The Red State Murder Problem
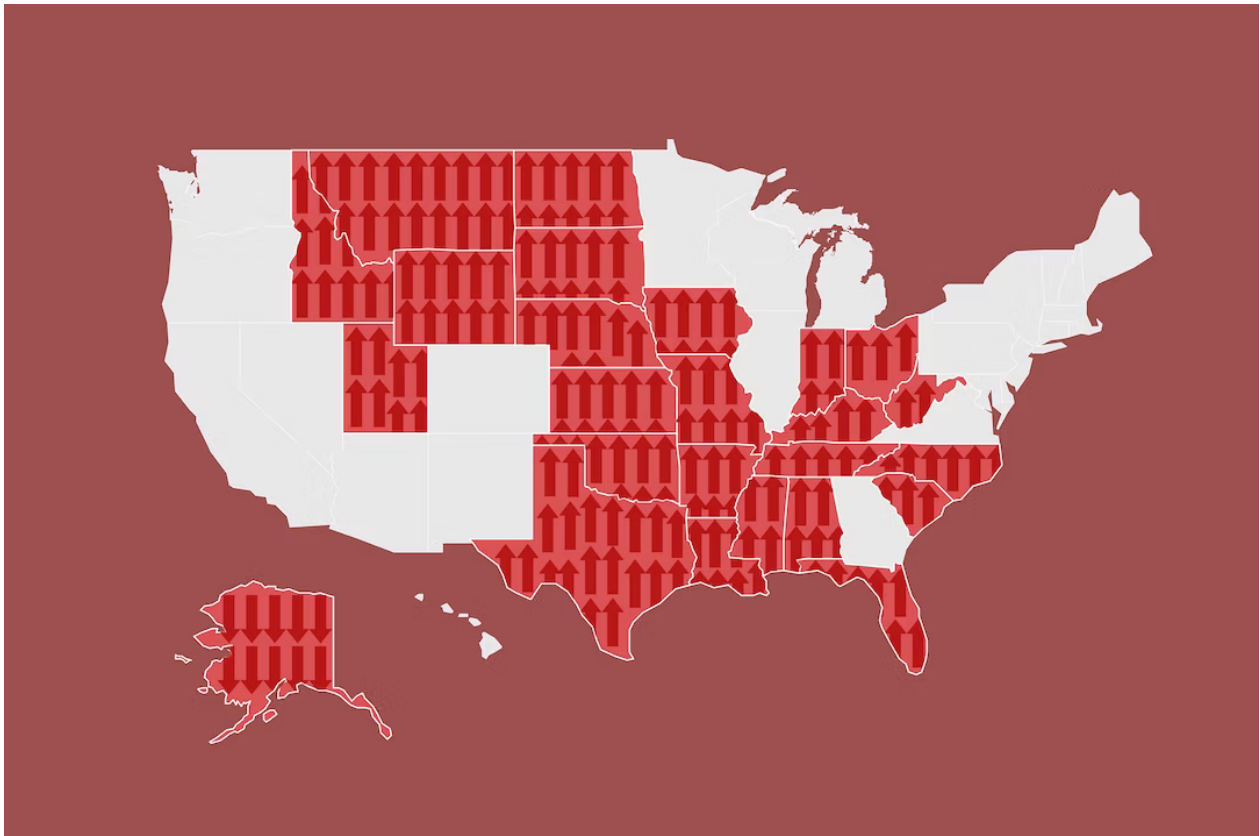
Kylie Murdock
Policy Advisor
🐦 @kyliemmurdock

Jim Kessler
Executive Vice President for Policy
🐦 @ThirdWayKessler

We published a underlinefollow-up report in January of 2023 to see if this one-year Red State murder epidemic was an anomaly. It was not. Despite a media narrative to the contrary, a wide and widening Red State murder gap has spanned the past two decades.

Takeaways

- The rate of murders in the US has gone up at an alarming rate. But, despite a media narrative to the contrary, this is a problem that afflicts Republican-run cities and states as much or more than the Democratic bastions.

- In 2020, per capita murder rates were 40% higher in states won by Donald Trump than those won by Joe Biden.

- 8 of the 10 states with the highest murder rates in 2020 voted for the Republican presidential nominee in every election this century.

Every news outlet from FOX to CNN to The New York Times to local newspapers has a story with attention-grabbing headlines like "US cities hit all-time murder records." Fox News and Republicans have jumped on this and framed it as a "Democrat" problem. They blame it on Democrat's "soft-on-crime" approach and have even referred to a New York District Attorney's approach as "hug-a-thug." Many news stories outside of Fox have also purported that police reform is responsible for this rise in murder and have pointed to cities like New York and Los Angeles.

There is a measure of truth to these stories. The US saw an alarming 30% increase in murder in 2020. While 2021 data is not yet complete, murder was on the rise again this past year. Some "blue" cities, like Chicago, Baltimore, and Philadelphia, have seen real and persistent increases in homicides. These cities—along with others like Los Angeles, New York, and Minneapolis—are also in places with wall-to-wall media coverage and national media interest.

