

An update of long-term trends in property and violent crime in New South Wales: 1990-2019

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Aim: The aim of this paper is to analyse the trends in the rates of annual recorded incidents of 10 categories of property and violent crime for the period 1990 to 2019 in New South Wales (NSW).

Method: Offence rates were calculated using criminal incident data from the NSW Police Force Computerised Operational Policing System (COPS) for the period 1995 to 2019, and the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research's recorded crime statistics report series for the period 1990 to 1994. Kendall's trend test was run on the 30 annual rates for each of the 10 offence categories.

Results: Some categories of crime in NSW are now at the lowest recorded levels they have been for over 25 years. Comparing per capita rates of crime in 2019 with per capita rates in 1990, lower rates were found for: robbery with a firearm (88% lower); motor vehicle theft (82% lower); break and enter non-dwelling (80% lower); break and enter dwelling (68% lower); robbery without a weapon (65% lower); robbery with a weapon not a firearm (56% lower) and murder (54% lower). Three of the ten offence types analysed in this report were found to have recorded rates higher in 2019 than in 1990: sexual assault (184% higher); other sexual offences (136% higher) and assault (61% higher).

Conclusion: In the period since 1990, sexual assault and other sexual offences rates recorded long term upward trends whilst the other eight offences analysed in this report were trending down or stable. The 2019 recorded sexual assault rate was the highest recorded since 1990. The three robbery and three property crime series all recorded falls of 75 per cent or more since 2000.

Keywords: trends, crime statistics, property crime, violent crime

Introduction

This brief is an annual update of the property and violent crime trends first reported in Moffatt and Poynton (2006). The aim of the paper is to examine the trends in the rates of annual recorded incidents of 10 categories of property and violent crime for the period 1990 to 2019 in NSW.

Method

Data

With the exception of murder, the data presented refer to the number of police recorded criminal incidents per 100,000 population.¹ For murder, rates are calculated on the numbers of murder victims per 100,000 population. Data from the NSW Police Force Computerised Operational Policing System (COPS)

have been used to calculate offence rates for the period 1995 to 2019. Criminal incident data for 1994 and for the years prior to the introduction of COPS have been taken from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research's (BOCSAR) report series *NSW Recorded Crime Statistics*. There have been three adjustments to the data series since 1995; these are all outlined below in the Notes section.²

Results

Violent crime

Figure 1 shows the number of *murder* victims in NSW per 100,000 population from 1990 to 2019. Figures 2, 3 and 4 show respectively the number of recorded *assault*, *sexual offences* and *robbery* incidents per 100,000 population from 1990 to 2019.

The major points to note from these figures are:

- A significant downward trend is apparent in the NSW *murder* rate (down 54% since 1990) (Figure 1). Apart from the 2017 recorded rate of 0.7 murder victims per 100,000 population, the 2019 rate of 0.9 murder victims is the lowest in the series (along with 2018 and 2016 also at 0.9).
- Figure 2 for the recorded NSW *assault* rate shows two things: firstly the steep upward trend between 1990 and 2002, and secondly the drop back since the early 2000s. In the early 1990s the recorded *assault* rate was about 500 incidents per 100,000 population climbing to over 1,000 incidents per 100,000 population by 2001 and remaining around 1,000 to 2008. Since 2008 there has been a gradual decline (to around 825 incidents in 2019) such that the current rate of recorded *assault* is similar to that of the late 1990s. The increases in recorded *assault* during the 1990s may in part be due to increased reporting of these offences by victims (Ringland & Baker, 2009). Kendall's trend test on the series reveals a significant downward trend since 2000, and currently the rate of assault remains 23% below the 2002 peak.
- Over the period from 1990 to 2019, NSW recorded increases in the crime rate of both *sexual assault* (up 184%) and *other sexual offences*³ (up 136%, Figure 3). The increases in *sexual assault* and *other sexual offences* may be partly due to increased reporting of these offences by victims (O'Brien, Jones & Korabelnikoff, 2008). In both cases, the sharpest rises occurred in the mid to late 1990s. *Other sexual offences* recorded a significant downward trend between 2002 and 2010 (see Figure 3) but has increased by 39% since then. *Sexual assault*, however, has continued the significant upward trend since 2000 (up 44%).

