Democracy Dies in Darkness

Opinion

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The good news about murder

Homicides are way down. What happened, what we can learn and how progressives became crime fighters.

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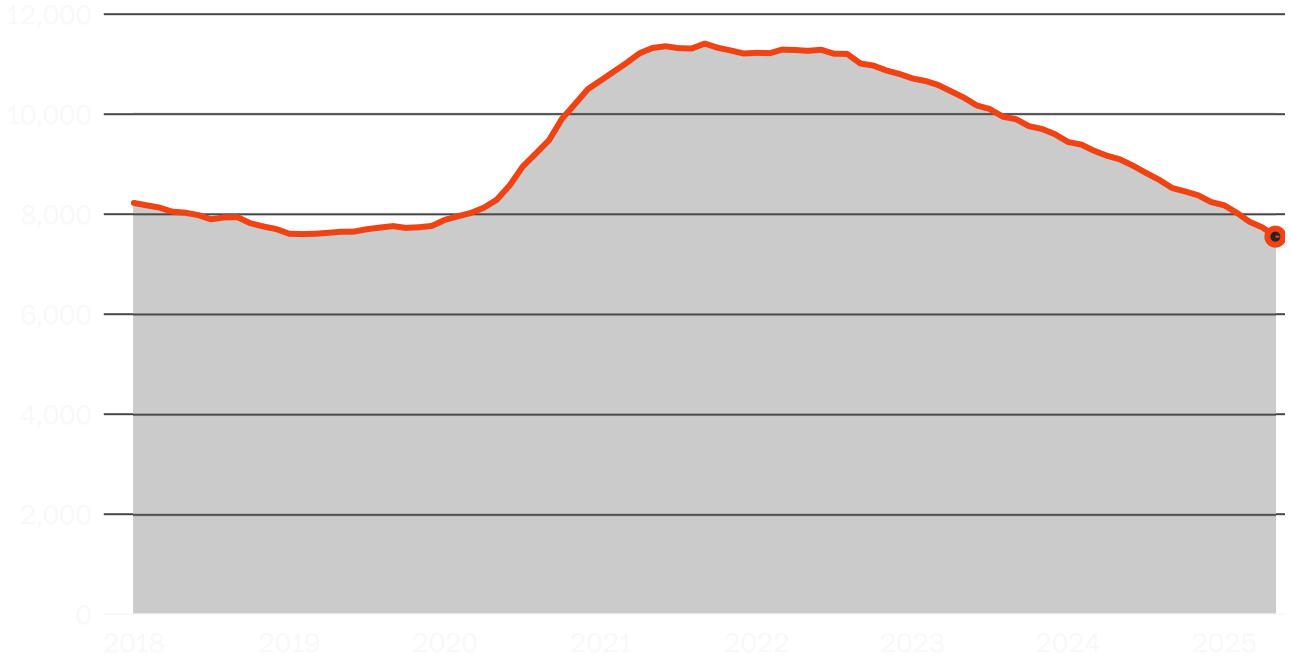
In politics, good news is often harder to accept than bad news. There is a habit, perhaps especially now, of seeing government as doomed to failure, social policy as futile and debates over hard problems — including, prominently, crime — as destined to break down into pointless ideological clashes.

But sometimes the facts are so obvious that everyone has to accept them. That's what should be happening now with the truly remarkable decline in the number of murders and shootings across the United States, especially in big cities that were wracked by a spike in violence during the covid pandemic. The numbers are compelling enough to force even Eeyores to take notice.

Murder rates have declined from the pandemic high

12-month rolling totals



The monthly figures aggregate reported murders from 421 agencies over the past 12 months. Crime counts are preliminary, unofficial and subject to change.

Source: Real-Time Crime Index

Jeff Asher, the co-founder of AH Datalytics and one of the country's most respected crime statisticians, summarizes the data this way. Murders rose by roughly 30 percent in 2020, the fastest rate of increase on record, and the stats stayed steady in 2021 and 2022. Then began the great decline with three record-breaking drops in a row: 2023, murders down 12 percent; 2024, down 14 percent; 2025, on track so far to be down 20 percent.

The declines were especially robust in the biggest cities with the biggest crime problems.

Between 2021 and 2024, murders were down 53 percent in Philadelphia, and 43 percent in both Baltimore and New Orleans. The drop was even more striking using Asher's most recent data from his Real-Time Crime Index through May, 2025: a decline of 59 percent in Baltimore, 58 percent in Philadelphia and 48 percent in New Orleans. Other major cities experiencing large improvements — they are far from alone — include Boston, Los Angeles, Denver, Phoenix, Chicago, New York and Atlanta.

