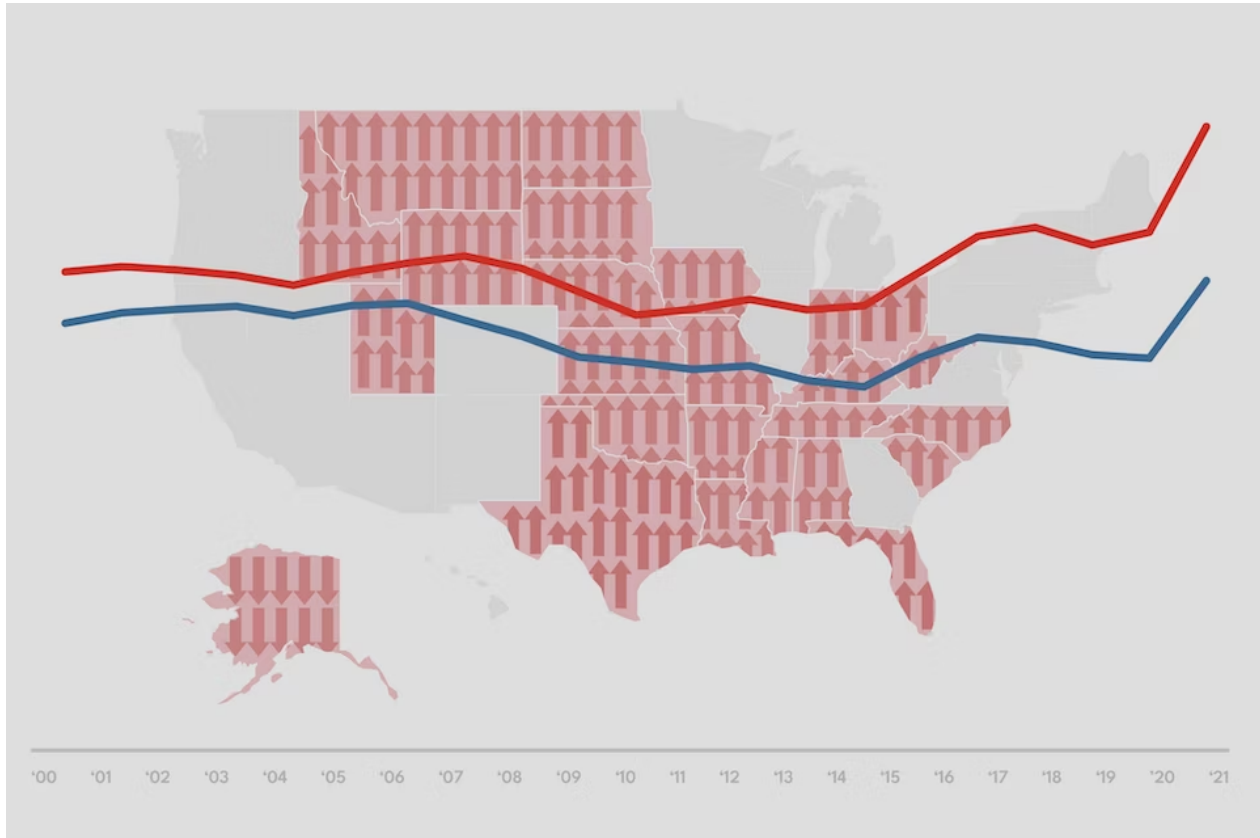




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# The Two-Decade Red State Murder Problem



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## Takeaways

- The murder rate in the 25 states that voted for Donald Trump has exceeded the murder rate in the 25 states that voted for Joe Biden in every year from 2000 to 2020.

- Over this 21-year span, this Red State murder gap has steadily widened from a low of 9% more per capita red state murders in 2003 and 2004 to 44% more per capita red state murders in 2019, before settling back to 43% in 2020.
- Altogether, the per capita Red State murder rate was 23% higher than the Blue State murder rate when all 21 years were combined.
- If Blue State murder rates were as high as Red State murder rates, Biden-voting states would have suffered over 45,000 more murders between 2000 and 2020.
- Even when murders in the largest cities in red states are removed, overall murder rates in Trump-voting states were 12% higher than Biden-voting states across this 21-year period and were higher in 18 of the 21 years observed.

