


## GUEST ESSAY

# The Left Keeps Getting It Wrong on Crime

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After spikes in homicides and other offenses, which sparked fears of a return to the bloody New York of the 1990s, major crime in New York City has headed toward historic lows.

In New York and throughout the country, that rise in crime since 2020 was preceded by progressive policy experiments that kept criminals and suspects out of prison and jail, reduced the number of and activity by police officers, treated fewer offenses as crimes and destroyed public trust in the left.

One reason for the current reduction in crime, especially under New York's very popular police commissioner, Jessica Tisch, is a rejection of the common anti-policing approach, with increased enforcement, concentrated in areas of New York City with the most crime.

But progressives in New York and elsewhere are still trying to eliminate tools that have made the police more effective.

Gang violence is a central concern in deploying officers to areas with the most crime. In a recent interview, Commissioner Tisch noted that some 60 percent of the city's shootings are gang-related.

In the past several weeks, local and federal prosecutors, using the Police Department's database of people suspected of being gang members, have announced indictments of scores of people connected to dozens of shootings.

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There's good evidence supporting this focus on gangs. A 2021 study credited gang takedowns with "nearly one-quarter of the decline in gun violence in New York City's public housing communities" between 2011 and 2019.

The gang database — a running record of individuals suspected of gang membership based on intelligence gathered by officers and detectives — is central to these efforts. As John Hall, a former inspector in the Police Department's Office of Crime Control Strategies and a scholar at the National Institute for Justice, explained in a recent essay, "When a gang member is shot, officers use the database to assess rivalries, anticipate reprisals and deploy resources strategically to contain escalating violence."

Nevertheless, Democratic lawmakers and progressive activists are pushing to abolish gang databases, as progressives in cities across the country have been trying to do for years.

How can a city possibly tackle gang violence without any means of tracking who the gang members are? Progressive critics of the databases don't say.

They allege that those who are included in such databases are exposed to excessive police surveillance, criminal charges and, potentially, harsher penalties, even if they are not actually gang members. But inclusion in a gang database is not an independent basis for criminal charges or harsher sentencing. Nor should it be considered harassment if the police pay closer attention to people suspected of being gang members.

Perhaps the most resonant objection to gang databases is that they largely include Black and Hispanic men. In New York City, for example, critics note that while about 60 percent of New Yorkers are Black, Hispanic or mixed race, about 99 percent of those in the database are Black or Hispanic. They claim that is evidence of racism.

But that is, sadly, roughly in line with the share of the city's known shooting victims and suspects who are Black or Hispanic. Between 2019 and 2023, an annual average of 95.8 percent of known shooting victims were Black and Hispanic, as were an annual average of 96.5 percent of known shooting suspects. And about half of New York City's violence is committed on just 3.7 percent of the city's street segments.

If the police are going to be responsive to the problem of criminal violence, their efforts are going to have to reflect the geographic and demographic concentration of that problem. So policing that produces racial disparities in enforcement is a matter not of racism but of demographics. This also means that the benefits achieved by gang sweeps are disproportionately concentrated in the neighborhoods where police resources are being disproportionately deployed, which are predominantly Black and Hispanic.

The same accusations of racism and disproportionate policing are being deployed in New York and other cities by progressive critics of acoustic gunshot detection technology, such as ShotSpotter. This year the New York City comptroller and mayoral hopeful Brad Lander refused to register the Police Department's contract renewal for gunshot detection services. He recommended in a report last year that the Police Department end its gunshot detection contract.

Critics of the technology say it is ineffectual and misallocates police resources because so few of the alerts lead to evidence of shootings. But just because no evidence of a shooting is found doesn't mean no shooting occurred. And given that most shootings are not reported to 911, the technology provides the police with information they would not otherwise have. One study found that when the technology was used, shooting victims were less likely to die of their injuries, suggesting that it helped police officers get to victims in time to save their lives. In Chicago, Mayor Brandon Johnson ended the city's use of that technology in September. An analysis by a local crime watchdog has since found that of the 42 people found shot in areas previously covered by the service (often in shootings that were not reported to 911), 37 were Black or Hispanic.

The push to end the use of gunshot detection technology in Chicago gained momentum after the death of Adam Toledo, a 13-year-old who was killed late at night by a police officer after running away with a gun in his hand. The police were directed to Adam's location by the ShotSpotter system.

His death also led Chicago to restrict foot pursuits, making it easier for armed offenders to evade arrest and harder for the police to get those guns off the streets. That sort of policy response doesn't make any sense. After all, evidence suggests that Adam participated in a shooting just before he was killed. Those shots set off an alert that directed police officers to the precise location of the shooting, where they observed Adam with a firearm still in his hand.

Far from constituting a problem to be solved, an officer's decision to chase Adam — through a dark alley, and while Adam was still armed — was an act of bravery. The left simply doesn't show anywhere near enough appreciation for the risks police officers take every day by putting themselves between armed criminals and the residents of the communities they terrorize.

Consider the reluctance of many New York State Democrats to make modest adjustments to the state's 2019 discovery changes, which set onerous requirements for prosecutors to turn over evidence to defense lawyers. The revisions to the reform — supported by Gov. Kathy Hochul, all five of the city's district attorneys and the Police Department — would stem the wave of case dismissals caused by prosecutors' inability to meet the burdens of the changes, which require prosecutors to acquire and turn over a trove of documents that may not even be relevant to their cases. Before the changes, in 2019, just 42 percent of cases were dismissed. By 2023, that number was at 62 percent.

The proposal to fix it is more than reasonable. It would require defense lawyers to register in a timely manner their objections to what's been turned over, restrict requirements to evidence that is relevant to the charges being brought and make defendants prove they have been harmed by a failure to disclose a particular record before a case can be dismissed.

While it appears that a legislative compromise may be in place, progressive Democrats have resisted until now.

It's as if the default setting for the progressive left on public safety issues is to make crime less costly to commit or make the law harder to enforce. Sometimes it seems those on the left are more concerned about criminals than they are about victims.

It wasn't always this way. In the 1980s and '90s, Americans regularly saw the left and right arrive at consensus on crime control, even if there was disagreement. Let's not wait for things to get as bad as they were then before moving back toward the center.

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