



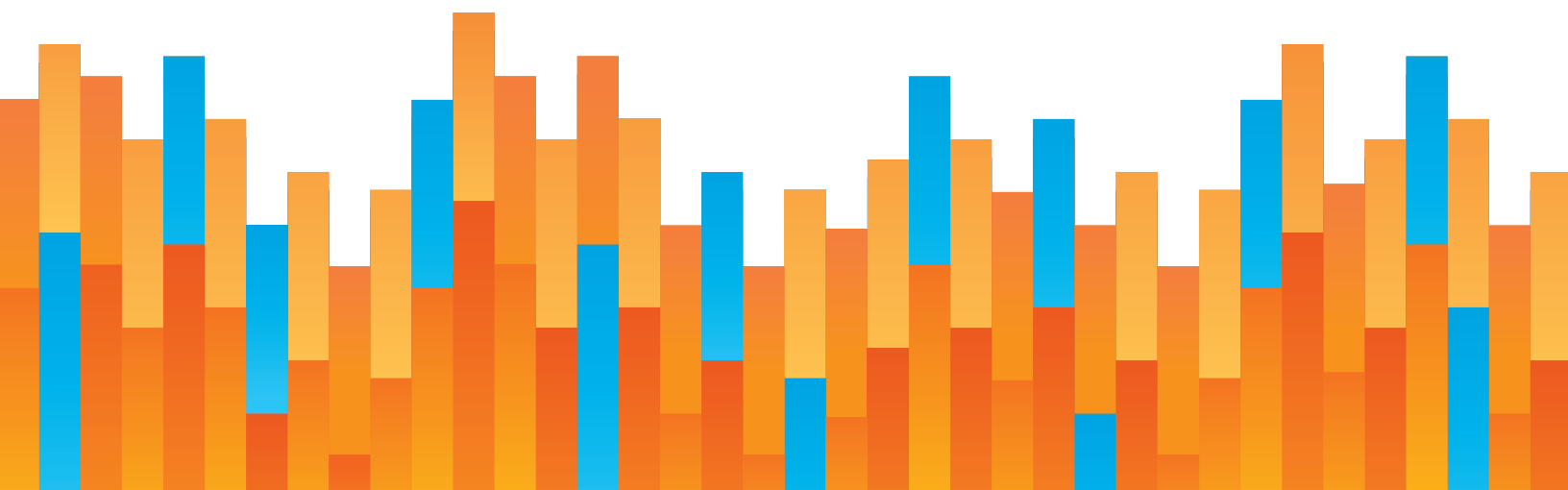
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# THEY ARE GETTING AWAY WITH IT: COULD CLEARANCE RATES BE KEY TO ADDRESSING CRIMINAL JUSTICE FAILURES?

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## PART 1

# INTRODUCTION

There is a poorly understood criminal justice metric that might just be a key component of fixing a faltering system that has gotten more expensive and, arguably, less effective at protecting public safety over decades. Clearance rates are the closest metric we have to evaluating how well the criminal justice system does at catching people who commit crimes. Clearance rates measure the percentage of reported crimes that result in a suspect being arrested, in an attempt to approximate the effectiveness of police agencies at that critical job. This brief is particularly interested in how effective the police are at solving violent crimes, a top concern of the public.<sup>1</sup>

The effectiveness of the U.S. criminal enforcement system in solving violent crimes—as reflected by clearance rates—has been flat with a slightly downward trend over time. When focusing just on homicides, those rates have suffered a decades-long slide since the mid-1960s, with an even more pronounced decline in the years since 2019. Even as crime rates have trended down fairly consistently since 1993, and even though police spending has dramatically increased, not declined, since 1982, the percentage of violent crimes reported that get “cleared” (solved) has been stagnant at best since about the mid-1960s.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark H. Moore, Robert C. Trojanowicz, and George L. Kelling, “Crime and Policing,” National Institute of Justice/Department of Justice, June 1988. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/111460.pdf> (accessed September 14, 2025).

<sup>2</sup> Nikki Pressley and Ross Jackson, “Ensuring Justice: Innovative Approaches to Improve Crime Clearance Rates,” Right on Crime, 2024. [https://rightoncrime.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/2024-12-ROC-Crime-Clearance-Rates-PressleyJackson\\_FINAL.pdf](https://rightoncrime.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/2024-12-ROC-Crime-Clearance-Rates-PressleyJackson_FINAL.pdf). (Accessed 28 July, 2025).

To put a finer point on the increased spending on police, the Urban Institute concluded from analyzing census data that “[f]rom 1977 to 2021, in 2021 inflation-adjusted dollars, state and local government spending on police increased from \$47 billion to \$135 billion, an increase of 189%.”<sup>3</sup> In addition, a study by ABC-owned television stations examining budgets of more than 100 cities and counties determined that 83% spent at least 2% more on police in 2022 than they spent in 2019.<sup>4</sup>

Early indications suggest that some of the steeper declines in clearance rates that were experienced after 2019 bounced back somewhat in 2023 and 2024, but there is no conclusive data yet, and the long-term trend since the 1980s remains in place. The chaos of the pandemic years likely plays an outsized role in the data for those years so, looking back in hindsight, the accelerated decline in rates may prove those years to be outliers.<sup>5</sup> Even so, the long-term trends demonstrate that vast improvement can be had in clearance rates across the criminal system.

In the mid-1960s, more than 90% of murders were solved nationally (Figure 1). By 1990, that percentage had dropped into the 60s.<sup>6</sup> In 2022, only 37% of violent crimes were cleared, and just over half of murders, according to FBI data.<sup>7</sup> These are historic lows for a statistic that has been collected using the same methodology since at least 1960.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, peer nations in Western Europe and Asia reportedly performed as well as the U.S. did in the 1960s, and their numbers have remained much higher than the figures for

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<sup>3</sup> Urban Institute, “Criminal Justice Expenditures: Police, Corrections, and Courts,” 2022. <https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/cross-center-initiatives/state-and-local-finance-initiative/state-and-local-backgrounders/criminal-justice-police-corrections-courts-expenditures> (accessed July 31, 2025).

<sup>4</sup> Grace Manthey, Frank Esposito, and Amanda Hernandez, “Despite ‘defunding’ claims, police funding has increased in many US cities,” ABC News, October 16, 2022. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/defunding-claims-police-funding-increased-us-cities/story?id=91511971> (accessed July 30, 2025); see also <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/27/world/canada/canada-letter-police-spending-crime.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Jeff Asher, “Actually, Murder Clearance Rates Probably Rose A Good Bit In 2024,” Jeff-alytics, Substack, 30 June, 2025. <https://jasher.substack.com/p/actually-murder-clearance-rates-probably> (accessed July 31, 2025).

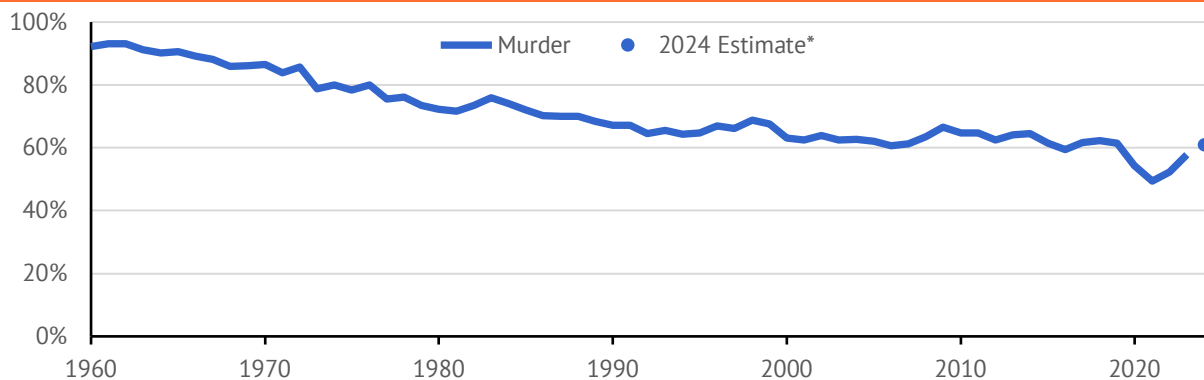
<sup>6</sup> Philip J. Cook and Ashley Mancik, “The sixty-year trajectory of homicide clearance rates: Toward a better understanding of the great decline,” *Annual Review of Criminology* 7, no.1 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-criminol-022422-122744> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>7</sup> CSG Justice Center, “Trends in Violent Crime and Accountability: 50-state violent crime data,” Council of State Governments, 2023. <https://projects.csjusticecenter.org/tools-for-states-to-address-crime/50-state-crime-data/> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>8</sup> Many researchers discount clearance rates data before the 1980s, because scarce data were collected and reported, and small departments did not provide adequate information. See, e.g., Cynthia Lum, Charles Wellford, et al., “Trajectories of U.S. Crime Clearance Rates,” Report for the Laura and John Arnold Foundation. Fairfax, Va.: Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy, George Mason University, March 2016. <https://cebcp.org/wp-content/evidence-based-policing/TrajectoryClearance.pdf> (accessed July 31, 2025).

the U.S.<sup>9</sup> Note that though clearance rates for property crimes and lower-level offenses are typically much worse than those for violent crimes, they have also remained more stable over time (Figure 2). As an example, in 2022, 36.7% of violent crimes reported to police were cleared, compared with 12.1% of property crimes.<sup>10</sup>

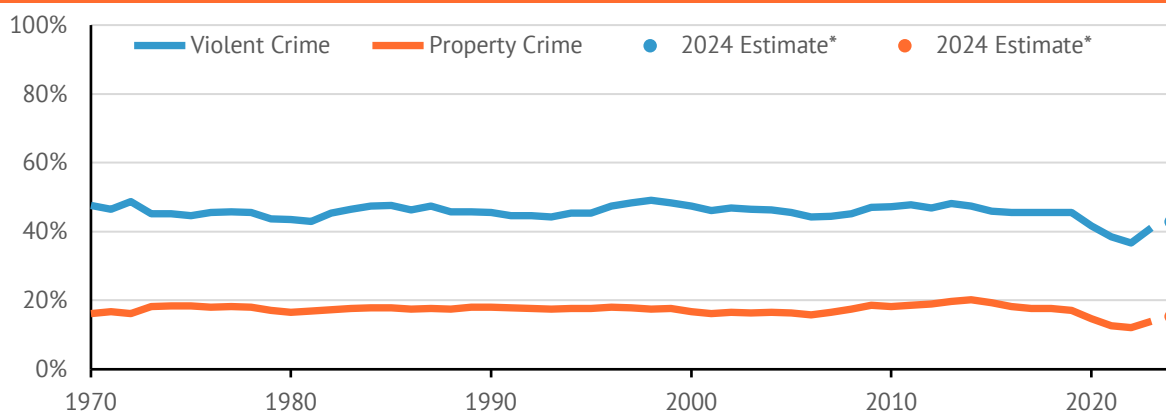
**FIGURE 1: MURDER CLEARANCE RATE 1960-2024\***



Source: FBI; Jeff Asher (2025)

Note: The FBI did not publish regular clearance rate tables in 2021 due to the transition to NIBRs. This chart relies on a murder estimate produced by Jeff Asher for that year. \*2024 Estimate produced by Jeff Asher.

