



OJRC Crime Statistics Primer

Crime and Safety in Oregon in 2022: Myths, Facts, and Solutions

Report by Justin Low, May 2022

Crime Rates in Oregon from 2019-2020

- Despite the sensationalism from elected officials and media outlets about the alleged rise in crime in recent years, statewide violent crime rates decreased overall by 0.6% between 2019 and 2020,¹ notwithstanding the destabilizing effects of COVID-19. Notably, the violent crime rate remained lower in 2020 — after the implementation of significant criminal justice reforms and in the wake of recent national crises (e.g., COVID and the ensuing recession) — than in 2005,² when those factors were not present.
- Statewide property crime rates also hit a historic low in 2020, dropping 4.6% from the previous year — the lowest since 1965.³
- The homicide rate, however, increased in Oregon by 3.6% between 2019 and 2020.⁴ Still, the increase in Oregon’s homicide rate remained well below [national trends](#)⁵— according to the FBI, the national homicide [rate rose](#) by 30% between 2019 and 2020.⁶ Comparatively, California’s homicide rate increased by 30.2% and Washington’s by 44.4% in the same period.⁷
 - It should be noted that while most Oregon jurisdictions experienced a leveling or reduction in their homicide rates, the overall increase in the state’s homicide rate can be largely attributed to the rise in the homicide rate in Portland⁸ — which points to divestments made in urban centers discussed later in this report.
- Nevertheless, despite the increase in the state homicide rate, the overall crime rate in Oregon remained at historic lows.⁹

Oregon's Property and Violent Crime Rates from 1985 to 2020

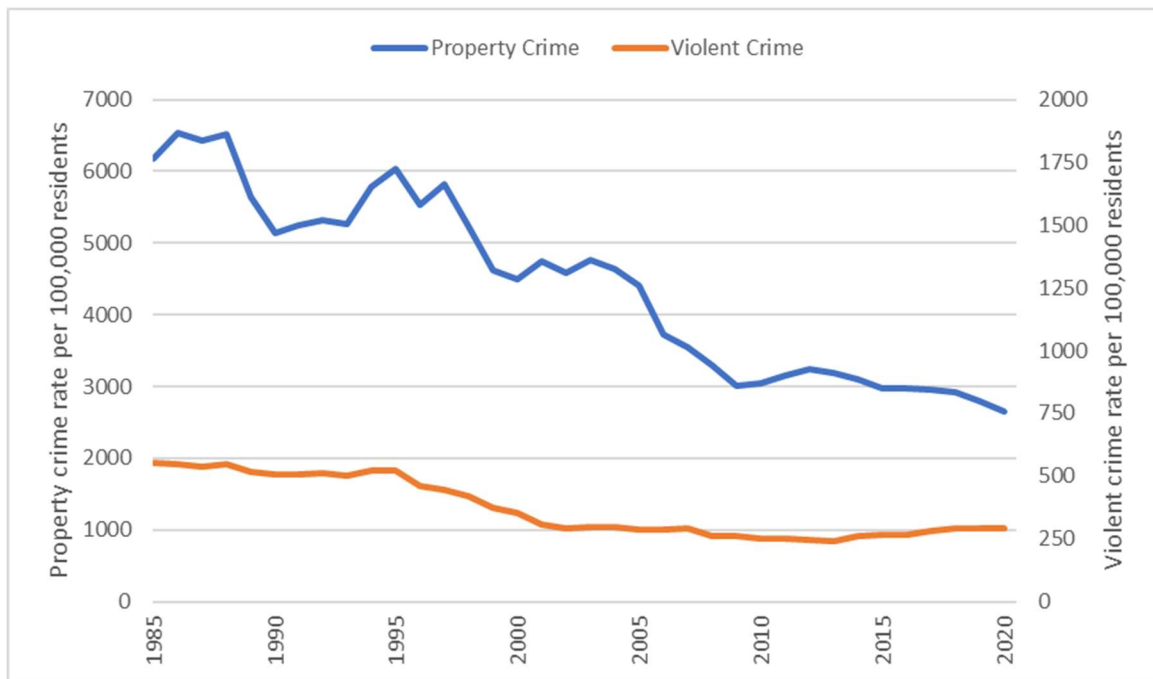


Figure 1: Data sourced from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Report 2020.¹⁰ Note that violent crime includes homicide, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault; property crime includes burglary, motor vehicle theft, and larceny theft (including non-felonious larceny theft).

