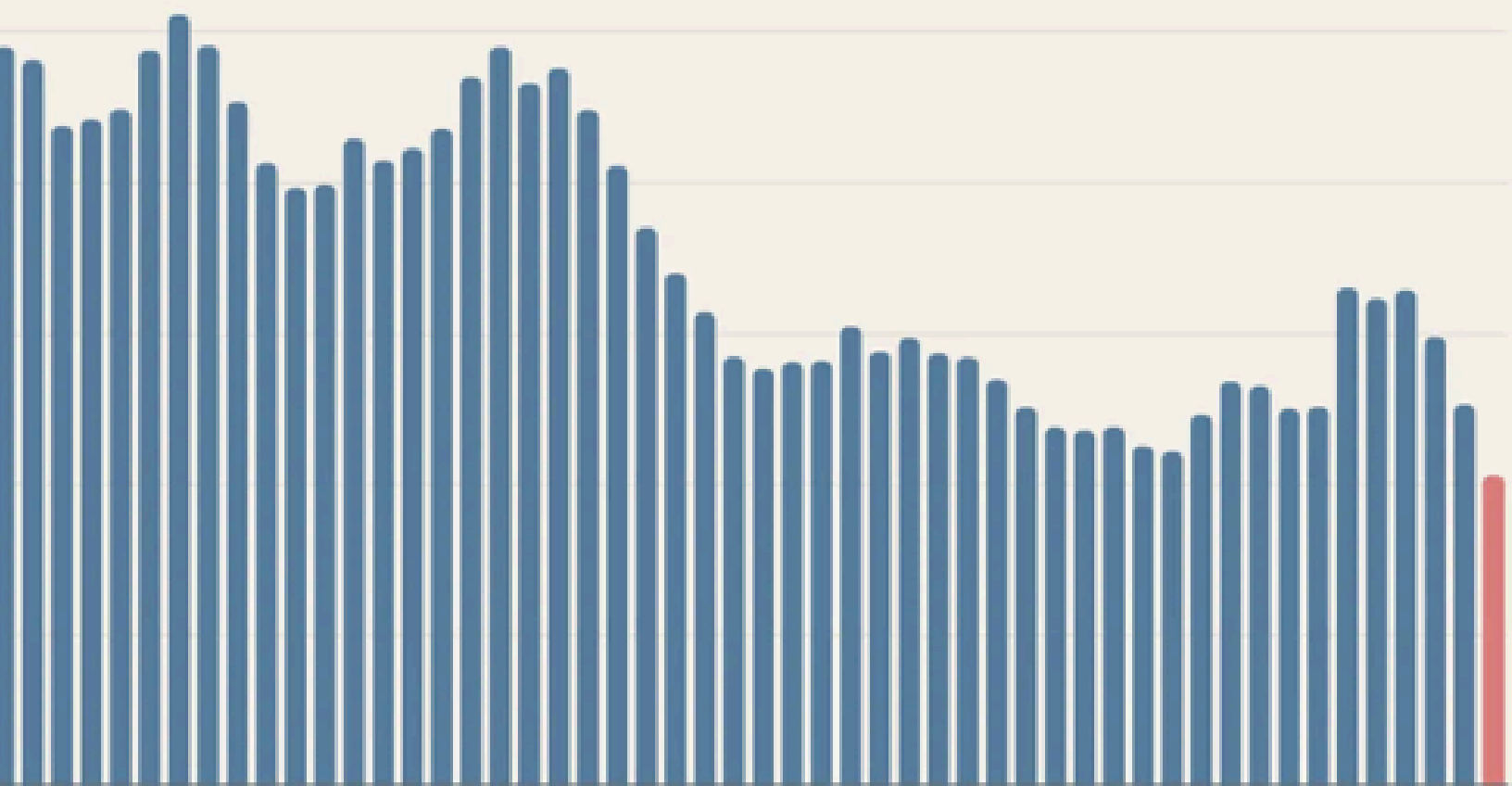




Understanding the Great Decline in Homicide Deaths in the United States

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