OVERVIEW OF "FUGITIVE SAFE SURRENDER: PROGRAM DESCRIPTION, INITIAL FINDINGS, AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS"

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Research Summary
This study describes the implementation and initial descriptive findings from the Fugitive Safe Surrender (FSS) program, conducted in 20 cities, where 35,103 individuals who believed they had a warrant for their arrest surrendered voluntarily at a local church. A total of 3,501 felony persons had 4,238 felony warrants, and 18,400 misdemeanants accounted for 44,971 misdemeanor warrants. Nearly 1 in 5 had no warrant located, and less than 2% were arrested. For those with a new court date, 94% appeared as scheduled. An anonymous self-report survey showed 73% of respondents indicated it was important or very important that the surrender location was a church. The most common reasons cited for surrendering were to obtain a driver’s license (47%), wanting to start over (42%), and fear of arrest (40%); many participants did not surrender previously because they did not have money to pay bail or fines.

Policy Implications
The Fugitive Safe Surrender program illustrates that collaborations between law enforcement and faith-based organizations can result in a significant number of open warrants being cleared in a nonconflict setting. This can be done without appreciably increasing the local jail population. Although our data do not provide for detailed cost–benefit analysis, communities cleared a significant number of outstanding warrants at a reduced cost relative to the typical resources required to serve open warrants, track down felony offenders, process bench warrants for failure to appear, or incarcerate wanted fugitives picked up during routine policing activities. In addition, FSS provides a safe...
environment for surrender, which reduces potentially dangerous interactions between law enforcement and fugitives on the street.

Implementing a program like Fugitive Safe Surrender is fraught with many significant challenges, not the least of which is that most jurisdictions cannot provide an accurate count of the number of open local or state warrants in their community. This challenge makes an assessment of how effective FSS is in reducing the volume of known fugitives or warrants difficult to calculate. Most fugitives with active warrants had more than one and sometimes multiple types of warrants across multiple jurisdictions. A related issue is the number of persons who appeared thinking they had an active warrant but none could be located. These issues illustrate the need for consistency in how law enforcement agencies gather information on warrant and charge information, and the need for making this information available to persons in an accessible, flexible format. Persons who suspect they have a warrant could check the system to confirm their status, which also might provide them the impetus to surrender to authorities before their cases are embedded in the legal system.

Persons with open warrants reported a major reason they did not resolve their case was the cost of obtaining a hearing. If we make the ability to post bond or pay a fine a prerequisite to have one’s open warrant status resolved, then many persons will remain fugitives simply because of the economic cost of surrendering. Persons with open warrants already report high rates of unemployment and low rates of legitimate employment. Many persons appeared in large urban cities in part because there was no requirement to pay to receive a hearing of one’s case. If the purpose of programs like FSS is to reintegrate persons as productive members of their community and provide them opportunities for legitimate employment, education, and the chance to get their driver’s license back, then we need to examine the role of fiscal burden in the way our criminal justice system processes persons with outstanding warrants; in particular, those with traffic warrants, bench warrants for failure to appear, and child support warrants.

On average, persons had open warrants that were more than 2 years old. Therefore, persons with warrants are either very good at evading capture if they want to, or our law enforcement systems are overwhelmed with the number of outstanding warrants and cannot possibly find, process, prosecute, and incarcerate the number of persons with open warrants for their arrest. FSS showed that it is not necessary to arrest and incarcerate everybody with an open warrant to resolve their case and reengage them in the justice system. Only 2.2% of persons with warrants were arrested, and for all those who received a new court date, often months later, more than 9 of 10 seemed to continue with the resolution of their case.

At the core of the FSS program was the role of faith-based organizations and the importance of the church as the place where persons could surrender. This approach is different than the typically adversarial role of law enforcement interactions with
citizens as they search actively for persons with open warrants, particularly those with felony or violent offense histories. In addition, FSS is contrary to the strategy of using deception to lure felony offenders to events so that they can be taken into custody. The role of police legitimacy and community trust of law enforcement and the role of the church in providing a setting for safe surrender deserves further exploration.

This descriptive study does not provide specific information about the motivation of persons who surrender at a church because they believe they have an outstanding warrant for their arrest, nor does it specifically assess particular questions about why a person would choose to surrender versus continue to evade capture. These theoretical questions require additional investigation, particularly if we will learn more about the process individuals go through in making the choice to turn themselves in voluntarily or the perceptions about the role of the church in their decision to surrender voluntarily.

Last, a major policy question is whether a program like FSS should be offered on a regular basis. Aside from cost and safety benefits to the justice system, what would keep individuals with open warrants from waiting for the next FSS program to resolve their cases? Providing a program like FSS too frequently may be counterproductive by inadvertently encouraging persons to evade capture until the next program comes along offering them favorable consideration, the chance to resolve their case without paying a fine or bond, and the chance to start again with a clean slate. It remains an open question whether this strategy is truly a chance to start over and "get their lives back together" or a chance to take advantage of the system and reoffend.

Keywords
fugitives, surrender, faith-based, warrants, law enforcement