

# POLICY *focus*

RECIPES FOR RATIONAL GOVERNMENT

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## Stopping the Epidemic of Violence in American Cities

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### What You Should Know

On September 27, the FBI confirmed that 2020 witnessed the largest single-year murder increase in modern American history. The total number of homicides jumped by **nearly 30 percent**, more than doubling the previous record of **12.7 percent**, set in 1968.

Many U.S. cities saw murders spike by over 30 percent, including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Phoenix, Philadelphia, Fort Worth, Columbus, Indianapolis, Seattle, Denver, Boston, Portland, Ore., Memphis, Louisville, Milwaukee, Tucson, Fresno, Mesa, Atlanta, Omaha, Oakland, New Orleans, Cleveland, St. Louis, Buffalo, and others.

The surge of violence was not geographically isolated, but nationwide, with the most dramatic increase in murders beginning after the tragic death of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25.

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Floyd's death ignited protests, deadly riots, and fierce condemnations of policing as discriminatory. All of this served to demoralize the men and women who serve in law enforcement, discourage proactive policing, and embolden criminals. The result was a more intense and far-reaching version of what happened in **many U.S. cities** after the 2014 death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., or what happened in **Baltimore** after the 2015 death of Freddie Gray: a police pullback, followed by an explosion of murders and shootings.

Curbing the violence will require a revival of proactive policing and a rejection of policies that have undermined it. We must also refute the notion that most black Americans want less policing of their communities—a pernicious falsehood that has had disastrous consequences.

## Why You Should Care

Soaring violence has devastated many of the poorest, most vulnerable neighborhoods in our cities. Some analysts have tried to downplay the problem, reminding us that the overall U.S. violent-crime rate remains well below its **early-1990s peak**. But that is small comfort to people whose families and communities have been ravaged by murders and shootings. The numbers from 2020 and 2021 signify an ongoing crisis in urban areas across the country:

- **Cities set records.** In 2020, several cities—including **Columbus, Indianapolis, Memphis, Louisville, Milwaukee, and Kansas City, Mo.**—each set an all-time record for aggregate homicides. Meanwhile, **St. Paul** tied its all-time record; **Philadelphia** finished one murder shy of its record; and **Cleveland** and **St. Louis** both posted their highest murder rate in modern history. At 87 per 100,000 residents, the murder rate in St. Louis reached a level we normally associate with war zones or **gang-ravaged countries in Central America**.
- **High levels of violence have continued in 2021.** Through the first half of the year, total homicides were up by a combined **21 percent** in 66 of America’s largest police jurisdictions, according to the Major Cities Chiefs Association. More recent data show that, as of mid-October, murders were up by **45 percent** in Albuquerque, **36 percent** in Oakland, **31 percent** in Columbus, **29 percent** in Houston, and **24 percent** in Louisville. Shootings in Portland **skyrocketed** from 388 in 2019 to 891 in 2020. There have already been **more than 1,000** in 2021. “This is the most violent time in my career,” a 24-year veteran of the Portland Police Bureau **told** a local news outlet in September. “This is the highest level of gun violence I’ve seen.”
- **An appalling number of gunshot victims have been children or teenagers.** “Since 2020,” *Time* recently **reported**, “children’s hospitals have been dealing with a record surge in shooting patients, with many on track to eclipse their previous totals.” Last year, the number of people under the age of 18 killed in gun violence increased by **39 percent**, according to the nonprofit Gun Violence Archive. This year, the number killed will likely be **even larger**. In Chicago alone, no fewer than **16 children age 15 or younger** had been shot to death as of September 7, according to the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

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## More Information

What happened to George Floyd was outrageous, and we should continue demanding accountability for police officers who abuse their power. There’s no question that many cops need better training on how to handle potentially combustible situations. Yet the relentless campaign to demonize and hamstring American law enforcement has been a catastrophe, especially for people who live in disadvantaged communities.

Just look at Minneapolis, which suffered days of arson, looting, and other violence after Floyd died, followed by months in which local officials **denounced** and tried to **defund** their police force.

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In response to being **abandoned and vilified** by the political class, Minneapolis cops felt they no longer had the support necessary to do proactive policing (i.e., policing that attempts to prevent crime before it happens). So they adopted “what amounts to a hands-off approach to everyday lawbreaking,” according to a Reuters **investigation**. For example, officers stopped far fewer people on the street for acting suspicious, and they pulled over far fewer cars for traffic violations.

The **results** were all too predictable: In 2020 as a whole, citywide murders increased by 71 percent, the number of shooting victims increased by 105 percent, and carjackings increased by 301 percent.

“Although violent crime was trending upward through the first half of the [year], it really took off after May 25, when Floyd died,” the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* has **noted**. Through the **first nine months** of 2021, murders were up by another 16 percent, the number of shooting victims was up by 26 percent, and carjackings were up by 35 percent.

While Minneapolis was ground zero for the urban mayhem of 2020, many other cities went through the same cycle: Rioting and anti-cop agitation precipitated a police pullback, which precipitated a sharp uptick in murders and shootings.