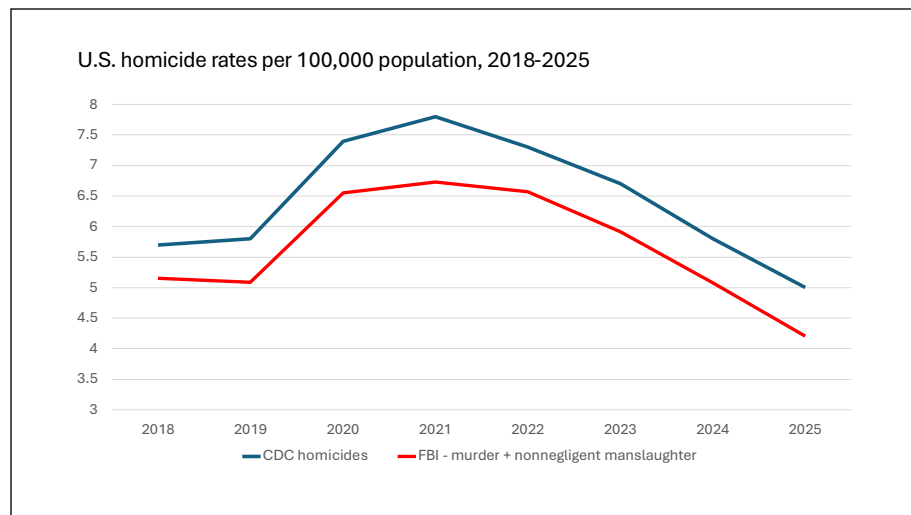
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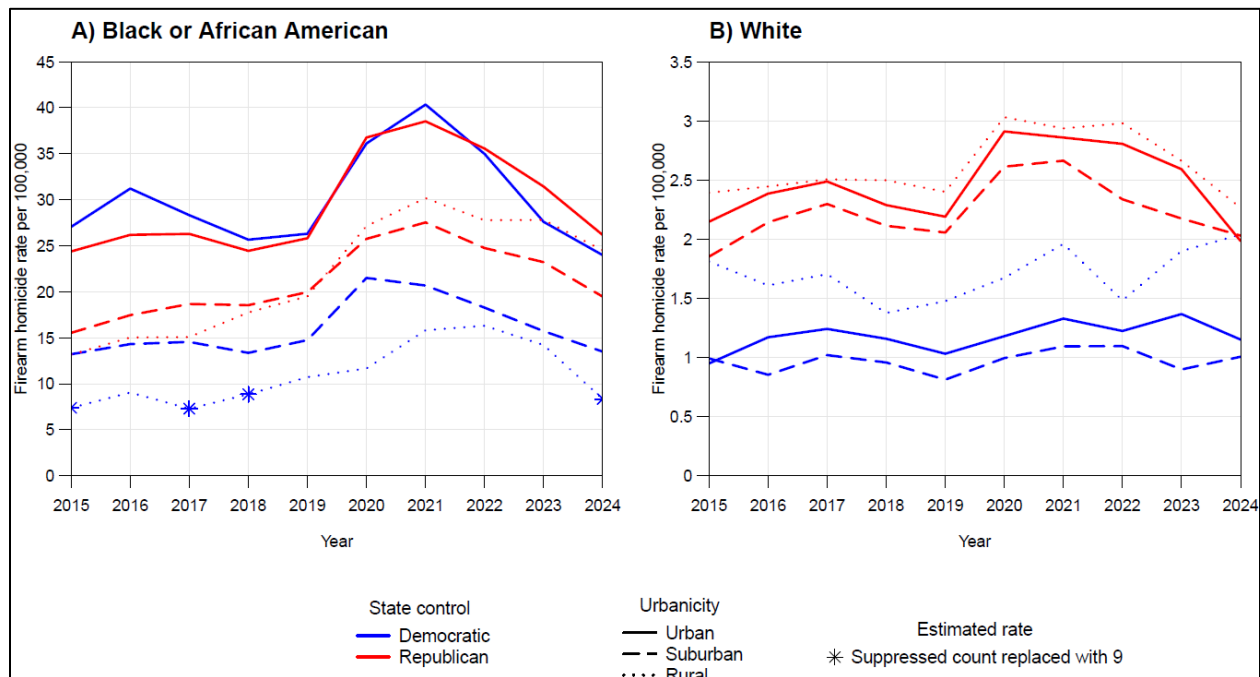
Overview