Preliminary 2021 Data on Crime Rates in Oregon

- Violent crime rates between 2019 and 2021— despite the societal impacts of COVID-19 — decreased overall by 2.3%.^{11 12} This follows two legislative sessions where Salem lawmakers passed historic legislation addressing reforms to the state criminal justice system, public safety, and community wellbeing.
- Property crime rates continued to hit historic lows, decreasing by 4.9% between 2019 and 2021.^{13 14}
- While the statewide homicide rate rose to an estimated 4.1 homicides per 100,000 people in 2021 (a 46.5% increase from 2019),^{15 16} it remained below the [national homicide rate](#) estimated at 6.9 homicides per 100,000 people.¹⁷
 - Again, it is essential to reiterate that the rise in the statewide homicide rate is primarily attributed to the increase in the homicide rate and the decrease in social and community investments in Portland. Other major cities and counties in Oregon [experienced a leveling or reduction of homicides](#) from 2019 to 2021.¹⁸

Oregon's Property and Violent Crime Rates from 2019 to 2021



Figure 2: Author's calculations are based data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Report 2019,¹⁹ Oregon's Uniform Crime Report 2021,²⁰ and Portland State University's Population Report 2021.²¹ Note that violent crime includes homicide, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault; property crime includes burglary, motor vehicle theft, and larceny theft (including non-felonious larceny theft).

Preliminary 2021 Data on Total Crime in Major Oregon Cities

- **Portland²²**
 - Preliminary data from the City of Portland reports that total violent, person-related crimes (e.g., assaults, homicide, human trafficking, abduction, and sex offenses) increased by 3.4% from 2019 to 2021, with the majority of those offenses coming from homicides (144% increase) and assaults (4.4% total increase). Concurrently, reported sex offenses fell by 20.6%.
 - Meanwhile, preliminary reports show that total property-related crimes increased by 13.2% from 2019 to 2021, with the majority of those offenses coming from extortion (63.3% total increase), vandalism (55.3% total increase), and motor vehicle theft (40.5% total increase).
 - Lastly, records show that total societal-related crimes decreased by 43.4% from 2019 to 2021, with a 78.7% total decrease in drug offenses but an uptick in weapon law violations (26% total increase).
- **Salem²³**

- In Oregon’s second-largest city, the Salem Police Department reported a decrease in willful homicides, as defined by the Oregon State Police, with 9 occurring in 2019 and 7 occurring in 2021.
- Additionally, in 2019, there were 19,929 reported criminal offenses that occurred in Salem, while in 2021, there were 17,075. This equates to a 14.3% decrease in reported criminal activity.
- **Eugene²⁴**
 - Eugene, Oregon’s third-largest city, reflected similar patterns to Salem, where it also had a decrease in total reported criminal offenses, with 18,187 reported in 2019 and 18,000 reported in 2021.
 - As for homicides, Eugene’s total homicides leveled out with two occurring in 2019 and two occurring in 2021.

Data on Portland Police Bureau Budget, Staffing Rates, and Total Crimes

- **Portland Police Bureau Budget and Total Crime**
 - Many national articles and studies have reported that no correlation exists between the size of police budgets and local crime rates. [The Washington Post’s study](#) reported that about \$2 billion was spent by state and local governments on police in 1960, and there were about 1,887 crimes per 100,000 Americans.²⁵ In 1980, state and local spending increased to \$14.6 billion and crime rates increased to 5,950 crimes per 100,000 Americans.²⁶ [As a New York Times article put it](#), “Sometimes a boost for policing is followed by a drop in crime; sometimes it isn’t.”²⁷ In Portland’s case, a recent study showed that the crime rate fluctuated independently of increases or decreases in Portland Police Bureau’s (PPB) budget.²⁸
 - Over the last five years, total crime in Portland fluctuated independently of the PPB budget. In 2019, the PPB budget was at an all-time high and total reported crime incidents were the second-highest within the last five years.²⁹ Leading up to 2020 there were steep increases in the PPB budget every year.³⁰ Concurrently, from 2016 to 2020, the total number of total reported crimes also rose.³¹ In 2020, while the PPB budget began to plateau, total reported crime dropped drastically.³² Then, in 2021 the total offenses reported started to spike again, despite an increase in the PPB budget.³³ This indicates that regardless of budget increases to PPB, total reported crime has historically and independently risen or plateaued in Portland.
 - Furthermore, since these statistics are related to policy and budget discussions in 2022, it should be noted that contrary to claims by media outlets and tough-on-crime supporters, PPB’s budget was not actually reduced after 2020. This is evidenced by Portland City Council’s decision to [funnel those previously reallocated funds back into the PPB budget](#) after a rise in shootings and homicides began to occur later that year.³⁴

