

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS
OF HOMICIDE TRENDS IN
61 MAJOR U.S. CITIES,
2015-2021

LDF

**THURGOOD
MARSHALL
INSTITUTE**

Kesha Moore PhD, Ryan Tom, Jackie O'Neil

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While homicides in most U.S. cities increased in 2020, there is substantial variation in the size and direction of changes in homicides. Our findings demonstrate that neither bail reform practices nor changes in prosecutor policies can adequately explain the increase in homicides. Economic insecurity and income equality, both of which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, most clearly account for the different trajectories cities experienced following the homicide spike in 2020.

Our research analyzes homicide trends in 61 major U.S. cities. We drew our sample from the 100 most populous cities based on 2019 American Community Survey data. We collected homicide data from reports published by the local or state police department and supplemented when needed with data from Major Cities Chiefs Association (MCAA) reports. From the initial sample of 100 cities, we then selected cities with continuous annual reporting of homicide data from 2015 to 2021. This process resulted in a final sample of 61 U.S. cities for our analysis.

The 61 major cities were then examined for evidence of cash bail reform or the changes in prosecutor policies. Cities that took proactive steps to limit cash bail and reform the pretrial system were included in the “Bail Reform” sample. Jurisdictions that had elected a progressive prosecutor into office during the analysis’ timeframe were included in the “Progressive Prosecutor,” sample. To operationalize the term “Progressive Prosecutor,” we reviewed District Attorney candidate profiles for any of the following criteria: discussion of harms with the current criminal justice system; a campaign platform calling for decarceration; refusing to prosecute certain types of crimes as a form of harm reduction (e.g. sex work or marijuana possession), enhancing conviction integrity units, and/or refusing to prosecute cases associated with law enforcement officers that have a history of dishonesty or corruption. Prosecutors articulating any of these positions, were identified as “Progressive Prosecutors,” for the purposes of this analysis.

Addressing the root causes of violence by promoting housing and economic stability seem to be the most promising avenues for reducing the number of homicides, particularly within cities with higher levels of income inequality.

Descriptive Analysis of Homicide Trends in 61 Major U.S. Cities, 2015-2021

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National Crime Pattern

Crime, including violent crime, has had a relatively consistent and steady decline over the past 30 years. There has been a sharp and continuous decrease in crime since 1990's.¹ Social scientists do not have a clear explanation for what caused the decline in crime because factors influencing crime include a number of variables, and it is unlikely to have one singular cause. Yet, research suggests it cannot be attributed to increases in incarceration. A 2015 report found that ,since 2000, increased incarceration has had an almost zero effect on crime.² CA, MI, NJ, NY, TX have successfully reduced imprisonment while crime rates continue to fall.³