Figure 1. Murder[^] rate for NSW, 1990-2019

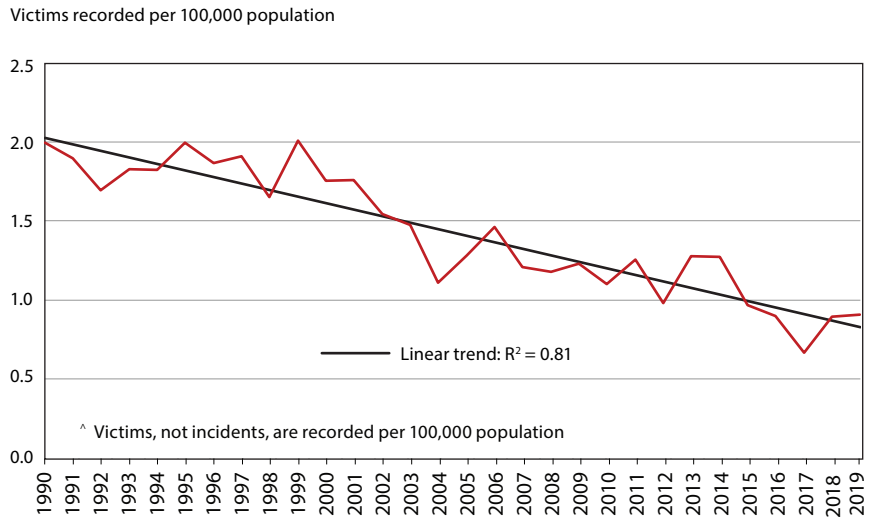


Figure 2. Assault rate for NSW, 1990-2019

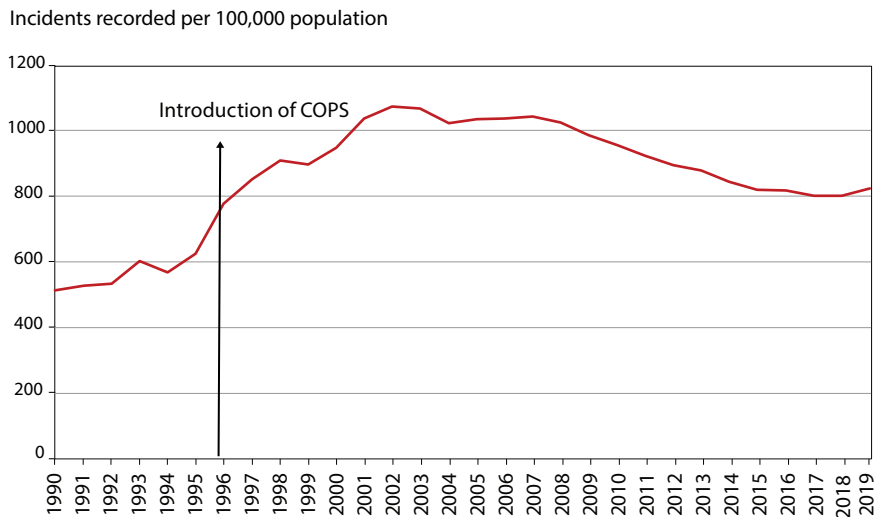


Figure 3. Sexual offences rate for NSW, 1990-2019

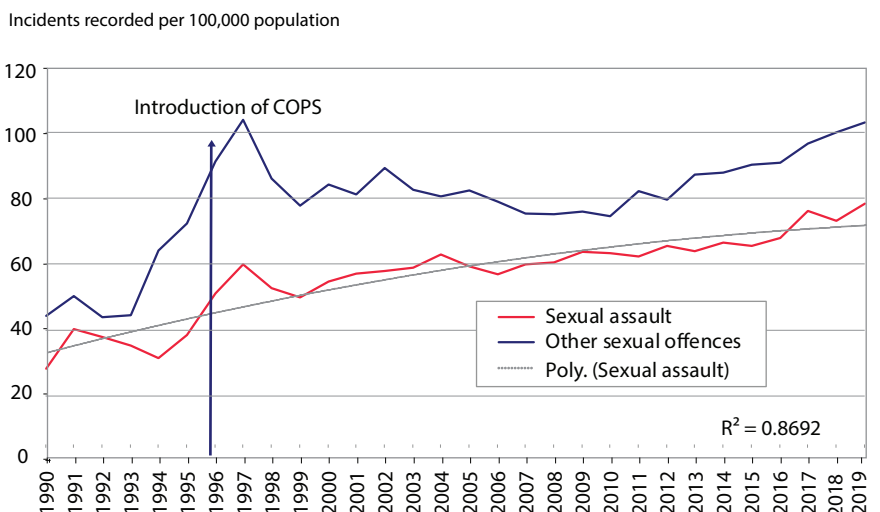
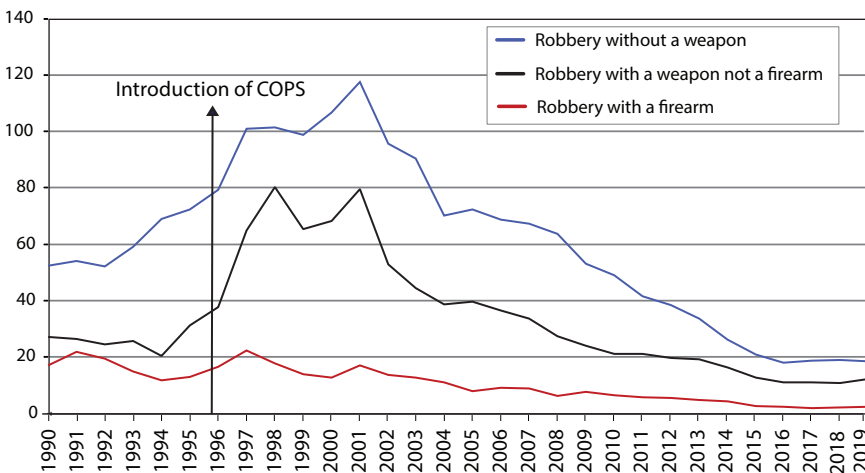


Figure 4. Robbery rate for NSW, 1990-2019

Incidents recorded per 100,000 population



- Recorded rates of all three robbery offences are now below those seen around 1990 and continue to show declines (see Figure 4). All three robbery offences show a significant and consistent downward long-term trend since 1990: *robbery with a firearm* (down 88%); *robbery without a weapon* (down 65%) and *robbery with a weapon not a firearm* (down 56%). The 2019 rate for *robbery with a firearm* is over eight times lower than the 1990 rate (see Figure 4a).

Property Crime

Figure 5 shows recorded rates for three major theft categories with significant downward trends since 1990: *break and enter dwelling*, *break and enter non-dwelling* and *motor vehicle theft*. The major points to note from this figure are:

- The overall shapes of the graphs for these offences show remarkable similarity. The rates of *motor vehicle theft* and *break and enter non-dwelling* continue to track one another closely as has been the case since the late 1990s. In fact the correlations between all the series in Figure 5 are 0.9 or higher since 1990.
- Recorded rates of *motor vehicle theft* continue to decline significantly (down 82% since 1990). After a fall in this theft category in the early 1990s, the incident rate began to increase from 1993 onwards. From about 1997, the rate of *motor vehicle theft* stabilised at around 820 incidents per 100,000 population and then dropped sharply from 2001 onwards, having registered a 80 per cent fall since then.
- Break and enter dwelling* rates increased sharply in the late 1990s, but since 2001 have been on a monotonic decline as have the rates for *break and enter non-dwelling* and *motor vehicle theft*.

