



The Center for Just Journalism

Gun Homicide: What to Know and Where to Go

¹ The FBI's 2021 estimated national crime statistics were highly uncertain, because nearly 40% of local police agencies did not submit any data. For more information about the problems with this data and with crime data from police departments in general, see our report on the issue:

[A Journalist's Guide to the FBI's 2021 Crime Statistics](#)

The homicide rate in the United States increased sharply in 2020, probably¹ increased at a slower pace in 2021, and appears to be decreasing in 2022. The vast majority of these homicides were committed with a gun. Gun homicide is a serious problem that journalists are uniquely positioned to impact. The United States is the [world leader in the availability of guns](#) and has the [highest gun homicide rate among large, high-income countries](#). But even in the U.S., gun homicide remains relatively rare compared to other types of crime and violence. Because [many people have not been personally impacted by it](#), the news media has a lot of influence over how people understand gun homicide.

Much of the news coverage about the recent rise in gun homicide has focused on [police](#), [prosecutors](#), and other aspects of the [legal system](#), either as sources in the stories or as solutions to the problem. This outside focus on the legal system obscures what the evidence tells us about the well-established causes of gun homicide and many of the effective solutions that communities across the country have implemented to reduce it. Whether it's a daily, feature, or investigative story, there are important pieces of context that journalists can provide to help their audience better understand the rise in gun homicide, what caused it, and what can be done to address it.

Data on Gun Homicide: The Latest Trends, Where to Go for More, and Questions to Consider

2 The words "homicide" and "murder" are used interchangeably in this document.

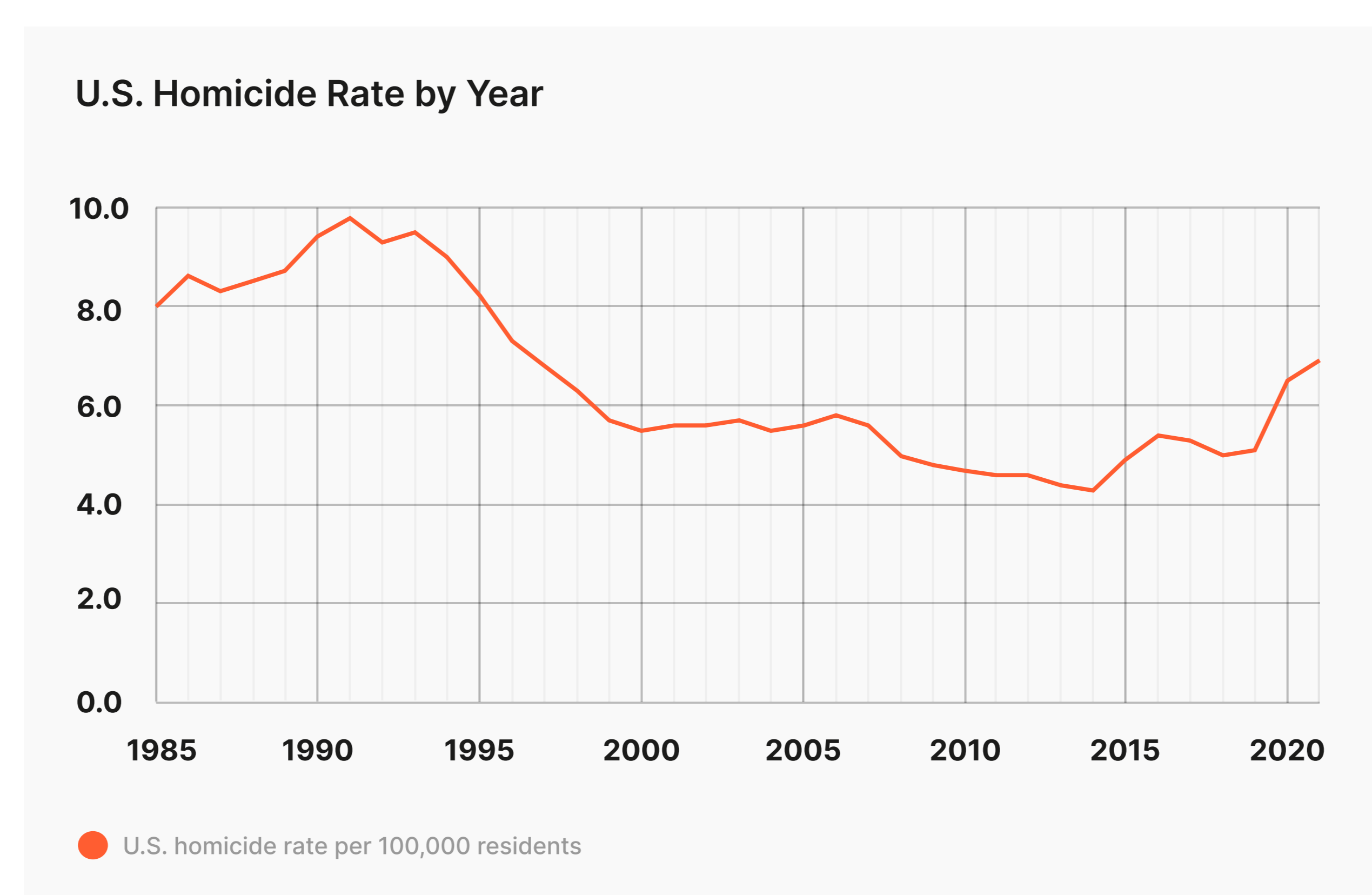
3 For additional analysis of this divergence, see this piece:

