



The 2020 Homicide Spike— Beyond the COVID-19 Explanation

[Matt Dolan, J.D.](#)
March, 2021

Elected officials, journalists and some police chiefs have been offering possible explanations for the sudden and historic jump in homicides seen in cities across the country in 2020. Most of these explanations point to the increased mental and economic stress brought on by COVID-19 and its related government restrictions as substantially contributing to the spike in homicides. Undoubtedly, millions of American have experienced mental distress brought on by COVID-19 and its related government restrictions, and that may well have contributed to increases in domestic violence and other forms of criminality. **But, when it comes to homicides, do the facts actually support the claim that the 2020 homicide spike can be attributed to COVID-19?**

It is vital that we are willing go beyond COVID-19 and examine other possible factors. The stakes are too high for us to ignore these other factors that may prove to be more uncomfortable to discuss in favor of a narrative based on the pandemic that allows some elected officials and police leaders to avoid any responsibility. **A failure to honestly address the most likely causes of the 2020 spike in homicides may leave our cities, and our most vulnerable communities, to see another year like 2020.**

What Did the Spike Look Like?

While the FBI's official Uniform Crime Report (UCR) statistics are only available through 2019, the tremendous spike in serious violent crime, especially homicide, is clear based on the homicide data collected by various news outlets throughout the country—particularly in the largest U.S. cities. This allows us to estimate what the urban homicide trend was for 2020. And the numbers are disturbing.

Across our cities it appears that, compared to 2019, the homicide rate in U.S. cities increased by somewhere between 21% and 37%, depending on which cities were included in the analysis

made by the specific news source. These are incredibly large percentage increases as national homicide rates have *never* experienced one-year double-digit percentage increases since the federal agencies began tracking these statistics in the 1960s.ⁱ

We are all aware of the violent unrest witnessed this year in places like Minneapolis, Portland, Seattle, and St. Louis, but homicides have skyrocketed in most other cities across the nation as well. Detroit saw a 20% increase in homicides.ⁱⁱ Atlanta experienced a 46% increase in homicidesⁱⁱⁱ and Chicago experienced a 53% increase in homicides.^{iv} Beyond our largest cities, many of our mid-sized major cities experienced substantial increases as well. Compared to 2019, Kansas City experienced a 28% increase in homicides^v and Omaha had a 61% increase.^{vi}

Even smaller cities were impacted by this violent crime spike. Grand Rapids, Michigan, which experienced 17 homicides in 2019, saw a record 38 homicides in 2020, an increase of 124%.^{vii} Fort Wayne, Indiana had a 43% increase in homicides,^{viii} Springfield, Missouri increased by 64%, and homicides rose 186% in Spokane, Washington.^{ix}

Available data shows two common traits across the country. Ask yourself if these factors apply to your city or cities near you.

First, the alleged perpetrators of homicides in 2020 were **overwhelmingly repeat offenders with lengthy criminal records, including prior convictions for violent crimes. They were not enrolled in school and not lawfully employed before the pandemic hit.** They were dangerous repeat offenders who engaged in criminal activity long before COVID-19.

Second, **the neighborhoods, blocks, and addresses where these homicides occurred were not unpredictable, as they tended to be the same locations where violent crime has been high for years if not decades.**

So how exactly did the COVID-19 restrictions impact those who have been charged with perpetrating homicides in 2020? **Where are the cases of law-abiding citizens quickly turning homicidal in the numbers sufficient to explain the homicide spike of 2020?** In most cases, it seems clear that they did not lose a lawful job or experience school closings that impacted them. The restrictions could not have been *the cause* of their violent behavior because they were already violent, as their criminal records reveal. And the restrictions did not usually lead to violence spilling into low-crime areas but, instead, the same vulnerable communities that have been terrorized by crime for years only saw the rate of violence and victimization increase in the very same neighborhoods.

De-Policing and Criminal Justice Reform

Returning to the popular explanation of COVID-19 and its related government restrictions having to do with the increased stress and economic pressures, it becomes less and less plausible when it is subjected to logical scrutiny. And more plausible explanations emerge.

Based on the characteristics of the 2020 spike in homicides already discussed, an economic explanation would only make sense if law-abiding individuals quickly turned to a dramatic life of

crime involving homicide. Or, at the very least, that non-violent criminals quickly graduated to homicidal acts. Neither of these trends seem common across the country.