- **Portland Police Bureau Staffing and Total Crimes**
 - [Another independent study](#) demonstrated that Portland Police Bureau's staff has fluctuated countless times over the last five years and has had no correlation with total reported crime in any given month.³⁵
 - While there were two instances where total reported crime was above 5,400 reported incidents and the number of Portland Police officers on duty was below 550 in those months, there have been four instances where total crime was above 5,400 reported incidents and the number of Portland Police officers on duty was between 600-650 in those months.³⁶ This data supports the position that more police officers on duty do not directly lead to lower amounts of crime.
 - [The Portland Mercury also reported](#) that increases in PPB's funding did not translate to more officers working in the field.³⁷ This is attributed to the higher costs associated with current and retiring officers and an inability to hire and retain new officers.³⁸

Number of PPB Officers and Number of Crimes per Month

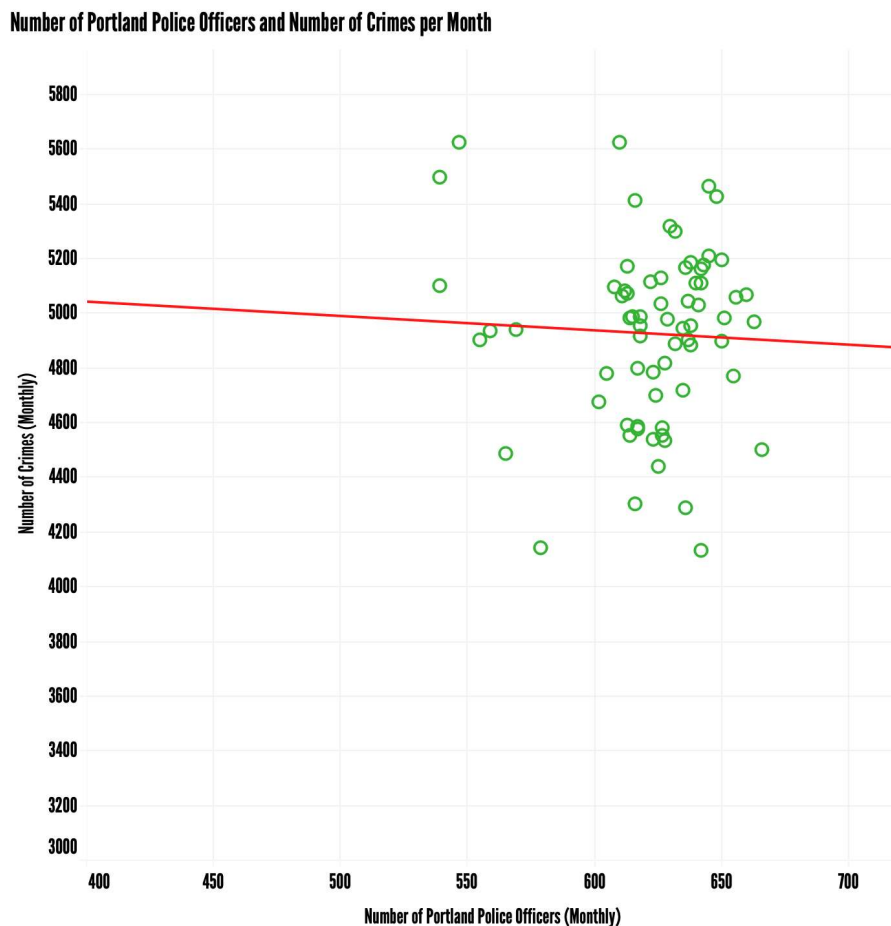


Figure 3: This graph plots the number of PPB officers and total number of crimes recorded during each month between January 2016 and October 2021.³⁹ “For instance, a dot further to the right indicates a month where Portland had more officers, and dots higher up on the graph show months with high crime rates. The line indicates a slight decrease in crimes as more officers are employed. - Kat McKelvey”⁴⁰

- **Final Thoughts on PPB, Officer Numbers, Budget Size, and Crime Incidents**
 - At any given time in the last five years, crime has increased and decreased independent of changes to PPB’s ranks, budget, and capacity. Whether it be during historic highs in funding and officer-staffing or during decreases in either budget and personnel, total reported crime has fluctuated with no clear pattern or correlation.^{41 42}
 - Concurrently, [COVID-19 and divestments made in urban centers](#) — resources, services, and social care available for their residents — have exacerbated socio-economic hardships, houselessness, and mental and physical health outcomes for the most vulnerable community members.⁴³ While the data coming out of Portland contradicts the “tough-on-crime” narrative that is being forwarded by groups and elected officials advocating for increases in law enforcement funding, it also opens the conversation about what social structures and investments are needed to support community safety and well-being.
 - Lastly, in regards to rising incidents of homicides in Portland, [research has shown](#) that increases in law enforcement do not lower the number of homicides in a city.⁴⁴ Rather, investments in community-rooted solutions like the [recent ‘traffic-calming’ program](#) in SE Portland have demonstrated that shootings and homicides can decrease significantly without expanding police budgets.⁴⁵

