

Increase in Police Staffing

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Key Takeaways

- + Despite widespread concerns about police staffing shortages, sworn officer numbers changed relatively little across large U.S. cities between 2019 and 2024, declining by approximately 6%.
- + Staffing changes do not explain why some cities experienced much larger increases in homicide than in others between 2019 and 2022.
- + Staffing changes also do not explain why homicide fell more rapidly in some cities than in others between 2022 and 2024.
- + The broader research literature consistently finds that police staffing affects crime on average, but the historical relationship is modest.

Established Evidence and Theoretical Mechanism

A large body of research has examined whether investments in policing reduce crime. The overall conclusion is remarkably consistent: Larger police forces tend to reduce crime, including serious violent crimes like murder, but the effect is modest. The most recent estimates suggest that a 10% increase in police manpower—a large increase by historical standards—has, on average, reduced murders by around 6%.¹ Randomized experiments in criminology and natural experiments in police deployments in economics both bolster the estimates in the staffing literature, finding that when police presence is higher in an area, crime tends to decline.^{2,3} While the mechanisms at play are hard to definitively pin down, the available literature suggests that deterrence likely plays a larger role than incapacitation. This finding follows from the fact that growth in police staffing does not lead to an increase in the number of arrests a department makes for serious crimes.

Recent Evidence and Relevance to Current Trends

Police Staffing and Crime in the Post-COVID Era

The sharp increase in homicide following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic remains one of the most consequential developments in recent American crime trends. Between 2019 and 2022, homicides increased dramatically in most large cities before declining substantially after 2022, in some cities to levels not seen in more than 50 years.

Beginning in 2020, some large police departments reported hiring slowdowns, elevated retirements, resignations, and recruiting challenges in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder and subsequent protests.⁴ This brief considers whether a decline in police staffing after the pandemic can explain the large increase in homicide between 2020 and 2022 and if, correspondingly, there is any staffing data that would explain the subsequent dramatic fall in U.S. homicide rates after 2022.

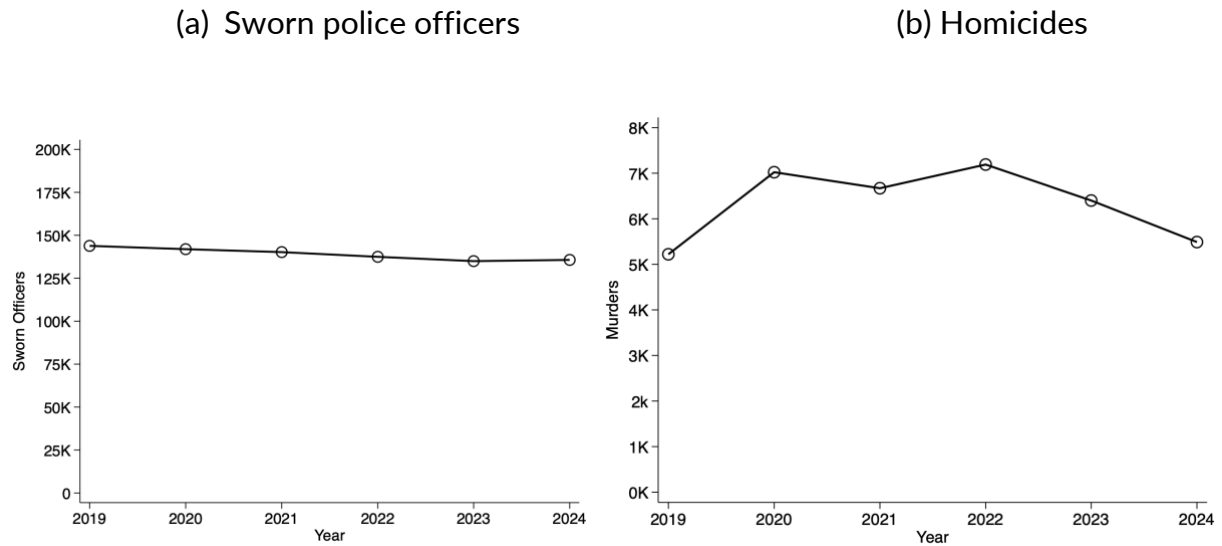
While establishing causality is difficult in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic chaos and the many changes to public life that occurred all at once, the hypothesis that changes in police staffing explains what happened to homicide rates in the post-COVID era has a clear testable implication. In particular, if police staffing were a major driver of the post-pandemic homicide cycle, one would expect cities that experienced the largest declines in sworn officers to have experienced the largest increases in homicide. Likewise, cities that recovered staffing more quickly after 2022 should have experienced larger declines in homicide.

To investigate, I utilize data from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports for the 2019-2024 period, which encompasses the rise and fall of homicide during and after the pandemic. After scrubbing the data of cities for which the data appear unreliable, I am left with a sample of 167 cities with a population of 100,000 or greater during the time period. The evidence presented here provides little support for the prediction that police staffing explains variation in homicide trends among cities.

Officer Staffing Changed Only Modestly

The first notable feature of the data is that staffing levels changed relatively little over the study period. Among municipalities in the sample, the total number of sworn officers declined modestly from roughly 144,000 in 2019 to approximately 136,000 in 2023, a 6% decline, before stabilizing in 2024 (Figure 1, panel a).

