

WHY IS GUN VIOLENCE SURGING ACROSS AMERICA?

National Institute for
Criminal Justice Reform

By David Muhammad, Nehali Vishwanath,
and Keiland Henderson

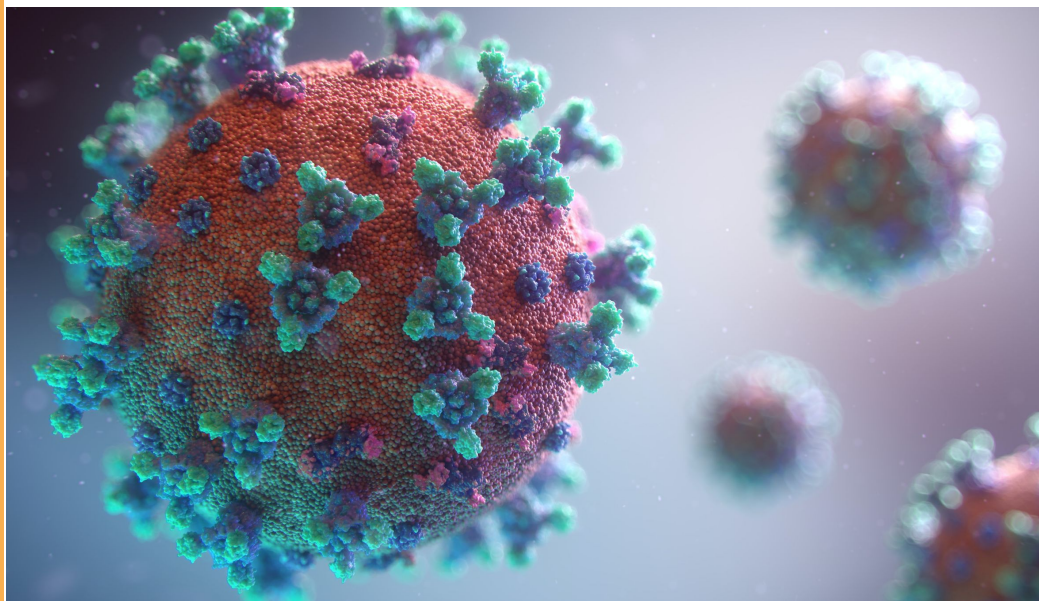
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Global Pandemic

Violence has significantly increased in cities throughout the country since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic . As the virus spread, so did the violence. The multifaceted aspects of the pandemic caused shootings to surge.

(Please note that links to several studies and articles are included throughout this report as references and for further information.)



At a Glance

In Portland, Oregon, 2020 ended up being the city's most violent in 27 years, and the homicide rate increased by 60 percent from 2019.¹ In Memphis, Tennessee, homicides increased by 73.8 percent in 2020 from the previous year.² Violent incidents in Memphis are also up by 30.1 percent during the same time period.³ In 2020, New York City experienced a 44 percent rise in homicides as well as a 95 percent increase in shooting incidents over the previous year.⁴ In Chicago, the rise in homicides during the same time period was 53 percent, and the increase in shooting incidents was similar at 52.7 percent.⁵

¹ <https://www.koin.com/is-portland-over/looking-at-the-data-portland-crime-during-the-pandemic/#:~:text=PORTLAND%2C%20Ore.,reported%20in%202018%20and%202017>

² <https://www.wreg.com/news/memphis-homicide-rises-over-several-years/>

³ <https://dailyMemphian.com/section/metro/article/21859/cure-for-gun-violence-epidemic-regional-one>

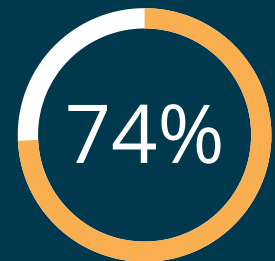
⁴ <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/nypd/news/p0106a/overall-crime-new-york-city-reaches-record-low-2020>

⁵ <https://chicago.suntimes.com/crime/2020/12/31/22208002/chicago-murders-2020-skyrocket-crime-violence-cpd-homicides>

