

Pandemic, Social Unrest, and Crime in U.S. Cities

September 2021 Update

RICHARD ROSENFELD

Curators' Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Missouri - St. Louis

ERNESTO LOPEZ

Research Specialist, Council on Criminal Justice

Council on Criminal Justice
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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Richard Rosenfeld is the Curators' Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Missouri - St. Louis. His research focuses on crime trends and crime control policy. Professor Rosenfeld is a Fellow and former President of the American Society of Criminology.

Ernesto Lopez Jr. is the Council's Research Specialist and a doctoral student at the University of Missouri – St. Louis.

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Summary

- + This study updates and supplements previous reports released in [July](#), [September](#), and [November](#) of 2020 and in [January](#), [May](#), and [July](#) of 2021 with additional crime data through the first three quarters (January-September) of 2021. It examines weekly crime rates for ten violent, property, and drug offenses in 27 American cities. Not all cities reported data for each offense.
- + During the first three quarters of 2021, homicide rates declined from their recent peak in the summer of 2020, but remained above the levels of the prior three years. The number of homicides rose by 4% compared to the first three quarters of 2020 (an increase of 126 homicides).
- + Even with the 2021 increase, the homicide rate for the cities studied was just over half what it was for those cities in the early 1990s (16 deaths per 100,000 residents versus 28 per 100,000 in 1993).
- + Aggravated and gun assault rates were also higher in the first three quarters of 2021 than in the same period of 2020. Aggravated assaults increased by 3%, while gun assaults rose by 0.4%.
- + Burglary, larceny, and drug offense rates were lower in the first three quarters of 2021 than during the first three quarters of 2020. Residential burglary, non-residential burglary, larceny, and drug offense rates dropped by 10%, 11%, 5%, and 14%, respectively, from the same period in 2020. Motor vehicle theft rates were 13% higher in the first three quarters of 2021 than the year before.
- + Data on domestic violence shows that roughly the same number of incidents occurred in the first nine months of 2021 as the year before. But this result is based on just 13 of the 27 cities studied and should be viewed with caution.
- + In response to elevated rates of homicide and serious assaults, the authors conclude that urgent action is required. As the pandemic subsides, pursuing crime-control strategies of proven effectiveness and enacting needed policing reforms will be essential to achieving durable reductions in violent crime in our cities.
- + In July, the Council on Criminal Justice established a Violent Crime Working Group to offer guidance to policymakers on concrete solutions to address violence now. More information and recent guidance from the Group can be found [here](#).

Introduction

This report updates our previous studies of crime changes during the COVID-19 pandemic, extending the data through the first three quarters (January-September) of 2021. The results are generally consistent with those of our earlier work and our conclusions have not changed: as the pandemic subsides, long lasting reductions in violence and crime will require cities to adopt evidence-based crime-control strategies and long-needed reforms to policing.

The 27 cities included in the current study (see Appendix I for full list) range from Norfolk, VA, the smallest, with 245,000 residents, to Los Angeles, the largest city in the sample, with 3.97 million residents. The mean population of the cities for which crime data were available is approximately 849,945, while the median population is approximately 617,790.

For this report, we assessed weekly changes over time in the following ten crimes: homicide, aggravated assault, gun assault, domestic violence, robbery, residential burglary, nonresidential burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, and drug offenses, with a special emphasis on homicides. The crime data were obtained from online portals of city police departments that provided weekly data for the period between January 2018 and September 2021. Offense counts were converted to weekly crime rates per 100,000 city residents for analysis. The crime data are subject to revision, and offense classifications varied somewhat across the cities. Not all of the cities reported data for each of the crimes or for each week. The total number of cities reporting crimes ranged from 24 for robbery and motor vehicle theft to 13 for gun assault and domestic violence. Homicide data were available for 22 cities.

KEY TAKEAWAY

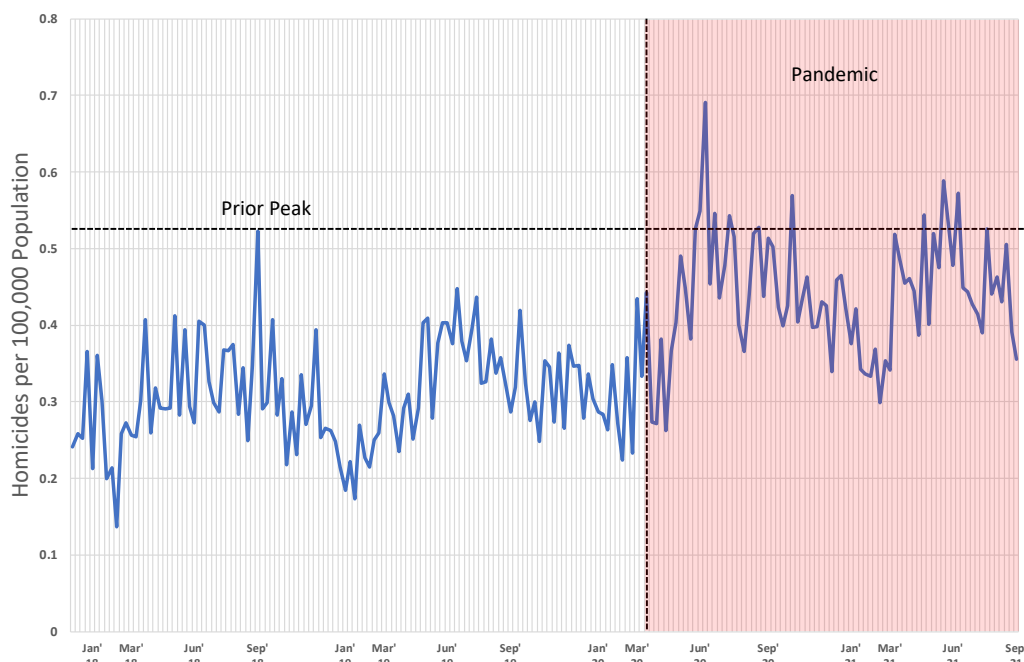
Our conclusions have not changed: As the pandemic subsides, long-lasting reductions in violence and crime will require pursuing evidence-based crime-control strategies and enacting long-needed reforms to policing.

