What To Do About Crime's Persistent Perception Problem?

A new-ish poll and some ideas for the future.

JEFF ASHER

SEP 08, 2025

♡ 26   💬 27   ⟲ 6   Sha

YouGov released [a poll](#) recently asking two questions on crime:

1. Since 1990, would you say murder rates in U.S. cities have...

And

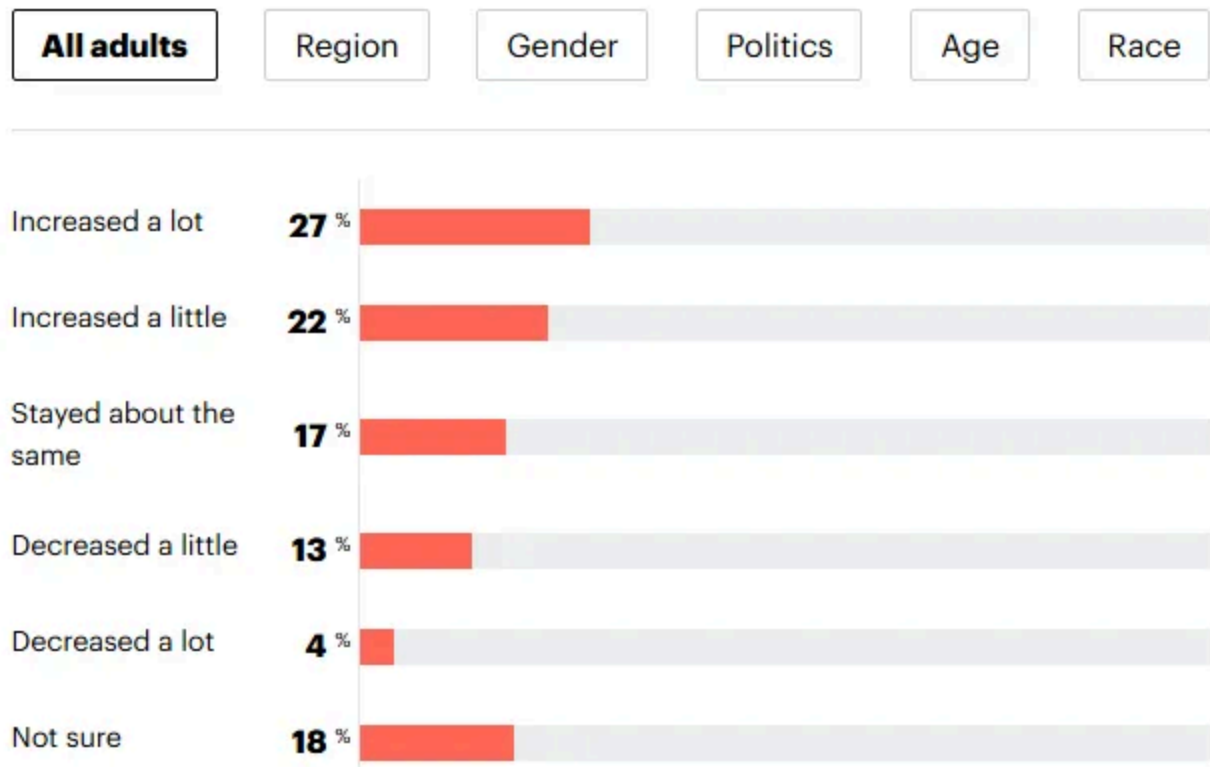2. Since 2020, would you say murder rates in U.S. cities have...

This is a variation on a question that [Gallup](#) has asked for decades, but I like it a lot more because it's very specific to murder over set timeframes while Gallup's question asks about a more vaguely defined "crime".

Thanks for reading Jeff-alytics! Subscribe for free to receive new posts and support my work.

