

Milwaukee Ald. Johnson: What we need: A broad and holistic approach focused on prevention

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Statement from Alderman Cavalier Johnson

For years, the conversation around criminal justice has too often given way to harsher penalties. There's this idea that if we as a society simply lock more people away, the criminal element will be erased from our neighborhoods. We don't have to look very far to see the folly of that logic. Milwaukee, our city, the anchor of our greater community and the economic engine of our state, is home to the most incarcerated ZIP code in the United States. By that logic, 53206, a ZIP code where I spent the formative years of my life, should be a shining city on a hill and a beacon of hope filled with prosperity, and unyielding resolve that Wisconsin and America's policies of placing more people behind bars for longer periods of time is the ultimate public safety solution.

But that isn't the story of that area. From what I have heard from the Milwaukee Police Department is that the relatively small ZIP code represents about 10 percent of crime in the city. In fact, the police have zeroed in on 53206 with a "Center Street Corridor" strategy focused on tackling those issues - issues that shouldn't be present at all today if locking people away for long periods of time is the answer. With one in eight African American men in Wisconsin currently behind bars (which by the way is nearly double the national average) and half of Black men spending some time inside of a cell by the time they are 30 years old, I believe that it's safe to say that we should be looking in a different direction.

Today the Milwaukee Common Council passed a resolution encouraging leaders in the State Legislature to consider a different approach to public safety. Those recommendations call for the State to consider not only reforming the broken juvenile justice system but also to make investments on the front end so that more Wisconsin citizens never have contact with the corrections system in the first place.

I, and I'm certain my colleagues on the Council, realize that people who habitually engage in criminal acts require sanction. There should be accountability for actions. Many of us are sensitive to issues of crime because they happen in our districts and sometimes to law abiding citizens that we represent. But we also represent those who have been jailed time and again and we know that approach simply has not worked.

Much like the roads that we all drive on, each of us makes investments via our tax dollars in our fellow citizens. I believe that we can get the most bang for our buck if we proactively invest in quality education including early childhood education, trauma informed care, and focus on connecting more people to living wage jobs that help to stabilize families and neighborhoods. Taxpayers win when everyone has a chance to positively contribute to our society instead of paying to house and feed people in a system that doesn't do a well enough job at rehabilitating perpetrators and reducing recidivism. If those in Madison are serious about making neighborhoods safer, then their views on public safety should not be narrowly focused on increased incarceration. Instead, our focus should be broader and encompass the root causes of poverty and crime.