

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

2021 Year-End 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

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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 by the [Council on Criminal Justice](#) on recent U.S. crime trends with additional crime data through the end of 2021. It examines monthly crime rates for ten violent, property, and drug offenses in 27 American cities. Not all cities reported data for each offense.
- + The number of homicides rose by 5% between 2020 and 2021, an increase of 218 killings in the cities studied. The rate of increase was far lower than the national jump of 29% in 2020, and the 2021 homicide rate for the cities studied was just over half what it was for those cities in the early 1990s (15 deaths per 100,000 residents versus 28 per 100,000 in 1993). But the number of homicides in 2021 represents a 44% increase over the 2019 murder count, accounting for 1,298 additional lives lost in the cities studied.
- + Aggravated and gun assault rates were also higher in 2021 than in 2020. Aggravated assaults increased by 4%, while gun assaults went up by 8%. The gun assault result is based on data from just 12 cities and should be viewed with caution. Robbery rates increased slightly after dropping in 2020.
- + Burglary, larceny, and drug offense rates were lower in 2021 than in 2020, by 6%, 1%, and 12%, respectively. The decrease in larceny was smaller than the decrease from 2019 to 2020. Motor vehicle theft rates were 14% higher in 2021 than the year before.
- + Domestic violence incidents increased by nearly 4% between 2020 and 2021. But this result is based on just 11 of the 27 cities studied and should be viewed with caution.
- + In response to continuing increases in homicide and serious assaults, the authors conclude that police and policymakers should pursue violence-prevention strategies of proven effectiveness and enact needed policing reforms to achieving durable reductions in violent crime in our cities.

Introduction

This report updates our previous studies of crime changes during the coronavirus pandemic, extending the data through end 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 for full list) range from Norfolk, VA, the smallest, with 245,000 residents, to Los Angeles, the largest, with more than 3.9 million residents. The mean population of the cities for which crime data were available is approximately 849,945, and the median population is approximately 617,790.

For this report, we assessed monthly changes between January of 2018 to December of 2021 for the following ten crimes: homicide, aggravated assault, gun assault, domestic violence, robbery, residential burglary, nonresidential burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, and drug offenses. As in our previous reports, we direct special attention to the trend in homicides. The crime data were obtained from online portals of city police departments that provided monthly incident-level data for the period between January 2018 and December 2021.¹ Offense counts were converted to monthly 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 month. The number of cities reporting crime ranged from a high of 24 for robbery and motor vehicle theft to a low of 11 for domestic violence. Homicide data were available for 22 cities. The city sample used for this report is not necessarily representative of all large cities or the nation as a whole.

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.

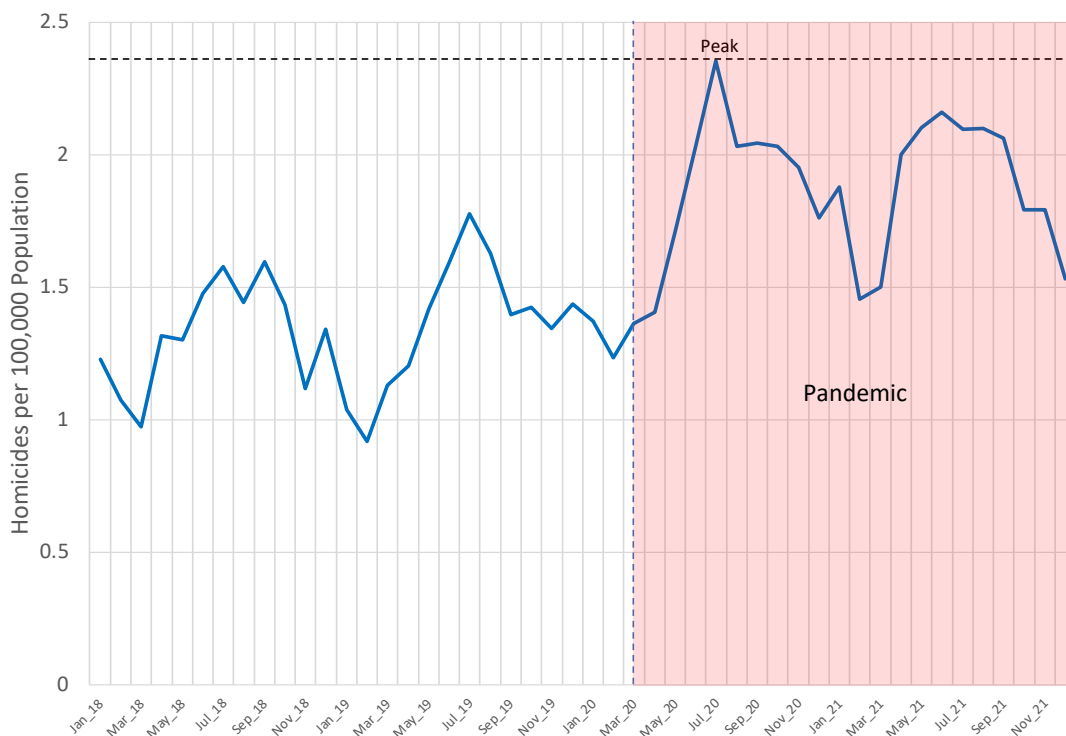
¹ We compiled the crime data through January 13, 2022. Cities that had not posted 2021 year-end crime data on their websites by that date (e.g., New York) could not be included in this report.

