

Advancing Public Safety and Moving Justice Forward

The last few years have been among the most difficult in recent American history. The interconnected problems that have arisen or worsened in the wake of the pandemic, specifically the rise in gun homicides, have rightfully brought conversations about public safety to the forefront. As we move to urgently protect the safety of all Americans we must recall that over the last decade, policymakers and voters in **red, blue, and purple jurisdictions have advanced criminal justice reforms that safely reduced prison and jail populations**, expanding freedom and opportunities to tens of millions of Americans.

A robust body of research built over decades has proven that jail stays and long prison sentences do not reduce crime rates. Meanwhile the harms of mass incarceration are clear: it breaks apart families, destabilizes communities and aggravates the very types of racial and economic inequality that make communities more vulnerable to gun violence. Fortunately, we also have a powerful evidence base about what does work to reduce crime and, in particular, gun violence. We must turn to these solutions now as we protect and advance the critical wins on criminal justice reform and continue the work of making our country both safer and more just.

What’s happening with crime?

THE NUMBERS:

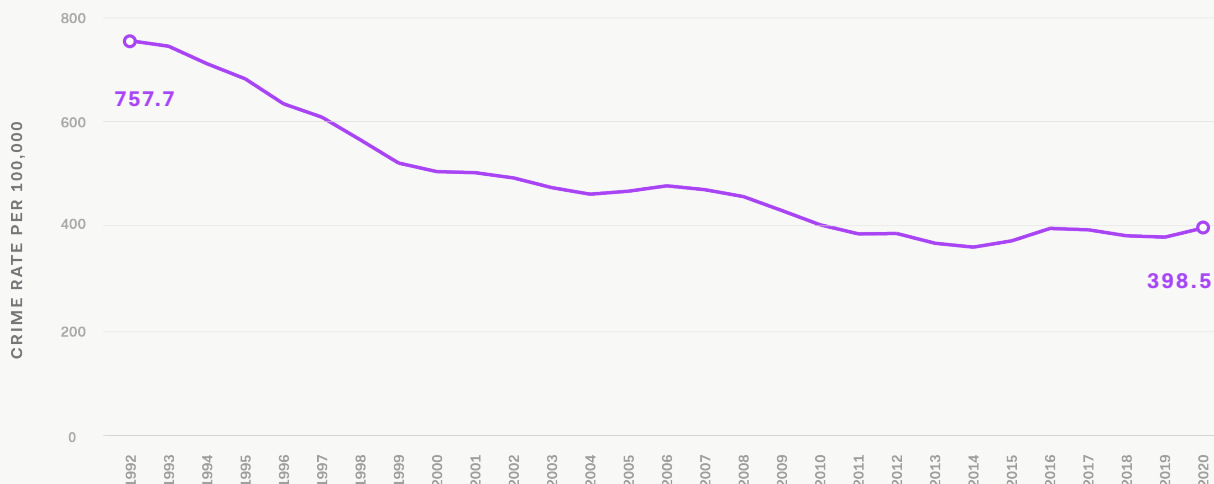
After a quarter century of mostly declining violent crime, the U.S. has seen a concerning surge in gun homicides since the start of the pandemic. Violent crime increased 5.2% from 2019 to 2020 driven primarily by a significant increase in gun related homicides (up nearly 35% from 2019 to 2020).¹ There was a 65% increase in gun sales from 2019 to 2020, and more than 90% of the growth in homicides from 2019 to 2020 was due to firearm homicides.²

The current “crime wave” is more accurately described as a serious increase in America’s long-term gun violence problem.

As of early September 2022, FBI crime data for 2021 has not yet been released and this year’s data will be even less comprehensive than usual due to a switch in data collection systems.³ But available data suggest a slowdown or slight reversal in homicide trends for 2021 and 2022.⁴ Voters remain concerned about gun violence, though recent polling supports a downward trend in the salience of crime as it falls behind inflation in prioritization for many.⁵

The violent crime rate declined by almost half since 1992

Reported violent crimes per 100,000 residents, 1992-2020



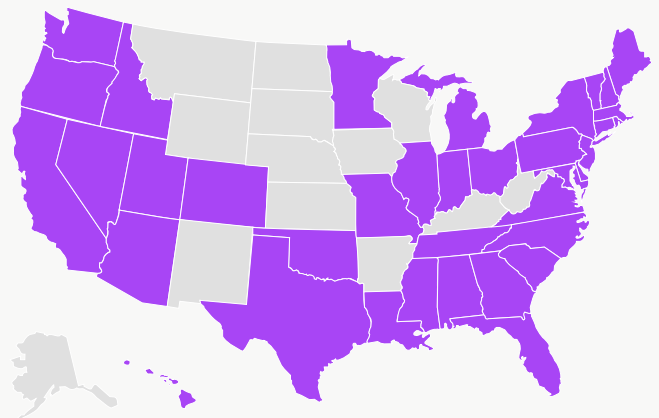
Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Reporting Program

Advancing Public Safety

WHAT DOES NOT WORK TO MAKE US SAFER?

