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The Business of Crime: Research Findings Reveal Economic Motives

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The business of crime is growing significantly and public officials must continually expand their knowledge of criminal behavior to develop appropriate public policy in providing safeguards for our communities. Last year property crimes increased once again (FBI Uniform Crime Report) and cost the victims of these crimes twelve billion dollars. This figure is even more significant when compared to the actual reporting rate, as reported by the 1986 National Victimization Study, where based on the reporting rate only 42 percent of the crime is actually reported to the police. A simple calculation points to the actual cost to victims of property crimes near $28 billion dollars, more than double of the total amount of dollars expended for local law enforcement services in 1986.

Crime is a big business and recent research viewing crime from an economic perspective clearly shows that criminal perpetrators make decisions based on the costs and benefits involved. The importance of understanding crime as a business is paramount when public officials develop policies and programs designed to prevent or contain criminal activity. With local resources being held in check for law enforcement activities, the importance of focusing on effective countermeasures to crime is ever growing in importance. The results of the research provided in this article demonstrate the need for public officials and law enforcement officials to focus on programs designed for interdiction, apprehension and prevention. Establishing an understanding of the business of crime will assist local governments in placing emphasis on criminal recidivist, both adult and juvenile perpetrators, and public education on prevention.

The information contained in a recent research effort conducted by Figgie International, Inc., a privately funded corporation aimed at assessing the impact of crime in the United States, provides a factual base to further develop policies and strategies to effectively impact crime in our communities. Provided in the following paragraphs is a summary of the research findings:
A Few Offenders Commit a Large Proportion of Crimes

* Fifty-one of the Offenders reported at least 100 crimes each in the year before they were convicted.

* Nine percent of the respondents accounted for at least 55 percent of all crimes committed by the entire sample.

* The average (mean) number of crimes reported by each offender in the year before conviction was 16.7.

Criminals Start Their Careers Early

The average age which the inmates committed their first property crimes was 15 years, and more of them began at 12 than any other age.

* About half (51 percent) were under the age 14 when they started.

* Fifty-three (9 percent) said they were less than 10 when they began.

* Only 2 percent were over 30 when they committed their first crime.

Why Do They Do It?

* One-third (36 percent) said they either wanted money for or were under the influence of drugs or alcohol when they committed crime.

* One-fifth (20 percent) said they needed money for their own expenses.

* Fifteen percent said they needed money for family support.

Criminals Overestimate the Risks and Benefits of Crime

The inmates overestimated the risk of arrest for every crime -- by as much as much as three times in several instances. They also overestimated the potential "take" on almost every crime -- by as much as eight times, as in the case of bank robbery.
Which Home and Business Security Measures Work Best?

The inmates gave the highest effectiveness ratings to:

* burglar alarms connected to law enforcement;
* electronic window sensors;
* closed circuit TV's;
* private security; and
* dogs.

The lowest scores went to: marking valuable with ID's; timed interior lights; deadbolt locks; and burglar alarms not connected to law enforcement.

What Should You Do If You Live In a High-Crime Neighborhood?

The most frequently suggested measures were:

* get a dog;
* use an alarm system;
* move; and
* have someone stay home.

What If You're Poor?

The low-budget security measures suggested most often were:

* get a dog;
* buy or use a gun;
* have someone stay at home; and
* form a neighborhood watch.
How Do Criminals React to Home Security Measures?

* One quarter (26.5 percent) said they would "score" at the same house, either immediately or later.

* 41.1 percent said they would find another target in the same neighborhood.

* 32.4 percent said they would find a target in another neighborhood.

Do Criminals Plan Their Crimes?

* A quarter (24.6 percent) said they always plan their crimes.

* 30.9 percent claimed that they sometimes plan crimes.

* 44.5 percent said they never plan.

How Should Law Enforcement Be Toughened?

Several "Get Tough" measures were singled out as being effective in preventing crime, specifically:

* increased chances of imprisonment;

* "add on" time for aggravated crimes; and

* doubled prison sentences.

Those rated unimportant included using more police helicopters, wiretapping, random lie detector tests, and reducing "good time" credits.

Which Correctional Policies and Programs Work Best?

Personal improvement programs -- especially those designed to increase employability and combat drug and alcohol abuse -- were generally rated most important among all types of programs in preventing property crime. The highest rated measures were:

* vocational education;

* programs to develop good work habits;
* drug/alcohol education

* education beyond literacy; and

* work furlough.

Which Social and Economic Factors Contribute Most to Crime?

The inmates identified a long list of social/economic factors which they believe are important in causing crime, chief among them being:

* drugs;

* unemployment;

* alcohol; and

* gangs.

Which Criminals Are Least Afraid of Arrest?

The armed robbers, burglars and auto thieves appeared to be the property criminals most willing to take risks.

Who Are the High-Volume Offenders?

The most criminally active individuals tend to be:

* Young -- 51 percent of those under 21 report at least four additional crimes in the year before conviction.

* Early starters -- 48 percent of those who began their criminal careers before turning 15 committed six more crimes in the year prior to conviction.

* Substance abusers -- 37 percent of those reporting at least six crimes in the year, indicated their primary motivation was drugs or alcohol.

* Planners -- 63 percent who always plan committed at least six crimes in that year.
High-volume offenders represent a special challenge because they not only account for a large proportion of criminal activity, but they also appear to be very difficult to deter and rehabilitate.

For Further Information

Further information on the business of crime may be obtained by contacting your MTAS Municipal Management Consultant in Knoxville at (615) 974-5301; Nashville at (615) 256-8141; or Jackson at (901) 423-3710.
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