

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

June 2021 Update

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Summary

- + **This study updates and supplements previous reports released in [July](#), [September](#), and [November of 2020](#), [January 2021](#), and [May 2021](#) with additional crime data through the first half (January-June) of 2021.** It examines weekly crime rates for ten violent, property, and drug offenses in 29 American cities. Not all cities reported data for each offense.
- + **During the first half of 2021, homicide rates remained above the levels seen during the same period in prior years.** The number of homicides rose by 16% compared to the first half of 2020 (an increase of 259 homicides) and by 42% from the first half of 2019 (an increase of 548 homicides.) The rate of increase in homicide slowed from the first to the second quarter of 2021.
- + **Even with the 2021 increase, the homicide rate for the cities studied was well below the rate for those cities in the early 1990s** (15 deaths per 100,000 residents versus 28 murders per 100,000 in 1993).
- + **Aggravated and gun assault rates were also higher in the first half of 2021 than in the same period of 2020.** Aggravated assault rates increased 9%, while gun assault rates went up by 5%. Motor vehicle theft rates were 21% higher in the first half of 2021 than the year before.
- + **Other major crimes declined.** Robbery (-6%), residential burglary (-9%), non-residential burglary (-9%), larceny (-6%), and drug offense (-12%) rates dropped from the same period in 2020.
- + **Domestic violence rates were 2% higher during the first six months of 2021 than they were in the first half of 2020.** This result is based on just 12 of the 29 cities and should be viewed with caution.
- + **In response to elevated rates of homicide, 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 prompt yet durable reductions in violent crime in our cities.

Introduction

This report updates our previous studies of crime changes during the COVID-19 pandemic, extending the data through the first half (January-June) 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 29 cities included in the current study range from Norfolk, VA, the smallest, with 245,000 residents, to Los Angeles, the largest city in the sample, with 3.97 million residents. (See Appendix for full list.) The mean population of the cities for which crime data were available is approximately 821,844, and the median is approximately 617,790. Boston, Chandler, AZ, and Detroit have been added to the sample since our last report. Houston, New York, Omaha, Portland, San Diego, and San Jose have been removed from the sample due to the unavailability of data.

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 updates for the period between January 2018 and June 2021. Offense counts were converted to weekly crime rates per 100,000 city residents for analysis. The crime data are subject to revision; not all of the cities reported data for each of the crimes or for each week, and offense classifications varied somewhat across the cities.

KEY TAKEAWAY

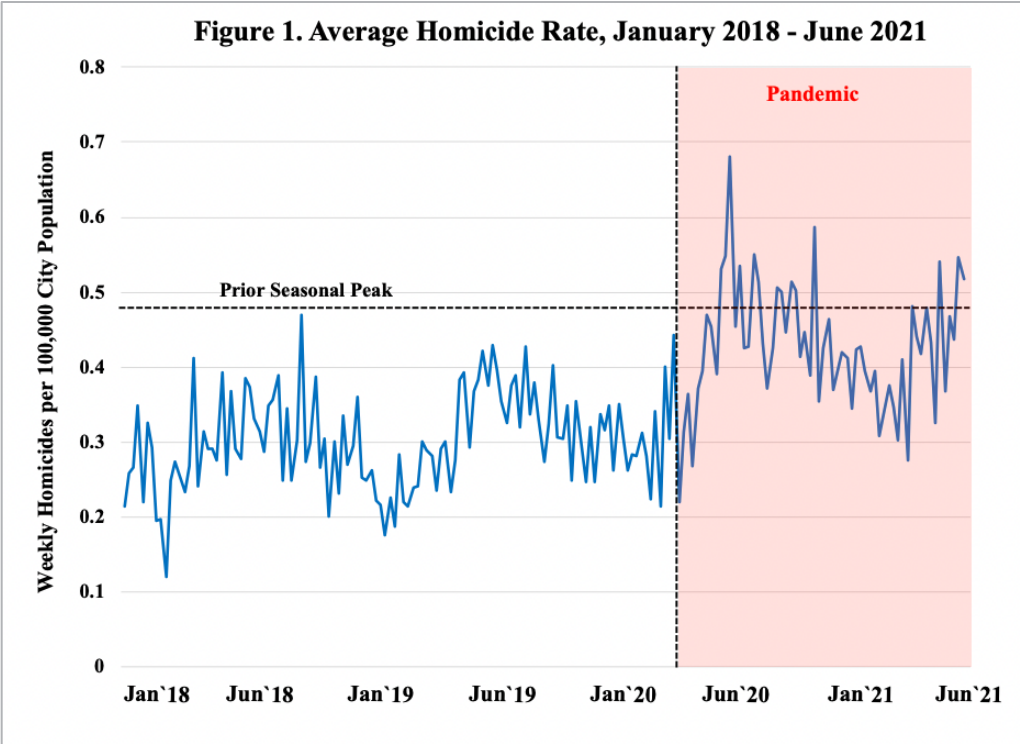
Our conclusions have not changed: As the pandemic subsides, long-lasting reductions in violence and crime will require pursuing evidence-based crime-control strategies and enacting long-needed reforms to policing.