Changes in Violent, Property, and Drug Offenses

HOMICIDE

Figure 1 displays the average weekly homicide rate in the 22 cities for which such data were available (see Appendix I). Our analysis identified a rough cyclical pattern in the homicide rate over time. The rate rose sharply, exceeding the previous seasonal peak, immediately after George Floyd's May 2020 murder, which sparked nationwide protests against police violence. Homicide levels remained elevated through the summer before decreasing through the late fall of 2020 and the winter of 2021. Homicides rose again in the spring and summer of 2021. The number of homicides during the first three quarters of 2021 was 4% greater than during the same period in 2020. In the 22 cities studied, there were 126 more homicides between January and September of 2021 than during the same timeframe the year before (see Appendix II for city-level figures).

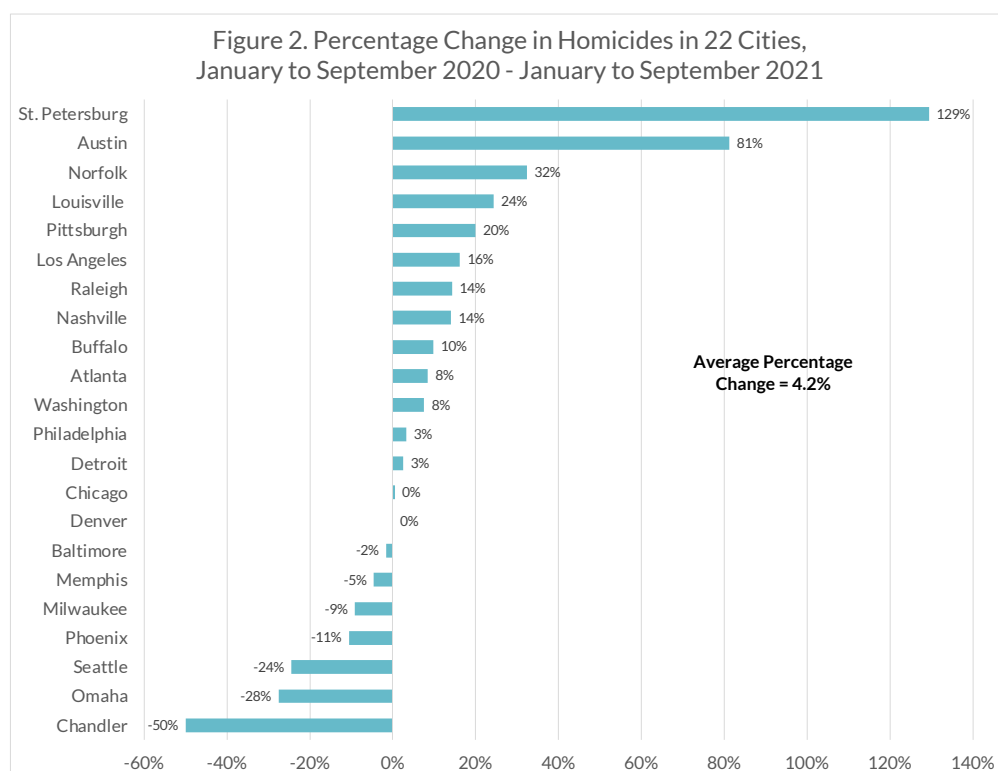
Figure 1. Average Weekly Homicide Rate in 22 Cities, January 2018 - September 2021



The homicide rise of 2020 has continued well into 2021, but at a slower pace. In the first three quarters of 2020, the number of homicides in the 22 cities studied rose by 36% over the same timeframe in 2019; that compared to a 4% increase recorded between the first

three quarters of 2020 and 2021. Homicide increases above and beyond normal seasonal changes remain deeply troubling and require immediate action from policymakers, as we discuss below. Despite the recent increases, however, homicide rates remain well below historical highs. On an annualized basis, the homicide rate during the first three quarters of 2021 for the 22 cities studied was 43% below the rate for those cities in the early 1990s (16 deaths per 100,000 residents versus 28 per 100,000 in 1993).

In order to explore the variation across cities during the first nine months of 2021, Figure 2 shows the percentage change between January and September of 2020 and January and September of 2021 in the number of homicides in the 22 cities for which we obtained data. Fourteen of the 22 cities reported increases in homicide rates, ranging from .5% in Chicago to 129% in St. Petersburg. One city (Denver) saw no change in homicide, while seven cities experienced a reduction, although the 50% decrease in Chandler, AZ, was based on a small number of homicides (ten between January and September of 2021 versus five the year before). The additional 56 homicides that occurred in the three largest cities in the sample (Los Angeles, Chicago, and Philadelphia) accounted for over 40% of the total homicide rise in the 22 cities between the first three quarters of 2020 and the first three quarters of 2021.



