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# Is crime getting better or worse?

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We talk to three experts about what different government reports tell us about crime.

*I'm Isaac Saul, and this is Tangle: an independent, nonpartisan, subscriber-supported politics newsletter that summarizes the best arguments from across the political spectrum on the news of the day — then “my take.”*

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## Introduction.

Is crime increasing or decreasing in America? This seemingly simple question is not as easy to answer as you might think.

This week, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) released its annual [Crime in the Nation report](#), which shared data on over 14 million criminal offenses reported to the agency in 2023. News outlets like [The Associated Press](#), [The New York Times](#), [NPR](#), and others ran headlines on a “steep” decline in crime since 2020, but others like [Fox News](#) and [The Daily Caller](#) raised concerns about the FBI’s data or highlighted areas where the crime rate increased. The opinion pages, too, showed a stark contrast in how the report was received.

“Contrary to media myth, U.S. urban crime rates are up,” Jeffrey H. Anderson [wrote](#) in The Wall Street Journal. “Police and victim data finally agree that crime is falling,” Bloomberg’s Justin Fox [said](#).

Earlier this month, the Bureau of Justice Statistics released the [National Crime Victimization Survey](#) (NCVS), an annual report on self-reported instances of crime. The survey found that the overall rate of violent victimizations dropped slightly from 2022 to 2023 but remained higher than the rate in 2020, exemplified by [an increase](#) in the rate of violent crime (excluding simple assault) from 5.6 per 1,000 in 2020 to 8.7 per 1,000 in 2023. Unlike the FBI report, though, few news outlets wrote about the NCVS data.

What’s going on here?

In last week’s Friday edition, we shared a side-by-side breakdown of former President Donald Trump and Vice President Kamala Harris’s record and positions on eight of the biggest issues in the 2024 election. In the [section on crime](#), we noted that voters have diverging views not only on the best policies to address crime but on the prevalence of crime itself — in 2023, 77% of Americans thought there was [more crime in the U.S. than the year prior](#). What explains the gap between

perception and the data? Or could former President Trump and others be correct that the FBI's data is [fatally flawed](#)?

Today's edition focuses on three core questions about crime in America:

1. How reliable is the crime rate data?
2. What is driving the gap between Americans' perception of crime and the crime data?
3. What policies are most effective at addressing crime?

To answer these three questions, we spoke with three experts who span the political spectrum in their views but have all dedicated their careers in part to studying crime and advocating for evidence-based solutions to the issue. [Ames Grawert](#) is senior counsel in the Brennan Center's Justice Program, leading quantitative and policy research focused on crime and criminal justice reform. [John Lott](#) is president of the Crime Prevention Center and served as the Senior Advisor for Research and Statistics in the U.S. Department of Justice during the Trump administration. [Robert VerBruggen](#) is a policy researcher at the Manhattan Institute, where he covers issues like crime, education, and family policy.

Before we dive in, here are a few pieces of background information on the sources crime analysts use:

- The FBI's annual Crime in the Nation report contains data collected from the agency's **Uniform Crime Reporting** program, which compiles reports on crime from cities, universities, counties, states, tribes, and federal law enforcement agencies across the U.S. In the 2023 report, the FBI [says](#) approximately 16,000 sources covering areas with 94.3% of the U.S. population submitted data.
- In 2015, the FBI [announced](#) it would transition from collecting data using two systems — an aggregate crime-reporting system called the **Summary Reporting System (SRS)** and an incident-based reporting system called the **National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS)** — to only using the incident-based NIBRS system. 2021 was the first and only year the FBI accepted [only NIBRS data](#). In 2022 and 2023 it once again accepted both NIBRS and SRS data.
- The **National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)** is an annual survey sponsored by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, and it collects data on self-

reported instances of crime (excluding homicide) from a random sample of roughly 230,000 U.S. residents aged 12 or older.

- The **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)** also publishes [annual data](#) on homicides based on death certificates for U.S. residents.
- Changes in the rates of crime vary between type of crime and location in the FBI and NCVS reports. You can explore the full FBI data [here](#) and the full NCVS report [here](#).

We spoke with Grawert, Lott, and VerBruggen individually this week, and the interviews below have been lightly edited for clarity.

## Is crime data reliable?

**Tangle:** Ames, you've written several pieces in the last year looking at the crime rate in the U.S. and found that crime has decreased meaningfully since the pandemic. What sources of data are you using to reach that conclusion?

**Ames Grawert:** The gold standard of crime data in the United States is the FBI's annual Uniform Crime Reporting publications. The FBI publishes two series of tables — one is called Offenses Known to Law Enforcement, and the other is called Crime in the United States. These are essentially the final say on crime, at least according to police data in the United States. The problem is they don't come out very regularly, typically about nine months after the end of the year that they cover. For example, just three days ago we got the final data on 2023. So it's gold standard data, but it takes time to produce, takes time to get right, and we have to wait for it.