Homicides are intentional acts leading to someone's death and reporting is mandatory. FBI data comes from law enforcement agencies who voluntarily report these deaths, usually accounting for over 95% of the population, if there is criminal intent. Additionally, the CDC Vital Record's database helps health departments across the country track homicides on an annual basis. Data from each system show historic declines in homicides since 2021, with projections for 2026 showing the lowest U.S. homicide rate ever. Relative to the peak in 2022, trends point towards 11,000 to 12,000 fewer homicides in 2026, a 46% decline in just four years. Year-over-year declines since 2023 have been the largest on record.



Source: Jeff Asher, *Summarizing a Historic 2025 Crime Report with Charts & Tables*. Substack, August 24, 2026.

Over 95% of the decline in homicides between 2021 and 2025 is due to a reduction in homicides committed with firearms.¹ There are important differences in recent firearm homicide trends when the data are stratified by race of victims, urbanicity, and states whose government has been controlled by Democrats (Blue) versus Republicans (Red). The extremely sharp increase in firearm homicide rates among Black individuals in the most urban counties from 2019 to 2021 that exacerbated racial disparities (note the differences in the scales below) was nearly identical in Red and Blue states; but the decline has been notably sharper in Blue states driven in large part by significant reductions in Baltimore and Chicago. The 2019-2021 rise in firearm homicide rates for Black victims and the subsequent fall is also mirrored in suburban and rural counties regardless of the party controlling state government. The general temporal pattern for firearm homicide rates over this period for white victims were only evident in states with Republican governments.²



Hypotheses for Homicide Decline

There are dozens of theories about the reasons for the recent dramatic decline in homicides. Scholars convened by the Council on Criminal Justice recently reviewed the evidence relevant to over 40 potential reasons and issued a [report](#).³ Many of these theories, not surprisingly, focused on changes in law enforcement and the criminal justice system. Questions included:

- Were there changes in law enforcement resources or practices that could have yielded dramatic reductions in murders?
- Did the consequences of violent offending increase after many of the courts were constrained during the pandemic and judges were reluctant to imprison those awaiting trial because of the threat of spreading the virus?
- Did the widespread 2020 protests against police violence lead police to be less proactive and community members be less willing to call or share information with police?
- Were the sharp rise and subsequent fall in homicides driven by the many disruptions to social and economic conditions with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic that abated after the pandemic?

Other theories about the decline focused on increased investments in public health interventions like community violence intervention (CVI) programs, stronger federal gun laws, and federal funding that cities received to bolster their ability to meet the needs of their residents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some hypothesized that less active or volatile markets for illicit drugs may have led to lower homicide rates and that the decline in overdose deaths from opioids drove down homicides. Finally, authors examined the possibility that attrition among those at highest risk of killing and being killed due to mortality during the spike in homicides in 2020-2021 and increased incarceration in the years following may have left significantly fewer people most likely to kill or be killed in recent years.

Methodology

I reviewed brief reports on potential contributors to the drop in homicides. I drew upon the data and analyses for many of the reports to inform my assessments and generate this report. While I agreed with many of these reports, I also acknowledge that I do not necessarily agree with all of the conclusions drawn from an effort to synthesize the evidence and achieve some consensus among experts.^a

What is Likely Not Causing Homicide Reductions

I'd like to start with theories that should be dismissed on the grounds that the data are inconsistent with those narratives. I examined the evidence for the “more guns,

^a Due to scheduling, I could not attend the convening where attendees voted on the evidence.

less violence” hypothesis and concluded that the evidence did not support claims that increased gun ownership and carrying deterred homicides.⁴ A sharp rise in pre-gun-sale background checks coincided with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and leveled off in 2022 before dropping down to pre-pandemic levels by 2025.⁵ The share of the U.S. adult population that owned a firearm rose from 25% pre-pandemic to 30% in 2024.⁶ Numerous policy changes deregulating concealed gun carrying have likely led to significant increases in concealed gun carrying since 2022.

