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After an historic surge starting in 2020, the homicide rate in the United States has declined sharply. Over the past three years, homicides have fallen by an average of 16% per year; this includes CCJ's finding of a 21% drop from 2024 to 2025 in a sample of 35 large cities. If a similar decline is reflected in national data, the U.S. homicide rate in 2025 would be the lowest observed since at least 1900 (see Figure 1). Applying a 20% decline from 2024 to 2025 suggests a national homicide rate of 4.0 per 100,000 residents in 2025, eclipsing the previous historic low of 4.4 per 100,000 recorded in 2014.

Figure 1. U.S. Homicide Rate and Year-Over-Year Percent Change, 1900–2025

While the downward trajectory is clear, the reasons behind it—and the likelihood it will endure—are less certain. Researchers and practitioners have pointed to a range of possible influences, including changes in criminal justice policies and programs, shifts in the use of technology, and broader social, economic, and cultural trends.

To help inform public understanding and policy discussions, the Council on Criminal Justice invited a group of leading experts to share their perspectives on two questions:

- What are the primary factors driving the recent decline in homicides?
- How low can the homicide rate realistically go in the years ahead?

Their responses, edited lightly for clarity and length, reflect a diversity of views about the relative importance of policy, social, and behavioral factors, as well as differing expectations about whether recent gains will continue, plateau, or reverse. Together, these expert assessments underscore both the progress achieved and the uncertainty that remains as the U.S. enters the next phase of its post-pandemic crime trajectory.

Respondents included:

- Ruth Abaya: Abaya is senior director of Health Systems and CVI Integration at The Health Alliance for Violence Prevention and an attending emergency physician at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Her work focuses on gun violence prevention.

- Shani Buggs: Buggs is an associate professor at the University of California-Davis

Health. She is a public health and public policy researcher focused on understanding the causes, consequences, and prevention of firearm and community violence.

- Thaddeus L. Johnson: Johnson is a senior fellow at the Council on Criminal Justice, an assistant professor of criminal justice and criminology at Georgia State University, and a former Memphis police official.

- Emily Owens: Owens is the Deans' Professor of Criminology and Economics at the University of California, Irvine, and a visiting professor at the London School of Economics. Her research focuses on the economics of crime.

- Alexis R. Piquero: Piquero is chair of the Department of Sociology and Criminology at the University of Miami and a former director of the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics. His research focuses on criminal careers, violence, policing, and evidence-based crime policy.

- John Roman: Roman is a senior fellow and director of the Center on Public Safety and Justice at NORC at the University of Chicago. He is an economist whose research focuses on crime trends, public safety, and criminal justice policy evaluation.

- Patrick Sharkey: Sharkey is the William S. Tod Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs at Princeton University. His research focuses on violence, neighborhood inequality, policing, and the social and institutional conditions that shape crime trends.

What is Driving the Decline in Homicides?

- **Ruth Abaya**: The historic reduction seen in a number of cities around the country is likely to be multifactorial. One likely contribution includes significant investments in community violence intervention (CVI) strategies that several of these jurisdictions have made since violence surged in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. These strategies are specific and intentional—they engage those at the highest risk of exposure to violence, providing a range of services intended to address trauma and create lasting change. These models engage various key stakeholders, including community-based organizations, health systems and public health departments. Given that in some cities violence has dropped beyond pre-pandemic levels to historic lows, it appears that recovery from the pandemic, while it might have contributed, is unlikely to be the only

significant factor.

- **Shani Buggs**: Beginning in 2023, and continuing in 2024, cities of varying sizes and across geographic regions saw impressive reductions in homicides. In 2025, many of those same cities experienced record or historic reductions, including Birmingham, AL; Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York, Modesto, CA, Oakland, Philadelphia, and Richmond, CA. We do not have reliable, multi-sector data or comparable contextual information available across jurisdictions to definitively identify—now or perhaps ever—what drove these declines.

  That said, as cities have returned to more stable routines, employment levels, and social supports following the COVID-19 pandemic, many jurisdictions with dramatic drops in homicide share key elements that warrant further exploration as potential reduction mechanisms:
  - Record investments in and coordination of CVI and violence prevention efforts, often supported by federal American Rescue Plan Act funds
  - Increases in social support, youth development, and community stabilization services following the pandemic
  - Higher clearance rates for homicide and other serious violent crimes
  - Intentional, focused efforts by law enforcement and prosecutors to address violence (e.g., precision policing, prioritization of individuals with repeat violence-related offenses)
  - City leadership adopting a whole-government approach to public safety, rather than relying solely on police or carceral responses

- **Thaddeus Johnson:** The homicide decline likely reflects several forces moving in the same direction, not one magic solution. Criminal justice factors mattered. Many cities focused enforcement and prevention on the small number of neighborhoods and groups driving a large share of shootings, improved shooting investigations, and got the courts moving again. As prosecutors and courts worked through backlogged cases, some high-risk repeat offenders were detained, sentenced, or held longer pretrial, which reduced violence through incapacitation concentrated in the places hit hardest.