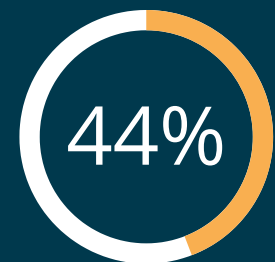
INCREASE IN HOMICIDES 2019-2020



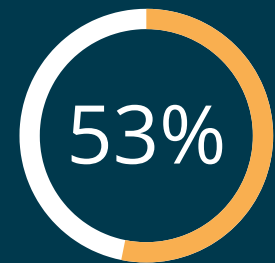
PORTLAND




MEMPHIS



NEW YORK CITY



CHICAGO



The Council on Criminal Justice conducted a [study of the crime trends in 34 cities](#) to determine the impact of COVID-19 on violence. The study found that during the first quarter of 2021, homicides rose by 24 percent compared to the first quarter of 2020 (an increase of 193 homicides) and by 49 percent compared to the first quarter of 2019 (an increase of 324 homicides). Despite the fact that 2020 saw sharp rises in shootings and homicides across America, the report concluded that: “The 2020 year-end homicide rate in the study sample was just over half what it was for those cities 25 years ago (11.4 deaths per 100,000 residents in those cities versus 19.4 per 100,000 in 1995).”⁶

⁶ <https://covid19.counciloncj.org/2021/05/21/impact-report-covid-19-and-crime-4/>

Gun Violence Problem Analysis

NICJR and its partner, the California Partnership for Safe Communities, has conducted a series of Gun Violence Problem Analysis studies in several cities throughout the country including: Oakland, Stockton, San Francisco, and San Bernardino, CA; Portland, OR; Indianapolis, IN; and an ongoing Problem Analysis in Washington, DC. We have found a very similar outcome in each city: gun violence is tightly concentrated on a small number of young adults who are at very high risk. These individuals are identifiable, and the violence is predictable. Therefore, the shootings are also preventable with effective intervention.



An aerial photograph of Oakland, California, showing a dense urban landscape with numerous high-rise buildings and a large body of water in the foreground. The city is surrounded by green hills and mountains in the distance under a clear blue sky.

Oakland, CA

For the past eight years, Oakland has had a very successful [gun violence reduction strategy](#), commonly known as Ceasefire. After implementing this strategy and focusing intensive intervention efforts on those identified as being at the highest risk for violence, Oakland achieved a 50 percent gun violence reduction. The city had six consecutive years of reductions in injury shootings and homicides – something Oakland had never experienced before. An [external evaluation](#) determined the vast majority of the reductions were attributable to the gun violence reduction strategy. At the end of March 2020, there was a 38 percent year to date reduction in homicides. Oakland was on track to have its lowest homicide rate in history. Then the pandemic hit. Like other cities across the country, the 30 plus staff among several community-based organizations working to engage the very highest risk individuals went away.

Last year, there was a 25 percent increase in gun violence within 50 of the largest cities across America. What happened?

The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it despair and desperation, especially for those communities and individuals already marginalized and struggling. The pandemic exposed and exacerbated disparate outcomes and access to resources. There were not only employment and financial impacts, but also social ones. The shelter-in-place orders caused many restless young adults in under-resourced communities to be bored, agitated, and more willing to solve disputes with easily accessible illegal firearms. With schools closed and summer jobs gone, the medical emergencies of loved ones ravaged by the virus all took its toll.

Maps showing areas of high infection rates and increased shootings are nearly identical and overlay onto the same Black and Latino neighborhoods with high poverty rates. The twin public health crises of a new contagious disease and

violence spread hard and fast in poor communities of color with few resources to prevent or curtail either.

Another major cause for the increase in gun violence was the loss of effective intervention efforts. The tremendous work of Credible Messengers, Street Outreach Workers, Life Coaches, and Violence Interventionists came to an abrupt halt. These vital staff, who have similar lived experiences as the very high risk clients they are serving and provide an example of change, a trusting relationship, and connection to needed supports, have proven to help reduce violence in cities across the country. Though some outreach workers continued to work remotely, and eventually cities recognized these community first responders as essential workers, the damage had already been done.

As mentioned above, in Oakland, there are more than 30 well-trained and effective professionals whose full-time job it is to intervene and mediate conflict. They also provide intensive life coaching, typically spending between 8-12 hours every day, engaging and building a trusting relationship with individuals who are at the highest risk for being victims or perpetrators of gun violence. For many months these workers were sidelined or forced to engage with individuals virtually. The intervention, mediation, positive reinforcement, and mentorship these workers and programs provide were all minimized.

So too were the employment, housing, and mental health services offered.