Murders declined across big cities in America

Change in reported murders between January and May 2025 form the same period four years ago (January-May 2021)

CITY	CHANGE
Baltimore	−59%
Philadelphia	−58%
New Orleans	−48%
San Antonio, TX	−43%
Chicago	−40%
New York City	−39%
Las Vegas	−37%
Los Angeles	−37%
Phoenix, AZ	−36%
Houston, TX	−34%
Dallas	−34%
Atlanta	−33%
San Diego	−6%

Source: Real-Time Crime Data

The horror of the Park Avenue killings in New York on Monday is a warning against any complacency about gun violence. But the positive trend on crime is clear. A study based on 42 cities published on July 24 by the Council on Criminal Justice, a nonprofit research organization, found that of the 13 categories of crimes the council tracks, only car theft "remained elevated compared to midyear 2019 totals."

No crime analyst pretends that there is a single reason for the good news. The best analysts preach intellectual humility. "The louder someone says they know why," Asher told me of the rise and fall of murder rates, "the less likely I tend to be to believe them."

The best news may be that the recent decline in violence is likely a restoration of pre-pandemic trends. The pandemic appears to have been a nasty blip. Using FBI data, John Gramlich of the Pew Research Center reported that violent crime fell by 49 percent in the nearly 30 years between 1993 and 2022 — meaning that even near the height of the pandemic crime surge, the nation's streets and neighborhoods were still far safer than they had been three decades earlier.

But if the pandemic played a significant role in the killing surge, it also spurred federal action that sent large sums of stimulus and anti-crime money to state and local governments. "The most compelling answer as far as what the main driver is, is that basically we spent a lot of money on stuff," Asher says.

The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act of 2022, the first major federal gun safety legislation in nearly 30 years, tightened gun laws while expanding federal support for mental health and anti-violence programs based in schools and neighborhoods.

The effort to spread anti-crime best practices across the country is one of the Biden administration's largely unheralded achievements.

"With the creation of the first ever White House Office on Gun Violence Prevention, we ran a comprehensive playbook across the federal government," Rob Wilcox, the office's deputy director, told me. "It involved investing in community violence intervention, supporting law enforcement in solving shootings, cracking down on every link in the gun trafficking chain — from ghost gun companies to rogue gun dealers — and supporting the victims and survivors who experienced violence."

Wilcox believes the success of these anti-crime efforts creates a large opportunity for Democrats and progressives to change the political valence of the crime issue. He's right. Law and order has long been a staple in conservative campaigning. Public safety rooted in smart policies could now be a centerpiece of the progressive case.

It was also during the pandemic that the Black Lives Matter movement gained national prominence after the May 2020 police killing of George Floyd. The urgency of reform unleashed calls to "defund the police," which in turn prompted backlash and political recriminations that worked against Democrats.

The tensions of that era and the injustices it surfaced have not disappeared. But five years on, it's possible to see that some of its lessons, particularly on the need for closer relationships among the police, neighborhood leaders and citizens, have had an effect. Yes, enforcement matters. But so does smart programming. Fairer and more just paths to public safety can lead to greater public safety.

Why crime spiked during the pandemic

The relationship between crime and the pandemic cannot be understated. People were stressed. Unemployment spiked. Streets emptied. Schools closed. Policing was impeded. Violence followed. "Everything we counted on to reduce gun violence was undermined in that period," Roseanna Ander, executive director of the University of Chicago crime lab, told me.

"Social institutions that normally try to control and de-conflict personal arguments basically turned off during the pandemic," including schools and social programs, said Jens Ludwig, a professor at the University of Chicago's Harris School of Public Policy. The pandemic reminded us of how institutions we take for granted play an indirect but powerful role in making us safer.

But human emotion was part of the story, too. Ludwig is the author of the recently published "Unforgiving Places: The Unexpected Origins of American Gun Violence." It argues that the vast majority of gun violence stems from personal conflicts spiraling out of control. "Most gun violence in America seems to stem from arguments that go back and forth," he told me. "Both parties have the chance to de-escalate, they don't, they take the conflict in a different way, and then someone winds up dead because they've got a gun."

Ludwig said there is some evidence that "gun carrying may have gone up" in the pandemic years, the very moment when young people, who are more likely to be involved in violence, were feeling especially stressed. He pointed to a 2020 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study finding that 74.9 percent of respondents aged 18 to 24 reported "at least one adverse mental or behavioral health symptom."

The combination was, literally, lethal. "You put those two things together and you've got a picture of more interpersonal conflicts among young people and a higher likelihood of guns being present when conflict does happen," Ludwig said.