Changes in Violent, Property, and Drug Offenses

HOMICIDE

Figure 1 displays the average monthly homicide rate in the 22 cities for which such data were available (see Appendix). Our analysis identified an upward trending cyclical pattern in the homicide rate over time. The rate peaked in July of 2020, far exceeding previous peaks during the study period, amid widespread protests against police violence after George Floyd’s murder in May. 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 and then fell through the remainder of the year. The number of 2021 homicides in the cities studied was 5% greater than in 2020 – representing 218 additional murders in those cities – and 44% greater than in 2019, representing 1,298 additional lives lost.

Figure 1. Monthly Homicide Rate, January 2018 - December 2021

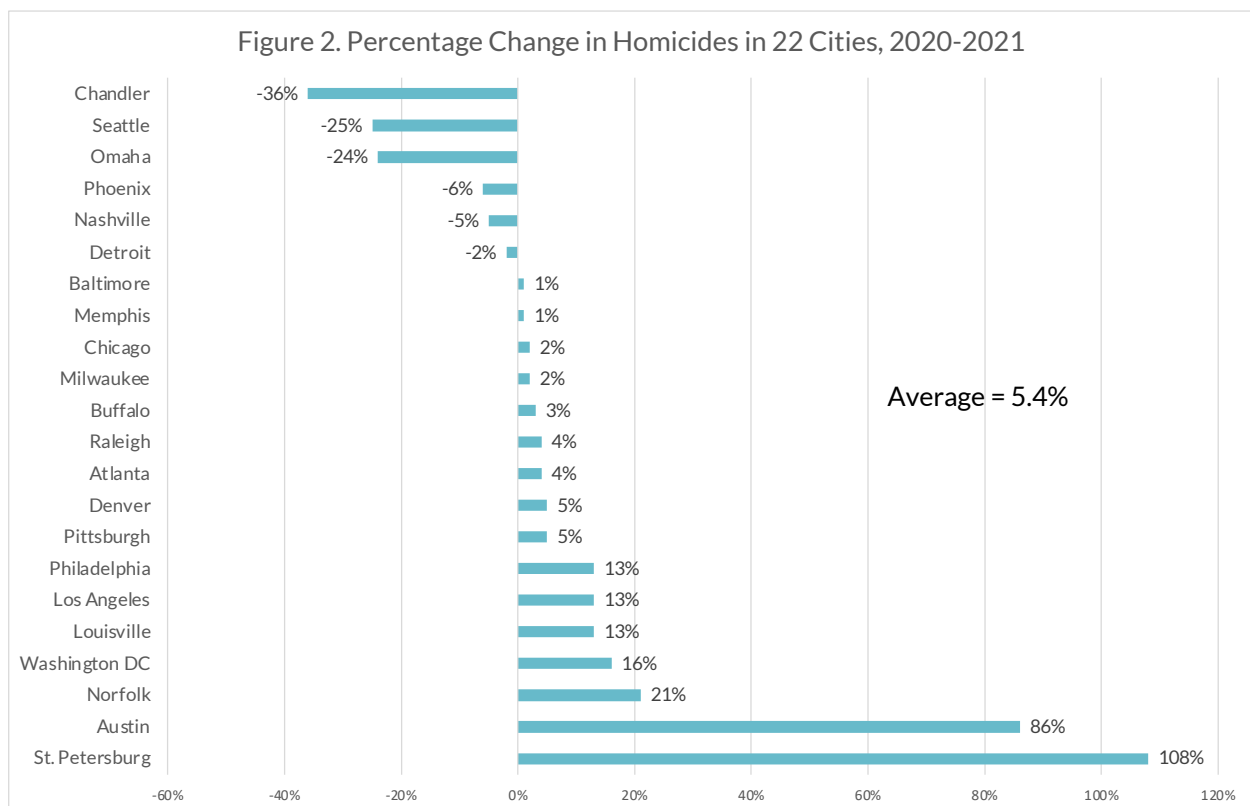


As noted in our earlier reports, the homicide rise of 2020 was historic, resulting in 1,268 more deaths in the city sample than in 2019. That increase continued into 2021, but at a

considerably slower pace. The FBI reported that the total number of homicides nationally rose by 29% between 2019 and 2020, a significantly higher jump than the 5% increase between 2020 and 2021 in the sample available for this study.

The homicide rate remains well below historical highs: The rate in 2021 for the 22 cities studied was 46% below the rate for those cities in the early 1990s (15 deaths per 100,000 residents versus 28 per 100,000 in 1993). However, homicide increases above and beyond normal seasonal changes remain deeply troubling and require immediate action from policymakers, as we discuss below.

In order to explore the variation in homicides across cities during 2021, Figure 2 shows the percentage change between 2020 and 2021 in the number of homicides in the 22 cities for which we obtained data. Sixteen of the cities reported a rise in homicide, ranging from increases of 108% in St. Petersburg to less than 1% in Memphis and Baltimore. Six cities saw reductions in homicide.



