While Missouri saw a 6 percent decrease in property crime between 2019 and 2021, violent crime increased by 7 percent. Murders also increased in this period by 25.5 percent, and 689 people were shot and killed, making 2020 the state’s deadliest year yet for gun violence. St. Louis, the state’s economic engine, has been especially hard hit by the rise in violent crime and stands to lose millions of dollars in business. Indeed, St. Louis, Kansas City and Springfield, the state’s major economic hubs, are among the top ten cities with the highest violent crime rates in the United States.

Missouri’s law enforcement agencies likewise are struggling with violent crime. Departments across the state, from small communities to large urban centers, are enduring insufficient staffing and resources. Jails also are grappling with overcrowding, understaffing and underfunding. Predictably, dangerous jail conditions culminated in riots at St. Louis City Justice Center this past year.

Although there are no easy solutions to these problems, expanding the use of field citations to address low-level offenses helps reduce jail crowding, minimize taxpayer costs and enable officers to focus on addressing violent crime. A field citation is a written order issued by an officer in lieu of custodial arrest, allowing a delayed arraignment. Upon signing a promise to pay a fine or appear in court on a specific date for adjudication of the charge, an offender is released by the officer at the scene.

Contrary to popular belief, about 80 percent of arrests are for non-violent misdemeanors. Burdened by arrests for low-level offenses, officers spend only 4 percent of their time dealing with violent crime.

The average violent crime clearance rate in 2019 for police nationwide was 45.5 percent, while Missouri’s in 2020 was 36 percent. This clearance rate is not an indictment of police performance, but reflects that undue obstacles impede officers’ abilities.

The reality is that arresting and jailing nonviolent misdemeanants is time-consuming and expensive. An average arrest can take two hours or longer. Further, it costs Missouri taxpayers roughly $50 per day to jail an offender, but these costs accumulate astronomically. In 2020, the state owed counties $32 million in unpaid reimbursements for jail housing.

To reduce jail overcrowding, lessen the economic burden on taxpayers and enable law enforcement officers to focus on violent crime, many states are using alternatives to custodial arrest to deal with petty offenses.

While all 50 states permit some form of discretionary citation, a growing number of states are requiring police officers to issue field citations for some low-level offenses. This approach offers numerous benefits.

First, expanding the use of field citations to address petty offenses frees up officers to focus on violent crime. It can also reduce the risk of harm to police by limiting the duration and degree of physical contact in street encounters.
which often escalate violence. Because officer assaults and deaths are more likely to occur in arrest situations than in any other circumstance, using alternatives to arrest for low-level offenses can help protect lives.

Second, reducing arrests for petty offenses also correlates with fewer police shootings, which can improve the police-community relationships that are essential to crime control. By contrast, detaining low-level offenders in jail correlates to increases in recidivism rates. Further, evidence indicates that diverting low-level offenders from arrest does not increase violent crime or crime as a whole.

Lastly, the use of field citations in lieu of arrest lessens the size of jail populations. This, in turn, reduces the cost of housing detainees. It also enhances institutional safety by decreasing jail crowding and understaffing, factors that escalate violence. In the wake of jail closures and riots, this is of particular concern to Missouri taxpayers, who must pay not only exorbitant jail costs, but also the added expense of lawsuits regarding unconstitutional jail conditions.

**ACTION ITEMS**

Missouri statutes, Supreme Court rules, local ordinances and police protocols allow citations for some offenses. However, local practices can vary between jurisdictions, yielding unfair disparities and outcomes.

To address such problems, Missouri lawmakers should consider enacting thoughtful legislation that expands the use of field citations for low-level, non-violent offenses. In doing so, public safety must be paramount. To that end, a presumption in favor of field citations should exclude certain offenses, such as those that are sexual, violent, or present an ongoing threat to persons or property. It also should exclude certain categories of offenders, such as those who present a flight risk; have a history of serious criminal offenses; have outstanding warrants; are on parole or probation; or display similar characteristics that weigh against release.

In short, expanding the use of field citations for low-level offenses is a cost-effective, “smart on crime” solution that could address Missouri’s needs and enhance public safety by reducing violent crime and optimizing the use of limited resources—all while holding low-level offenders accountable.