

Iowa State team calculates societal costs of five major crimes; finds murder at \$17.25 million

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Matt DeLisi, an Iowa State University associate professor of sociology and director of the criminal justice program, led a team of five Iowa State graduate students on the study of 654 convicted murderers calculating the cost to society of the five most serious crimes. Credit: Photo by Bob Elbert, Iowa State University News Service

Murder takes an obvious toll on society in terms of the loss of human life, but what does it actually cost each time there's a murder? It's about \$17.25 million according a recent Iowa State University study.

Matt DeLisi, an ISU associate professor of sociology and director of the criminal justice program, led a team of five Iowa State graduate students on the study of 654 convicted and incarcerated murderers. Expanding upon earlier monetization estimates, they calculated the costs of five

crimes -- murder, rape, armed [robbery](#), aggravated assault and burglary -- in terms of the victim costs, [criminal justice system](#) costs, lost productivity estimates for both the victim and the criminal, and estimates on the public's resulting willingness to pay to prevent future violence.

"The person who invented this is Mark Cohen (a professor of economics, ethics and [corporate social responsibility](#) at Vanderbilt University), and he published an article back in 1998 that was called 'The Monetary Value of Saving a High-Risk Youth,'" said DeLisi, who has published several books and journal articles on delinquency and criminals. "He's the one that pioneered this monetization approach where we can say, 'What do offenders cost over time?'"

"And I've done some analysis in recent years along with Cohen and other researchers that incorporates this new wrinkle, which is this willingness to pay estimates," he continued. "And what we find is that the public is remarkably balanced in terms of crime control. We aren't shy about punishing people, but we are also very humanistic and want to prevent crime and rehabilitate offenders. Even if society is very hard on crime, or are crime-control oriented, it seems we'd rather pay money up front than let it all unfold and pay for it later."

Iowa State sociology graduate students Anna Kosloski, Molly Sween, Emily Hachmeister, Matt Moore and Alan Drury joined DeLisi on the study. Their paper, titled "Murder by numbers: monetary costs imposed by a sample of homicide offenders," was published in the August 2010 edition of *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*.

The study uses data from one of DeLisi's previous studies (2003) on 654 convicted and incarcerated homicide offenders in eight states -- Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, New Jersey, Ohio, Oklahoma and Texas. In addition to the per murder cost (\$17,252, 656),

the researchers calculated that the most violent offenders singly produced costs greater than \$150 million.

"That each murder costs more than \$17.25 million still does not convey the true costs imposed by homicide offenders in the current sample," the authors wrote. "Since the mean homicide conviction was more than one, the average murderer in these analyses actually imposed costs approaching \$24 million. For the offender who murdered nine victims, the total murder-specific costs were \$155,457,083!"

The ISU researchers also calculated costs of rape (\$448,532), armed robbery (\$335,733), aggravated assault (\$145,379) and burglary (\$41,288).

While research attaching cost estimates to heinous crimes may appear may appear a bit cold in nature, DeLisi says it's actually conducted with prevention in mind.

"This area of research has really been run with prevention researchers," he said. "That's because what they find is that even if a prevention program is very expensive -- and most of them are actually shockingly inexpensive -- they're still more cost effective than allowing these careers to unfold."

DeLisi sees the expensive [monetary costs](#) associated with incarcerating murderers supporting both sides of the political fence when it comes to crime.

"I think that the left and the right are both right and wrong on crime," he said. "Where the right maybe has to bend is in acknowledging the benefits of prevention. It's simply more humanistic and it's just smarter to invest up front, and the costs are so much smaller than allowing it to unfold."

"On the flip side, conservatives are absolutely correct in noting how bad some offenders are," he continued. "And here's where liberals generally aren't as strong in admitting how bad these offenders are. They really are [bad], and when you can bring out [costs](#) that show this, you can really see it."

Provided by Iowa State University

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