

# Guns, Poverty, and Social Welfare: How Republicans Fail to Address Crime



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Violent crime is on the rise in America, in both red and blue states, in urban and rural areas. Although Democrats bear the brunt of the blame, Republican leaders are just as responsible—if not more—for the uptick in violence across the country.

Our March 2022 report revealed that per capita murder rates were 40% higher in states won by Donald Trump in 2020.<sup>1</sup> Eight of the ten states with the highest murder rates in 2020 voted for the Republican presidential nominee in every election this century. What’s more, Democratic-run cities employ more police officers per capita than GOP cities, turning the “defund the police” invective on its head.<sup>2</sup>

Every use of the “Democrats are soft-on-crime” narrative is a deliberate effort to shift the focus away from Republicans’ socially restrictive policies, lax gun laws, and paltry community investments exacerbating the problem. Republicans’ monopoly on violent crime discourse in the

media allows them to facilitate a one-sided conversation highlighting liberal criminal justice policies, like police reform or rehabilitation, as the reason for the slight but certain surge in violence. While researchers are still examining the cause of the 2020 spike in crime, theories attribute the blame to Covid-disrupted services, the Black Lives Matter protests, and the rise in inflation.<sup>3</sup>

There's a reason Republican-run states have higher crime rates. Below, we offer theories for how fewer restrictions on gun ownership, higher poverty levels, and deprioritizing social policy investment prove Republicans' inadequacy on preventing violent crime.

## Gun Ownership

Statistically, gun ownership correlates to more violent crime. States with less restrictive gun laws have witnessed higher rates of gun violence. In 2020, deeply red states like Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Wyoming had the highest firearm mortality rate in the country. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Mississippi's firearm mortality rate was 28.6 per 100,000 people. Comparatively, New York had a firearm mortality rate of just 5.3 per 100,000 people.<sup>4</sup>

Though gun laws vary by state, places with looser concealed-carry laws have a higher homicide rate on average.<sup>5</sup> A 2022 report for Johns Hopkins University found that the five states with the lowest gun death rates in 2020 enacted both an extreme risk protection order law and a firearm purchaser licensing law, or a waiting period.<sup>6</sup>

In Iowa, however, gun homicides increased 23.5% *within one year*, according to the Center for American Progress.<sup>7</sup> Between 2020 and 2021, the Iowa State Legislature repealed two measures vital for gun safety: requirements for permits to purchase firearms and permits for concealed carry in public spaces. In a state where gun violence is the most common cause of homicide, their Republican state representatives are failing to keep citizens safe.<sup>8</sup>

The distinctions aren't always clear-cut. Though urban areas have higher rates of gun homicides, rural areas have 28% more gun deaths per capita, largely because suicides make up two-thirds of this mortality rate.<sup>9</sup> Population density further skews this media bias, as rural counties' proportional gun violence rate far outnumbers urban areas.<sup>10</sup>

Without fail, Republicans campaign on two main things every election season: fighting crime and fighting restrictions on gun ownership. The data places these two factors at odds. Unfortunately for Republicans, reducing violence is not possible without restricting gun ownership.

## More Poverty, More Crime

Communities with higher levels of poverty observe higher levels of crime, and red states occupy eight out of the ten states with the highest poverty levels, according to the U.S. Census Bureau

(Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, West Virginia, Alabama, Kentucky, South Carolina, and Oklahoma). Among them, Mississippi, Louisiana, Kentucky, Alabama, South Carolina, and Arkansas have some of the highest murder rates. There is an obvious correlation between material hardship and violence.

