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What do you think when you think Detroit? Some of us think “poverty” or “homelessness”. Others think “bad economy”. However, crime is arguably Detroit’s biggest problem. Although we must tackle all of these problems to “fix” Detroit, I believe that crime in Detroit has to be our biggest priority—based off of extensive research, of course. But, what should we do? How do we stop crime in a city which was number one in violent crimes and murders? (detroitnews.com, federal bureau of investigation) The answer is simple. We need to invest into Detroit’s outdated lighting system. In the following paragraphs, I plan to provide an overview of crime in Detroit, in order to show what we are really dealing with. I also want to provide an in-depth analysis of Detroit’s lighting issue to show its severity. Finally, we should understand how the lack of an effective lighting system contributes to crime, and why this matters to the city of Detroit.

Crime is arguably Detroit’s biggest issue. In fact, 58% of Detroiters believe that this fact is true. Only 12% percent make the claim that Detroit’s biggest issue is the economy. (Detroit news.com) Because of the crime issue, 39% of Detroiters plan to leave in the next five years, while 50% say that they would live somewhere else if they could. (Detroit News.com) Is this what we really need for Detroit? Of course not. Suburbanization is not what this city needs. In the last decades, Detroit’s population has already decreased from 1.8 million to 700 thousand. (The Wall Street Journal) We need people to move into the city, not out of it. We can’t have a thriving city without the influx of residents and business owners. Detroit’s crime rates are not just bad. In fact, they are probably the worst. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, in 2013, Detroit led the nation un violent crimes, with 14,504, and also in homicides, with 316. To reinforce this fact even more, Flint, who was second in the number of violent crimes and homicides, had 1,907 and 48, respectively. (Detroit News.com) As far as crime rates go, Detroit has left everyone in the dust.

In order to make a dent in Detroit’s crime rates, we need to invest in Detroit’s aging and outdated lighting system. Detroit’s lighting system definitely needs it too. Detroit has 88,000 streetlights. However, almost 50% of these lights are not in operation. (The Wall Street Journal) Detroit cannot eliminate the darkness that arises and reinforces crime by merely repairing the streetlights. Why? Because Detroit’s lighting system is too outdated. Detroit, along with Milwaukee, is the only city that uses the “Christmas Style” streetlights. When one street light goes out, the rest of the streetlights along the whole block go out. (USA Today.com) That means that the longer we wait to invest, the more money it will cost to do so. In fact, this financial neglect has gone on for 40 years, and as a result, it will cost an estimated 200 to 300 million to replace the system, which is why we need to invest now, before it’s too late. In addition, Detroit’s lighting staff has gone from 500 to 85, and of these 85 employees, only nine are in charge of repairing the 1,400 miles of street lights. Most cities don’t have to deal with this type of maintenance, because their systems aren’t operated by hand, unlike Detroit’s. (Fox News.com) This outdated lighting system seems to represent that the idea of “city profitable” is heavily overemphasized in Detroit. According to the Wall Street Journal, millions of dollars that were set aside for the lighting had been allocated to “unknown endeavors”. And, it seems true. Detroit seems to be able to allocate plenty of money to fancy casinos and stadiums. To me, this is where the “city profitable” idea comes into play, as it seems that these decisions are driven by greed and political corruption. We definitely need to prioritize better. Because at the root of this lighting problem is the crime problem. Every city has some sort of financial issue of some sort. Every city has corruption and poverty, and a lack of jobs. However, no city comes even close to the annual rate of 300 homicides that Detroit has.

An investment in street lighting is the best solution to Detroit’s crime problem. Not only does lighting create real safety, but it creates perceptual safety as well. In order for people to flock to Detroit, they need to *feel* safe. Studies show that street lights in urban areas create a more pleasing environment to an individual, allowing that individual to feel the freedom to go out more often at night. In addition, studies also show that street lighting is viewed worldwide as “the most important physical feature of an environment to affect perceived safety”. (Science Direct, ProQuest) Lighting affects visibility, which is the sense that is shown to recognize and stop crime to the greatest extent. (Science Direct, ProQuest) Lighting has a large psychological impact on how safe people feel. In turn, if people feel safer in Detroit, the city becomes much more appealing to the public. The increase in appeal that more lighting provides is important in stopping crime. If the psychological effects described above apply, increased lighting would cause more nighttime community interaction. People would be more comfortable to sit outside, take a walk, or go out at night. A report issued by the U.S. Department of Justice refers to this as something called “informal surveillance”. Informal surveillance would discourage offenders from commiting crimes, because the chances of being caught increase. The same report states that the combined studies of increased lighting to reduce crime led to a 21 percent decrease in crime. The fact that 44,000 street lights in Detroit are not working gives local offenders the perfect cover to lurk about and cause trouble. Detroit’s old fashioned lighting system provides yet another small sign. Because Detroit’s streetlights are built from the ground up—unlike most cities—criminals have the opportunity to vandalize the lights by stealing the copper wire. ( The Wall Street Journal) This is just one example of how Detroit’s system leads to not only elicit activity, but to lights that are now in disrepair, costing Detroit not only money, but peace of mind as well. Studies done by The University of Virginia show that the extra hour provided by Daylight Savings Time decreased robberies by 51 percent, murder by 43 percent, and rape by 56 percent nationwide. Although this isn’t quite the same as adding street lights, it is the same general concept. More light equals less crime. Adding more street lighting has worked before as well. In the years 1975-1976, new street lighting was added to 2.39 miles of Denver, Colorado, which was considered one of the most dangerous cities in that time. After the street lighting was applied to that area, crime decreased by 11.8 percent. 67 percent of the individuals who were aware of the changes stated that they “felt safer”. When the same study applied new lighting to 113 blocks of Washington, D.C, night robbery and vandalism decreased by 65 percent and by 43 percent respectively, in two years. (popcenter.org/google scholar) Imagine what 1400 new miles of street lighting could do for Detroit.

In order to revive Detroit, we must bring the appeal back to the city. However, we cannot do so if people are constantly feeling threatened. Not only does new lighting provide real safety by discouraging criminal safety, but it creates a psychological feeling of security. If we don’t solve the crime problem, people will continue to migrate towards the suburbs, and Detroit is depending on people moving back in to recreate economic activity. According to Witold Rybczynski, people only come to cities to work and play. However, 40 percent of Detroiters don’t want to do even that. The number of people per square mile in Detroit has decreased 13,249 in 1950 to 5,170 in 2010. (Journal of Urban Affairs) The city cannot afford any more decentralization. Based on the research, an investment in Detroit’s lighting system is the best solution. The only other plausible solution would seem to be to upgrade the police force. However, the budget of the Detroit Police is already 400 million. (CBS Detroit.com) This budget is a good deal more expensive than the estimated figure it would take to repair the lighting system (200-300 million). 400 million dollars also seems like a high budget for a seemingly ineffective force. Detroit has lost 1400 officers in a decade, and has only 16 officers per square mile. (mlive.com) It doesn’t seem that upgrading the police force would be a better solution than upgrading the lighting. This research should matter to every Detroiter who believes that things need to change in Detroit. Our city is bankrupt, and we have no idea where money is really being allocated to. What is really being done to fix Detroit? These are the questions that we need to ask ourselves as a city. When we start asking questions and investigating, we will start making progress. With the fact that lighting has not been invested in for forty years means that we might not even realize what types of benefits it could bring to Detroit and maybe even other crime-ridden cities nationwide.

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