



TODD SAUNDERS | DR. MICHAEL ARMENTO | MICHAL DOMOGALA | DAVID KIEFER

January 22, 2024

Re: Urgent Action Needed to Address Rising Crime in Westfield

Dear Senator Bramnick, Assemblywoman Matsikoudis and Assemblywoman Munoz,

We hope this letter finds you well. As newly elected members of the Westfield Town Council, we are reaching out to express the deep concerns of our constituents regarding the escalating incidents of car thefts and home burglaries in our community.

The frustration among our residents is palpable, and we believe urgent action is required to address this alarming situation. Criminals from other parts of the State have identified Westfield as a target for theft and have shown a complete disregard for any deterrence created by home security systems and our police. Shockingly, there has been a 60% increase in vehicle thefts from 2022 to 2023, and the actual situation is even more dire than the statistics suggest.

Residents have reported criminals breaking into their homes, often in search of car keys, at all hours of the night and early morning. This has led to distressing encounters between residents and burglars, causing genuine fear for their safety. Some of these residents, particularly those with small children, are contemplating moving out of the town due to the heightened security risks.

We acknowledge that Westfield is not alone in facing this issue; property crimes, especially car theft, have surged across the state in recent years. Governor Murphy has rightly called it an "epidemic," with car theft in New Jersey increasing by over 30% from 2019 to 2022. Unfortunately, the response from state leaders in Trenton has been inadequate, as they appear to turn a blind eye to the rising crime rates and prioritize the creation of new "rights" for criminals over the safety of our residents.

A recent incident in our town highlights the severity of the problem and underscores that addressing it goes beyond increasing local police patrols. Last September, Westfield Police pursued a stolen vehicle occupied by three individuals through Westfield, Scotch Plains, and Fanwood. After apprehending all three suspects, our officers discovered an illegal, loaded handgun in the possession of the driver, along with narcotics in the possession of all suspects. Our officers risked their personal safety to make these arrests, but the suspects were processed and immediately released on their own recognizance, while the officers were still filling out their paperwork.

This situation is unacceptable and demands immediate action. As our elected representatives in Trenton, we respectfully urge you to take decisive steps on behalf of our constituents. We believe there are several common-sense reforms that must be implemented to restore a sense of security to our State and Town. They include:

1. **Fully Staff Our Judiciary:** Our police officers often encounter challenges in securing convictions for car thefts due to a deficit of Superior Court Judges. Despite a reduction in vacancies from 75 to 47 since 2022, this number remains unacceptably high. Even when our officers make an arrest for a car theft, the County Prosecutor is unable to secure a conviction, or even put forth a plausible plea offer to the defendant, due to the Prosecutor's inability to secure a trial date. Trenton is not working as it should. Whether it is petty politics at work, or compensation packages not being attractive enough for candidates, the problem can be, and must be, addressed.
2. **Address and Assist Juvenile Offenders:** It is shocking to us how young some of the individuals are who are perpetrating these offenses. While it is important to allow juveniles to be rehabilitated, it is also important to not allow crime rings to entice juveniles to partake in crime with the promise that there will be no legal consequences. We understand that this is a multi-layered issue and cannot be solved through the criminal justice system alone. Accordingly, we suggest that you work with community leaders in disadvantaged areas to learn what resources they need to keep at-risk youth on a path far away from crime. Allocating State resources towards prevention may go a long way to keeping juveniles out of our legal system and on a path to productivity.
3. **Stiffer Sentences for Repeat Offenders:** Unlike their juvenile counterparts, professional car thieves and home burglars must be incarcerated. Based on the arrest reports we have seen, repeat offenders are mainly the ones prowling the streets of Westfield. Now that the State has legalized marijuana and made efforts to reduce sentences for non-violent offenders, it will not risk overincarceration by imprisoning these hardened criminals. In fact, a recent study published by the ACLU noted that New Jersey has reduced its overall prison population by more than 50% since 2011 and leads the nation in de-incarceration. While that has undoubtedly led to certain positive results, such as rehabilitating non-violent drug offenders, it does not mean that this trend should be taken to the level of allowing repeat thieves and burglars to roam free. To be clear, theft and burglary are not victimless crimes, like possession of narcotics. They directly impact their victims economically, mentally, and emotionally and run the risk of a violent, even deadly, confrontation with the property owners. The bottom line is that the criminals roaming Westfield are not second-guessing their choices due to the lack of a threat of incarceration. We need to change their calculus of risk by creating a real deterrent effect.
4. **Fix Pre-Trial Detention:** As you know, when New Jersey abolished cash bail in 2017, it adopted a pretrial risk assessment to inform judges whether to detain a defendant pending trial. While there was bi-partisan support for the elimination of cash bail, and it has achieved several of its stated goals, the pretrial risk assessment, as implemented, has allowed recidivist car thieves and burglars to avoid any sort of detention and to continue stealing at will. It must be revisited and changed to allow and encourage judges to keep repeat offenders in jail pending their trial. One option is to explore supporting Bill S3347 introduced by Senators Sarlo and Lagana, which would create a "rebuttable presumption" of pretrial detention for a number of offenses and "any other crime for which the prosecutor believes there is a serious risk" of flight, danger, or obstruction.
5. **Bust the Car Theft Rings:** It appears that at least some of the cars our residents are losing are being shipped overseas by organized criminal organizations. This is evidenced by the recent conviction of a Union County resident who was the member of a gang that stole luxury cars and planned to ship them to Ghana from Port Newark. This individual was prosecuted by the U.S. Attorney's Office, but we should not have to wait for federal agencies to address this issue.

We suggest that you meet with Attorney General Platkin and inquire about what is being done to investigate and prosecute these gangs. Afterall, if these individuals are incarcerated, it will prevent juveniles from becoming pawns in their lucrative enterprises.

We write this letter in our individual capacity as councilmen, wishing to voice the concerns of our residents. While this letter is not an official proclamation by vote of the Westfield Town Council, we feel compelled to directly voice the concerns of residents to our elected State and Federal representatives. We trust that you will consider our suggestions and do everything in your power to help address the serious concerns. If you would like to discuss our proposals in more detail, please let us know and we will be happy to arrange a meeting where you can speak directly to the residents that have been personally impacted by this persistent problem. We look forward to hearing from you soon.

Respectfully,



TODD SAUNDERS
WARD 1 COUNCILMAN



DR. MICHAEL ARMENTO
WARD 2 COUNCILMAN



MICHAL D. DOMOGALA
WARD 3 COUNCILMAN



DAVID KIEFER
WARD 4 COUNCILMAN

CC:
Governor Phil Murphy
Attorney General Matt Platkin
Congressman Tom Kean, Jr.
Senate President Nicholas Scutari
Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin