

Charles M. Blow

High Cost of Crime

www.nytimes.com/ OCT. 8, 2010

When times get hard and talk turns to spending and budgets, there is one area that gets short shrift: the cost of crime and our enormous criminal justice system. For instance, how much do you think a single murder costs society? According to researchers at Iowa State University, it is a whopping \$17.25 million.

Those researchers analyzed 2003 data from cases in Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, New Jersey, Ohio, Oklahoma and Texas and calculated the figure based on “victim costs, criminal justice system costs, lost productivity estimates for both the victim and the criminal, and estimates on the public’s resulting willingness to pay to prevent future violence.” That willingness to prevent future violence includes collateral costs like expenditures for security measures, insurance and government welfare programs. It’s hard to believe that they could calculate the collateral costs with any real degree of accuracy, but I understand the concept.

(They also calculated that each rape costs \$448,532, each robbery \$335,733, each aggravated assault \$145,379 and each burglary \$41,288.)

By their estimates, more than 18,000 homicides that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recorded in 2007 alone will cost us roughly \$300 billion. That’s about as much as we’ve spent over nine years fighting the war in Afghanistan. That’s more than the 2010 federal budget for the Departments of Education, Justice, Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, Labor and Homeland Security combined. Does anyone else see a problem here?

Although the annual murder rate in the U.S. has fallen to historic lows, it is still at least twice as high as that of any of the other rich countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, according to data from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. In fact, it’s even higher than in countries like Rwanda, Angola and Mozambique. And there are troubling signs this year as big cities around the country — New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit — are seeing sharp rises in murder rates.

I would like to see the statistics on crimes with guns involved. It seems a lot of crimes are perpetrated with the access of guns.
vandalfan October 10, 2010

Funding for community based mental health facilities should be increased. Jails have become the substitute for the mental hospitals of old....

Make bullets cost \$10,000 each! Each! People can then have all the guns they want.

Our approach to this crime problem for more than two decades has been the mass incarceration of millions of Americans and the industrializing of our criminal justice system. Over the last 25 years, the prison population has quadrupled. This is a race to the bottom and a waste of human capital. A prosperous country cannot remain so by following this path.

Many crimes could have been prevented if the offenders had had the benefit of a competent educational system and a more expansive, better-financed social service system. Sure, some criminals are just bad people, but more are people who took a wrong turn, got lost and ended up on

the wrong path. Those we can save.

We have a choice to make: pay a little now or a lot later. Seems like a clear choice to me. But I'm not in Washington where they view clarity as an affliction of the weak.