Changes in Violent, Property, and Drug Offenses

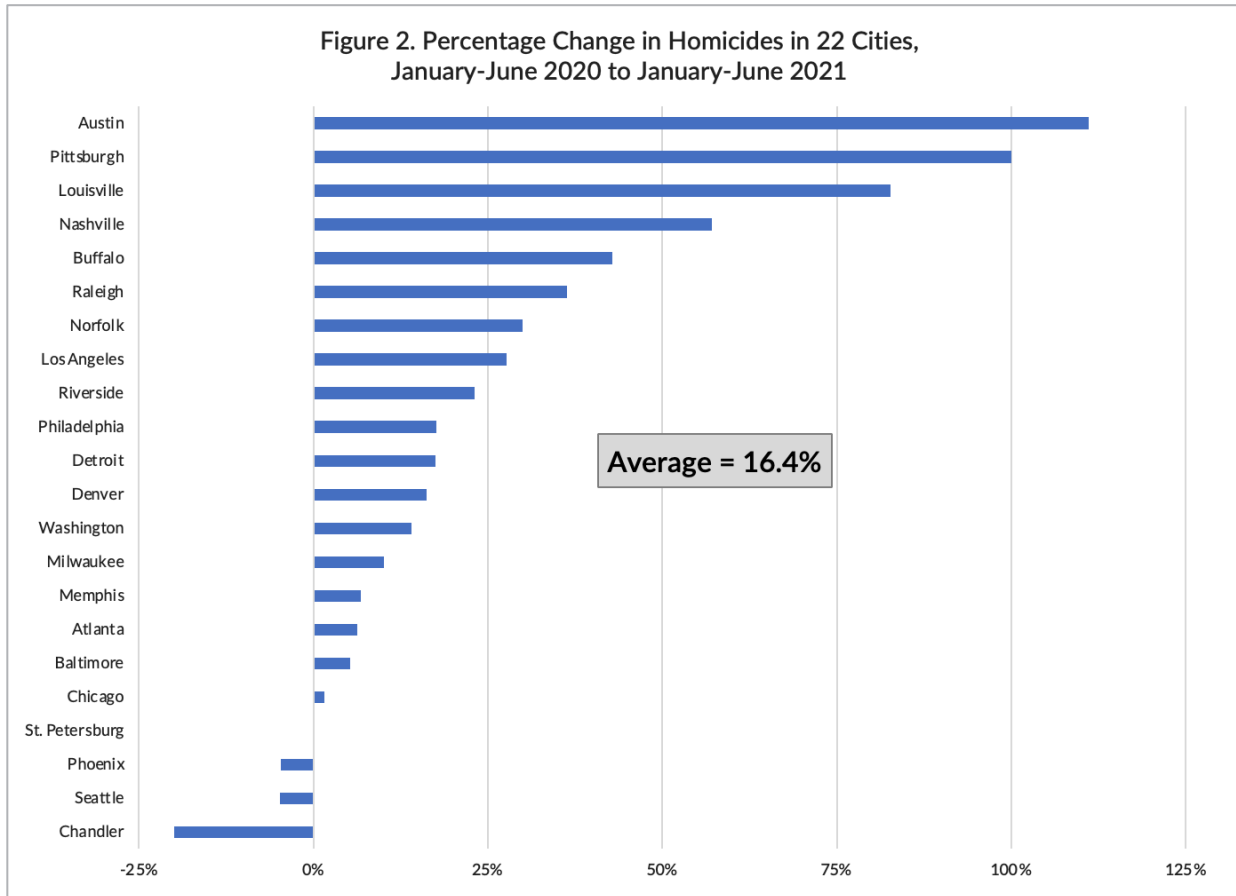
This report describes the average change over time in monthly crime rates for ten offenses in a sample of 22 cities.

HOMICIDE

Figure 1 displays the average weekly homicide rate in the 22 cities for which such data were available (see Appendix). Our analysis identified a rough cyclical pattern in the homicide rate over time. The rate rose sharply, exceeding the previous seasonal peak, immediately after the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, an event that 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 beginning in the spring of 2021. The homicide rise of 2020 has continued well into 2021. The number of homicides during the first half of 2021 was 16% greater than during the same period in 2020 and 42% greater than during the first half of 2019. In the 22 cities studied, there were 259 more homicides in the first half of 2021 than during the same time frame the year before and 548 more homicides than during the same period in 2019.



Double-digit percentage increases in homicide, above and beyond normal seasonal changes, are deeply troubling and require immediate action from policymakers. (See discussion below.) Despite the recent increases, however, homicide rates remain significantly lower than historical highs. On an annualized basis, the homicide rate in the first half of 2021 for the 22 cities studied was about half the rate for those cities during the most recent peak of violent crime rates in the early 1990s (15 deaths per 100,000 residents versus 28 per 100,000 in 1993).



In order to explore the variation across cities during the first half of 2021, Figure 2 shows the percentage change between January and June of 2020 and January and June of 2021 in the number of homicides in the 22 cities for which we obtained data. Eighteen of the 22 cities reported increases in homicide rates. Austin, Pittsburgh, Louisville, and Nashville led the way with increases exceeding 50%. Chandler, AZ, Seattle, and Phoenix saw reductions in homicide, although the 20% decrease in Chandler was based on a difference of just one homicide (five homicides between January and June of 2020 versus four the year before). The three largest cities in the sample – Los Angeles, Chicago, and Philadelphia – saw increases of 28%, 2%, and 18%. Those three cities accounted for over a quarter of the homicide rise between the first half of 2020 and the first half of 2021.