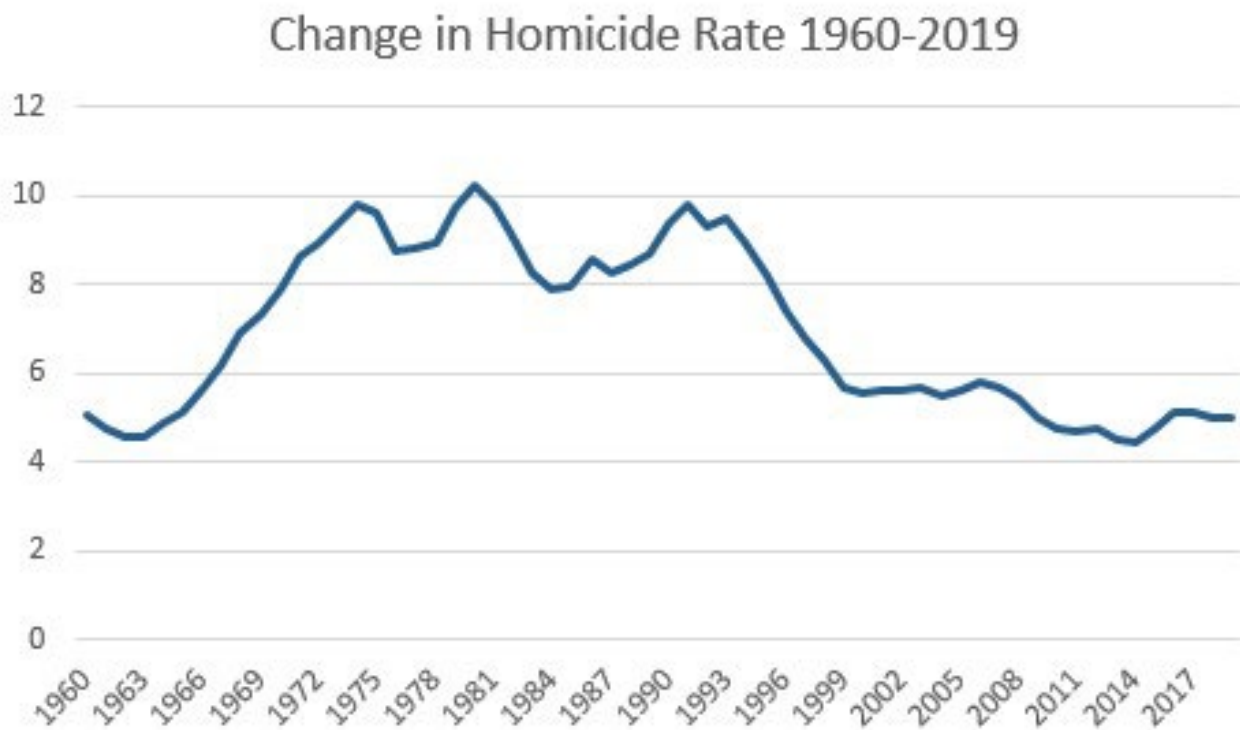


Figure 1. National homicide rate 1960-2018 based on research from [Dr. Rohman](#)⁴

The COVID-19 pandemic correlates with a spike in homicides across the nation, but the magnitude and consistency of that spike varies based on the local context¹. Our analysis reveals a spike in homicides in 2020 in all but one (Virginia Beach) of the cities in our sample. In this

¹ See Table 1 for a complete list of cities in the sample.

analysis we attempt to describe the magnitude of the 2020 spike in homicides and explain what it means for the future.

Is the 2020 spike in homicides a prediction of continual increases in homicides? Is the 2020 homicide spike followed by a more moderate increase that is consistent with variations in homicides during the pre-pandemic years? Is the 2020 spike in homicides followed by a decrease in homicides that approach the numbers of homicides during the pre-pandemic years? All three patterns are present in the data. Economic insecurity and income equality, both of which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, most clearly account for the different trajectories cities experience following the homicide spike in 2020.

Crime Wave and Criminal Justice Reform

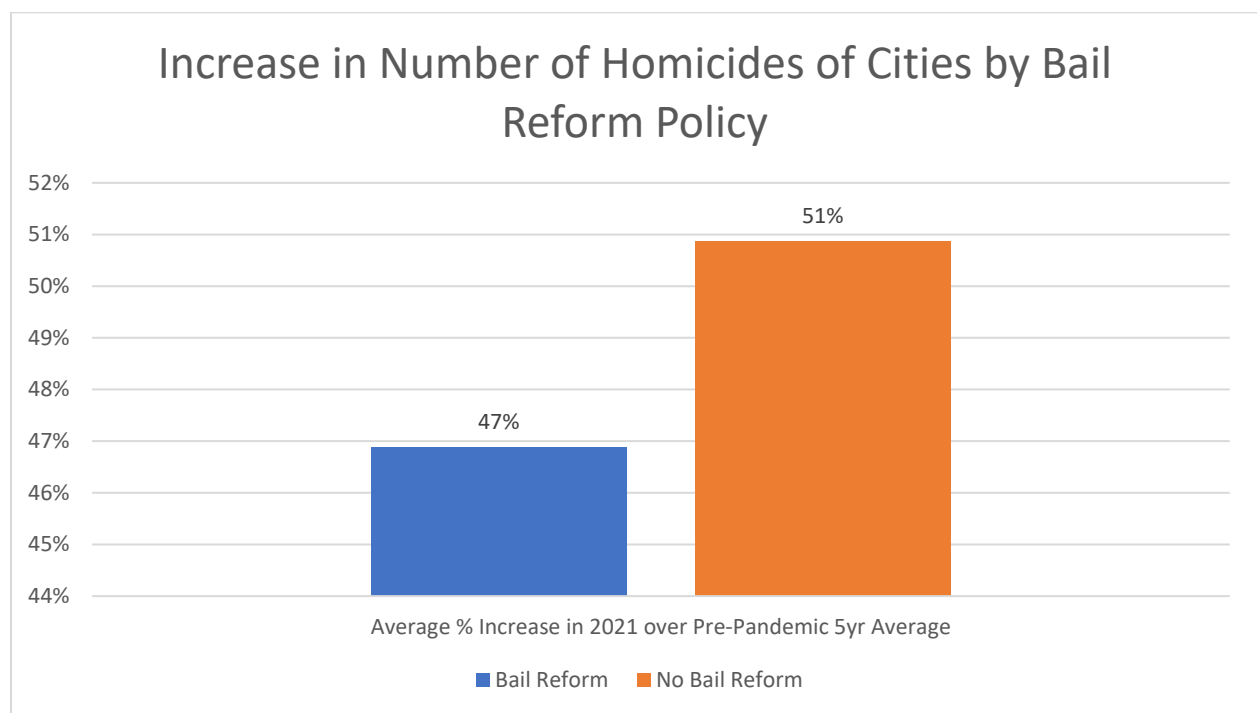


Figure 2. Changes in number of homicides for 5-year average (2015-2019) based on whether cities have experienced bail reform within the last 5 years; N=61

Whether a city requires cash bail or eliminates cash bail does not explain the variation in a city's 2020 homicide spike. In 2021, cities with bail reform experienced a 47% increase in homicides compared to their 5-year pre-pandemic average, and cities without bail reform experienced a 51% increase. Thus, localities with bail reform are slightly less likely to have an increase in homicide compared to pre-pandemic five-year averages. Bail reform itself does not seem to be a strong predictor or explanatory variable in understanding which cities are experiencing an

increase in homicides and which are not. Studies that compare crime rates before and after implementing bail reform within a locality have shown no impact on crime rates or an increase in public safety after implementing bail reform.⁵ The money bail system is an unjust, unsafe, and expensive system. Research shows that we can successfully decarcerate our jails without compromising public safety.