So, is the drop in homicides since 2021 a validation of the NRA’s Wayne Lapiere’s “The only thing that stops a bad guy with guns is a good guy with a gun” thesis? No. If that were true then the surge in new gun owners and in legal gun carrying during 2020 and 2021 would have led to fewer homicides, yet homicides surged. More importantly, prior studies indicate that higher levels of civilian gun ownership and gun carrying are associated with higher rates of gun crime, including homicide.^{7, 8, 9} The huge reduction in homicides has occurred *despite* greater gun access in the general population and not due to there being more armed citizens.

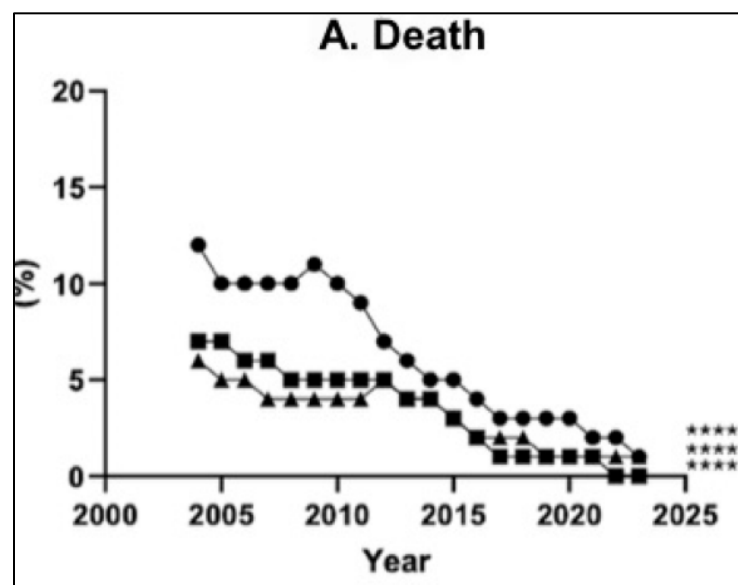
Another theory is that the decline in homicides is a consequence of President Trump’s use of the National Guard in several major cities or to the mass arrests, detention, and deportation of individuals who were in violation of immigration laws. There is no evidence for either hypothesis. The National Guard has been deployed in places where homicides are very rare and they have no powers to investigate or arrest violent criminals.¹⁰ Native born Americans have violent crime arrests rates that are 2.5 times higher than undocumented immigrants.¹¹ Increases in immigrants living in neighborhoods tends to result in fewer homicides.¹² Furthermore, only a small percentage of those who have been detained by ICE and CBP have histories of committing violent crime.¹³ If anything, it is likely that the National Guard deployment and federal immigration efforts have hindered public safety by decreasing trust in police, disrupting employment, and diverting public safety resources away from things that actually reduce homicides.

I also rule out the theory that homicides have sharply declined because we have more police on the streets. There were 6% fewer sworn law enforcement officers in 2024 compared with 2019 and changes in the number of police officers does not explain variation in cities’ changes in homicides between 2022 and 2024.¹⁴

The huge increase in homicides between 1987 and 1994 prompted many police departments to dramatically increase arrests with a focus on drug-related crimes. Lawmakers responded with draconian sentencing for drug and gun offenses. Those

approaches led to what Patrick Sharkey termed in his aptly titled book “Uneasy Peace” – fewer homicides, but at the enormous cost of mass incarceration.¹⁵ But we have not gone back to the 1990s era of mass arrests and mass incarceration to achieve historic reductions in homicides. There were approximately 25% fewer arrests in 2025 than in 2019. Data on incarceration are less up to date, but there was no significant change in the rate of incarceration between 2021 and 2023.¹⁶ But policing and arrests nevertheless appear to play an important role in the sharp reduction in homicides since 2022. This is because the arrests and police actions appear to be significantly more targeted towards active violent gun offenders, who are at greatest risk of offending and victimization, than broad arrests without specific targets or goals.

