

Cities in Blue States Experiencing Larger Declines in Gun Violence in 2023



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Grant Park is seen in Chicago on June 25, 2019. (Getty/Raymond Boyd)

Introduction and summary

Gun violence anywhere is unacceptable. Yet increasingly, Americans are forced to grieve the unimaginable horrors of school and hate-motivated shootings in innocent communities, in addition to the daily occurrence of gun violence across the United States.¹ It is no wonder that Americans see gun violence as a top issue for Congress.² To stop gun violence in this country, every lawmaker at every level of government must come together to pass commonsense gun laws and stop violence before it happens. Unfortunately, this has not been the case.

Even though gun violence is an epidemic—touching the lives of Americans everywhere—instead of passing stronger gun laws, Republican leaders are choosing to weaponize the issue for political gain by using misinformation to stoke fears of “Democrat-controlled” cities. In 2022, for example, after a shooter took the lives of 19 children and two teachers at Robb Elementary School in

Uvalde, Texas, Gov. Greg Abbott (R-TX) claimed that gun violence in the cities of New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago is evidence that tougher gun laws are “not a real solution.”³ Similarly, despite evidence that New York City actually has relatively low rates of gun violence when controlling for its size,⁴ in April 2023, Rep. Jim Jordan (R-OH) used his powers as the House Judiciary Committee chair to hold a field hearing on violent crime in Manhattan⁵ to disrepute Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg after Bragg brought charges against former President Donald Trump. These examples demonstrate a larger coordinated effort⁶ by conservatives to make violent crime a “Democrat” issue while at the same time diverting attention from their own public safety failures to address gun violence, including neglecting to make it harder for individuals with violent intentions to obtain a gun.

However, despite the millions of dollars spent on this misinformation campaign,⁷ the data on gun violence homicides in America paint an entirely different picture. Original analysis conducted by the Center for American Progress Action Fund on the 300 most populous U.S. cities comparing gun homicide rates from January 2015 to August 2023 finds that, after controlling for population size:

- Cities in blue states,⁸ based on how a state voted in the 2020 presidential election, are consistently safer from guns than cities in red states, regardless of which party is represented in city leadership.
- From 2018 to 2021, red-state cities experienced larger increases in gun violence rates than blue-state cities.
- In 2023, blue-state cities are experiencing larger declines in gun violence rates than red-state cities.

Not only do blue-state cities on average experience lower rates of gun violence in each year of the study, but now, gun violence rates appear to be decreasing faster on average in these cities than in red-state cities. Put simply, the data do not back up the blame-game politics of Republican lawmakers such as Texas Gov. Abbott and Rep. Jordan.

Blue states are safer from guns

First, it is important to recognize that gun violence is not a problem unique to large American cities. Rural communities, particularly in red states, are experiencing some of the highest rates of gun violence in the United States.⁹ For example, from 2016 to 2020, 13 of the 20 U.S. counties with the most gun homicides per capita were rural.¹⁰ Furthermore, while Republican leaders want to center the public narrative around gun violence on “Democrat-run”¹¹ cities and states, red states have experienced higher murder rates than blue states in every year from 2000 to 2020.¹² And the difference is not driven by gun violence happening disproportionately in large cities. According to Third Way, even when the largest cities in each red state are removed from the analysis, the overall murder rate is still 12 percent higher than in blue states across that entire period.¹³ However, this does not fully answer the question about what violence looks like in American cities and whether there is a strong correlation with political affiliation.

“From 2016 to 2020, 13 of the 20 U.S. counties with the most gun homicides per capita were rural.”