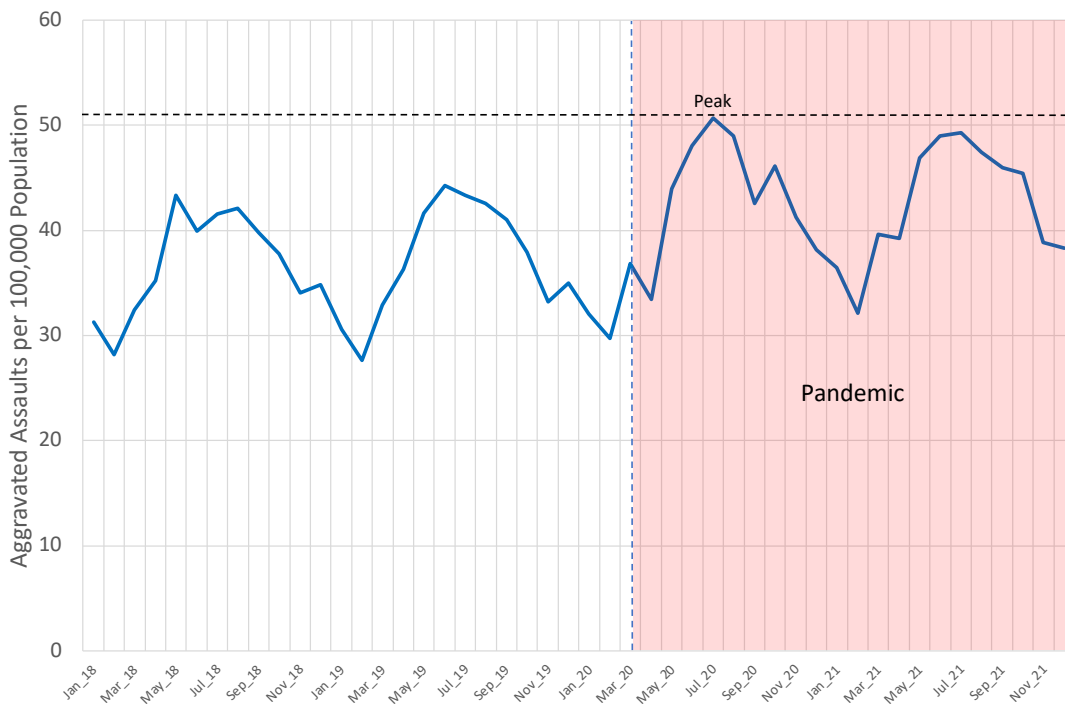
KEY TAKEAWAY

The number of homicides was 5% higher in 2021 – 218 more homicides – than the year before. The increase in homicide between 2020 and 2021 was smaller than the increase between 2019 and 2020.

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 monthly 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 previous peaks. The rate fell through the remainder of the year, before rising again during the first half of 2021 and falling during the second half. The number of aggravated assaults during 2021 was 4% higher than in 2020. There were 2,934 more aggravated assaults in 2021 than the year before.

Figure 3. Monthly Aggravated Assault Rate, January 2018 - December 2021



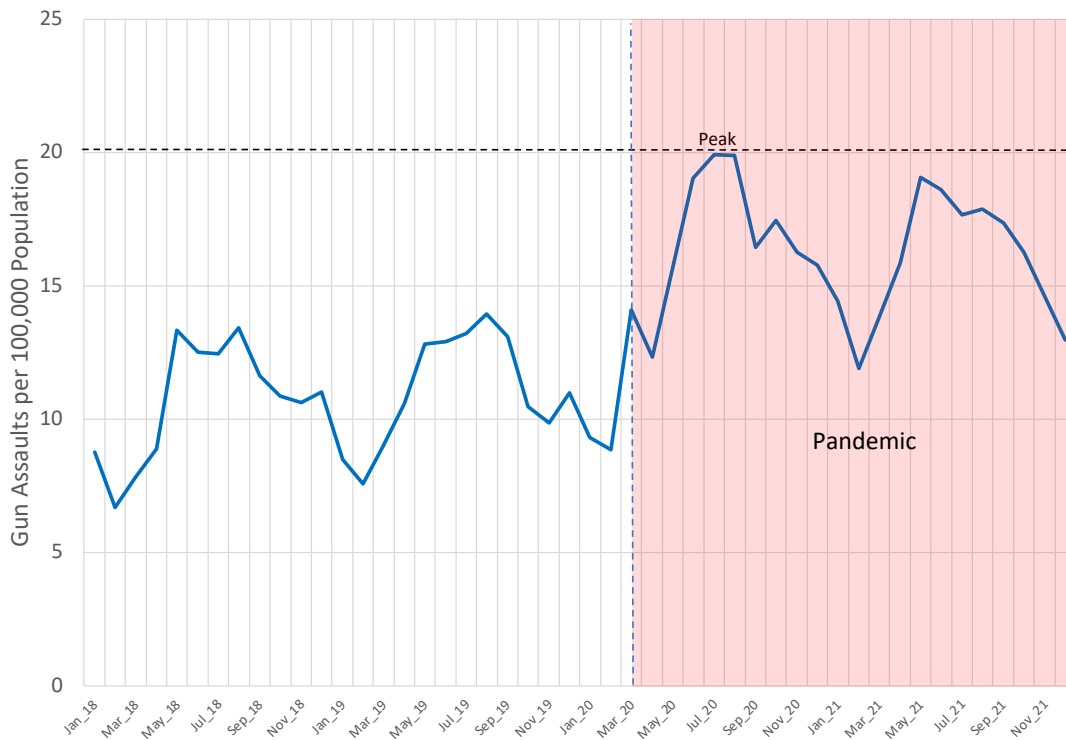
KEY TAKEAWAY

The number of aggravated assaults was 4% higher in 2021 – 2,934 more aggravated assaults – than the year before.