Poverty is a policy failure. Republican leaders *choose* to forgo enacting policies that will raise their communities out of poverty. By doing so, they are also choosing to ignore a rising crime rate. Economic security programs like Social Security, food assistance, tax credits, and housing assistance significantly reduced the poverty rate over the last few decades. In 2021, Social Security was the most critical program for poverty reduction, according to data released by the Census Bureau.<sup>11</sup>

But Republicans want to strip Americans of these crucial safety nets. In Mississippi, for example, Governor Tate Reeves halted the federal rental assistance program in August of 2022 to “incentivize work,” even though 66% of the program’s beneficiaries were employed, two-thirds of which were behind on their rent or mortgage under threat of eviction or foreclosure.<sup>12</sup>

Impoverished communities often lack crime-detering resources. Strain Theory asserts that crimes committed to obtain financial security stem from inaccessible means of achieving societal definitions of success. Along the same vein, Environmental Criminology highlights how the built environment of an area can either influence or deter crime. The effects associated with poverty (homelessness, food insecurity, inaccessible healthcare) disrupt informal social processes—community organization, family bonds, central value systems—that keep communities safe and violence at bay.<sup>13</sup>

Crime reduction begins with economic security provided for all Americans. On the principle that ‘any government spending is bad,’ Republicans routinely advocate for blocking essential aid that working-class citizens need to survive.

## **Investing in Social Policy Means Investing in Crime Reduction**

A 2017 study for BMJ Open found that “spending on social and public health services is associated with significantly lower homicide rates at the state level.”<sup>14</sup> The initial costs of crime prevention pale in comparison to the high expenditures of the ineffective institutions Republicans support. Investing in social policy means investing in safer, healthier communities.

States with higher levels of education have lower levels of crime. Typically, increased investment in public education results in better high school graduation rates. Bolstering education systems provides students with activities that occupy their time and energy and opportunities to plan their futures. Most crimes are perpetrated by teenagers under the age of 24.<sup>15</sup> Whether because of perceived impunity, lack of structure, or the fact that 18–24-year-olds lack fully developed

prefrontal cortexes—the part of the brain associated with risk assessment—there are several explanations as to why the most common perpetrators of violent crime are young people, especially young men. Commitment to education is a key deterrent for juvenile delinquency.

Spending on elementary and secondary education per capita is roughly 50% higher in blue states.<sup>16</sup> Lochner and Moretti found that a 1% increase in male high school graduation rates would save as much as \$1.4 billion in social savings and significantly reduce the probability of incarceration and arrest.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, a University of Michigan study reported similar findings, concluding that “students who attended better-funded schools were 15% less likely to be arrested through age 30.”<sup>18</sup>

Although most public elementary and secondary education funding comes from state sources, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, Republican leadership at both the state and national levels routinely supports massive cuts to education budgets.<sup>19</sup>

Communities with universal access to healthcare have a better chance at curbing violence. However, Republican-controlled states consistently block the expansion of eligibility for Medicaid, according to an analysis for the UC Berkeley School of Public Health.<sup>20</sup> Restricting vital access to healthcare for low-income individuals worsens the conditions that breed criminal activity.

For example, providing mental and behavioral health and substance abuse resources reduces crime rates. Brookings found that increasing the number of treatment facilities reduced both violent and financially motivated crime.<sup>21</sup> They discovered that the expansion of Medicaid lowered violent and property crime rates due to a 20% increase in the number of people receiving substance abuse treatment.

## Conclusion

Crime is complex. Despite its excessive politicization, violent crimes are often motivated by several high-emotion tensions like anger, revenge, social clout, and impromptu aggression. But Republican-run states fail to address the rise in crime in more ways than one.

One of the biggest myths surrounding crime reduction is that stricter sentencing and harsher punishments reduce violence.<sup>22</sup> In fact, these punitive measures do little to deter crime and may exacerbate recidivism. However, Republicans continually brand themselves as tough-on-crime while ignoring the systemic issues at fault. By politicizing the problem, they exploit fear for personal gain.

If Republicans worked to fix the conditions that breed criminal activity, they would not win elections. Red states have higher rates of gun ownership, poverty, and less access to social services that could reduce crime. Their citizens deserve leaders who care about their safety and well-being and enact policies to prove it.

TOPICS

**JUSTICE** 37

## ENDNOTES

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