Figure 4a. Robbery with a firearm rate for NSW, 1990-2019

Incidents recorded per 100,000 population

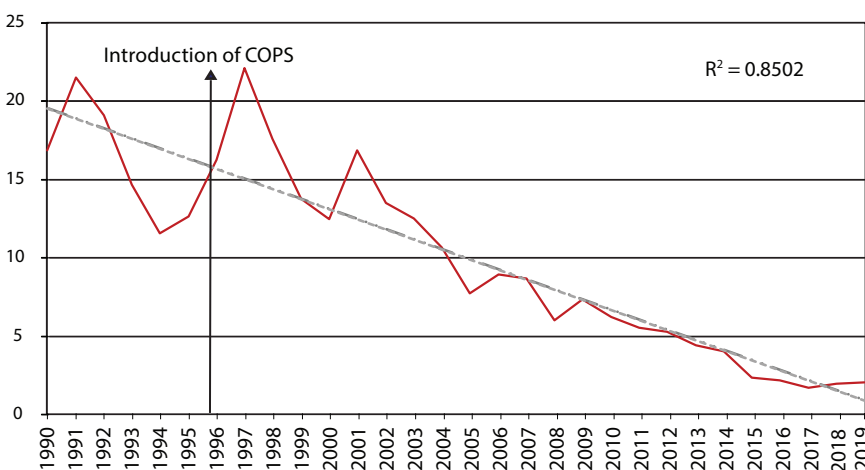
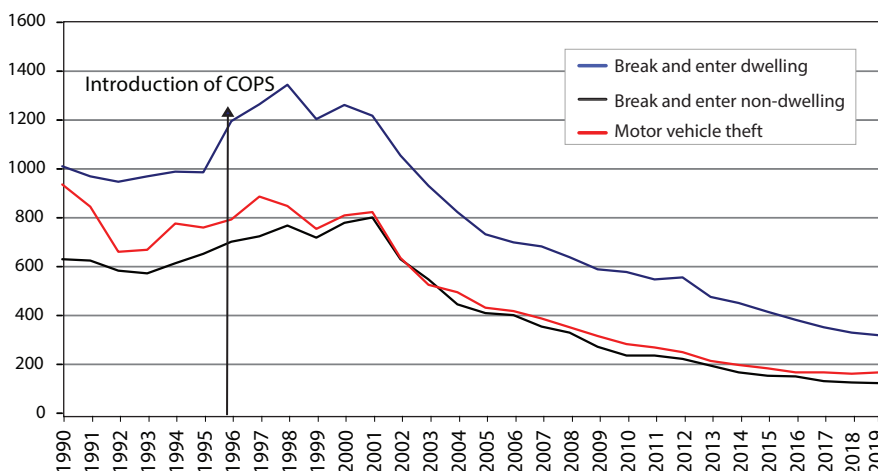


Figure 5. Burglary and motor vehicle theft rate for NSW, 1990-2019

Incidents recorded per 100,000 population



All three property crime series shown in Figure 5 are about a quarter of the rate of 2001 and are now well below the recorded 1990 levels.

Discussion

Some categories of crime in NSW are now at the lowest recorded levels they have been for over 28 years. Comparing per capita rates of crime in 2019 with per capita rates in 1990, the rate of:

- *robbery with a firearm* is 88 per cent lower;
- *motor vehicle theft* is 82 per cent lower;
- *break and enter non-dwelling* is 80 per cent lower;
- *break and enter dwelling* is 68 per cent lower;
- *robbery without a weapon* is 65 per cent lower;
- *robbery with a weapon not a firearm* is 56 per cent lower, and
- *murder* is 54 per cent lower.