**FIGURE 2: VIOLENT AND PROPERTY CRIME CLEARANCE RATES 1970-2024\***

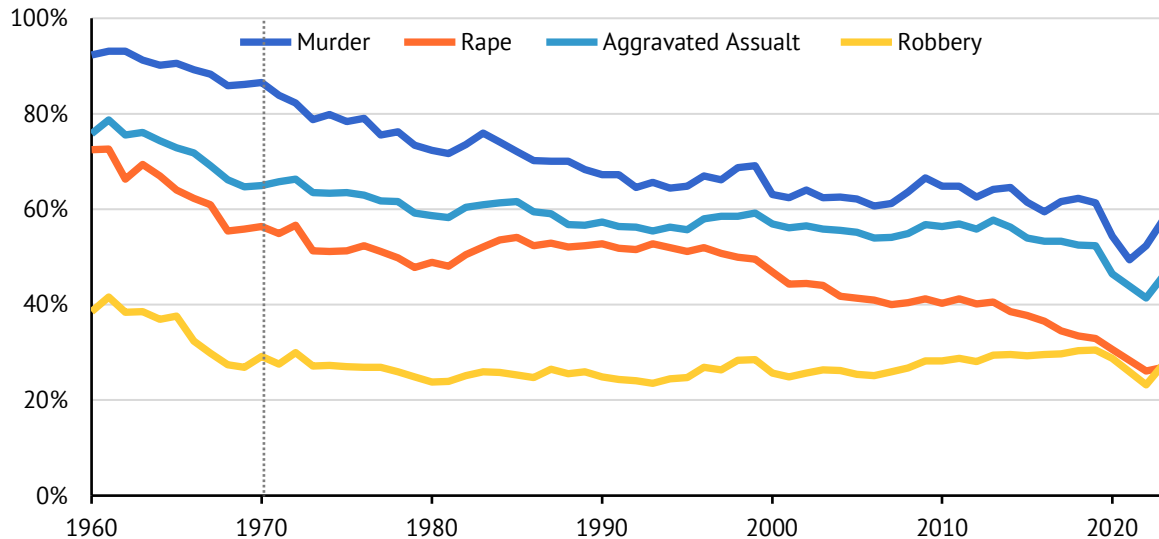


Source: FBI; Jeff Asher (2025)

Note: The FBI did not publish regular clearance rate tables in 2021 due to the transition to NIBRs. This chart relies on estimates produced by Jeff Asher for that year. \*2024 Estimate produced by Jeff Asher.

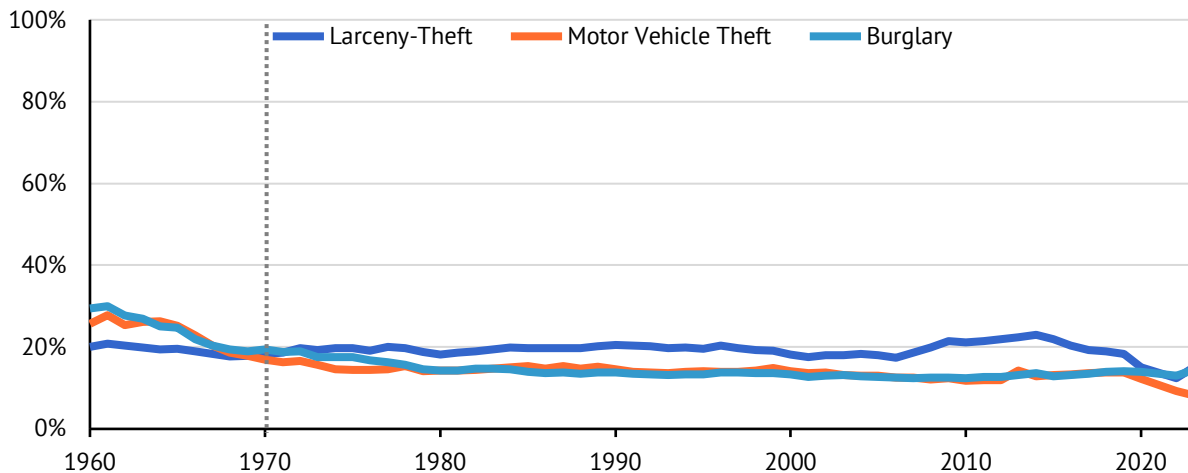
<sup>9</sup> Cook and Mancik, "The sixty-year trajectory of homicide clearance rates"; see also Marieke Liem, Karoliina Suonpää, Martti Lehti, Janne Kivivuori, Sven Granath, Simone Walser, and Martin Killias, "Homicide clearance in Western Europe," *European Journal of Criminology*, 30 March 2018. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6328993/> (accessed July 10, 2025).

<sup>10</sup> John Gramlich, "What the data says about crime in the U.S.," Pew Research Center, 4 April 2024. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/24/what-the-data-says-about-crime-in-the-us/> (accessed July 14, 2025).

**FIGURE 3: CLEARANCE RATES FOR SELECTED VIOLENT CRIMES 1960-2023**

Source: FBI; Jeff Asher (2025)

Note: The FBI did not publish regular clearance rate tables in 2021 due to the transition to NIBRs. This chart relies on a murder estimate produced by Jeff Asher for that year.

**FIGURE 4: CLEARANCE RATES FOR SELECTED PROPERTY CRIMES 1960-2023**

Source: FBI

Note: The FBI did not publish regular clearance rate tables in 2021 due to the transition to NIBRs.

When violent crimes are not prosecuted, or perpetrators don't face punishment, it harms public safety and causes fear in the community; if left unchecked, this can lead to rampant disrespect for the law and eventually produce chaos. The perpetrator remains unidentified and loose in the community, able to commit further crimes.

Allowing cases to languish unsolved has additional implications for deterrence. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, “Research shows clearly that the chance of being caught is a vastly more effective deterrent than even draconian punishment.”<sup>11</sup> So even as our prisons and jails are bursting with people being confined for ever-longer time periods, there is evidence that our policy choices are not yielding effective deterrence, let alone crafted to achieve optimal results. Indeed, the evidence is well-established that long sentences are not the only or even best way to address crime.<sup>12</sup> When roughly half of murderers can expect to get away with it, the deterrent effect of amping penalties without increasing the likelihood of being caught will be limited. With property crime, those incentives are even worse since those are less likely to be cleared.

Failing to solve cases also is a severe disservice to victims, who are rarely healed or compensated by our present system. In fact, surveys show that victims of violent crime prefer prevention strategies to long prison sentences.<sup>13</sup>

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... surveys show that victims of violent crime prefer prevention strategies to long prison sentences.”  
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So why aren't clearance rates the most important criminal justice metric we have? Why have many members of the public not even heard of them? This brief will discuss clearance rates, their merits, and their decades-long downward trajectory. Why do clearance rates matter? How can the abysmal rates seen today be improved? Can public awareness of this crisis lead to action? What are the solutions?

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<sup>11</sup> National Institute of Justice, “Five Things About Deterrence,” U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs, May 2016. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/247350.pdf> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>12</sup> See College of Policing, What stops people offending?, July 2021. <https://www.college.police.uk/research/what-works-policing-reduce-crime/what-stops-people-offending#:~:text=Their%20analysis%20provided%20evidence%20in%20support%20of,of%20the%20type%20of%20punishment%20that%20follows> (reviewing evidence); Francis T. Cullen, *Taking Stock*, available at VitalSource Bookshelf (Taylor & Francis, 2017); Nolan Center for Justice, “Public safety in the 2024 election: Policies to continue commonsense, evidence-based changes to criminal justice laws,” (Alexandria: American Conservative Union Foundation, 2024). [https://conservativejusticereform.org/public\\_safety\\_in\\_the\\_2024\\_election/](https://conservativejusticereform.org/public_safety_in_the_2024_election/) (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>13</sup> Alliance for Safety and Justice, “Crime Survivors Speak 2024: A National Survey of Victims' Views On Safety And Justice,” Alliance for Safety and Justice, 2024. <https://asj.allianceforsafetyandjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/CrimeSurvivorsSpeak2024.pdf> (accessed June 25, 2025).



## PART 2

# WHAT ARE CLEARANCE RATES?

Clearance rates represent the rate at which police departments solve crimes. They are generally calculated by dividing the number of “cleared” cases by the number of reported cases. Cases are “cleared” when at least one person is arrested, charged, and, depending on the jurisdiction’s definitions, turned over for prosecution for a reported crime.

Clearance rates as a measure have some other limitations. Because the measure only includes crimes that are reported, the rate will be inaccurate as a solve rate for *all* crimes. It just includes crime the police know about, which is generally less than half of the violent crimes reported in the National Crime Victimization Survey<sup>14</sup> (the survey, as a self-reporting measure, naturally excludes murders, but it should be noted that murders are more likely to be reported than many other violent crimes). It is also worth mentioning that most crimes get cleared in a day or less, so the ones that need greater investigative resources are the more difficult to solve. That means that old cases affect the denominator in the calculation, so sometimes clearing old cases or accumulating new cold cases can throw off an agency’s numbers.

Despite their limitations, clearance rates have been reported in the same manner for decades; thus, it is still of great value to reflect on the trends in the data and demonstrate—at least as a proxy—our police agencies’ slipping efficacy at solving violent crime.

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<sup>14</sup> Rachel Morgan et al., “National Crime Victimization Survey,” Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2023 (published annually). <https://bjs.ojp.gov/data-collection/ncvs> <https://bjs.ojp.gov/data-collection/ncvs> (accessed July 10, 2025).

Attention to clearance rates has recently grown, perhaps because of the abyss to which they sunk in 2021 and 2022. Accordingly, it is likely that reform is coming aimed at bringing violent crime solve rates up, even though clearance rates have not been a prominent component of the reform agenda to date. Developing a focus on clearance rates can add value to the field, and focusing on solving crimes that frighten residents can deliver better results.

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Experts agree, however, that while clearance rates are a useful statistic, they can be amenable to manipulation.<sup>15</sup> For example, law enforcement agencies face pressure to find a culprit and make an arrest, especially in grisly cases that cause fear and put communities on edge. This clamor for results can lead to arresting and prosecuting the wrong person and discounting important additional evidence that would apprehend the person who actually did commit the crime.

