DATA BRIEF ◆ AUGUST, 2018

ARE U.S. CITIES GETTING MORE OR LESS VIOLENT?

Understanding Trends in Urban Violence Over the Short-Term and the Long-Term

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The authors of this report are part of the team that created AmericanViolence.org in an attempt to provide a single resource that can be used by the public, and by journalists, policy makers and researchers to understand short-term and long-term trends in violence. The report uses data from the site to analyze trends in violence over three time periods: from 1991, the last "peak" of violence, to the present; from 2014, the latest "trough" of violence, to the present; and over the most recent twelve months with accurate and comprehensive data, from April 2017 through March 2018.

The three different time periods allow for a more complete perspective on whether U.S. cities are becoming more or less violent, and leads to three clear conclusions:

- Since 1991, American cities have become dramatically safer; violence has fallen in almost all major cities.
- Since 2014, many American cities have become more violent; a small number of cities have become much more violent.
- In the last year, most American cities have become less violent; the recent trend of rising violence appears to have ended.

Since 1991, American cities have become dramatically safer

Nearly 25,000 people were murdered in the United States in 1991, the most criminal homicides since official records have been kept in the modern United States. Murder has fallen precipitously in the time since. In 2016, there were more than 7,000 fewer murders than in 1991.

Our sample of 78 of the largest US cities with murder data available shows a 45 percent decline in the number of murders, from over 12,000 in 1991 to under 6,600 in 2017; and a 57 percent decline in the rate of murders per 100,000 people between 1991 and 2017. The murder rate fell or stayed the same in 56 out of the 78 cities, and almost all of the largest urban centers experienced a decline in murder. The murder rate fell in 29 of 34 cities with 500,000 or more people in 2017, and it fell in all ten cities with 1 million or more people in 2017.

Although just about all of the largest cities experienced a drop in violence, the decline in New York City and Los Angeles alone accounts for nearly half of the decrease in the entire sample. New York City and Los Angeles had 1,864 and 744 fewer murders, respectively, in 2017 than in 1991. In total, 11 cities had at least 100 fewer murders in 2017 than they had in 1991. While New York and Los Angeles had the greatest absolute declines in the number of murders, no big city experienced a steeper decline in the murder rate than Washington, DC which went from a rate of roughly 80 murders per 100,000 residents in 1991 to under 17 murders per 100,000 residents in 2017.

