

## Briggs' mailbag: Why downtown Indianapolis scares suburbanites

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**Why do people who live outside downtown seem to be so afraid of it, and how does it get fixed? My office is downtown and everyone who lives outside of downtown always talks about how dangerous it is. The people in the office who actually live downtown do not share these same concerns.**

Republican Jefferson Shreve's [ill-fated run for mayor last year](#) offers a good case study for this question.

The whole Shreve campaign was premised on a view of Indianapolis — Crime! Danger! — that appeals to people outside the city and confuses many people who live in it, especially downtown. For example, one Shreve ad featured a woman afraid of jogging downtown. But, if you actually spend time downtown, you'll see lots of women jogging. There was a total disconnect between Shreve's depiction of Indianapolis and the way people live in the city.

While Shreve failed to convince residents to distrust their own experiences, he did subject hundreds of thousands of people across Central Indiana to months of fear-mongering ads, playing into *their* ideas of what Indianapolis is. That's one example of how outsiders come to fear downtown.

Other explanations include people in small towns and suburbs mistaking momentary disorder (like the 2020 riots) as the permanent state of downtown or feeling general discomfort with sights, noises and crowds in urban settings. And, yes, some people harbor racist views of cities. I grew up in a two-stoplight town among people who feared cities for all of these reasons.

Dangerous things happen downtown, of course, but political campaigns and media coverage disproportionately highlight urban crime in ways that lead outsiders to think cities are more dangerous than they actually are.

Everyone knows, for instance, that the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with a massive spike in homicides in Indianapolis. Fewer people know small towns [have been dealing with the exact same surge](#) in violence.

Part of that is visibility. Just as there are many women jogging in downtown Indianapolis, there also are many people panhandling or behaving erratically, which, if you're visiting and inclined to scan for danger, might reinforce your fears even as joggers blend into the background.

I'd point out there are shadowy people in rural areas, too. We're just less likely to encounter them in public spaces and, when we do, we tend not to draw big-picture conclusions about large geographic areas.

When my family visited rural West Virginia for a wedding a few years ago, a man in a Subway restaurant leered over my son and said some creepy things that still cause me to shudder — an experience more troubling than any I've had in Indianapolis.

If, prior to that experience, I had seen television reports and political ads warning about creepy men roaming West Virginia fast-food restaurants, I might have been primed to blame local politicians for the man's existence. Instead, my instinct at the time was to keep watch over my son and feel sad for the man.

The incentives for hyping urban crime aren't going away anytime soon, so the best Indianapolis can do is give visitors the best possible experience while trying to improve quality of life for residents.