As retired Maj. Neill Franklin, who served as a law enforcement officer for 34 years in the Maryland State Police and Baltimore Police Departments, and then spent a decade as executive director of the Law Enforcement Action Partnership (LEAP), noted: “Different police departments will have different criteria for what constitutes ... a clearance.” Franklin cautioned against focusing too closely on arrests, which is baked into the clearance rate calculation, to avoid the chance that, for example, summary arrests could be used to clear cases that then cannot hold up for trial. Franklin also warned that the other means of clearing a case, termed “exceptional means” and referring to cases where the perpetrator has died or left the United States to an unreachable jurisdiction, is a fairly fuzzy category also amenable to manipulation.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jeff Asher, “Fewer crimes usually means higher clearance rates,” Jeff-alytics, Substack, 2 December 2024. <https://jasher.substack.com/p/fewer-crimes-usually-means-higher> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>16</sup> Neill Franklin, Hanna Liebman Dershowitz, Reason Foundation, Zoom interview, 23 Jan. 2025; see also Cynthia Lum, Charles Wellford, Thomas Scott, Heather Vovak, Jacqueline A. Scherer, and Michael Goodier, “Differences between high and low performing police agencies in clearing robberies, aggravated assaults, and burglaries: Findings from an eight-agency case study,” *Police Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1177/10986111231182728> (accessed July 13, 2025).

### Spotlight on Historic Lows in Homicide Clearance Rates

Many scholars have focused on the changes in clearance rates for homicides in particular, as they show the most pronounced declines when looked at individually, even referring to the homicide downward clearance rate trajectory as the “Great Decline.”<sup>17</sup>

The precise explanations for the slide in murder solvency are complicated to discern, and many reasons will likely explain reduced clearance rates for other violent crimes as well. That investigative techniques have not changed too much over the same timeframe of the Great Decline suggests that the effectiveness changes don’t rest prominently on the police work itself.<sup>18</sup>

There are many additional potential factors, but none fully explains the drop in solving murders. The body of research points to a multiplicity of factors, rather than an overarching cause such as racial bias or the quality of detective work flagging over time.<sup>19</sup> Technology, for its part, despite some important advances in DNA, databases, and other advanced investigative tools, has not appeared on balance to bolster clearance rates—or at least it does not show in the data.<sup>20</sup> That said, there is some evidence that better tech tools and resources can improve results—it just doesn’t necessarily move the needle much.<sup>21</sup> This seems a ripe area for research, and any research on the topic should be designed to isolate the tools and their effect on both deterring crime (to assess prevention) and on clearance rates (to show whether the tools produce valuable leads).

Another possible explanation for declining homicide and other violent crime clearance rates is the expansion of the entire criminal legal system in the period from the 1980s through the mid-2010s, which coincided with a drastic expansion in the range of problems being handled by police officers, compared with what officers handled before the 1980s. While there is a paucity of data available, and it is not readily comparable across police agencies, the best attempts to categorize how police spend their time today have found that only about 4% of officer time is spent on responding to violent crimes.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Philip J. Cook and Ashley Mancik, “The Sixty-Year Trajectory of Homicide Clearance Rates: Toward a Better Understanding of the Great Decline,” *Annual Review Of Criminology*, 2024. <https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev-criminol-022422-122744> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>18</sup> Leslie W. Kennedy, Joel M. Caplan, Eric L. Piza, and Amanda L. Thomas, “Environmental factors influencing urban homicide clearance rates: A spatial analysis of New York City,” *Homicide Studies* 25, no. 4 (2021). 313-334. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088767920976183> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Cook and Mancik, “The sixty-year trajectory of homicide clearance rates.”

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Jeff Asher and Ben Horwitz, “How Do the Police Actually Spend Their Time?” *The New York Times*, 19 June 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/19/upshot/unrest-police-time-violent-crime.html> (accessed June 25, 2025).

## PART 3

# CHALLENGES TO IMPROVING VIOLENT CRIME CLEARANCE RATES

Given that clearance rates have sunk so low, it should be attractive to policy makers to shift focus from decades of increasing penalties to prioritizing interventions that will reduce future crimes and improve other system outcomes.<sup>23</sup>

That said, improving violent crime clearance rates comes with several challenges:

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<sup>23</sup> Jeff Asher, “Police Departments Nationwide Are Struggling to Solve Crimes,” *The New York Times*, Dec. 5, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/05/opinion/police-crime-data.html> (accessed June 25, 2025). See also Raymond Paternoster and LeeAnn Iovanni, “The Deterrent Effect of Perceived Severity: A Reexamination,” U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, date unavailable. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/101714NCJRS.pdf> (accessed June 25, 2025); and Heather Mann, Ximena Garcia-Rada, Lars Hornuf, and Juan Tafurt, “What Deters Crime? Comparing the Effectiveness of Legal, Social, and Internal Sanctions Across Countries,” *Frontiers in Psychology*, February 2016. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4744856/> (accessed June 25, 2025).

## 3.1

## VARIATIONS AMONG DEPARTMENTS (AND DATA) MAKES POLICY GUIDANCE MORE COMPLEX

Our nation's police don't operate under a single set of standards—in fact U.S. police forces are composed of around 18,000 federal, state, and county police forces, and each is independent.<sup>24</sup> Most agencies have 10 or fewer people, while some departments range up to more than 30,000. It is inherently challenging to impact the decisions, processes, and resource allocations of 18,000 different agencies. Successful efforts would likely include incentives, leadership, and culture change.

There are numerous variables that impact clearance rates and overall police effectiveness that make it hard to ascertain exactly how to improve the system at an aggregate level. In fact, just the difference in effectiveness across agencies of different sizes is bad enough. Rural communities, for example, have long faced challenges that are different from those of large police agencies. Small agencies can experience a huge variation in resource needs depending on the level of crime in the community—if a murder happens in some communities, adding a murder investigation would enormously impact the department's total capacity in a given year.



*While it may seem like a safe bet that more resources would be the key factor in increasing case clearances, that does not seem to be the case.*



While it may seem like a safe bet that more resources would be the key factor in increasing case clearances, that does not seem to be the case. A recent review of all the available research on investigative effectiveness found that individual case characteristics, such as availability of witnesses, are the most impactful on case solvability.<sup>25</sup> Counterintuitively, the

<sup>24</sup> Duren Banks, Joshua Hendrix, Matthew Hickman, and Tracey Kyckelhahn, "National Sources of Law Enforcement Employment Data," U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 4 Oct. 2016 (revised version). <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/nsleed.pdf> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>25</sup> Heather Prince, Cynthia Lum and Christopher S. Koper, "Effective police investigative practices: an evidence-assessment of the research," *Criminology, Law and Society*, May 2021. <https://craftmediabucket.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/2021-Prince-Lum-Koper-Effective-Investigations.pdf> (accessed June 25, 2025).

study concludes that training, staffing, workload (e.g., caseloads, paperwork, etc.), and unit organization across multiple agencies do *not* meaningfully impact crime or clearance rates.

Some studies do, however, suggest that caseloads can make a huge difference to the overall effectiveness of a department and that of individual officers or investigators. In one study, Timothy G. Keel, M.S., a retired detective lieutenant from the Baltimore Police Department's homicide unit who worked at the FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime's Behavioral Analysis Unit, surveyed police departments with more than 25 homicides a year that also submit their data to the Uniform Crime Report. Keel's research found that departments where investigators handled five or more homicide cases annually on average yielded an average clearance rate of 59.7%, whereas departments with fewer than five cases boasted a 65.1% clearance rate on average.<sup>26</sup> That all the studies don't fully concur as to the level of effects on clearance rates speaks to the multiplicity of factors that impact police performance across place and time, and the lack of consistency in study design, let alone data and record-keeping.



*That all the studies don't fully concur as to the level of effects on clearance rates speaks to the multiplicity of factors that impact police performance across place and time, and the lack of consistency in study design, let alone data and record-keeping.*



Nevertheless, it is clear that implementing practices such as caseload caps in departments with high caseloads and low clearance rates will generally improve overall performance. Indeed, according to analyst Jeff Asher, "Other work has demonstrated that the number of investigators is likely influenced by police budgets to a greater degree than other positions within police departments."<sup>27</sup> It seems prudent, then, that as police budgets are modified, any growth should be intentionally directed to investigations.

<sup>26</sup> Timothy G. Keel, "Detecting clues in homicide management: A homicide 'best practices' research project," Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> MNPD's Response Times, Caseloads, and Clearance Rates: Informational, Nashville Community Oversight Board, 2023 (based on data analysis by Jeff Asher). <https://www.nashville.gov/sites/default/files/2023-02/Response-Time-and-Clearance-Rates-Community-Oversight-Board.pdf?ct=1677264138> (accessed July 13, 2025).

One study showed how the Boston Police Department was able to realize a drastic improvement in homicide clearance rates by implementing best practices in a concerted, consistent effort.<sup>28</sup> The kinds of practices implemented included developing cooperative witnesses, collecting more physical evidence from the homicide scene, conducting more forensic testing, and other investigative actions.<sup>29</sup> That said, the outcome of analyzing all the evidence across the available studies is unsatisfyingly anodyne: Basically, agencies with high clearance rates tend to employ some of the best practices that seem most obvious—like having good working relationships and collaborating across units, assigning cases to investigators rather than using triage methods, and using clearance rates as a performance measure.



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Conversely, so evident it hardly seems worth mentioning, agencies that don't use effective evidence-gathering methods or have poor relationships with crime labs perform more poorly in their case clearance rates. It would appear that better practices do generally help occasion better outcomes, but are often outweighed by individual case characteristics that reduce solvability and other discrete factors.

## 3.2

### CASE CHARACTERISTICS PLAY A ROLE

Case type prevalence plays a key role in the efficacy of investigations, which makes sense. Some kinds of cases are just more difficult to solve, according to research. Some are easier, such as cases where the victim knows the perpetrator, there are reliable witnesses, or there is decisive forensic evidence. If you run a police department in a place where there are very few complex cases, you will likely fare better in your case clearance rates.

<sup>28</sup> Anthony A. Braga and Desiree Dusseault, "Can Homicide Detectives Improve Homicide Clearance Rates?" *Crime and Delinquency*, Nov. 25, 2016. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0011128716679164?journalCode=cadc> (accessed July 31, 2025).

<sup>29</sup> Prince, Lum and Koper, "Effective police investigative practices: an evidence-assessment of the research."

One study from George Mason University's Cynthia Lum, though, found that adherence to best practices in each organization made more of a difference than case types:

*[F]or each one-unit increase in the number of organizational best practices a department adheres to, there is a 95% increase in the likelihood of solving a homicide. In total, the findings from that and this study indicate that while case solvability might be somewhat important to clearing cases, organizational practices and approaches to investigations also play a significant role in an agency's ability to solve crimes.<sup>30</sup>*

Response time also feeds into the success of investigations, as does understaffing, morale, or resource strains in departments. Moreover, depending on the deployment of police resources, officers may not have enough discretion to focus on violent crimes, especially when they are assigned to respond to calls for service, which largely are for more minor incidents. This reality is reflected in the success of alternate-responder/diversion models, discussed below in Part 7.2.