Finally, I considered whether the dramatic drop in homicides between 2021 and 2025 was simply due to better trauma care for gunshot wounds. This is a theory getting some traction with the publication of Malcom Gladwell’s new book, “The American Way of Killing: The Invention of an Epidemic,” and was covered in the CCJ convening. There have been improvements in trauma care that have increased the survival rates for gunshot injuries as was documented in a recent large national study covering 2004-2023. The percentage of firearm injuries leading to deaths declined from 12% in 2004 to 1% in 2023.¹⁷ But there hasn’t been much change between the peak for homicides in 2021 and the last data point in the study, 2023, and the most dramatic period of declining gunshot wound fatality rates, 11% in 2009 to just under 4% in 2017, occurred when firearm homicide rates increased from 4.0 to 4.5 per 100,000 population, a 12.5% increase.



Source: <https://doi.org/10.3390/medicina62020235>

How Public Health Principles and Approaches Help Explain the Recent Reductions in Homicides

Public health is a field centered around understanding risks and how to mitigate those risks. Studies across many U.S. cities reveal that the individuals at greatest risk of being an offender or victims of homicide represent an extremely small percentage of the population in cities or even within neighborhoods where homicides cluster. They usually come from communities of highly concentrated economic and social disadvantage¹⁸ and have lives marred by repeated violence, trauma, and poor educational and economic opportunities. Importantly, they tend to be part of peer networks that have similarly high risks for involvement in gun violence. Gun violence spreads among and across these high-risk social networks much like infectious disease outbreaks, with a small number of individuals acting as super spreaders.¹⁹ Easy access to firearms within these networks is akin to a predisposing condition that, along with a lack of protective measures, facilitates the spread of violence and increases risks for lethal outcomes.

Like most infectious diseases, epidemic outbreaks of gun violence eventually plateau and then decline quickly in response to effective prevention measures and a declining pool of individuals most vulnerable. Big reductions in homicides over a short period of time can only occur via highly focused interventions directed towards changing the behavior of these individuals or, like quarantines, temporarily removing them from communities where they risk killing or being killed and possibly furthering the spread of gun violence.

1. Easing of pandemic-related economic and social disruptions and system recovery

Regression to the mean – when an indicator spikes upward and then falls near to its pre-spike mean - is commonly covered in introduction to biostatistics classes. A recent study, designed to estimate the effects of federal American Rescue Plan Act funds received by cities in response to the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic on homicides, found that the degree that homicides declined in a city since 2021 was strongly related to the size of its surge in homicides from 2019 to 2021. This may reflect the reduction in the challenges posed by the pandemic.²⁰ Population health and safety are largely determined by systems far beyond healthcare. Policies and systems that affect housing, economic opportunities, education, the environment, education, as well as policing and criminal justice impact a wide swath of health

outcomes including homicides. All of these were negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic when homicides spiked in 2020 resulting in the largest year-to-year increase in homicides on record. State and local governments lost 1.25 million jobs in spring 2020. Local government employment grew rapidly in 2022 and returned to its pre-pandemic level in September 2023.²¹ When these systems began to stabilize, homicides began to fall precipitously.

But huge drops in homicides in cities across the nation do not occur based on statistical probabilities. Some processes must drive those reductions. Available data and my understanding of the factors that drive homicides suggest that conditions involving the very small share of the population involved in or close to social networks where gun violence is common have driven the sharp reductions in homicides. Cities with the largest spikes in violence are likely to be the most determined to curb their homicide problem. They are most likely to focus more law enforcement and CVI-related resources on the high-risk individuals and groups and the behaviors that elevate risks such as illegal gun possession. We now turn to these factors.