[The Spike in Homicide in 2020](#)

A data deep dive.

What can the latest data tell us about...

- *...the homicide rate?*
 - According to data published by the FBI, the United States' homicide rate increased by 27.4% in 2020 to 6.5 murders² per 100,000 residents. The FBI estimates that the homicide rate rose another 3.5% in 2021, but the agency expressed less confidence than usual in its estimate because so many police departments did not submit any data to the FBI in 2021. Data from dozens of U.S. cities shows that the number of murders has declined by roughly 5% thus far in 2022. [Sources: [FBI \(2\)](#), [AH Datalytics](#)]
- *...the gun homicide rate?*
 - According to data published by the CDC, the United States' gun homicide rate increased by 34.6% in 2020 and by 8.3% in 2021. These increases are larger than the increases in the overall homicide rate because a larger share of homicides were committed with a gun. In 2020, 79% of homicides were committed with a gun (already an increase over recent years) and that share rose to 81% in 2021, the highest percentage in more than 50 years. [Sources: [CDC \(2\)](#)]
- *...how these rates compare to the past?*
 - The 2020 homicide rate was roughly two-thirds the 1991 rate of 9.8 murders per 100,000 residents. [Sources: [FBI](#)]



- *....how homicide trends compare to other crimes?*
 - The homicide rate increased in 2020 while the reported rate of most other crimes tracked by the police, including rape, robbery, burglary, and larceny, decreased. Those directional trends mostly held during 2021. This divergence, especially of such a large magnitude, is very uncommon³. [Sources: [FBI \(2\)](#)]

4 For more on the homicide increase in rural parts of the United States, see this piece:

[Rural America Reels From Violent Crime. 'People Lost Their Ever-Lovin' Minds.'](#)

