



National Commission
on COVID-19 and
Criminal Justice

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

March 2021 Update

PREPARED FOR THE COMMISSION BY

RICHARD ROSENFELD

Curators' Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Criminology and Criminal Justice,
University of Missouri - St. Louis

ERNESTO LOPEZ

Graduate Research Assistant, University of Missouri — St. Louis

Council on Criminal Justice
May 2021

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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 a graduate research assistant at the University of Missouri - St. Louis.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper was produced with support from Arnold Ventures, the Justice and Mobility Fund, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Microsoft, the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, and other contributors.

Suggested Citation

Rosenfeld, Richard and Ernesto Lopez. Pandemic, Social Unrest, and Crime in U.S. Cities: March 2021 Update. Washington, D.C.: Council on Criminal Justice, May 2021.

Summary

- + This study updates and supplements previous reports released in [July](#), [September](#), and [November of 2020](#), and [January 2021](#) with additional crime data through the first quarter (January-March) of 2021. It examines crime rates for ten violent, property, and drug offenses in 32 American cities. Not all cities reported data for each offense.
- + During the first quarter of 2021, homicide rates declined from their peak in the summer of 2020, but remained above levels in the first quarter of prior years. The number of homicides rose by 24% compared to the first quarter of 2020 (an increase of 193 homicides) and by 49% compared to the first quarter of 2019 (an increase of 324 homicides).
- + Despite recent increases, the 2020 year-end homicide rate in the study sample was just over half what it was for those cities 25 years ago (11.4 deaths per 100,000 residents in those cities versus 19.4 per 100,000 in 1995).
- + Aggravated and gun assault rates were also higher in the first quarter of 2021 than in the same period of 2020. Aggravated assault rates increased 7%, while gun assault rates went up by 22%.
- + Burglary, larceny, and drug offense rates were lower in the first quarter of 2021 than during the first quarter of 2020. Residential burglary, non-residential burglary, larceny, and drug offense rates dropped by 16%, 7%, 16%, and 24% from the same period in 2020. Motor vehicle theft rates were 28% higher in the first quarter of 2021 than the year before.
- + Domestic violence did not increase in the first quarter of 2021 over the first quarter of 2020. This result is based on just 11 of the 32 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 quarter (January-March) 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 32 cities included in the current study (see Appendix for full list) range from Norfolk, VA, the smallest, with 245,000 residents, to New York, the largest city in the sample, with 8.42 million residents. The mean population of the cities for which crime data were available is approximately 1.1 million, and the median is approximately 645,000. Houston, Portland, OR, and San Jose have been added to the sample since our last report. Crime data for St. Louis and Chandler, AZ, were unavailable during their transition to the National Incident Based Reporting System.

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 was obtained from online portals of city police departments that provided weekly data for the period between January 2017 and March 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

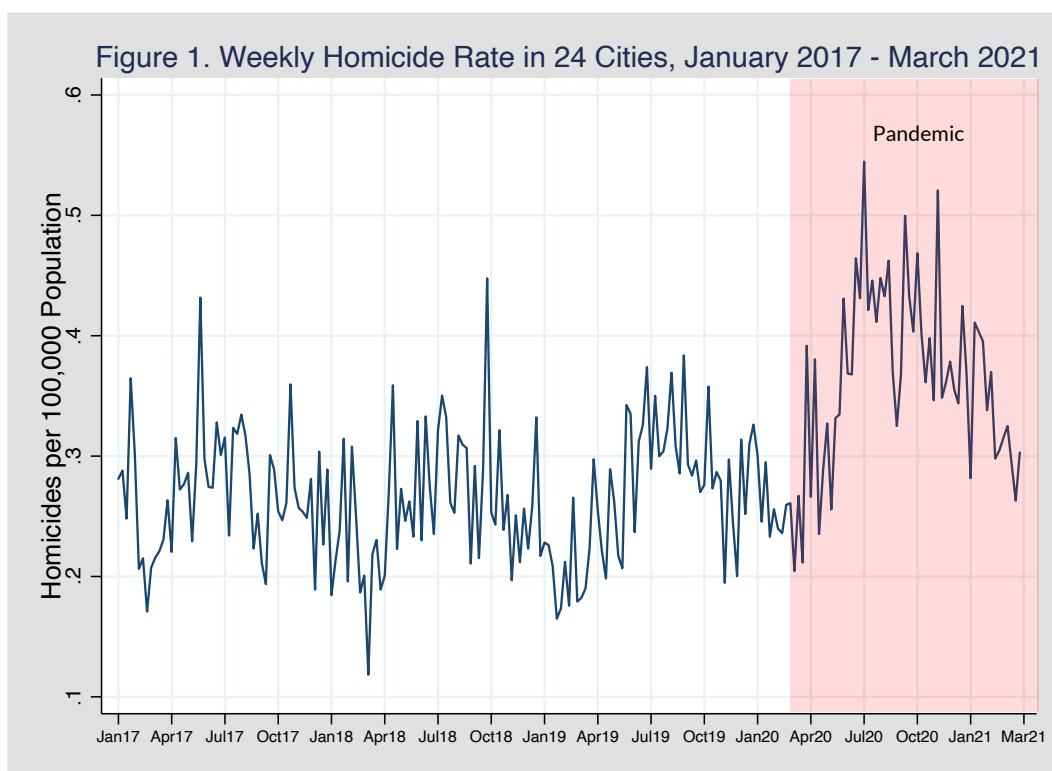
Our conclusions have not changed: As the pandemic subsides, long-lasting reductions in violence and crime will require pursuing evidence-based crime-control strategies and enacting long-needed reforms to policing.