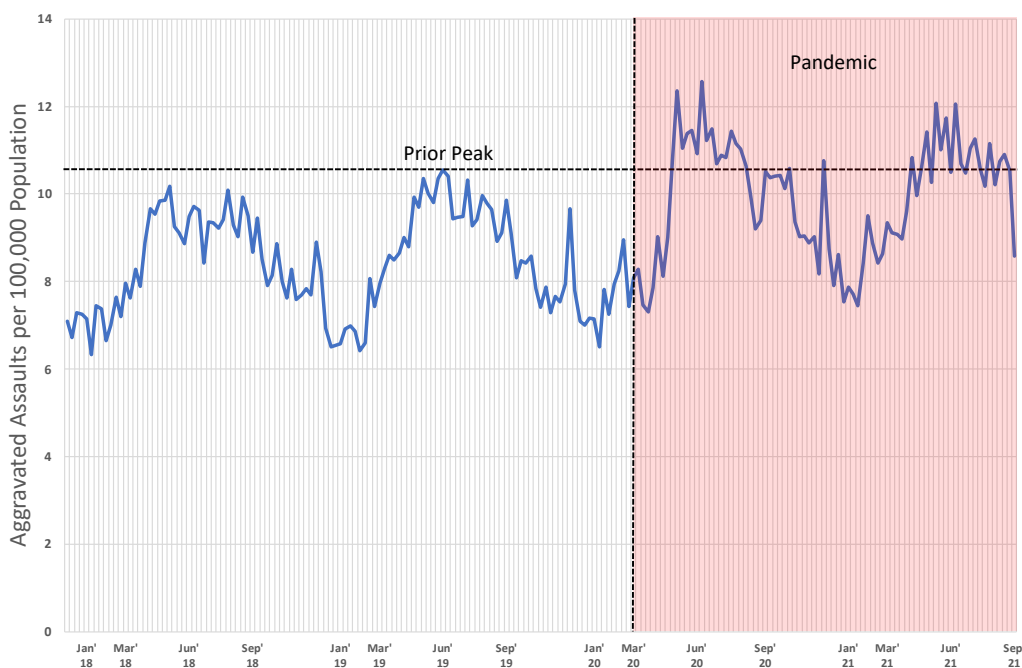
KEY TAKEAWAY

The number of homicides was 4% higher in the first three quarters of 2021 – 126 more homicides – than the year before. The increase in homicide slowed during 2021.

AGGRAVATED ASSAULT

Aggravated assaults are assaults that are committed with a deadly weapon or result in or threaten serious bodily injury to the victim. As shown in Figure 3, the average weekly aggravated assault rate in the 17 cities with available data exhibited a clear cyclical pattern over time, rising during the late spring and summer months and falling during the fall and winter. Like the homicide rate, the aggravated assault rate peaked during the summer of 2020 at levels that surpassed those of the previous peak. The rates fell through the remainder of the year, before rising again during the first half of 2021. The number of aggravated assaults during the first three quarters of 2021 was 3% higher than in the first three quarters of 2020. There were 1,515 more aggravated assaults in the first three quarters of 2021 than the year before.

Figure 3. Average Weekly Aggravated Assault Rate in 17 Cities, January 2018 - September 2021



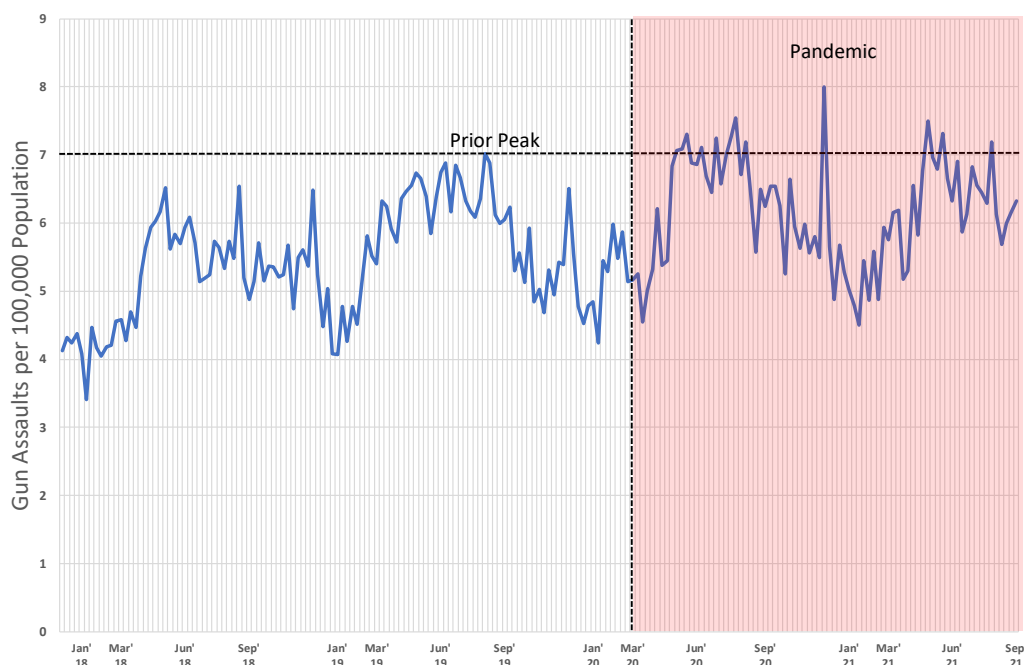
KEY TAKEAWAY

The number of aggravated assaults was 3% higher in the first three quarters of 2021 – 1,515 more aggravated assaults – than the year before.