In that sense, the costs of the riots go well beyond the people who were **killed or injured** and the property that was **damaged or destroyed** in the riots themselves. We must also include the massive, sustained increase in violence that followed. By the end of 2020, murders had spiked by more than 30 percent for the year in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Phoenix, Philadelphia, Fort Worth, Columbus, Indianapolis, Seattle, Denver, Boston, Portland, Ore., Memphis, Louisville, Milwaukee, Tucson, Fresno, Mesa, Atlanta, Omaha, Oakland, New Orleans, Cleveland, St. Louis, Buffalo, and other cities.

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## The Minneapolis Effect

More than six years ago, Manhattan Institute scholar Heather Mac Donald popularized the term “**Ferguson Effect**” to describe the police pullback and subsequent increase in violent crime that followed the August 2014 death of Michael Brown and riots in Ferguson, Mo.

The events in Ferguson became a rallying cry for anti-police activists, who insisted that Officer Darren Wilson had shot Brown while he was trying to surrender. In March 2015, the Obama Justice Department announced a very different conclusion: “Given that Wilson’s account is corroborated by physical evidence and that his perception of a threat posed by Brown is corroborated by other eyewitnesses,” it said in a **report**, “there is no credible evidence that Wilson willfully shot Brown as he was attempting to surrender or was otherwise not posing a threat.”

By that point, however, the myth of Ferguson had supercharged the Black Lives Matter movement, fueled a poisonous backlash against police officers, and made many officers

reluctant to engage in **proactive policing**. Criminals exploited the vacuum and unleashed a swell of violence in **cities across the country**. Between 2014 and 2016, both the number and rate of murders in the United States jumped by **23 percent**.

Speaking at the University of Chicago Law School in October 2015, then-FBI Director James Comey **said** he had “a strong sense” that the Ferguson Effect was real. “Most of America’s 50 largest cities have seen an increase in homicides and shootings this year, and many of them have seen a huge increase,” Comey observed. “I do have a strong sense that some part of the explanation is a chill wind blowing through American law enforcement over the last year. And that wind is surely changing behavior.”

Something similar happened after the 2020 riots—only this time, the increase in violence has been much larger and more widespread.

Many journalists continue to blame the murder spike on COVID-19, as if the stress of the lockdowns and economic disruption prompted Americans to lash out in homicidal rage. The protracted lockdowns, and especially the protracted school closures, were clearly a mistake. But they don’t come close to explaining the eruption of bloodshed.

According to a **study** of 34 U.S. cities by crime researchers Richard Rosenfeld and Ernesto Lopez of the University of Missouri-St. Louis and Thomas Abt of the Council on Criminal Justice, the historic spike in murders did *not* begin at the height of the lockdowns in late March, April, or early May. It began after the death of George Floyd.

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“Homicide rates were higher during every month of 2020 relative to rates from the previous year,” Rosenfeld, Lopez, and Abt noted. “That said, rates increased significantly in June, well after the pandemic began, coinciding with the death of George Floyd and the mass protests that followed.”

Again, the key drivers appear to be a reduction in proactive policing and a newfound sense of impunity among criminals.

“A close analysis of the emerging crime patterns suggests that American cities may be witnessing significant declines in some forms of policing, which in turn is producing the homicide spikes,” University of Utah law professor Paul Cassell **wrote** last year. “Crime rates are increasing only for a few specific categories—namely homicides and shootings. These crime categories are particularly responsive to reductions in proactive policing. The data also pinpoint the timing of the spikes to late May 2020, which corresponds with the death of George Floyd while in police custody in Minneapolis and subsequent anti-police protests—protests that likely led to declines in law enforcement.”

In St. Louis, for example, murders were actually below 2019 levels through the first several months of the year, before skyrocketing in June and July.

“By the end of May 2020, we were down five UCR [Uniform Crime Reporting] homicides Year-To-Date, compared to 2019, and things seemed to be trending in the right direction,” St. Louis Police Commissioner John Hayden **wrote** in the department’s 2020 annual report. “Unfortunately, by the end of July our UCR homicide numbers rose to 30 more than the same time in 2019.”

In New York, murders and shooting incidents were up by only about **4 percent and 5 percent**, respectively, through the end of April 2020. By the end of July, they were up by **30 percent and 72 percent**.

In Chicago, murders and shootings were up by about **8 percent and 16 percent**, respectively, through the first four months of 2020. By the end of July, they were up by **51 percent and 47 percent**.

Of course, plenty of additional factors have contributed to the violence. Progressive bail “**reforms**” have made it more difficult to keep criminals behind bars while they await trial. Some cities have also witnessed a steep decline in felony prosecutions, thanks to **left-wing district attorneys**. Police departments from New York to Minneapolis to Seattle are grappling with a flood of departures and retirements. And the decision by many cities to **slash police funding** amid a crime explosion surely exacerbated the problem.

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## The Reality of ‘Mass Incarceration’

To help boost and maintain support for proactive policing, we must debunk some popular misconceptions about the criminal-justice system—especially “mass incarceration.”