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 32 cities.

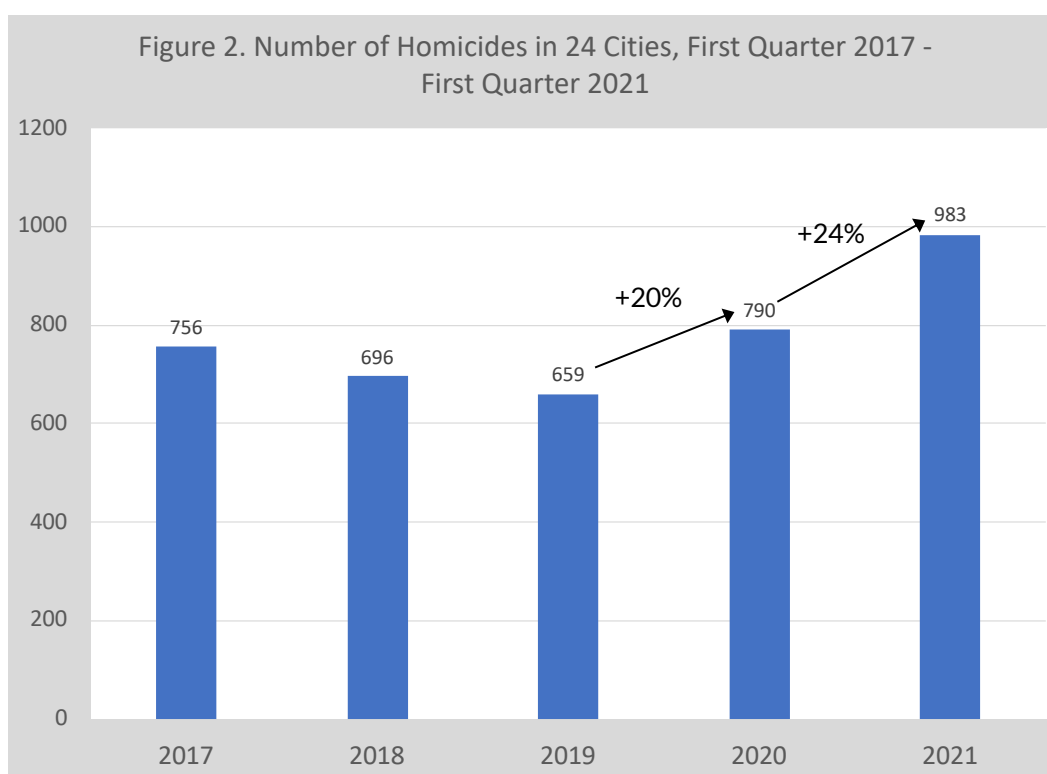
HOMICIDE

Figure 1 displays the average weekly homicide rate in the 24 cities for which such data was available (see Appendix). Our analysis identified a rough cyclical pattern in the homicide rate over time. That said, the rate began to increase in the beginning of 2020 and rose sharply immediately after George Floyd's May 25 murder, which sparked nationwide protests against police violence. Homicide levels remained elevated through the summer, before decreasing through the late fall of 2020 and first three months of 2021. Even with that decline, however, the number of homicides during the first quarter of 2021 was 24% greater than during the same period in 2020 and 49% greater than the same period in 2019. In the 24 cities for which homicide data was available, there were 193 more homicides in the first quarter of 2021 than during the same timeframe the year before, and 324 more than the year before that.



Double-digit percentage increases in homicide above and beyond normal seasonal changes are deeply troubling and suggest that the homicide rise of 2020 has continued into early 2021. As we noted in our year-end report, the historic (30%) rise in homicide rates was likely attributable to the pandemic, social unrest, and other factors that combined to create a “perfect storm” of circumstances.

It is unclear, however, whether the continuing effects of the pandemic and other conditions that emerged over the past year are entirely responsible for the homicide increase seen in the opening months of 2021. The first-quarter 2021 homicide increase actually began in 2019, prior to the pandemic and well before protests against police violence spread across the country. The number of homicides in the 24-city sample rose 24% between the first quarter of 2020 and 2021, as noted above and shown in Figure 2. The number rose 20% between 2019 and 2020.