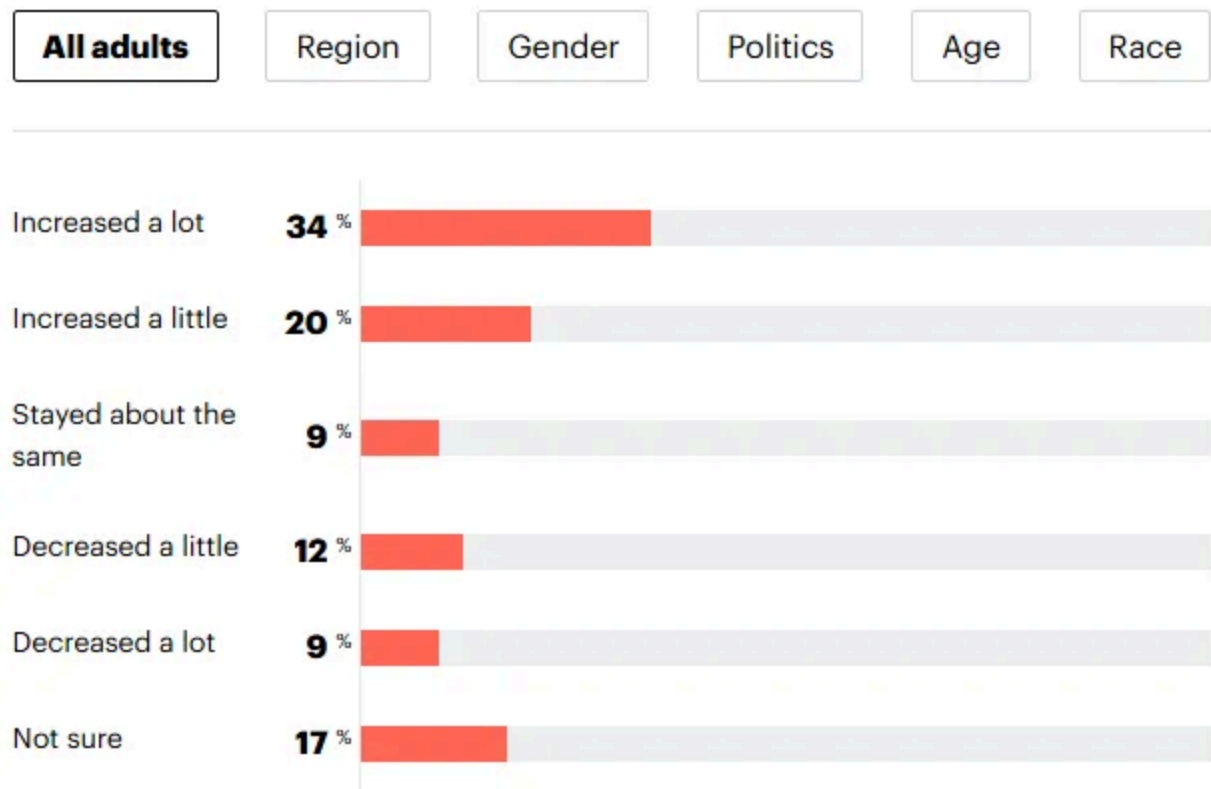| Type your email... | Subscribe |

It won't shock you to learn that a majority of respondents answer both questions with "increased" by fairly wide margins.

Since 2020, would you say murder rates in U.S. cities have...?

| All adults | Region | Gender | Politics | Age | Race |

Increased a lot	27 %
Increased a little	22 %
Stayed about the same	17 %
Decreased a little	13 %
Decreased a lot	4 %
Not sure	18 %

Adding things up, that's 49 percent saying murder increased since 2020 compared to 17 percent saying it decreased (35 percent said either stayed about the same or they weren't sure). Turning to the question about 1990 we get a similarly sized gap:

Since 1990, would you say murder rates in U.S. cities have...?

All adults	Region	Gender	Politics	Age	Race

Increased a lot	**34** %	
Increased a little	**20** %	
Stayed about the same	**9** %	
Decreased a little	**12** %	
Decreased a lot	**9** %	
Not sure	**17** %	

Murder has quite obviously fallen a lot since 2020 and it's fallen a miraculous amount since 1990. If you want to take the question literally and only look at data from cities then you get a murder rate of 11.5 per 100k in US cities in 1990 and a rate of 6.8 per 100k in 2023 (the 2024 data will almost certainly show a sizable decline when it's released in a few weeks).

Philip Bump wrote up a good summary of the survey and I don't need to rehash his discussion of why so many respondents are so wrong. John Roman also had a good write up of the issue that I'd recommend reading.

I don't want to rehash the reasons that I think most prominently explain why peoples' perceptions of crime differ so strongly from

reality, I [wrote about that](#) a year and a half ago. Hell, we could [go back a century](#) and find police chiefs using public perceptions of crime waves as their impetus to start collecting standardized crime data in the first place.

