

# Public Safety Remains Our Top Priority

Our Town has been experiencing an alarming increase in vehicle thefts and vehicle break ins, something we have rarely seen in a community like Clarence. Unfortunately, this is not just a local issue. Communities throughout Erie County and across New York State have experienced similar crime trends, leaving many residents understandably frustrated and concerned.

What has been especially troubling is that virtually every neighborhood in Clarence has been targeted at some point. No area of Town has been immune. Families from every corner of our community have experienced stolen vehicles, attempted thefts, or late night break ins. This is no longer something that only happens somewhere else. It is happening here.

Sadly, this issue also hit close to home for my own family. In March, my daughter's vehicle was stolen, giving our family a firsthand look at the emotional and financial toll these crimes have on innocent victims. No family should have to experience that feeling of violation or wonder whether the people responsible will ever be held accountable.

Two years ago, during another spike in vehicle thefts, I wrote about New York State's 2019 Bail Reform Act and the impact it has had on law enforcement's ability to keep repeat offenders off our streets. Since taking effect in 2020, the law has significantly limited the use of cash bail and pretrial detention for many misdemeanors and non violent felonies. While judges retain some discretion in certain cases, many law enforcement officials have expressed frustration that repeat offenders are often arrested, processed, and released within hours.

At the same time, New York's Raise the Age law changed how many younger offenders are handled by the criminal justice system. Most 16 and 17 year olds are now processed through the youth justice system rather than adult criminal court, with the goal of emphasizing rehabilitation over incarceration. While the law was created with good intentions, many law enforcement officials have raised concerns that repeat juvenile offenders are cycling through the system without meaningful consequences. A significant number of the vehicle thefts across Western New York have involved juvenile offenders, some of whom have been arrested multiple times before facing serious consequences.

We continue to see troubling examples throughout Western New York. Individuals accused of stealing vehicles have been released on appearance tickets after crashes, while others have failed to appear in court altogether. Some stolen vehicles have even been found parked outside the suspects' own residences, highlighting the confidence many offenders appear to have that there will be few immediate consequences for their actions.

Our local law enforcement agencies deserve tremendous credit for the work they are doing. The Erie County Sheriff's Office, New York State Police, and neighboring police departments have dedicated significant manpower to combating these crimes. On many weekends, additional patrols, aviation units, and coordinated enforcement efforts have been deployed throughout our area. Despite those efforts, officers can only do so much when individuals who are arrested are quickly returned to the streets.

Sheriff John Garcia has been outspoken in calling for changes to state law, arguing that meaningful consequences are necessary to deter repeat offenders. I have also contacted our state representatives, including the Governor's Office, urging them to revisit these policies. Whether through targeted reforms or broader legislative changes, I believe New York State must provide law enforcement with the tools necessary to hold repeat offenders accountable while protecting the rights of victims and the safety of our communities.

My greatest concern is that someone, whether a resident, a police officer, or a suspect, will be seriously injured or killed during one of these incidents. No vehicle is worth a human life. Residents should never attempt to physically confront someone stealing a vehicle. Instead, call 911 immediately and allow law enforcement to respond. Every stolen vehicle, every pursuit, and every break in increases the potential for tragedy, and that is something none of us wants to see.

Clarence has always been a safe community and a wonderful place to raise a family. We owe it to our residents, our law enforcement officers, and future generations to demand laws that protect victims, hold repeat offenders accountable, and restore confidence that our criminal justice system places public safety first.