Republicans have made crime a major selling point over the past several elections. In 2020 and 2022, they ran ads accusing Democratic candidates of wanting to “defund the police” – a position held by only a handful of fringe Democratic officeholders. In October 2022, one-quarter of ads from Republican candidates and PACs focused on crime. Republican-aligned Fox News aired, on average, 141 segments on crime across weekdays in the two months leading up to the midterms. In the week after the midterm, their coverage of violent crime dropped by 50%.

In March of 2022, we released a report that found murder rates in 2020 were 40% higher in Trump-voting states than Biden-voting states. In this follow-up report, we studied homicide data going back to 2000 to see if this one-year Red State murder epidemic was an anomaly. It was not. Despite a media narrative to

the contrary, a wide and widening Red State murder gap has spanned the past two decades.

In this study, we collected homicide data from 2000 through 2020 for all 50 states from the Center of Disease Control Wonder's National Center for Health Statistics Mortality Data. Data is based on death certificates collected by state registries and provided to the National Vital Statistics System. We chose CDC data over FBI data because it's more up to date and does not rely on voluntary reporting from counties and states. All states are *required* to report mortality data to the CDC; they're only *encouraged* to report crime data to the FBI. The United States Department of Justice has acknowledged that CDC data is more accurate. (There were four states with several years of missing data—New Hampshire, North Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming. In these instances, we relied on FBI numbers from the Uniform Crime Statistics.)<sup>1</sup> To allow for comparison, we calculated the state's per capita murder rate, the number of murders per 100,000 residents, and categorized states by their presidential vote in the 2020 election, resulting in an even 25-25 state split.

We found that the murder rate in Trump-voting states has exceeded the murder rate in Biden-voting states every year this century. Cumulatively, overall murder rates since 2000 were on average 23% higher in Trump-voting states. For the past 21 years, the top 10 murder rate states have been dominated by reliably red states, namely Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Missouri. Even when we removed the county with the largest city in Trump-voting states (and kept them in for Biden-voting states), murder rates were still significantly higher in these red states.

And while media reports give the impression that murder rates are skyrocketing in blue areas, murder rates have actually increased at far higher rates in Trump-voting states over the past two decades, widening the Red State murder gap from a low of 9% in 2003 and 2004 to a high of 44% in 2019, before falling to 43% in 2020. Since 2000, murder rates have increased 39.4% in red states and just 13.4% in blue states.

There is a media and political narrative that crime is a Democratic problem, occurring mostly in big blue cities and fueled by lax policies. While murder is by no means the only crime in America, it is the most serious. And as far as murder is concerned, it is a bigger problem in red states than blue states and only becoming more so. As we noted in our last report, Republicans do a much better job blaming others for crime than actually stopping it.