GUN ASSAULT

Gun assaults are aggravated assaults committed with a firearm. The monthly gun assault rate in the 12 cities with available data exhibited a cyclical trend over time. It peaked during the summer of 2020 and peaked again in the spring and summer of 2021 before falling through the remainder of the year. There were 1,941 more gun assaults in the 12 study cities in 2021 than in 2020, an increase of 8%. Given the small number of cities on which these results are based, they should be viewed with caution.

Figure 4. Monthly Gun Assault Rate, January 2018 - December 2021



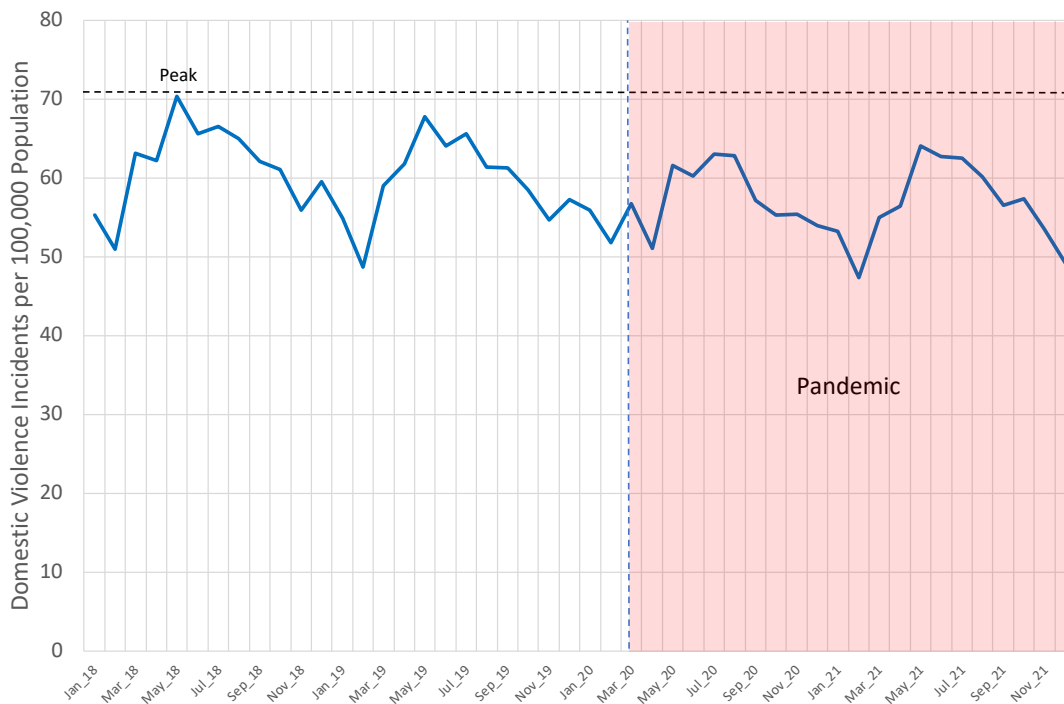
KEY TAKEAWAY

The number of gun assaults was 8% higher in 2021 – 1,941 more gun assaults – than the year before. The result should be viewed with caution because it is based on data from just 12 cities.

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 monthly domestic violence rate exhibited a cyclical pattern over time and was lower during the first year of the pandemic than during the previous two years. Domestic violence rose, however, in 2021. There were 3,075 more domestic violence cases in 2021 than in 2020, an increase of just under 4%. But these results must be viewed with caution because they are based on only 11 cities for which domestic violence data was available. 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.