There are other sources out there that help to fill the gap between the lag time created by this wait for FBI data. One is the [Council on Criminal Justice](#), a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization run by a team of eminent criminologists. They collect police data from across the country and do their best to standardize it and publish a look at crime trends in this group of major cities they study. Major city crime trends don't always match the national trend, but I'm not aware of a year that the sign and trend of the city crime trends were significantly different from the national trends.

Others do similar work. Jeff Asher is an analyst based in New Orleans who runs a site called the [Real-Time Crime Index](#), which is a really, really exciting site. He's essentially built a digital pipeline from hundreds of police departments to his website, and they publish — in relatively short order — up-to-date crime data from police departments, which gives a much more timely picture of national crime trends.

A third source that's brand new is [quarterly data from the FBI](#). With the launch of this new data system that they've been rolling out for decades, they've also started publishing quarterly data. It still has a lag of a couple quarters and it's also preliminary, but it publishes more frequently. It did diverge from what the final data showed, but it did get the sign and the magnitude right at showing large declines in murder and modest declines in violent crime.

**Tangle: John, you've argued that the crime data from sources like the FBI is not painting a full picture of the true crime rate in the U.S. Why do you say that's the case?**

**John Lott:** Well, the FBI deals with reported crime. We've known for many decades that not all crimes are reported to police. About 40% of violent crimes are reported to police; about 30% of property crimes are reported to police. And that share over the last few years in particular has fallen. 51 years ago, precisely because of those concerns, the Department of Justice set up something called the National Crime Victimization Survey inside the Bureau of Justice Statistics. It is a truly massive survey. A lot of large surveys you hear about are 8,000 or 10,000 people; this survey is 240,000 people each year, and they've been doing it for 51 years.

That allows you to break out both reported and unreported crime to go and get a measure of total crime. There are other measures outside of the Department of Justice — like murders tracked by the Centers for Disease Control — but one of the big problems that you have with the FBI data over the last few years (from 2021 on) is that a huge percentage of police departments have stopped reporting or are only partially reporting crime data to the FBI *[Editor's note: When the FBI changed its reporting system in 2021, law enforcement agencies covering approximately 215 million U.S. inhabitants reported data for that year's report. In 2023, when the FBI*

*again accepted both the NIBRS and SRS data, agencies covering approximately 314 million inhabitants submitted data.]*

In 2020, police departments covering 97% of the population of the United States were reporting crime data to the FBI. In 2022, 31% of police departments weren't reporting any crime data, and that included three of the five largest cities in the United States: New York, Los Angeles, and Phoenix. Then you had another 24% of police departments that were only partially reporting crime data to the FBI [*Editor's note: Lott is referring to the FBI's quarterly crime report. In 2022's Q4 report, [only 44% of agencies had reported a full 12 months of crime data](#), 24% submitted partial data, and 32% did not participate at all, including cities like New York City, Los Angeles, and Phoenix. However, overall participation was higher for the full (non-quarterly) report — approximately 87% of agencies submitted data. New York City did not submit complete data in 2021 or 2022 but did in 2023; Los Angeles did not submit any data in 2021 but did in 2022 and 2023; Phoenix did not submit any data in 2021 but did in 2022 and 2023 (you can search for crime data by city [here](#))*].

We know crime varies a lot over the course of the year — you have a lot more violent crime in the summer than you have in the winter, for example — and these police departments that were only partially reporting data overwhelmingly tended to report the data that they did report during the relatively slow crime rate parts of the year. The FBI — let's say you got three months of the winter — the FBI would take those three months and extrapolate them over the rest of the year, assuming that the rest of the year had the same crime rate that you had during those three months that they reported. You can see pretty clearly why that could create an underestimate of crime.

There are other problems that have occurred. The FBI has been found in a couple of cases to take the crime data that they did get from the cities and report a lower number than those cities had given them. In fact, one thing that's gotten almost no news coverage is that the FBI said in the 2022 data on reported crimes that it had fallen by 2.1%. Well, they've gone back and re-looked at [the numbers that they had](#), and now they've revised it from a drop of 2.1% to an increase of 4.5% — a net swing of 6.6%.