But there is a large piece of the homicide story that is missing and calls into question the veracity of the right-wing obsession over homicides in Democratic cities: murder rates are far higher in Trump-voting red states than Biden-voting blue states. And sometimes, murder rates are highest in cities with Republican mayors.

For example, Jacksonville, a city with a Republican mayor, had 128 more murders in 2020 than San Francisco, a city with a Democrat mayor, despite their comparable populations. In fact, the homicide rate in Speaker Nancy Pelosi's San Francisco was half that of House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy's Bakersfield, a city with a Republican mayor that overwhelmingly voted for Trump. Yet there is barely a whisper, let alone an outcry, over the stunning levels of murders in these and other places.

We collected 2019 and 2020 murder data from all 50 states. (Comprehensive 2021 data is not yet available.) We pulled the data from yearly crime reports released by state governments, specifically the Departments of Justice and Safety. For states that didn't issue state crime reports, we pulled data from reputable local news sources. To allow for comparison, we calculated the state's per capita murder rate, the number of murders per 100,000 residents, and categorized states by their presidential vote in the 2020 election, resulting in an even 25-25 split.

We found that murder rates are, on average, 40% higher in the 25 states Donald Trump won in the last presidential election compared to those that voted for Joe Biden. In addition, murder rates in many of these red states dwarf those in blue states like New York, California, and Massachusetts. And finally, many of the states with the worst murder rates—like Mississippi, Kentucky, Alabama,

South Carolina, and Arkansas—are ones that few would describe as urban. Only 2 of America's top 100 cities in population are located in these high murder rate states. And not a single one of the top 10 murder states registers in the top 15 for population density.

Whether one does or does not blame Republican leaders for high murder rates, it seems that Republican officeholders do a better job of blaming Democrats for lethal crime than actually reducing lethal crime.

Trump-Voting States Account for 8 out of the 10 Highest Murder Rates in 2020.

If you're tuned in to the media, you'd think murder is rocketing skyward in New York, California, Illinois. But those states don't even crack the top ten.

In fact, the top per capita murder rate states in 2020 were mostly those far from massive urban centers and Democratic mayors and governors. Eight of the top ten worst murder rate states voted for Trump in 2020. None of those eight has supported a Democrat for president since 1996.

The chart below shows the top 10 murder rate states in 2020. Mississippi had the highest homicide rate at 20.50 murders per 100,000 residents, followed by Louisiana at 15.79, Kentucky at 14.32, Alabama at 14.2, and Missouri at 14. The national average was 6.5 per 100,000 residents, but the top five states had rates more than twice that high.

These red states are not generating "murder is out of control" national headlines. They seem to generate no headlines at all. The rest of the top ten were filled out by South Carolina, New Mexico, Georgia, Arkansas, and Tennessee—all states rarely talked about in breathless media reports about rampant crime in Democratic strongholds. Notably, New Mexico and Georgia were the only Biden-voting states in the top ten, and they ranked seventh and eighth, respectively.

Top 10 Murder Rates in the United States

State	Per Capita Murder Rate
Mississippi	20.50
Louisiana	15.79
Kentucky	14.32
Alabama	14.20
Missouri	14.00
South Carolina	10.72
New Mexico	10.70
Georgia	10.50
Arkansas	10.29
Tennessee	9.90

Source: Calculations based on publicly available state crime reports and local news sources.

⊛ **THIRD WAY**

Five of the largest Biden-voting states by population, and those often in the news when it comes to crime, had much lower murder rates. New York at 4.11 per 100,000 residents, California at 5.59, and New Jersey at 3.70 were each well below the national average. Pennsylvania (7.22) and Illinois (9.20) were higher than the national average. But Mississippi's murder rate was nearly 400% higher than New York's, more than 250% higher than California's, and about 120% higher than Illinois's. In fact, the five states with the highest murder rates, all Trump-voting states, had rates at least 240% higher than New York's murder rate and at least 150% higher than California's, the homes to some of the largest cities featured prominently in the "crime is out of control" narrative.

2020 Murder Rates Are 40% Higher in Trump-Voting States Compared to Biden-Voting States.

Beyond the top 10, we looked at the 2020 murder rates in the 25 states that voted for Donald Trump and compared it with the murder rates in the 25 states that voted for Joe Biden. The 8.20 murders per 100,000 residents rate in Trump states was 40% higher than the 5.78 murders per 100,000 residents in Biden states. These Biden-voting states include the "crime-is-out-of-control" cities of Los Angeles, New York City, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Portland, Baltimore, and Minneapolis, among other large cities.

Among the 50 states, murder rates were often well above the national average in many Republican-controlled states and cities. Jacksonville with 176 homicides and a murder rate (19.776) more than three times that of New York City (5.94) has a Republican mayor. Tulsa (19.64) and Oklahoma City (11.16) have Republican mayors in a Republican state and have murder rates that dwarf that of Los Angeles (6.74). Lexington's Republican mayor saw record homicides in 2020 and 2021, with a murder rate (10.61) nearly twice that of New York City. Bakersfield (11.91) and Fresno (14.09) each have Republican mayors and murder rates far higher than either San Francisco or Los Angeles.