The falls in these categories of crime are countered by increases in recorded rates of *sexual assault*, *other sexual offences* and *assault*. Comparing rates of crime in 2019 with those in 1990, the rate of:

- *sexual assault* is 184 per cent higher;
- *other sexual offences* is 136 per cent higher; and
- *assault* is 61 per cent higher.

Given that recorded crime data includes only crimes that come to the attention of the police⁴, and not all criminal acts are reported to the authorities, the trends in recorded crime presented here should be interpreted in conjunction with data from crime victim surveys.

A summary of these data is provided in Moffatt and Poynton (2006) and more recently in the 2018-19 Crime Victimization catalogue (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2020). This ABS publication now contains 11 consecutive financial years (2008-9 to 2018-19) of personal and household summary crime data obtained from a national survey, much of which is disaggregated to state level. For NSW, the latest report states that physical assault for those aged 15 and over was reported to police 58 per cent of the time, with a personal victimisation rate of 2.2 per cent. For households, NSW break-ins were reported to police 77 per cent of the time, with a household victimisation rate of 1.9 per cent.

Conclusion

In the period since 1990, *sexual assault* and *other sexual offences* rates recorded significant long term upward trends whilst the other eight offences analysed in this report were trending down or stable. The 2019 recorded *sexual assault* rate was the highest recorded since 1990, up 184 per cent. Apart from *sexual assault* and *other sexual offences*, the remaining eight offences recorded significant downtrends in recorded rates since 2000. The three robbery and three property crime series all recorded drops of 75 per cent or more since 2000.

Notes

1. For the rate calculations, population data were obtained from the 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics publication: Regional Population Growth, Australia, 2016-17, Cat. No. 3218.0 (for population estimates 1995 to 2019). As no population estimates were available for 2018 and 2019 at the time this report was prepared, rates for these years were calculated using 2017 population estimates. Another consideration is that Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) population estimates have slight revisions over time, which may impact on rates being slightly revised from previous updates of this report.
2. Prior to August 2008, if police suspected a criminal incident reported to them did not occur they could record it as 'doubtful'. In the past BOCSAR's recorded crime statistics have included 'accepted' and 'doubtful' incidents. In August 2008 NSW Police removed the 'doubtful' category from COPS, instead directing police officers to categorise these incidents as 'accepted' unless evidence existed to indicate the crime did not occur, in which case the incident would be categorised as 'rejected'. Thus, recorded crime statistics from August 2008 to the present have not contained 'doubtful' incidents. In order to present a continuous series recorded crime statistics have been restricted to only 'accepted' incidents. To do this, we removed the 'doubtful' incidents from crime data from January 1995 to August 2008. This resulted in a slight revision of incident counts (and hence rates) from 1995 to 2008 to those reported in earlier versions of this brief. As we are unable to view which incidents were doubtful in the period 1990 to 1994, the series were not adjusted in these years.

Until 2011, revision of NSW Police Force data by BOCSAR only revised incident counts for the immediate past 24 months of data. From 2011, due to improvements in data extraction, we are now able to revise the complete NSW Police Force data set back to 1995 each time we take a new data extract. Hence some series have been adjusted upwards for past years. This has not altered any of the long term trends. The average annual update for the tabulated counts in Table A1 was approximately 1.4 per cent (rates per 100,000 population are shown in Table A2). The 2011 revision is expected to be a once only adjustment of that size. Some incidents may only become accepted at much later dates than their report date, for example, a suspected murder where remains were only found, say three years after the initial report date. These longer term revisions arise because our crime data is compiled using report dates and some incidents may not be included in a current year if on-going investigations mean that the incident has not been accepted by the time the extract is downloaded. This is more likely to occur for offences such as murder and sexual offences.

The third occurred for the 2014 update. Due to improvements in data extraction, incidents of robbery without a weapon can now be more accurately classified and so incident counts for this category have been revised

back to 1995. As such, some incidents that were previously classified as robbery without a weapon have now been moved into the other two categories of robbery.