The government overestimated the number of people employed over the course of last year by 818,000. Well, it turns out that they did something similar with regard to reported crime numbers. For the last year, we've had news articles saying crime is down, and people are mistaken — even though they should say *reported* crime is down — but even that turned out to be wrong when they revised these numbers up. If you look at the National Crime Victimization Survey data, reported crimes have moved in dramatically different directions from the FBI's measure of reported crimes. For example, in 2022, while the FBI initially reported a 2.1% drop and revised it to a 4.5% increase, the NCVS data showed a 29% increase in reported violent crime numbers. That's a huge increase. In the numbers that just came out for 2023, the FBI claims a 3% drop in violent crime, but the NCVS data showed a 4.5% increase in reported violent crime.

The FBI data claims that violent crime — reported violent crime — has fallen by 5% during the Biden administration. [The NCVS data](#) says that total violent crime has increased by 55% *[Editor's note: Total violent crime as measured by the NCVS data is up between 2020 and 2023, [rising](#) from 16.4 per 1,000 to 22.5 per 1,000, or a 37% increase. However, the total violent crime rate was 21.0 per 1,000 in 2019 — the last pre-pandemic year — resulting in a 7% increase between 2019 and 2023. Lott clarified with us that he was referring to the NCVS's figures for violent crime with simple assault excluded, which corresponds with the FBI's definition of violent felonies and showed a 55% increase over the 2020-2023 period]*. That's the largest three-year percentage increase on record in the 51 years that the National Crime Victimization data has been collected — by far the largest. The largest previous [three-year] increase was [from 2004 to] 2006, which was 27%. You have a 42% increase in rape, a 63% increase in robbery, and a 55% increase in aggravated assault.

David Muir, when he fact-checked Trump on the crime rate, basically said, "Well, the FBI's measure of reported violent crime has fallen." But Trump was not only right about the claim about violent crime — because Trump didn't say reported crime, he talked about total violent crime changing. He was also correct in his response to Muir about the fact that a lot of major cities with high crime rates aren't reporting their data.

**Tangle: Robert, how reliable is the data that we're getting from sources like the FBI? Are there reasons to doubt that this data is capturing the whole picture?**

**Robert VerBruggen:** There are a few different reliable sources that you can use to look at crime trends. One is called the National Crime Victimization Survey. Another is to use the FBI data, which is drawn from reports by police departments. This only includes crimes that are actually reported to the police, and many of the agencies don't report their data to the FBI — though the FBI does make estimates to account for the fact that the data isn't reported.

My personal favorite is the CDC's homicide data based on death certificates. They have a broader definition: Homicide is any situation in which one person kills another person. The FBI keeps tabs on murders and non-negligent homicide — basically, a killing that is found to be legally wrong. And they show very, very similar trends. Both show that if you divide American history up into a few different periods, we had a really big surge of crime between the 1960s and the early 1990s, followed by a really big drop in crime in the 1990s that carried over into the 2000s.

**Tangle: Ames, do you think there are flaws in the FBI's new system of collecting crime data?**

**Ames Grawert:** The criticism of the FBI's data applies to an issue they had in the past, but that thankfully has largely been resolved. Those problems originated with this change in how the FBI tracks and reports crime data. That switch was 20 years or more in the making — the FBI said years ago, "We're going to change this new, better way of collecting crime data and the deadline for doing it is 2021." It just happens to be that they picked the 2021 rollout date.

What the FBI said to police agencies was, "For the 2021 report, you either report with the new system or you don't report at all." And unfortunately, due to no fault of their own, a lot of agencies couldn't make this deadline. [40-50% of the population](#) was not represented in the FBI's 2021 crime report. This is not something that people were trying to shove under the rug — many organizations that study crime called out the issues with this report.



The good news is it's no longer 2021. For its 2022 report, the FBI did something that I think is really clever. They invited jurisdictions to submit under either system, while still heavily encouraging people to make the transition to the new one. Then they fused those two sets of data together in a very rigorous statistical way. As a result, 85-90% of the population was covered by the 2022 report, and 94% of the population was covered by the 2023 report *[Editor's note: Agencies covering roughly 94% of the population submitted data, but not for every crime and demographic category the FBI asks for].*

Long story short, it's true that in the past there have been issues of population coverage in the FBI data. The critical thing to know is that those issues are in the past. The Bureau's worked really hard to solve them, and I think has solved them. This year's report was materially complete. Are there still gaps? Yes, there are every year. But 95% population coverage is pretty normal for a given year, and I think we should be very skeptical of those who apply the criticism of 2021's report to this year's *[Editor's note: For [2017](#), [2018](#) and [2019](#), the FBI did not specify population coverage in its report, but 90%, 90%, and 89% of agencies, respectively, reported data for those years, which is in line with the 2023 report — so it's fair to assume that population coverage is roughly 95% in normal years].*

**Tangle: John, why do you think the FBI's new data collection system has tainted the results relative to the past system?**

**John Lott:** In 2021, they changed the reporting requirements and reporting standards. Rather than an annual report, they had the police departments put out a quarterly report. They also required a little bit more data than they had before. Some police departments just said, "This is too much of a burden for us to go and do." Some of them said, "We'll do it when we have extra time," which may be in low-crime parts of the year when their police aren't as overburdened as they are in high-crime parts of the year.

