

How we perceive safety in San Diego

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The city of San Diego may soon experience its own version of trickle-down economics. The pension fiasco has already impacted low-level budget items, but the magnitude of the problem may soon force more painful cuts in such basic areas as police protection. Already the city has underfunded critical crime fighting tools for financial reasons, including officers on patrol, civilian support in communications and crime lab and basic equipment needs.

The San Diego Police Department has long been skilled at doing more with less. Despite the fact that San Diego regularly has the lowest ratio of officers to citizens, it consistently ranks as one of America's safest cities. The FBI crime rate index lists San Diego as the country's second safest large city, surpassed only by New York City. Impressive given that New York has five officers for every 1,000 residents, while San Diego gets by with less than two.

But being safe and feeling safe can be two different things. A new KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Poll examined the perception side of the question: Do San Diego residents feel safe?

An October 2004 Gallup poll found that 61 percent of U.S. residents felt that crime is not serious where they live. Given the local low-crime reality, one would expect San Diegans to possess a greater sense of safety than the national average. Surprisingly, that is not the case. The proportion of residents who feel crime is not serious here is the same as it is for the nation as a whole. Further, our results show that, when asked whether they avoid certain places or neighborhoods they might otherwise want to go, local residents may be more likely to respond "yes," than Americans in general.

Why is this disconnect between reality and perception important? Because it means that even a slight increase in crime rates could drastically affect the public's sense of safety. Imagine if crime rates in the city of San Diego start to move upward due to decreased public safety resources. While city officials may have cold hard statistics showing the city is merely moving from being extremely safe to very safe, the average San Diegan is likely to perceive a more dangerous situation. Because public opinion is not starting at the same high point, residents may feel that increased crime means they are moving from a somewhat safe community to a serious problem. This could be especially true if the urban markers of crime, such as graffiti and loitering, increase.

To avoid cutting the Police Department's budget, public officials may be tempted to

trim back existing social programs. Such steps could prove politically dangerous. Despite a well-documented conservative streak, the KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Poll shows that San Diegans are actually more liberal than the rest of the country when it comes to how best to lower crime rates. By a ratio of 3-to-1, local residents think the best way to get the crime rate down is to attack the social and economic problems that lead to crime as opposed to deterring the criminal element by strengthening law enforcement. Nearly half strongly feel that attacking social problems is the answer. Stealing from social programs to bolster law enforcement may very well backfire in the court of public opinion.

Especially striking is that even conservative residents now tend to agree that addressing crime's precursors is the best way to lowering the crime rate. This seems to suggest that there has been an ideological "meeting of the minds" when it comes to law enforcement policy. California has long been a law-and-order state, having pursued such policies as "three strikes," Megan's Law, and other "get-tough" policies. Perhaps San Diegans believe that state and local policy is tough enough and maybe even that policy should shift back the other way.

San Diego's elected officials remain in a difficult bind. The first job of government is the protection of its citizenry, and even a slight rise in crime may be perceived by residents as a failure to perform that critical task. If the public sees the city's fiscal problems leading to increased crime, current discontent will pale in comparison to the resulting outcry.

Credit: Nelson is a research analyst and Nienstedt is president with Competitive Edge Research (www.cerc.net).

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