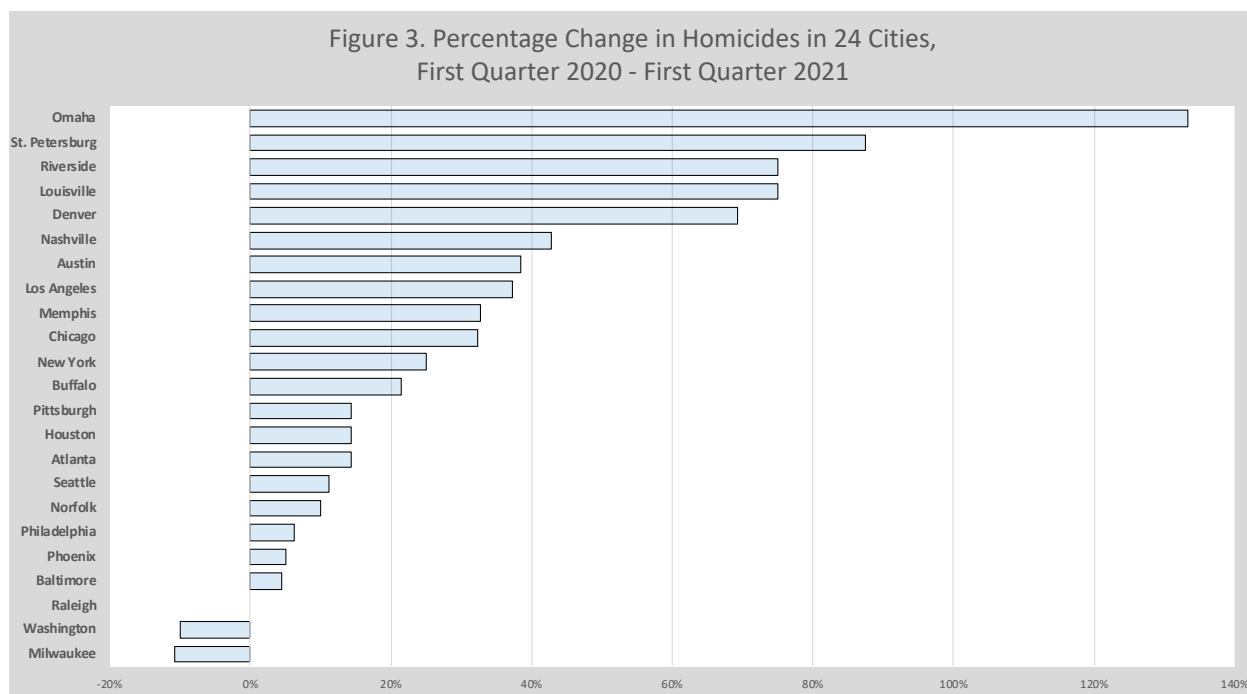


It should be noted that, despite recent increases, homicide rates remain well below historical highs. The 2020 year-end homicide rate for the 24 cities in the study sample was just over half what it was for those cities 25 years ago (11.4 deaths per 100,000 residents in those cities versus 19.4 per 100,000 in 1995).

In order to explore the variation across cities during the first quarter of 2021, Figure 3 shows the percentage change between the first quarter of 2020 and the first quarter of 2021 in the number of homicides in 23 of the 24 cities for which we obtained data. The

remaining city, Portland, OR, is not included in the figure because it is literally off the chart. Portland recorded 21 homicides in the first quarter of 2021 compared with just two during that quarter the year before, an increase of 950%.

Overall, 21 of 24 cities reported increases in homicide rates. Portland aside, some of the largest percentage increases were in smaller cities with very small homicide counts. Omaha, for example, experienced a 133% increase in homicide, based on a difference of just four homicides (three in 2020 versus seven in 2021). Similarly, St. Petersburg's 88% increase resulted from seven additional homicides in 2021 over the eight recorded in 2020. But cities with histories of much larger numbers of homicides also experienced pronounced percentage increases. Chicago added 33 murders to its first-quarter 2020 total of 102, representing an increase of 32%. Los Angeles added 25 homicides in the first quarter of 2021, a 37% increase. Not surprisingly, big cities contributed disproportionately to the overall increase in homicide victims. The three largest cities (New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago) accounted for 39% of the 193 additional people killed in the first quarter of 2021.

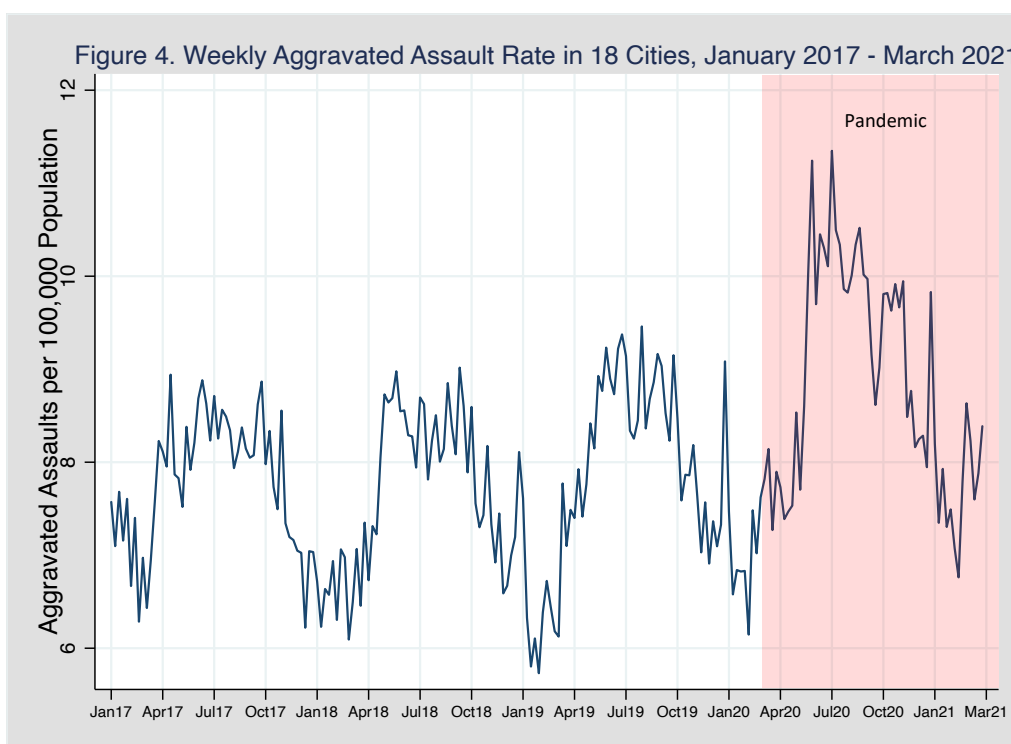


KEY TAKEAWAY

Homicides increased by 24% in the first quarter of 2021 from the year before, accounting for 193 more deaths, and by 49% over the same period in 2019, accounting for 324 more deaths. All but three cities in the sample experienced increases.