Which points to this irreducible fact: a nation with highly permissive gun laws — and nearly 400 million guns — has murder rates between 3 and 29 times higher than those of the other wealthy Group of Seven nations. In 2021, the United States had 6.78 homicide victims per 100,000 inhabitants. Canada had 2.08; Britain 1.15; Germany 0.83; and Japan, 0.23. "We've got too many freaking guns," Charles Beck, who spent nearly nine years as police chief in Los Angeles, said in an interview. "A conflict between young men absent a firearm would result in a bloody nose, maybe. But it results in a death."

Meanwhile, millions of Americans lost their jobs. While some lucky Americans could stay at home during the pandemic and have their groceries and medicines delivered, families on the margins were not so lucky — and "essential workers" had to work. They ventured out even as public health concerns interfered with regular policing. There were fewer police stops, Ludwig noted, while Rafael Mangual, a fellow at the conservative/libertarian Manhattan Institute, said that widespread mask-wearing made identification and thus prosecution of wrongdoers more difficult.

Jeffrey Fagan, a professor of law and epidemiology at Columbia University, argues that crime epidemics often flow from other epidemics: Sharp rises in the use of heroin in the late 1960s, cocaine in the 1970s and crack in the 1990s, he told me, all created circumstances that boosted rates of violence. The pandemic was the latest in a line of order-shattering events. The result: A majority of Americans — particularly those in big cities — became very afraid. A Gallup poll in October of 2022 found 56 percent of U.S. adults reporting an increase in crime where they lived, the highest in Gallup's trends on the question dating back to 1972.

Seen in this context, the pandemic's impact is hardly surprising. Donald Trump was not at all reluctant to highlight the crime issue once he left office. "Our country is now a cesspool of crime," Trump said in a 2022 speech previewing what was coming in his 2024 campaign. "We have blood, death and suffering on a scale once unthinkable because of the Democratic Party's effort to destroy and dismantle law enforcement all throughout America."

What has gone right to reduce gun violence

But Trump was polemicizing just as the pandemic crime wave was beginning its dramatic ebb. As society switched back on, so did the schools, local governments, and other civic and social institutions. Streets, parks and other public spaces filled with people again. Cities once again had many "eyes on the street," the famed urbanist Jane Jacobs's phrase for the informal but vital role residents play in enforcing social norms and looking out for each other.

Mayor Brandon Scott in Baltimore and Mayor Michelle Wu in Boston both cited large-scale federal assistance from a variety of sources as key to the success of anti-violence efforts in their cities. "Much of what we have moved forward," Wu said in an interview, "was because we had unprecedented investment from federal recovery dollars."

Wu, who is up for reelection this year, has made public safety central to her case, and she and her city have a lot to brag about. “We are the safest that Boston has been in anyone’s lifetime,” Wu told me. Homicides hit a record low last year, falling from 58 in 2020 to 24 in 2024 — the city’s lowest murder rate since 1957.

Like other crime-fighting progressive mayors, Wu credits more effective policing but also expansions in programs that build a sense of community and opportunity for young people — “investments into parks and programming and block parties, community centers, pools, really trying to make sure that Boston is a home for everyone.”

Scott offers a comparable list of programs that have helped Baltimore experience the fewest homicides in 50 years. They included expansions of education, literacy, recreation and sports programs, all aimed at creating engaging alternatives to the street. His city has also been reforming its police department under the terms of a 2017 consent decree spurred in significant part by the 2015 death of 25-year-old Freddie Gray while he was in police custody.

Elected in 2020, the 41-year-old Scott has made reducing gun violence a personal passion, and, in an interview, he invoked his grandparents to describe a little-appreciated consensus in his community about policing. “My grandmother’s generation was very clear,” he told me. “They said that they want lawful, constitutional policing because there is a need for that when people are hurting people, robbing people, all of these things. But what they did not want is for what has happened for the entirety of my life to continue to happen, where myself, my brother, people who just look like us, we could just be pulled off and arrested just because of the way we look. That’s a very distinct difference [from] saying I don’t want policing at all.” Scott, Wu and others also point to the role of “community violence intervention” (CVI) programs in reducing crime. Intervenors (or “interrupters”) step in to mediate disputes and de-escalate violence before the shooting starts. Many of the intervenors are former offenders who served prison time.

Chico Tillmon is representative of the movement he leads in one sense: He got caught up in the gangs on Chicago’s West Side and spent 16 years behind bars. But he is also exceptional, securing a PhD from the University of Illinois at Chicago. His dissertation focused on “desistance,” the process by which people move from antisocial or criminal behavior to, as Tillmon put it, “a pro-social lifestyle.”

