

# Advancing Public Safety *and Moving Justice Forward*

**Every American deserves to be safe in their community. Evidence and experience make clear that safety and justice go hand in hand.** 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<sup>1</sup> to tens of millions of Americans.

Following the massive disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, a sharp increase in gun homicides rightly brought conversations about public safety to the forefront. Thankfully, as the initial shock of the pandemic subsided and communities began to rebuild the social structures that advance safety, homicides began declining in 2022 and are continuing to subside.<sup>2</sup> Preliminary 2023 data shows one of the largest declines in homicides ever recorded,<sup>3</sup> though Americans still face real challenges related to gun violence. We also face challenges related to poverty,<sup>4</sup> such as unmet behavioral health needs and increasing homelessness— problems that incarceration often makes worse.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, in the wake of the pandemic we have also seen some politicians and opponents of criminal justice reform seize on the 2020 gun violence spike to falsely pit criminal justice reform and public safety against one another.

**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 violence. Fortunately, we also have a powerful evidence base about what works to reduce crime and, in particular, gun violence. We must rely on these solutions 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.

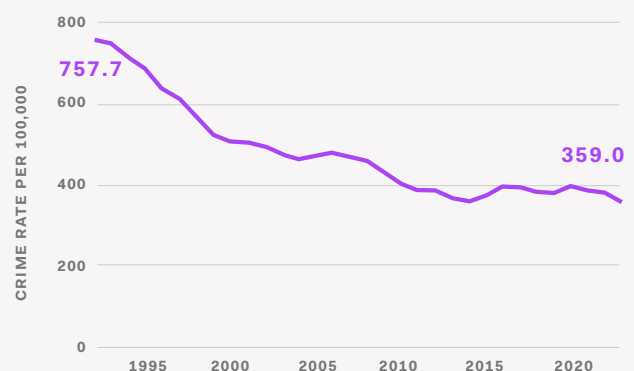
## What’s happening with crime?

A decade of declining crime and incarceration shows that we can have both more safety and more freedom. The U.S. has had a quarter century of mostly declining violent crime, briefly interrupted by the social and economic travails of the COVID-19 pandemic. After an initial surge in gun homicides in 2020 and 2021, 2022 and 2023 have found violent crime declining across the country.

**The overall crime rate remains much lower than at its peak in the 1990s.** For example, people were nearly 70% less likely<sup>6</sup> to be a victim of a violent crime in 2022 compared to 1993. Despite some media portrayals, property crime remains historically low, with official 2022 rates near 2020 rates, and early indications of further declines in 2023. Rates of theft and burglary are down across the country based on initial 2023 data, despite social media claims that "smash and grabs"<sup>7</sup> are on the rise. Many jurisdictions have seen real increases in car thefts over the past several years, but these appear to be primarily driven by viral social media videos<sup>8</sup> that showed how to exploit manufacturing vulnerabilities<sup>9</sup> and steal certain models.

### *The violent crime rate declined by at least half since 1992*

Reported violent crimes per 100,000 residents 1992-2023



Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Reporting Program, \*2023 numbers are preliminary.

## WHAT CAUSED THE FLUCTUATIONS?

In 2020 and 2021, gun violence increased in red and blue states, in cities and rural areas, though the communities that were and are hardest hit by gun violence are also those that have long been the most harmed by mass incarceration. Counties with higher poverty levels had higher rates and greater increases<sup>10</sup> in gun homicides in 2020, and Black Americans are 12 times more likely<sup>11</sup> than white Americans to die by gun homicide. The available evidence<sup>12</sup> suggests that likely drivers of the gun violence spike included sharp increases in unemployment, greater access to guns, stress, and lack of social support aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Though more research remains to be done on the causes of homicide reductions in 2022 and 2023, it is notable that these drops coincided with historic investments in community responses to violence.<sup>13</sup>

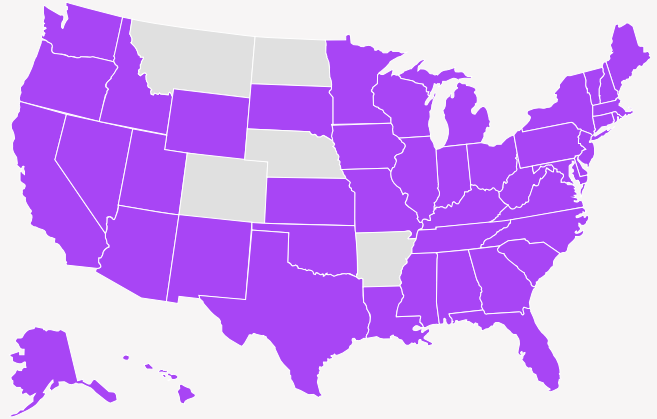
**There is an enormous amount of data and research showing that criminal justice reform did not drive increases in crime or violence.** Gun violence rose in cities that have elected reform-minded prosecutors and in cities that did not, and in states that have limited cash bail, defelonized crimes and reduced jail and prison terms as well as those that have not. 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.<sup>14</sup>

