

Jim Kessler Crime Subcommittee Testimony – 9/11/2024

Thank you Chairman Biggs, Ranking member McBath, members of the Committee and fellow panelists. I also want to acknowledge Kylie Murdock, a Third Way policy advisor who has worked hard on this issue.

I have been obsessed and fascinated by crime since the 1976 All-Star game at Philadelphia's Veterans Stadium where I was mugged! I've also had the privilege of working for a former Chair and ranking member of this Subcommittee in the 1990s. And now I get to testify.

I have to say, however, I am baffled by the topic.

We are here to talk about soft-on-crime policies and have been offered up Minnesota under Gov Tim Walz and California under AG Kamala Harris as object lessons ... yet a clear-eyed look at the results show that both of these states are safer than the rest of the country, at least when it comes to murder.

I didn't say "safe", I said "safer." 40 years ago, I had a gun pressed against my forehead in downtown Boston. 30 years ago, I had a gun leveled at my chest in rural Maine. No place in America is safe.

But today, the murder rate in MN under Tim Walz is 12th lowest in the nation. The murder rate in MN under Tim Walz is less than half of the national average. The murder rate in MN under Tim Walz is lower than the murder rates of all 11 of the states of members on this Subcommittee.

If America had the same murder rate as MN under Tim Walz, since the start of this century there would be 186,000 more Americans alive today. If Arizona had the same murder rate as MN under Tim Walz, since the start of the century there would be 5,600 more Arizonans alive. There would be 12,800 more Floridians. 16,600 more Texans. 5,800 more South Carolinians.

California under AG Kamala Harris – with Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Oakland – also has a murder rate below the national average, and a murder rate less than half that of Red States like Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama. If all of America had the same murder rate as California, from the start of the century there would be 62,000 more Americans alive.

Results matter. So what does it mean to be smart on crime?

If you look at what has made MN and CA so successful relative to the rest of the nation, it is a balance of accountability and prevention. Accountability – holding criminals accountable for their actions.

Prevention – investing in efforts to give people a path away from crime.

I'll touch on 4 areas.

- 1) Police funding: Across the nation, per capita spending on police is 33% higher in Blue States than in Red States. Minnesota ranks 10th in police spending per capita. California is #1. Under AG Harris conviction rates hit a 15 year high. If you're not funding police and convicting criminals, you're soft on crime.
- 2) Poverty: There is a strong correlation between poverty rates and crime. In general, poverty rates are higher in red states than blue states. If you're not trying to address poverty, you're soft on crime.

- 3) Prevention programs: Substance abuse, mental health, after school programs, summer jobs. Most violent crimes are committed by those between 16 and 25. Many are committed by those on drugs or mentally ill. If you're not addressing substance abuse, mental health, idle kids – you're soft on crime.
- 4) And guns: 86% of all murders are by guns. If, like many Red states, guns are seen as only a solution to the crime problem and not a cause – if there isn't a balance between gun rights and gun responsibilities and accountability – you're soft on crime.

Walz and Harris have successful results on crime because they check all of the accountability and prevention boxes. Police funding under Walz is up, and he worked with Democrats and Republicans in his state to secure it. After the murder of George Floyd, he called for investments in responsible community policing, bucking the defund movement. Police funding under Biden-Harris – both federal law enforcement and local law enforcement aid – is up.

They each actively addressed poverty – school lunches, child tax credit.

They invested in substance abuse, mental health, after school programs and summer jobs.

And within the confines of the Second Amendment, they each passed gun safety laws.

A word about illegal immigration. It was soft on crime to not pass the bipartisan border security bill, but that's water under the bridge. There are studies that show undocumented immigrants commit fewer violent crimes than the general population. Even conservative groups like Cato agree. I know some of you are skeptical, so here is something irrefutable.

Between 2000 and 2022, three states have by far the highest murder rates in America. Each of these states – Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama -- have among the [lowest number](#) of immigrant residents of any state.¹ That's a fact. Over the last few years, states with high immigrant populations have actually seen a decrease in crime. The bulk of America's crime problem comes from Americans, not migrants.

In conclusion, in 2020, in the last year of the Trump Administration we had a massive and unprecedented 30% spike in murder and crime. By 2022, under Biden-Harris crime and murder rates fell, in 2023 we saw the largest drop in murder in history and that trend is continuing in 2024.

For each and every one of the last 23 years – that's every year this century – red states in America have had higher murder rates than blue states in America. Republicans can't blame that on Democrats.

I truly believe that elected Republicans believe they are tough on crime, because they talk tough on crime. But the results say otherwise.

We are a nation of 330 million flawed, imperfect people – many with lots of problems, with easy access to firearms, social media with algorithms that profit from making us angry – I hope that one day this Committee will embrace this complexity to come up with the next crime bill that ushers in a safer America.

¹ Mississippi ranks 49th, Alabama ranks 45th, Louisiana ranks 41st in % of population that is foreign born.