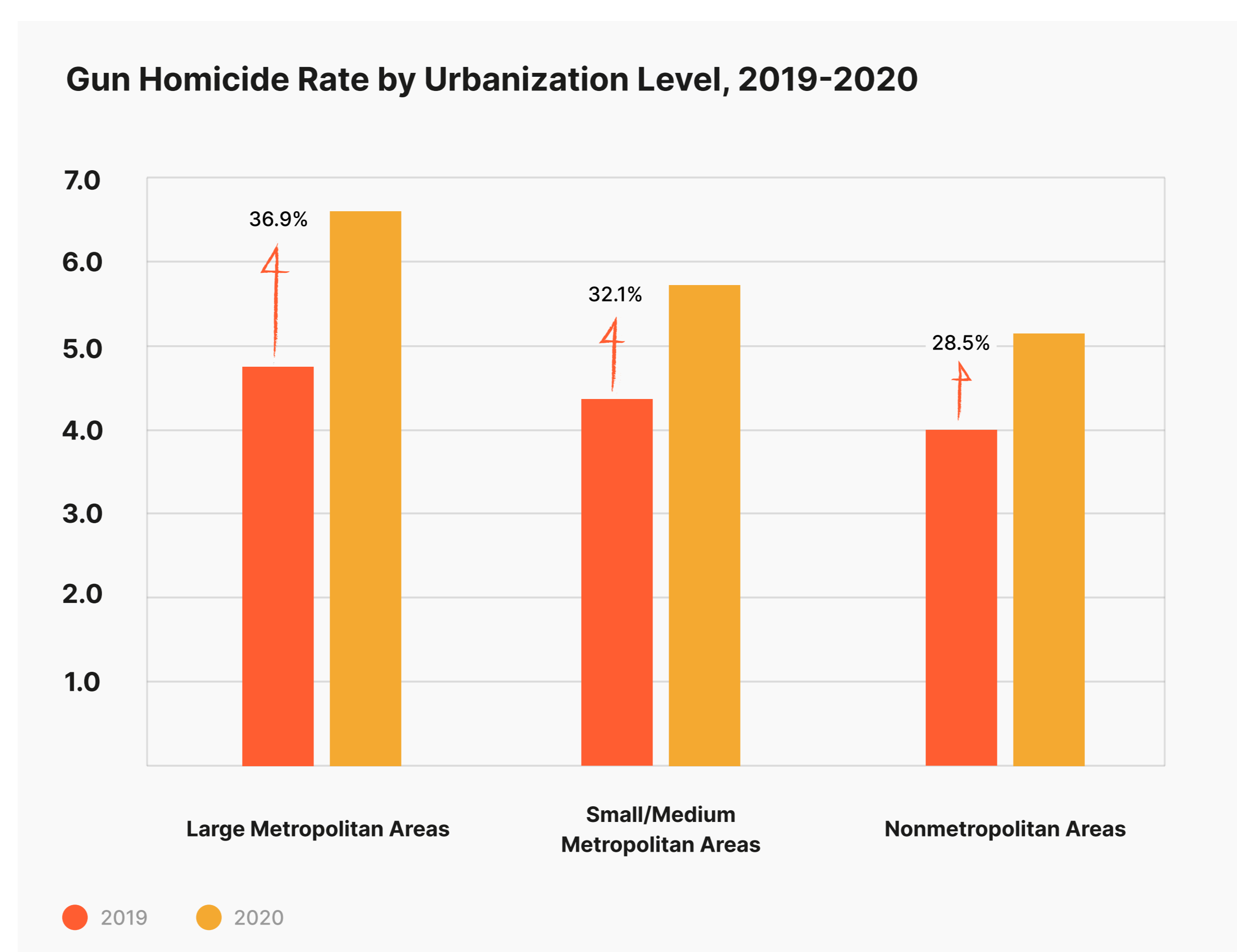
5 For a more detailed description of these data sets and the differences between them, see:

[The Nation's Two Measures of Homicide](#)

6 The FBI recently began issuing preliminary quarterly crime reports on a much more timely basis, typically within weeks of the end of each quarter. However, these reports do not provide aggregate, national-level estimates unless more than 60% of police agencies report their data in that quarter. If the 60% threshold isn't met, the data is presented only at the agency level. That threshold was not met in any quarter of 2021 or 2022 to date.

Where did homicide increase?

- Gun homicide rose sharply in large cities, small/medium metropolitan areas, and rural areas⁴ in 2020. [Sources: [CDC](#)]



- Homicide increased in traditionally “red” and “blue” cities and states and in cities that increased and decreased their police budgets. [Sources: [The New York Times](#), [Third Way](#), [USA Today](#)]
- Counties with the highest poverty levels, already experiencing the highest levels of gun homicide, saw the largest increases in 2020. [Sources: [CDC](#)]
- In many cities, the rise in gun homicide was heavily concentrated in a small number of neighborhoods that were already experiencing the highest rates of gun violence. Those neighborhoods have several things in common: high rates of poverty, low rates of public and private investment, and a history of discriminatory housing policies. [Sources: [The Brookings Institution](#)]

What communities experienced the largest increases in gun homicide?