Figure 5. Monthly Domestic Violence Rate, January 2018 - December 2021



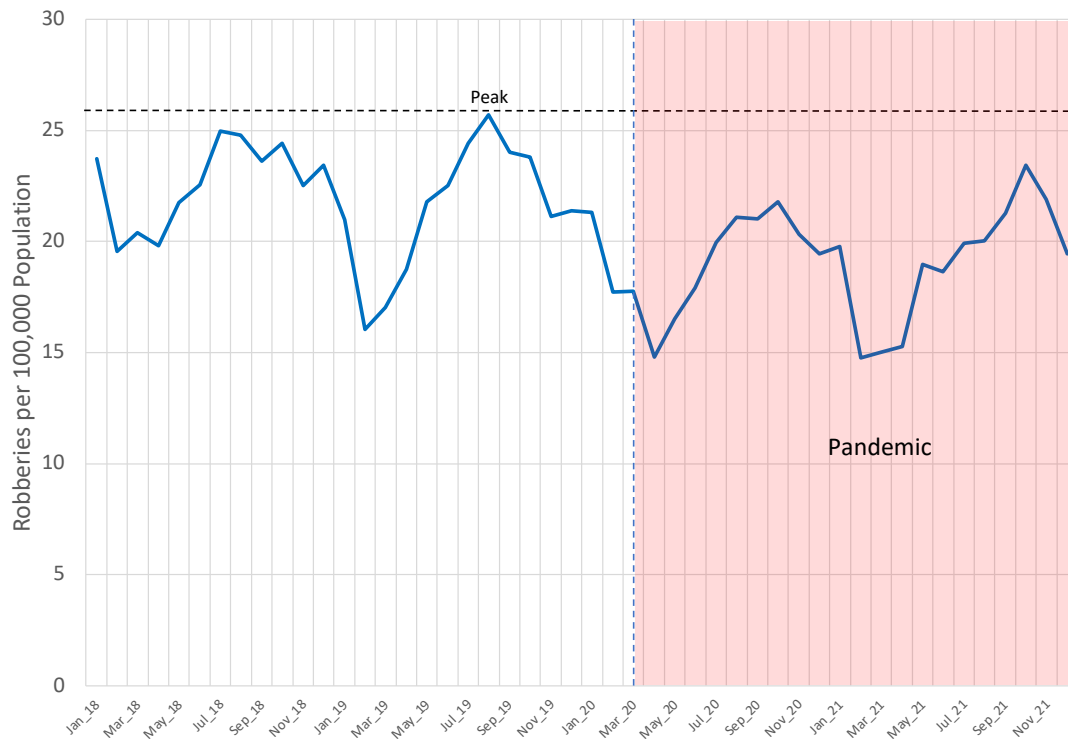
KEY TAKEAWAY

The number of domestic violence cases was nearly 4% higher in 2021 – 3,075 more incidents – than the year before. This result should be viewed with caution because it is based on data from just 11 cities.

ROBBERY

Robberies are thefts committed with force or the threat of force. The average monthly robbery rate in the 24 cities with available data was lower during the first year of the pandemic than during the preceding two years. There were 396 more robberies in 2021, however, than the year before, an increase of just under 1%. This increase accelerated toward the end of 2021. There were 9% more robberies in the fourth quarter (October-December) of 2021 than during the same period in 2020.

Figure 6. Monthly Robbery Rate, January 2018 - December 2021



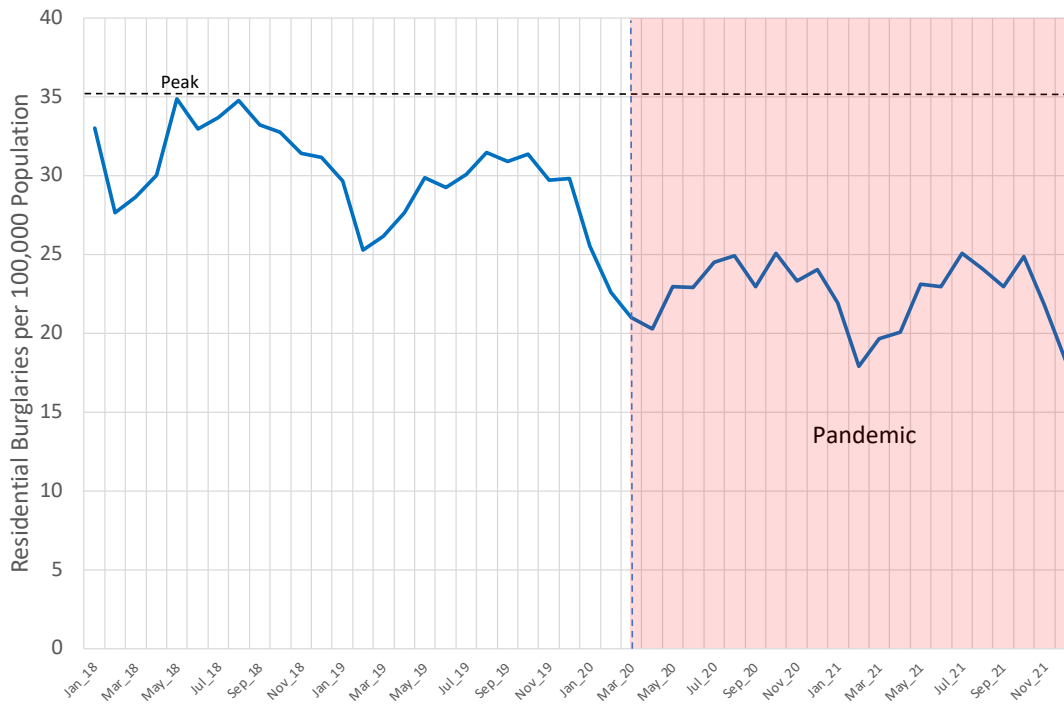
KEY TAKEAWAY

The number of robberies was about 1% higher in 2021 – 396 more robberies – than the year before. The increase accelerated during the fourth quarter of 2021.

RESIDENTIAL BURGLARY

Burglaries involve breaking and entering a residential or commercial premise for the purpose of committing a crime. The average monthly residential burglary rate in the 15 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 2021 was 5.5% lower – representing 2,125 fewer burglaries – than in 2020.