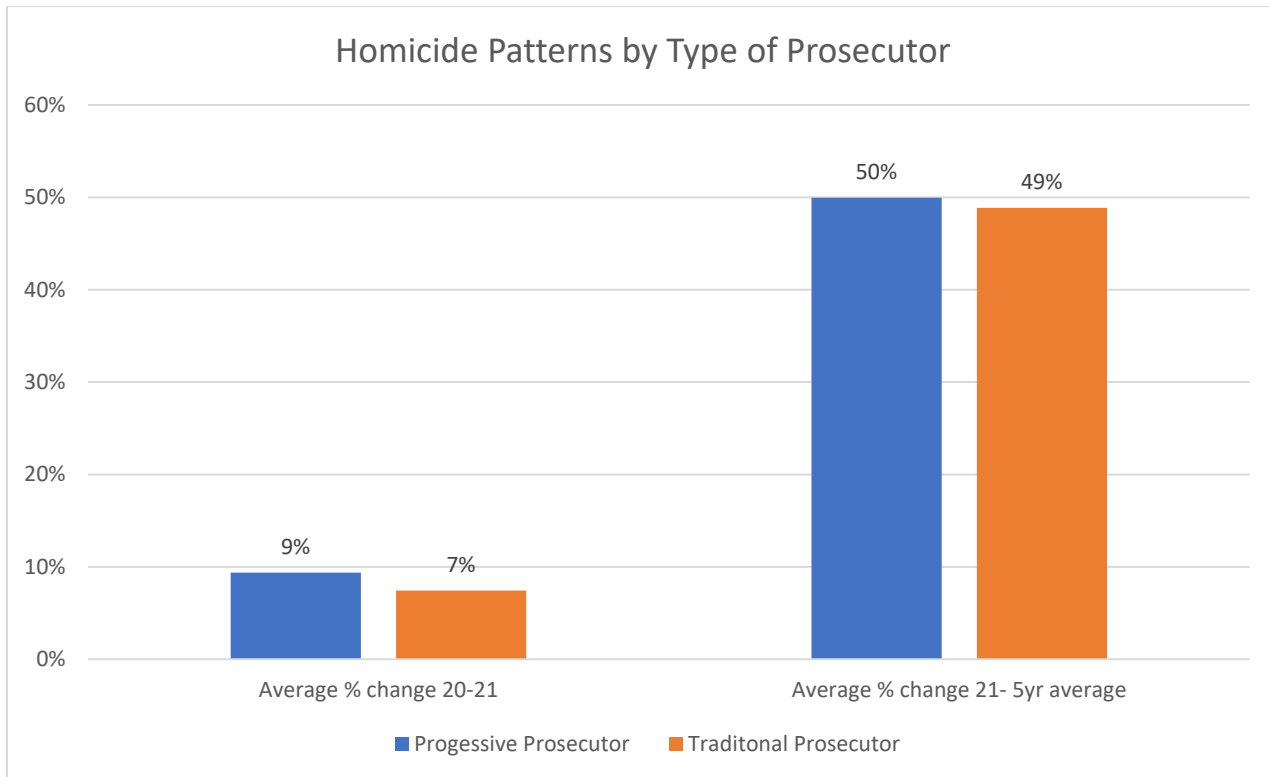


Figure 2. Changes in crime rate based on whether cities have progressive prosecutors, N=61

The impact of prosecutorial policies seems to have little to no impact on the increase in homicides. Cities with a prosecutor described as “progressive” experienced a 9% growth in homicides in 2021 compared to a 7% increase from those with more traditional prosecutors (see Table 1 in the Appendix for criteria of “progressive prosecutor”). These 2021 homicide rates reflect a 50% increase over the pre-pandemic 5-year average, compared to a 49% increase for traditional prosecutors. The data documents cities experiencing small increases in homicide, large increases in homicide, and decreases in homicide have progressive prosecutors and traditional prosecutors in each of those categories.