Homicides Increased Nationwide, Including in Counties with Conservative Approaches to Crime and Safety

- [Over two-thirds of the nation’s 40 most populous cities](#) saw more homicides in 2021 than in 2020.⁴⁶ Many of which are governed by mayors, county commissions, city councils, and district attorneys who have all adopted a “tough-on-crime” platform.
- Fresno, California, witnessed a significant increase in homicides from [45 in 2019 to 74 in 2020, and then another 71 in 2021](#).⁴⁷ Fresno’s DA is widely regarded as among the most anti-reform DAs in California.
- Fort Worth, Texas, just hit [a 27-year high](#) in homicides despite its “tough on crime” approach,⁴⁸ including [high prosecution rates for possession of less than a few ounces of marijuana](#).⁴⁹

What is causing increases in gun violence?

- **Research strongly supports that the primary cause of increased gun violence from 2019 through 2021 was the pandemic and its destabilizing effects, coupled with the widespread availability of firearms.⁵⁰ Moreover, there is no evidence that law enforcement agencies' budgets were reduced and therefore, there is no evidence that “defunding” efforts are connected to any increase of crime rates of specific categories.⁵¹**
 - 2020 was the “perfect storm” of conditions for gun violence, [according to Dr. Daniel Webster](#), the director of the John Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research.⁵² “[E]verything bad happened at the same time — you had the COVID outbreak, huge economic disruption, people were scared.”⁵³
 - Dr. Paddy Sentongo, Assistant Professor for Neural Engineering at Pennsylvania State University, [pointed to numerous pandemic related factors](#) that likely caused the increase: psychological distress caused by shelter-in-place orders, increased rates of domestic violence, disruption of social networks, unemployment, and record increases in gun sales and access to guns during the pandemic.⁵⁴
- **We have also seen a massive increase in gun sales, many of which are linked to increasing crime:**
 - [18.8 million guns were sold in 2021](#).⁵⁵ This is the second-highest number of firearms sold since 2000.
 - [Brookings Institute data on firearm sales](#) suggests that nearly 3 million more guns were purchased during the COVID-19 pandemic than in the same period in 2019.⁵⁶
 - [ATF data](#) indicates that the increase in sales is impacting crime.⁵⁷ It’s “time to crime” data shows that guns sold in 2020 were far more likely to be found at a crime scene than in any other previous period.⁵⁸

Takeaways and Solutions that Keep People Safe and Communities Whole

- **Takeaways**
 - **Upstream Interventions over Downstream Investments**
 - Rather than investing in public safety and community wellness responses that are reactive, costly, and after the fact, Oregon should prioritize investing in upstream interventions that prevent and mitigate the propensity for offending in the first place. Upstream interventions, such as accessible and equitable education programs, affordable childcare, increases in the minimum wage, family support services, community wellness programs, and accessible counseling and treatment services, are cost-efficient, humane, and more effective. To implement these, municipal, city, and state budgets need to be re-balanced to emphasize funding upstream interventions to counter the exorbitant costs associated

with downstream investments, like law enforcement and corrections budgets.

