

Crime in COVID Times

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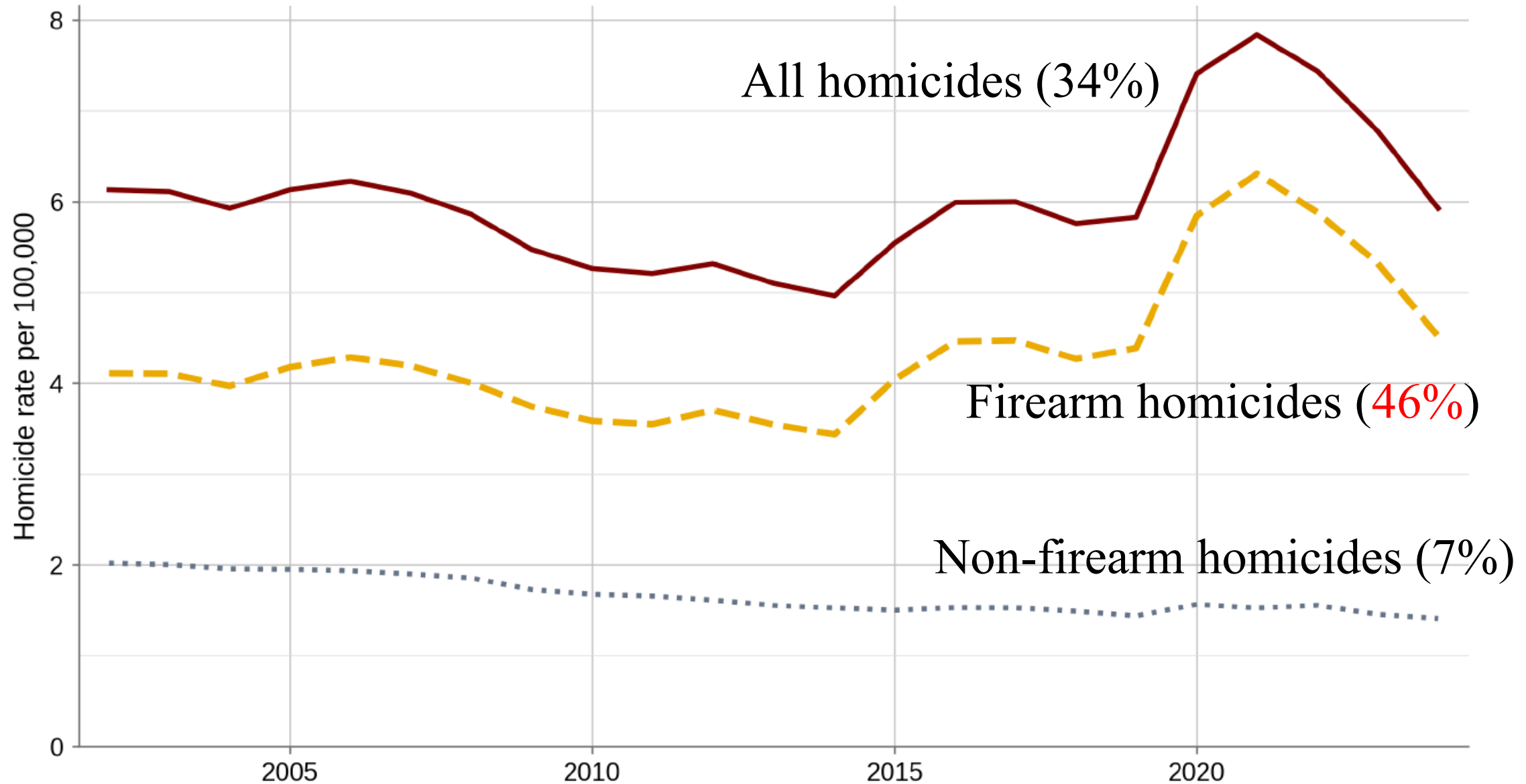
(With deepest thanks to Oren Tirschwell for spectacular research assistance)