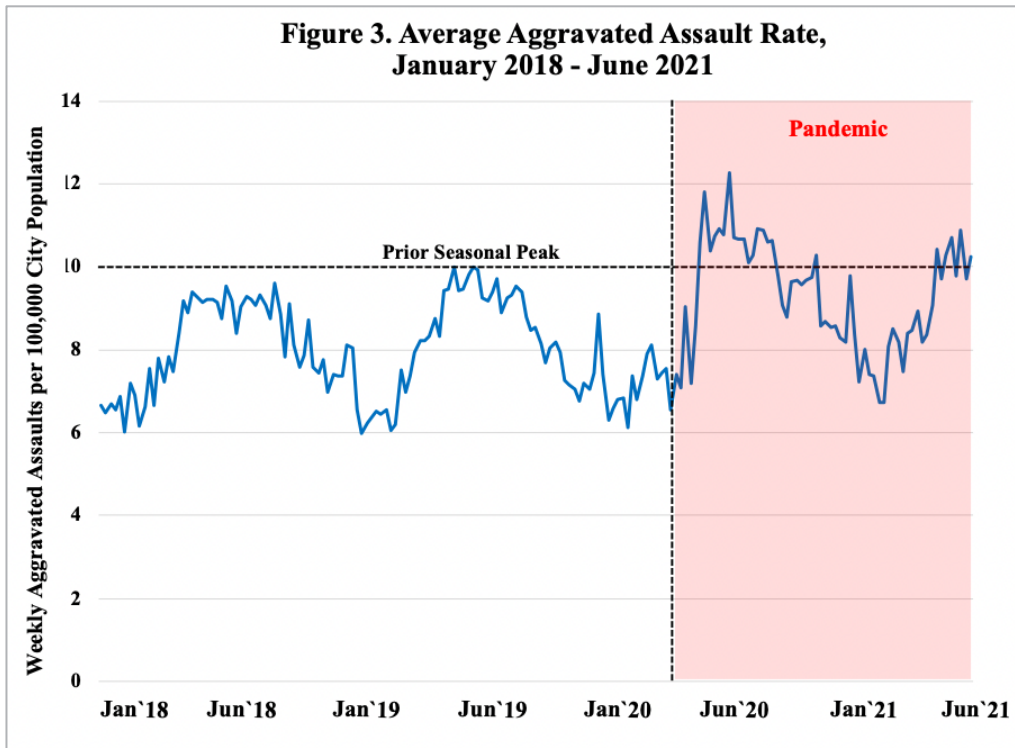
Although 2021 rates of homicide remained elevated compared to prior years, it appears that the rate of increase in homicide slowed between the first and second quarters. Compared to the same time frames in 2020, homicides in the 22 cities studied increased by 23% during the first quarter (January-March) of 2021 and by 11% during the second quarter (April-June) of 2021.

KEY TAKEAWAY

The homicide rate was 16% higher in the first half of 2021 - 259 more homicides - than the year before. The increase in homicide slowed between the first and second quarters of 2021.

AGGRAVATED ASSAULT

Aggravated assaults are assaults committed with a deadly weapon or those that result in or threaten serious bodily injury to the victim. As shown in Figure 3, the average weekly aggravated assault rate in the 18 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 aggravated assault rate during the first half of 2021 was 9% higher than in the first half of 2020. There were 3,046 more aggravated assaults in the study cities in the first half of 2021 than occurred the year before.