- **Modern Law Enforcement Budgets Have Diminishing Returns**
 - The data in this report supports the position that increasing law enforcement budgets has diminishing returns for community wellbeing, resulting in neutral or negative results. Notwithstanding recent historic funding levels in Oregon, increases in law enforcement budgets and personnel have not led to decreases in criminal activity, which is in direct contradiction to the rhetoric used by some public officials. Furthermore, increases in law enforcement budgets do not always result in increases in hiring new personnel due to agency issues with training and retention. They do increase harm to the communities that pay for them by diverting important resources away from interventions that are proven to work, further false narratives and fearmongering, and exacerbate racial and socioeconomic divisions. General budget increases in law enforcement are typically an ineffective and inefficient use of taxpayer dollars.
- **Public Safety and Community Wellness should Prioritize Higher Returns on Investment**
 - Taxpayer dollars should be spent on resources that have evidence-based track records in producing higher returns on investment for the community. People would never tolerate an investor placing their retirement funds in bad investments with zero to negative investment returns. Neither should they tolerate elected officials spending their money on methods that are counterproductive to improving public safety and community wellness. Instead, tax dollars should be reallocated to fund policies and programs that have higher returns on investment, like street lighting, locally conscious public infrastructure improvements, and mental health crisis response teams that do not involve armed personnel. Furthermore, these higher return investments do not put civilians at risk of injury or death by state actors.
- **Solutions**
 - **Expand Portland Street Response and Invest in Similar Programs**
 - Portland Street Response is a new branch of Portland's first-response system that assists people experiencing mental and behavioral health crises that just wrapped up its first year of operation. Instead of law enforcement officers, Portland Street Response sends a team consisting of a licensed mental health crisis responder, a firefighter paramedic, and peer support specialists to respond to mental and behavioral health-related calls. Within its first year, Portland Street Response responded to 903 calls. None of which resulted in arrests, and 824 of which were calls that the Portland Police Bureau would have traditionally responded to.⁵⁹ Alternatives like Portland Street Response (and CAHOOTS in Eugene) have demonstrated that there are alternatives to policing that are more responsive to the community's needs and well-being.

- **Increase and Centralize Re-entry Infrastructure and Resources**
 - For folks leaving incarceration and re-entering the general public, access to employment, health care, housing, and transportation services are all critical to that individual's successful re-integration. Not only are these resources essential to a smooth and manageable transition, but they have been empirically shown to reduce recidivism rates. With at least 95% of all adults in custody returning to the general public at some point,⁶⁰ Oregon officials should be responsible for making sure they have the tools and resources to rejoin their families and peers instead of leaving them high and dry during such a drastic life transition. Importantly, these resources should be centrally coordinated to ensure that there is a clear and transparent understanding of the scope, scale, and quality of services in Oregon.
- **Support Crime Survivors**
 - Victims of criminal and offending activities are more likely to become offenders than people who have never been victimized in the first place. State leaders need to ensure that victim assistance grants and funding are available to reduce gun violence while also supporting services for victims and survivors of gun violence and violent acts. This can take the form of trauma-informed intervention services, community-based outreach, and hospital-based intervention programs. Too often, victims are presented as a monolith or a homogenous group and District Attorneys are presented as the sole representative of victims. It is important that we address these false narratives and acknowledge that there is a diversity of experiences within the community of victims. District attorneys represent the State on behalf of the people. Their goals and priorities may align with victims' in a given case or they may not. District attorneys do not speak for all victims. By recognizing the diversity of victims and voices, we can better appreciate their needs and the resources required to support them.
- **Expand Access to Substance Use Disorder Treatment and Support**
 - Local and state officials must build out new and existing resources and infrastructure for substance use disorder treatment and support. In addition to ending unnecessary stops and arrests for recreational drug use, Measure 110 carved out state funds for substance use disorder treatment and support. While the historic rollout of Measure 110 is still relatively new, it is incumbent on the state to ensure that those who require physical and mental health care and treatment related to their use of substances know how to access these resources and are provided the necessary support to utilize them to their full potential.
- **Invest in Evidence-Based Violence Prevention Programs**
 - Oregon should heavily invest in evidence-based violence prevention programs and violence interrupters that can prevent retaliatory violence. Like Advance Peace or Cure Violence, programs in other states have implemented successful violence interruption strategies utilizing credible

messengers who have experienced or perpetrated violence themselves. During its two-year duration, Cure Violence reduced homicides in North Philadelphia by 30%. In one South Bronx neighborhood, it helped reduce shootings by 63%, and in Chicago, shootings went down by 40% in some neighborhoods.⁶¹

- **Pass Comprehensive Gun Violence Prevention Laws**

- Gun violence prevention does not end with passing and enacting background checks or red flag laws. As a state, Oregon should look at this issue holistically and adopt policies that serve as upstream interventions well before a gun can be purchased or individuals commit offending behavior. Downloadable guns and ghost guns must be completely inaccessible. Credit card companies and banks should be required to block these purchases, manufacturers of these parts should be tightly regulated, and 3D-printing companies should create safeguards against being used to produce these weapons. Furthermore, to keep public spaces safer, guns should be prohibited in sensitive areas and campus grounds, high-capacity firearms should be banned from purchase, and lost or stolen guns should be required to be reported to mitigate gun theft and trafficking. Criminalization and law enforcement responses to on-scene incidents of gun violence are reactive and after-the-fact. State leaders have the agency and authority to do more to ensure that gun violence is prevented in the first place.

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