This matters because the largest jump in gun deaths and gunshot-related disability was among Black residents—particularly among young Black men—which underscores how concentrated the surge and the response have been. Violence interruption, hospital-based programs, and other reforms likely helped at the margins by cooling conflicts and improving follow-through.

Broader social shifts also played a role. As the pandemic period eased, daily routines normalized, more people were out and about, and informal guardianship returned—more "eyes on the street," bystanders, and community presence that can help defuse conflicts before they escalate. But national averages can hide what is happening in some neighborhoods. The key question is which neighborhoods are sustaining gains, and which are not.

- **Emily Owens:** Here are the data stories that jump out at me. Homicide, like most other violent crimes, appears generally to have been on a slow, relatively steady decline since 2020-2021. Nationwide, the overall trend is, and always will be, driven by big cities like New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, simply because those are where most of the people live. However, the city-by-city results suggest that violent crime rates have generally fallen everywhere, including in smaller cities with higher rates of violent crime, such as St Louis, Baltimore, and Detroit.

  The consistency of the homicide decline, both across cities and over time, makes me inclined to think this has to do with larger social movements, temporarily disrupted by COVID-19 when the world turned upside down, than with any one particular thing one particular city might be doing.

  Property crime, on the other hand, does seem to be evolving differently in different cities, although changes in the propensity of people to report these offenses can sometimes make official data hard to interpret.

- **Alexis Piquero:** What makes the homicide decline big news is that it was not just a local trend, but a national one, implying that the forces contributing to falling crime rates in America are national in scope. Looking at what may underlie this shift, it appears we are seeing a return to evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies that rely on both police and non-police approaches. These are the kinds of

strategies we know address the short-, medium-, and long-term factors that drive violence, and are consistent with those recommended by the Council on Criminal Justice Violent Crime Working Group in its Ten Essential Actions report. Because many of these strategies have been operating simultaneously, it is difficult to pinpoint one or two specific drivers of the decline. Ultimately, however, what matters most is the drop itself—and the relief it brings to people and communities long plagued by violence.

- **John Roman:** I see the primary driver of the ongoing crime decline as the result of a variety of federal responses to the pandemic. Data from 2024 and 2025 indicate that the decline has been broad-based, with almost all large cities, as well as suburban and rural areas, experiencing simultaneous decreases. The FBI national crime statistics for 2024 (the most recent year for which we have federal data, because 2025 numbers have not yet been released) show declines across all violent and property crime categories. This suggests that the decline is caused by national, not local, forces.

  The largest driver of the decline appears to be the federal American Rescue Plan Act, which allocated $362 billion to state, local, tribal, and territorial governments to help address pandemic-related impacts. These funds helped stabilize local governments reeling from lost pandemic revenue, and included broad prevention funding for employees who work most directly with young people at risk of violence and victimization, including teachers, counselors, community health workers, and other support personnel. A smaller but important federal investment, the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, provided $15 billion to states for targeted, primarily community-based services, including community violence prevention, mental health services, and school safety.

- **Patrick Sharkey:** Explanations for the three-year decline in violence should be thought of as hypotheses, as very little causal evidence has been produced on the rise of violence in 2020-2021 and the fall of violence from 2023 onward.

  The most likely explanations for the drop in violence are twofold. First, the conditions that contributed to the sharp rise in violence in 2020 and 2021 receded as the pandemic subsided. Institutions of collective life reopened, the spike in gun sales plateaued, changes to local drug markets faded, and heightened tension between community residents and police eased.

  Second, hundreds of billions of dollars in federal funding were used to stabilize local

governments, bolster police forces, and support community organizations that have become more effective in reducing violence. This funding allowed cities and states to maintain services and social supports while also investing in novel approaches to responding more effectively to gun violence.

What Comes Next? And How Low Might the Homicide Rate Go?

- **Roman:** My forecast for 2026 is that there will be greater variation in crime than in 2025. Under the American Rescue Plan Act, funds had to be allocated by the end of 2024 and disbursed by the end of 2026. By now, most of this funding has been spent. This means that an important policy lever used by state and local governments is no longer available. The same is true for Bipartisan Safer Communities Act funding, some of which ended in 2025. The upshot is that the gravitational pull of lower crime from massive federal spending will wane substantially this year.