Figure 1 – Sworn police officers and homicides, US cities > 100,000 Populations

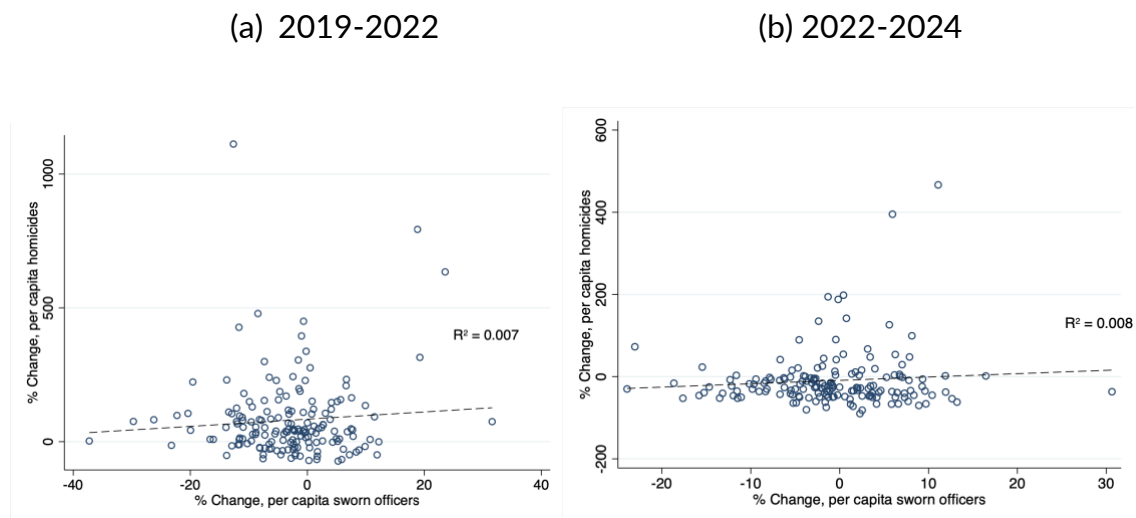


By contrast, murders increased sharply in 2020, remained elevated through 2022, and then declined substantially over the following two years (Figure 1, panel b). The prior literature suggests that a 6% decline in staffing might predict a 3-4% rise in homicides, but the actual rise was more than 40%. Thus, even a charitable view of the evidence would suggest that changes in staffing were a minor driver, at best, of the dramatic rise in national homicide rates.

Direct Analysis of Police Staffing Changes and Homicide Rate Changes

Next, I consider a more compelling test of the staffing hypothesis: whether the cities that experienced the most meaningful staffing changes also experienced the largest swings in homicide. I divide the data into two distinct periods: 2019-2022, when homicide rates were rising, and 2022-2024 when they were falling. Figure 2 plots the percentage change in per-capita homicides against the percentage change in sworn officers between 2019 and 2022 (Panel a) and between 2022 and 2024 (Panel b).

Figure 2 – Homicides, US cities > 100,000 Populations



If staffing losses were an important driver of the homicide increase, cities with the largest declines in officers would be expected to exhibit the largest increases in homicide. Instead, the relationship is essentially absent (Panel a). The fitted regression line through the data is nearly flat and indicates that variation in staffing explains well less than one percent of the cross-city variation in homicide changes. The same conclusion emerges when examining the recovery period. With Panel b, the figure compares staffing changes and homicide changes between 2022 and 2024. Overall, the figure demonstrates that the widespread increase and then decline in homicide during the 2019-2024 period appears to have occurred largely independent of changes in police employment.

Emerging Questions and Future Directions

Outside of what happens to homicide and police staffing over the next decade, two additional questions will be critical to answer. First, what will happen to other serious crimes? Does the dramatic decline in homicide reflect, in part, a reallocation of law enforcement resources toward gangs, groups, and gun offenders? If so, has that prioritization come at the expense of other investigations or routine patrol? Second, how will changes in prosecutorial practices shape the effects of policing? Policing and prosecution are inherently interconnected when it comes to both incapacitation and deterrence. Over the next decade, will prosecutors continue to successfully prosecute felony cases or will a larger share of cases be declined or dismissed? Will more arrestees be diverted into programs that effectively address the underlying causes of their offending? Because serious crime is highly concentrated among a relatively small number of individuals, the answers to these questions may ultimately depend less on what

happens to the average offender than on how the criminal justice system responds to those at the extreme upper tail of the offending distribution, and vice versa.⁵

Prepared for CCJ Homicide Decline Research Summit

The United States has experienced a sharp decline in homicide since the middle of 2022. This dramatic and largely unexpected shift has sparked a high-stakes debate about what is driving it. To examine the plausibility of dozens of potential factors, CCJ convened a two-day summit in September 2026 with about 50 researchers from criminology, economics, public health, psychology, sociology, and related disciplines. This brief was prepared to inform discussions during the convening.

Endnotes

¹ Chalfin, Aaron, et al. "Police force size and civilian race." *American Economic Review: Insights* 4.2 (2022): 139-158.

² Braga, Anthony A., et al. "Hot spots policing and crime reduction: An update of an ongoing systematic review and meta-analysis." *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 15.3 (2019): 289-311

³ Weisburd, Sarit. "Police presence, rapid response rates, and crime prevention." *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 103.2 (2021): 280-293.

⁴ Adams, Ian T., Scott M. Mourtgos, and Justin Nix. "Turnover in large US policing agencies following the George Floyd protests." *Journal of Criminal Justice* 88 (2023): 102105.

⁵ MacDonald, John. "Criminal justice reform guided by evidence: social control works—The Academy of Experimental Criminology 2022 Joan McCord Lecture: MacDonald." *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 20.3 (2024): 743-760.