There are other places like New York and Los Angeles, which aren't reporting for political reasons as best as I can figure. You can go to their websites and look at their CompStat data where they have crime broken down by week — the FBI could just go to their websites and see what the crime data is. So I can't think of anything

other than just purely a political decision on the part of some jurisdictions to do it. They've used the change that occurred during the Biden administration as an excuse for whether they report the data.

### **Tangle: Robert, is crime data being manipulated to suit political agendas?**

**Robert VerBruggen:** For a couple of years now I've been following this petty, partisan dust-up over red-versus-blue crime. I think a lot of people on the right are eager to say, "The blue areas of the country, they have all these problems with progressive prosecutors, and all this crime in the big cities. So blue America is the one with the crime problem."

But, a few years ago, we started to see counterattacks from the left where they would say, "No, actually, it's red America that has the bigger crime problem." I worked on [a report](#) with Professor George Borjas, who's an economist, and found that these claims were a sort of "one-neat-trick" situation, where if you look at the data at a more local level — look at counties or look at cities — you see that that blue America tends to have the crime problem because crime tends to be more concentrated in urban areas. But if you look at the state level, you find that the South — essentially since America's founding — has actually had a higher crime rate than the rest of the country.

We have this interesting situation where this fairly subtle difference in methods — what type of area you look at — can create this radical difference in results. We highlighted that in the brief, and we also looked at adding some control variables, like accounting for the racial demographics and income levels of these different places. What we found is that when you add on those control variables, trends in crime are not so clear at all; you can flatten it out so that partisanship doesn't make any difference.

So depending on how you look at the data, you can say that red America is crime-ridden, blue America is crime-ridden, or that partisanship doesn't make a difference. It's a very clean example of how in social science you can use different methods and different data to reach radically different conclusions.

## **Tangle: Ames, what do you think of the data from the National Crime Victimization Survey? How do you reconcile the differences with the FBI's data?**

**Ames Grawert:** The NCVS is a really important part of the constellation of crime data and justice statistics. It's a complementary way to understand crime. The NCVS is a nationally representative survey, so they call households and say, "Whether or not you reported it to police, were you a victim of crime last year? And did you tell the police about it?" Because it's a survey of victims, they don't track murder.

A good way to think of the survey is in terms of an example from my own life. I lived in Brooklyn in 2011, and I had my bike stolen. I didn't report it to police — that bike was long gone. If NCVS had called me, I would have told them about that experience. So that experience would have shown up in NCVS, but not in the FBI's data for that year.

What does that mean for our understanding of crime data today? It is true that FBI data is just tracking the offenses known to law enforcement, so it doesn't capture unreported crimes. But for the criticism of the FBI's crime data to be true — that there's been a huge spike in unreported violent crime — we would expect to see that in NCVS, and we don't. In fact, we see pretty stable levels of unreported violent crime. That strongly indicates that while there is always a gap between crime reported to police and crime in reality, that gap has stayed relatively constant — with some variation — over the recent years. That means that what we're seeing in the FBI data is probably real, even if it doesn't capture the full experience of crime in the United States. The 2023 NCVS came out recently, and it showed relatively similar levels of violent crime between 2019 and 2023. That's basically the same story the FBI data is telling.

Where there's a disjoint is during the pandemic years. NCVS shows crime going down; FBI data shows crime going up. Part of that is because FBI data tracks murder, which spiked significantly during the pandemic. Another part of it is the difficulty of conducting a survey during a respiratory pandemic. I give a lot of credit to government statisticians — I don't think they got it wrong in 2020 and 2021, I think they just had a really difficult hand dealt to them. Those are anomalous years.

So when people say violent crime went down in 2020 and 2021, that just doesn't align with either the FBI data or the experiences of people you talk to.

Long story short, there's no sign that unreported crime has gone up. And if you look at NCVS, for the last pre-pandemic year and today, you see relatively static or similar levels of violent victimization, which actually aligns with the FBI data.