Figure 7. Monthly Residential Burglary Rate, January 2018 - December 2021



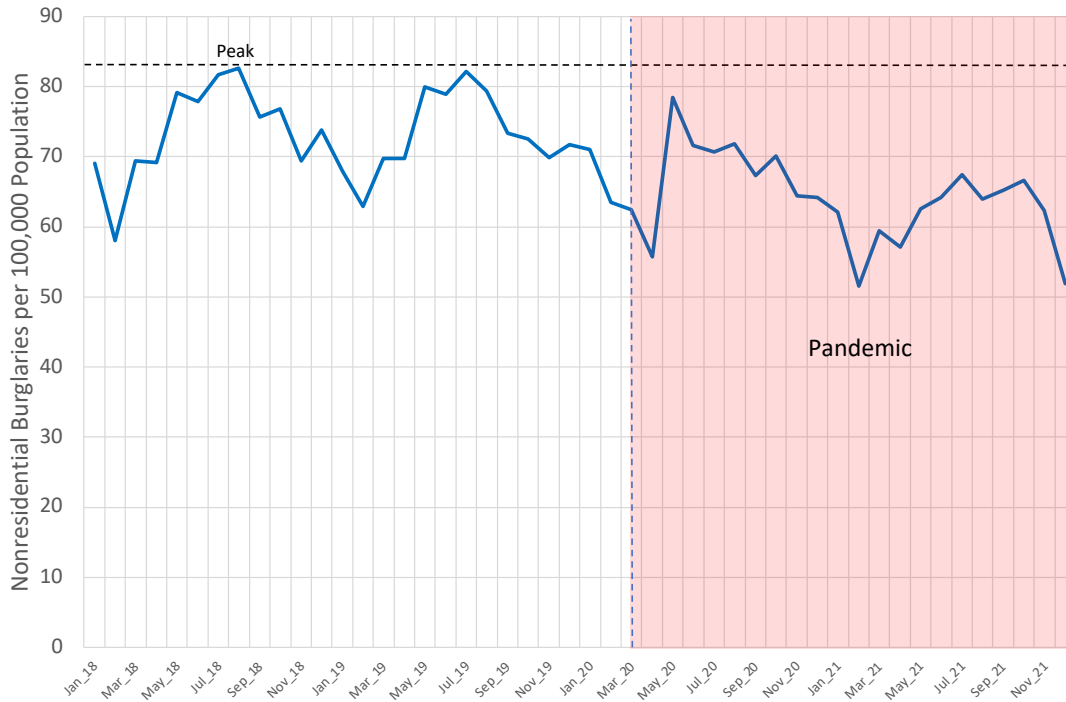
KEY TAKEAWAY

The number of residential burglaries was 5.5% lower in 2021 – 2,125 fewer residential burglaries – than the year before.

NONRESIDENTIAL BURGLARY

In the 15 cities with available data, the nonresidential burglary rate exhibited a flat cyclical pattern before the pandemic and has decreased during the pandemic. The number of nonresidential burglaries fell by 6% from 2020 to 2021, representing 15,993 fewer nonresidential burglaries.

Figure 8. Monthly Nonresidential Burglary Rate, January 2018 - December 2021

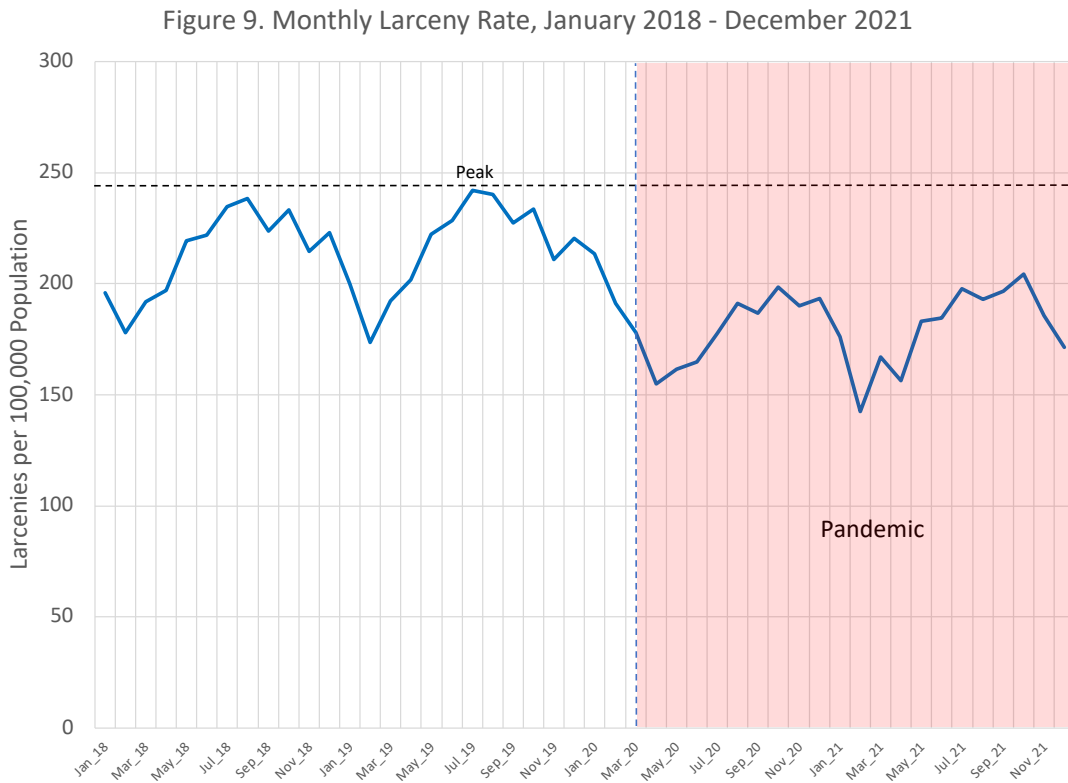


KEY TAKEAWAY

The number of nonresidential burglaries was 6% lower in 2021 – 15,993 fewer nonresidential burglaries – than during the previous year.