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*... depending on the deployment of police resources, officers may not have enough discretion to focus on violent crimes, especially when they are assigned to respond to calls for service, which largely are for more minor incidents.*

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### 3.3

## THE BURGEONING PROBLEM OF GUNS

One huge variable that has changed dramatically in recent years is the prevalence of guns and gun crimes, both in sheer numbers and as a proportion of all violent crimes. According to the Council on Criminal Justice:

<sup>30</sup> Cynthia Lum, Charles Wellford, Thomas Scott, Heather Vovak, Jacqueline A. Scherer, and Michael Goodier, “Differences between high and low performing police agencies in clearing robberies, aggravated assaults, and burglaries: Findings from an eight-agency case study,” *Police Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1177/10986111231182728> (accessed July 13, 2025).



*Since 2020, more than three-quarters of homicides have been committed with guns. This marks an increase from 1980 to 1990, when firearms were used in fewer than two-thirds of reported homicides.*<sup>31</sup>

According to Jeff Asher, prominent crime data analyst and co-founder of AH Datalytics, as quoted in *The Atlantic*:

*[T]he share of murders committed by firearms has crept up at a nearly identical rate to the steady decline of murder clearances. Correlation does not equal causation, but if you plot the two together, you see a very strong correlation in the last 40 years.*<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps the prevalence of guns is another reason we have sagged in solve rates. That would also explain the accelerated pace of murder clearance rate declines from 2019 to 2022, given that gun ownership exploded in that same period, with 17 million guns going on sale in 2020 and 23.4 million the following year.<sup>33</sup> That is a 152% increase over 2011, and a 442% increase over 2001.<sup>34</sup>

Gun homicides are more difficult to solve than other homicides.<sup>35</sup> Asher sets forth some reasons for that: “They take place from farther away. You often have fewer witnesses. There’s less physical evidence.... Most of these self-solvers (murders that have clear evidence right away, such as a person caught standing over a victim and stabbing them) are non-firearm murders. So a higher share of gun violence can lead to a lower clearance rate.”<sup>36</sup>

Homicide cases already present a special set of problems for investigations. “Homicide cases can be very difficult to clear—and violent firearms-related cases can be even more

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<sup>31</sup> “Trends in Homicide: What You Need to Know,” Council on Criminal Justice, December 2023. <https://counciloncj.org/homicide-trends-report/> (accessed July 31, 2025).

<sup>32</sup> Derek Thompson, “Six Reasons the Murder Clearance Rate Is at an All-Time Low: For the past 60 years, U.S. detectives have gotten worse at one of the most basic jobs of law enforcement,” *The Atlantic*, 7 July 2022. <https://www.theatlantic.com/newsletters/archive/2022/07/police-murder-clearance-rate/661500/> (accessed July 13, 2025).

<sup>33</sup> Jennifer Mascia and Chip Brownlee, “How many guns are circulating in the U.S.?” *The Trace*, 6 March 2023. <https://www.thetrace.org/2023/03/guns-america-data-atf-total/> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Anthony A. Braga, “Improving police clearance rates of shootings: A review of the evidence,” Manhattan Institute, 20 June 2021. <https://manhattan.institute/article/improving-police-clearance-rates-of-shootings-a-review-of-the-evidence> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>36</sup> Thompson, “Six Reasons the Murder Clearance Rate Is at an All-Time Low.”

so,” Patrick Yoes, Fraternal Order of Police National President, has said.<sup>37</sup> “Closing these types of crimes requires diligence, manpower, and a sustained investigative effort. Given the limited resources of law enforcement agencies, it’s important to provide the significant, dedicated resources that clearing these crimes requires, especially given their oftentimes heinous nature.... When we can clear more crimes like these, our communities are safer places to live and work.”

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*In the face of gun trends, historical approaches to clearing cases such as using patrol officers and relying on evidence gathered at the scene is not holding up.*

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In the face of gun trends, historical approaches to clearing cases such as using patrol officers and relying on evidence gathered at the scene is not holding up. According to a Manhattan Institute report on shootings:

*Enhanced investigative resources, improved management structures, and oversight processes can increase homicide clearance rates and improve the chances that murderers are apprehended. ... More gang- and drug-related gun homicides that plague most urban areas can be cleared with a focused investigation strategy. Given the considerable overlap between fatal and nonfatal shooting events, so, too, might more of these latter crimes be cleared. The effective investigation of shootings can help prevent further cascades of gun violence in cities by deterring retaliation and by incapacitating violent individuals who could persist in their crimes or end up as victims of retaliatory shootings.<sup>38</sup>*

The report described how the Boston Police Department achieved a 23% improvement after boosting best practices. This militates in favor of shifting resources toward investigators as a bigger share of budgets in all, but especially low-performing police departments.

<sup>37</sup> John Kennedy, U.S. Senator for Louisiana, “Kennedy, Booker introduce bipartisan bill to help law enforcement solve crimes,” 8 February 2024. <https://www.kennedy.senate.gov/public/2024/2/kennedy-booker-introduce-bipartisan-bill-to-help-law-enforcement-solve-crimes#:~:text=When%20we%20can%20clear%20more,enforcement%20agency%20strives%20to%20achieve> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>38</sup> Anthony A. Braga, “Improving police clearance rates of shootings: A review of the evidence,” Manhattan Institute, 20 June 2021. <https://manhattan.institute/article/improving-police-clearance-rates-of-shootings-a-review-of-the-evidence> (accessed June 25, 2025).

*The Atlantic* bemoaned the state of affairs in 2022, noting “American violence is resurgent. Gun murders rose to their highest figure on record in 2020, the last year for which we have complete data. While violent crime is rising, America’s police departments are struggling more than ever to bring the perpetrators to justice.”<sup>39</sup> And even though the number of shootings has been decreasing since that spike; still, in 2023, about eight out of 10 U.S. murders involved a firearm (79%).<sup>40</sup> That was among the highest percentages since 1968, the earliest year for which the CDC has online records.

While shootings have abated since 2020, the notable gap in clearances for fatal and nonfatal shootings seems to be ubiquitous in the cities that have examined this issue.<sup>41</sup> In Chicago, between 2010 and 2016, annual clearance rates for gun homicides ranged from 26% to 46% and from 5% to 11% for nonfatal shootings. In Durham, N.C., half of all gun homicides in 2015 resulted in an arrest but only 10% of nonfatal shootings.<sup>42</sup>

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“*In Durham, N.C., half of all gun homicides in 2015 resulted in an arrest but only 10 percent of nonfatal shootings.*”

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It would be helpful to the field if research were conducted into the value of shifting more resources to non-fatal shootings. Some research shows solving non-fatal shootings prevents follow-on/retaliatory violence and increases the public’s trust in the police.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Thompson, “Six Reasons the Murder Clearance Rate Is at an All-Time Low.” See also USA Facts, “How many people die from gun-related injuries in the US each month?” 11 March 2025. <https://usafacts.org/answers/how-many-people-die-from-gun-related-injuries-in-the-us-each-month/country/united-states/> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>40</sup> John Gramlich, “What the data says about gun deaths in the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, 5 March 2025. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/03/05/what-the-data-says-about-gun-deaths-in-the-us/> (accessed July 10, 2025).

<sup>41</sup> Anthony A. Braga, “Improving Police Clearance Rates of Shootings: A Review of the Evidence,” Manhattan Institute, 20 July 2021. <https://manhattan.institute/article/improving-police-clearance-rates-of-shootings-a-review-of-the-evidence> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

## PART 4

# POLICE-COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Among the most important and complex factors impacting clearance of violent crimes is community trust in the police. Franklin explains: “Any savvy police detective who’s really involved in solving crimes will tell you we can’t be effective in solving ... serious crimes without the cooperation of the community. We need people to come forward when we knock on their doors to ask them if they saw anything or heard anything; we need them to help us out. We need tips. We need people calling in. We need people offering this information, but when you have driven this wedge in between the police and community,” it hampers the success of the law enforcement function.<sup>44</sup>

A 2023 report from the Council on Criminal Justice limited to homicides underscored the importance of public trust.<sup>45</sup> In *Newsweek*, CCJ co-author Ernesto Lopez said:

*Other factors, such as increased police response times and declines in public trust in police[,] may also affect initial apprehension and witness cooperation and can lower clearance rates. A lower clearance rate does not automatically equate to less police*

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<sup>44</sup> Franklin Zoom interview, 2025.

<sup>45</sup> “Trends in Homicide: What You Need to Know,” Council on Criminal Justice, December 2023. <https://counciloncj.org/homicide-trends-report/> (accessed July 10, 2025).

*effectiveness, but when factors like low trust result in less cooperation, that is a major problem for our justice system.<sup>46</sup>*

Part of the problem may also be that the details surrounding homicides have become less clear over time. The share of homicides with no information available on “circumstances of the homicide,” which include arguments and homicides committed while committing another felony, doubled from 22% in 1985 to 43% in 2022, according to the CCJ report. In those same years, the share of cases with unknown relationship between the victim and the perpetrator also swelled.



*It is no surprise, then, that during the months after the public uproar over the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others in 2020, clearance rates deteriorated because of the contemporary atmosphere of mistrust of police.*



It is no surprise, then, that during the months after the public uproar over the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others in 2020, clearance rates deteriorated because of the contemporary atmosphere of mistrust of police.<sup>47</sup> Unfortunately, there has not been a restoration of trust in law enforcement in the years since 2020. Between public impugment, loss of morale, and understaffing, the way forward will be challenging for law enforcement leaders to build the needed trust between police and community members.

<sup>46</sup> Sean O'Driscoll, “America’s Police Can’t Solve Murders Anymore,” *Newsweek*, 19 December 2023. <https://www.newsweek.com/murder-clearance-rate-decline-report-council-criminal-justice-homicide-rates-1853748> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>47</sup> Hady Mawajdeh, “Police are solving fewer crimes. Why?” *Vox*, 23 December 2023. <https://www.vox.com/2023/12/23/24012514/police-crime-data-solve-rate-eddie-garcia-today-explained> (accessed June 25, 2025).

## PART 5

# WORKFORCE ISSUES

Since 2020, confidence in police agencies, as well as internal police morale, have continued to suffer, affecting crime and clearance rates in multifaceted ways. It will likely take years of study to unpack these effects more fully, but the decline in violent crime clearance rates has accelerated since that time.