Blue-state cities have lower rates of gun homicides

In October, the FBI is expected to release audited 2022 crime data through its Uniform Crime Reporting Program’s National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS), which is the standard for law enforcement crime data reporting in the United States. Unfortunately, due to the FBI’s recent transition from the Summary Reporting System to the NIBRS, nearly one-third of law enforcement agencies will have missing or incomplete data, including major city police departments such as Los Angeles and New York.¹⁴ Moreover, because the FBI’s NIBRS data are a year behind and will only report statistics for 2022, these data cannot provide insights into more recent crime or gun violence trends. Given these issues with missing or incomplete reporting and the inability to analyze gun violence trends closer to real time using this dataset, the Gun Violence Archive (GVA), an independent data collection organization that collects data “from over 7,500 law enforcement, media, government and commercial sources,”¹⁵ currently provides the most reliable, incident-level, up-to-date data that researchers can leverage to study gun violence at the city level.

An original analysis conducted by the Center for American Progress Action Fund of GVA data on the 300 most populous U.S. cities reveals that after controlling for population, blue-state cities are consistently safer from gun violence than red-state cities. From 2015 to 2022, cities in blues states saw an average gun homicide rate of 7.23 per 100,000 residents. In red-states cities, that rate was 11.1 per 100,000 residents—53 percent higher than the rate in blue-state cities.

For a city as large as New York, this difference—approximately four more gun homicides per 100,000 people—would be equivalent to 352 more gun homicides per year. To put that into perspective, in 2022, the New York City Police Department reported 338 total gun homicides.¹⁶ In fact, of the 300 cities included in this sample, in 2022, New York had only the 218th-highest rate of firearm-involved homicides per 100,000 residents. Similarly, Los Angeles was the 151st ranked city, and 34 cities had higher rates of gun violence than Chicago. While some leaders want to cherry-pick these three cities based on the media attention they garner as examples of failed policies to reduce gun violence, the reality is that seven of the top 10 cities in terms of gun violence rates are in red states, not blue.

Not only are gun homicides higher in red-state cities, accidental gun deaths—as defined by the GVA—are also higher in these cities. In each year from 2016 to 2022, cities in red states had higher population-adjusted rates of accidental gun deaths than cities in blue states. In 2022, for example, cities in red states experienced 27 percent more accidental shootings, on average, than cities in blue states. These data suggest that the difference between these cities is not just a crime problem; it’s a gun problem.

“In each year from 2016 to 2022, cities in red states had higher population-adjusted rates of accidental gun deaths than cities in blue states.”

Gun violence went up faster in red-state cities from 2018 to 2021

Americans are right when they say gun violence is a “very big” problem in the country today.^{[17](#)} After more than a decade of relatively low rates of gun deaths in the United States from 2000 to 2018,^{[18](#)} there has been an alarming surge in gun violence over the past couple years. From 2019 to 2021, the United States experienced the largest two-year increase in homicides ever recorded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—and it was almost entirely driven by gun homicides.^{[19](#)} This statistic is alarming and forces gun violence to the center of every public safety conversation. How policymakers have responded to this hard truth is telling. States such as Oregon, New Jersey, and 19 others—of which 15 were blue states—plus Washington D.C., passed a combined 91 gun safety bills in 2022 alone.^{[20](#)} Notably, the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence’s annual state scorecard rankings show states with the strongest gun laws consistently have the lowest rates of gun violence.^{[21](#)}

Despite this strong association, conservative politicians continue to push the narrative that gun violence is getting worse in cities in blue states. However, the data do not support this claim. In the 300 most populous U.S. cities, from 2018 to the peak of gun violence in 2021, red-state cities, on average, saw their rates of gun homicides increase by 27 percent more than in blue-state cities.

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Gun violence is decreasing faster in blue-state cities

While still higher than pre-2019 levels, preliminary data suggest that 2023 will show the largest single-year decline in murders in U.S. history.^{[22](#)} As 81 percent of all homicides in the United States are committed by firearm, this signals a similarly large drop in gun homicides this year.^{[23](#)} However, this drop in gun homicides is not happening uniformly across U.S. cities. Among the 300 most populous U.S. cities, cities in blue states have seen a 14.9 percent decrease in year-to-date gun homicides after adjusting for population. In red-state cities, the drop is only 3.7 percent. Furthermore, the most significant declines in year-to-date gun homicide rates are also occurring in blue-state cities. Among the 100 most populous U.S. cities, seven of the top 10 cities experiencing the largest year-to-date drop in gun homicide rates, compared with 2022 rates, are in blue states.

