

Contrary to Media Myth, U.S. Urban Crime Rates Are Up

The FBI's flawed statistics hide the disturbing results of the defund-the-police movement since 2020.

By

Jeffrey H. Anderson Sept. 22, 2024 4:08 pm ET



The Philadelphia Police Crime Scene Unit places evidence markers at a crime scene in Philadelphia, May 29. Photo: Kyle Mazza/Zuma Press

Left-leaning commentators and advocates have insisted over the past year that crime rates are falling. ABC's David Muir asserted so while rebutting [Donald Trump](#) during the recent presidential debate. The nation's largest crime survey says otherwise: Crime rates haven't been falling, and urban crime is far worse than it was in the pre-George Floyd era.

The new findings were released this month by the National Crime Victimization Survey. Run by the Bureau of Justice Statistics and administered by the Census Bureau, the NCVS dates to the Nixon administration and is one of the largest federal surveys on any topic. It asks some 230,000 U.S. residents annually whether they've been the victims of crimes. It then asks about the nature of the crime, whether it was reported to the police, the demographics of the perpetrator and other particulars.

The NCVS report for 2023 finds no statistically significant evidence that violent crime or property crime is dropping in America. Excluding simple assault—the type of violent crime least likely to be charged as a felony—the violent crime rate in 2023 was 19% higher than in 2019, the last year before the defund-the-police movement swept the country.

But crime hasn't risen equally across the nation. America's recent crime spike has been concentrated in urban areas. These are the areas in which leftist prosecutors have gained the strongest footholds, where police have been the most heavily scrutinized, and where lax enforcement and prosecution have become common.

The results aren't pretty. According to the NCVS, the urban violent-crime rate increased 40% from 2019 to 2023. Excluding simple assault, the urban violent-crime rate rose 54% over that span. From 2022 to 2023, the urban violent-crime rate didn't change to a statistically significant degree, so these higher crime rates appear to be the new norm in America's cities.

The urban property-crime rate is also getting worse. It rose from 176.1 victimizations per 1,000 households in 2022 to 192.3 in 2023. That's part of a 26% increase in the urban property-crime rate since 2019. These numbers exclude rampant shoplifting, since the NCVS is a survey of households and not of businesses.

In contrast, violent-crime rates in suburban and rural areas have been essentially unchanged since 2019. In suburban areas in 2019, there were 22.3 violent victimizations per 1,000 persons 12 or older, compared with 23.3 in 2023—a statistically insignificant change. In rural areas, the rate was 16.3 in 2019 and 15.3 in 2023—again, not a statistically significant change. Our recent crime spike is essentially limited to cities.

Such NCVS findings are far more reliable than the Federal Bureau of Investigation figures that left-leaning commentators emphasize, for five reasons. First, the NCVS figures are finalized statistics, not unpolished, partial-year preliminary figures. Second, the FBI switched to a new reporting system in 2021 that makes year-to-year comparisons (from before to after its change) difficult if not impossible.

Third, the NCVS is a nationally representative survey, while the FBI lacks data from a relatively large number of law enforcement agencies, including the Los Angeles Police Department, and it hasn't had the same mix of agencies reporting data each year. Fourth, the FBI isn't considered a principal statistical agency by the federal government, so its ability to compensate for such missing data is limited.

Fifth, the NCVS captures crimes whether they are reported to the police or not. In the 2023 NCVS, crime victims conveyed that a majority—55%—of violent victimizations weren't reported to the police, while 70% of property-crime victimizations weren't reported. The FBI publishes data only on crimes reported to the police, which means it doesn't capture most crimes.

Since the summer of 2020, when many cities adopted lax law enforcement policies, the U.S. has experienced a huge urban crime spike. The newly released figures don't show this urban crime spike abating. If we insist on rerunning the failed social experiments of the 1960s and '70s, we should expect similar results. Thanks to the success of "broken windows" policing in the 1990s and 2000s, we know what works. When will our cities adopt such sensible policies in lieu of their current ones?

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