**Tangle: John, why do you think the results from the FBI's annual report and the NCVS report have diverged in recent years?**

**John Lott:** Prior to 2021, the FBI measure of reported crimes and the National Crime Victimization Survey measure of reported crimes went hand in hand, and there really weren't any major differences. The differences have occurred since then, and there are multiple reasons for that. One is that the FBI changed its reporting standards for cities and police departments in 2021. We had this huge change in the rate that places were reporting to the FBI. Second, we've had a collapse of law enforcement in the United States over the last few years. You look in the five years before Covid for large cities over a million, for example, 44% of violent crimes resulted in an arrest. By 2022, it had fallen to 20%. We've never seen such a large drop, and we've never seen such incredibly low arrest rate numbers. If you want to use the FBI data, this is from the FBI — 20% of reported violent crimes result in arrest.

For property crimes — from the FBI, if that's what people want to use — only 4% of reported property crimes result in arrests in those cities. If you adjust for the NCVS data, only 8% of total violent crimes and only 1% of total property crimes in those cities result in arrest. Obviously, just because somebody's arrested doesn't mean that they're charged, let alone prosecuted or convicted. So you've had a huge drop in punishment rates for these criminals *[Editor's note: For the past five years, [monthly property crime reports](#) have ranged between roughly 307,000 and 1,000,000, but the number of monthly clearances has never exceeded 180,000. In December 2023, about 15% of reported property crimes were cleared, according to the FBI's data].*

One of the things that we've known for a long time is that the rate that people report crimes to police depends in part on whether they think anything's going to happen

— whether they think the criminal is going to be caught and punished. It's not too surprising to me that if I tell you that there's a 55% drop in arrest rates for violent crimes and a 65% drop in arrest rates for property crimes, you're going to have more crime occurring in those places. I see the NCVS data moving in a direction that I'm not particularly surprised by given these huge changes in arrest rates.

## What's driving the perception gap?

**Tangle: John, why do you think perceptions of crime differ from data that show the crime rate decreasing? What do you make of the differences between reported crime to the FBI and self-reported crime in the NCVS data?**

**John Lott:** Let me give a simple example. I don't know what city you live in, but in many cities across the country — in New York or D.C. or Chicago or Los Angeles or San Francisco — if you walk into a CVS or Walgreens, you're going to see everything behind Plexiglas. That wasn't the case a few years ago. If you want to go and buy something, you have to have a sales clerk come out, stand next to you, open the Plexiglas, and stand next to you while you read the ingredients and try to figure out which one of the packages you're going to buy. That's a very costly thing, and it's not a particularly fun way to go and shop. They're not doing it for fun. And people know that that wasn't the case just a few years ago.

For property crimes, people can see direct evidence of what must be a huge increase in crime for these stores to go and make those types of investments. Walmart, in many parts of the country, has put huge amounts of things behind Plexiglas. But it's not just the property crimes that have been affected by this. And again, even by the FBI numbers, even if that's what you want to rely on, there's been huge drops in arrest rates for all sorts of violent and property crimes.

One of the things that just drives me nuts is the media reporting on the crime data. When the National Crime Victimization Survey data for 2023 came out two days after the debate, there was no mainstream media coverage of it, no mentions at all. Even when Trump held a press conference on that Friday where he went through the

percentage changes in the survey, the mainstream media refused to cover it. The only thing you had was some [fact-checks from the Associated Press](#), and they said it wasn't a big change. But even they refused to mention what the percentage changes were.

Now, this week when we had the FBI data come out, you have headline after headline that says, "Violent crime has fallen," some of them for saying for two years in a row. You have these headlines in outlets like USA Today, which make two mistakes or two errors in one headline. One, they don't mention it's reported crime. And two, they apparently just looked at news articles from last year and didn't look at the actual FBI data to show that the agency had changed their percentages for the 2022 data.

Why do we see these differences? It's one thing to point out that total crime is different from reported crime, it's another thing to say that these two measures of reported crime aren't lining up. There are multiple reasons for it; I'll just give you one: I think that people believe that simply calling up 911 results in a crime being reported. In many parts of the country, if you have a crime occur and you call up the police, what the operator on 911 is going to ask you is, "Is it an emergency? Is the criminal there right now committing the crime?" And if you say, "No, the criminal's already left," what the operator will say is, "Okay, you have to come down to the police station and wait in line and go and have a police report filled out."

A few years ago they would have sent out a police car to you, but some people will say now, "Well, you know, it's just not worth my time to go down there to go and report the crime." If you make it more costly, fewer people are going to report it. So calling 911 doesn't result in a police report that gets included in the FBI data, but it can result in the NCVS including it. You get these big differences.

**Tangle: Ames, many Americans say they've perceived an uptick in crime based on changes in their surroundings — for example, when they see items at CVS and Walgreens locked behind Plexiglas, that seems to indicate that there is a serious problem with theft. Are those concerns valid?**

**Ames Grawert:** To start at a high level, violent crime and murder trends are highly nationalized, at least lately. The 2020 murder spike happened in most cities. There were exceptions, like Newark, New Jersey, but the decline in violent crime and murder in cities since the pandemic is also highly nationalized.