3. The offence category *other sexual offences* includes recorded incidents of *indecent assault, acts of indecency, grooming/procuring* and *other sexual offences* (e.g. wilful and obscene exposure, peep or pry).
4. There may sometimes be one off events which can impact on collection of crime data such as the Sydney Olympics or NSW Police industrial action. For example, during November and part of December 2011, NSW Police Force industrial action meant that fewer incidents than expected were recorded for some offences, particularly those involving police enforcement and issuing of infringements. We estimate that due to the industrial action in the last two months of 2011, assault counts may have been around 1.5 per cent below expected recorded levels for 2011. The effect of the industrial action on other offences in this brief was expected to be well below 1 per cent for 2011. After sensitivity analysis we remain confident that there was negligible impact on statewide recorded trends from the 2011 NSW Police industrial action.

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Appendix

Table A1. Number of criminal incidents recorded by NSW Police by year and offence type

	Murder ^a	Assault	Sexual assault	Other sexual offences	Robbery without a weapon	Robbery with a firearm	Robbery with a weapon not a firearm	Break and enter dwelling	Break and enter non-dwelling	Motor vehicle theft
1990	119	29,776	1,606	2,552	3,022	981	1,568	58,862	36,639	54,488
1991	115	31,014	2,343	2,942	3,173	1,265	1,542	57,155	36,838	49,758
1992	101	31,773	2,220	2,583	3,080	1,132	1,444	56,437	34,754	39,423
1993	110	36,076	2,083	2,646	3,525	877	1,528	58,036	34,379	40,169
1994	83	25,732	1,397	2,908	3,120	522	912	44,850	27,858	35,304
1995	124	38,775	2,350	4,485	4,465	781	1,915	61,000	40,395	47,021
1996	116	48,236	3,141	5,673	4,894	1,005	2,320	74,010	43,526	49,149
1997	120	53,514	3,743	6,547	6,305	1,382	4,051	79,244	45,461	55,545
1998	105	57,718	3,318	5,455	6,401	1,111	5,061	84,967	48,730	53,729
1999	129	57,506	3,176	4,987	6,305	878	4,164	76,986	45,947	48,295
2000	114	61,559	3,525	5,465	6,894	805	4,398	81,650	50,411	52,507
2001	115	67,807	3,714	5,303	7,651	1,097	5,170	79,342	52,219	53,755
2002	102	70,808	3,794	5,879	6,268	883	3,461	69,246	41,441	41,874
2003	98	70,865	3,889	5,467	5,962	825	2,924	61,505	36,310	34,744
2004	74	68,087	4,165	5,367	4,649	705	2,546	54,751	29,713	32,995
2005	86	69,406	3,958	5,524	4,812	514	2,624	48,898	27,559	28,947
2006	99	70,025	3,821	5,329	4,615	598	2,446	47,033	27,082	28,158
2007	83	71,394	4,073	5,144	4,580	590	2,280	46,657	24,375	26,616
2008	82	71,262	4,187	5,216	4,392	416	1,882	44,341	22,965	24,441
2009	87	69,628	4,476	5,364	3,728	515	1,668	41,615	19,231	22,330
2010	79	68,394	4,509	5,326	3,484	442	1,493	41,253	17,057	20,285
2011	91	66,771	4,485	5,935	2,975	396	1,496	39,547	17,082	19,593
2012	72	65,371	4,767	5,815	2,782	382	1,419	40,614	16,285	18,288
2013	95	65,175	4,719	6,474	2,468	325	1,395	35,278	14,597	15,953
2014	96	63,483	4,988	6,609	1,937	299	1,198	33,979	12,792	14,894
2015	74	62,443	4,982	6,885	1,568	178	952	31,628	11,911	14,121
2016	70	63,245	5,249	7,040	1,363	166	829	29,717	11,707	13,115
2017	53	63,032	5,994	7,626	1,451	131	850	27,836	10,575	13,213
2018	72	64,097	5,846	8,021	1,497	155	841	26,549	10,229	13,074
2019	73	65,867	6,269	8,268	1,452	162	944	25,467	9,902	13,406

