

Keeping Kalamazoo Competitive

(This report by Howard Husock of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and Wendell Cox challenges the findings of the Kalamazoo County Compact by David Rusk and recommends competition based measures to improve the competitiveness of Kalamazoo.)

By
Howard Husock and Wendell Cox Report
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Abstract.....-

City of Kalamazoo Public Safety Spending

If high costs related to tax-exempt institutions are not the key cause of the high city of Kalamazoo tax rate, what are the key parts of higher spending? The conventional wisdom among both city and county officials focuses on the city's decision in the 1970s to combine its police and fire departments. Implementation involved labor contract incentives to convince members of both departments to accept the model of the single "public service officer." As a result, this unusual approach has resulted in higher costs.⁽³⁸⁾ It is beyond the scope of this report to analyze the details of city of Kalamazoo's contract with its public service officers.

But it appears the conventional wisdom about public safety spending is, in fact, correct. It is incontrovertibly true that public safety costs in the city of Kalamazoo are among the highest, per capita, in the state of Michigan (Table #6).

Further, the city of Kalamazoo devotes a higher percentage of its operating budget to public safety than any other reporting city (Table #7).

The city of Kalamazoo's high public safety costs are particularly significant in light of the fact that Western Michigan University has its own police force.

Crime may arguably be more of a problem in the city of Kalamazoo than in immediately surrounding areas, thus accounting for some differential compared to villages and townships. But the city of Kalamazoo's high per capita spending on public safety compared to comparable older, lower-income cities in the state with similar crime rates, suggests that the city of Kalamazoo's higher costs are not necessarily the result of its higher crime rate (Figure #9).⁽³⁹⁾

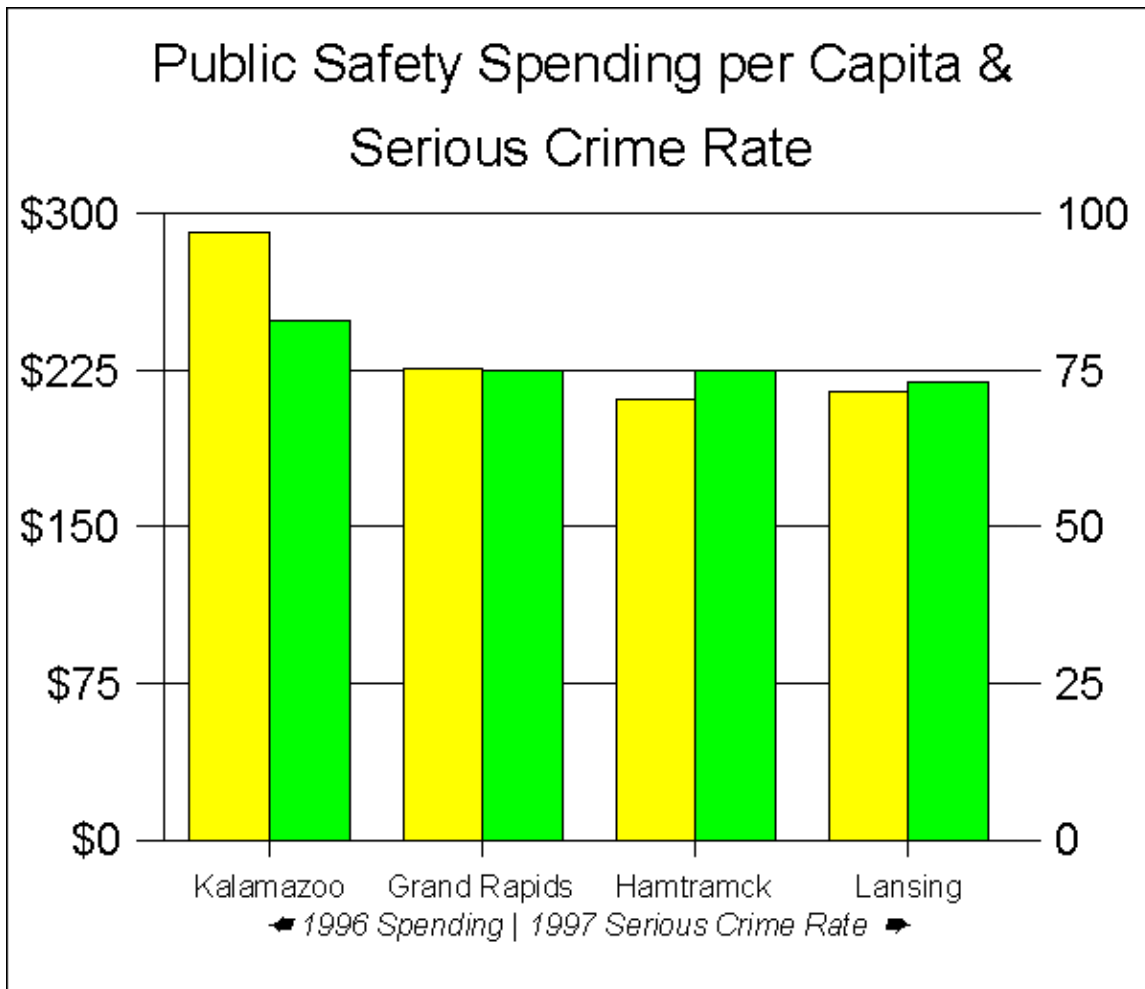


Figure 9

Source: US Census Bureau and Michigan State Police.