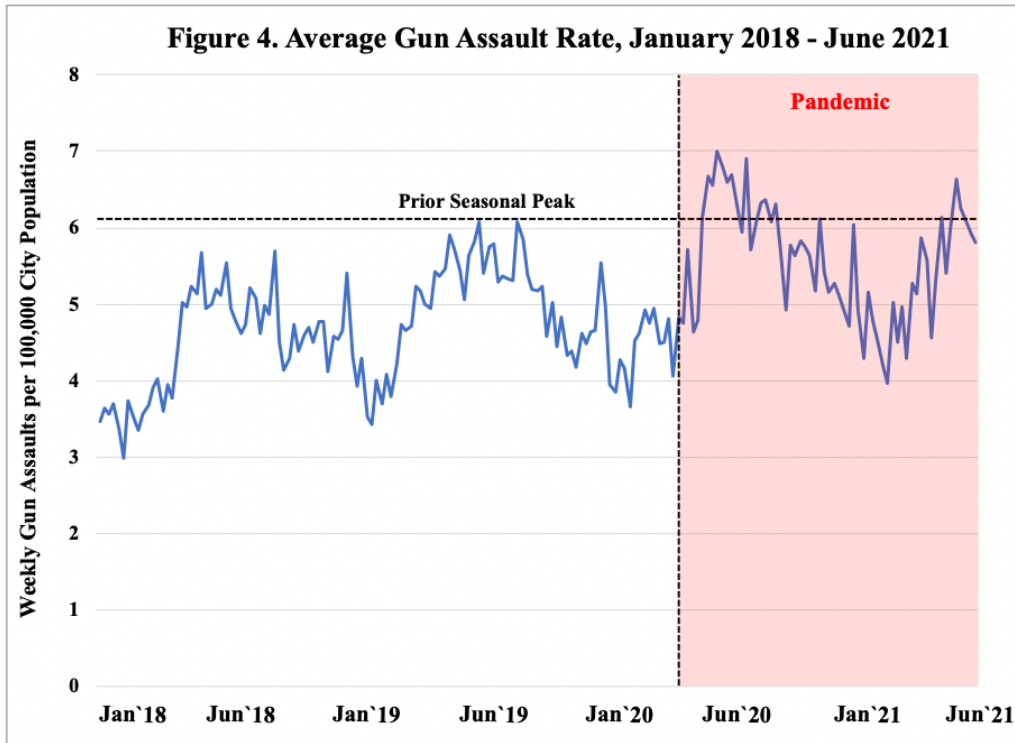


KEY TAKEAWAY

The aggravated assault rate was 9% higher in the first half of 2021 - 3,046 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 17 cities with available data exhibited a cyclical trend over time, peaked during the summer of 2020, fell through the end of the year, and rose through the first half of 2021. The gun assault rate was 5% higher during the first half of 2021 than in the first half of 2020. In the study cities, there were 1,360 more gun assaults in the first half of 2021 than during the same period the year before.

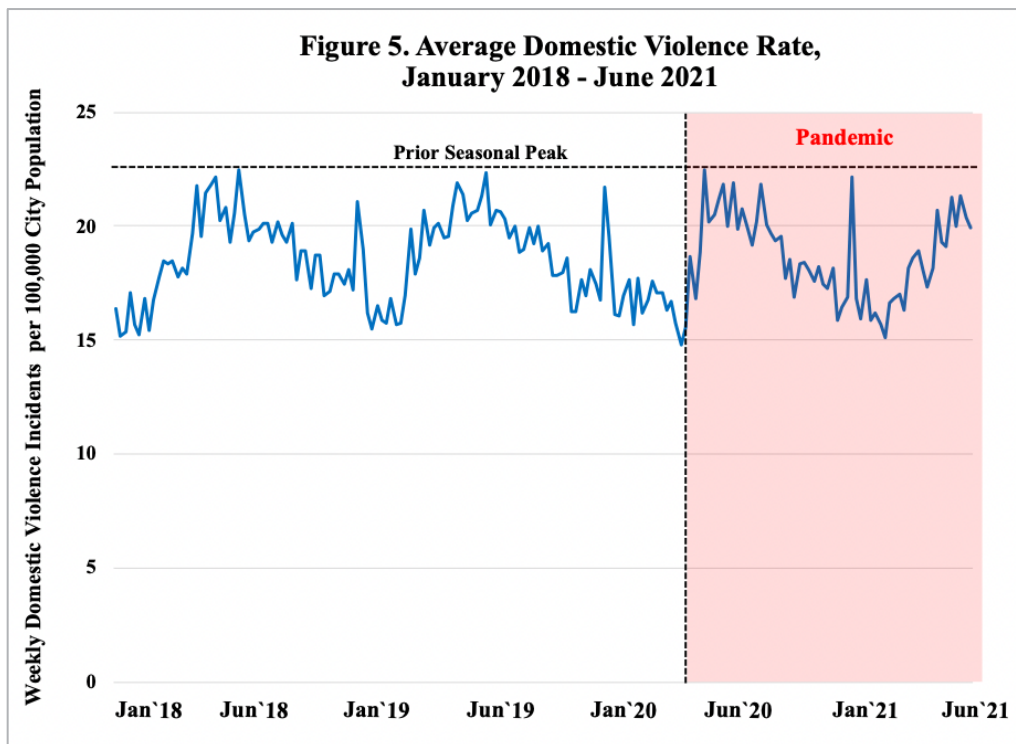


KEY TAKEAWAY

The gun assault rate was 5% higher in the first half of 2021 - 1,360 more gun assaults - than the year before.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence consists primarily of aggravated and so-called simple assaults. The latter crime is committed without a dangerous weapon or serious bodily injury to the victim. The weekly domestic violence rate exhibited a cyclical pattern over time, with no evident change during the pandemic over previous years. The domestic violence rate was 2% higher during the first half of 2021 than in the first half of 2020. The increase means that there were 2,589 more domestic violence incidents in the first half of 2021 than during the same period the year before. But these results must be viewed with caution because they are based on just 12 cities for which we were able to obtain domestic violence data. In addition, a previously released Council on Criminal Justice [systematic review](#) documented an 8.1% increase in domestic violence incidents after jurisdictions imposed pandemic-related lockdown orders in the spring of 2020.

