Crime Increase in Colorado: Multiple Explanations

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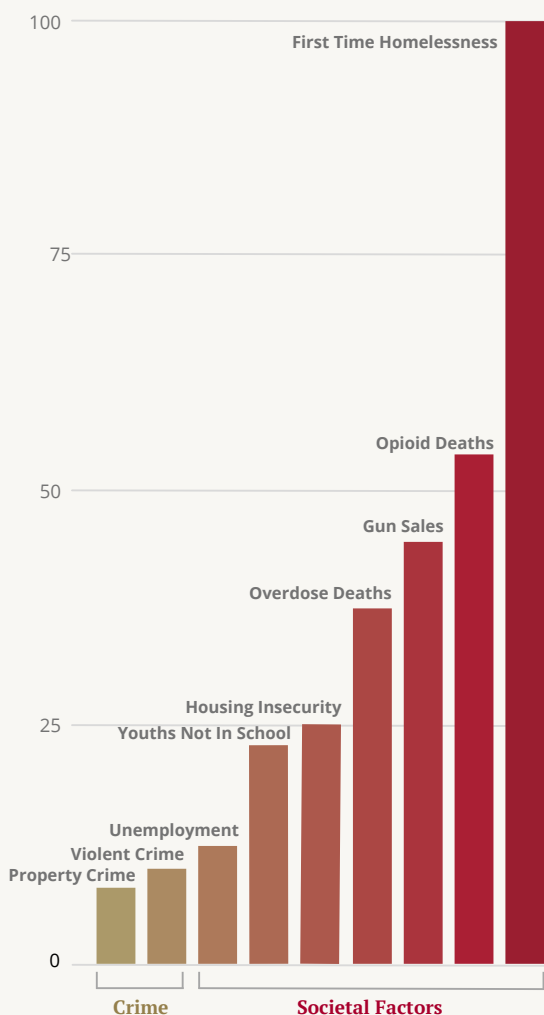Department of Sociology and Criminology

Prepared for the Joint Judiciary Committee SMART Government Act Hearing, January 28, 2022.

Recent media coverage of the increase in Colorado's crime rates have placed blame on criminal justice reform and decreasing incarcerated populations. The data does not support this supposition. **This brief illustrates other factors that correlate with such increases.**

QUESTION: What are the factors that affect the increase in crime rates?

ANSWER: As we have long known, increase in crime is tied with housing insecurity, drug misuse and abuse,* gun sales, unemployment and joblessness, mental health struggles, family disruption and violence, as well as fewer youth in school,** lower consumer confidence and security, and lack of access to services.

While Colorado experienced a 10% increase in violent crime and an 8% increase in property crime from 2019-2020[1], our state also experienced **significant increases** in these **historical root drivers of crime:**

≈100% ↑
First time homelessness

First-time homelessness nearly **doubled.**[2] About **90%** of stolen cars recovered in the suburbs North of Denver had evidence of people living in them.[3]

45% ↑
Gun sales

Gun sales **increased by 45%**. Firearms were used in **70%** of homicides, resulting in 202 deaths.[4]

25% ↑
Housing insecurity

Housing insecurity **increased by 25%**[5] with a **$15.18/hour gap** between minimum wage and that needed to afford the average rent.[6]

54% ↑
Opioid deaths

Overdose deaths jumped to an all time high, **up 38%,** with opioid deaths **up 54%.**[7]

12% ↑
Unemployment

With some variation, unemployment saw a spike in April 2020, **on average hitting at 12%.**[8]

23% ↑
Youths not in school

The number of children not enrolled in school **increased by 23%.**[9]

Colorado has the nation's highest rate of adult mental illness with the lowest access to mental health care[10]

23% of Coloradans suffer from mental illness and in 2020 we continued to have the **5th highest suicide rate** in the country.[11] Coloradans face the nation's **worst access to mental health care** with people waitlisted over a year for treatment.[12]

*as evidenced by overdoses increases   **in crime-risk age cohort (16-20)

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QUESTION: Does national data show a correlation between criminal justice reform and increase in crime?

ANSWER: NO.