2. Law-Enforcement-Related Strategies

As I have navigated my career and opportunities to reduce gun violence as a public health researcher, I have often focused on ways that law enforcement can be better at curbing gun violence while minimizing its potential harms. Given its size and powers, it seems likely that changes in law enforcement approaches may have played a substantial role in reversing a historic rise in homicides in 2020. But that observation begs the questions of what changes, and how these changes operate. Here are several factors that I believe are contributing.

2.1. Improved Capacity to Arrest Violent Offenders

The number of law enforcement officers has not increased over the past four years; but there is evidence that police have become more focused on violence, more proactive (e.g., getting out of their vehicles to investigate suspicious or dangerous situations), and better at arresting individuals who commit violent crimes and illegally possess guns. For example, using data from the FBI, and an assumption that arrests for violent crimes typically occur within three months of the incident, I calculated clearance (usually by arrest) ratios for major violent crimes in a given month relative to the number of such incidents in that month and the two preceding

months. Between 2022 and July 2026, clearance ratios improved by 35% for homicides, 30% for aggravated assaults, and 56% for robberies.²²

It is important to note that arrests for nearly all nonviolent offenses have either declined (e.g., most drug violations) or stayed steady between 2022 and 2026. In a forthcoming study, I find that Baltimore's 60% reduction in homicides in recent years is significantly related to improved clearances for the most serious violent crimes.²³ Many large cities with historically high homicide rates have deployed real-time crime centers or crime intelligence centers that employ multiple technologies – ballistic imaging, street surveillance cameras, license plate readers– that intelligence officers and detectives use to solve crimes and deter crime through directed patrols. And as homicides and other violent crime drop sharply, detectives have more time to solve each case and thereby increase the certainty of arrest, a phenomenon that criminologists have long proved deters crime.²⁴ More research is needed, but I and many other experts believe that police can significantly improve investigations, increase the odds that violent offenders are arrested, and thereby reduce homicides.²⁵

2.2. Greater use of Group Violence Reduction Strategy

Increased clearance rates work in tandem with other novel approaches – particularly those informed by other public health insights. It is important to note that individuals who are involved in gun violence are more motivated to accept services and supports to step away from violence when they realize that their risk of arrest has increased appreciably. That is why Baltimore's Group Violence Reduction Strategy (GVRs), that combines greater police focus on identifying shooters, warning them of consequences if they continue to engage in violence, and offering them an array of services and supports for stepping away from violence, and similar approaches have the most impressive track record for curbing urban gun violence. Thus, it's important to think of GVRs, when done right, as both as a policing system change coupled with data-informed problem analysis and supports that appropriately fall into a public health basket.²⁶ Just as GVRs, a version of a strategy known as focused deterrence for gun violence, has been integral to Baltimore's historic reduction in homicides,²⁷ there is evidence and some expert consensus that many cities either initiated or expanded focused deterrence initiatives between 2021 and 2025. This approach, when implemented appropriately, has a remarkable history of success in reducing gun violence in cities.²⁸ When the underlying principles of GVRs and focused deterrence graduate from a discrete program to an overarching strategy for reducing homicides and gun violence that changes

policing, outreach, and the delivery of services and supports to those at highest risk of violence, citywide changes occur that lead to less violence with fewer arrests.

2.3. Proactive policing focused on people at greatest risk for shooting others

Targeted and strategic proactive policing practices that focus on places and people at the highest risk for offending have been shown to reduce gun violence.²⁹ In some cities, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and widespread protests against police violence, proactive policing declined sharply.³⁰ Although it is difficult to measure, there are indications that proactive police actions increased in recent years and focused on curbing gun violence. Although police staffing dropped by 6% between 2019 and 2024 and 17 states passed laws that allowed any lawful gun owner to carry a concealed firearm in most places and eight additional states adopted laws making it easier to lawfully carry concealed firearms, arrests for illegal weapon possession increased by 18% between 2019 and 2023 before leveling off as gun violence declines. These trends, in addition to the increased clearances for serious violent crimes, suggest that police have increasingly focused both proactive and investigative resources on offenders most likely to commit gun violence.