AGGRAVATED ASSAULT

Aggravated assaults are assaults committed with a deadly weapon or those that result in or threaten serious bodily injury to the victim. 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 declining during the fall and winter. Like the homicide rate, the aggravated assault rate peaked during the summer and fell through the remainder of 2020 and the first quarter of 2021. The aggravated assault rate during the first quarter of 2021 was 7% higher than in the first quarter of 2020. There were 1,260 more aggravated assaults in the first quarter of 2021 than there were in the same timeframe the year before.

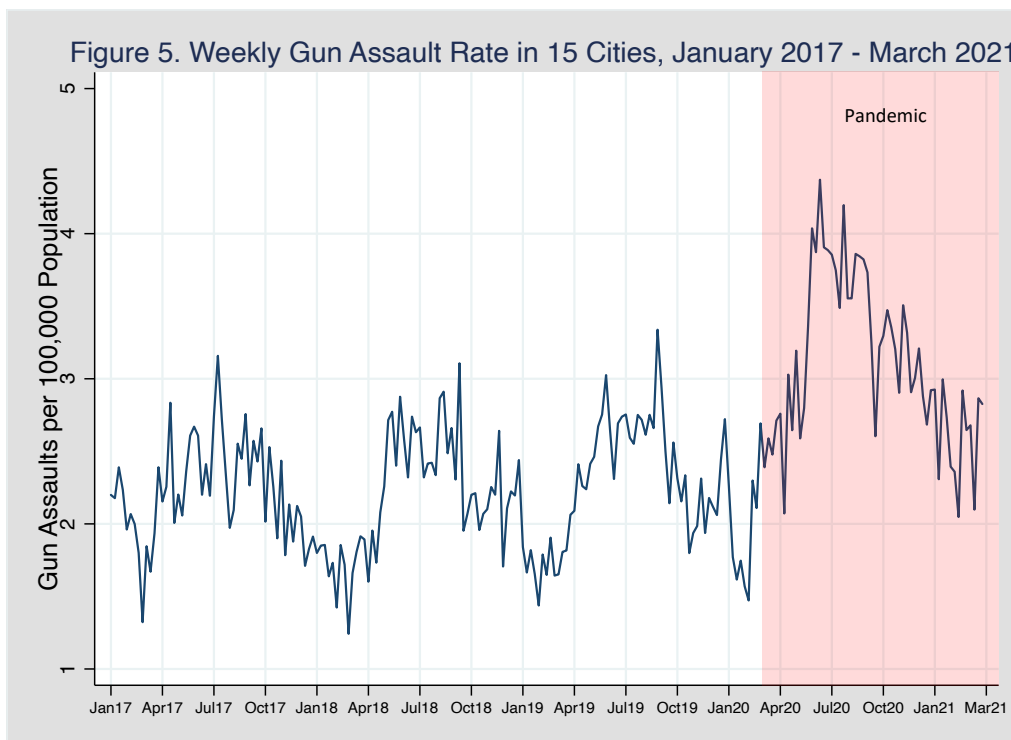


KEY TAKEAWAY

The aggravated assault rate was 7% higher in the first quarter of 2021 – 1,260 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 15 cities with available data exhibited a cyclical trend over time, peaked during the summer of 2020, and then dropped through the first quarter of 2021. The gun assault rate was 22% higher during the first quarter of 2021 than in the first quarter of 2020. There were 1,407 more gun assaults in the first quarter of 2021 than occurred during the same period the year before.