  States and local governments used these funds in different ways and have varying access to sustainable resources to replace federal dollars. Jurisdictions that used these funds for crime suppression are likely to see the quickest upticks in crime, while those that invested in broader prevention may experience a slowing of recent crime declines. The biggest unknown for 2026 is the effect of the federalization of policing through the rapid expansion of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and other federal law enforcement agencies. This could deter crime. Or, if trust in policing is eroded, it could contribute to increases instead.

- **Buggs:** I dearly hope that rates continue to decline. Any one life violently lost is devastating to loved ones, forever. The benefits of lives saved and increasing safety for families, communities, and our society, cannot be fully quantified in dollars. We should be doubling and tripling down on what community members and local government leaders see as effective in contributing to these homicide reductions. Yet, in 2025, the federal administration made deep cuts to violence prevention and public safety funding. These cuts disrupted critical services and partnerships among community-based organizations and state and local agencies dedicated to victim services, housing, education, and workforce development, reentry, substance use disorder treatment, and healing supports.

  At the same time, the administration radically increased funding for federal patrol and

ICE operations, expanding their ranks and intensifying surveillance, detention, and violence against residents with seeming impunity. Meanwhile, the costs of living and healthcare continue to rise, unemployment and poverty are increasing, and pathways to stability are being cut. While many agencies remain committed to violence intervention and prevention, it is hard to remain hopeful. Violence begets violence, and throughout our nation's history, violence at the structural level has shaped violence at the interpersonal level.

- **Johnson:** I expect the national homicide rate to level off or keep falling, but more slowly, and with meaningful variation across place. Early declines often reflect a retreat from extreme peaks; sustaining further progress requires steady, targeted work, including higher shooting clearance rates, focused deterrence, and strong reentry supports.

  There is also a geographical risk being overlooked. Even when homicides fall in large cities, violence can shift rather than disappear. Recent analyses using the National Crime Victimization Survey suggest the urban-nonurban divide has weakened, with suburban and rural areas experiencing increases in robbery, aggravated assault, and nonfatal gun victimization. If prevention and enforcement capacity remain concentrated in cities, non-urban areas may be less prepared for spikes in violence. Another risk is spillover from federal immigration operations and the confusion and uncertainty they create. When communities fear that contact with police could draw federal attention, trust can erode, crimes may go unreported, and the places that need the most help can become harder to stabilize.

  Nationally, homicide rates are already below mid-2010s levels. The key test is whether progress extends to the highest-risk neighborhoods and emerging non-urban hot spots.

- **Owens:** In the absence of other large changes, I would expect homicide rates to continue to decline. However, it is not clear that the political and institutional conditions that shape how local governments function will remain stable.

  Effective policing requires a continuous, careful practice, where officers must exert their authority to resolve conflict and protect the public in a legitimate way. Police officers have the right to use force and the responsibility to use that right in a way that makes the public feel more safe, not less safe. This is an incredibly hard thing to do.

One lesson from the past 20 years is that trust in all police falls when the public learns about individual instances of excessive or unwarranted force. While the recent highly publicized instances of violence against civilians by law enforcement (up to and including lethal force) have mostly involved federal agents, the challenging environment created by these events makes me concerned about how long members of local law enforcement will be able to productively work with their communities.

- **Sharkey:** Violence is too complex to forecast into the future, because it is an emergent phenomenon that can build on itself; as a result, changes in the level of violence cannot be understood as the result of a simple combination of a set of causal factors. That said, the sunsetting of federal stimulus and recovery funds, combined with the continued prevalence of circulating guns and the extreme levels of concentrated disadvantage in U.S. cities, means that American cities remain vulnerable to surges of violence similar to those experienced in 2020.

- **Abaya:** I cannot make a specific prediction about how low homicide rates will go, because my best guess is that future trends will be variable. Some jurisdictions may be able to hang on to their investments in CVI and other violence prevention strategies despite cuts in federal funding and continue to see gains, while others may not, making it difficult to predict what this will mean for national rates.

  In the near term, we are likely to hang on to recent gains in many cities, in part because city leadership has been vocal about these reductions and is under significant pressure to sustain them. Over time, however, the impact of reductions in violence prevention and intervention funding is likely to catch up, particularly if civil unrest continues to increase.

  For these reasons, I'll stop short of stating a clear national direction, and instead expect homicide trends to remain heterogeneous across the country.

- **Piquero:** Making predictions is difficult, and often risky, but I am an optimist. I believe that if we support the crime prevention and intervention efforts currently underway, we can continue to reduce violence on our nation's streets. What I hope to see is not a specific "low" number per se, but a continued decline in crime and violence in America. Now is not the time to take our foot off the prevention-and-intervention pedal. Quite the

contrary, we need to double down and further invest in what works, right here and right now, for the next generation of kids. We can prevent crime if we invest in people and in places using strategies well-supported by research and evidence.