- In 2020, the gun homicide victimization rate rose most sharply among Black females (who experienced a 47.2% increase), Black males (who experienced a 38.2% increase), and American Indian or Alaskan Native males (who experienced a 34.2% increase). [Sources: [CDC](#)]

How does homicide rank as a leading cause of death in the U.S.?

- Homicide does not rank in the top 10 leading causes of death for the overall U.S. population. In 2021, the top 10 leading causes of death were, in order: heart disease, cancer, COVID-19, unintentional injuries (which include drug overdoses, falls, and car crashes, among other things), stroke, chronic low respiratory disease, Alzheimer's disease, diabetes, chronic liver disease and cirrhosis, and kidney disease. [Sources: [CDC](#)]
- For Black males between the ages of 15 and 34, homicide is the leading cause of death. [Sources: [CDC](#)]

Where can I find reliable and up-to-date data on gun homicide?

Two federal agencies—the FBI and the CDC⁵—publish nationwide data on homicide, and gun homicide more specifically, each year. That data typically lags⁶ by at least nine months, such that 2020 data came out in September 2021, etc.... Several non-governmental organizations have stepped in to fill this lag in reporting. Their data is typically sourced from large cities whose police departments publish crime statistics more frequently and usually does not include the type of weapon used in each offense, limiting the analysis to homicides as a whole. Below are links to several sources for data on homicide and gun homicide.

Government data sources:

- FBI [crime data](#) and the [supplementary homicide report](#) (1985-2020).
 - For 2021 estimates, see the FBI's [NIBRS Estimation Report](#).
- CDC [fatal injury reports](#) and [leading causes of death reports](#) (1981-2020).
 - For 2021 estimates, see the CDC's [provisional report](#).
 - To conduct more detailed analysis, see the CDC's [underlying cause of death data tool](#).
 - A CDC [analysis](#) of its own 2020 data.
 - Analyses of 2020 CDC data from [The Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions](#) and [The Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence](#).
 - The Pew Research Center's [analysis](#) of 2020 CDC (and some FBI) data.

Other data sources:

- AH Datalytics' [year-to-date](#) homicide data compiled from 99 cities.
- The Gun Violence Archive's [data](#), which does not have a gun homicide category but does have information on specific types of gun homicide like mass murders, killings by police officers, and murder/suicide incidents.
- The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's [data](#) on international homicide rates.
- The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation's [Global Burden of Disease Study](#) on leading causes of death across nations, including homicide.
- The Philadelphia Center for Gun Violence Reporting's [data catalog](#).

Important considerations when reporting on gun homicide data:

⁷ Crime rates are typically calculated as the number of reported incidents per 100,000 residents of the geographic area in question.

- Rates⁷ are better metrics than gross numbers for tracking trends over time. Because the total population of the United States is increasing, growth in the *rate* of homicides is a more meaningful indicator than growth in the *number* of homicides.
- Percentages may be misleading in the context of homicide. Murder remains the [rarest major crime](#) tracked by police, and the murder rate, prior to 2020, was near its lowest point in decades. Both of these factors make numerical increases appear large in percentage form. This is especially true in rural areas and even small cities where homicides number in the tens, not hundreds each year. For example, stating that the number of homicides increased from 10 to 12 may make more sense than saying the number of homicides increased by 20%.

Research on Gun Homicide: What Causes It and What Are the Most Effective Ways to Reduce It

When gun violence increases, public officials often [blame local policy changes](#) and suggest punitive responses, like [hiring more police officers](#), [jailing more people before trial](#), and [sentencing more people to prison](#). Journalists are uniquely positioned to contextualize these statements with evidence on what does and doesn't cause violence and what does and doesn't work to reduce it.

What drives gun homicide and other types of serious violence?

Modern research on gun homicide has homed in on a number of societal factors—specifically, income inequality and residential segregation—that drive gun homicide and other types of violent crime. Researchers have found that inequality and segregation disrupt social cohesion and trust, foreclose opportunities for social mobility, and limit access to high-quality education and housing, all of which contribute to higher rates of violence. Access to guns, at both the individual and societal levels, is also associated with higher rates of homicide. See below for research demonstrating the link between gun homicide and each of these factors.