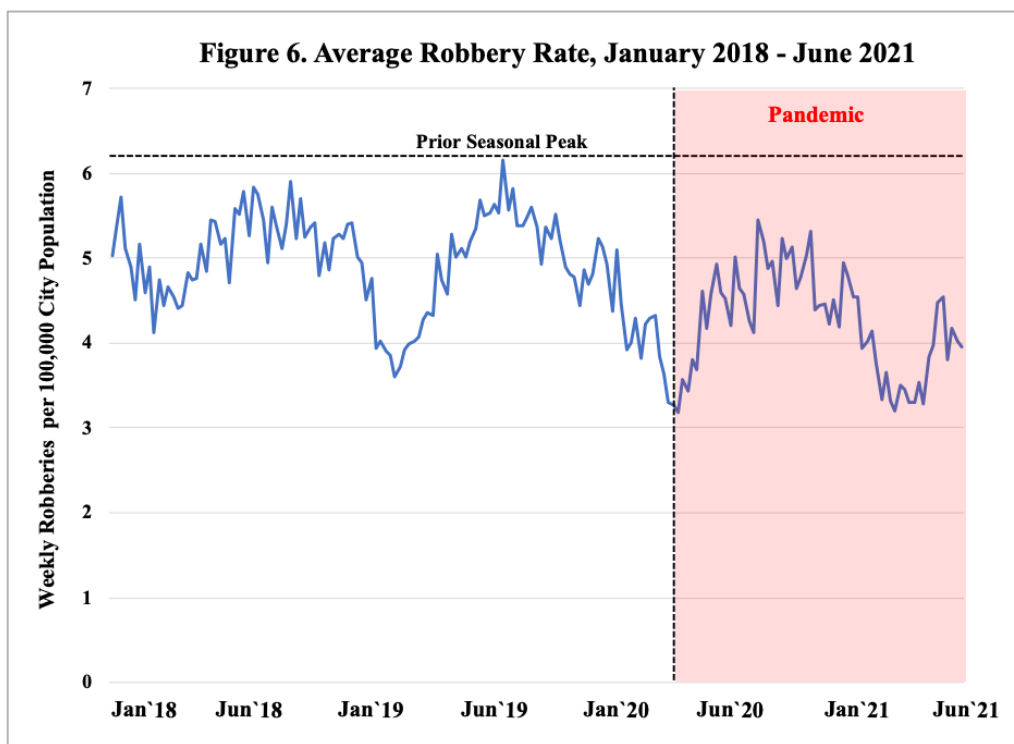


KEY TAKEAWAY

The domestic violence rate was 2% higher in the first half of 2021 - 2,589 more incidents - than the year before. This result should be viewed with caution because it is based on data from just 12 cities.

ROBBERY

Robberies are thefts committed with force or the threat of force. The average weekly robbery rate in the 26 cities with available data exhibited a downward cyclical trend from January of 2018 through the first half of 2021. The robbery rate rose during the summer and early fall of 2020, fell during the winter, and then rose through June of 2021. These fluctuations, however, are consistent with those in previous years and with the longer term decline in robbery. The robbery rate was 6% lower during the first half of 2021 than during the same period in 2020. The decrease means that there were 1,396 fewer robberies in the study cities during the first six months of 2021 than occurred in the first half of the previous year.

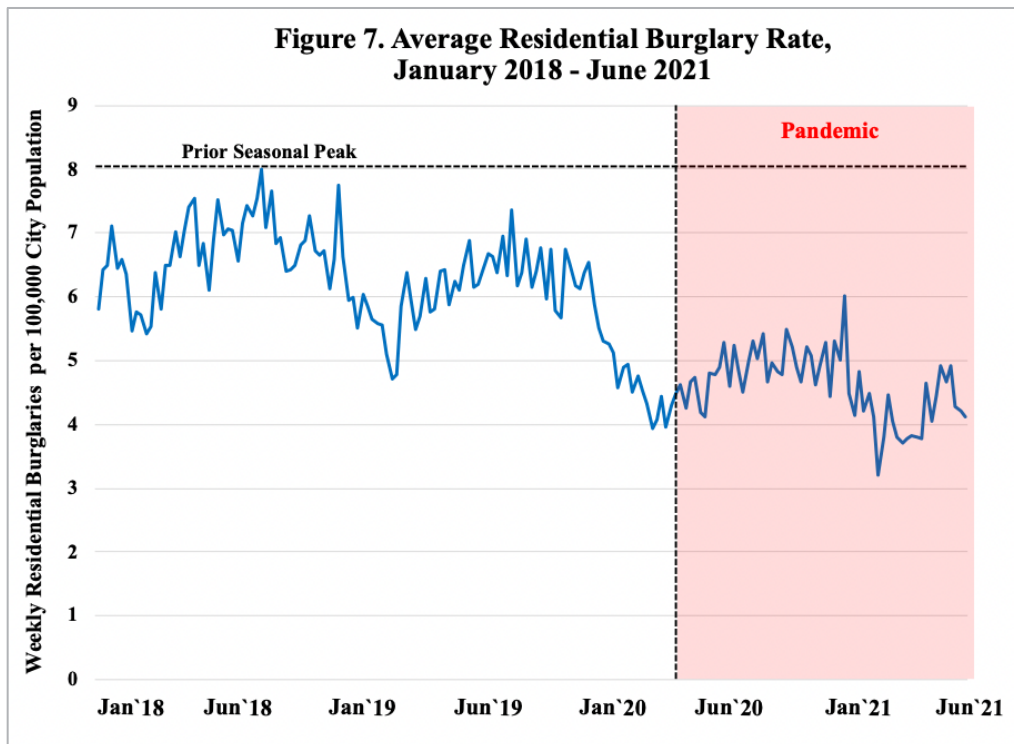


KEY TAKEAWAY

The robbery rate was 6% lower in the first half of 2021 - 1,396 fewer robberies - than the year before. This reduction was a continuation of the downward trend in robbery since 2018.