> *The murder rate in major U.S. cities dropped by 57 percent from 1991 to 2017.*
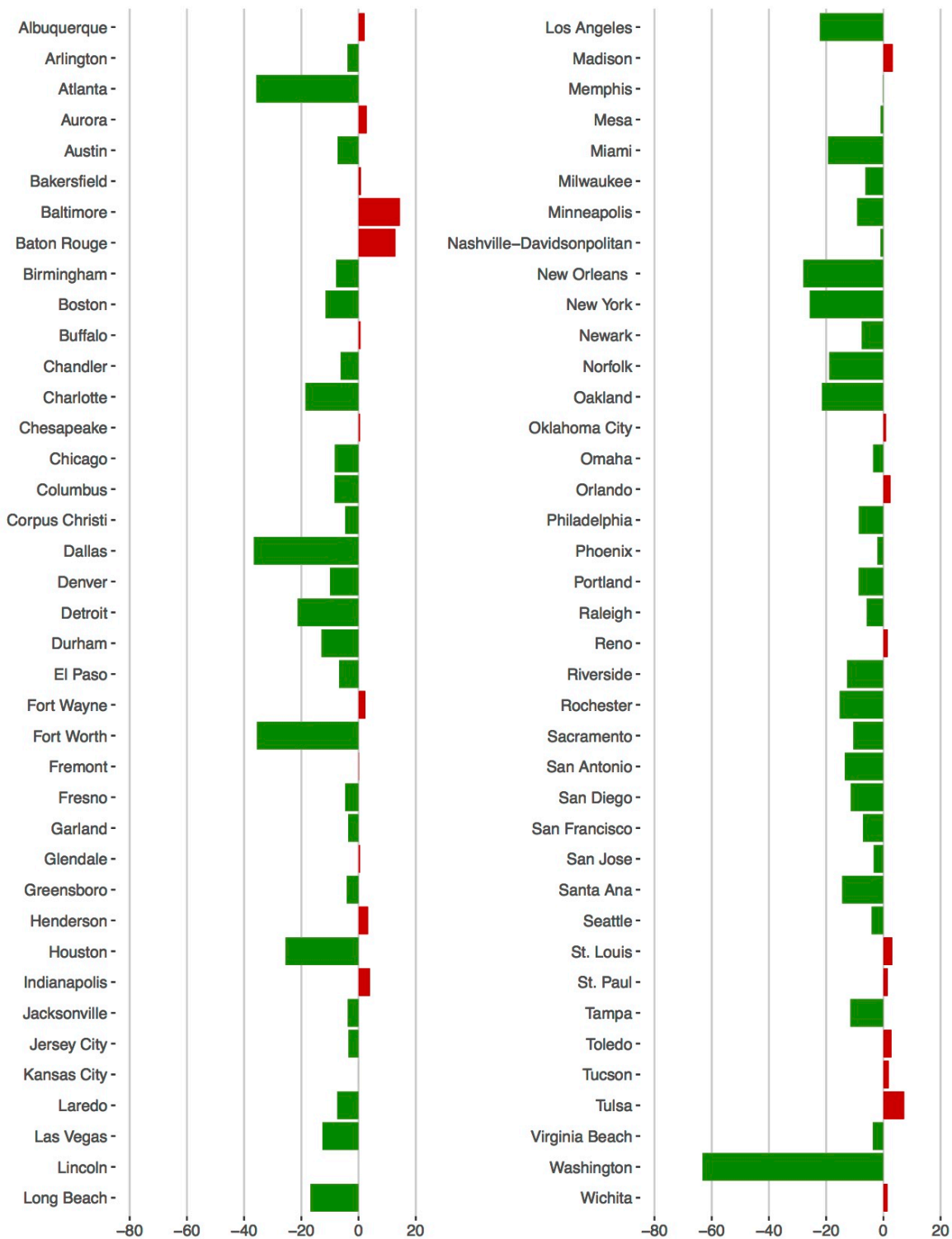
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Figure 1. Changes in murder from 1991-2017. Green=decline in murder, Red=increase in murder.

Since 2014, many American cities have become more violent

In 2014, the national level of violence reached its lowest point in at least fifty years, as the murder rate fell to 4.4 murders for every 100,000 residents. Since 2014, however, many cities have experienced a rise in violence. In our sample of the largest U.S. cities, we find that just over 60 out of 81 experienced a positive change in the murder rate, and over all of these cities the number of murders increased by 1,360, a rise of approximately 25 percent, from 2014 to 2017.

Chicago had the largest increase in the total number of murders, with 245 more killings in 2017 than just three years earlier, translating to slightly over 9 more murders per 100,000 residents between 2014 and 2017. Baltimore also experienced a large increase of 130 murders, raising its murder rate by 22 murders per 100,000 residents over this three-year period. Other than Baltimore, five other cities showed an increase in the murder rate of at least 10 murders per 100,000 residents. The greatest decrease in the murder rate occurred in Newark, NJ, where the rate dropped approximately 9 murders per 100,000 residents from 2014 to 2017.

The rise of violence from 2014 to 2017 is an important trend that should not be ignored or dismissed, but it is also important to place this trend in a larger historical context. The change that has occurred since 2014 is worrisome because it marks a shift from the long-term pattern of declining violence, but the recent increase in violence does not compare in scale or breadth to the fall of violence that has taken pace since 1991. The recent rise of violence has barely made a dent in the long-term crime decline.

> *Many cities experienced an increase in murder from 2014 to 2017—in a few, like Chicago and Baltimore, violence surged.*

Figure 2. Changes in murder from 2014-2017. Green=decline in murder, Red=increase in murder.

In the last year, American cities have become less violent

Our sample of 75 cities with monthly data available through the first quarter of 2018 has shown a drop in violence in recent months. Comparing the 12 months from April 2017 through March 2018 with the previous period from April 2016 through March 2017, there were 384 fewer murders. Just under 60 percent of the sample experienced a decline in the murder rate, and in 15 cities the murder rate dropped by at least 3 murders per 100,000 residents. Most notably, the total count of murders in Chicago dropped by 142, a decrease in the murder rate of over 5 murders per 100,000 residents. Chicago received an extraordinary amount of attention when the city's murder rate rose sharply in 2016, but few media outlets have noticed as murders have started to fall downward.