The same isn't true of shoplifting. First off, we don't actually have national shoplifting data; we have national larceny data. Larceny is all kinds of theft — to go back to my bike example, that was a larceny. Someone steals your laptop at a coffee shop, that's a larceny. Someone steals a can of laundry detergent at the supermarket, that's a larceny. It's a very broad category, but we don't really see a national larceny trend. To be clear, that means we don't see a national increase in shoplifting, but we do see individual cities that have very different experiences with shoplifting. San Francisco, where there's been a lot of talk about this trend, did see a huge spike in shoplifting and then it declined precipitously and faded. Los Angeles and New York appear to be in the middle of or recovering from a spike in shoplifting.

So when people think about this offense, they might be thinking about their community experience. They might be thinking about highly publicized stories about the experiences of specific cities. But it just doesn't align with the national data because it's not representative of the whole national experience. That doesn't make it less real, it just means because the data is more spotty and localized, it's a more complicated story to tell.

In a piece that I wrote with my colleague, Ram, we talked about how the differences in the ways that police get reports of shoplifting and the ways stores report shoplifting can have a telling and complicated effect on shoplifting data. Recently, the Manhattan Institute wrote a piece on shoplifting data that said there are massive challenges in getting data that captures the true volume of retail theft in a community and that we need to look for other ways of understanding the problem. So it's a complicated issue, unfortunately.

**Tangle: Robert, what factors do you think could be driving the public's perception of crime?**

**Robert VerBruggen:** In the past 10 years or so, we've had these cycles that are generally tied to a news event or high-salience racial issue, like the Ferguson riots and the George Floyd riots, where we have localized increases in crime and a broader national breakdown in law and order. We had increases in crime in 2015 and then again in 2020 — that most recent one has now begun to peter out. So we are seeing homicides fall — I think that's unambiguous no matter which data source you're looking at [*Editor's note: The violent crime rate did increase from 2014-2016 and 2019-2020, according to the FBI's data. Experts continue to [debate the precise causes](#) of those increases*].

In recent years, crime has been at a reasonably good place, historically speaking, for this country. As I said, the crime rate was really high in the early 90s but fell like a rock throughout the rest of the decade. It's held at a similar level and declined a bit more since then. We had pretty stable, low rates of crime until about 2014 or so, then we started having these incidents of racial unrest that were followed by increases in homicide rates. That's when we saw those two different spikes — one in 2015 and then another much bigger one in 2020.

My first focus is always on homicide because these are lives that are lost. It's the single most devastating crime, but also it's the best measured. When you start getting into those other types of crimes, you start having issues with whether they're being reported to the police. In the case of the survey data, it tends to fluctuate more and has bigger confidence intervals. Since the big surge in 2020, homicides are definitely just unambiguously down, and we've generally seen declines in other types of violent crime as well. But a big outlier when it comes to property crime is motor vehicle theft.

## What policy solutions should we pursue?

**Tangle:** Ames, what are some policies on crime that you would like to see the next administration pursue?



**Ames Grawert:** The Biden administration has done a really good job of directing money toward community-led crime prevention programs that are run by people who know their neighborhood like the back of their hand. A lot of money has gone to them through the American Rescue Plan and other initiatives. I think these programs will have long-term positive effects. Covid-19 created a perfect storm of factors that drove the crime rate up, but we've seen crime recede as the pandemic has. However, another reason it's gone down so fast might be because those community-based initiatives have been helpful.

Another thing I think a lot about is gun crime. When murder spiked in 2020, it was murder with guns — you can see this crystal clear in the data. In New York City, the murders went up by like 40%, and shootings doubled between 2019 and 2020. When we see murder spikes in the United States, it is because of its gun violence. So policies that tackle that are part of a holistic public safety solution.

We've been very supportive of policies that help people who have interacted with the justice system, been convicted of a crime, or spent time in prison get a real second chance after they're released. I think it's important to understand those policies as not just criminal justice reform policies, which they are, but also as making the justice system fairer. They are about rectifying historic disparities. They're also public safety strategies.

**Tangle: John, what are some policies that you'd like to see Trump, Harris, or any local and state political officials pursue to address crime?**

**John Lott:** All this isn't rocket science. If you want to make it risky for criminals to commit crime, or reduce crime, you have to make it risky for criminals to commit crime. That means higher arrest rates, higher conviction rates, longer prison sentences. We had the "Defund the Police" movement, and we've had a huge number of retirements for police. Police departments across the country have been having a very difficult time getting back up, even when they've decided in the last year or so to go back and hire police. They've had a hard time hiring people, even after dramatically lowering standards in many places. Somebody on the job for just six months or a year is not going to effectively replace an officer who retired with 15

or 20 years of experience. It's going to be years before they get up to the same abilities that the officer that retired or left had.