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 18 cities with available data exhibited a downward cyclical trend over time, with a more pronounced decline beginning in January of 2020, about two months before the quarantines and other pandemic-related restrictions took hold. With some weekly fluctuation, the residential burglary rate rose through the end of 2020, fell through the first quarter of 2021, and rose again through June. These changes were modest in size and burglary rates remained lower in the first six months of 2021 than at any previous point since the beginning of 2018. The average residential burglary rate during the first half of 2021 was 9% lower than during the same period in 2020. There were 2,283 fewer residential burglaries in the study cities in the first half of 2021 than occurred in the first half of 2020.

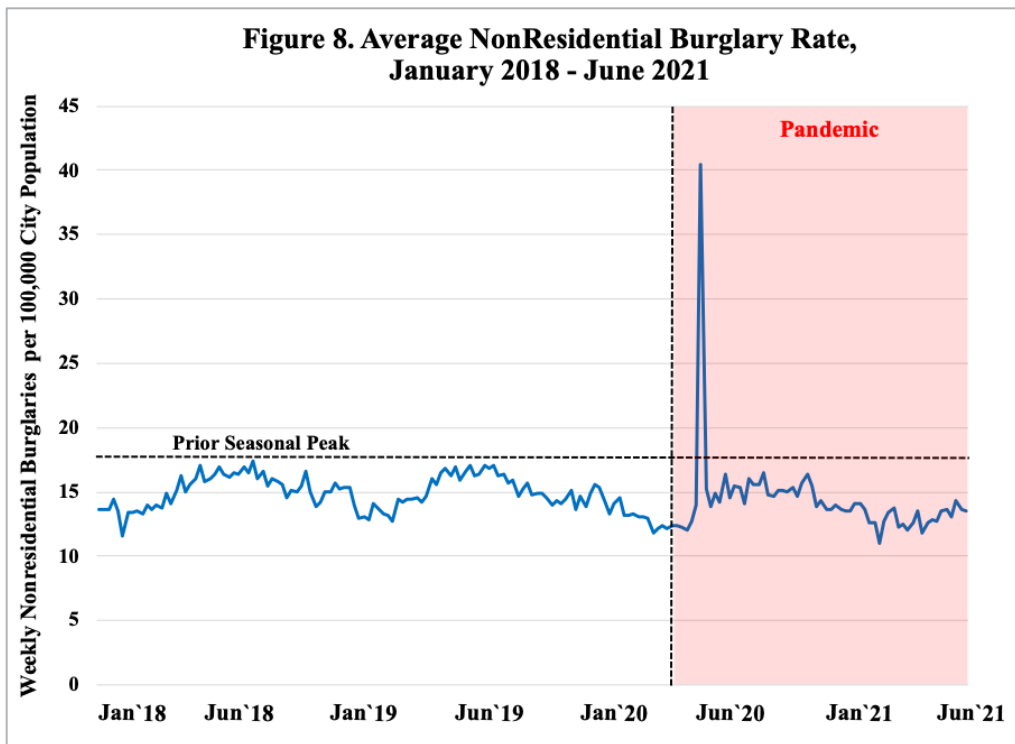


KEY TAKEAWAY

The residential burglary rate was 9% lower in the first half of 2021 - 2,283 fewer residential burglaries - than the year before.

NONRESIDENTIAL BURGLARY

The nonresidential burglary rate exhibited a flat cyclical pattern over time in the 18 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 death. The nonresidential burglary rate fell by 9% during the first half of 2021 compared to the same period in 2020. That means there were 12,089 fewer nonresidential burglaries in the study cities in the first six months of 2021 than occurred in the first half of 2020.