Of course, some cities controlled by Democrats have alarming murder rates, like Chicago (28.49) and Houston (17.32). But we hear about these and other Democrat-run cities all the time. We aren't getting the whole picture.

The Average Murder Rate is 40% Higher in Trump-Voting States

Trump State	2020 per capita	Biden State	2020 per capita
MS	20.50	NM	10.70
LA	15.79	GA	10.50
KY	14.32	IL	9.20
AL	14.20	MD	9.15
MO	14.00	DE	7.60
SC	10.72	MI	7.51
AR	10.29	PA	7.22
TN	9.90	VA	6.12
NC	7.65	NV	5.93
IN	7.50	AZ	5.81
OK	7.25	CA	5.59
OH	7.00	CO	5.14
TX	6.64	WI	5.12
KS	6.57	NY	4.11
AK	6.56	CT	4.01
WV	6.53	WA	3.94
FL	5.97	NJ	3.70
SD	5.53	RI	3.03
MT	4.63	HI	2.90
ND	4.11	OR	2.89
WY	3.99	MN	2.69
NE	3.57	MA	2.44
IA	3.49	VT	2.20
UT	2.53	ME	1.64
ID	2.12	NH	0.88
Avg	**8.20**	**Avg**	**5.78**

Source: Calculations based on publicly available state crime reports and local news sources.

THIRD WAY

Between 2019 and 2020, Murder Rates increased slightly faster in Trump-voting states than Biden-voting states.

In 2020, murder rates increased nearly everywhere. But they increased more in Trump-voting states than Biden-voting states, albeit slightly. The average increase in murder rate across all Trump-voting states was 32.2% [1] compared to 30.8% in Biden-voting states.

Three out of the five states with the highest murder rates in 2020—Mississippi, Missouri, and Alabama—didn't have reliable 2019 data available, so they weren't included in this analysis.

Three of the five states with the largest increase in murder rate were Trump-voting Wyoming at 91.7%, South Dakota at 69%, and Nebraska at 59.1%. These states are decidedly rural and do not conform to the *chaos-in-the-city* meme that has overtaken the crime debate. Biden-voting Wisconsin came in at the number three spot at 63.2% and Minnesota came in fifth at 58.1%. Out of the top ten states, six were Trump-voting states—with the additional three being Kentucky, West Virginia, and Kansas. The remaining states in the top ten were Delaware and Washington. Only one of the top ten states in murder rate increases, Delaware, was among the top twenty in population density.

Top 10 Murder Rate Increases in the United States

State	% Increase in Murder Rate
WY	91.7%
SD	69.0%
WI	63.2%
NE	59.1%
MN	58.1%
KY	58.0%
DE	54.2%
WA	50.2%
WV	50.0%
KS	48.5%

Source: Calculations based on publicly available state crime reports and local news sources.

THIRD WAY

Again, California, New York, and Illinois aren't in the top ten. California's murder rate increase was 31.1%, or about the national average. Both New York (45.8%) and Illinois (38.2%) were above the national average.

Conclusion

The current narrative around crime and murder is convenient and wrong. Whether you're watching CNN or Fox News, or getting news online or from a traditional newspaper, you would think that the increase in murder is a phenomenon found mostly in liberal cities. Many have tried attributing this increase to Democratic policies, specifically police reform. Republican lawmakers and ad makers have contributed to this narrative through clever messaging and strategies.

But the data clearly paint a different story. The increase in murders is not a liberal cities problem but a national problem. Murder rates are actually higher in Republican, Trump-voting states that haven't even flirted with ideas like defund the police. Eight of the ten most lawless, high-murder states are not only Trump-voting states, but GOP bastions for the last quarter of a century. A more accurate conclusion from the data is that Republicans do a far better job blaming others for high murder rates than actually reducing high murder rates.

Methodology

We sought 2019 and 2020 murder data from all 50 states. Our primary source was the annual crime reports released by state governments, more specifically from their Departments of Justice or Public Safety. We chose state data because we found it's more comprehensive than FBI data which is often compiled later. For example, "the FBI estimated crime statistics for Mississippi are based on data received from 113 of 251 law enforcement agencies in the state that year." 37 states had crime reports for the years 2019 and 2020: Alaska, Arkansas, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Iowa, Idaho, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, North Carolina, North Dakota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Nevada, New York, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. For the remaining states we pulled data from published public sources: Alabama- US News, Georgia- US News, Hawaii- The Center Square, Indiana- Hartford City News Times, Louisiana- US News, Maryland- Ocean City Today, Mississippi- US News, Missouri- US News, New Mexico- US News, Ohio- Axios, Oregon-

KOIN, Vermont- WCAX, West Virginia- The Center Square. In seven states, the public sources only provided murder per capita rates, so using the rates and census population data, we estimated the number of murders in that state. Data and sources are attached above.

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ENDNOTES

1.   Excluding MI, MS, and AL.