- Income inequality: [/1/](#) [/2/](#) [/3/](#) [/4/](#) [/5/](#) [/6/](#)
- Residential segregation along racial and economic lines: [/1/](#) [/2/](#) [/3/](#) [/4/](#) [/5/](#)
- Access to guns: [/1/](#) [/2/](#) [/3/](#) [/4/](#)

What works to reduce gun homicide and other types of serious violence?

Political and media discourse about gun homicide often focuses on policing, prosecution, and incarceration as the default responses to violence. These systems continue to receive the bulk of the country's public safety investments, but the evidence on their efficacy at reducing violent crime is weak. Many studies find that these systems have [limited](#), [no](#), or [negative](#) impacts on public safety. Studies that do show an effect rarely account for the harms caused by these systems or compare their efficacy with programs that don't rely exclusively on punishment. Future work from The Center for Just Journalism will delve into the research on policing, prosecution, and incarceration in more detail, but this issue brief is focused on highlighting research on the promising violence reduction strategies that generate far less news coverage. The reports below compile much of this research into easily searchable reference documents.

- The [John Jay College Research Advisory Group on Preventing and Reducing Community Violence](#) reviewed and summarized the research on a wide range of community violence reduction strategies. They looked at dozens of policies across eight major categories:
 - Improving the physical environment (e.g. cleaning up and adding greenery to vacant lots, preventing foreclosures and extended home vacancies, reducing childrens' exposure to lead, etc.)

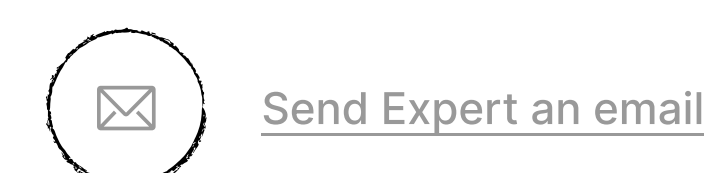
- Strengthening anti-violence social norms and peer relationships (e.g. violence interruption programs, hospital-based intervention programs with recent gunshot victims, etc.)
 - Engaging and supporting youth (e.g. summer jobs programs, raising the minimum school dropout age, etc.)
 - Reducing substance abuse (e.g. increasing access to substance abuse treatment, expanding medical marijuana laws, etc.)
 - Mitigating financial stress (e.g. housing voucher programs, immediate financial assistance to people who lose their jobs, etc.)
 - Reducing the harmful effects of the justice process (e.g. declining to prosecute misdemeanors, diverting people accused of felonies from prosecution, reducing the use of prisons for children, etc.)
 - Confronting the gun problem (e.g. removing “stand your ground” laws, regulation and oversight of gun sellers, etc.)
- A recent [Brookings report](#) compiled evidence on violence reduction programs, including strategies involving public health and prevention, economic opportunity and housing security, youth development and education, built environment and community spaces, and institutional transformation.
 - The [Center for American Progress](#) published a report with a wealth of information on community-based violence intervention programs, like Advance Peace, Cure Violence, and Ceasefire.
 - Plus a few additional studies that do not appear in any of the reviews above demonstrating the ability of [home repairs in high-poverty neighborhoods](#), [treatment for lead exposure](#), [Medicaid expansion](#), [local non-profits](#), and [social spending](#) to reduce violence.

The Experts

The list below primarily focuses on people conducting academic research on gun homicide. While critically important, academic expertise is only one of many forms of expertise. See the next section of this brief for ideas on how to connect with experts on the ground implementing violence reduction solutions in your community.



Hanna Love is a research associate at the Brookings Institution, where she has conducted research on the concentration of gun homicide at the neighborhood level and reviewed research on solutions to gun violence.



Dr. Jessica Simes is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Boston University where she conducts research on mass incarceration and health outcomes. She has recently analyzed the connection between Medicaid expansion and criminal punishment.