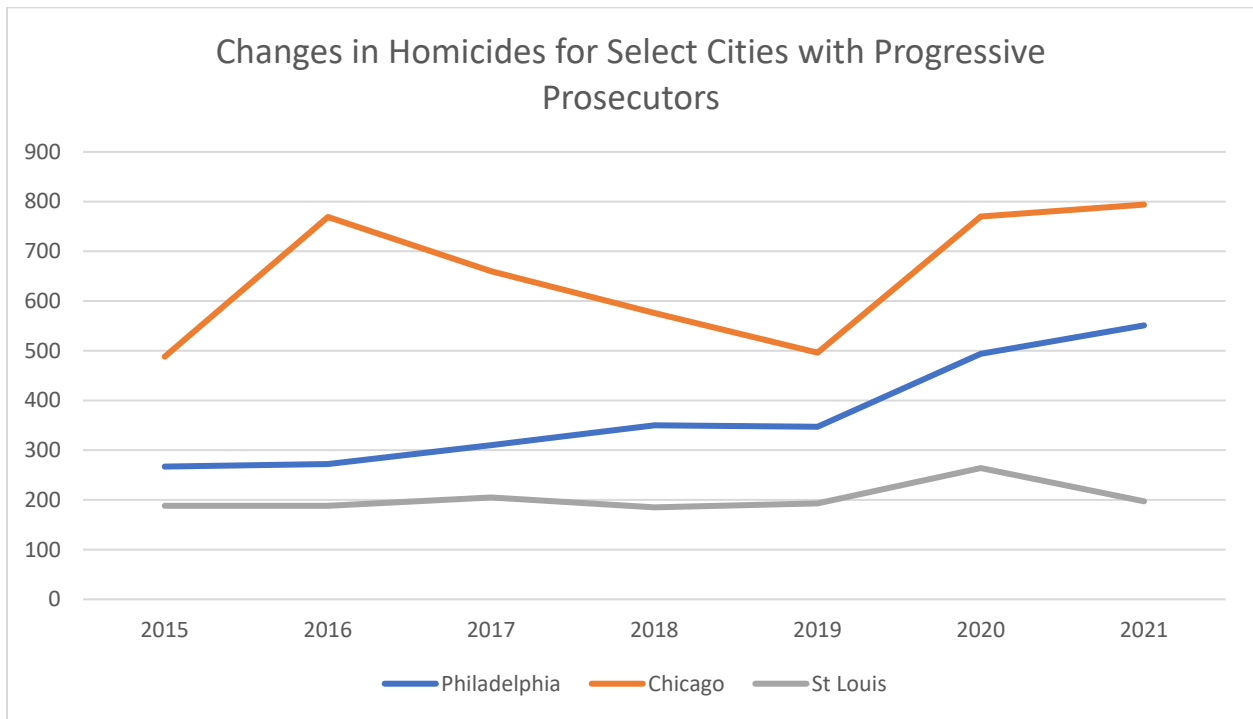


Figure 3. Homicide Pattern of Three Cities with Progressive Prosecutors, N=3.

Figure 4 provides a more in-depth examination on homicide trends in cities with progressive prosecutors. Cities with progressive prosecutors had homicide trends consistent with the three 2021 patterns we have described in this analysis: cities with small increases, large increases, and decreases in homicide. Note that there is a progressive prosecutive in each category of city: cities with small increases in 2021 (Chicago), cities with above average increases in 2021 (Philadelphia), cities with decreasing homicides in 2021 (St. Louis). Because all three cities have progressive prosecutors but varying homicide trends, it is incorrect to claim that the mere presence of progressive prosecutors results in increased homicides.