Again, these data reject the assertion that blue cities in blue states are the epicenter of rising gun violence in America. Not only have blue-state cities been historically much safer from gun homicides on average, but the historic single-year decline in gun violence in 2023 is primarily occurring in cities in blue states.

Cities everywhere are fighting an uphill battle to stop gun violence

Drawing conclusions about national gun violence trends based on comparisons of city-level control is unhelpful and misleading. Blue cities²⁴ are demographically and socioeconomically different from red cities. Original analysis on estimates from the 2021 American Community Survey finds that, on average, blue cities are statistically different from red cities in terms of commonly used socioeconomic indicators: population size, poverty rate, income inequality, and racial diversity. This means that comparing all blue cities with all red cities does not allow for meaningful conclusions about gun violence trends because it is not an apples-to-apples comparison. On the other hand, when comparing blue cities in blue states with blue cities in red states, there are no statistically significant differences in these same indicators, which provides a better comparison. Likewise, red cities in red states and red cities in blue states are only statistically different from each other in terms of income inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient—which measures the distribution of wealth shares across income levels in a society. As such, making a comparison between cities of the same party affiliation but different state party affiliations provides a clearer picture of the possible association with gun violence trends.

Using this as the basis for deeper analysis, the trend does not change; cities in blue states are safer than their peers in red states, regardless of the affiliation of the mayor. Using mayoral party affiliation as a proxy for political association, analysis of the 100 most populous cities in the United States reveals that blue cities in blue states are safer than blue cities in red states, and, similarly, red cities in blue states are safer than red cities in red states.

This evidence further suggests that while it may be politically expedient to blame mayors and elected city officials for the rising gun violence in their cities, there are larger, more systemic factors contributing to these national trends. Furthermore, while mayors and local leaders have tools to address the unique, hyperlocal issues of their cities and stop cycles of interpersonal violence, they are often hamstrung by state legislatures, preventing them from directly stopping or regulating the sale or possession of guns in their cities through state-level preemption laws.

Preemption laws hinder efforts to address gun violence

Instead of passing stronger gun laws in response to the recent surge in gun violence, 22 states introduced firearm-related preemptive legislation from July 2, 2020, to November 1, 2021.²⁵ Preemption laws are widely used by state governments to remove regulatory powers from lower-level governments, such as cities, counties, and other municipalities,²⁶ and in some cases can even threaten officials with prohibitive fees, legal action, or removal from office.²⁷ Moreover, conservative legislatures have pursued codifying additional preemption statutes in direct response to actions taken by city officials.²⁸ As it relates to firearms, preemption laws take authority away from local elected leaders and police chiefs to pass and implement laws that regulate the possession, transfer, sale, ownership, and transportation of firearms, among other regulatory policies. This has been a particular issue for local officials seeking to confront gun violence in their communities. Some 45 states—both red and blue—have preemption laws on the books that

explicitly bar local governments from passing firearm-related ordinances in some form.²⁹ Only Hawaii, New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Jersey do not explicitly preempt firearm regulations.³⁰ Notably, these states had five of the six lowest gun death rates in 2022.³¹

The consequences of these laws are devastating. Preemption statutes can threaten public safety by ignoring local variations, hindering enforcement agencies, and denying innovation in gun violence prevention strategies.³² In the 42 states with broad preemption laws, the export rate of crime guns per 100,000 residents in 2018 was more than four times that of states that allow the local regulation of firearms.³³ Moreover, preemption laws leave local officials and communities vulnerable. For example, state supreme courts ruled that colleges in Colorado, Utah, and Oregon could not set gun policies and therefore had no authority to restrict the carrying of guns on their campuses.³⁴

