COMMENTARY

Don't credit Trump with drop in crime

Law enforcement is primarily a state and local function, and many factors other than federal policy affect crime rates.

By Jacob Sullum | Nov 5, 2026, 5:00am MST



President Donald Trump talks to reporters during a tour of the White House ballroom construction Wednesday. | Alex Brandon/AP

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Survey data published last week shows a sharp decrease in violent crime from 2024 to 2025, which is consistent with FBI numbers released last summer. Although the Trump administration has tried to take credit for that welcome development, there are several reasons to doubt such claims.

In August, the FBI reported that the U.S. homicide rate fell by 18% from 2024 to 2025, an unprecedented drop. According to data compiled by the Council on Criminal Justice, the 2025 rate was the lowest recorded since at least 1900, and the rate is likely to reach "a new historic low" this year.

"We have the numbers down because of what the federal government's doing," President Donald Trump averred during an Aug. 14 speech at the Nassau County, New York, police academy. "Everyone knows we've done an amazing job."

Four days later, a White House news release reinforced that message. "President Trump Delivers the Largest Drop in Violent Crime in American History," the headline said.

Trump "backed law enforcement, empowered the FBI to hunt predators instead of political targets, and rejected the failed Democrat lunacy that left communities reeling," the White House bragged. "The results are clear: fewer murders, fewer victims and safer streets."

That pattern repeated after the Justice Department announced the preliminary results of the 2025 National Crime Victimization Survey last week. The 2025 victimization rate for nonfatal violent crime, excluding simple assault, was 7.4 per 1,000 Americans 12 or older, down 25% from 2024.

"President Trump Delivers Historic Drop in Violent Crime," the White House crowed. "Violent crime PLUMMETED in 2025 compared to 2024," Attorney General Todd Blanche said. "This is what happens when you have an administration [that] prioritizes the safety and security of Americans and our communities."

Inconveniently for Trump, the downward trend in violent crime began in 2023, two years before he started his current term. And if Trump deserves credit for the continuation of that trend, doesn't he also deserve blame for the huge 2020 spike in homicides, which likewise happened on his watch?

The truth is that neither inference is justified without additional evidence. Presidents have a limited role in law enforcement, which is primarily a state and local function, and many factors other than federal policy affect crime rates.

In September, the Council on Criminal Justice convened a panel of 48 crime experts to assess four dozen possible explanations for the recent decline in homicides. None of them thought the federal policies highlighted by Trump had played a major role.

Not a single expert said Trump's National Guard deployments had made a "major" contribution, and just one perceived a "limited" impact. No one listed that factor as a top-five contributor. Nor did anyone mention increased immigration enforcement as a top contributor, although two participants said it had played a "limited" role.

The Council on Criminal Justice did not specifically ask about FBI arrests, another explanation favored by Trump. The survey did ask about improvements in homicide clearance rates, which 11% of the experts viewed as a top contributor. But since the FBI accounts for a small share of violent crime arrests (about 8%, in 2025), Trump is surely overrating the agency's role in reducing homicides.

Less concretely, the experts weighed the potential impact of "presidential public safety signals." Three participants credited that factor with a "limited" impact, and none thought it was a top contributor.

The most strongly favored explanation was "easing pandemic-related social and economic disruption," which 57% of the experts deemed "a major contributor." Other factors with relatively high scores included expansion of community violence prevention programs, increased use of "focused deterrence" aimed at "high-risk individuals and groups," increases in local government capacity, and increases in public safety and support services "relative to demand."

These assessments are a work in progress, and firmer answers won't be possible without further research. But one thing seems clear: Trump's policies fall woefully short of explaining recent declines in violent crime.

Jacob Sullum is a senior editor at Reason magazine.

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Jacob Sullum
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