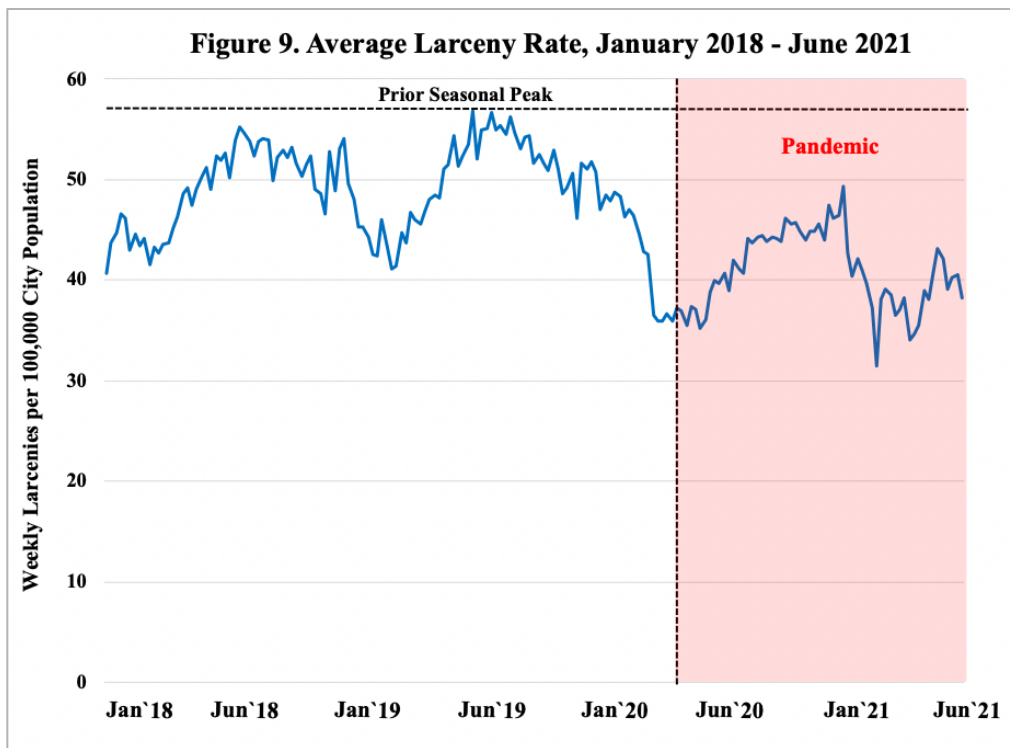


KEY TAKEAWAY

The nonresidential burglary rate was 9% lower in the first half of 2021 - 12,089 fewer nonresidential burglaries - than during the previous year.

LARCENY

Larcenies are thefts unaccompanied by force or breaking and entering. The average weekly larceny rate in the 24 cities with available data exhibited a distinct cyclical pattern over time. The larceny rate decreased in the early months of the pandemic, rose through the end of 2020, and decreased again during the first half of 2021. The larceny rate was 6% lower in the first half of 2021 than during the same period in 2020. There were 11,747 fewer larcenies in the study cities in the first half of 2021 than occurred in the first half of 2020.

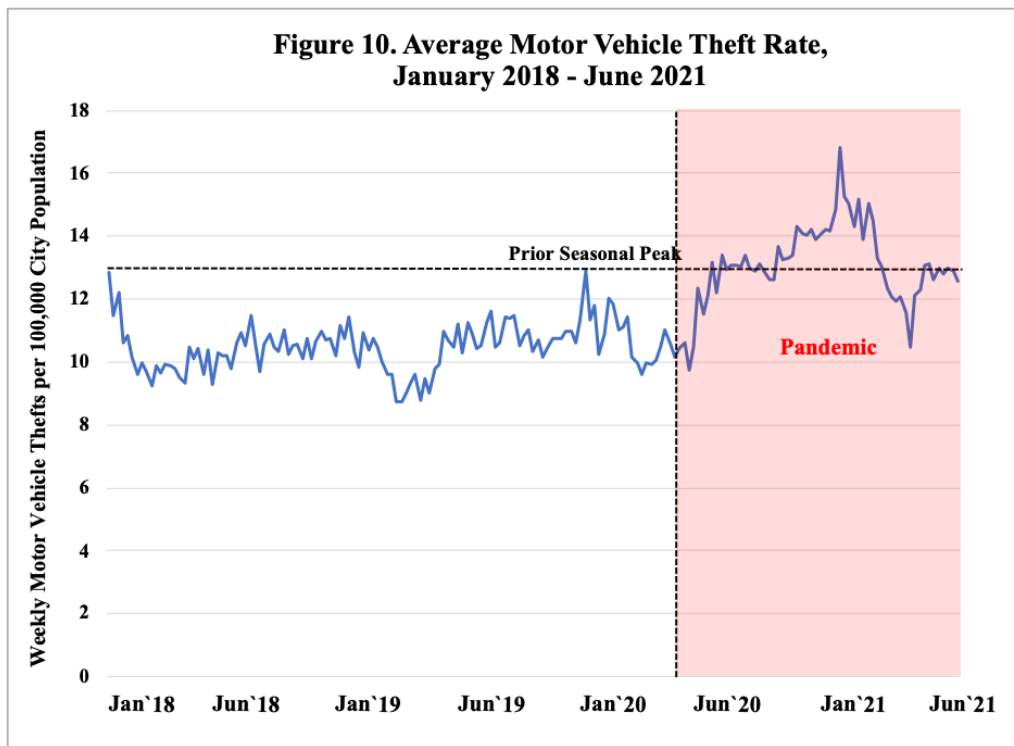


KEY TAKEAWAY

The larceny rate was 6% lower - 11,747 fewer larcenies - during the first half 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 26 cities with available data. It then rose through the end of the year, surpassing its previous seasonal peak, and fell during the first half of 2021. The motor vehicle theft rate was 21% higher in the first half of 2021 than during the same period in 2020. There were 9,861 more motor vehicle thefts in the study cities during the first half of 2021 than in the first half of 2020.