3. Shrinking pool of individuals at high risk for homicide

There are multiple forces that are likely shrinking the pool of individuals at highest risk of homicide. As noted above, the ability of law enforcement to arrest and incarcerate violent offenders has increased significantly. Additionally, some of the highest risk individuals – in the parlance of infectious disease, the super spreaders – were killed or severely injured during the 2019-2021 homicide surge. Replacement of high-volume gun offenders is not a given as individuals see the consequences of involvement in gun violence. Younger cohorts are offending at significantly lower rates and have less exposure to the criminal justice system.³¹ Violence prevention programs, of course, may also be shrinking the available pool at highest risk for homicide.

4. Community violence intervention initiatives

During the Biden Administration there was a huge increase in funding for community violence intervention (CVI) programs through various mechanisms. Many states, localities, and philanthropy also invested in CVI programs. Additionally, many cities established offices of violence prevention to develop and oversee strategies for curbing violence like CVI that do not involve law enforcement and received technical assistance support for leadership to frontline workers. CVI

programs come in many forms and have evolved over time from ones that focused primarily on street outreach to those at highest risk and conflict mediation to others that attempt to reach the same high-risk population with services that address trauma and use behavior change methods based on cognitive behavior theory and expanded job opportunities. Neighborhood effects of CVI programs, most using the Cure Violence model emphasizing conflict mediations, are mixed³² but with more successes at than not while the few studies of intensive CVI programs on participants' offending are promising, generally showing significant reductions.^{33 34}

³⁵ It is likely that increased investments in CVI and its infrastructure have contributed to many cities' reductions in homicides and did so without the costs of more arrests and incarceration. However, that contribution is understandably going to be much less than the changes in law enforcement because CVI investments and capacities pale in comparison to that of law enforcement.

5. Gun Policy

As it became riskier for persons prohibited to possess and use guns in crime, there is evidence that federal policies adopted during the Biden Administration constrained the supply of guns to the illegal market.

5.1. Bans of ghost guns

In August 2022, the ATF issued a new rule requiring that all buy-build-shoot kits with gun parts which accounted for nearly all so-called "ghost guns" be regulated just as any other firearm including mandatory serialization and record-keeping to allow for tracing as well as background checks for sales by licensed dealers. The exponential rise in the use of ghost guns in crime paralleled the surge in gun violence between 2018 and 2021, especially in states with the strictest gun laws and especially among underage youth where they could account for 15%-25% of recovered crime guns. Following the ATF rule on gun kits, analogous state laws, and successful lawsuits against sellers of the kits, trends in the use of ghost guns have reversed and have been declining steadily.³⁶ In Baltimore, where 40% of ghost gun offenders were under the age of 21, trends in ghost gun use parallel those of youthful victims of gun violence.³⁷ Juveniles fatally shot in Baltimore have plummeted from 14 in 2022 to 3 in all of 2025 and 3 in 2026.

5.2. Federal gun policies to prevent access to high-risk individuals

In addition to the ghost gun rule, the ATF also adopted a "zero tolerance" policy for licensed dealers' noncompliance with key gun laws during the Biden

administration. License revocations rose by 350% between the first Trump Administration and the last two years of the Biden Administration, 2023-2024. Additional non-complying dealers chose not to renew their licenses to sell firearms. Crackdowns on illegal sales practices of a small share of problem dealers can have widespread effects on the diversion of illegal firearms for use in crime.^{38,39} Finally, the Bipartisan Community Safety Act of 2022 included some measures that may have modestly reduced access of firearms to high-risk individuals including expanded prohibitions for domestic violence, enhanced background checks to identify prohibiting conditions for young adults attempting to purchase firearms, new anti-trafficking offenses, and expanding background checks requirements for certain sales.^b

The combination of increased risk of arrest for criminal use of firearms and the increased risk for illegally diverting firearms for use in crime may be contributing to the reduced likelihood of use of firearms in violent crimes. Between the peak of homicides in 2020-2021 to January 2025 through September 2026, the share of aggravated assaults committed with firearms dropped from 40% to 30% while the share of homicides committed with firearms dropped from 76% to 70%.