It is always a mistake to make firm conclusions or projections based on short-term changes in violence. However, the most updated figures provide sufficient evidence to reach a more modest conclusion: the rise in violence that took place in many cities after 2014 has not continued in the past year. Whether the recent drop in violence will persist, or expand to more cities, is an open question.

> *In most major cities, violence has fallen—sometimes sharply—in the past twelve months.*
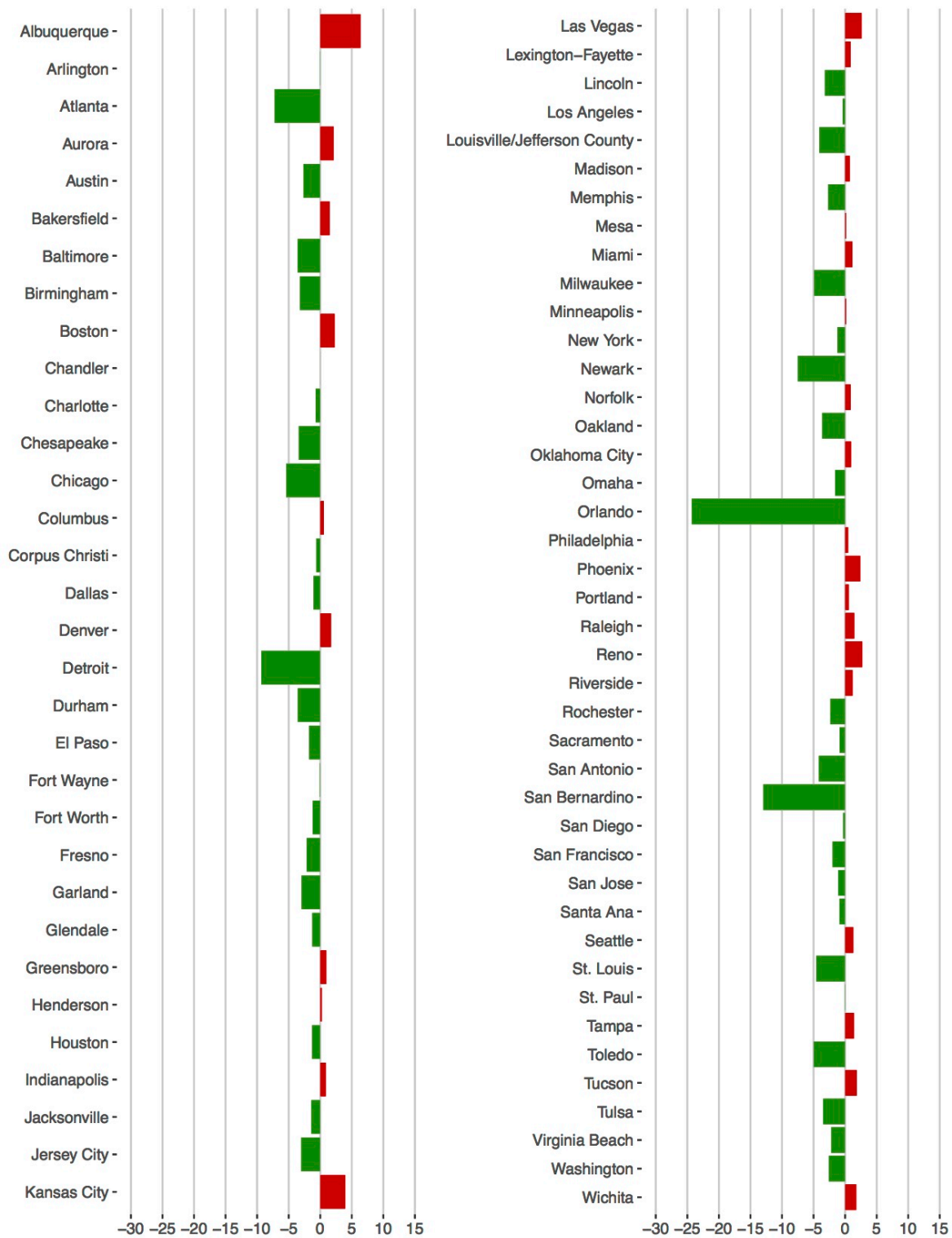
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Figure 3. Changes in murder in last year. Green=decline in murder, Red=increase in murder.