As a result, city officials desperate to protect their city's residents are attempting to stop gun violence without the means to regulate it. One such battle is playing out now in the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. In April 2023, the Philadelphia City Council passed a resolution calling on the Pennsylvania General Assembly to suspend preemption on gun laws³⁵ so it could better address gun violence at the local level. "We've passed commonsense gun laws, but we've been held hostage [by state law]," said Philadelphia Councilmember Curtis Jones Jr. about the resolution.³⁶ On September 13, 2023, city attorneys made oral arguments in front of the state Supreme Court, arguing that the preemption of local gun laws interferes with Philadelphia's ability to protect its residents, constituting a "state-created danger."³⁷ As of the publication of this report, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court has not rendered a ruling, but the state has rejected two previous attempts to assert city-level self-regulation.³⁸

Out-of-state gun trafficking contributes to violence in states with strong gun laws

Not only are cities vulnerable to policies of their state leaders, but when it comes to curbing gun violence, cities are also fighting an uphill battle against the decisions of neighboring states. Even when states pass strong gun laws, such as requiring background checks on all gun sales, guns used in crimes often come from outside a state's borders.³⁹ In New York City, for example, 93 percent of crime guns recovered from 2017 to 2021 could be traced to a licensed dealer in another state.⁴⁰

Chicago provides another stark example of the challenges city leaders face in preventing gun violence. Despite Illinois having an "A-" rating from the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence's annual state scorecard rankings since 2019, Chicago is surrounded by states with some of the weakest gun laws.⁴¹ As a result, Chicago is under constant stress from guns flowing into the city.⁴² Case in point: Westforth Sports Inc., located just 10 miles from Illinois' border, has been tied to 850 crime guns recovered in Chicago from 2013 to 2016, making it the "third-largest federally licensed source of crime guns in the Chicago area."⁴³ While city officials can celebrate

the recent closure of the “No. 1 supplier of out-of-state crime guns,” Westforth Sports is only one example of a much more systemic problem: gun trafficking from states with weak gun laws to states with stronger gun laws.

Before casting aspersions on elected city leaders regarding gun violence in their cities, it is important to remember that city officials can work only with the tools they are given. By taking away their ability to pass local gun laws, city officials are forced to fight gun violence with one hand tied behind their backs.

Conclusion

When the FBI releases the 2022 NIBRS data this fall, the political playbook will likely look all too familiar, with conservative lawmakers and pundits waging another misinformation campaign that prioritizes stoking fear over promoting gun safety. They will most certainly cherry-pick examples where crime and gun violence are going up to convince the public blue cities in blue states are dangerous. However, the data reject this false and divisive narrative on which Republicans have spent millions. This political fracture means a growing divide when it comes to gun laws and public safety. If policymakers in this country are serious about ending the gun violence epidemic, they should be promoting stronger gun laws, not fear.

Methodology

The goal of this report is to analyze gun violence trends in U.S. cities based on affiliation with the major political parties at the state and local levels to understand what, if any, association exists. This project was motivated, in part, by frequent and coordinated efforts by conservative lawmakers and pundits to frame violent crime, specifically gun violence, as an issue in “Democrat-controlled” cities. While a more robust research design and the exploitation of a natural experiment would be necessary to provide definitive insights into which policies are associated with higher or lower levels of gun violence, through this analysis, the author can still test the hypothesis: Do Democrat-controlled cities have higher rates of gun violence than non-Democratic-controlled cities.