## Advancing Public Safety

### WHAT DOES NOT WORK TO MAKE US SAFER?

Mass incarceration does not make us safe or solve our social problems: public safety and a more fair and just criminal system are not in conflict. From 2012 to 2022, 45 states reduced imprisonment rates and crime rates simultaneously, and crime declined two times as fast in these states as in the five that increased imprisonment.<sup>15</sup> Decades of research has repeatedly shown that incarceration is among the least effective<sup>16</sup> and most expensive approaches to crime prevention. One of the major drivers of mass incarceration are long sentences that waste people's lives and taxpayer dollars without making us safer.<sup>17</sup> More than 200,000 people<sup>18</sup> are currently serving life or virtual life sentences, many of whom could be safely at home and contributing to their communities. Widespread and lengthy incarceration diverts 89 billion taxpayer dollars each year<sup>19</sup> away from investments in people and communities that have proven to address the root causes of crime.

*45 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.

**Nearly 1 in 2 adults**<sup>20</sup> in the U.S. have an immediate family member that has been incarcerated, and, perhaps informed by these high exposure rates, voters understand that the criminal justice system needs more reform. **Nearly eighty percent**<sup>21</sup> of all voters, including nearly two-thirds of Republican voters, support common sense criminal justice reform, and 6 in 10 voters say that a candidate supporting criminal justice reform would make them more likely to vote for that candidate. 6 in 10 voters and **over 70 percent of Black voters**<sup>22</sup> believe that mass incarceration contributes to social problems such as homelessness, public drug use and overdoses. These voters know that defending justice and further reforming our broken criminal justice system is necessary to keeping communities safe, healthy, and whole.

Incarcerating people often increases the likelihood people will return to jail or prison in the future,<sup>23</sup> destabilizes communities and increases racial disparities in the criminal justice system and larger society. 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<sup>24</sup> and a shortened life expectancy<sup>25</sup>; their children and family members also suffer decreased financial stability<sup>26</sup> and physical<sup>27</sup> and emotional health repercussions.

## WHAT WORKS TO MAKE US SAFER?

There is a compelling and growing body of evidence<sup>28</sup> that investments in long-neglected social services and community-based supports—including access to healthcare and mental healthcare, affordable housing and youth employment opportunities—along with targeted community interventions can effectively reduce crime and violence. One recent study found that Medicaid expansion, which increased community access to behavioral health care, produced a 20-32% reduction in overall arrest rates<sup>29</sup> in the first three years. Medicaid enrollment for people coming home from state prison reduced reincarceration by 16% and increased employment by 25%.<sup>30</sup> 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%,<sup>31</sup> and the chance of a felony arrest by 23%. 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.<sup>32</sup>

Investments in community cohesion and public spaces can reduce neighborhood violence: a multi-year study in Philadelphia found a nearly 22% reduction in homicides<sup>33</sup> associated with city housing repair for low-income homeowners and a nearly 30% reduction in gun violence<sup>34</sup> associated with cleaning up vacant lots. Community-based violence intervention programs<sup>35</sup> 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.

### **Reducing our reliance on incarceration increases racial and economic opportunity, strengthening our communities.**

Though Black people, and particularly Black men, are still disproportionately represented in prison and jail, the past decade of criminal justice reform has produced meaningful gains for Black communities.<sup>37</sup> For Black men, the lifetime risk of incarceration declined by nearly half<sup>38</sup> from 1999 to 2019—from 1 in 3 Black men imprisoned in their lifetime to 1 in 5. While still unacceptably high, this reduction in incarceration rates means that Black men are now more likely to graduate college than go to prison, a reverse from the decade before.

*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 Chicago, IL, led to 65% fewer arrests for shootings and homicides among participants.<sup>36</sup>

**Safety and justice go hand in hand. Taking safety seriously means investing in strong communities and reducing our reliance on incarceration.**

# Endnotes

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