LARCENY

Larcenies are thefts unaccompanied by force or breaking and entering. The average monthly larceny rate exhibited a distinct cyclical pattern over time. The larceny rate in the 23 cities with available data was lower during the first year of the pandemic than during the prior two years. But this decline slowed almost to a halt in 2021. The number of larcenies was just 1% lower in 2021 than in 2020, representing a reduction of 3,703 larcenies.



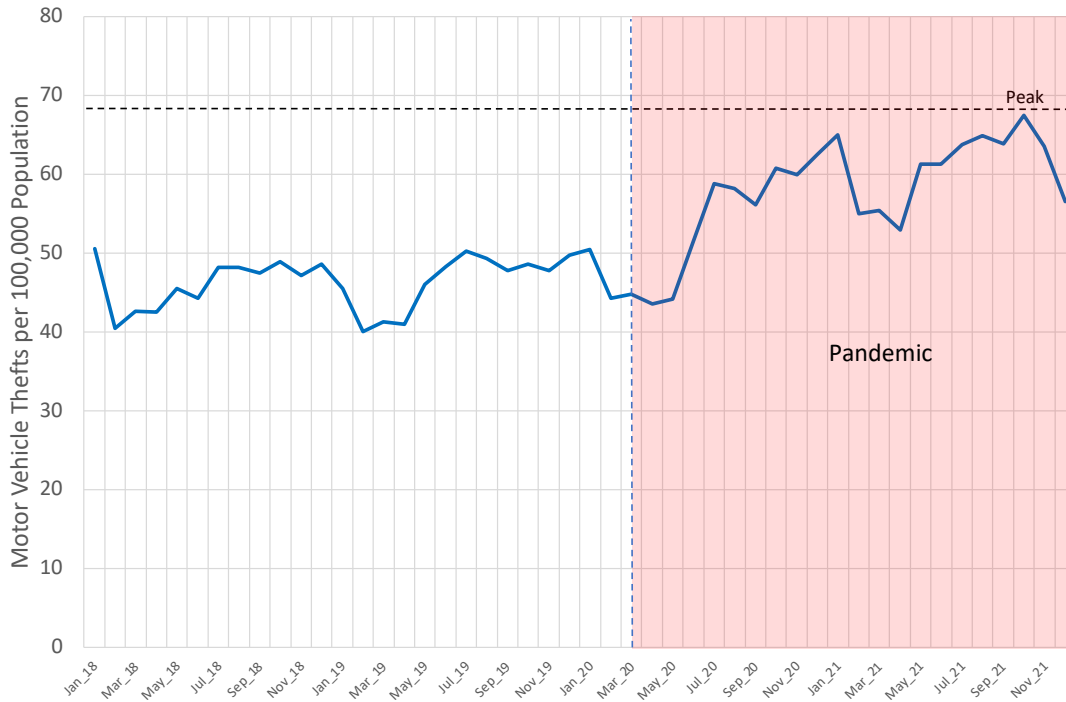
KEY TAKEAWAY

The number of larcenies was 1% lower – 3,703 fewer larcenies – during 2021 than the year before.

MOTOR VEHICLE THEFT

The average monthly 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, with seasonal fluctuations, to a peak in October of 2021. There were 18,227 more motor vehicle thefts during 2021, a 14% increase over 2020.