There have been increases in police retirements, reductions in applications to become officers, and morale problems in police agencies.<sup>48</sup> The Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics (LEMAS) survey in 2016 showed that for agencies with 100-plus officers, approximately 27% of sworn personnel were specifically assigned to investigative functions.<sup>49</sup> But in 2022, law enforcement agencies show a decline to only 15% of sworn personnel assigned to investigations.<sup>50</sup> According to researchers, “This decline may be partially due to COVID’s impacts on the supply of law enforcement. However, the decline may also be due to demands for police reform and defunding,” which have contributed to recruitment and retention problems in many organizations, retrenchment of some affirmative policing strategies, and in some places, the shifting of detectives back to patrol

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<sup>48</sup> Nikki Pressley and Ross Jackson, “Ensuring justice: Innovative approaches to improve crime clearance rates,” Right on Crime, December 2024. [https://rightoncrime.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/2024-12-ROC-Crime-Clearance-Rates-PressleyJackson\\_FINAL.pdf](https://rightoncrime.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/2024-12-ROC-Crime-Clearance-Rates-PressleyJackson_FINAL.pdf) (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>49</sup> Lum, “Differences between high and low performing police agencies in clearing robberies, aggravated assaults, and burglaries.”

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

to fill vacancies due to officers (and detectives) leaving agencies prematurely.<sup>51</sup> Combined with increases in crime in several jurisdictions (and for specific types of crimes that often require significant investigative resources), improving investigations in evidence-based ways may be challenging in the near future.<sup>52</sup>



*Given the highly unusual and complex COVID era and the impact of protests against police violence on officer retention and morale, it is fair to be skeptical of any research covering those years that claims to elucidate precise causes for clearance rates changes.*



Given the highly unusual and complex COVID era and the impact of protests against police violence on officer retention and morale, it is fair to be skeptical of any research covering those years that claims to elucidate precise causes for clearance rates changes. The only thing clear about police agency workforce issues today is that there are layers upon layers of complex intersecting factors that influence police agencies and officer behavior, and that these factors necessarily muddy the view of researchers examining clearance rates. That said, more research in some of the areas discussed above would be welcome to the field.

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<sup>51</sup> Lum, “Differences between high and low performing police agencies in clearing robberies, aggravated assaults, and burglaries.”; Ian T. Adams, Scott M. Mourtgos, and Justin Nix, “Turnover in large US policing agencies following the George Floyd protests,” *Journal of Criminal Justice*, September–October 2023; see also Tyler Smith, “Community Engagement with Law Enforcement after High-Profile Acts of Police Violence,” *American Economic Review: Insights*, March 2025.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

## PART 6

# POLICE SPENDING AND THE ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES

One conspicuous idea for shoring up sagging clearance rates would be to simply add more resources to police overall; but research encompassing 50 of the largest cities concluded that adding officers or blindly increasing police funding in and of themselves do not lead to material differences in clearance rates for violent crimes such as homicide.<sup>53</sup> In a 2019 study, David A. Makin of Washington State University et al. note that:

*Studies demonstrate that police resources do matter in the provision of public safety outcomes.<sup>54</sup> However, the likelihood of clearance of a crime is contingent on the availability of policing resources devoted to investigation..., including the ability to actively search for evidence and to spend time on the development of leads.<sup>55</sup>*

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<sup>53</sup> David Bjerk, “Does greater police funding help catch more murderers?” *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies*, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jels.12325> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>54</sup> David A. Makin, Dale W. Willits, Guangzhen Wu, Kathryn O. DuBois, Ruibin Lu, Mary K. Stohr, Wendy Koslicki et al., “Marijuana legalization and crime clearance rates: Testing proponent assertions in Colorado and Washington State,” *Police Quarterly*, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098611118786255> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>55</sup> Mark Cooney, “Evidence as partisanship,” *Law & Society Review*, 1994. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3053999> (accessed June 25, 2025).



Another study from California confirmed that despite high police spending, expending resources alone isn't sufficient:

*The odds of being imprisoned per arrest have risen to near-record heights. However, despite record spending on California law enforcement agencies in recent years, one of the core measures of law enforcement effectiveness—crime clearance rates—has fallen to historically low levels. ... Over the past three decades, these clearance rates fell by 41%, from a 22.3% clearance rate in 1990 to 13.2% in 2022, which equates to fewer than one in seven crimes solved. ... California's decline in overall clearance rates has been driven by falling property felony clearances (-59%), though the solve rate for violent felonies also fell during the 1990 – 2022 period (-14%).<sup>56</sup>*

This body of evidence underscores the importance of using the right resources for the crimes being addressed and the importance of police personnel being qualified and well-trained in the precise crime type they are investigating.

Keeping the right personnel on the right tasks is, of course, tricky to maintain because crimes are sporadic and available personnel are in constant flux. This is exacerbated by record-low staffing levels in many police agencies.<sup>57</sup>

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*According to one study of how police spend their time in various city police departments, less than 1% to up to 4% of time is spent on violent crimes.*

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If resources were properly allocated, it would certainly be an improvement over the current state of affairs: According to one study of how police spend their time in various city police departments, less than 1% to up to 4% of time is spent on violent crimes; the largest block of time, roughly about a third of officer time, is devoted to “responding to noncriminal

<sup>56</sup> Mike Males, *California law enforcement agencies are spending more but solving fewer crimes* (San Francisco: Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, 2024), <https://www.cjcj.org/reports-publications/report/california-law-enforcement-agencies-are-spending-more-but-solving-fewer-crimes> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>57</sup> See “The State of Recruitment & Retention: A Continuing Crisis for Policing: 2024 Survey Results,” International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2024. [https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/IACP\\_Recruitment\\_Report\\_Survey.pdf](https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/IACP_Recruitment_Report_Survey.pdf) (accessed July 10, 2025); see also Dr. Gene Ira Katz, DMJ, “Insufficient police staffing continues throughout the U.S.,” *American Police Beat*, 3 May, 2025.

calls.”<sup>58</sup> Another hefty share of the day is spent on traffic accidents and enforcement, and a good chunk of time goes to responding to property crimes and other nonviolent incidents. Very little time is categorized as “proactive,” an undefined term in the reporting. One study showed how focusing on traffic and low-level crimes, and its likely impact on clearance rates, is exacerbated when departments rely on fees from low-level stops to fund their departments, concluding that “police departments in cities that collect a greater share of their revenue from fees solve violent and property crimes at significantly lower rates.”<sup>59</sup>

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*Many officers themselves would prefer to focus on serious crimes.*

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Many officers themselves would prefer to focus on serious crimes. According to Derek Thompson, contributing writer at *The Atlantic*, “Police today spend much of their time clearing homelessness or responding to mental-health crises in downtown areas. That’s not being a detective. That’s being a social worker with a gun in your pocket.”<sup>60</sup> This attitude on the part of police officers is common: According to Edgardo “Eddie” Garcia, chief of the Dallas Police Department since 2021: “I started 32 years ago. And I’ll tell you what, being a police officer 32 years ago is different than it is today. There’s a lot more on officers’ plates, quite frankly. Officers are asked to do too much, to deal with a lot of the social ills that are impacting crime.”<sup>61</sup>

The bottom line on resources is that how they are used matters more than the raw numbers. Police budgets have gone up over time, never down, but clearance rates have plummeted. Something isn’t adding up.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Jeff Asher and Ben Horwitz, “How Do the Police Actually Spend Their Time?” *The New York Times*, June 19, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/19/upshot/unrest-police-time-violent-crime.html> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>59</sup> Rebecca Goldstein, Michael W. Sances, and Hye Young You, “Exploitative Revenues, Law Enforcement, and the Quality of Government Service,” *Urban Affairs Review*, 2018. <https://hyeyoungyou.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/finesandpolicing.pdf> (accessed Aug. 26, 2025).

<sup>60</sup> Thompson, “Six Reasons the Murder Clearance Rate Is at an All-Time Low.”

<sup>61</sup> Hady Mawajdeh, “Police are solving fewer crimes. Why?” *Vox*, 23 Dec. 2023. <https://www.vox.com/2023/12/23/24012514/police-crime-data-solve-rate-eddie-garcia-today-explained> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>62</sup> Grace Manthey, Frank Esposito, and Amanda Hernandez, “Despite ‘defunding’ claims, police funding has increased in many US cities,” *ABC News*, 16 Oct. 16 2022. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/defunding-claims-police-funding-increased-us-cities/story?id=91511971> (accessed June 25, 2025).

## PART 7

# WHAT WORKS TO BOOST EFFECTIVE CLEARANCE OF VIOLENT CASES?

There is a wealth of information about strategies that reduce crime. Many of these same strategies also reduce institutional load on police agencies so they can focus their resources on cracking violent crimes.

### 7.1

## ORGANIZATIONAL BEST PRACTICES

While the diversity of departments makes pinning down precise causal relationships tricky, studies have identified numerous factors that are associated with higher clearance rates at some agencies, such as:

- more formal and specialized training;
- better management oversight;
- use of accountability mechanisms and performance metrics for investigations;
- assignment of cases to investigators instead of employing a triage method;
- using cold case units, case screenings, team policing, and task force approaches;
- fostering good working relationships among law enforcement staff;

- emphasizing clearance rates as performance measures; and
- formally prompting investigators to seek out witnesses and provide witness protection programs.<sup>63</sup>

## 7.2

## CO-RESPONSE/ALTERNATIVE RESPONSE MODELS, DIVERSION, AND VIOLENCE INTERRUPTION

A promising bloom of interventions that limit interactions with police, freeing them to focus on violent crime investigations, merit further study and scaled-up implementation. These include programs that address disorder on the streets without resorting to arrests. One such program, Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion, has been replicated in dozens of localities since it was piloted in Seattle in 2011.<sup>64</sup>



*Baltimore saw a 32% reduction in homicides in the first four years after it implemented a community violence intervention program called Safe Streets Baltimore in 2007.*



Other programs sidestep law enforcement entirely. For example, Baltimore saw a 32% reduction in homicides in the first four years after it implemented a community violence intervention program called Safe Streets Baltimore in 2007. The program trains members of the community who are known to be trusted messengers (trusted messengers generally include people who previously committed violent crimes or were in gangs, and others who are able to garner trust within communities at risk of committing violence) who reach out to people at risk for gun violence involvement and provide education, conflict mediation, and violence interruption.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Prince, Lum and Koper, “Effective police investigative practices.”

<sup>64</sup> Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion Support Bureau, <https://leadbureau.org> (accessed September 14, 2025).

<sup>65</sup> Daniel W. Webster, Carla G. Tilchin, and Mitchell L. Doucette, “Estimating the Effects of Safe Streets Baltimore on Gun Violence, 2007–2022,” Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Center for Gun Violence Solutions, March 2023. <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/sites/default/files/2023-10/estimating-the-effects-of-safe-streets-baltimore-on-gun-violence-july-2023.pdf> (accessed June 25, 2025).