Pretrial/Bail Reform. A November 2020 study of public safety data in 13 jurisdictions before and after adoption of pretrial reforms saw decreases or negligible increases in crime after implementing reforms.[13] **Releasing people pretrial did not negatively impact public safety.**

Decarceration. A report by the Vera Institute of Justice concludes **increased incarceration rates have no demonstrated effect on violent crime** and in some instances may increase crime. The Prison Paradox concluded similarly: since 2000, the **increased use of jails and prisons accounted for nearly zero percent of the overall reduction in crime.**[14]

Police Budgets. Cities that increased or did not reduce police budgets in 2020 in response to protests following George Floyd's murder **saw the same kind of staggering increases in homicides** as cities that reduced their police budgets.[15]

Spotlight on New Jersey

Reform: 2017 legislation virtually ended cash bond.

Impact: By 2019, overall jail population declined 45%.

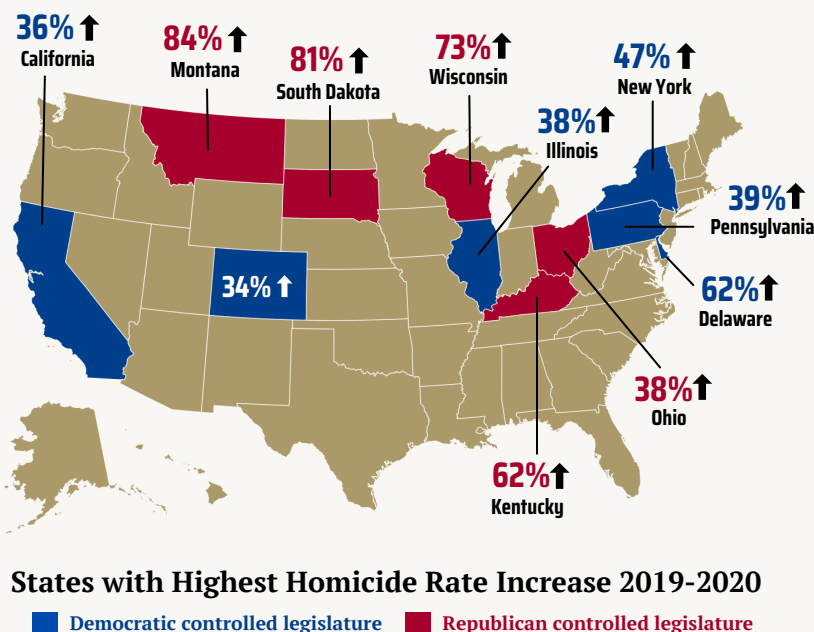**Public Safety:** Violent crimes decreased by 16% between 2016 to 2018.

www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2020/11/17/pretrial-releases/

QUESTION: Does the data show any correlation between political party and increases in violent crime?

ANSWER: NO.

Most states, **regardless of politics,** saw their murder rate rise by 30% or more in 2020, with a few conservative states, such as Montana, South Dakota, and Kentucky, seeing the highest jumps (84%, 81%, and 62% respectively).[16]

Higher-than-average increases also occurred in New York (+47%), Pennsylvania (+39%), Illinois (+38%), Ohio (+38%) and California (+36%).[16]

36% California
84% Montana
81% South Dakota
73% Wisconsin
47% New York
38% Illinois
39% Pennsylvania
62% Delaware
34%
38% Ohio
62% Kentucky

States with Highest Homicide Rate Increase 2019-2020

🟦 **Democratic controlled legislature**   🟥 **Republican controlled legislature**

CONCLUSION:

1 **Crime is not increased by jail/prison depopulation or criminal justice reform.** There is no direct correlation between incarceration and crime rates.

2 **Crime is not political.** Crime is increasing in places throughout the country regardless of political affiliation.

3 **Crime DOES correlate with instability in society.** As issues regarding mental health, addiction, access to guns, housing, jobs, education are exacerbated, crime increases.

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[4] denverpost.com/2021/07/10/colorado-gun-sales-2021/
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[7] www.coloradohealthinstitute.org/news/opioid-overdose-deaths-54-2020-fentanyl-fatalities-spike
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[15] denverpost.com/2022/01/23/colorado-crime-rate-homicides-shootings-assaults/
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