Available datasets

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s WONDER dataset is considered widely to be the most accurate estimate of firearm-related deaths nationally. However, the smallest unit of aggregation reported in the WONDER dataset is at the county level and therefore does not provide the opportunity to accurately compare across cities. The FBI’s Uniform Crime Reporting Program’s National Incident-Based Reporting System, which is the standard for law enforcement crime data reporting in the United States, reports crime statistics at the agency level and therefore could be leveraged for a cross-sectional study of U.S. cities. However, due to the recent transition to NIBRS, one-third of law enforcement agencies will have missing or incomplete data in this year’s data release. Further, while some U.S. cities’ police departments, such as New York,

Chicago, and New Orleans, maintain public data portals that report incident-level data on gun violence, this practice is not universal, nor is the level of granularity included in homicide data reported by city police departments, which would allow one to disaggregate firearm-related homicides from others. Presently, the Gun Violence Archive is the only publicly available dataset that reports year-to-date incident-level gun violence data assigned to a city-level geography.

Creating the dataset

To analyze the gun violence rates of the 300 most populous U.S. cities, the author used the World Population Review's list of the 300 most populous cities,^{[44](#)} as a reference to generate the list of cities that would be included in this analysis. Using that list, the author matched each city via the state and place application programming interface (API) codes to their estimated population using the 2021 American Community Survey's one-year estimates.^{[45](#)}

For incident-level data on gun violence in the cities included in this analysis, the author used data from the GVA.^{[46](#)} Using an API with the GVA, the author scraped all reported incidents between January 1, 2015, and August 31, 2023, then filtered the data down to only incidents attributed to the cities included for this analysis. To validate the accuracy of this dataset, the author ran multiple checks to search for any missing cities that could have been omitted due to naming conventions and, where necessary, manually mapped city names from the GVA's dataset to match the author's list for analysis.

Furthermore, each incident included in the dataset is tagged with various attributes that the GVA uses to classify incident characteristics. To analyze only incidents that could be classified as homicides, the author further filtered the dataset to include only incidents that contained the tag "Shot – Dead" and did not contain "Suicide" or "Accidental Shooting." The author created a separate dataset to observe only accidental shootings following a similar methodology of filtering to only incidents that included the tag "Accidental Shooting."

To match the data with state party affiliation, the author assigned each city to either Republican or Democrat based on the state electoral outcomes of the 2020 presidential election, using the MIT Election Data and Science Lab as a reference for voting results.^{[47](#)} For party affiliation at the city level, the author used mayoral party affiliation as a proxy. A subset of cities were assigned party affiliation based on Ballotpedia's reporting on mayoral party affiliation of the largest 100 cities.^{[48](#)}

Analysis

After creating the database, the author used estimates from the 2021 American Community Survey to conduct a balance table test on observable variables—specifically, population size of the city, poverty rate, racial diversity (using the share of population that is white as a proxy), and income inequality (measured by the Gini coefficient). These variables were selected for the balance table test based on 1) intuition that socioeconomic factors contribute to rising and falling rates of gun violence and 2) that these variables reflect socioeconomic dynamics within the city and control against regional effects. Due to the data limitation of only having political affiliation at

the city level assigned to the 100 largest cities, the author used this subset to conduct the balance table test. Results and discussion are included in the report, under “Cities everywhere are fighting an uphill battle to stop gun violence.”

Calculating population-adjusted gun violence rates

For each city in the dataset, the author calculated gun violence rates per 100,000 residents using the following formula:

$$\text{Death}_{ti} / \text{Population}_{ti} * 100,000$$

Where “Deaths” is the total number of victims killed according to GVA incident data, “t” represents a vector of years in the sample, “i” represents a vector of cities included in the sample, and “Population” is the 2021 estimated total population from the 2021 American Community Survey.

Monthly rolling average

As is widely studied,⁴⁹ there is an often observed seasonality in gun violence rates, where gun violence is typically higher in the summer months and lower in the winter months. Therefore, to meaningfully interpret 2023 gun violence data and compare it to previous years, the author calculated a 12-month rolling average of population-adjusted gun violence rates for each city—for statistical purposes—absorb that seasonal variation in gun violence rates.

Endnotes

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