

LOCAL ELECTED OFFICIALS SOUND OFF ON ISSUES IMPORTANT TO THEM.

CRIME

IN OUR COMMUNITY

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Feeling safe in our homes, neighborhoods and community at large is one of the key ingredients in our quality of life and in the confidence we have in our city and its leadership. Crime strips this security away, and unfortunately, is on the rise in our country, state and city.

As a city councilman, I find crime is often the first thing people want to talk to me about, and it is an issue we can't run from. The causes of crime are numerous, as are the solutions, but in our community there is no real deterrent for crime. With prison overcrowding at an all-time high, there is literally no room in the jails — no place to put convicted criminals.

Recently in Montgomery, a man was arrested 170 times for misdemeanor offenses, and when he was arrested again for stealing a small amount of copper, he was simply released. Why?

I asked one of our city judges. Although he didn't have the details on that particular case, he explained this case was not an isolated incident and not that unusual. He told me that one day, he had 20 criminals before him, and all of them needed to go to jail. But only 10 went, because there just was no room in our jail. So 10 criminals were set free, back in our communities.

It does not take long for a common criminal to know that today if they commit another crime and are found guilty, there is a pretty good chance they will receive a softer penalty or no penalty. Hence, they continue to commit crimes.

We cannot simply pack additional prisoners into our prisons. Our state's parole board and prison commission have maximum numbers they have to abide by, numbers that are all federally mandated. At one point last year there were over 29,000

inmates in Alabama's prison system, a system that was built for approximately 12,000 inmates. Our Prison Commissioner has been threatened with being locked up if he did not release a certain number of prisoners to comply with mandated occupancy numbers.

Creating the additional space in prisons to properly punish criminals would go a long way in cutting down crime, but prison overcrowding has to be addressed by the state, and it is an expensive fix. It costs approximately \$50,000 for one cell to accommodate one criminal. There is work being done on changing our laws to more appropriate levels of jail time. However if we prescribe longer jail sentences, and don't have enough cells to put the condemned in, these criminals will be turned loose regardless.

Currently in Montgomery County, we are building a new county jail that should be finished later this year and will hold 600 prisoners. It will be filled to capacity as soon as it is opened. We have an adequate number of police officers in our city, but our officers are picking up the same people every other day. The countless repeat offenders that constantly move through the system have become not only a real waste of our city's manpower but also your tax dollar!

So what can we do? A task force has been assembled in Montgomery charged with finding ways to deter crime in our city, but there is one thing we already know. The best defense to crime starts with each citizen.

Creating neighborhood watch programs throughout Montgomery has been very

successful. With technology like the Internet and e-mail, these programs work more efficiently and effectively.

In addition, as citizens, we need to be proactive. It is a disturbing fact that going shopping or stopping for gas today is just not the same as it was 10 years ago. We must, at all times, be attentive to our surroundings.

Education is the key to a long-term solution. An educated community leads to people with hope and goals for their future. With a good education, citizens get better and higher paying jobs, cutting crime rates. Cities with higher educational levels have lower crime rates.

Continued communication is also key. The problem of crime will not just go away. We all need to work on the solutions through combined efforts in our civic groups, in our churches, and among our friends and families.

There is no quick, easy solution to the crime problem in our city, state or country. Improving the problem will take a true commitment from all of us. To get started as an individual you can join or organize a neighborhood association or watch. You can support our education system and/or community programs. We are in this together. Do your part. Get involved! **ML**