Also, the paperwork requirements that are being imposed on police officers effectively reduce the number of police. In Chicago, every time a police officer goes and stops and talks to somebody, they have to fill out two legal pages of forms, which take an average of an hour. So they go and talk to four people in the morning, and then their afternoon is taken up filling out paperwork. In California, if an officer gives a traffic citation to somebody, they have to fill out forms, which take on average about 45 minutes to go and fill out. Among the questions that the officers have to answer now are what the sexual orientation was of the person that they gave the traffic citation to. So not only have we had a reduction in the number of officers, we've had a reduction in the number of effective officer hours that police can work with all these paperwork requirements. You could quickly increase the number of police hours by just dialing back — hopefully dramatically — these paperwork requirements.

The other issue you have is the prosecutors. Somebody like Alvin Bragg — one of these Soros prosecutors, but this is true across many of these cities — has reduced 60% of the felony charges for people in Manhattan, the vast majority of those reduced from felonies to misdemeanors. A major part of that has to do with aggravated assaults. What can make something an aggravated assault, as opposed to a simple assault, is whether a weapon is used. Alvin Bragg is refusing to prosecute people for firearms offenses. If you use a gun in an assault on somebody, he downgrades it to a misdemeanor without a weapon. *[Editor's note: Bragg faced widespread pushback in 2022 for instructing prosecutors to avoid seeking jail time for certain crimes including robbery, assault, and gun possession. The backlash prompted Bragg to [significantly revise](#) those policies. Bragg also has a history of downgrading certain crimes; in 2022, his office [downgraded 52%](#) of potential felonies to misdemeanors, a higher rate than Bragg's predecessor].*

Again, if you want to go and make it costly for criminals to go and commit crimes, you've got to go and punish them for the types of crimes that they're committing. But you have these Soros prosecutors in every place from Los Angeles, San Francisco, St. Louis, Chicago, and even in places like Dallas and Houston. I'd like the

Biden administration and Kamala Harris to call out some of these practices. They refuse to criticize these prosecutors for doing these types of things.

Then you have liberal judges across the country, who up through 2022 were releasing large percentages of inmates from local jails. The people in these jails are overwhelmingly young people, 18 to maybe 30 or so. They released them because of concerns about Covid. The thing is, we knew even in 2020, that somebody in their 20s wasn't at risk for Covid. We're not talking about releasing people who are over 65, or people with other severe comorbidities, but they essentially just used it as an excuse to release these inmates. In some of these urban areas, two thirds of the inmates were being released from local jails that were there, and many of them were violent criminals.

Finally, I would change bail reform rules. The guy who drove an [SUV into a Christmas parade in Wisconsin](#) — he was already facing multiple felonies. He had tried to use the same SUV to run over the mother of his child. He's facing attempted murder charges and three other felonies — a possible criminal sentence of over 30 years in prison. He's already basically facing a life sentence, but they release him on essentially no bail, and he goes and drives the SUV into a Christmas crowd, killing six people and sending 61 people to the hospital. Essentially, all those crimes are free crimes for him.

You see this across the country. These lawmakers don't understand the notion of marginal deterrence, or they refuse to understand it. They're not punishing the guys they catch. And of course, that demoralizes the police; what's the point of going and risking your safety to go and arrest people if they're not going to be charged or if they're immediately released to go out and commit more crimes?

**Tangle: Robert, what do you see as the best strategies to address crime?**

**Robert VerBruggen:** When I think about this topic, I always start with the 1990s, because that was a time when America really brought violent crime down in a really big way. There's been an academic dispute about exactly how to break down all the different causes of that for years, and we'll never totally resolve it, but I think we can point to a few different things.

One is that we started incarcerating more. It's a rough decision to make, but we did start incarcerating more and we started incapacitating people who were participating in violence.

The other big success was New York City bringing crime down through the use of smart policing. When it comes to policing strategies, I always think about place-based strategies and people-based strategies. Place-based strategies are paying attention to the map of your city and where the crime is happening and putting more police where crimes are happening. Crime tends to be very concentrated within certain places of a city, and if you put police there, you can stop crime before it happens and generally keep it under control.

People-based strategies have also seen a lot of success. New York has done gang takedowns, where they target specific gangs that are causing trouble. Police departments have also had success with a strategy called "focused deterrence." In that approach, you essentially map out social networks of who's involved in crime in your city, get a hold of those people, and offer them services and assistance to get out of what they're doing. But also make it clear to them that you know what they're doing and will stop them if they don't on their own.