## **The murder rate in Trump-voting states has exceeded Biden-voting states every year this century.**

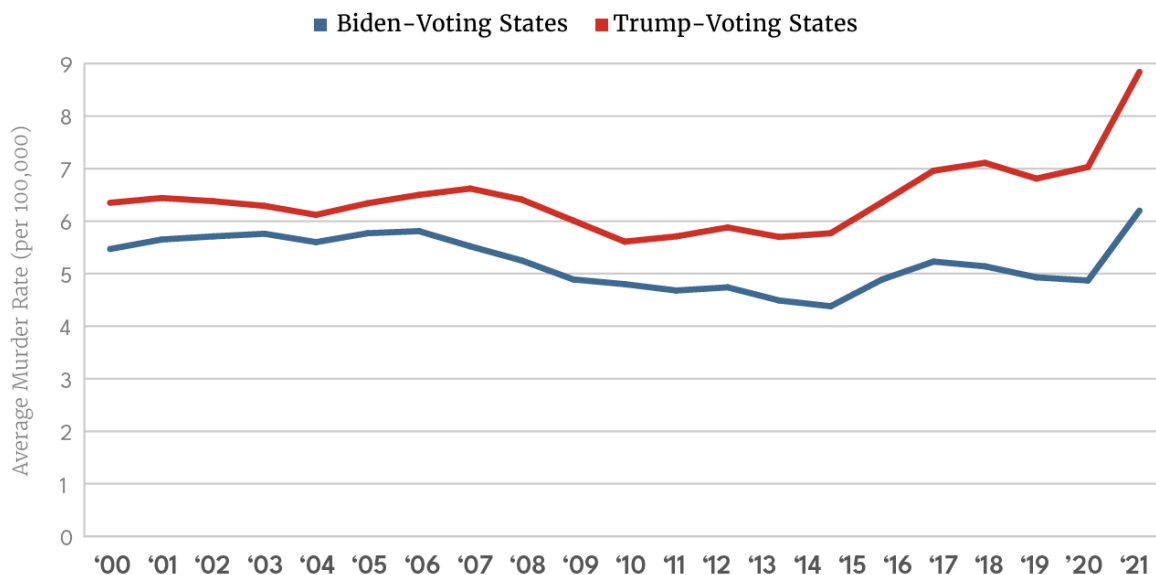
Despite the “Democrat-caused crime crisis,” murder rates in Trump-voting states have been higher than Biden-voting states every single year this century (see graph below). In 2000, the murder rate in Trump-voting states was 6.35 per 100,000 residents compared to Biden states’ 5.47 per 100,000 residents, 16% higher. At its lowest, in 2003 and 2004, murder rates in Trump states were 9% higher than in Biden states. At its highest, in 2019, murder rates in Trump states were 44% higher than in Biden states.

Overall, when looking at 2000–2020, murder rates were on average 23% higher in Trump states. The average murder rate in Trump states between 2000 and 2020 was 6.44 per 100,000 residents compared to 5.23 per 100,000 residents in Biden states. If Biden states had the same murder rate as Trump states, they would have seen 5,000 more murders in 2020 alone. Between 2000 and 2020, they would have suffered an additional 45,400 murders.

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### The Murder Rate in Trump-Voting States Has Exceeded the Rate in Biden-Voting States Every Year This Century



Source: Author's calculations based on CDC data.

## **The top 10 murder rate states are increasingly dominated by Trump-voting states.**

Solidly red states have dominated the top 10 murder rate states for the past decade—some for each of the last 21 years. Louisiana had the highest murder rate in the country from 2000 to 2018, until it was surpassed by Mississippi. Before becoming the state with the highest murder rate in 2019, Mississippi held the number two spot for 16 years between 2000 and 2018. Alabama has been in the top 5 for 20 out of the last 21 years. South Carolina has been in the top 10 for each of the past 21 years. All of these states have voted for the Republican presidential candidate in every election since 2000. The red states of Arkansas, Tennessee, and Missouri have also consistently been in the top 10 since 2004.

A handful of Biden states have as well, but not to the same degree as Trump states. Maryland has been among the top 10 for 20 out of 21 years, New Mexico for 16 years, and Georgia for 10 years. States often mentioned in the media as crime havens, like California and New York, have not graced the top 10 once. New York has never even been in the top 25 for murder rates this century.

Between 2000 and 2010, red states and blue states roughly split the top 10, with four or five of the states being blue. But after 2010, murder rates fell in blue states relative to red states. Beginning in 2011, red states have held 7 or 8 spots in the top 10 every year.