Figure 10. Monthly Motor Vehicle Theft Rate, January 2018 - December 2021



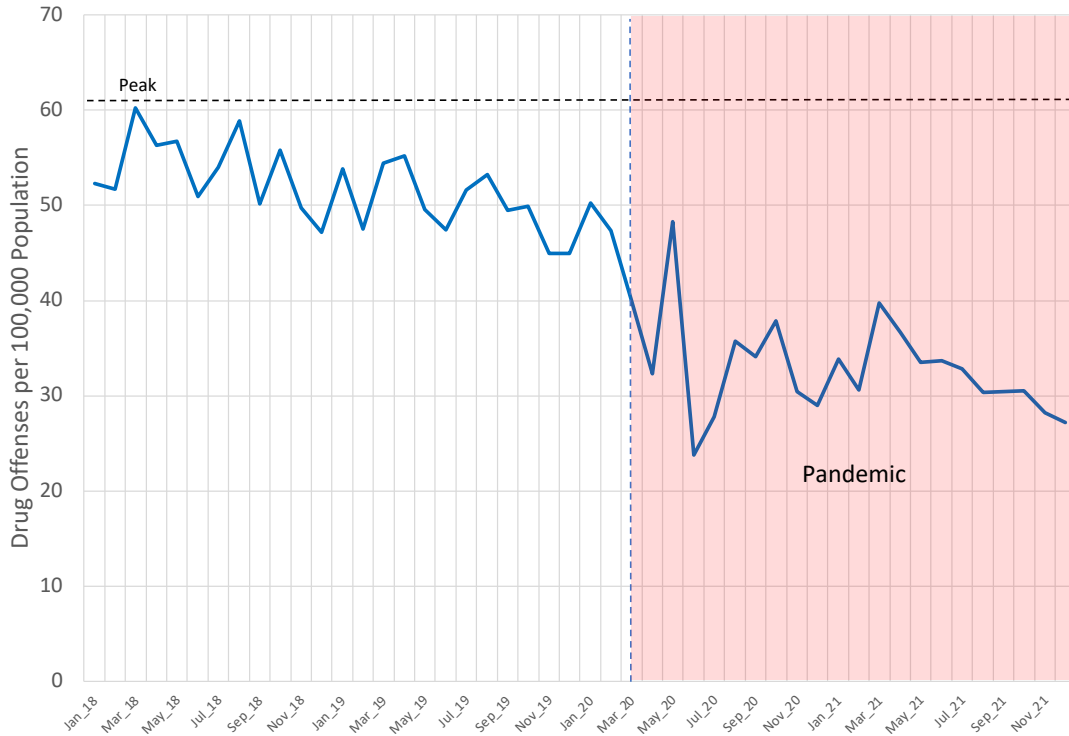
KEY TAKEAWAY

The number of motor vehicle thefts was 14% greater – 18,227 more motor vehicle thefts – during 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. There were 6,764 fewer drug offenses in 2021 than in 2020, a 12% decrease.

Figure 11. Monthly Drug Offense Rate, January 2018 - December 2021



KEY TAKEAWAY

The number of drug offenses was 12% lower – 6,764 fewer drug offenses – in 2021 than the year before.

Conclusion

This study is the eighth in a series of reports exploring crime changes during the coronavirus for the Council on Criminal Justice. Updating that earlier work, this analysis reveals both increases and decreases in crime rates in a sample of U.S. cities between 2020 and 2021. Homicides, aggravated and gun assaults, and motor vehicle thefts increased, while residential burglaries, nonresidential burglaries, larcenies, and drug offenses fell. Robberies, which had been decreasing, rose slightly in 2021.

The declines in burglaries, larcenies, and drug crimes in 2020 coincided with the stay-at-home mandates and business closings during the early months of the pandemic. Quarantines reduced residential burglary. When businesses are closed, there is no shoplifting. 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.

The increase in robberies in 2021 accelerated during the final months of the year, and the 1% decrease in larcenies in 2021 was much smaller than reductions seen earlier in the pandemic. The uptick in robberies and the smaller decline in larcenies in 2021 could reflect a return to somewhat normal living conditions as the pandemic appeared to recede – at least until the Omicron outbreak that began in December of 2021. These trends could also stem from the emergence of new destabilizing conditions, such as the sharp rise in the price of food, fuel, and housing during the final months of 2021. It is too early to tell whether the changes in the trajectory of robbery and larceny rates were momentary fluctuations or will persist into 2022. Future reports will devote special attention to these offenses.

Motor vehicle theft stands out as a nonviolent crime that has increased throughout the pandemic. Our findings show that there was a 14% increase in motor vehicle thefts in 2021 over 2020, 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. But the increase has persisted as employment has returned to near pre-pandemic levels, although many people continue to work at home. 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.² As violent crime rates have continued to increase since the summer of 2020, motor vehicle thefts may have followed suit.

Increases in homicide and nonfatal gun violence have understandably stirred the greatest public concern. It is important to note, however, that homicide rates remain well below the historical peaks seen in the early 1990s, and that the increases have slowed during 2021. A precipitous rise in homicide and gun assault in the late spring of 2020 coincided with the emergence of mass protests after George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis, but the connection, if any, between the social unrest and heightened violence remains uncertain. Some analysts have argued that the homicide rise in 2015 and 2016 during the social unrest following the police killing in Ferguson, MO, resulted from diminished policing, a reduction in police legitimacy, or both.³ Those explanations have also been applied to the more recent homicide increase,⁴ but both are hypotheses that await systematic empirical evaluation.

Even at a slower rate of increase, the elevated rates of homicide and serious assaults require an urgent response from elected 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 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. Ten essential actions cities can take to reduce violence are discussed in a recent [report](#) by the Violent Crime Working Group of the Council on Criminal Justice.

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 that in many cases are better equipped to handle them. Abandoning long-needed police reform is not a viable policy option. Rather, because collaborative relationships between police and communities are essential to achieve durable reductions in urban violence, police reforms that strengthen trust and legitimacy also are essential.

² 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.

³ Rosenfeld, R., Gaston, S., Spivak, H., and Irazola, S. (2017). *Assessing and responding to the recent homicide rise in the United States*. NCJ 251067. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice.

⁴ Rosenfeld, R. (2020). Is de-policing the cause of the spike in urban violence? *Federal Sentencing Reporter*, 33, 142-143.

A year ago, we concluded our yearend 2020 report with the words: "With so many lives at stake, the time to act is now." They are as germane now as they were then.

Appendix I: Cities and Offenses

City	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Atlanta	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
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
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
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	12	11	24	15	15	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