We should ask alternative questions in light of the aforementioned realities across our cities. **Were the cities served by prosecutors seeking to reform their systems of justice by way of shorter sentences for repeat offenders likely to see more deadly violence? Did the release of violent offenders so as to protect them from contracting COVID-19 lead to increased victimization in the communities to which they returned? Did elected officials demonstrate an aversion to proactive policing strategies in 2020 that allowed violent criminals to more freely engaged in predatory behavior in their communities? Is there any correlation between demands to defund the police, low officer morale and increases in homicides?**

Finding honest answers to these questions is crucial to minimize future bloodshed. And those answers may vary somewhat from city to city. But they are the questions that must be asked and addressed, rather than giving into the temptation of citing COVID-19 as the primary cause of the 2020 homicide spike in spite of evidence to the contrary.

In time, we will have more thorough analyses of the numbers—not just of homicides but the nonfatal shootings that also increased in so many cities. Your jurisdiction will have a clearer picture of the scope of victimization and the pre-existing criminal histories of the perpetrators. There are not, as of yet, comprehensive statistics showing how many violent offenders suddenly appeared on our city streets in 2020 due to criminal justice reform efforts and concerns of COVID-19 infection among our prison populations. It is also unclear to what extent a “no contact, no complaint” approach to day-to-day policing allowed them to operate more freely and victimize more of the people in their communities.

What we do know is that the simple explanation regularly offered, that COVID-19 and its related government restrictions drove otherwise non-violent citizens to engage in homicides, is without data to support it. Rather, the available data on the alleged perpetrators of these homicides—and common sense—point to causes that are much more closely related to the release of more violent offenders back into the streets coupled with de-policing in the neighborhoods where violent offenders operate.

Law enforcement leaders and elected officials are obliged to examine what happened in their cities in 2020 and what can be done to address the justified fears of those living in the neighborhoods most impacted by violent crime. We know that a failure to honestly address the most likely causes of the 2020 spike in homicides may leave our cities, and our most vulnerable communities, to see another year like 2020.

About the Author

Matt Dolan is a licensed attorney who specializes in training and advising public safety agencies in matters of legal liability, risk management and ethical leadership. His training focuses on helping agency leaders create ethically and legally sound policies and procedures as a proactive means of minimizing liability and maximizing agency effectiveness.

A member of a law enforcement family dating back three generations, he serves as both Director and Public Safety Instructor with Dolan Consulting Group.

His training courses include [Recruiting and Hiring for Law Enforcement](#), [Confronting the Toxic Officer](#), [Performance Evaluations for Public Safety](#), [Making Discipline Stick®](#), and [Supervisor Liability for Public Safety](#).

ⁱ Alas, Horus. "2020 a 'Perfect Storm' for Homicide Surge" U.S. News & World Report, February 4, 2021; Barrett, Devlin. "2020 Saw an Unprecedented Spike in Homicides from Big Cities to Small Towns." Washington Post, December 30, 2020; Corley, Cheryl. "Massive 1-year Rise in Homicide Rates Collided with the Pandemic in 2020." National Public Radio, January 6, 2021; Pagonis, Stephanie. "Crime Wave 2020: These Cities Smashed Homicide Records Amid Nationwide Crime Spike." Fox News, December 30, 2020.

ⁱⁱ Hunter, George. "Bloody New Year in Detroit: 6 shot, 3 killed." *The Detroit News*, January 1, 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ Torpy, William "Murder, mayhem, donuts, and a crazed year in public safety." *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 13, 2020.

^{iv} Charles, Sam. "After 3 years of progress, Chicago's murder tally skyrockets in 2020." *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 31, 2020.

^v Ricon, Angie. "Comparing Kansas City's homicide rate to the rest of the country." *Kansas City KCTV 5 News*, December 30, 2020.

^{vi} Conley, Alia. "Omaha saw a 61% spike in homicides in 2020 after the lows of the last two years." *Omaha World-Herald*, January 3, 2021.

^{vii} Hicks, Justin P. "Homicides increase in 2019 for Grand Rapids, Kent County." *Grand Rapids Press MLive*, January 13, 2020; WZZM Channel 13 News. "GRPD investigates 38th homicide of the year." *Grand Rapids WZZM Channel 13 News*, December 30, 2020.

^{viii} Williams, Taylor. "By the numbers: 2020 Allen County homicides." *Fort Wayne WANE Channel 15 News*, January 1, 2021.

^{ix} Quinlan, Maggie. "Spokane police record a 186% increase in homicides in 2020." *The Spokesman-Review*, January 3, 2021; Watson, Francis "Authorities say a rise of violent crime in Springfield during 2020 linked to firearms." *Springfield KY3 News*, December 30, 2020.