GUN ASSAULT

Gun assaults are aggravated assaults committed with a firearm. The weekly gun assault rate in the 13 cities with available data exhibited a cyclical trend over time, peaked during the summer of 2020, and peaked again in the spring and summer of 2021. The number of gun assaults was 0.4% higher during the first three quarters of 2021 than in the first three quarters of 2020. There were 109 more gun assaults in the first three quarters of 2021 than during the same period the year before. Given the small number of cities on which these results are based, they should be viewed with caution.¹

Figure 4. Average Weekly Gun Assault Rate in 13 Cities, January 2018 - September 2021



KEY TAKEAWAY

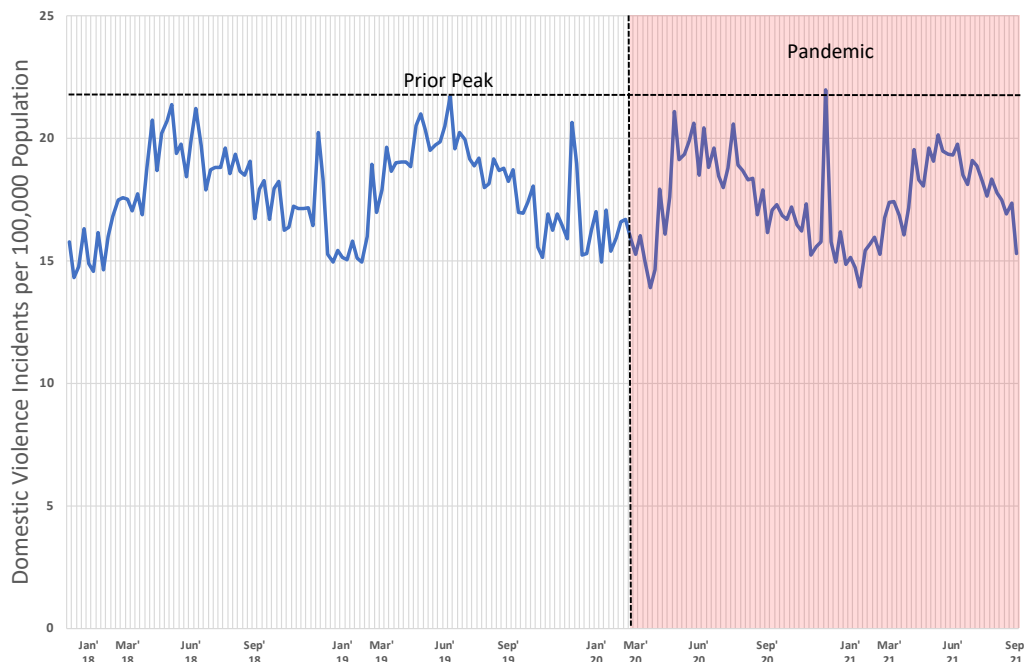
The number of gun assaults was 0.4% higher in the first nine months of 2021 – 19 more gun assaults – than the year before. The result should be viewed with caution because it is based on data from just 13 cities.

¹ A sizable spike in gun assaults occurred during the third week of December in 2020. The spike resulted from a single outlier, Detroit, which recorded a gun assault rate of 49 per 100,000 population that week. The city with the next highest rate of gun assaults the same week was Philadelphia, with 7 per 100,000 residents.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence consists primarily of aggravated and so-called simple assaults. The latter crime is committed without a dangerous weapon or the infliction of serious bodily injury on the victim. The weekly domestic violence rate exhibited a cyclical pattern over time, with no evident change during the pandemic over previous years. The number of domestic violence cases was essentially unchanged in the first three quarters of 2021 compared with the same period in 2020. There were 53 more domestic violence incidents between January and September of 2021 than during the same period the year before, an increase of just .06%. But these results are based on only 13 cities for which we were able to obtain domestic violence data and should be viewed with caution.

Figure 5. Average Weekly Domestic Violence Rate in 13 Cities, January 2018 - September 2021



KEY TAKEAWAY

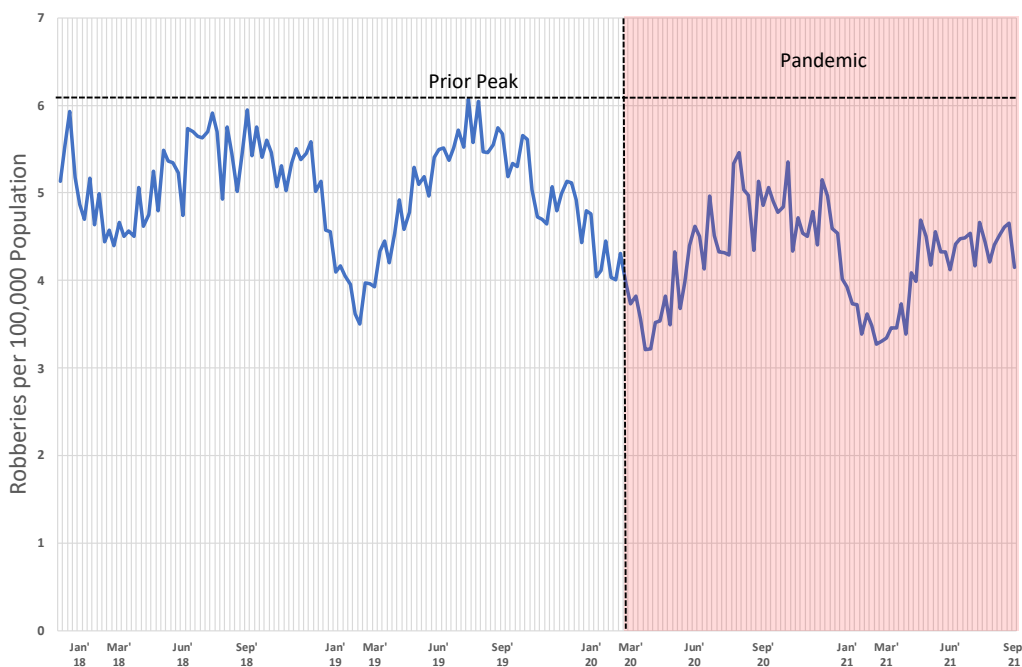
The number of domestic violence cases was .06% higher in the first three quarters of 2021 – 53 more incidents – than the year before. This result should be viewed with caution because it is based on data from just 13 cities.