## Red States Have Dominated the Top 10 Murder Rate States for Two Decades

|      | 1  | 2  | 3  | 4  | 5  | 6  | 7  | 8  | 9  | 10 |
|------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| 2000 | LA | MS | AL | MD | NM | TN | NC | SC | GA | IL |
| 2001 | LA | MS | AL | MD | AZ | SC | IL | NV | GA | TN |
| 2002 | LA | MS | MD | AZ | AL | NM | TN | NV | IL | SC |
| 2003 | LA | MS | MD | AL | AZ | NM | GA | NV | SC | IL |
| 2004 | LA | MS | MD | AZ | NM | AL | NV | SC | AR | GA |
| 2005 | LA | MD | AL | AZ | MS | TN | NM | SC | AR | NV |
| 2006 | LA | MS | MD | AL | AZ | SC | NV | AR | TN | GA |
| 2007 | LA | AL | MD | MS | AR | AZ | SC | GA | NM | TN |
| 2008 | LA | MS | AL | MD | MO | SC | TN | NM | AZ | GA |
| 2009 | LA | MS | AL | NM | TN | MD | AR | SC | MO | IL |
| 2010 | LA | MS | AL | MD | NM | MO | SC | DE | GA | AZ |
| 2011 | LA | MS | AL | SC | NM | MD | MO | AR | TN | OK |
| 2012 | LA | MS | AL | AR | SC | MI | TN | OK | MO | DE |
| 2013 | LA | MS | AL | AR | MD | OK | SC | NM | MO | MI |
| 2014 | LA | MS | AL | SC | AR | MO | GA | MD | NM | OK |
| 2015 | LA | MS | MD | AL | SC | MO | AK | OK | NM | AR |
| 2016 | LA | MS | AL | MD | MO | IL | NM | SC | TN | AR |
| 2017 | LA | AL | MS | MO | AK | MD | AR | SC | IL | TN |
| 2018 | LA | MS | AL | MO | NM | SC | MD | TN | AR | IL |
| 2019 | MS | LA | AL | NM | AK | MO | SC | MD | AR | TN |
| 2020 | MS | LA | AL | MO | AR | SC | TN | IL | MD | GA |

Source: Author's calculations based on CDC data. Red states are states that voted for Trump in 2020. Blue states are ones that voted for Biden in 2020.



# The murder rate gap between Trump and Biden states has widened over the course

## of two decades.

Murder rates in Trump states have been increasing at much higher rates than Biden states. Back in 2000, murder rates in Trump states were 16% higher and fell to a 9% gap in 2003 and 2004. By 2007, the Red State murder gap reached 20% and would exceed 20% in every year but one thereafter. In 2014, the Red State murder gap exceeded 30% for the first time (32% in 2014) and would remain above that threshold throughout. The Red State murder gap crossed the threshold of 40% in 2019, when murder rates in Trump states were 44% higher than Biden states, before receding slightly to 43% in 2020.

Over the period studied, murder rates jumped 39.4% in Trump-voting states (6.35 murders/100,000 population in 2000 to 8.84/100,000 in 2020). Murder rates increased just 13.4% in Biden-voting states (5.47 murders/100,000 population in 2000 to 6.20/100,000 in 2020).

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**Even when large cities are removed from red states, murder rates are still higher.**

Some on the right argue that murder rates in red states are higher because of the blue cities in those red states. Of course, blue states have more blue urban areas



than red states. That is what makes most states blue. The fact is that murder rates have increased in urban, suburban, and rural areas.

But to answer these critics, we performed an exercise to give red states a special boost. For this exercise, we removed all of the murders in the county with the largest city for 19 of 25 red states. In six rural red states home to no cities with large numbers of murders, this calculation was not possible based on available CDC data.<sup>2</sup> Blue states would get no such advantage. But even with the largest city removed from red states, the Red State murder gap persisted.

Over the course of the full 21 years between 2000 and 2020, the Red State murder rate was still 12% higher than the Blue State murder rate, even when murders in the largest cities in those red states were removed. And the murder rate was still higher in 18 of 21 years.

Between 2010 and 2020, even after removing New Orleans and Jackson, Louisiana and Mississippi continued to hold the number one and two spots for highest murder rates. Alabama, Kentucky, Missouri, South Carolina, and Tennessee were still consistently in the top 10 after removing their largest city.

In 2020, the states with the highest murder rates stayed roughly the same after making this change: Mississippi in first, then Louisiana, Alabama, South Carolina, Missouri, Illinois, Maryland, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Georgia.

## **Why are Murder Rates Persistently Higher in Red States?**

Crime and murder are complicated issues that are, unfortunately, ripe for demagoguery. This paper is not intended to provide definitive causes for the growing and persistent Red State murder gap; rather it is meant to show that it exists. But here are some thoughts on why red states have higher murder rates.