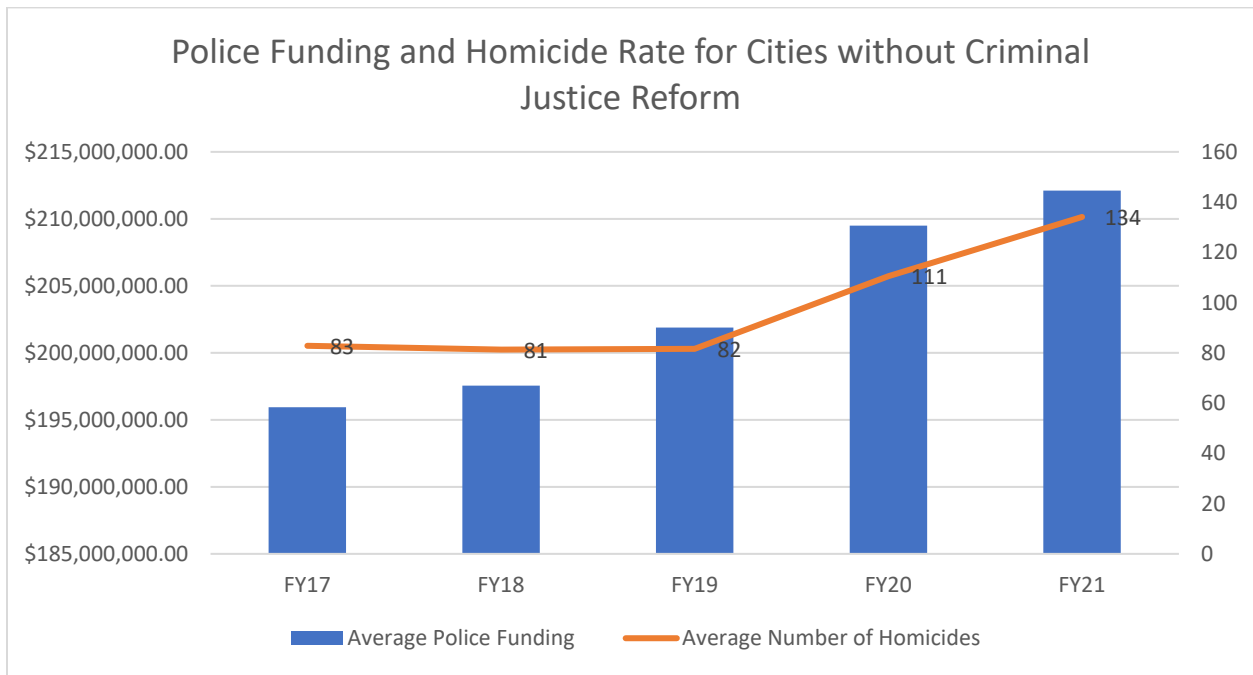


Figure 5. Number of Homicides and Police Funding for 10 Cities with Large Increases in 2021 Homicides without bail reform or progressive prosecutors. N=10

More law enforcement officers are not the answer to the 2020 spike in homicides. There are several cities experiencing substantial increases in homicide for 2020 and 2021 that continue to require cash bail and continue traditional prosecution policies. Figure 5 shows the pandemic increase in homicides for these cities despite rapid increases in police funding. According to the [National Police Funding Database](#), Little Rock, AR had more than twice the number of police per 1,000 people as other similarly sized cities and Richmond, VA had almost three times the number of police officers.⁶ Despite such an overrepresentation of police, Richmond’s 2021 homicides were 60% above the five-year pre-pandemic average and Little Rock’s homicide increase was 73% above the five-year pre-pandemic average. The 10 cities reflected in Figure 5 have traditional prosecutors, no bail reform, and spend an average of \$2.1 million annually in policing. Yet, their average number of homicides increased from 82 into 2019 to 111 in 2020, (representing a 35% increase) and to 134 in 2021 (representing an additional 21% increase).