A growing number of states and cities have adopted models, sometimes referred to as co-response models, where instead of sending police to respond to every call, the jurisdiction sends trained mental health professionals, social workers, and/or other combinations of personnel either instead of or in addition to law enforcement officers. According to the Brennan Center for Justice, even though data are still limited, these programs are able to “lessen the burden on law enforcement as first responders and better address mental illness and substance use by connecting vulnerable populations to appropriate services.”<sup>66</sup> Given the successes thus far in preventing crime and unnecessary arrests, these programs need to be scaled and studied widely.

## 7.3

## ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES TO PUBLIC SPACES

Adjustments to environmental factors such as lighting and amenities in community public spaces are also proven to reduce crime. In a randomized controlled study of lighting in 40 public housing developments in New York City that had experienced heightened crime, “increased levels of lighting led to a 36% reduction in index crimes, as well as certain property crimes ... that took place outdoors at night, with an overall 4% reduction in index crimes.”<sup>67</sup> Similar crime-preventing effects are seen from programs for at-risk youth and families.<sup>68</sup> Thus, if cities made the capital investment in environmental changes like better lighting, more law enforcement resources (particularly personnel) could be allocated to investigations.

*...if cities made the capital investment in environmental changes like better lighting, more law enforcement resources (particularly personnel) could be allocated to investigations.*

<sup>66</sup> Hernandez D. Stroud and Rosemary Nidiry, “A Federal Agenda to Promote Safety and Justice,” Brennan Center for Justice, 30 January 2025. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/policy-solutions/federal-agenda-promote-safety-and-justice> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>67</sup> Aaron Chalfin, “Reducing Crime Through Environmental Design,” University of Chicago Crime Lab, 2015 – 2021. <https://crimelab.uchicago.edu/projects/nyc-street-lighting-reducing-crime-through-environmental-design/> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>68</sup> John K. Roman, “20 Strategies for Reducing Crime in Cities,” Vital City, 10 Oct. 2023. <https://www.vitalcitynyc.org/articles/twenty-strategies-for-reducing-crime-in-cities> (accessed June 25, 2025).

Additional research into these and other emerging models for addressing violence would be useful, but there is little need to wait. Rather, it is apparent that most interventions to tamp down violence better prevent future crime (and at greatly reduced monetary, social, and moral costs) than incarcerating people after they commit crimes. It would be encouraging to see government leaders committing to these programs at scale and gathering additional support for their results. Once the programs prove their mettle, departments should be incentivized to apply savings gleaned from these programs to investigative resources matched to their local needs.

## 7.4

## TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES

Numerous technologies have advanced crime-fighting, including DNA identification, body-worn cameras, cell phone records, and electronic discovery. Beyond the obvious need for improved, modern data systems that communicate with each other and produce data to guide policies and strategies, there are additional technologies that can be applied to crime-solving that will reduce workload and free up time to devote to the most serious crimes. These include text reminders for court appearances, which have been shown to improve rates of appearances, and should be scaled and implemented for probation appointments. Other technology solutions could include simplifying fee notices and payment protocols, license plate readers, facial recognition, keeping databases relating to police use of force, and better surveillance equipment. It is critical that for any of these uses, the advantages must be weighed carefully against any intrusions on civil liberties.

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## PART 8

# MARIJUANA LEGALIZATION: A NATURAL CASE STUDY

Legalization of recreational adult use of marijuana in many states over the last decade or so has provided a series of natural experiments to test what would happen if a policy change freed up resources that could be reallocated to more pressing public safety needs. As a result, some strong data has emerged from the available studies showing that violent crime clearance rates have gone up after legalization.

The question of how legalization has impacted crime rates has garnered a much larger body of research than has the impact on clearance rates, but that issue is far from settled. For example, a study published in the *Journal of Criminal Justice* in 2021 found some evidence of increases in crimes after legalization in Oregon in 2014, but given that there is a larger body of divergent and inconclusive results on what happened to crime rates after implementing legalization in other jurisdictions, the study concluded that more research is needed to harmonize the results and make longer-term conclusions about crime rates after legalization.<sup>69</sup> Some studies have found decreases in serious violent crimes after legalization.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Guangzhen Wu, Ming Wen, and Fernando A. Wilson, “Impact of recreational marijuana legalization on crime: Evidence from Oregon,” *Journal of Criminal Justice* (2021). 101742. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2020.101742> (accessed July 10, 2025).

<sup>70</sup> Jorgensen, “Examining the effects of legalizing marijuana in Colorado and Washington on clearance rates: a quasi-experimental design.” <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11292-020-09446-7> (accessed July 10, 2025).

The evidence is strong that there could be improved police performance after legalization, though there are still many questions.

## 8.1

## DID THE WAR ON DRUGS FUEL CLEARANCE RATE DECLINES?

The expanded scope of the criminal justice system in recent decades may even play a role in the trajectory of clearance rates overall. While the question does not appear to have been studied, it seems likely that the tremendous explosion in the people arrested and prosecuted in the timeframe coincident with the Great Decline means the two are related.

Here are the facts: In 1980, 315,974 people were held in U.S. prisons (state and federal).<sup>71</sup> By 2021, that number had ballooned to 1.2 million. From 1973 through 2009, the prison population multiplied by seven.<sup>72</sup> These figures do not include federal and state jails, which hold mostly pretrial populations and people serving short sentences—these had reached 636,000 in 2021. And in 2021, there were almost four million additional people on probation or parole. From another perspective, in 2025, we incarcerated 580 per 100,000 people in the U.S., whereas in 1980, the U.S. incarcerated just 139 people per 100,000.<sup>73</sup> Drug prosecutions have been a huge driver of punitive expansion during the decades since 1980.

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*It would seem a ripe area for research to examine whether the sheer scope of the system has itself made solving discrete cases less likely. Is the U.S.’s one-way-ratchet-up approach to crime since the 1980s what’s been biting us?*

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<sup>71</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics “State and Federal Prisoners, 1925-85,” undated. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/sfp2585.pdf> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>72</sup> The Sentencing Project, “Mass Incarceration Trends,” May 21, 2024. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/mass-incarceration-trends/> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>73</sup> Wendy Sawyer and Peter Wagner, “Mass incarceration: The whole pie 2025,” Prison Policy Initiative, 14 March 2024. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2025.html> (accessed June 25, 2025).



It would seem a ripe area for research to examine whether the sheer scope of the system has itself made solving discrete cases less likely. Is the U.S.'s one-way-ratchet-up approach to crime since the 1980s what's been biting us? The U.S. continues to arrest and incarcerate at a much higher rate than most countries in the world (while also doing a much worse job at solving violent crimes (see above)). Would a logical solution be to shrink the overall system to bring the United States in line with peer countries? Or at least to jettison the public disorder and other minor cases that clog it?

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*There is good reason to hope that shifting the emphasis of the system toward dangerous violence and away from drugs and disorder can deliver public safety and reduce unnecessary contact with law enforcement.*

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There is good reason to hope that shifting the emphasis of the system toward dangerous violence and away from drugs and disorder can deliver public safety and reduce unnecessary contact with law enforcement. As veteran law enforcement officer Franklin explains, “Serious and sometimes violent drug sellers do not commit burglaries, assaults and robberies of average citizens. ... They may rob or assault another drug seller, but not regular citizens. As for drug users, ... it is true that many drug users who cannot or do not work, do commit robberies, burglaries, and assaults in order to fund their addictions. Through specific policy changes we can dramatically change this dynamic.”<sup>74</sup>

## 8.2

### WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT THE MARIJUANA LEGALIZATION CLEARANCE RATE OUTCOMES?

Leaders in legalizing states have attested that they have observed legalization freeing up law enforcement resources. For example, after Washington State had implemented its legalization program, then-Gov. Jay Inslee and Attorney General Bob Ferguson wrote:

<sup>74</sup> Franklin Zoom interview, 2025.

*Our state's efforts to regulate the sale of marijuana are succeeding. A few years ago, the illegal trafficking of marijuana lined the pockets of criminals everywhere. Now, in our state, illegal trafficking activity is being displaced by a closely regulated marijuana industry that pays hundreds of millions of dollars in taxes. This frees up significant law enforcement resources to protect our communities in other, more pressing ways.<sup>75</sup>*

On top of observed effects by law enforcement, there is some solid support in the academic literature as well for the theory that legalization has improved violent crime clearance rates. Most notably, a Washington State University study examined the aftermath of legalization in Washington and Colorado in 2019 and logged promising findings. The data showed that:

*Prior to legalization, clearance rates for violent and property crimes were declining in both Colorado and Washington. However, immediately after legalization, the slope of the clearance rate trends shifted upward for violent crime in both of the treatment states. Conversely, while there was a jump in the trend line for average violent clearance rate at the point of intervention at the national level, postintervention clearance trends did not shift upward as occurred in the treatment states.<sup>76</sup>*

After analyzing these results, the study concluded:

*Advocates of legalization expected improvements in police effectiveness through the reduction in police time and attention to cannabis offenses, thus allowing them to reallocate resources to more serious offenses. Using 2010 to 2015 Uniform Crime Reports data, the research undertakes interrupted time-series analysis on the offenses known to be cleared by arrest to create monthly counts of violent and property crime clearance rate as well as disaggregated counts by crime type. Findings suggest no negative effects of legalization on crime clearance rates. Moreover, evidence suggests some crime clearance rates have improved. Our findings suggest legalization has resulted in improvements in some clearance rates.<sup>77</sup>*

In an analysis looking at “Differences Between High and Low Performing Police Agencies in Clearing Robberies, Aggravated Assaults, and Burglaries,” experts at Washington State

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<sup>75</sup> “Colorado and Washington: Life After Legalization and Regulation,” Marijuana Policy Project, 2018. <https://www.cga.ct.gov/2019/GLdata/Tmy/2019HB-07371-R000322-MPP-TMY.PDF> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>76</sup> David A. Makin, et al. “Marijuana legalization and crime clearance rates.”