What happened? Volatility in murders specifically

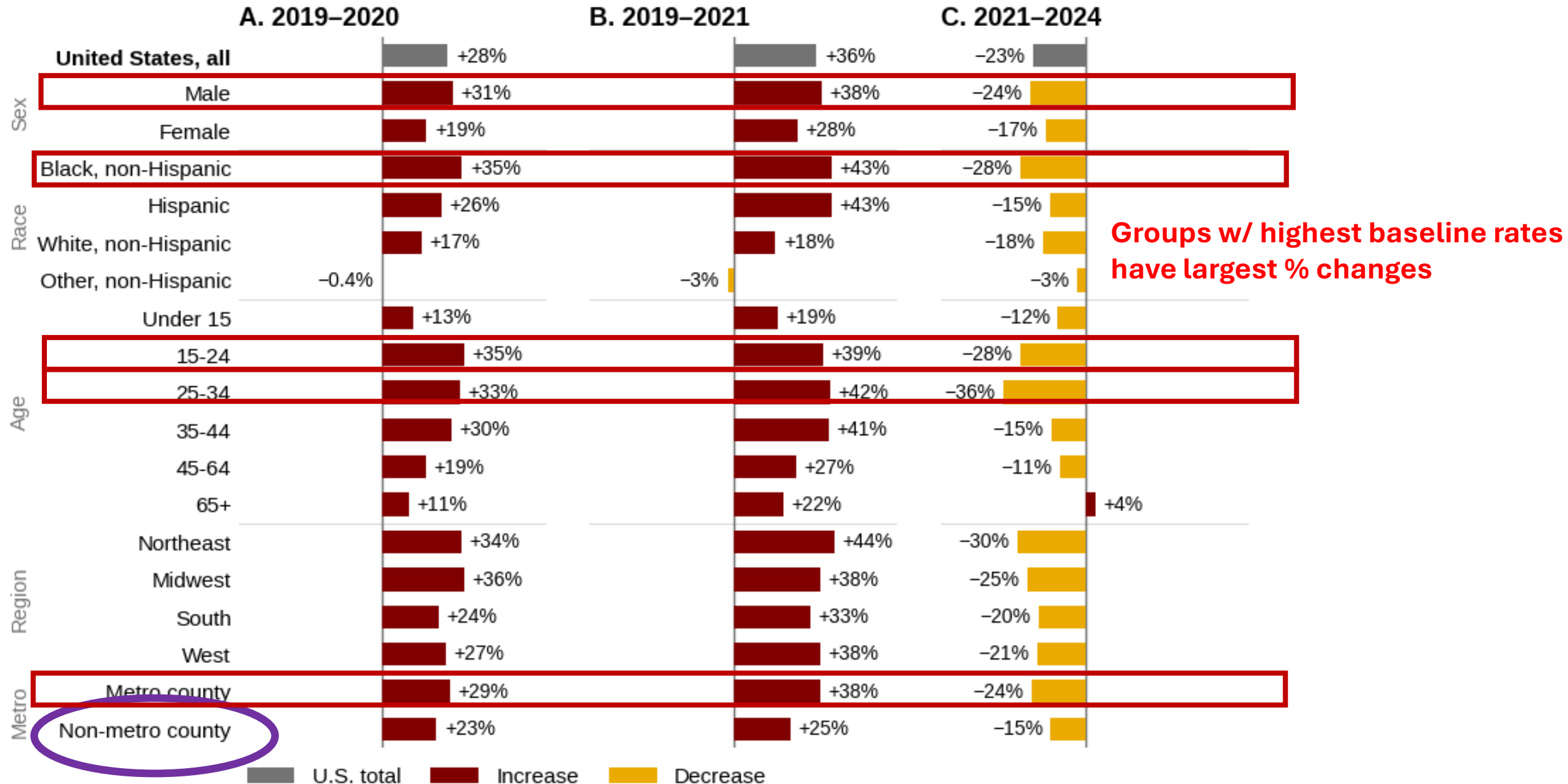
(WTP estimates tell us: accounts for most of the social cost of crime)



Almost all the volatility driven by gun homicides



Almost every demographic sub-group & part of the country was affected



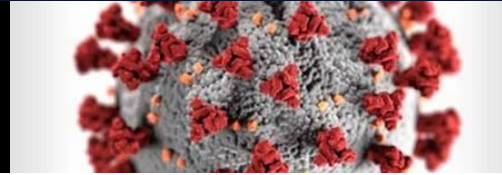
Not just in cities

Why?