Crime Wave and Pandemic Induced Instability

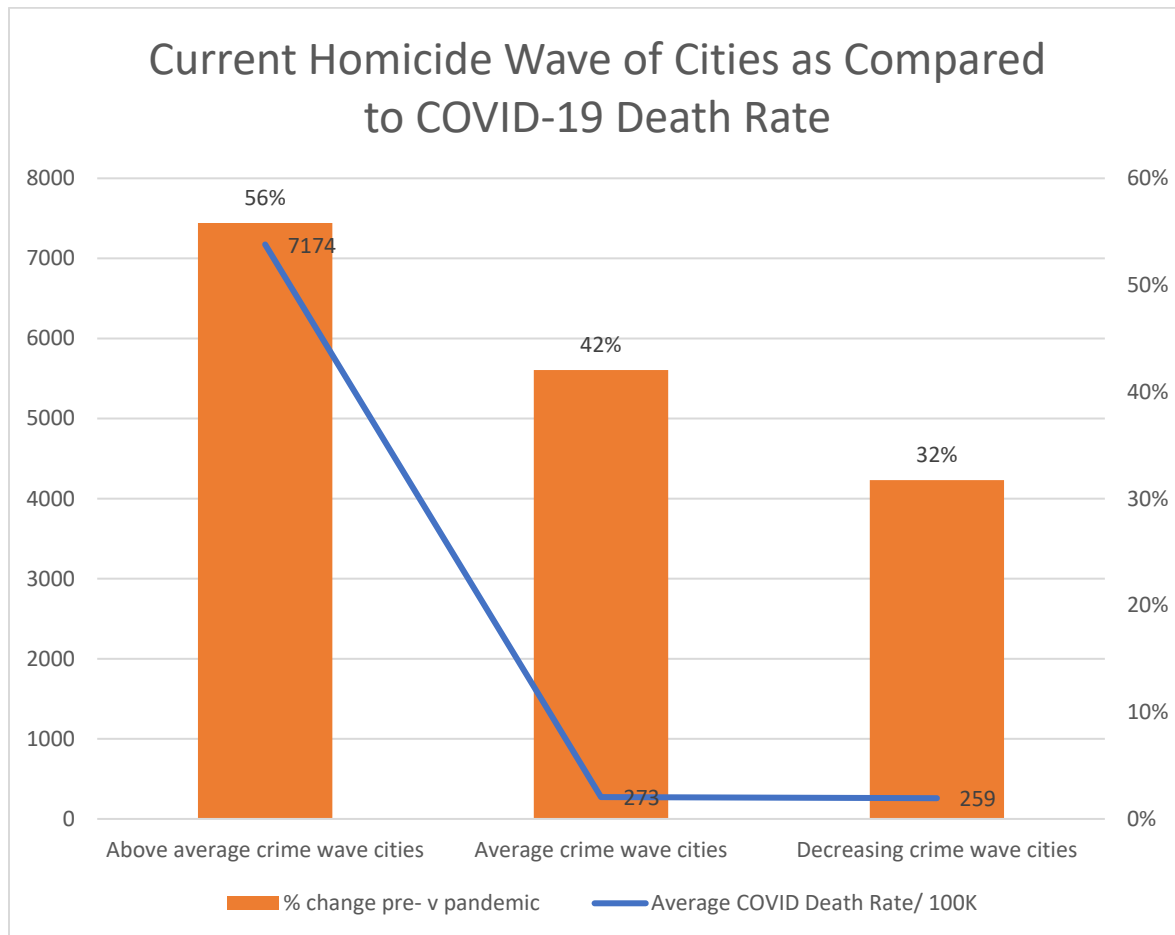


Figure 6. Changes in the two-year average number of homicides before the pandemic (2018 and 2019) and the two year-average number of homicides after the start of the pandemic (2020 and 2021) compared to the date death rate from COVID-19 (March 2020-December 2021).

Although the presence or absence of criminal justice reform does not explain the variation in a city's rate in the spike in homicides, social and economic destabilization measures associated with the pandemic do. In a study investigating the impact of eviction on crime rates in Philadelphia, researchers found that, while controlling for poverty, neighborhoods with higher eviction rates also had higher rates of homicide, robbery, and burglary.⁷ Figure 6 shows the strong relationship between pandemic-induced destabilization and homicide rates. Using CDC data from March 2020 through December 2021, cities with the highest year-to-date death rate from COVID-19 are also experiencing the highest increases in homicide during the pandemic. Particularly for Black and Latinx communities that were disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the highest death rates were not only among the elderly but rather

working-age populations.⁸ This could be attributed to the high numbers of Black and Latinx workers in service jobs deemed “essential” and forced to work during the height of the pandemic.⁹ The death of these individuals is not only an emotional loss but often leaves families more financially and socially unstable from the loss of a worker and primary caretaker.

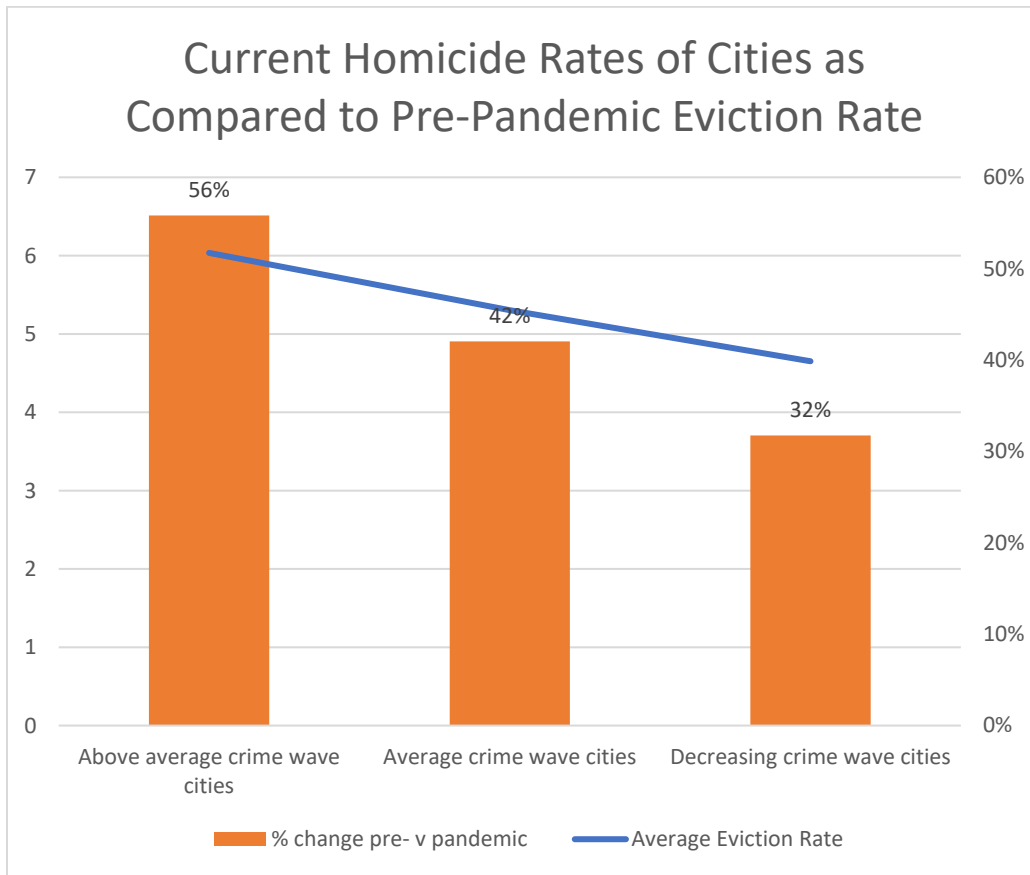


Figure 7. Changes in the two-year average number of homicides before the pandemic (2018 and 2019) and the two year-average number of homicides after the start of the pandemic (2020 and 2021) compared to 2019 eviction rates.