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

University looked at how practices of high- and low-performing agencies impacted results in clearing cases. The study confirmed that investigative practices do matter to police agencies' clearance rates, concluding that "while case solvability might be somewhat important to clearing cases, organizational practices and approaches to investigations also play a significant role in an agency's ability to solve crimes."<sup>78</sup>

Compounding the results shown in Colorado and Washington, a study published in the *International Journal of Drug Policy* in 2022 examined the "[e]ffects of recreational marijuana legalization on clearance rates for violent crimes" concentrated on the aftermath of Oregon's 2014 legalization, examining data from the federal government's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) data from 2007 to 2017.<sup>79</sup> That study determined there was:

*[S]ome evidence suggesting a beneficial impact of legalization on violent crime clearances, as manifested by significant increases in the clearance rate for overall violent crimes and that for aggravated assault in OR counties relative to those in the non-legalized states following legalization.*

Specifically, the data showed:

*On average, following legalization, counties in OR experienced an increase of approximately 4.5% in the clearance rate for violent crimes in general and approximately 5.92% in aggravated assault clearance rate relative to the counties in the non-legalized states.*

While these studies indicate that legalization is capable of improving violent crime clearance rates,<sup>80</sup> the extent of any effects will depend on many things, including whether leaders affirmatively elect to use the resources gained from not making marijuana arrests for violent crime abatement instead.<sup>81</sup> The need for buy-in from leadership is especially critical in the context of police agencies, which operate in a chain-of-command structure. This is important to recognize because one study that looked at local police activity after a new policy decreased enforcement of marijuana possessions in Prince Georges County,

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<sup>78</sup> Lum, "Differences between high and low performing police agencies in clearing robberies, aggravated assaults, and burglaries."

<sup>79</sup> Wu, "Effects of recreational marijuana legalization on clearance rates for violent crimes."

<sup>80</sup> Julian Morris, "Does Legalizing Marijuana Reduce Crime?" Reason Foundation, September 2018. <https://a8d50b36.delivery.rocketcdn.me/wp-content/uploads/does-legalizing-marijuana-reduce-crime.pdf> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>81</sup> Lum, "Differences between high and low performing police agencies in clearing robberies, aggravated assaults, and burglaries."

Maryland, concluded that the agencies there shifted their enforcement toward other low-level crimes, such as non-aggravated assaults and DUIs.<sup>82</sup> While this county still realized an enforcement boost in other areas after marijuana enforcement lessened, it was not realized in the violent felony categories.



*... one study that looked at local police activity after a new policy decreased enforcement of marijuana possessions in Prince Georges County, Maryland, concluded that the agencies there shifted their enforcement toward other low-level crimes, such as non-aggravated assaults and DUIs.*



It is quite likely that these police agencies shifted to other low-level offense categories because their performance metrics were attached to numbers of arrests and had not been adjusted to incentivize looking at harder-to-solve cases, and/or because individual line officers had not adjusted their own practices. Some researchers have posited that clearance rates could have gone up in the jurisdictions indicated because police in those departments who were motivated to keep up arrests were making questionable arrests in serious cases just to meet their numbers.<sup>83</sup> That said, the possibility of officers shifting to other misdemeanors that are easy to solve seems as plausible, if not more so, as was demonstrated in the Prince Georges County study. There are not enough studies to tease this out, but whatever the reasons for increased clearance rates, it is evident that marijuana has been an important source of arrests for officers, and legalization programs should include direction to officers to focus on more serious and violent offenses rather than low-hanging fruit. This has not been a feature of any legislation thus far and could be an interesting addition to future legalization bills.

<sup>82</sup> Meghan Kozlowski, Emily Glazener, James A. Mitchell, James P. Lynch, Jinney Smith, “Decriminalization and Depenalization of Marijuana Possession: A Case Study of Enforcement Outcomes in Prince Georges County,” *Criminology, Criminal Justice, Law & Society*, 2019. <https://ccjls.scholasticahq.com/article/9911-decriminalization-and-depenalization-of-marijuana-possession-a-case-study-of-enforcement-outcomes-in-prince-george-s-county> (accessed July 13, 2025).

<sup>83</sup> Wu, “Effects of recreational marijuana legalization on clearance rates for violent crimes.”

The Prince Georges County experience also reminds us that new police practices take time to fully implement, and police attitudes toward marijuana, and low-level enforcement in general, are still evolving. Major Franklin explains: “Police leaders will tell you... that we really need [marijuana to stay illegal] so that we can ‘know it when we smell it.’ It then gives a pretext for a search.” This practice of arresting people for low-level crimes like marijuana in order to fish for a bigger offense to charge is not an effective technique, according to Franklin.

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A similar dynamic could be at play in another study out of Boise State University and University of Colorado Colorado Springs that attempted to replicate the clearance rate increases that were seen in Colorado and Washington, but their effort discerned no real change and concluded that legalization is not a reliable way to improve clearance rates.<sup>84</sup> The Boise team, however, did not discount the findings in the earlier study. Rather, they noted that their effects were much milder than those shown in the other states; pointed out some data limitations and methodology differences in the two studies; bemoaned the lack of additional studies; and hypothesized that some effects of marijuana legalization may be blunted or delayed by a lack of corresponding change in the enforcement expectations, as noted above, or delayed until the culture of enforcement shifts over time.

The paucity of studies and lack of uniformity in the study outcomes can also be partly explained by the sheer number of variables at play in crime and policing, which combine to make it difficult to ascertain precise reasons for changes in case clearance rates, as discussed in Part 3. First, of course, is that success at achieving improvements in clearance

<sup>84</sup> Jorgensen, “Examining the effects of legalizing marijuana in Colorado and Washington on clearance rates.”

rates will vary by department and based on local leadership. There is a large variability in performance in police departments across the nation.<sup>85</sup>

Second, there simply hasn't been enough analysis of the states that have passed legalization measures to better predict the expected effect of legalization on violent crime clearance rates. But despite some caveats, the data available thus far support and are fully consistent with the conclusion that legalization of marijuana can improve overall law enforcement, and, when appropriately prioritized, can lead to better violent crime clearances.



*But despite some caveats, the data available thus far support and are fully consistent with the conclusion that legalization of marijuana can improve overall law enforcement, and, when appropriately prioritized, can lead to better violent crime clearances.*



Discussing the inherently complex and dynamic set of causal factors that affect how police behave in the field, a 2021 Oregon study from multiple researchers, including one from the seminal study of Colorado and Washington discussed earlier, admitted the robustness of earlier findings still needs a lot of shoring up:

*[L]egalization supporters claimed that legalization would improve police performance in solving serious crimes, as police officers could reallocate their resources from marijuana possession arrests to focus on more serious crimes, and would thus result in improved clearance rates for these crimes. This argument sounds reasonable. However, due to the lack of research, it is not clear how this policy change may affect police reallocation of resources. Although there is some evidence generally suggesting a positive connection between police resources and clearance rates, it is far from conclusive; evidence remains*

<sup>85</sup> Lum, "Differences between high and low performing police agencies in clearing robberies, aggravated assaults, and burglaries."

*elusive about the conditions under which police resources could translate to favorable outcomes as reflected by improved clearance rates.<sup>86</sup> [Internal citations omitted.]*

The lack of research in this area may partly rest on the lack of examples of policy changes to study that reduced police activity to the extent of marijuana legalization. Since repeal of alcohol Prohibition in 1933, there hasn't really been a large decriminalization event that freed up a chunk of resources at the federal level. Certainly, since the 1980s there have mostly been additions, not removals, of criminal sanctions.

While the research is far from settled on whether legalization always leads to better violent crime clearance rates, the results from marijuana recreational legalization so far suggest that it very well can lead to improvements, and has. The bulk of the research suggests that if departments intentionally reallocate resources from low-level drug crimes to solving violent crimes, there could be even greater gains than were realized from the natural experiment of legalization, when departments did not *deliberately* redeploy the resources.

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*Importantly, research has shown that such an intentional internal allocation of resources—rather than adding to the total amount of resources for the department—makes more of a difference in impacting the likelihood of clearance.*

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Importantly, research has shown that such an intentional internal allocation of resources—rather than adding to the total amount of resources for the department—makes more of a difference in impacting the likelihood of clearance.<sup>87</sup> One analysis concluded that “for a specific type of offense, the likelihood of clearance was more affected by the allocation of

<sup>86</sup> Guangzhen Wu, Ming Wen, and Fernando A. Wilson, “Impact of recreational marijuana legalization on crime: Evidence from Oregon,” *Journal of Criminal Justice* (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2020.101742> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>87</sup> Christopher Ingraham, “Does Legal Weed Make Police More Effective?” *Washington Post*, 18 July 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2018/07/18/does-legal-weed-make-police-more-effective/> (accessed June 25, 2025).

resources (the amount of resource allocated to investigate this type of crime) than the aggregated amount of resources used by the police.”<sup>88</sup>

Ultimately, research done in recent years may not show the full effects of the resource-freeing that can come from a legalization event, because in recent years there has been an “escalating staffing and turnover crisis across the U.S.”<sup>89</sup> such that extra resources will likely have to be deployed by triage rather than more intentional policy decisions. Staffing in police agencies strongly correlates with response times and affects capacity to respond to calls, including for violent crimes. Indeed, staffing seems to trump other factors in its ramifications on overall effectiveness of agencies across a range of domains.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Wu, Wen, and Wilson, “Impact of recreational marijuana legalization on crime: Evidence from Oregon.”

<sup>89</sup> Scott M. Mourtgos, Ian T. Adams, and Justin Nix, “Staffing Levels are the Most Important Factor Influencing Police Response Times,” *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, 1 Jan. 2024. <https://www.crimrxiv.com/pub/02md8eqk/release/1> (accessed July 13, 2025).

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.



## PART 9

# RECOMMENDATIONS: TARGETED, RESPONSIVE POLICY

Despite the limitations on clearance rate data and the lack of definitive research, focusing public attention on improving the solve rates for violent crime can be valuable if it leads to policies that improve results of and faith in the criminal justice system. Greater awareness of the importance of investigative resources would be beneficial to improving solve rates and to the overall system. Importantly, though, it is not useful to merely throw money at police agencies—these resources need to be deployed properly to meet the conditions on the ground.

### 10 RECOMMENDATIONS

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|--|--|
| 1. Improve the rigor of criminal justice data.                                     | 6. Use the purse strings.                            |
| 2. Reduce load on police departments.  | 7. Scale up violence interruption.                   |
| 3. Reduce need for scarce investigative resources.                                 | 8. Increase public understanding of clearance rates. |
| 4. Make clearance rates a key performance metric used by agencies and governments. | 9. Focus resources on violence.                      |
| 5. Target clearance rate-boosting through legislation in Congress and the states.  | 10. Apply technology that improves case solving.     |

The crimes people are most afraid of involve violent victimization, and based on the weight of the data, we are failing to curtail that or even to devote sufficient resources to it. In order to address flagging clearance rates for violent crimes, it makes sense to focus squarely on those cases, following the evidence about what works:

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1. **Improve the rigor of criminal justice data** collection and research, and increase the frequency of causal study. We need to experiment with things that seem promising, study impacts, and then more widely adopt the interventions that prove effective. And then we need to study the impacts some more. In particular, improve and harmonize data collection across all jurisdictions relating to clearance rates, thereby boosting the utility of the clearance rates data.

The pernicious effects of poor data in the criminal justice system are rampant across many dimensions of the system. In a system as complicated as criminal justice that impacts personal liberty and life and death, the present state of the data should not be tolerated. We should not be operating blindly.