In addition, a previously released Council on Criminal Justice [systematic review](#), which was based on a broader array of information sources, documented an 8.1% increase in domestic violence incidents after jurisdictions imposed pandemic-related lockdown orders in the spring of 2020.²

ROBBERY

Robberies are thefts committed with force or the threat of force. The average weekly robbery rate in the 24 cities with available data fell during the pandemic. The number of robberies was 6% lower during the first three quarters of 2021 than during the same period in 2020. The decrease means that there were 2,144 fewer robberies during the first nine months of 2021 than in the first nine months of the previous year.

Figure 6. Average Weekly Robbery Rate in 24 Cities,
January 2018 - September 2021



² There was a notable spike in domestic violence during the third week of December 2021. As with gun assault, the spike was driven by Detroit, which recorded a domestic violence rate of 84 per 100,000 population during that week. The next highest rate during the same week was in Memphis, which reported 46 domestic violence cases per 100,000 residents.

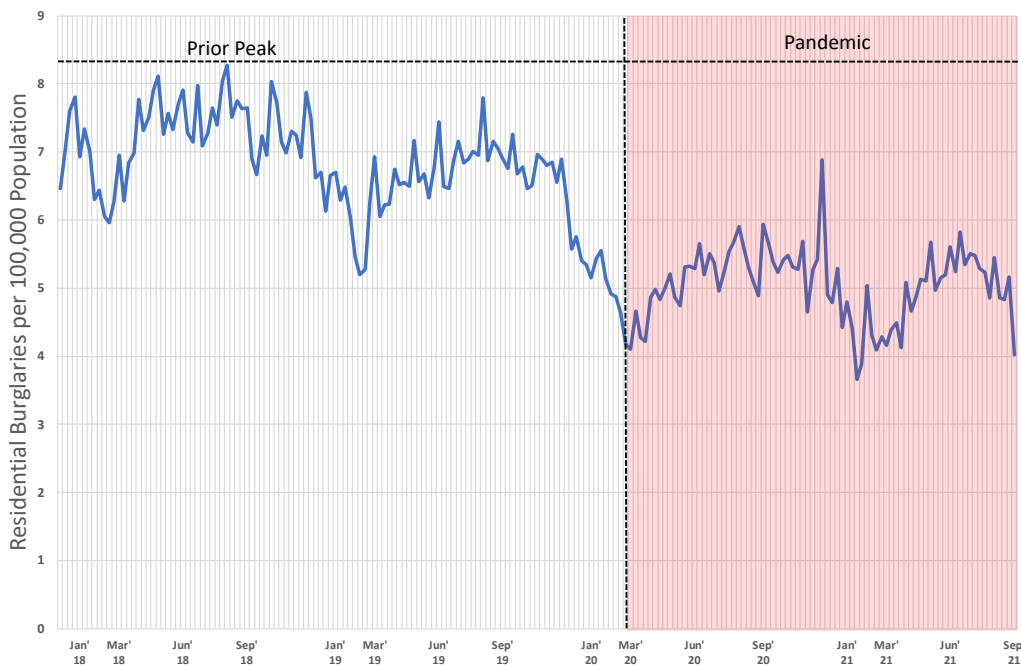
KEY TAKEAWAY

The number of robberies was 6% lower in the first three quarters of 2021 – 2,144 fewer robberies – than the year before.

RESIDENTIAL BURGLARY

Burglaries involve breaking and entering a residential or commercial premise for the purpose of committing a crime. The average weekly residential burglary rate in the 16 cities with available data exhibited a downward cyclical trend over time. We observed a more pronounced decline in residential burglary beginning in January of 2020, about two months before the quarantines and other pandemic-related restrictions took hold. The number of residential burglaries during the first three quarters of 2021 was 10% lower than during the same period in 2020. There were 3,062 fewer residential burglaries in the first three quarters of 2021 than occurred in the first three quarters of 2020.

Figure 7. Average Weekly Residential Burglary Rate in 16 Cities,
January 2018 - September 2021



