

Elmer Smith | Avoid the urge to surge - city needs to get more PO'd

BAGHDAD IS one of the few cities on Earth with a homicide rate comparable to Philadelphia's.

Which may be why the men who would be mayor of this town seem so intrigued by the president's idea of a troop surge.

Michael Nutter and state Rep. Dwight Evans have unveiled crime-fighting plans that call for at least 500 more police officers. U.S. Rep. Chaka Fattah, who opposes troop surges in Baghdad, is all for it on the streets of his hometown.

Tom Knox hasn't said how many more cops he'd hire. But he may be forced to enter the candidates' "can-you-top-this?" sweepstakes in self-defense.

Nevermind that we had a higher body count in the '70s, when we had 1,500 more cops on the street than now - even more than we'd have with the surge.

In a town with such a rapidly escalating homicide rate, it's hard to argue that we can't use more cops.

But considering the estimated \$130 million cost of adding 500 cops, which could take years to hire, there may be a more cost-effective corps of crime fighters that we can deploy in the meantime:

By any reasonable estimate of what constitutes a workable caseload, this city could use another 450 adult- and juvenile- probation/parole officers.

They may be the most under-manned team of crime fighters in town. Some 53,000 adults are on probation in the city. They are serviced by 300 POs.

On the juvenile side, where early intervention is a proven life-saving measure, 125 PO's handle nearly 6,000 cases.

"By the standards of the American Probation and Parole Association, we'd need twice as many," said Peter Solomon, who runs the city's parole agency.

"But we'd do the dance of exquisite happiness if we could get down to a caseload of 150 per officer."

Jim Cash, chief of the Juvenile Probation Department, agreed that he'd need to double his staff of officers to fully serve the need.

"It can take four to six weeks from the time they get out for [an ex-offender] to be contacted by his parole officer," Mayor Street told me this week. He agrees that this is a problem. But the mayor points out that probation and parole are functions of the court system paid for in the state budget - not his.

The city's contribution so far is to spend thousands of dollars in overtime costs for police who go out on off-hours to accompany POs on home visits.

What makes such a compelling case for hiring more POs is the fact that an alarming percentage of the crimes here are committed by repeat offenders.

Police Commissioner Sylvester Johnson told our editorial board on Wednesday that 83 percent of those arrested in the 406 homicides last year had police records. More than 53,000 people in Philadelphia have been imprisoned *at least* three times.

"You've got people who just had an attack of the stupids and committed a crime," Solomon said. "Jail traumatized them so much that they'll never go back.

"Some are so damaged by life that it's only a question of how long before they go back or get killed."

Sandwiched between those extremes is a vast number for whom good social-services work by a PO can end a cycle of recidivism. When caseloads permit, POs provide for drug- treatment, job-training and placement-for-education opportunities - or get their clients help in learning to cope with anger management.

"Sometimes they need someone to just listen or to support them when no one else does," Solomon said.

"But we're hemorrhaging officers around here. A lot of them come and go within two years. We use them up because we don't meet their expectations."

What it would take to keep them is another whole column. But at a minimum, there ought to be at least as much talk about a troop surge in the probation departments as there is about hiring more cops.

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