- **Guns:** Gun ownership rates are far higher in red states than blue states. Studies have estimated that gun ownership rates are as much as twice as high in a typical red state than a typical blue state. Since 79% of all homicides are committed with a firearm, it stands to reason that more guns will produce more murders, not less.
- **Poverty:** Studies have found a correlation between poverty and violent crime. Red states tend to have higher poverty rates than blue states.
- **Educational Attainment:** Those who have a high school diploma or less tend to be overrepresented among victims and perpetrators of homicide. Increasingly, there is an educational attainment gap between red and blue states as well.
- **Social Service and Police Resources:** Despite accusations that Democrats “defund the police,” we found that cities with Democratic mayors fund police at far higher levels on a per capita basis than cities run by Republican mayors. In 2020, the 25 largest Democrat-run cities spent 38% more on policing per capita than the 25 largest Republican-run cities. In addition, blue states may be more likely to fund social service programs that help steer people away from violent crime than red states.

## Conclusion

On a typical day, about 65 Americans are murdered. If we watch the cable networks, we're likely to hear about one of them. The one that is chosen often fits a narrative that is as familiar as it is shallow. It may cohere with a political point a network wants to make – chaos in Democratic cities, an illegal immigrant committing a brazen and lethal act. Usually, it's a murder in New York City or Los Angeles, two cities that actually have murder rates far lower than many states.

These crime stories aren't inaccurate, but they are curated. And when we see them every day they create an impression of crime and murder in America that

tells only a part of the story. When we released “The Red State Murder Problem” in March 2022 showing that murder rates in Trump-voting states in 2020 were far higher than Biden-voting states, the reaction was incredulity. That is because the news stories we see each day tell us something different.

But the numbers don’t lie. It is our hope that with this report we can create a more accurate political discussion about crime. And perhaps with a more holistic political discussion, we can do more to actually reduce violent and lethal crime.

## Methodology

We collected murder data for all 50 states from 2000 to 2020. Our primary source was the Center of Disease Control Wonder’s National Center for Health Statistics Mortality Data. We chose to use CDC data over FBI data because it tends to be more accurate. This is because states are *required* to report mortality data to the CDC while states are only *encouraged* to report crime data to the FBI. As mentioned above, there were four states that were missing a few years of data in the CDC database. New Hampshire was missing data for 2002, North Dakota was missing data for 2001, 2002, and 2008, Vermont was missing data for 2002 and 2009–2013, and Wyoming was missing data for 2006 and 2010. For these, we used FBI data. Using the CDC data and population data from the US Census Bureau, we calculated the per capita murder rate for each state for every year. We split states into “red” and “blue” states based on their vote in the 2020 Presidential election—Trump versus Biden. For each year, we averaged the number of homicides and populations for “red” and “blue” states and calculated the average per capita murder rate. When we removed the largest cities from red states, we removed the following counties: Alabama- Madison County (Huntsville), Arkansas- Pulaski County (Little Rock), Kentucky- Jefferson County (Louisville), Louisiana- Orleans Parish (New Orleans), Mississippi- Hinds County (Jackson), Missouri- Jackson County (Kansas City), South Carolina- Charleston County (Charleston), Tennessee- Davidson County (Nashville), Alaska- Anchorage Borough (Anchorage), Florida- Duval County (Jacksonville), Indiana- Marion County (Indianapolis), Kansas- Sedgwick

County (Wichita), Nebraska- Douglas County (Omaha), North Carolina- Mecklenburg County (Charlotte), Ohio- Franklin County (Columbus), Oklahoma- Oklahoma County (Oklahoma City), Texas- Harris County (Houston), Utah- Salt Lake County (Salt Lake City), West Virginia- Kanawha County (Charleston). The following states had less than 10 murders in their largest city (the CDC doesn't disclose murders under 10 for privacy reasons): Idaho, Iowa, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming. Data is attached.

## TOPICS

**JUSTICE** 43

## ENDNOTES

- 1.** We used FBI data for New Hampshire for 2002. For North Dakota for 2001, 2002, and 2008. For Vermont for 2002, 2009–2013. For Wyoming for 2006 and 2010.
- 2.** 19 out of 25 red states had homicide data that allowed us to do this exercise. The largest cities in the 6 other states typically had less than 10 murders in a year, and because of the way the CDC compiles and publicly releases data, the exact number of murders in these states was not made available by the CDC for privacy reasons. The 6 red states not included in this calculation are Idaho (the county with Boise), Iowa (the county with Des Moines), Montana (the county with Billings), North Dakota (the county with Fargo), South Dakota (the county with Sioux Falls), and Wyoming (the county with Cheyenne).