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# Fugitives, please come forward

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The saying that you cannot outrun the long arm of the law isn't exactly true.

Consider that the Houston Police Department catches a mere 6 percent of home burglars.

Earlier this year, Dallas backed down on participation in a statewide one-week roundup of people with outstanding Class C misdemeanor warrants -- there are 400,000 such warrants in the county -- after learning that the Dallas County jail was so overcrowded that more than 700 inmates had to be released to meet state standards.

Our criminal justice system is bursting at the seams. There are simply not enough law enforcement and correctional resources to keep up with the glut of lawbreakers.

Federal and local authorities are recognizing that it is more efficient to use carrots in addition to sticks.

Earlier this month, Austin announced plans to implement a program similar to the highly successful U.S. marshals' Fugitive Safe Surrender initiative, which encourages people wanted for nonviolent felonies or misdemeanors to voluntarily surrender in a neutral setting where their case is adjudicated on the spot. Congress authorized the initiative in July 2006.

This is not amnesty. Offenders are still held accountable for their crimes, albeit in a less adversarial forum.

The advantages for fugitives include favorable consideration of the voluntary surrender in their punishment, not being arrested and taken to jail as if they were stopped, and assistance with re-entry resources such as a referral to a local job training program.

Offenders who, even if the police budget were doubled, otherwise might never have been brought to justice are being held accountable to crime victims and the public at a nominal cost to taxpayers.

The results have been impressive. Since 2005, 4,000 fugitives have surrendered in the program's five cities: Cleveland and Akron, Ohio; Phoenix; Nashville; and Indianapolis.

C. Jay Matthews, a Cleveland pastor and program leader, said: "We've protected our neighborhoods, kept our law enforcement officers from danger, silenced the naysayers, and given those who surrendered the opportunity to turn their lives around."

A similar program could also be designed for individuals who have committed property crimes but have not even been identified, let alone had a warrant issued for their arrest. It would essentially be a government version of a church confession booth. It would have to offer a greater incentive to come forward than Safe Surrender because those being targeted understand that there is a slim chance they would ever be identified, let alone apprehended.

Here's how it might work in the case of shoplifting: The person would come in, admit stealing an item and describe the circumstances. The admission would then be matched to a police report, if there one exists, and a restitution and community service agreement would be signed by the offender, the victim and the state.

Upon successful completion of that agreement, the police report would be closed so that the person could never be charged for that crime. Unlike Safe Surrender, the individual would not have a criminal conviction but would be supervised to ensure that the agreement is carried out.

These approaches are part of redefining success in criminal justice. Traditionally, success has been

measured by the volume of processes: more arrests, more warrants, more convictions and longer sentences. However, the focus should be on better outcomes -- namely, restoring victims and communities harmed by crime and reducing recidivism.

The system cannot accomplish these goals as long as most criminals are never brought to justice. Just as importantly, respect for the rule of law, an essential element of a free society, is eroded when a system is so overloaded that there are 400,000 outstanding warrants in a city of more than 1.2 million. Less adversarial and more informal processes for nonviolent offenders -- before and after being charged -- hold great promise.

The law should continue to extend its long arm, but it also should offer a place of refuge for nonviolent offenders who are ready to take responsibility and make amends to those they have harmed.