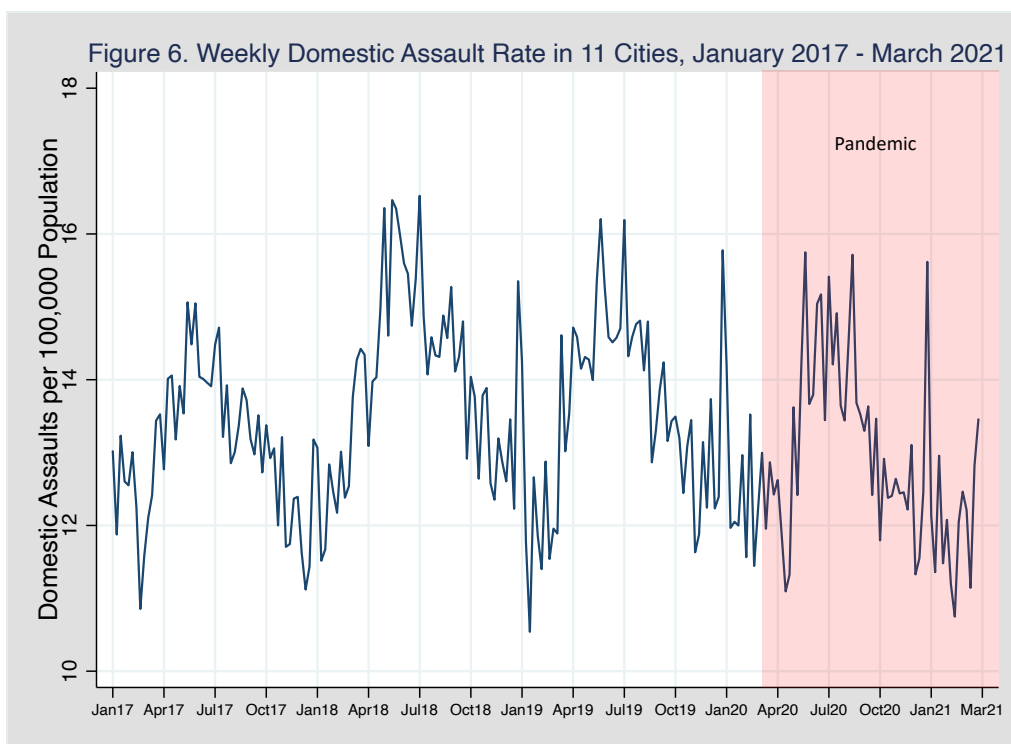


KEY TAKEAWAY

The gun assault rate was 22% higher in the first quarter of 2021 – 1,407 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 4% lower during the first quarter of 2021 than in the first quarter of 2020. That decrease means there were 347 fewer domestic violence incidents in the first quarter of 2021 than during the same period the prior year. But these results must be viewed with caution because they are based on just 11 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.

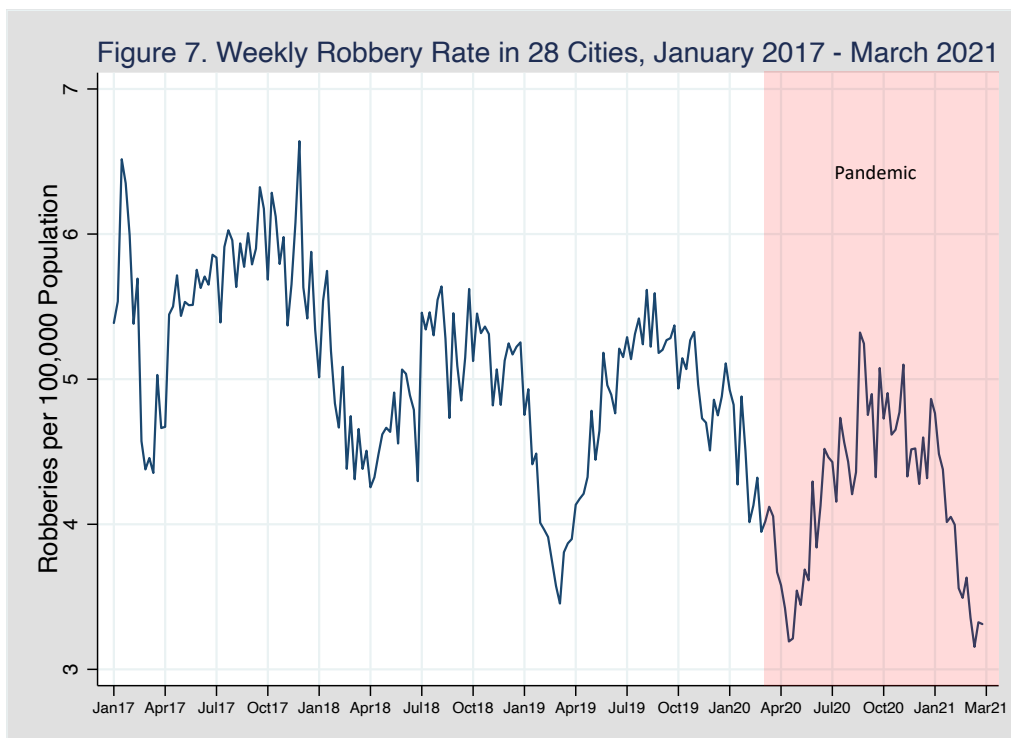


KEY TAKEAWAY

The domestic violence rate was 4% lower in the first quarter of 2021 – 347 fewer 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 weekly robbery rate in the 28 cities with available data exhibited a downward cyclical trend from January of 2017 through the first quarter of 2021. The robbery rate decreased during the early months of the pandemic, rose during the summer and early fall of 2020, and dropped again through March of 2021. These fluctuations, however, are consistent with those in previous years and with the overall decline in robbery since 2017. The robbery rate was 11% lower during the first quarter of 2021 than during the same period in 2020. That decrease means there were 2,473 fewer robberies during the first three months of 2021 than occurred in the first quarter of the previous year.

