

Cops and robbers

Public safety remains a hot-button topic

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Crime and public safety have long been topics of keen interest in Asheville. But throughout 2023, they were on the minds of many local residents in unusually amplified ways.

Asheville Watchdog's 12-part "Down Town" series shed light on the myriad issues impacting the central business district, reporting that attracted the attention of *Fox News*, which painted Asheville as a city "plagued with rising violent crime." Whether the national coverage led to decreased sales at local businesses during the summer was among subsequent debates reported by *Watchdog*. Meanwhile, portions of the city's 60-day downtown safety and cleanliness pilot transitioned into ongoing services in hopes of addressing numerous urban woes.

To help see the bigger picture on the past year in public safety, *Xpress* checked in with some local notable figures whose work and lives intersect with the topic's various aspects.

What do you think are the main drivers for crime in our area in 2023, and how have local governments responded to it?

"If you look at the poverty level in Asheville, where crimes are taking [place] and who is committing those crimes, the common denominator is poverty. Our local governments might

be doing the best they can, but this is a nationwide problem that has to have a different and alternative approach to handling these types of situations."

— **Michael Hayes**,
executive director of Umoja Health,
Wellness and Justice Collective

"The decrease in COVID dollars from the government is one factor increasing poverty and, in turn, crime. The opioid epidemic is also increasing crime as people get desperate and do things they might not normally do."

— **Andrew Celwyn**,
former board member,
Buncombe County Tourism
Development Authority

"For certain, crime is driven by inequality, alienation, scarcity and segregation. Asheville has all of these things. Local governments can only do so much — Raleigh has made sure of it. I think there's a tendency among Asheville residents to blame outsiders for our problems, and I'd love to see our local governments ask us to take a harder look at ourselves. At least some of the aforementioned problems are of our own creation."

— **Andrew Paul**,
lead organizer, Asheville For All

"Heat and density. There have been studies that suggest crime decreases as the canopy increases. Asheville has responded by hiring a dedicated individual to ... work with all citizens to improve their understanding and



ON THE LOOKOUT: Asheville Police Department officers Garrett Proffitt, left, and Joseph Savastano were part of increased city efforts to curb downtown crime in 2023. Photo courtesy of APD

conservation of the natural environment that surrounds us all."

— **Keith Aitken**,
urban forester, City of Asheville

"Crime is complex and multifaceted, and drivers can be related to ... a multitude of social, economic, psychological and other factors. Whether it be substance abuse disorder, experiencing homelessness, low wages [and] high cost of living, among other issues — these items all have the potential to contribute to crime. We have been fortunate to have a low crime rate in Fletcher. However, we all need to

figure out how we can collaborate to support our most vulnerable population so that they may exist in a happy, healthy and safe community."

— **Preston Blakely**,
Fletcher mayor

Do you feel more or less safe than you did at the start of the year?

"I'm feeling as safe as a chicken in a fox den, toting mace and hiring security for our shows. That's a first. The queer scene is a whole new rodeo with national drag bans and laws



KEITH AITKEN



MORGAN ALBRITTON



GRACE BARRON-MARTINEZ



PRESTON BLAKELY



ANDREW CELWYN



DIVINE



BILLY DOUBRASKI



PIP FLICKINGER



JAX HAMMOND



MICHAEL HAYES



STU HELM



HELEN HYATT



SANDRA KILGORE



XERO KOFFSKY



ESTHER MANHEIMER