President Trump Delivers the Largest Drop in Violent Crime in American History

The White House

August 18, 2026



Mayor Brandon M. Scott Announces Continued Historic Crime Reductions In 2026



Coronavirus Relief Fund

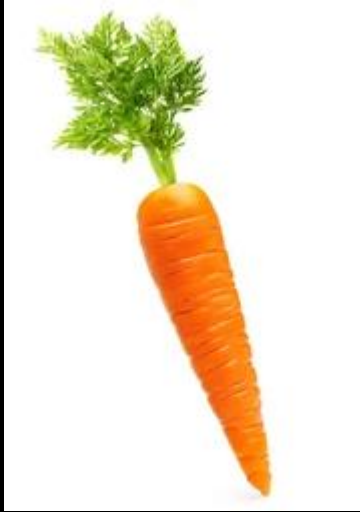
Through the Coronavirus Relief Fund, the CARES Act provided for payments to State, Local, and Tribal governments navigating the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Standard Becker model

(what public largely believes, too)

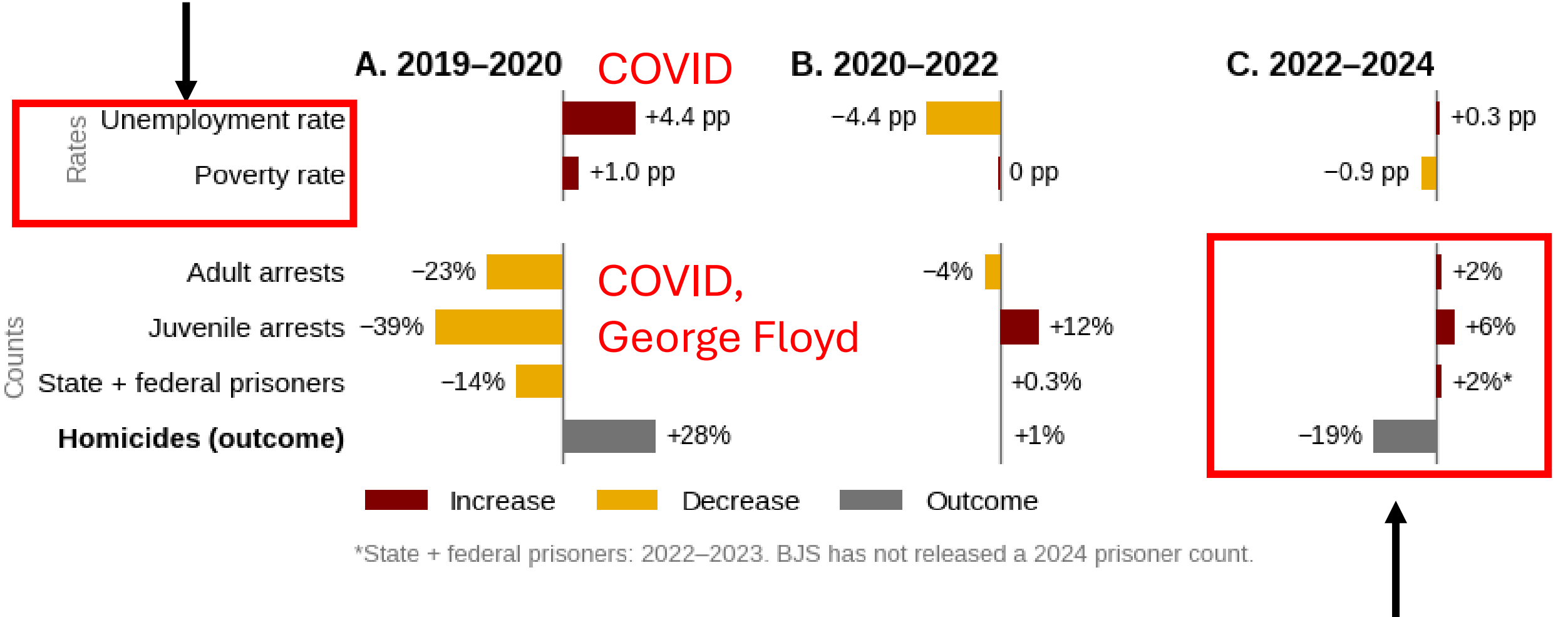


+



= INTENTIONS

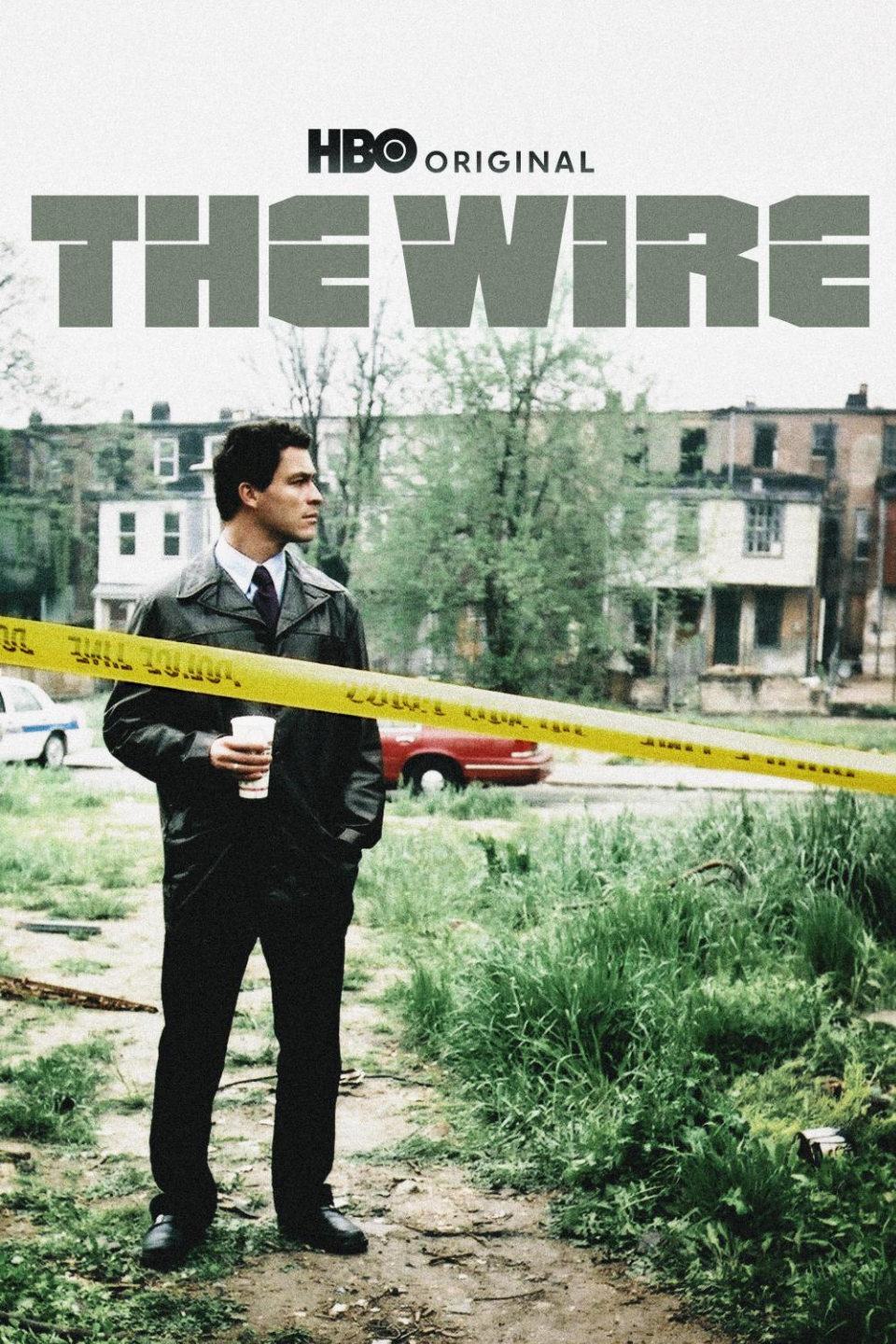
Micro studies show these not related to violence (plus property crime did not increase)



Enforcement rebound far too small to explain murder declines

Glaeser, Sacerdote, Scheinkman (1996)

“The high variance of crime rates across time and space is one of the oldest puzzles in the social sciences; this variance appears too high to be explained by changes in the exogenous costs and benefits of crime”



Robberies

Hierarchical, organized gangs fighting over drug turf

Criminologists: “Instrumental violence”



Classification system from Miethe, Regoeczi, and Drass (2004).