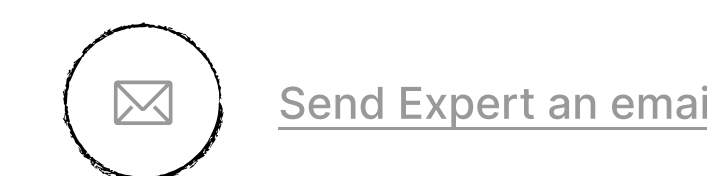
Dr. Joseph Richardson, Jr. is the Joel and Kim Feller Endowed Professor of African-American Studies and Anthropology at the University of Maryland. He is the Principal Investigator for the UMB Center for Injury Prevention and Policy and the Violence Intervention Program, a hospital-based violence intervention program at the University of Maryland R Adams Cowley Shock Trauma Center and has conducted research on a range of issues, particularly the impact of gun violence on young, Black men.



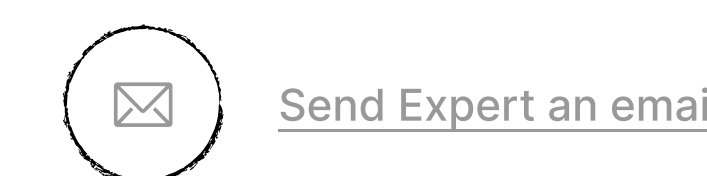
Dr. Mary Bernstein is Professor of Sociology at the University of Connecticut. She co-organized a conference on the “Correlates, Causes, and Solutions for Firearm Violence in America” and has written on differing responses to community gun violence and mass shootings.



Dr. Michael Poulson is a resident physician and research fellow in general surgery at Boston University School of Medicine and Boston Medical Center. In addition to serving as a trauma surgeon, he has conducted research on the impact of residential segregation and the physical environment on gun violence.



Dr. Shani Buggs is Assistant Professor with the University of California, Davis’ Violence Prevention Research Program, where her research is focused on community-based violence reductions programs and access to firearms.



Opportunities for Reporting

Daily, local news stories about gun homicide are enormously important, given their frequency and [impact on public opinion](#). While journalists working on these stories may not have the lead time or resources of investigative reporters, there are still steps that daily beat reporters and editors can take to ground their stories in the best available data and research on gun homicide.

Recommendations for editors:

- Audit the balance of stories in your beat dedicated to homicide versus other forms of serious harm and common causes of death.
- Build in regular moments for stories focused on trend analysis, new community-based responses to gun violence, and other big-picture questions.
 - [Gannett has pledged](#) to focus more on trends than individual crimes, along with several other changes to the way they approach public safety coverage, across the dozens of daily newspapers they own.
- Avoid assigning stories about arrests, given the large share of [charges that are dismissed](#).

Recommendations for reporters:

- Make a list of facts and statistics that only need periodic updating that can be inserted into common story frames, like:
 - How gun homicide rates in your community have changed over time.
 - Where gun homicide ranks as a leading cause of death in your community.
 - How gun homicide rates in your community compare to other parts of the state, other states, and/or other countries.
 - A list of factors that cause gun violence and solutions that are proven to reduce it.
- When public officials make claims about the causes of gun violence and propose policy responses, cite evidence showing whether or not their claims and policy proposals are backed up by research.
- Follow case outcomes, including when charges are dropped, cases are dismissed, or individuals are acquitted at trial.

Resources for identifying and connecting with local violence intervention workers:

- The Health Alliance for Violence Intervention maintains a [directory](#) of hospital-based violence prevention programs.
- The National Offices of Violence Prevention Network is a [community](#) of local government agencies working to reduce violence.
- The Brookings Institution is [tracking](#) the community-based violence prevention programs that state and local governments are funding with American Rescue Plan dollars allocated for that purpose.
- The Community Justice Action Fund [assessed](#) the violence prevention programs, services, and policies in the 50 U.S. cities with the highest rates of gun violence.
- One Million Experiments maintains a [list](#) of community-based projects focused on transforming harm.
- The [Philadelphia Center for Gun Violence Reporting](#) offers a range of resources for journalists covering gun violence, including a credible messenger reporting project that “empowers people impacted by gun violence to report on root causes, lived experience and possible solutions from the community perspective.”