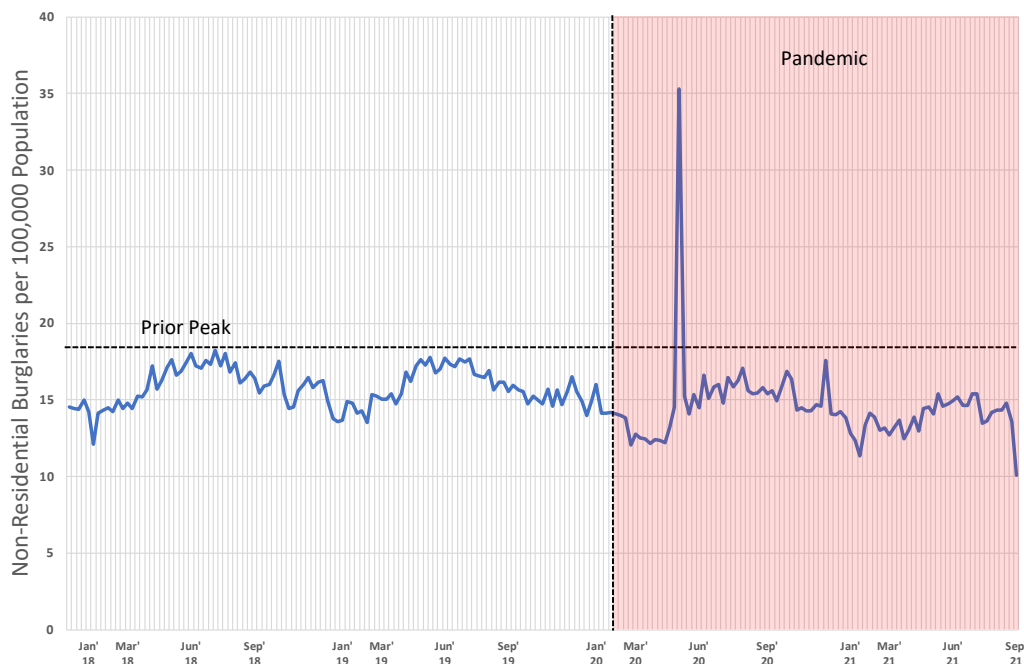
KEY TAKEAWAY

The number of residential burglaries was 10% lower in the first three quarters of 2021 – 3,062 fewer residential burglaries – than the year before.

NONRESIDENTIAL BURGLARY

The nonresidential burglary rate exhibited a flat cyclical pattern over time in the 16 cities with available data. It decreased during the early months of the pandemic, increased abruptly in the final week of May 2020, and just as abruptly reverted to prior levels in the following week. The brief spike in nonresidential burglary coincided with the emergence of mass protests against police violence in many cities after George Floyd's murder. The number of nonresidential burglaries fell by 11% during the first three quarters of 2021 compared to the same period in 2020. That means there were 20,546 fewer nonresidential burglaries in the first nine months of 2021 than in the first nine months of 2020.

Figure 8. Average Weekly Non-Residential Burglary Rate in 16 Cities, January 2018 - September 2021



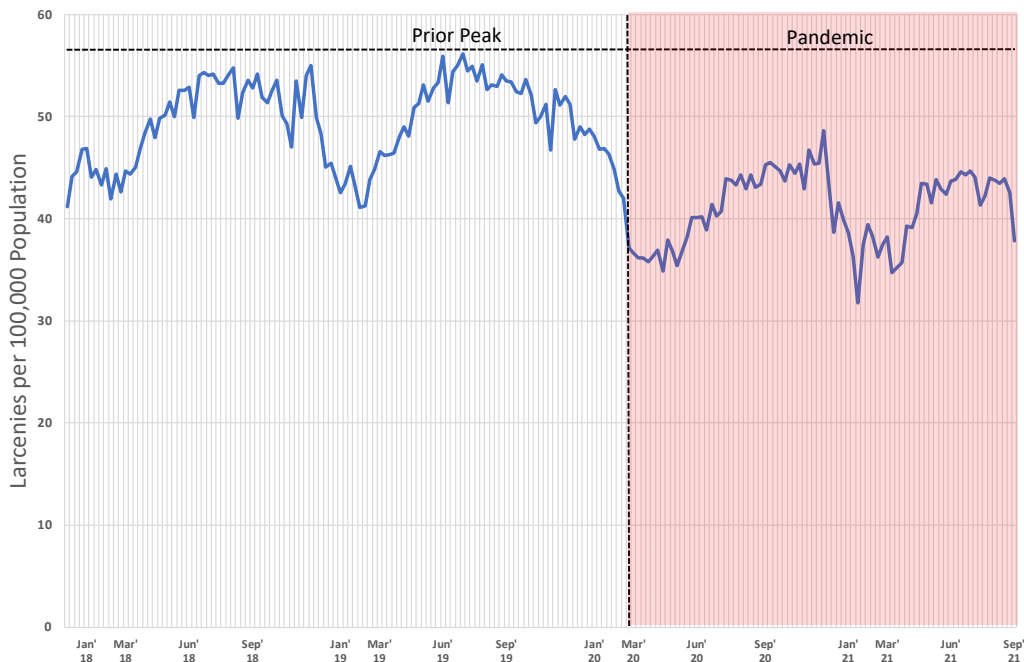
KEY TAKEAWAY

The number of nonresidential burglaries was 11% lower in the first three quarters of 2021 – 20,546 fewer nonresidential burglaries – than during the previous year.

LARCENY

Larcenies are thefts unaccompanied by force or breaking and entering. The average weekly larceny rate exhibited a distinct cyclical pattern over time. The average larceny rate in the 24 cities with available data fell during the pandemic. The number of larcenies was 5% lower in the first three quarters of 2021 than during the same period in 2020. There were 12,862 fewer larcenies in the first nine months of 2021 than in the first nine months of 2020.