Cognition we're *not* aware of

Cognition we're aware of

SYSTEM 2

Rational thinking



5%

Takes effort
Slow
Logical
Lazy
Indecisive

Misconstrue what's happening
Assume others know what you know
Think everything is about you

Kahneman, 2011, Thinking, Fast and Slow



2009-2010

2740 7th-10th graders

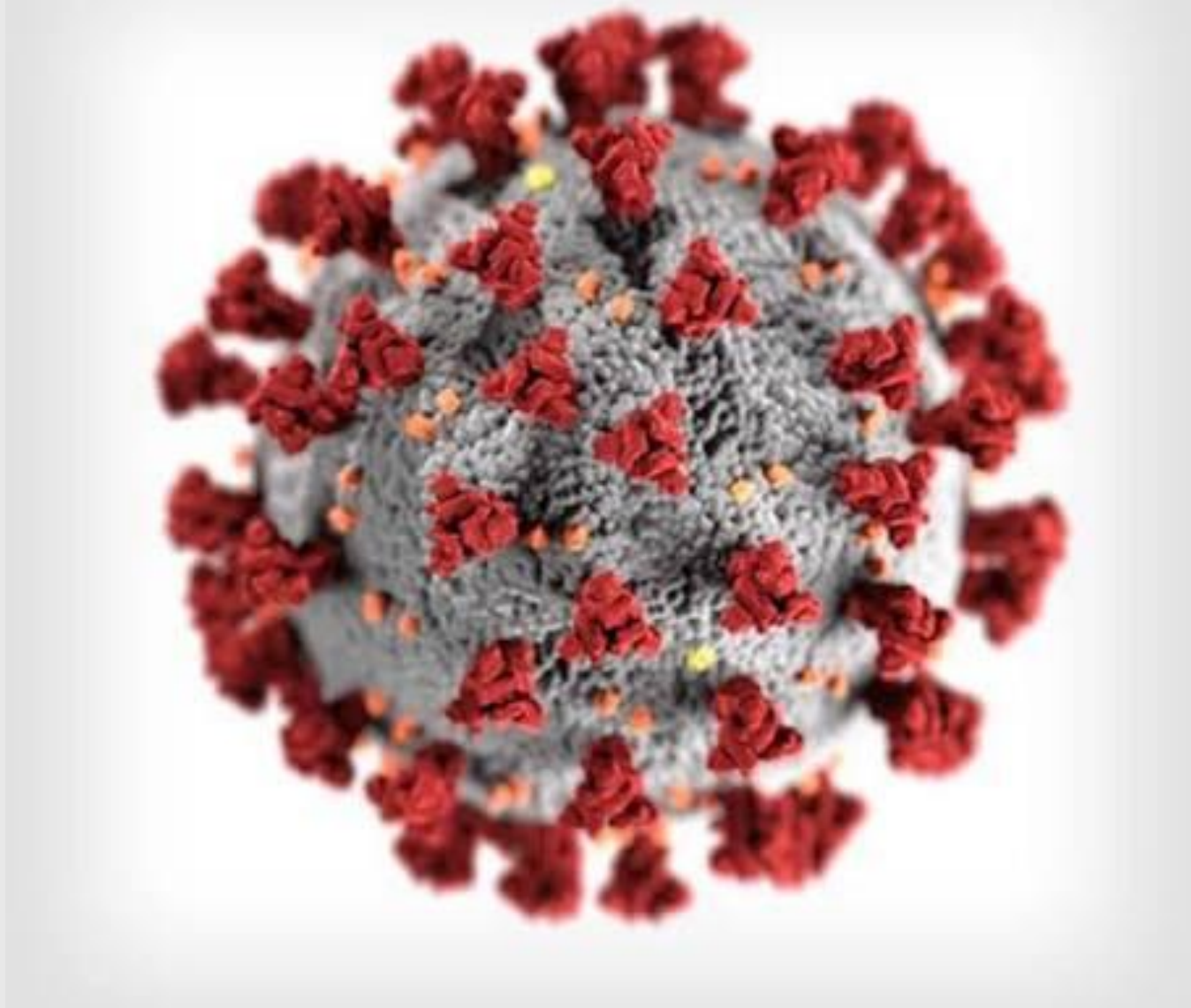
45% reduction in violent-crime arrests

2013-2014

2064 9th-10th graders

50% reduction in violent-crime arrests

Stress “bandwidth tax” increases automaticity (Mullainathan and Shafir, 2013)



