O n January 24, the small city of Methuen, Massachusetts started laying off half of its police officers. Two years prior, in the fall of 2017, Methuen's lawmakers passed a lucrative new contract for local law enforcement that now threatened to bankrupt the municipality, which sits about 30 miles north of Boston. After a budget standoff, the city of 50,000 had to tell 50 cops — 44 percent of the police department's staff — that they were out of a job.

City officials were apoplectic. "It's not only crazy, it's dangerous," police chief Joseph Solomon said to the *Boston Globe*. Paul Fahey, the mayor's chief of staff, told *Boston.com* that the layoffs were "a true public safety crisis."

Crime rates in Methuen, which are roughly in line with other cities its size, are the lowest they've been since the late 1960s and early '70s. But back then, there were only about half as many people working for the city's police department. This follows a nationwide pattern; modern security systems are unthinkably powerful compared to what they were the last time crime was this low. Methuen's panic is a symptom of how that power — in terms of technology, strategy, and sheer bodies — has come to seem normal and necessary. The city's reaction is a perfect illustration of the country's blinkered thinking about how to keep Americans safe.

In 1967, a presidential commission released a seminal report on crime in the U.S. titled "The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society," which detailed the shortcomings of contemporary law enforcement. There were technical problems, like overstuffed filing systems that had to be searched by hand — if police found a suspect's fingerprints at a crime scene, they couldn't cross reference them with the department's records unless they found prints from all 10 of the suspect's fingers. Any fewer, and it would simply take too long to search through records to find individual matches.