

The Crime Trends Working Group reviewed the recent CCJ report, [Crime Trends in U.S. Cities: Mid-Year 2023 Update](#), which compared rates of violent and property crimes in the first half of 2023 to the same period in 2022. Among other findings, the analysis showed that among the 30 cities in the CCJ sample that reported homicide data, the number of murders in the first half of 2023 fell by 9.4% compared to the first half of 2022. In contrast, motor vehicle thefts rose by 33.5% in the first half of the year, representing 23,974 more stolen vehicles in the 32 cities that reported motor vehicle thefts.

Homicide Rates: Pre-Pandemic Trends, 2023 Decline, and Possible Explanations

Homicide rates are higher today than they were in 2019, the year prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and racial justice protests of 2020. There were 24% more homicides during the first half of 2023 than during the first half of 2019 in the study cities. 

Source: [Crime Trends in U.S. Cities: Mid-Year 2023 Update](#)

Members began the meeting by discussing explanations for the sharp increase in homicides that began in most sample cities in May 2020 and has subsequently declined, albeit not to 2019 levels. Proposed explanations shared by members and discussed by the Working Group included the following:

- **Routine Activity Theory:** The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the lives of virtually all Americans. However, these disruptions may have had an especially pronounced impact on young men living in neighborhoods characterized by high levels of violence. [Routine activity theory](#) argues that crime stems from the combination of a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of capable guardians. Early in the pandemic, in addition to dealing with the same economic stresses and anxieties that affected the entire population, young men in high crime neighborhoods—many of whom had

experienced high levels of trauma—were also forced to remain in close proximity to people with whom they had serious and unresolved disputes. Members discussed the extent to which this theory could explain the homicide spike that began in May 2020.

- **Police Legitimacy:** The homicide increase in many cities began almost immediately after the murder of George Floyd, as protests erupted in cities across the United States. That has led to a theory that a decline in perceived legitimacy of law enforcement combined with an increase in legal cynicism fueled the homicide surge. One working group member questioned that explanation, noting that police legitimacy was already low in areas with high levels of violence.
- **“De-Policing”:** A “de-policing” narrative emphasizes the idea that police pulled back from traditional police activities in response to protests and that may have contributed to the spike in homicides. However, one member expressed the belief that “de-policing” is poorly understood, and prior to the protests, police had already pulled back from making arrests in order to avoid contracting COVID-19. Perhaps even more importantly, court systems had largely shut down, further disincentivizing police from making arrests. Working group members discussed whether the fact that many other crime trends, particularly property crimes, moved in a different direction strengthened or weakened the “de-policing” explanation.
- **Gun Sales:** Members also noted the increase in gun sales, although the point was made that most new gun purchases were made by existing gun owners.
- **Bail Reform and Progressive Prosecution:** Members discussed the claim that criminal justice reforms such as bail reform in New York or less vigorous prosecution by so-called “progressive” prosecutors had caused homicide to spike. The fact that homicide rates had declined for the past year-and-a-half made that theory “less credible” in the eyes of some members. Other members put more credence in this explanation, noting that local law enforcement frequently complained of rearresting offenders and charging them with increasingly serious crimes during the period of the homicide increase.
- **Drug Markets:** Members also noted that violent gun crime appeared, in some areas, to be correlated with changes in drug markets, particularly as the markets related to a rise in the use of fentanyl.
- **Crime-Reduction Interventions:** Local and state authorities in many areas have responded to the homicide surge with considerable urgency, deploying new community violence intervention initiatives and focusing law enforcement on the small number of people deeply involved in gun violence. Several members said they thought these

interventions likely contributed to the homicide decline, albeit in ways that are hard to measure.

Motor Vehicle Theft Rates: Pre-Pandemic Trends, 2023 Spike, and Possible Explanations

The Working Group then turned its attention to the increase in motor vehicle theft. Motor vehicle thefts continued their upward trend through the first half of 2023.

Source: [Crime Trends in U.S. Cities: Mid-Year 2023 Update](#)

There were 33.5% more motor vehicle thefts from January through June 2023 compared to the first half of 2022, in 32 cities with available data. The number of vehicle thefts from January to June 2023 was 104.3% higher than in the first half of 2019, the year before the pandemic and protests over police violence. Members discussed several factors that may have contributed to the 2023 spike, including:

- **Kia / Hyundai Theft and Juvenile Crime:** Members generally agreed that a problem with specific Kia and Hyundai models (namely, [their lack of “immobilizers”](#)) continues to be a factor in the ongoing surge in motor vehicle thefts. Members then discussed the possibility that the comparative ease of stealing certain Kia and Hyundai models could have inspired what now appears to be a broader wave of auto theft.
- **Youth Involvement:** Motor vehicle theft is often described as a crime committed by youth and young people (including people who watched videos on how to [steal cars on TikTok](#)). Members discussed whether this was the case and, if so, whether motor vehicle

theft was emerging as a “keystone” crime – a type of crime used in the commission of other crimes.

- **Organized Crime and International Markets:** Members also discussed emerging evidence that a significant portion of motor vehicle theft could be driven by organized crime, with connections to international illicit markets. According to this theory, motor vehicle theft is emerging as part of a new black market that is starting to drive a significant upsurge in property crime. Based on this, members discussed the idea that the heavy emphasis on TikTok and youth involvement could be misguided. However, others said that law enforcement in at least some cities with high levels of motor vehicle theft continue to see considerable youth involvement. Cities such as [St. Paul](#) have also seen successes reducing auto theft by focusing law enforcement units on organized stolen car rings.

Members discussed devoting future meetings to specific topics, including further exploration of the causes of the homicide increase and decrease, the prospects of crime forecasting, and the areas where public health reporting and crime data converge (or should converge).