



# Increasing the Certainty of Punishment



Crime causes significant harm to victims, communities, and the economy. All Americans deserve a safe society with thriving communities that uphold people's constitutional and civil rights. Research shows that one of the most effective deterrents of crime is increasing the likelihood that perpetrators are caught and held accountable. **But too many crimes go unsolved today, leaving offenders undeterred.** The national average homicide clearance rate is just 59%, and it is lower for other violent offenses. Property crimes often have clearance rates under 15%.<sup>1</sup>

## WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT INCREASING CERTAINTY

- **Crime deterrence:** Decades of empirical research show that people are more deterred from committing crime by the likelihood of being caught than by the severity of the sentence.<sup>2</sup> Certainty of punishment produces both specific (individuals stop reoffending) and general (others are discouraged) deterrent effects.
- **Trust:** Certainty may also build public confidence in the criminal justice system. Predictable consequences can increase perceived legitimacy of the justice system, leading to a virtuous cycle of more witness cooperation and less criminal behavior. In fact, descriptive evidence suggests that higher actual and perceived homicide clearance rates significantly increase the probability that community members will cooperate in homicide investigations.<sup>3</sup> There is good reason to believe that solving more crimes, and more quickly, would increase public trust in law enforcement and reduce retaliatory cycles of violence, especially in communities where clearance rates are especially low.
- **Incarceration:** If individuals believe they will be caught, they are less likely to offend, which should reduce the need for incarceration. For this reason, modest sanctions that are swift and predictable will likely be far more cost-effective than our current system of lower probability but severe punishments.<sup>4</sup>

## WHAT POLICYMAKERS SHOULD FOCUS ON

- Increasing police presence since there is substantial, strong empirical evidence that hiring more police officers prevents crime, especially violent crime like homicide.<sup>5</sup> The likely reason for this is that increasing visible law enforcement presence in high-crime areas raises the perceived risk of apprehension.<sup>6</sup> Studies have shown that the increase in police staffing and visibility works through deterrence rather than an increase in arrests for serious crimes.<sup>7</sup>
- Leveraging effective enforcement strategies such as “hot-spot” and “problem-oriented” policing prevent crime and increase apprehension of high-frequency offenders. Place-network investigations also show promise.
- Expanding investigative tools that can help deter crime and increase the certainty of accountability. Developing law enforcement DNA databases helps solve both current and cold cases and increases deterrence.<sup>8</sup> Cameras are also an effective crime deterrent. Other tools and approaches show promise: facial recognition technology, drones as first responders, and enhanced data-sharing across agencies and jurisdictions are all worth trying, alongside strategies to mitigate privacy concerns.



## ENDNOTES

- 1 Asher, J. (2025, June 30). *Actually, murder clearance rates probably rose a good bit in 2024*. Jeff-alytics. Retrieved December 12, 2025, from <https://jasher.substack.com/p/actually-murder-clearance-rates-probably/>.
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- 4 Doleac, J. (2024). Why crime matters, and what to do about it. In M. S. Kearney & L. Pardue (Eds.), *Strengthening America's economic dynamism*. Washington, DC: Aspen Institute.
- 5 Evans, W. N., & Owens, E. G. (2007). Cops and crime. *Journal of Public Economics*, 91(1–2), 181–201; Worrall, J. L., & Kovandzic, T. V. (2010). Police levels and crime rates: An instrumental variables approach. *Social Science Research*, 39(3), 506–516; Chalfin, A., Hansen, B., Weisburst, E. K., & Williams, M. C. (2022). Police force size and civilian race. *American Economic Review: Insights*, 4(3), 269–286; Mello, S. (2019). More cops, less crime. *Journal of Public Economics*, 172, 174–200.
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- 7 Evans, W. N., & Owens, E. G. (2007). Cops and crime. *Journal of Public Economics*, 91(1–2), 181–201; Chalfin, A., Hansen, B., Weisburst, E. K., & Williams, M. C. (2022). Police force size and civilian race. *American Economic Review: Insights*, 4(3), 269–286.
- 8 Roman, J. K., Reid, S. E., Chalfin, A. J., et al. (2009). The DNA field experiment: A randomized trial of the cost-effectiveness of using DNA to solve property crimes. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 5(4), 345–369; Doleac, J. L. (2017). The effects of DNA databases on crime. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 9(1), 165–201; Anker, A. S. T., Doleac, J. L., & Landersø, R. (2021). The effects of DNA databases on the deterrence and detection of offenders. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 13(4), 194–225.

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