Instead, I want to discuss why the YouGov poll provides some optimism that the perception gap can be closed and the steps my team are taking and plan to take to do so.

Let's start with the optimism which, in my opinion, comes in the form of the poll's breakdown by age.

Would you say murder rates in U.S. cities have...

Age Range	Increased Since 1990	Not Sure	Increased Since 2020	Not Sure
18-29	44%	27%	43%	28%
30-44	47%	20%	44%	23%
45-64	59%	13%	51%	15%
65+	63%	8%	54%	8%
Overall	54%	17%	49%	18%

Source: YouGov • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

An insane 63 percent of people 65+ in this poll said that murder had increased since 1990 . Someone who is 65 now was 30 in 1990. They have lived through crime at its very worst in the early 1990 and then twice seen remarkable drops, yet nearly two-thirds of respondents at that age said murder was higher now than then. They may be wrong but at least they're confidently wrong with on. 8 percent saying they aren't sure whether it increased.

On the other end of the spectrum (though not far enough over to g the question right) were people 18 to 29 and people of the "good"

generation (Millennials aged 30 to 44). Less than half of those groups said murder had *increased* since 1990 and 2020 and a decent sized chunk of each group said they weren't sure.

Younger groups do not believe murder is higher than it was in 199 as much as older groups. They also are more willing to say they aren't sure than older groups. I obviously could be reading too much into a single poll's results, but these points imply to me that younger generations are at least open to the idea of closing the perception-to-reality gap.

The real question, therefore, is how to start to close the gap. I posted my initial reaction to seeing the YouGov poll the other da and many of the replies focused on the role of the media in lead: people to think crime is rising.
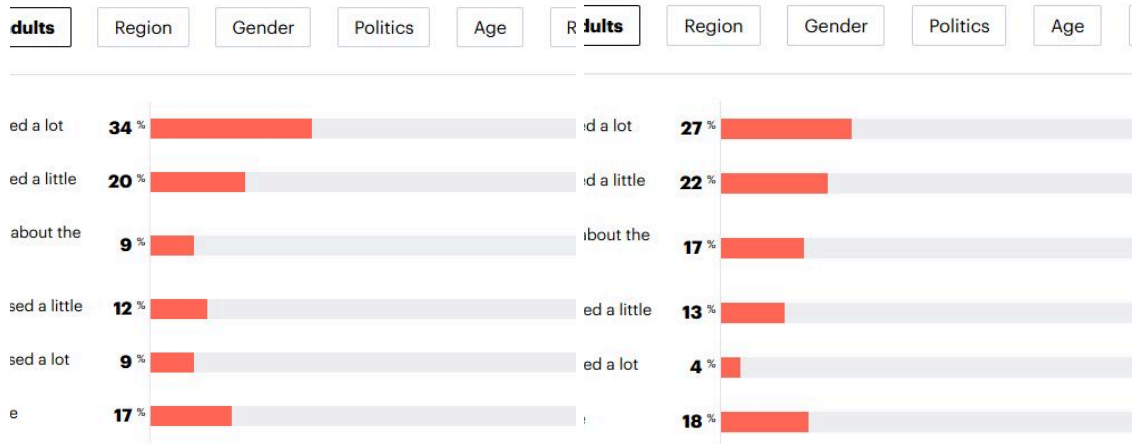
But I don't think it's that simple. My parents are in their 70s a they watch the local news, but it's [not like](#) younger generations are watching the 6 PM news each night to determine whether crime rising or falling where they are.

There has also been a decent level of media coverage of murder's decline in 2025. Within the span of a week in late July — around when th3 survey was running — we got articles on it from the [Washington Post](#), [New York Times](#), [Wall Street Journal](#), [Financial Times](#), and [Bloomberg](#). FBI Director Kash Patel [went on](#) the Joe Rog podcast in June and discussed a 20 percent drop in murder to potentially the lowest level ever recorded, Deputy Director Dan Bongino has been [tweeting](#) about it, even John Lott is discussing

at [The Federalist](). Even President Trump has [talked about]() enormous drops in murder nationally when not decrying surging crime in DC and elsewhere.

So "the media" is definitely talking about the murder decline, yet these pesky perceptions persist…problematically. The extreme politicization of the issue may be new, but the basic problem isn't new. People have long told Gallup that crime has risen in the last year nationally regardless of what the data tells us.