Where Violence Remains

 The three time periods provide different perspectives on how urban violence is changing, but the overarching conclusion is positive. American cities are much safer than they were in the early 1990s. And although violence rose in many cities from 2014 to 2017, the most recent year of data suggests that cities have turned a corner and this recent rise in violence may have come to an end. Over the last twelve months, violence has fallen in most big cities, and it has fallen sharply in Chicago, the city that experienced the most substantial spike in violence from 2014 to 2017.

Although violence has fallen over time, there are still cities and many neighborhoods with extreme levels of violence. One (admittedly crude) way to identify such places is to focus on cities or neighborhoods where the murder rate is higher than 20 per 100,000, a level that is common only in the most violent, war-torn nations of the world. In the early 1990s, 32 of the 78 largest cities with available data had murder rates that placed them above this threshold. By 2017, only twelve cities remained, as shown in Table 1 below.

The table reflects the complex conclusions that are inevitable in any analysis of trends in urban violence. On the one hand, the degree of change that has taken place since the early 1990s is truly staggering. On the other hand, there are still cities with extreme levels of violence—and within these cities, there are many neighborhoods where the threat of violence is constant.

Our goal, in this report and this website, is to provide the most accurate, updated data on violence for major cities across the country (and, in the second version of the site, we will provide the same information for neighborhoods). Our hope is that as this project continues, we will get to a point where there is not a single city with a murder rate above 20 per 100,000. In the cities that have already passed this threshold, our more optimistic hope is that every single community will eventually get to a point where there are fewer than 20 murders for every 100,000 residents. AmericanViolence.org will be tracking progress toward that goal in as precise and rigorous a manner possible.

Table 1. Cities with murder rates at or above 20 per 100,000 in 1991 and 2017.

STATE	CITY	1991 MURDER RATE (CITIES AT/ABOVE 20 PER 100,000)	2017 MURDER RATE (CITIES AT/ABOVE 20 PER 100,000)
AL	Birmingham	53	45
CA	Long Beach	22	-
CA	Los Angeles	29	-
CA	Oakland	40	-
CA	Santa Ana	20	-
DC	Washington	80	-
FL	Miami	35	-
FL	Tampa	20	-
GA	Atlanta	52	-
IL	Chicago	33	25
LA	Baton Rouge	26	39
LA	New Orleans	70	42
MA	Boston	20	-
MD	Baltimore	42	56
MI	Detroit	60	39
MO	Kansas City	31	31
MO	St. Louis	66	69
NC	Charlotte	28	-
NC	Durham	21	-
NJ	Newark	32	24
NV	Las Vegas	37	24
NY	New York	29	-
NY	Rochester	28	-
OH	Columbus	22	-
PA	Philadelphia	28	-
TN	Memphis	28	27
TX	Dallas	49	-
TX	Fort Worth	43	-
TX	Houston	37	-
TX	San Antonio	22	-
VA	Norfolk	33	-
WI	Milwaukee	26	20

A note on data

The data for this report are from AmericanViolence.org, which compiles data on murder for over 80 of the largest 100 cities in the United States. We began with yearly data from the F.B.I.'s Uniform Crime Reports for murder (Murder and Non-negligent Manslaughter), which is shown for all cities for all available years from 1990 through 2014 using the UCR data tool. To gather more recent monthly data we conducted an extensive search to try to find the best publicly-available source for each city.

Many cities do not have any source that provides accurate, updated monthly data on murder. In some of these cities we use data from an excellent public website, the Gun Violence Archive (GVA), to estimate the number of murders in each month. We use data from GVA in two ways. First, some cities report the number of homicides on a quarterly or yearly basis, rather than a monthly basis. In these cases we estimate how the total murders in each quarter were distributed across individual months using data on monthly counts of gun-related homicides available from the GVA. We assume that the distribution of all murders across the full period was the same as the distribution of gun-related homicides, and we estimate monthly counts accordingly. Second, some cities do not have any updated source of data on murders. In these cases if updated data are available from GVA we use the monthly data on gun-related homicides to estimate the number of total murders for each month. The estimates are based on a simple linear model derived from our analysis of historical data. Our approach effectively reweights the GVA data to generate an estimate of all murders.

For this report, we decided to report figures running through March, 2018 so that we could limit the need for estimated monthly figures. The website contains more updated figures running through May, 2018, and the latest figures reinforce the conclusions from this report. For more information on the data sources for each city please see the city pages on AmericanViolence.org.

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