Doubling down on more criminalization and incarceration does not advance safety. Public safety and a more fair and just criminal system are not in conflict. In the past decade, 37 states have experienced reductions in both crime and imprisonment – and crime fell faster in states that reduced imprisonment than in states that increased imprisonment.¹⁴ Decades of research has repeatedly shown that incarceration is among the least effective and most expensive approaches to crime prevention.¹⁵ Incarceration diverts 180 billion taxpayer dollars each year away from investments in people and communities that have proven to address the root causes of crime.¹⁶

37 states have experienced reductions in both crime and imprisonment



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Prisoner Statistics Series; Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Reporting Program.

Incarcerating people often increases the likelihood people will return to jail or prison in the future, destabilizes communities and increases racial disparities in the criminal justice system and larger society.¹⁷ These effects have disproportionate, irreversible and multi-generational negative impacts for entire communities, especially Black communities. Not only do people who have experienced incarceration have a lifetime of reduced earnings and a shortened life expectancy; their children and family members also suffer decreased financial stability and physical and emotional health repercussions.¹⁸

In order to best address the serious increase in gun homicide that occurred in 2020, we must be precise in our framing of the problem. **The overall crime rate—including the rate of murder and other violent and nonviolent crime—remains much lower than at its peak in the 1990s.** For example, people were nearly 80% less likely to be a victim of a violent crime in 2021 compared to 1993.⁶ Despite some media portrayals, property crime reached a historic low in 2020, leading to the 18th consecutive year the overall crime rate declined in the U.S.⁷ Most property and nonviolent crimes continued to decline in 2021.⁸

WHO IS IMPACTED BY THE INCREASE IN GUN HOMICIDES?

Gun violence has increased all across the country: in red states and blue states, in dense cities and in suburban and rural areas. The communities hardest hit by gun violence are also the most harmed by mass incarceration and social inequities worsened by the pandemic such as unemployment, poor access to healthcare, and a lack of affordable housing. **Counties with higher poverty levels had higher rates and greater increases in firearm homicides in 2020.**⁹ Black Americans are 10 times more likely than white Americans to die by gun homicide.¹⁰

WHAT CAUSED THE INCREASE IN GUN HOMICIDES?

The available evidence suggests that likely drivers of the increase in gun violence include sharp increases in unemployment, greater access to guns, stress, and isolation, paired with lack of social support aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹

Although it's hard to identify one simple cause for the homicide increase, there is an enormous amount of data and research showing that **criminal justice reform is not driving increases in crime or violence.** Gun violence rose in cities that have elected reform-minded prosecutors and in cities that did not, and in states that have limited cash bail, defelonedized crimes and reduced jail and prison terms as well as those that have not. In fact, some of the states that have long suffered with the highest incarceration rates are seeing some of the highest rates of murder.¹² Research shows that popularly scapegoated reforms –like bail reform in Texas and New York, changes in prosecution practices in Massachusetts, and a mass commutation in Oklahoma—are working safely without increasing rates of crime or violence.¹³

Voters, too, understand that the criminal justice system

needs more reform. Recent polling showed record-low confidence in the system, with only 14% of Americans reporting strong confidence.¹⁹ Nearly nine-in-ten Black adults polled in 2022 say policing, the judicial process, and the prison system need major changes for Black people to be treated fairly.²⁰ In Oklahoma, 75% of voters polled this summer support reforming the criminal justice system— and 64% are more likely to support a candidate who supports reforming the system.²¹ Voters of all kinds, including victims of crime, support common-sense criminal justice reforms and investments in community-based solutions.²²

WHAT WORKS TO MAKE US SAFER?

There is a compelling and growing body of evidence that investments in long-neglected social services and community-based supports—including access to health care and mental health care, affordable housing and youth employment opportunities—along with targeted community interventions can effectively reduce crime and violence.²³ One recent study found that Medicaid expansion, which increased access to behavioral health care, produced a 20-32% reduction in overall arrest rates in the first three years.²⁴ In New York City, youth participation in a summer jobs program decreased young people's chance of any arrest during the program summer by 17%, and the chance of a felony arrest by 23%.²⁵ In Denver, a randomized control trial demonstrated that providing supportive housing for people with frequent justice system contact resulted in a 40% reduction in arrests.²⁶

Investments in community cohesion and public spaces can reduce neighborhood violence: a multi-year study in Philadelphia found a nearly 22% reduction in homicides associated with city housing repair for low-income homeowners and community clean-up projects.²⁷ Community-based violence intervention programs have also been shown using rigorous research methods to prevent and interrupt cycles of shootings and homicides and to reduce gun violence at a citywide level—with more evidence on the way.²⁸

These solutions are popular with voters and can be brought to scale.²⁹ Nearly eight out of ten voters support federal investments that increase community-based violence prevention workers to help prevent young people from getting involved in crime.³⁰

Among the many community-based solutions that effectively reduce crime and violence, research has shown that:



EXPANDING MEDICAID

led to a 20-32% reduction in arrest rates in three years.



YOUTH SUMMER JOBS

in New York City led to a 23% reduction in felony arrests.



SUPPORTIVE HOUSING

in Denver, CO led to a 40% reduction in arrests for people with frequent justice contact.



NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSING REPAIR

in Philadelphia, PA led to a 22% reduction in homicides



A GUN VIOLENCE INTERVENTION PROGRAM

in Richmond, CA led to 55% fewer deaths and hospital visits.³¹

Americans deserve real solutions to the rise in gun violence. Evidence and experience tells us we can—and we must—have more safety and more justice together.

Endnotes

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