COMMUNITY SAFETY

THE OPPORTUNITY PICTURE

According to the 2013 Opportunity Index, 44 states experienced a decrease in violent crime.

One of the most positive findings in the new Index data is that the violent crime rate has dropped in most states. This progress should be celebrated and built on in 2014, particularly as the United States has one of the highest homicide rates among developed nations in the world. The effects of such violence exact a heavy toll on American youth. For every young person killed by violence, another 20 to 40 young people receive injuries that require hospital treatment.

The effects of community violence are not, however, solely physical. Studies show that crime in a neighborhood causes fear, stress and poor mental health. Children who witness or experience community violence may display, among other symptoms, anxiety, depression, disruptive and aggressive behavior, substance use, school disengagement and academic failure. Community violence can also stifle the amount of physical activity by residents, exacerbating pre-existing public health problems. One study found that fear of crime limits individuals’ mobility, physical activity and social interactions in violent neighborhoods. Mental and physical health, as well as community involvement, all contribute to economic mobility, and these factors are negatively affected by unsafe, violent environments.

Major retailers are often reluctant to move into areas with high crime rates, which also frequently have higher-than-average unemployment rates and foreclosed or abandoned houses. Property values plummet, insurance costs more and there is less investment. Violent crimes exact a severe economic toll on the victims who survive, as well as the families of those who do not, in lost earnings and physical and psychological problems. The economic opportunities for residents of these neighborhoods is limited. Society also pays a heavy price in the costs of jails, courts and prisons.

1 American Bar Association, Standing Committee on Gun Violence, The U.S. Compared to Other Nations, available at http://www.americanbar.org/groups/committees/gun_violence/resources/the_u_s_compared_to_other_nations.html.