Figure 10. Average Weekly Larceny Rate in 24 Cities,
January 2018 - September 2021



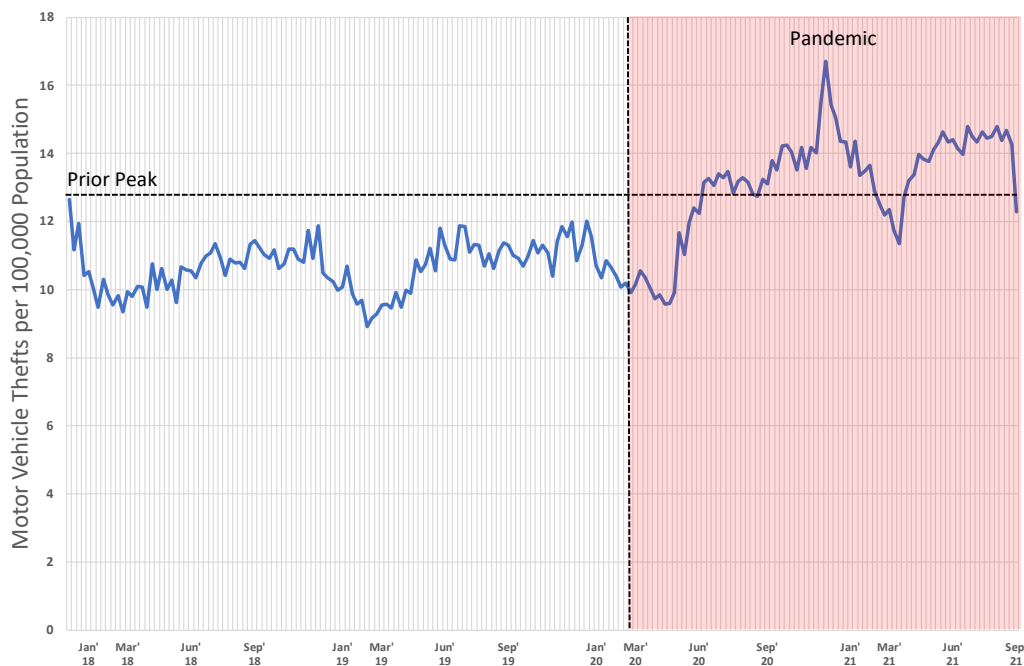
KEY TAKEAWAY

The number of larcenies was 5% lower – 12,862 fewer larcenies – during the first three quarters of 2021 than the year before.

MOTOR VEHICLE THEFT

The average weekly motor vehicle theft rate rose and fell cyclically with no evident linear trend from January 2018 to the end of May 2020 in the 24 cities with available data. It then rose, surpassing its previous seasonal peak through the remainder of 2020 and most of the first three quarters of 2021. The number of motor vehicle thefts was 13% greater in the first nine months of 2021 than during the first nine months of 2020. There were 12,260 more motor vehicle thefts during the first three quarters of 2021 than during the same period in 2020.

Figure 10. Average Weekly Motor Vehicle Theft Rate in 24 Cities,
January 2018 - September 2021



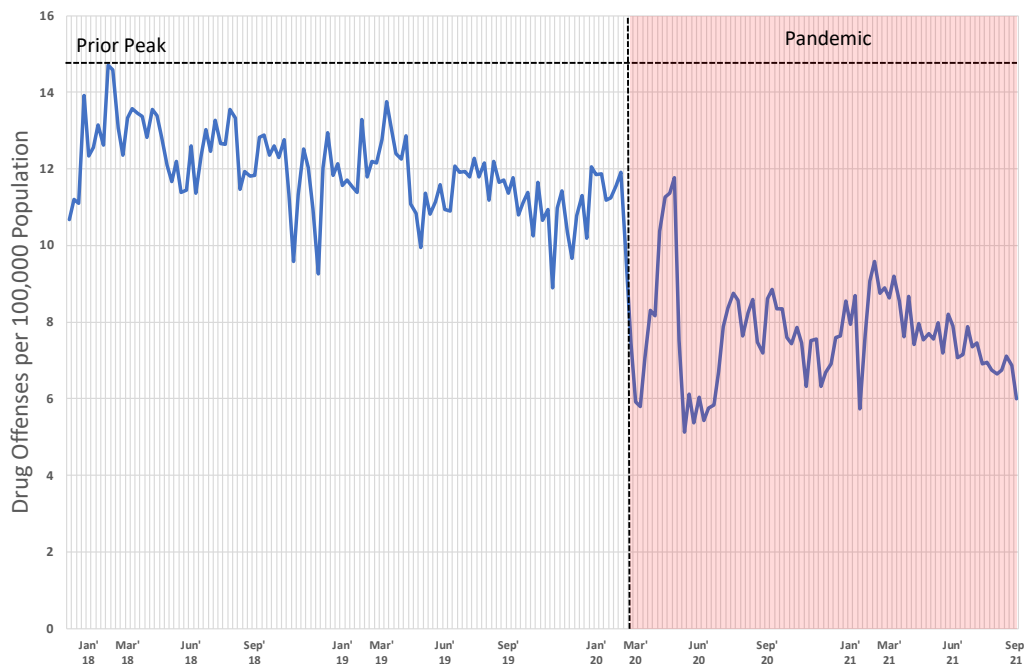
KEY TAKEAWAY

The number of motor vehicle thefts was 13% greater – 12,260 more motor vehicle thefts – during the first three quarters of 2021 than the year before.

DRUG OFFENSES

Drug offenses include arrests for the manufacture, sale, or possession of illicit drugs. The average weekly drug offense rate in the 17 cities with available data dropped during the pandemic to a level lower than at any time during the previous three years. The number of drug offenses decreased by 14% in the first three quarters of 2021 from the first three quarters of 2020. There were 6,151 fewer drug offenses in the first nine months of 2021 than during the same period in 2020.

Figure 11. Average Weekly Drug Offense Rate in 17 Cities, January 2018 - September 2021



KEY TAKEAWAY

The number of drug offenses was 14% lower – 6,151 fewer drug offenses – in the first half of 2021 than the year before.

