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Rochesterians, police working together to reduce crime

Your Turn

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Guest columnist

President Trump's questionably legal deployment of the National Guard to cities across the country has left many uneasy, not just because of the unprecedented show of force but because of its limited usefulness as a public safety solution.

I don't know if Rochester is on the president's list, but having lived in Rochester and run a national criminal justice nonprofit here for years, I can say with confidence that I hope he doesn't send troops. Because there is a better way.

To start, most experts argue that short-term interventions fail precisely because they are short term. So even if federal data tells us that crime has dipped over the past few weeks in cities with a deferral presence, what happens when the National Guard leaves and the president's takeovers end?

My organization has been putting local criminal justice data in the hands of community leaders for over a decade. We do this work because we know that evidence-based, community-driven programs are effective. There are countless examples, but one that easily comes to mind is the Cure Violence model for violence reduction that relies on local community members to help change norms–resulting, in NYC, in a 14% decrease in gun violence between 2012 and 2023.

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This is the kind of community takeover that makes sense for institutionalizing policies and practices that reduce crime, yes, but that also promote smarter spending and due process.

Here in Rochester we all know the crime rate has historically been above the national average. We also know community relations with the police have been fraught, to say the least. This is why Rochester felt like the perfect place to do our work.

We began here four years ago, starting with the District Attorney's Office and growing to include the Rochester Police Department. Both took steps to improve their data quality and to release their data in a way everyone could understand. Today, the data answers essential questions about everything from who is in jail and for what crimes, to how many use of force incidents happen each month. But the key part of the engagement has been bringing community leaders into the room where policies get made.

For months, former and current members of the police department worked alongside community leaders from local chapters of RISE UP, the Urban League of Rocheter and Coordinated Care Services – to name a few – to look at data, ask questions, find common ground and settle on a policy goal that reflects what's important to the Rochester community.

Their first goal is to reduce response times to four minutes. From December 2023 to December 2024, police averaged six minutes to arrive on scene. A two-minute difference could be the decider between saving lives and losing them.

Today, Rochester's police data is public and easily accessible. The Monroe County DA's data is public, as well. The final step is for the community to take ownership of its data and lead the charge towards public safety, fairness, and smarter spending. That work is underway. As I write, various community groups here – including the Urban League of Rochester – have been working with the police to center data in an effort to promote accountability and opportunity for those touched by the criminal justice system while promoting public safety.

Importantly, this ecosystem of stakeholders won't be leaving Rochester anytime soon. Unlike federal troops on borrowed time, this is a group of people who live and work here, who raise families here, who've been here for generations, and who are deeply invested in helping this community thrive.

When communities take over their own data and assume the power of working with law enforcement to reduce crime, real change happens. Any other kind of takeover is temporary at worst, cosmetic at best.

Amy Bach is the Founder and CEO of Measures for Justice.