Comparing Perceptions of Crime With Reported Trends

Year	Did Americans Say Crime Rose?	Did Violent Crime Rise?	Did Murder Rise?
2006	Yes	No	No
2007	Yes	No	Yes
2008	Yes	No	No
2009	Yes	No	No
2010	Yes	No	No
2011	Yes	No	Yes
2012	N/A	Yes	Yes
2013	Yes	No	No
2014	Yes	No	No
2015	Yes	Yes	Yes
2016	Yes	Yes	Yes
2017	Yes	No	Yes
2018	Yes	No	No
2019	Yes	No	Yes
2020	Yes	Yes	Yes
2021	Yes	No	No
2022	Yes	Yes	Yes
2023	Yes	No	No
2024	Yes	No	No

2012 polling data unavailable.

Source: FBI & Gallup • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

I know that this exact political moment is somewhat unique in ter
of perceptions of crime trends, but these problems extend far
beyond this year, or even this century. Standardized crime
statistics began being collected — at least in part — because
police chiefs wanted to be able to respond to people assuming tha
we were in the midst of a crime wave.

I'm certainly no communications expert, but it's my hope that at least part of the problem is that the platforms being used to spread information on crime trends are not the platforms younger people are using to receive news.

[Most people](#) get news from their "digital devices" and people are [far more likely](#) to get news from YouTube, Instagram, or TikTok th they are to get it from Twitter. All of which is why we are launching efforts on those platforms to provide content on crime data and trends and hopefully reach a wider audience that is not reading this Substack.

To that end, we created the Aggregated YouTube series. The first video is below for you to enjoy and by all means please head [over there](#) to subscribe. The goal is to produce new videos every other week covering current crime trends, looks at individual cities, other fun quirks that pop up. Here's the first video covering a brief history of crime data:

Episode 1: The History of Crime Data

And the second which is all about the Real-Time Crime Index:

Episode 2: Meet the Real-Time Crime Index

The third video looked at crime trends at midyear:

Episode 3: Mid-Year Crime Trend Review

The fourth video that came out last week talked about how posting on TikTok led to a surge in auto thefts:

Episode 4: The TikTok Car Theft Buzz

And, very excitedly, I'm creating a new podcast called (drumroll) the Jeff-alytics Podcast! I'm pumped about this and will have mor information in a few weeks, but the goal is to talk to journalist academics, policymakers, philanthropists, and more with the specific goals of 1) better understanding the gap between crime perceptions and the actual data and 2) exploring what is being do to bridge that gap. It's my hope that it's an expansive conversation about crime and criminal justice and how we can bett communicate what data and research finds to a public that typica only thinks things are getting worse (sometimes they're right!).

Like I said, I'll have more about the podcast in a few weeks, but the goal is to launch sometime in late-September and do for crime data and trends what Mike Duncan did for teaching people to overthrow regimes in protest of unfair taxes. People seem to like podcasts, hopefully they'll like this one too.

So that's the plan. It's obviously quite a steep hill to climb, providing content to people on the platforms they use is hopeful one way to close the gap between perceptions and reality.

Thanks for reading Jeff-alytics! This post is
public so feel free to share it.

26 Likes · 6 Restacks

Discussion about this post

Comments   Restacks

Write a comment...

Wigan ⊛ Sep 8 *Edited*

I find myself asking a funny-sounding question here, which is simply "does it matter if Americans crime is getting worse when it's not?"

As long as crime is still a serious problem what does it matter that the average voter also unders the trend direction?

As an analogy, I have no idea if the population of endangered Grey Wolves is going up or down, knowing the right answer wouldn't really change my support for laws or policies that protect the

♡ LIKE (3)   💬 REPLY

3 replies

Miss Anne Thrope ⊛ Sep 8

Jeff, at least you, with your data-driven voice of reason, seem to be gaining traction in the Big No arena since your name is increasingly mentioned in crime articles. Good work.

People refuse to accept the dropping-crime data because their TeeVee feed is full of crime and m
The Media blasts every crime that DOES occur (the bloodier the better) - plus, much of our
"entertainment" is based on fictional crime/murder. Since so many of us are Irrational, Illogical ar
Informed, we're unable to tell the difference between the fake crimes we see every night and the
based crime reality.

Maybe better instruction on Logic and Math in school would help? On 2nd thought - Nah!

♡ LIKE (2)   💬 REPLY

1 reply

25 more comments...