life and you will begin to understand that point of view.

So how do we transform the "lens of hopelessness" through which many potential criminals see the world? How do they begin to see a future that is worth working toward?

For those in the system already, it could be too late. Just last month, it was reported that 1 out of every 100 people in U.S. was in prison. CMPD reported that while violent crime was down by 7.2 percent in 2007 (the lowest rate since 1980), there were still 9,000 homes and 18,000 cars broken into last year. There are precious few resources and lagging commitment to prisoner rehabilitation.

But for the "would-be criminals" of the class of 2018, there is an incredible amount we can do to reduce the number of criminal "graduates."

If today we contribute our money and time toward supporting at-risk individuals, we could prevent the crime and avoid the price tag of jailing each of them for a year -- after the harm has already been done.

Commit to one third grader

On the community level, prevention involves putting more police officers on the street, creating more affordable housing, creating more living-wage jobs and increasing access to a higher quality education.

On the individual level, one possible action is calling Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools at 980-343-0954 to commit to one at-risk third grader. Become his or her advocate -- support and encourage his or her success. Make a long-term commitment to share six hours of time per month with the student for six straight years.

Many people say they don't have this kind of time. Actually, some of us could stand to miss a few episodes of reality TV in the service of creating a new reality for our children's future.

We can count on our local law enforcement to do its best at making sure laws are followed and violators face consequences. What will you do individually to make a difference?

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