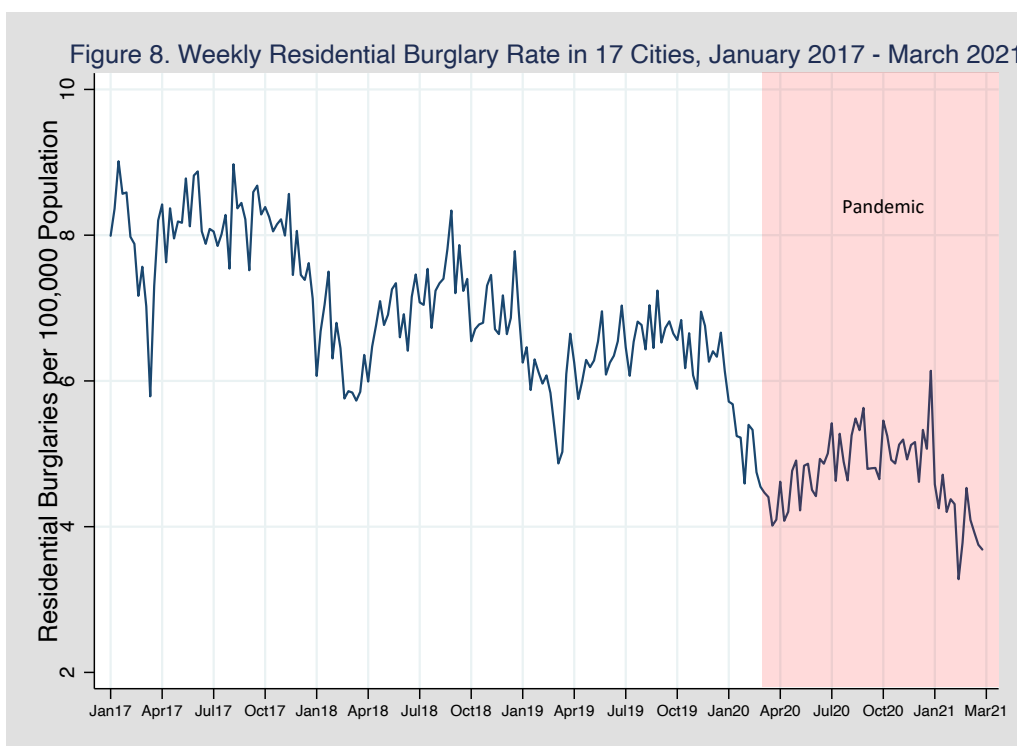


KEY TAKEAWAY

The robbery rate was 11% lower in the first quarter of 2021 – 2,473 fewer robberies – than the year before. This reduction was a continuation of the downward trend in robbery since 2017.

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 17 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. With some weekly fluctuation, the residential burglary rate remained flat through the end of 2020 and fell through the first quarter of 2021. The average residential burglary rate during the first quarter of 2021 was 16% lower than during the same period in 2020. There were 2,474 fewer residential burglaries in the first quarter of 2021 than occurred in the first quarter of 2020.

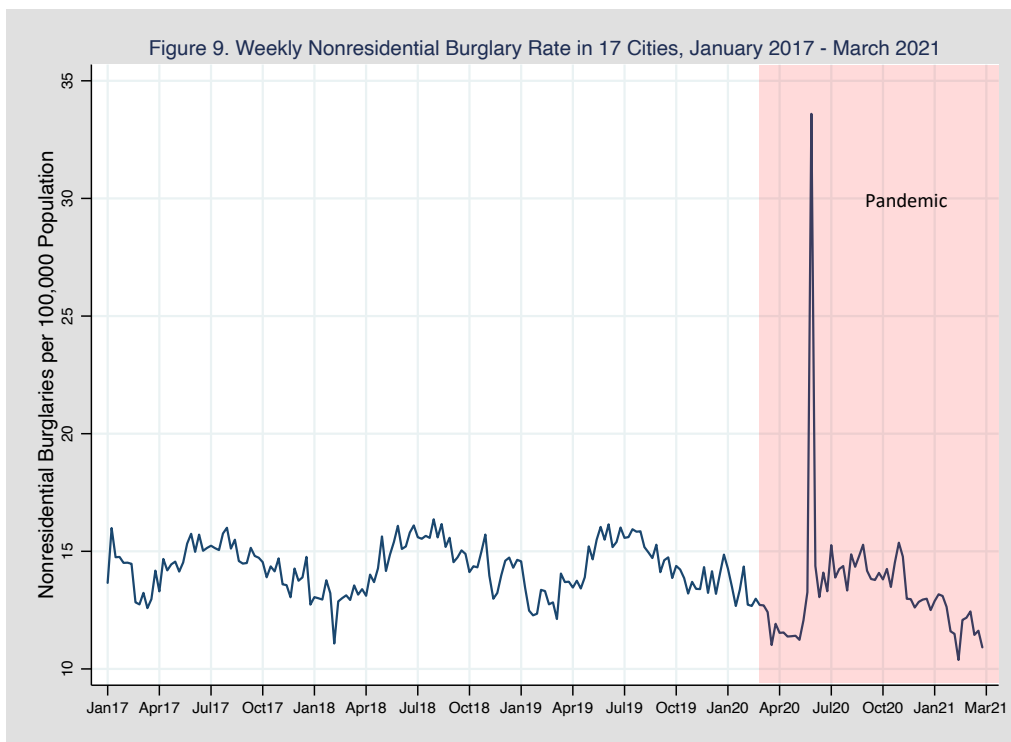


KEY TAKEAWAY

The residential burglary rate was 16% lower in the first quarter of 2021 – 2,474 fewer residential burglaries – than the year before.

NONRESIDENTIAL BURGLARY

The nonresidential burglary rate exhibited a flat cyclical pattern over time in the 17 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 7% during the first quarter of 2021 compared to the same period in 2020. That means there were 10,072 fewer nonresidential burglaries in the first quarter of 2021 than occurred in the first quarter of 2020.