Housing instability is another form of economic and social instability aggravated by the pandemic. Although there were various federal, state, and local moratoria on evictions during the beginning of the pandemic, many households were still evicted, and this number continues to increase. According to data from Princeton’s Eviction Lab, cities with the highest increases in homicide during the pandemic also have the highest average eviction rate preceding the pandemic.¹⁰ Likewise, cities with the lowest increases in homicides during the pandemic have the lowest average eviction rate before the pandemic.

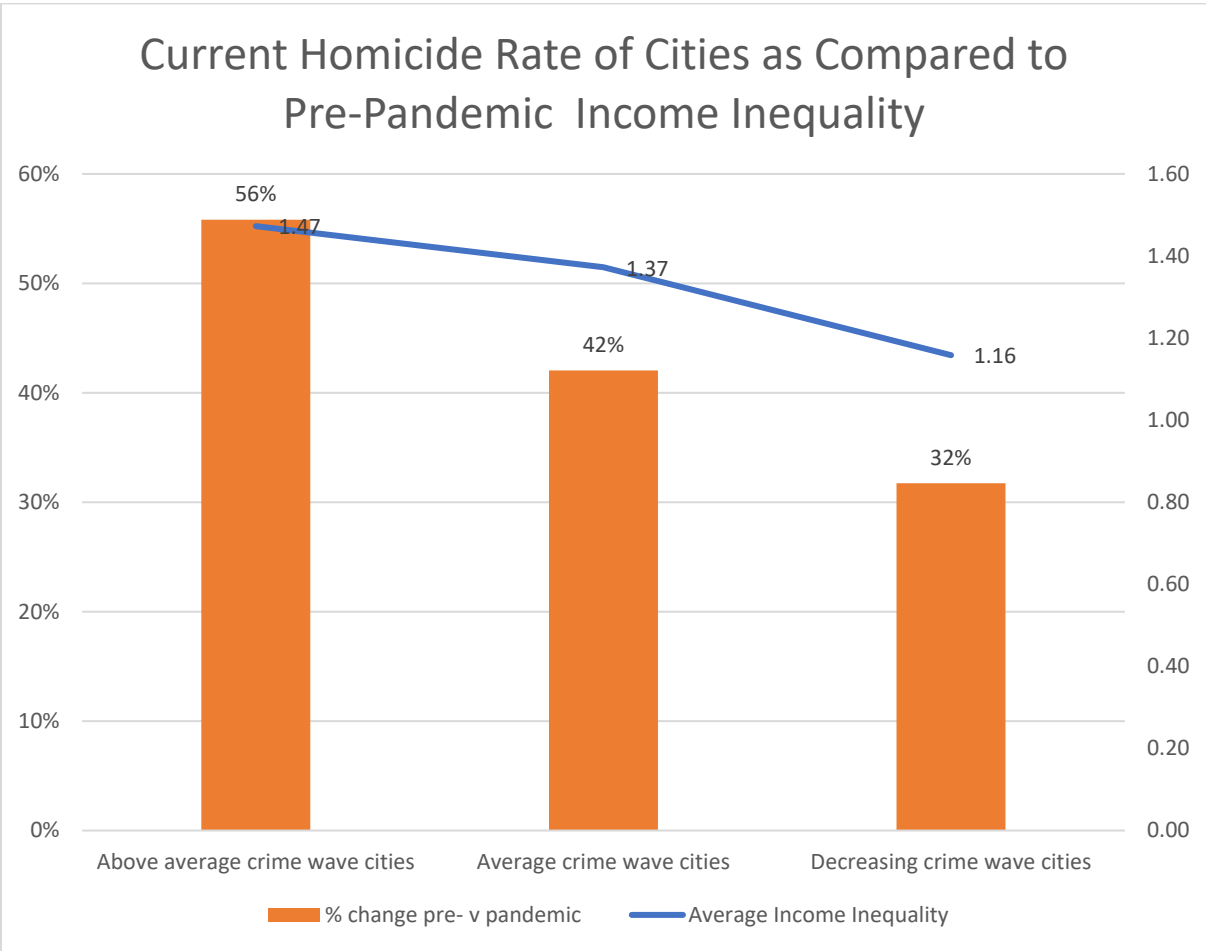


Figure 8. Changes in the two-year average number of homicides before the pandemic (2018 and 2019) and the two year-average number of homicides after the start of the pandemic (2020 and 2021) compared to the 2019 average income inequality of each group of cities.

Income inequality is another variable that helps us understand the divergent trajectories of cities in the most recent homicide spike. Income inequality is a robust predictor of crime above and beyond the influence of poverty.¹¹ Decreasing inequality by increasing government spending by \$10,000/poor person is associated with a 16% decrease in the homicide rate.¹² Figure 8 also shows a relationship between current homicide patterns and the degree of income inequality in specific localities. Cities with the highest increase in homicides during the pandemic also had the highest income inequality in 2019. Using the interquartile range divided by the median income as our measure of income inequality within cities, we see those cities with the highest increase in homicides during the pandemic had a degree of income inequality that is 1.47 times the median income. Likewise, cities with the lowest homicide spike have the lowest levels of income inequality- 1.16 times with median income.