Many progressives seem to believe that the enormous growth of America’s prison population from the 1970s through the 2000s was driven primarily by the so-called War on Drugs. In fact, it was driven primarily by the enormous rise in violent crime from the 1960s through the 1990s. Between 1961 and 1991, America’s violent-crime rate increased by **380 percent**, with the murder rate increasing by **104 percent**.

But aren’t U.S. prisons disproportionately filled with nonviolent drug offenders? Not even close. Before COVID, violent offenders represented 55 percent of all sentenced state prisoners, whereas drug offenders represented only 14 percent, according to the **Bureau of Justice Statistics** (BJS).

Those figures actually *understate* the share of violent criminals in state prisons, because many prisoners sentenced for a drug offense have also committed other crimes. As Fordham University law professor John Pfaff has **written** in the *Washington Post*, “If someone is arrested for a violent crime but ends up pleading guilty to a drug charge, his crime is classified as a nonviolent drug offense, even if the underlying incident—like a domestic violence case in which the victim won’t testify—is the reason the prosecutor sought prison time.”

It is true that, pre-COVID, drug offenders made up 46 percent of sentenced federal prisoners. But almost all of them (more than 99 percent) had been incarcerated for drug *trafficking* rather than possession, according to the BJS. Moreover, federal prisoners accounted for just 12 percent of all U.S. prisoners; state prisoners accounted for 88 percent.

Here’s another important point: Just as the prison population ballooned along with violent crime in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, it also began *declining* when violent crime went down. As of 2019, the overall U.S. imprisonment rate was at its lowest level since 1995, and the black imprisonment rate was at its lowest level since 1989.

## Race and Policing

Race is never far from the surface of discussions about crime, policing, and justice. The political debate over policing reform typically focuses on negative police interactions with black Americans. As **Heather Mac Donald** and others have shown, racial disparities in police interactions cannot be understood outside of racial disparities in crime rates and suspect behavior.

Meanwhile, far too little attention is given to how much blacks—who make up a disproportionately large share of crime victims—suffer when violence rises in response to more relaxed policing.

For example, in his 2016 book, *The Rise and Fall of Violent Crime in America*, criminologist Barry Latzer points out that blacks made up a staggering 47 percent of all homicide victims between 1976 and 2005. They have also accounted for a disproportionate share of murder victims in 2020 and 2021.

Unfortunately, anti-cop activists have fostered the idea that most blacks want less policing of their communities. Recent polls tell a very different story.

A Gallup survey conducted in the summer of 2020 found that **81 percent** of blacks want the police to spend either more time or the same amount of time in their area. In April 2021, **65 percent** of black likely voters told the liberal think tank Data for Progress that regular police patrols in their neighborhood would make them feel safer.

Likewise, in a Detroit Metro Area Communities Study survey conducted in June and July 2021, **45 percent** of black Detroiters said that an increased police presence in their neighborhood would make them feel safer, while only 8 percent said it would make them feel less safe.

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Even more striking was a September 2021 Minnesota Poll of registered, likely voters in Minneapolis, which showed that **75 percent** of blacks oppose reducing the size of the city's police force.

## A Nationwide Police Shortage?

Alarming, however, police forces across America are now facing a severe officer shortage—a shortage that threatens to intensify the epidemic of urban violence. This challenge has been exacerbated by COVID-19 vaccine mandates, which **many cops are resisting**.

Even before the death of George Floyd and the subsequent riots, police departments were struggling to recruit and retain officers. “It’s not an exaggeration to say that the workforce crisis in policing is dire,” declared a September 2019 **report** from the Police Executive Research Forum, highlighting the “triple threat” posed by “fewer applicants, more resignations, and a looming retirement bubble.”

The events of 2020 took a heavy toll on officer morale. The New York Police Department saw more than 5,300 uniformed officers—about 15 percent of its total force—either **resign or file for retirement**, according to the *New York Post*. **Los Angeles, Chicago, Seattle, Portland, Louisville, Baltimore, Raleigh, Minneapolis**, and many other cities are dealing with similar problems.

Agency size alone is no substitute for proactive policing. Still, putting more cops on the street **helped reduce crime** during the 1990s, and we clearly need more on the street today.

State and city lawmakers can do their part by delivering the resources that police agencies need. Congress can provide its own assistance through the **Community Oriented Policing Services** program.

Most importantly, all policymakers can and should reject the anti-cop narrative and affirm their support for the kind of policing that saves lives.

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# What You Can Do

## Get Informed

Learn more about violent crime and criminal justice in America. Visit:

- [Independent Women's Forum](#)
- [The Manhattan Institute](#)
- [The Bureau of Justice Statistics](#)

## Talk to Your Friends

Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Tell them about what's going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

## Become a Leader in the Community

Get a group together each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few motivated people can change the world.

## Remain Engaged Politically

Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your Representatives know your opinions. After all, they are supposed to work for you!

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Independent Women's Forum (IWF) is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility.

IWF, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.

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