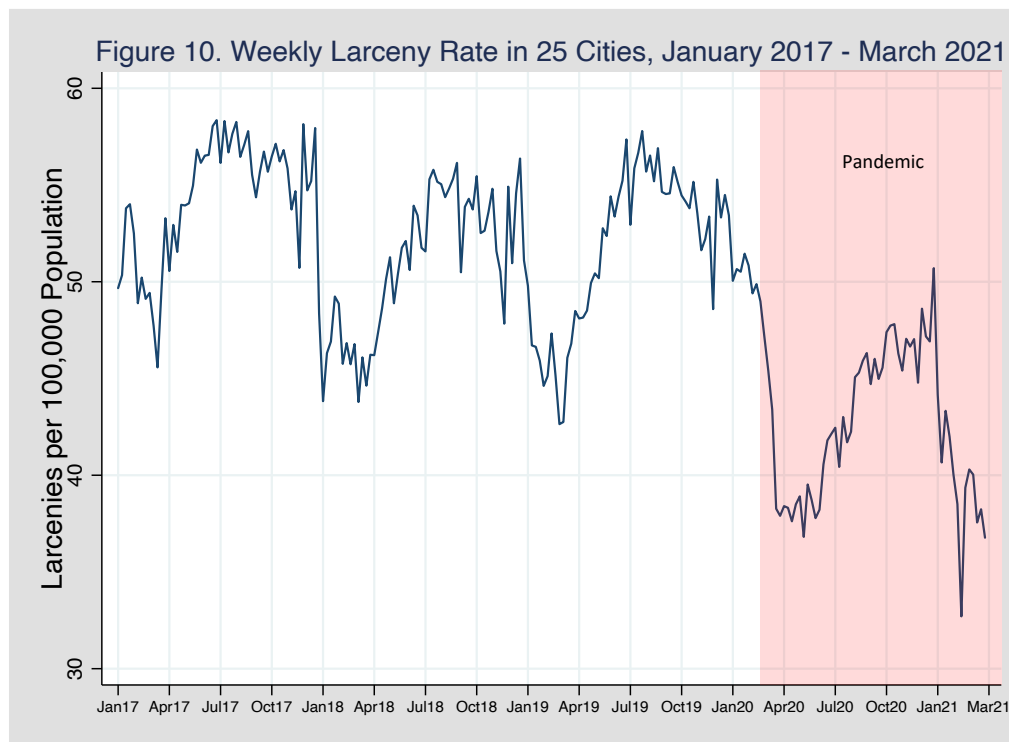


KEY TAKEAWAY

The nonresidential burglary rate was 7% lower in the first quarter of 2021 – 10,072 fewer nonresidential burglaries – than during the previous year.

LARCENY

Larcenies are thefts unaccompanied by force or breaking and entering. The average weekly larceny rate exhibited a distinct cyclical pattern over time. The larceny rate in the 25 cities with available data decreased in the early months of the pandemic, rose through the end of 2020, and decreased again during the first quarter of 2021. The larceny rate was 16% lower in the first quarter of 2021 than during the same period in 2020. There were 20,628 fewer larcenies in the first quarter of 2021 than occurred in the first quarter of 2020.

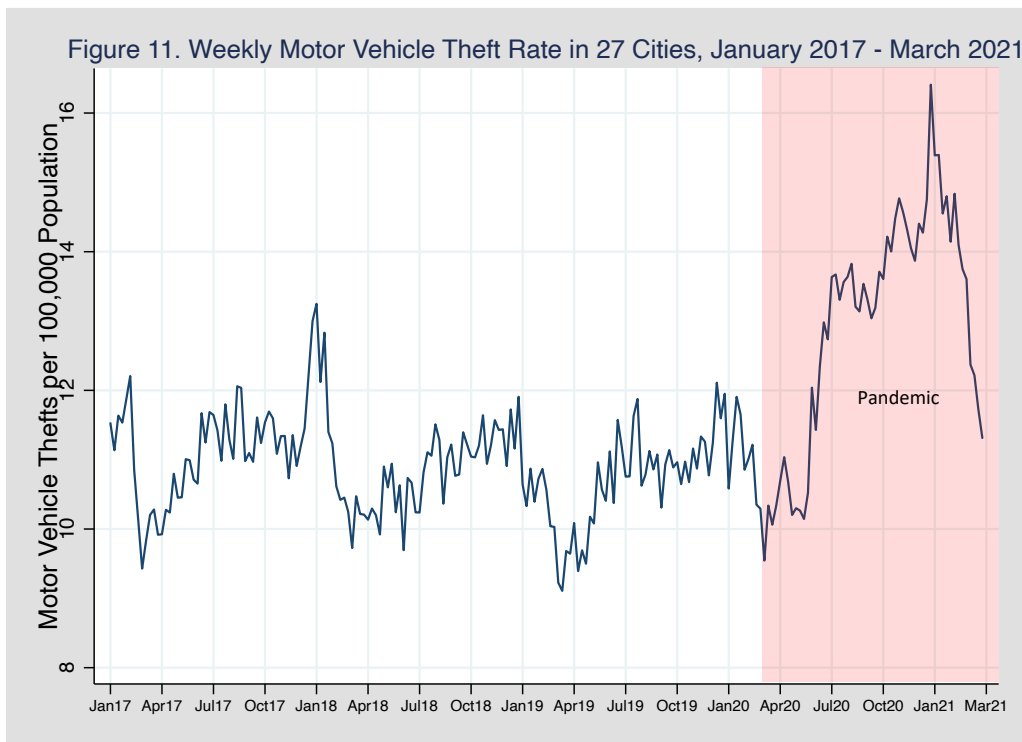


KEY TAKEAWAY

The larceny rate was 16% lower – 20,628 fewer larcenies – during the first quarter 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 2017 to the end of May 2020 in the 27 cities with available data. It then rose through the end of the year and fell during the first quarter of 2021. The motor vehicle theft rate was 28% higher in the first quarter of 2021 than during the same period in 2020. There were 7,195 more motor vehicle thefts during the first quarter of 2021 than occurred in the first quarter of 2020.