2. **Reduce load on police departments** by solving the understaffing crisis, decriminalizing drugs, and moving away from criminal prosecution of activities such as loitering, sleeping in public places, drug use, truancy, and prostitution in the criminal justice system.

Other ways to reduce load: Invest in evidence-based treatment and services in communities to prevent crime and stabilize families; and provide reentry supports to reduce recidivism. One formula for leaders would be proactively shifting resources from nonviolent and “victimless” crimes—for which many people can be rehabilitated at home without the severe disruption and expense of incarceration—toward violent crimes and toward investigations, which could help strengthen any natural positive effects on clearance rates that endemically result from those very shifts.

Any other poverty-reducing policies that are consistent with economic freedom and individual liberty will also drive down crime and unburden the criminal justice system. Studies have shown that “an increase in poverty rate contributes to increase in violent and property crime rates while an increase in educational attainment leads to lowering of both types of crimes committed.”<sup>91</sup>

Policies that offer incentives to departments to adopt both practices that are proven to reduce crime *and also* those proven to increase clearance of violent crimes will compound the benefits.

**3. Reduce need for scarce investigative resources** by preventing certain crimes and diverting cases when feasible.

As described above, some simple reallocations in resources and deployment of successful preventive strategies can free up needed investigative capacity:

- concentrate resources on processing evidence and conducting investigations on unsolved violent cases;
- scale up violence intervention programs and programs that divert some people from police contact and into public health solutions such as treatment;
- use co-response units or other non-police responders for mental health, drug overdoses, and low-level crimes; and
- adjust lighting and amenities in community public spaces, and offer community activities for high-risk youth, both of which are demonstrated to reduce crime.<sup>92</sup>

**4. Make clearance rates a key performance metric used by agencies and governments.**

In addition to adopting the practices of high-performing agencies that improve clearances and/or reduce load on agencies, local decision-makers can be held accountable. Policy makers can demand that resources be focused on solving violent crimes rather than misdemeanors, drug possessions, and other nonviolent offenses.

Oversight/watchdogging must also focus on holding police accountable for making arrests of the *right* individual, versus simply making arrests to boost clearance statistics; and on ensuring that arrests are followed by prosecution through the legal process to

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<sup>91</sup> Devika Hazra and Jose Aranzazu, “Crime, correction, education and welfare in the U.S. – What role does the government play?,” *Journal of Policy Modeling*, March–April 2022. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0161893822000163> (accessed July 10, 2025).

<sup>92</sup> Roman, “20 Strategies for Reducing Crime in Cities.”

conviction where warranted, so that the focus on arrests built into the way clearance rates are calculated doesn't incentivize shirking prosecutions.



*Oversight/watchdogging must also focus on holding police accountable for making arrests of the right individual, versus simply making arrests to boost clearance statistics.*



5. **Target clearance rate-boosting through legislation in Congress and the states.**

Nationally, consider bills such as the 2024 bipartisan VICTIM Act, an acronym for “Violent Incident Clearance and Technological Investigative Methods Act of 2024,” which called for allocating \$360 million in funds for hiring detectives and investigative personnel; training detectives and police personnel to investigate, solve, and respond to violent offenses, as well as to address needs of victims and family members; implementing technology solutions to enhance crime solving; and covering mental health resources and assistance with housing and other costs for victims.<sup>93</sup> State legislatures can likewise reduce criminalization and implement best practices to free up resources for serious investigations. Missouri passed a law that will take effect January 1, 2026, requiring enhanced public data dissemination on clearance rates and establishing a grant program for departments motivated to improve lagging rates.<sup>94</sup> Pennsylvania has a bipartisan bill with similar provisions pending in its legislature.<sup>95</sup>

6. **Use the purse strings.** The federal government can use its influence on states and localities, a common way to exert changes across many jurisdictions.<sup>96</sup> In this case, Congress could condition grants on the recipient police agencies directing resources toward improvements in violent crime solve rates. At the same time, federal legislation

<sup>93</sup> S. 3763 (118<sup>th</sup>), VICTIM Act of 2024, Govtrack. <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/118/s3763/text> (accessed Sept. 14, 2025).

<sup>94</sup> House Bill 225, Missouri Legislature, 2025. <https://house.mo.gov/bill.aspx?bill=HB225&year=2025&code=R> (accessed July 30, 2025).

<sup>95</sup> Pennsylvania Legislature, HB 1511, Legiscan. <https://legiscan.com/PA/bill/HB1511/2025> (accessed September 10, 2025).

<sup>96</sup> Hernandez D. Stroud and Rosemary Nidiry, “A Federal Agenda to Promote Safety and Justice,” Brennan Center for Justice, 30 January 2025. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/policy-solutions/federal-agenda-promote-safety-and-justice> (accessed June 25, 2025).

can impose safeguards against manipulation of clearance rates and uniform data collection standards, so we are able to accurately track success over time.

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*Congress could condition grants on the recipient police agencies directing resources toward improvements in violent crime solve rates.*

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In addition to realigning incentives toward solving violent crimes, the federal government will also need to cooperate and lead by realigning the strong monetary incentives instituted in the name of the drug war and encouraging a culture shift in police agencies away from the emphasis on drugs that resulted from decades of these incentives.<sup>97</sup>

These encouragements toward drug cases were compounded by an added arsenal for local police departments—for example, the Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984 allowed local police to receive up to 80% of assets confiscated by federal drug investigations if they cooperated with federal authorities in the investigation.<sup>98</sup> This forfeiture of assets takes place without even having to lodge a criminal case—and the loot goes to the department that seized the assets. The undeniable allure of fat budgets has fueled a perverse incentive structure that causes police to prioritize drug enforcement over violent crime investigations.<sup>99</sup>

7. **Scale up violence interruption.** Because gun crimes are so especially hard to clear, the federal government and state governments should target gun violence by funding community-based violence intervention programs. Baltimore saw a 35% reduction in homicides in its first four years of operation of one such program in several neighborhoods. Programs that are showing promising results should be continued and

<sup>97</sup> Marcus W. Brown, “Decriminalization As Police Reform,” Reason Foundation, September 2022. <https://a8d50b36.delivery.rocketcdn.me/wp-content/uploads/drug-decriminalization-impacts-policing.pdf> (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>98</sup> Shawn Kantor, Carl Kitchens, and Steven Pawlowski “Civil Asset Forfeiture, Crime, and Police Incentives: Evidence from the Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984,” Florida State University, 23 Jun 2017. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2991101](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2991101) (accessed June 25, 2025).

<sup>99</sup> Diane Goldstein, “End Civil Asset Forfeiture to Defund the Drug War,” *Filter Magazine*, 6 August 2020. <https://filtermag.org/civil-asset-forfeiture-abolish/> (accessed June 25, 2025).

expanded, such as those that send non-police officers like behavioral health specialists along with EMTs or other professionals to respond to crisis calls in lieu of police.<sup>100</sup>

8. **Increase public understanding of clearance rates.**<sup>101</sup> There is little public awareness of clearance rates, and more generally of how choices that are made in law and by police agencies impact how the criminal justice system functions in practice. There is some evidence for public support of the concept of crafting incentives to solve more violent crimes—for example, a recent poll of Texas voters showed 85% support for shifting law enforcement resources to solving and preventing crimes, rather than responding.<sup>102</sup> But even so, most of those voters have likely not heard of clearance rates as such.

Boosting public knowledge about the role of the clearance rates, as well as the complexities of improving them, would also allow people to get involved in public conversations about safety and justice that need to continue, given the failure of the system to actually solve crimes. The educated public could advocate for the government to prioritize solutions proven by the evidence to enhance public safety and solve violent crimes, which would help bring the government's actions in line with the desire of the populace.

In the past, public policy legislation aimed at reducing crime in states and at the federal level has focused on either increasing sentences, adding new offenses, or adding prosecutorial resources. Widening the lens to discuss reducing violent crime by focusing on clearance rates can usher in new reforms such as the ones discussed here.

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*There is little public awareness of clearance rates, and more generally of how choices that are made in law and by police agencies impact how the criminal justice system functions in practice.*

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Roman, “20 Strategies for Reducing Crime in Cities.”

<sup>102</sup> Nikki Pressley and Ross Jackson, “Ensuring justice: Innovative approaches to improve crime clearance rates,” Right on Crime, December 2024. [https://rightoncrime.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/2024-12-ROC-Crime-Clearance-Rates-PressleyJackson\\_FINAL.pdf](https://rightoncrime.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/2024-12-ROC-Crime-Clearance-Rates-PressleyJackson_FINAL.pdf) (accessed June 25, 2025).

9. **Focus resources on violence.** State and federal officials overseeing police should issue guidance to police agencies to concentrate resources on solving violent cases, perhaps by suggesting appropriate ranges for the proportion of misdemeanors to violent cases, and otherwise providing encouragement to shift resources toward violent cases and gun cases and away from low-level offense enforcement. Legislation can mandate that added resources be devoted to investigating violent crimes. Federal legislation can condition grant funds on being allocated to violent crimes and adding investigative capacity.
10. **Apply technology that improves case solving,** such as text reminders for securing appearance in court, electronic databases that can find matches to crime evidence, surveillance equipment, or databases to maintain records on police officers, taking care to build in safeguards to protect civil liberties. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, as of 2022 at least 10 states required some kind of reminder system, but there is no uniform mandate and many jurisdictions can implement a system or do a better job on this.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> “New Approaches for Addressing Court Appearance,” National Conference of State Legislatures, 13 Dec. 2022. <https://www.ncsl.org/civil-and-criminal-justice/new-approaches-for-addressing-court-appearance> (accessed July 10, 2025).

## PART 10

# CONCLUSION

The steady degradation in violent crime clearance rates is not a minor statistical trend; it is an enduring challenge to justice and public safety. When violent crimes go unsolved, perpetrators remain free, cycles of retaliation deepen, and communities lose faith that the system can protect them. At the same time, our nation continues to prioritize punitive approaches that do little to solve crimes or prevent future ones, while underinvesting in the investigative practices and community supports that make the most difference.

Research is clear: Clearance rates are shaped more by organizational practices, investigative focus, and community cooperation than by sheer levels of funding or police manpower. High-performing departments succeed not merely by being bigger, but when they deploy their resources strategically, adopt best practices, and earn community trust. Meanwhile, jurisdictions that redirect police away from low-level enforcement and toward violent crime investigations are likely to see better outcomes.

Lawmakers should prioritize policies that free police to focus on solving violent crimes, scale up evidence-based community violence interruption programs, and fund investigative capacity rather than rote or reactive enforcement.

By aligning incentives, reallocating resources, and investing in prevention and investigative excellence, the U.S. can reverse the downward trajectory of violent crime clearance rates. Doing so will not only bring justice to victims and their families but also restore confidence in our institutions and build safer, stronger communities for the long term.



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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