Appendix. U.S. Cities in the Research Sample

Cities	Pandemic Homicide Average (2020 & 2021)	Pre-Pandemic Homicide Average (2019 & 2018)	Presence of Bail Reform	Presence of Progressive Prosecutor
Homicide Increases Above National Average				
Austin	63.5	33.5		X
Rochester	66	30	X	
Portland	72.5	31		X
Albuquerque	95	91	X	
Las Vegas	124.5	103		
Richmond	78	55.5		
Hartford	29.5	21.5	X	
Winston-Salem	33.5	25		
Tucson	74.5	50		X
Shreveport	74.5	43.5		
New Haven	22.5	11	X	
Louisville	165.5	81		
Oakland	112.5	71	X	
Virginia Beach	11	15		
Houston	442	284.5		
Toledo	66.5	38.5		
San Francisco	52	43.5	X	X

Little Rock	59.5	43		
Indianapolis	232	157.5		
Pittsburgh	49.5	45		
Minneapolis	90	41	X	
Washington	212	163	X	
Los Angeles	379	258.5	X	X
Aurora	41.5	23.5		
New Orleans	206.5	133		X
Philadelphia	522.5	348.5	X	X
Flint	64	38.5		
Lexington	35.5	26.5		
Homicide Increase Consistent with National Average				
Savannah	32	26		X
New York	478	307	X	X
Milwaukee	208	113		
Newark	57	66	X	
Chicago	782	536	X	X
Fort Wayne	38.5	33		
Fort Worth	116.5	64.5		
Denver	95.5	65		
Baltimore	336.5	329	X	X
Atlanta	157.5	94		X

Charleston	16	9		
Long Beach	37	32	X	
Salt Lake City	18	12.5		
Cities with Decreasing Homicides				
Memphis	285	191		
Cincinnati	92.5	67		
Cleveland	173.5	121.5		
Nashville	109.5	83.5		
Detroit	316.5	268		X
Albany, GA	16.5	13.5		
Syracuse	30	22	X	
Buffalo	62.5	50.5	X	
Wichita	56.5	44		
San Antonio	122.5	106		X
Kansas City	168	141.5		
Dallas	237	185		X
Omaha	34.5	22.5		
Charlotte	108	82.5		
Arlington	21	12		
San Jose	46.5	30	X	
Seattle	46.5	34		X
Jacksonville	146	137.5		

St Louis	230.5	189	X	X
Boston	48	46.5	X	X

Endnotes:

¹ *What Caused the Crime Decline?* Lauren-Brooke Eisen, Oliver Roeder, and Julia Bowling. The Brennan Center for Justice. (2/12/15). Link: <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/what-caused-crime-decline>

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *The Great American Mystery Story: Why Did Crime Decline?* John Roman, PhD, External Processing. (2/20/21). Link: https://johnkroman.substack.com/p/the-great-american-mystery-story?utm_source=url&s=r

⁵ *Releasing people pretrial doesn't harm public safety*, Tiana Herring. Prison Policy Initiative. (11/17/20). Link: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2020/11/17/pretrial-releases/>

⁶ National Police Funding Database, Little Rock, AK and Richmond, VA Pages. Links: <https://policefundingdatabase.org/explore-the-database/locations/arkansas/little-rock/> and <https://policefundingdatabase.org/explore-the-database/locations/virginia/richmond/>

⁷ *Evidence from Philadelphia shows that eviction destabilizes communities and may lead to increased crime rates in US cities*. Daniel Semenza. LSE Phelan US Centre. Link: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2021/09/10/evidence-from-philadelphia-shows-that- eviction-destabilizes-communities-and-may-lead-to-increased-crime-rates-in-us-cities/>

⁸ *Race gaps in COVID-19 deaths are even bigger than they appear*. Tiffany N. Ford, Sarah Reber, and Richard V. Reeves. The Brookings Institute. (06/16/2020). Link: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/06/16/race-gaps-in-covid-19-deaths-are-even-bigger-than-they-appear/>; *Working-age Hispanics at highest risk of dying from COVID-19, by far*. Leigh Hopper. USC News. (4/5/2021). Link: <https://news.usc.edu/184155/working-age-foreign-born-hispanic-covid-19-deaths-usc-study/>

⁹ *Structural Racism is a Public Health Crisis: Addressing Racial Disparities in COVID-19*. Kesha Moore. The Thurgood Marshall Institute. (06/2020). Link: <https://tminstituteldf.org/addressing-racial-disparities-in-covid-19/>

¹⁰ *Ibid.* at 7

¹¹ *Intra- and inter-neighborhood income inequality and crime*, Thomas D. Stucky, Seth B. Payton & John R. Ottensmann. *Journal of Crime and Justice*, 39:3, 345-362. DOI: 10.1080/0735648X.2015.1004551

¹² *Spending on social and public health services and its association with homicide in the USA: an ecological study*. Sipsma HL, Canavan ME, Rogan E, et al. *BMJ Open*. 2017;7:e016379. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2017-016379