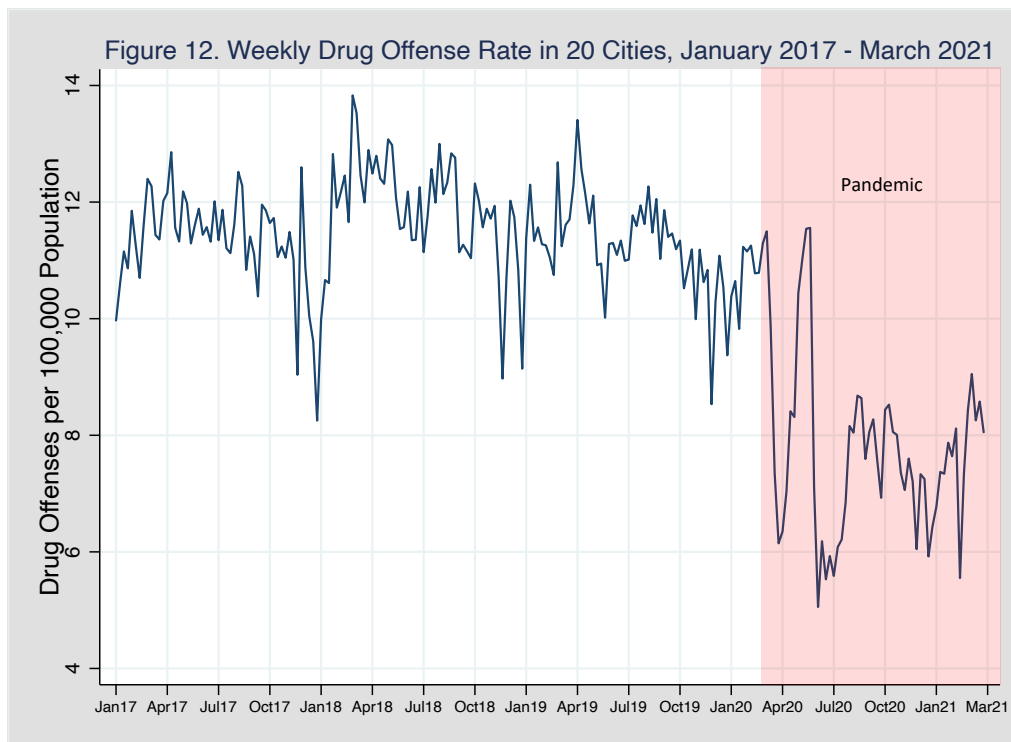


KEY TAKEAWAY

Motor vehicle theft was 28% higher – 7,195 more motor vehicle thefts – during the first quarter 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 20 cities with available data dropped sharply during the pandemic to a level far lower than at any time during the previous three years. The drug offense rate decreased by 24% in the first quarter of 2021 from the first quarter of 2020. That means there were 5,564 fewer drug offenses in the first quarter of 2021 than occurred during the same period in 2020.



KEY TAKEAWAY

The drug offense rate was 24% lower – 5,564 fewer drug offenses – in the first quarter of 2021 than the year before.

Conclusion

This study is the fifth in a series of reports exploring pandemic-related crime changes for the National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice. Updating that earlier work, this analysis reveals both increases and decreases in crime rates in a sample of United States cities during the first quarter of 2021 compared with the first quarter of 2020. Homicides, aggravated and gun assaults, and motor vehicle thefts increased, while residential burglaries, nonresidential burglaries, larcenies, and drug offenses fell.

The timing of the declines in 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. 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 26% increase in motor vehicle thefts in the first quarter 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.

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

As for domestic violence, rates were slightly lower during the first quarter of 2021 compared with the same period in 2020. This result, however, should be viewed with caution because it is based on just 11 of the 32 cities in the study – and other research shows an increase in domestic violence during the pandemic.

Increases in homicide and some other violent crimes have stirred the greatest public concern. Although they remain well below the historical peaks seen in the mid-1990s, murder rates began to increase in late 2019, before the pandemic began. 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. Homicide, aggravated assault, and gun assault rates remained significantly elevated during the rest of 2020 and the first quarter of 2021 compared to previous years.

As we concluded in our 2020 [year-end report](#), the recent rise in violent crime rates requires an urgent response from city, state, and federal leaders. Evidence-based strategies are available to address the increases 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.

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. Abandoning long-needed police reform is not a viable policy option. Rather, change is essential to improve the relationship between police and communities and 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.”

Appendix: 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	
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
Houston	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
New York	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
Portland	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 Diego										
San Francisco		x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
San Jose					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
Washington	x	x	x		x			x	x	
Total	24	18	15	11	28	17	17	25	27	20

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