Crime issues I generally think of handling more at the state and local level. When somebody commits a murder, when somebody commits a robbery, they're committing a state crime and they're prosecuted in the state courts. And the state and local governments are the ones hiring the police officers who handle that.

Of course, there are also federal crimes, and the federal government can further get involved by providing funding for police departments. That's something that we've seen a lot of proposals for: If we want more police officers and if we want to help spur on certain strategies, we can use the federal government to provide funding for that.

As a diehard federalist, I have mixed feelings about having the federal government getting involved to the extent that it has, but that's certainly a lever that they can pull to get more of these solutions in play.

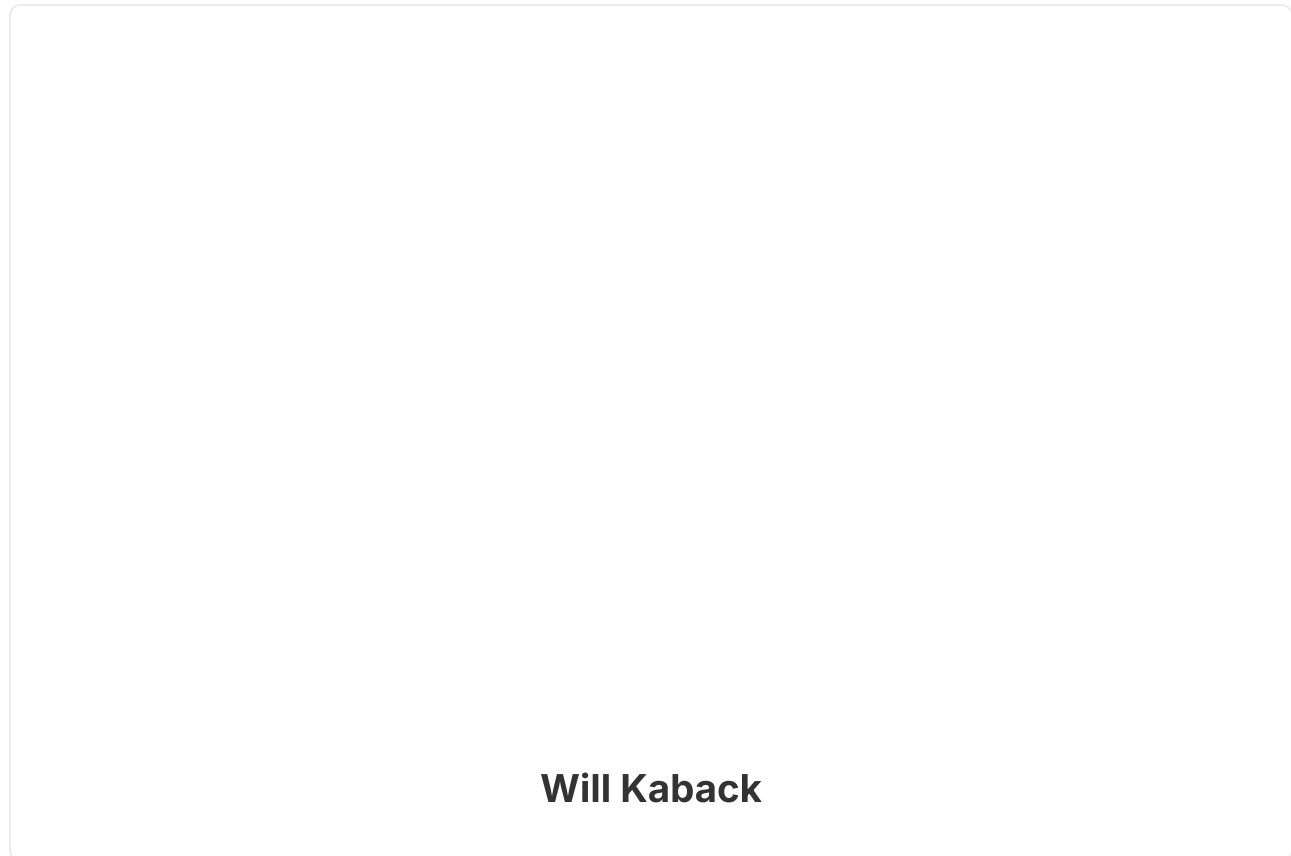
You can follow Ames Grawert's work at <https://www.brennancenter.org/>, or on X at <https://x.com/AmesCG>.

You can follow John Lott's work at <http://crimeresearch.org>, or on X at <https://x.com/JohnRLottJr>.

You can follow Robert VerBruggen's work at <https://manhattan.institute/>, or on X at <https://x.com/RAVerBruggen>.

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