Conclusion

To understand the lessons of the dramatic drop in homicides we are enjoying, it is helpful to understand the nature and drivers of homicides – both positive and negative – within the relatively small social networks where risks for involvement in gun violence are highly concentrated and contagious.

The story of the great decline in homicides likely relates to changes in policing strategy that have evolved to focus intelligence, investigations, and deterrence activities toward violent offenders. But it is not solely about policing. Many cities created offices or departments of violence prevention to implement multi-pronged efforts to curb violence using CVI, enhanced victims supports, and blight reduction. Policies to curb gun trafficking and prevent violence through CVI programs have also contributed to the remarkable success story in public safety.

Because gun violence is contagious, our record low homicide rates provide some confidence we could enjoy relatively low – by US standards – homicide rates in the years ahead. But some of the forces that helped to reduce homicides are being

^b Delays in implementing and enforcing the BCSA, but Trump Administration policies to not enforce these laws have, unfortunately, undercut their potential beneficial impacts.

undermined by the Trump Administration. Federal funding for community violence intervention has virtually been eliminated. Local government will be challenged to fill the CVI funding gap as cities and states face challenging fiscal environments. The Trump Administration has signaled that it will not enforce key federal laws or will adapt them to please the gun industry at the expense of public safety. This includes not charging licensed dealers who sell handguns to youth ages 18-20 (the minimum legal age is 21 years), allowing click and ship gun sales that do away with in-person review of government-issue identification for background checks and practices that ensure that firearms are transferred to qualified individuals, allowing frequent firearm sellers to do so without a license or background check requirements, significantly reducing gun dealer compliance, and bringing lawsuits against certain state and local gun restrictions. Finally, the massive surge in federal immigration law enforcement has destabilized communities and eroded trust in law enforcement. Federal funding incentives for local and state law enforcement to support ICE and CBP may divert resources away from combatting violent crime.

Given the Trump Administration's policies, it will be up to states and local government lawmakers and agencies, private philanthropy, community-based nonprofits, and civic organizations to fill the gap. The recent success in dramatically curbing homicides and violent crime demonstrates the great value of evidence-based strategies that address communities' needs for safety while minimizing the harms of mass arrests and incarceration.

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Democrat State	Republican governor	Period of Republican governorship within 2015–2024
California	None	None
Connecticut ^a	None	None
Delaware	None	None
Hawaii	None	None
Illinois	Bruce Rauner	January 12, 2015–January 14, 2019
Maryland	Larry Hogan	January 21, 2015–January 18, 2023
Massachusetts	Charlie Baker	January 8, 2015–January 5, 2023
New Jersey	Chris Christie	January 1, 2015–January 16, 2018
Oregon	None	None
Rhode Island	None	None
Vermont	Phil Scott	January 5, 2017–December 31, 2024

Republican State	Democratic governor	Period of Democratic governorship within 2015–2024
Alabama	None	None
Arizona	Katie Hobbs	January 2, 2023–December 31, 2024 g
Arkansas	Mike Beebe	January 1, 2015–January 13, 2015
Florida	None	None
Georgia	None	None
Idaho	None	None
Indiana	None	None
Kansas	Laura Kelly	January 14, 2019–December 31, 2024
Louisiana	John Bel Edwards	January 11, 2016–January 8, 2024
Mississippi	None	None
Missouri	Jay Nixon	January 1, 2015–January 9, 2017
Montana	Steve Bullock	January 1, 2015–January 4, 2021
North Carolina	Roy Cooper	January 1, 2017–December 31, 2024
North Dakota	None	None
Ohio	None	None
Oklahoma	None	None
South Carolina	None	None
South Dakota	None	None

Tennessee	None	None
Texas	None	None
Utah	None	None
West Virginia ^a	Earl Ray Tomblin; Jim Justice ^b	January 1, 2015–August 4, 2017
Wisconsin	Tony Evers	January 7, 2019–December 31, 2024
Wyoming	None	None

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