While most Outreach Workers and Interventionists are back at work and have returned to in-person engagement, the level of intensity is not yet back to pre-pandemic levels. One Life Coach in Oakland reported that he sees his clients in person now, “... but I’m not driving them in my car like I used to.” The same individuals and neighborhoods most likely to experience gun violence have some of the highest infection rates for COVID-19 while also having a very low rate of vaccinations.



Availability of Firearms

Added to this mix was an even greater availability of illegal firearms including “ghost guns,” untraceable firearms often assembled through legally obtained components purchased online. Last year, [San Francisco](#) police seized 164 of these “ghost guns” from off the streets, a staggering 2,600 % increase from 2016. Legal gun sales have also skyrocketed during the pandemic. An [academic study](#) found that there was a huge increase in gun sales and concluded that “A surge in firearm purchasing following the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic may have contributed to an increase in firearm violence.” Cities have also reported a steep increase in firearms stolen from vehicles. These stolen guns then wind up used in crimes.

Ironically, many people report carrying illegal guns for protection, yet the evidence shows that carrying firearms increases the chances of being a victim of gun violence. A [recent study](#) from the American Journal of Epidemiology found that when people carry illegal guns it vastly increases their likelihood of being shot.

The massive unemployment scams that followed the first COVID-19 relief bill, the CARES Act, also contributed to more funds being available to purchase illegal guns. In California alone, up to [\\$31 billion](#) was erroneously obtained from the state unemployment agency. This quick infusion of high sums of cash that temporarily found its way to communities also brought with it armed robberies and retaliatory shootings.

Another apparent manifestation of COVID-19 is that it simply drew out erratic behavior. Normal arguments escalated to fights, erratic driving being more prevalent, aggressive and rude behavior ensued, and of course, the increase in violence. Whether it was the lockdowns or the virus itself, the strange behavior, captured well in a [N.Y. Times article](#) focused on Cleveland, OH, is hard to explain but should be noted.





The murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis catalyzed widespread protest with [more than 20 million people in America participating in demonstrations in all 50 states.](#) Other high profile police shootings of unarmed Black people, shortly after the murder of Floyd, further spurred calls to “defund the police.” The protests themselves also resulted in reduced police interaction with communities hardest hit by violence due to the combination of high rates of COVID-19 among officers, as well as officer reluctance to be proactive in this era of heightened scrutiny. These factors, including increased

distrust in law enforcement, contribute to the rise in gun violence as well.

[Research by social scientists Tom Tyler and Tracy Mears](#) has proven that when community trust in law enforcement is diminished, crime and violence subsequently increase. The long-standing distrust between communities of color – especially those experiencing high poverty rates – and police is also connected to persistently high rates of violence. Increasing distrust within a particular jurisdiction can also lead to a spike in violence.

Another related law enforcement issue is complicated and controversial. In today's hyper-polarized opinions and politics, causing very little patience for much nuance in our debates, we are hesitant to raise this issue as an organization that works toward criminal justice reform. But it is important to address. Many police chiefs across the country have been very vocal in blaming a "broken criminal justice system" as the reason for a rise in violence, saying more people should be incarcerated.

In response to the global health crisis that has been disproportionately impacting inmates who were unable to practice social distancing, several states and counties amended the bail guidelines in order to ease overcrowding in jails. For the vast majority of defendants who were given reduced or zero bail, there was no public safety impact.

However, there were a very small number of high-risk people arrested for felonies that were either a violence perpetrator or victim upon days of release.

[A study commissioned by the MacArthur Foundation](#)

evaluated the changes in bail within eleven jurisdictions across the country implemented due to the COVID-19 pandemic and found that there was no increase in crime associated with the new bail policies.

Bail reform is necessary, safe, and effective. However, there are a small number of people engaged in deliberate gun violence that do need to be held for a period of time, for their individual safety and the safety of the community. . We have to improve the process of how the court makes this determination.

So Why Has Gun Violence Increased?

There is no simple or easy answer. It's a combination of a multitude of factors including a deadly pandemic, loss of intervention efforts, increased availability of illegal firearms, and diminished trust in law enforcement to name a few.. We experienced a perfect storm of conditions that converged all of the above into a deadly mix for cities large and small in every part of the country. The good news is [we know what works.](#) Now we have to re-focus our efforts on these strategies that are proven to save lives.