Conclusion

This study is the seventh in a series of reports exploring crime changes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Updating our earlier work, this analysis reveals both increases and decreases in crime rates in a sample of United States cities during the first three quarters of 2021 compared with the first three quarters of 2020. Homicides, aggravated and gun assaults, and motor vehicle thefts increased, while robberies, residential burglaries, nonresidential burglaries, larcenies, and drug offenses fell.

The timing of the declines in robberies, burglaries, larcenies, and drug crimes coincided with the stay-at-home mandates and business closings that occurred in response to the pandemic. Quarantines reduced residential burglary. When businesses are closed, there is no shoplifting. Committing robberies and selling drugs on the street is more difficult when there are fewer people on the street, and drug arrests fall when police reduce drug enforcement because they have prioritized other activities.

Our findings show a 13% increase in motor vehicle thefts in the first three quarters of 2021 compared to the same period in the previous year, even as other property crimes declined. Motor vehicle thefts may have risen during the early months of the pandemic as more people left their vehicles unattended at home rather than in secure parking facilities at work. Yet, motor vehicle thefts have continued to increase since then. The timing of the increase in motor vehicle thefts coincides with that of the increase in homicide and assaults, with a sharp rise over previous seasonal peaks beginning in the summer of 2020. Motor vehicle theft has been characterized as a “keystone” crime that facilitates the commission of other offenses, including homicides and assaults.³ Thus, it is possible that the increase in motor vehicle theft and violent crime may be related.

As for domestic violence, rates were essentially the same during the first nine months of 2021 compared with the same period in 2020. This result, however, should be viewed with caution because it is based on just 13 of the 27 cities in the study – and [other research](#) documented an increase in domestic violence during the pandemic.

Increases in homicide and some other violent crimes have stirred considerable public concern. Such concern is legitimate, but it is important to recognize that murder rates remain well below the historical peaks seen in the early 1990s, and that the increase has continued to slow through the third quarter of 2021. A precipitous rise in homicide in the late spring of 2020 coincided with the emergence of mass protests after George Floyd

³ Farrell, G., Tilley, N., Tseloni, A., & Mailley, J. (2011). The crime drop and the security hypothesis. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 48, 147–175.

was murdered by a police officer in Minneapolis, although the connection, if any, between the social unrest and heightened violence remains unclear.

Even at a slower rate of increase, the elevated rates of homicide and serious assaults require an urgent response from government and community leaders. Evidence-based strategies are available to address the increase in the short and medium term. As the pandemic subsides, cities should redouble efforts to deploy hot-spot strategies that focus on those areas where the violence is concentrated. The anti-violence initiatives of street outreach workers and other non-police actors who engage directly with those at the highest risk for violence must also be strengthened and sustained.

In July, CCJ established a Violent Crime Working Group to offer guidance to policymakers on concrete solutions to address violence now. More information and recent guidance from the Group can be found [here](#).

These anti-crime efforts should occur in tandem with long-term reforms to increase accountability for police misconduct and to redirect certain police functions, such as addressing the day-to-day problems of the homeless and responding to drug overdoses, to other agencies and personnel better equipped to handle them. Abandoning long-needed police reform is not a viable policy option. Rather, change is essential to improve the relationship between police and communities and achieve durable reductions in urban violence.

A more in-depth analysis and policy discussion of the homicide challenge was included in our 2020 year-end report. As we concluded there, “With so many lives at stake, the time to act is now.”

Appendix I: Cities and Offenses

City	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Atlanta	x		x		x	x	x	x	x	
Austin	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Baltimore	x	x	x		x			x	x	
Buffalo	x				x			x	x	
Chandler	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	
Chicago	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Cincinnati		x	x	x				x	x	
Dallas			x			x	x	x	x	x
Denver	x			x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Detroit	x	x	x	x	x				x	x
Los Angeles	x		x	x	x	x	x		x	
Louisville	x	x		x	x			x	x	x
Memphis	x			x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Milwaukee	x				x				x	
Minneapolis					x	x	x	x	x	
Nashville	x	x	x	x				x	x	x
Norfolk	x			x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Omaha	x	x		x	x			x	x	
Philadelphia	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x
Phoenix	x	x			x	x	x	x	x	x
Pittsburgh	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x
Raleigh	x	x			x	x	x	x	x	x
Sacramento			x		x					x
San Francisco		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Seattle	x	x			x			x	x	x
St. Petersburg	x	x			x	x	x	x	x	x
Washington	x	x	x		x			x	x	
Total	22	17	13	13	24	16	16	23	24	17

Key

1 - Homicide
 2 - Aggravated Assault
 3 - Gun Assault
 4 - Domestic Violence
 5 - Robbery

6 - Residential Burglary
 7 - Nonresidential Burglary
 8 - Larceny
 9 - Motor Vehicle Theft
 10 - Drug Offense

Appendix II: Number of Homicides by City January to September (2020 and 2021)

City	Homicide Count January-September 2020	Homicide Count January – September 2021	Percent Change
St. Petersburg	17	39	129%
Austin	32	58	81%
Norfolk	34	45	32%
Louisville	119	148	24%
Pittsburgh	30	36	20%
Los Angeles	259	301	16%
Raleigh	21	24	14%
Nashville	64	73	14%
Buffalo	51	56	10%
Atlanta	106	115	8%
Washington	145	156	8%
Philadelphia	333	344	3%
Detroit	233	239	3%
Chicago	617	620	0.5%
Denver	74	74	0%
Baltimore	252	248	-2%
Memphis	242	231	-5%
Milwaukee	132	120	-9%
Phoenix	151	135	-11%
Seattle	45	34	-24%
Omaha	29	21	-28%
Chandler	10	5	-50%