Now head of the Community Violence Intervention Leadership Academy at the University of Chicago's Crime Lab, Tillmon says intervenors tend to be "people with lived experience, born and raised" in the communities they serve. "Sometimes they are individuals who have shown resilience" from their own experiences in the criminal justice system and thus "have easy access to individuals who are currently caught up in the cycle of violence." They might also be coaches or educators who know their neighborhoods well and are figures "that people look up to."

Studies of CVI are ongoing, and researchers told me that effectiveness can vary substantially across programs. But reports on New York City, Baltimore and Detroit all suggested significant positive effects. "Historically, CVI programs have mostly been implemented in liberal urban centers," wrote Logan Seacrest, a resident fellow at the center-right R Street Institute. But he added: "Recent experiments in red states have been encouraging, demonstrating CVI's adaptability to different political environments and compatibility with bipartisan values such as fiscal restraint and local control."

There has been natural tension between intervenors and the police, since many of the intervenors were once on the opposite side of the law — precisely what helps connect them to those they are trying to help. But Beck, the former Los Angeles police chief, says police departments have increasingly come to see that the "unlikely partnership" between intervenors and law enforcement "adds tremendous credibility to the police."

"A lot of the reason that communities mistrust police, particularly communities of color that live in violent environments, is that they tend to see us as an outside force, as somebody that is just there to remove people from their community and is not really interested in the solution," Beck told me. "So when they see you working with these nontraditional partnerships … we increase community trust. Then you're able to reduce violence."

Can Democrats own the issue again?

Criminal violence is often cast as an intractable problem. As it turns out, it's not. Being able to accept the latest good news is essential to hanging on to the gains and making further progress. In some ideal world, the country's politicians might decide to take the crime issue out of the arena of partisanship and demagoguery and look pragmatically at which policies work to foster safety and justice. As R Street's Seacrest notes, some ideas actually are shared across our usual lines of division.

There would still be debates, of course. Mangual, reflecting the view of many conservatives, insists that higher arrest and incarceration rates partly explain the decline in criminality. And it's true that the prison population began ticking up in 2022 for the first time in almost a decade. Yet Mangual is also willing to look at new approaches. On CVI programs, for example, he describes his view as "reserved optimism," and wants to see more data.

But we are a long way from a nonpartisan, nonideological debate on crime, and it won't happen until progressives are bold enough to make a case for their own successes. Mayors such as Scott and Wu are good examples of progressives who take the challenge of battling violence seriously while maintaining their dedication to civil liberties and racial justice. The Biden era "playbook" Wilcox describes simultaneously celebrates effective policing, stronger gun laws, the imperative of community engagement and the investments in the nation's least advantaged neighborhoods.

As it happens, President Donald Trump is offering Democrats of all stripes a chance to go on the offensive. His allergy to anything associated with his predecessor seems to compel him to walk away even from programs that worked.

For starters, the administration has halted $1 billion for mental health services for children that were strongly supported by Republican negotiators of the 2022 gun bill. It has slashed $500 million in public safety grants pledged to more than 550 organizations across the country, a blow to the CVI groups. Trump has also proposed a 29 percent cut to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives for the 2026 fiscal year.

"We were beginning to disseminate best practices at the end of the Biden administration," Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Connecticut) told me, "and now we've stopped."

The lead negotiator for his party on the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, Murphy said that because of those policies, “it is just harder for the wrong people to get their hands on a weapon today. There is more money in our communities to try to interrupt cycles of violence. There’s more prosecution happening of gun traffickers.”

The triumphs against street violence haven’t gotten the attention they deserve, Murphy said, because “you don’t throw parties for the absence of something bad.” But when the absence in question is violence, recognition is in order.

Some mayors and police chiefs also worry that Trump’s efforts to enlist local police in his massive immigration raids will endanger hard-won trust between the police and immigrant communities. Gil Kerlikowske, commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection under President Barack Obama and a former police chief in several cities, warned of a negative “spillover effect” from “ICE making these raids, wearing masks, taking people off the street.”

Why? “Everyone is safer when everyone in our community can call 911 when they need help, can report crimes, can share information that they have, can help police solve crimes,” said Wu. “The types of tactics [being] used undermine that.”

The critique of Trump should be part of a larger effort. Progressives have a chance to argue that the best way to be tough on crime is to be smart about crime. They have the receipts.

What readers are saying

The comments on the article about the decline in murder rates across major U.S. cities highlight several factors contributing to this trend. Some commenters attribute the decline to improved trauma care, increased policing, and changes in demographics, such as a decrease in the... Show more

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