Table A2. Rate of criminal incidents recorded by NSW Police per 100,000 population by year and offence type

	Murder [^]	Assault	Sexual assault	Other sexual offences	Robbery without a weapon	Robbery with a firearm	Robbery with a weapon not a firearm	Break and enter dwelling	Break and enter non-dwelling	Motor vehicle theft
1990	2.0	511.0	27.6	43.8	51.9	16.8	26.9	1010.2	628.8	935.1
1991	1.9	525.8	39.7	49.9	53.8	21.4	26.1	968.9	624.5	843.5
1992	1.7	533.2	37.3	43.3	51.7	19.0	24.2	947.1	583.2	661.6
1993	1.8	600.8	34.7	44.1	58.7	14.6	25.4	966.5	572.5	668.9
1994	1.8	566.1	30.7	64.0	68.6	11.5	20.1	986.8	612.9	776.7
1995	2.0	624.9	37.9	72.3	72.0	12.6	30.9	983.1	651.0	757.8
1996	1.9	777.4	50.6	91.4	78.9	16.2	37.4	1192.8	701.5	792.1
1997	1.9	852.5	59.6	104.3	100.4	22.0	64.5	1262.5	724.3	884.9
1998	1.7	910.5	52.3	86.1	101.0	17.5	79.8	1340.4	768.7	847.6
1999	2.0	896.9	49.5	77.8	98.3	13.7	64.9	1200.8	716.6	753.3
2000	1.8	949.1	54.3	84.3	106.3	12.4	67.8	1258.8	777.2	809.5
2001	1.8	1038.3	56.9	81.2	117.2	16.8	79.2	1215.0	799.6	823.2
2002	1.5	1076.0	57.7	89.3	95.2	13.4	52.6	1052.2	629.7	636.3
2003	1.5	1070.4	58.7	82.6	90.1	12.5	44.2	929.0	548.4	524.8
2004	1.1	1023.8	62.6	80.7	69.9	10.6	38.3	823.2	446.8	496.1
2005	1.3	1037.0	59.1	82.5	71.9	7.7	39.2	730.6	411.7	432.5
2006	1.5	1038.5	56.7	79.0	68.4	8.9	36.3	697.5	401.6	417.6
2007	1.2	1044.7	59.6	75.3	67.0	8.6	33.4	682.7	356.7	389.5
2008	1.2	1026.3	60.3	75.1	63.3	6.0	27.1	638.6	330.7	352.0
2009	1.2	987.1	63.5	76.0	52.9	7.3	23.6	590.0	272.6	316.6
2010	1.1	957.3	63.1	74.5	48.8	6.2	20.9	577.4	238.8	283.9
2011	1.3	925.0	62.1	82.2	41.2	5.5	20.7	547.9	236.6	271.4
2012	1.0	895.0	65.3	79.6	38.1	5.2	19.4	556.0	223.0	250.4
2013	1.3	880.3	63.7	87.4	33.3	4.4	18.8	476.5	197.1	215.5
2014	1.3	845.5	66.4	88.0	25.8	4.0	16.0	452.5	170.4	198.4
2015	1.0	819.9	65.4	90.4	20.6	2.3	12.5	415.3	156.4	185.4
2016	0.9	817.9	67.9	91.0	17.6	2.1	10.7	384.3	151.4	169.6
2017	0.7	801.1	76.2	96.9	18.4	1.7	10.8	353.8	134.4	167.9
2018	0.9	802.4	73.2	100.4	18.7	1.9	10.5	332.4	128.1	163.7
2019	0.9	824.5	78.5	103.5	18.2	2.0	11.8	318.8	124.0	167.8

[^] For murder, the numbers and rates shown are for recorded victims rather than criminal incidents.