

**Your Turn**

William Martin

Guest columnist

# Fears and facts about crime in Broome County

Why is crime falling and gun violence increasing?

That's not something you will hear in the blustery rhetoric of local politicians, police chiefs and the Broome County sheriff, who all speak of a rising crime wave that threatens us daily. Their solution? Rollback reforms, impose more bail, refill the jail with more "dangerous" people, and send more on to state prison. Such recommendations fail, however, the tests of evidence and analysis.

Where's the crime?

The index (serious) crime rate has been falling steadily in Broome County for over four decades. Murders are rare, averaging five a year. Property theft, robbery, burglaries and motor vehicle theft are all down over the last five to 10 years. We have no devastating crime wave.

What has increased in gun violence. The number of persons injured from gun violence in Binghamton fell from seven to four from 2017 to 2019, but rose to 11 in 2021.

Why?

No study has shown that dropping bail for those with misdemeanors and nonviolent charges has increased crime and violence. State data show that less than 2% of nearly 100,000 bail releases resulted in a rearrest on a violent felony charge — a reduction from nearly 4% prior to bail reform.

Has defunding police forces led to increased crime and violence? Not in Broome County. Funding for law enforcement and our large county jail has steadily increased.

Weapons matter, and guns have proliferated. From new reports, we know there were already over 28,000 county pistol permits in 2013, with thousands added since. And national data show that increasing access to guns increases gun violence.

More common social cultivators of violence persist, unaddressed. We know that unemployment, poverty, a lack of housing, and racial and gender inequality are correlates of violence. Broome County ranks high on all these measures. And of course, the social isolation, anxiety, anger and deathly years of COVID have exacerbated the turn to violence.

What works?

There is little evidence that more policing offers relief. Dispatching armed and uniformed officers to deal with unarmed persons in mental, substance or domestic distress all too often results in more violence and even death — as occurred in the tragic death of the only county or municipal law officer to die on duty in the last 20 years.

Criminal justice, substance use and mental health workers increasingly recommend community-based alternatives such as violence interrupter teams, composed of survivors of youth and gun violence who live in, reach out and intervene in neighborhoods plagued by gun violence. Mental health and substance use responder teams, often linked to 24/7 stabilization centers, similarly respond to 911 calls regarding unarmed persons in psychotic or substance use crisis. Such community-based programs have proven effective in displacing the use of jails, especially for Black, Latinx, LGBTQ, immigrant and disadvantaged communities.

Conflict and violence are longstanding problems in our families and neighborhoods. We should not fall prey to the purveyors of fear promoting their own self-interest. We need bold thought and policy based on commonsense, data and committed analysis.

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