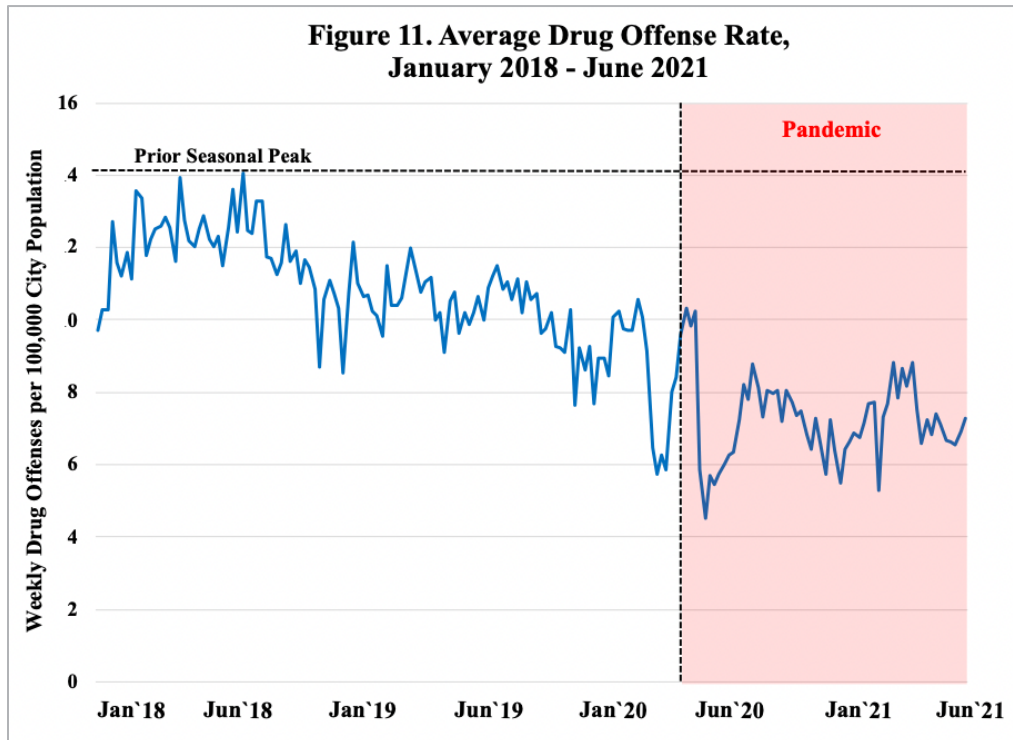


KEY TAKEAWAY

The motor vehicle theft rate was 21% higher - 9,861 more motor vehicle thefts - during the first half 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 19 cities with available data dropped during the pandemic to a level lower than at any time during the previous three years. The drug offense rate decreased by 12% in the first half of 2021 from the first half of 2020. There were 3,818 fewer drug offenses in the study cities in the first half of 2021 than occurred during the same period in 2020.



KEY TAKEAWAY

The drug offense rate was 12% lower - 3,818 fewer drug offenses - in the first half of 2021 than the year before.

Conclusion

This study is the sixth in a series of reports exploring crime changes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The series began as a project for the Council on Criminal Justice’s National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice, which has issued its [final report](#). Updating that earlier work, this analysis reveals both increases and decreases in crime rates in a sample of United States cities during the first half of 2021. 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 that there was a 21% increase in motor vehicle thefts in the first half 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 pandemic as more people left their vehicles unattended at home rather than in secure parking facilities at work. In addition, 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. That pattern is supported by research, given that motor vehicle theft has been characterized as a “gateway” or “keystone” crime that facilitates the commission of other offenses, including homicides and assaults.¹

As for domestic violence, rates were slightly higher during the first half of 2021 compared with the same period in 2020. This result, however, should be viewed with caution because it is based on just 12 of the 29 cities in the study – and [other research shows a larger increase](#) in domestic violence during the pandemic.

Not surprisingly, the recent increases in homicide and some other violent crimes have stirred the greatest public concern, although their rates remain well below the historical peaks seen in the early 1990s. A precipitous rise in homicide in the late spring of 2020 coincided with the emergence of mass protests after George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis, although the connection, if any, between the social unrest and heightened violence remains uncertain.

¹ 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.

The continuing increase in homicides through the first six months of 2021, which exceeds increases in nonfatal assaults, requires an urgent response from city leaders. Evidence-based strategies are available to address the increase in the short and medium term. As the pandemic subsides, hot-spot strategies that focus comprehensive enforcement and prevention efforts on those areas where the violence is concentrated should be redoubled. The anti-violence efforts 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.

“WITH SO MANY LIVES AT STAKE, THE TIME TO ACT IS NOW.”

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. Even if large-scale reallocation of these activities to other agencies is not feasible, abandoning long-needed police reform is not a viable policy option.² Rather, change is essential to improve the level of trust between the police and the communities they serve and to 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.”

² Lum, C., Koper, C. S., & Wu, X. (2021). Can we really defund the police? A nine-agency study of police response to calls for service. *Police Quarterly*. DOI: 10.1177/10986111211035002.

Appendix: 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	
Boston		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				x	
Minneapolis					x	x	x	x	x	
Nashville	x	x	x	x				x	x	x
Norfolk	x			x	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
Riverside	x		x		x	x	x	x	x	
Sacramento			x		x					x
San Francisco		x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
Seattle	x	x			x			x	x	x
St. Paul		x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x
St. Petersburg	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
Washington	x	x	x		x			x	x	
Total	22	18	17	12	26	18	18	24	26	19

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