More drug / alcohol use (usually doesn't make decisions better)

Figure 31: Unruly-passenger incidents reported to the FAA, 2019-2025

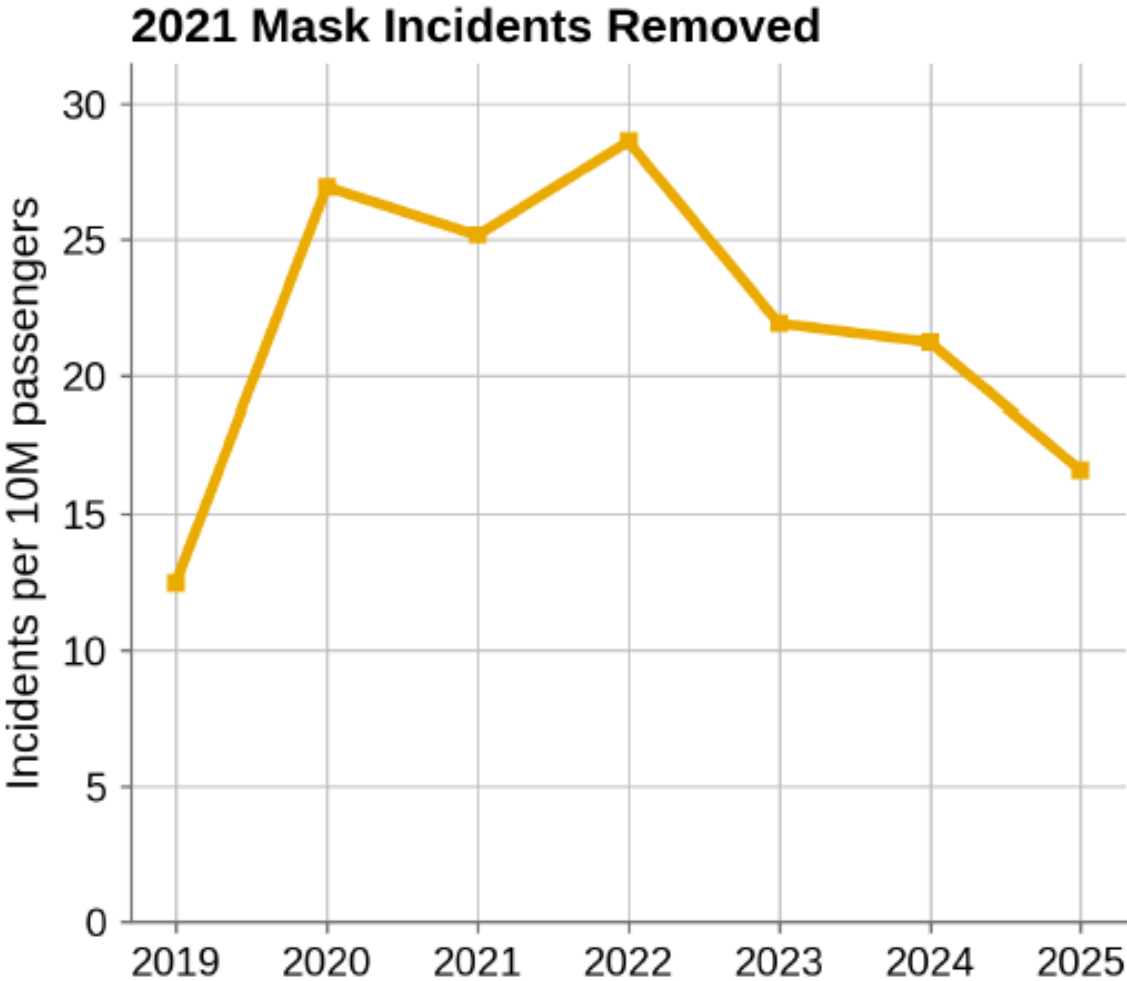
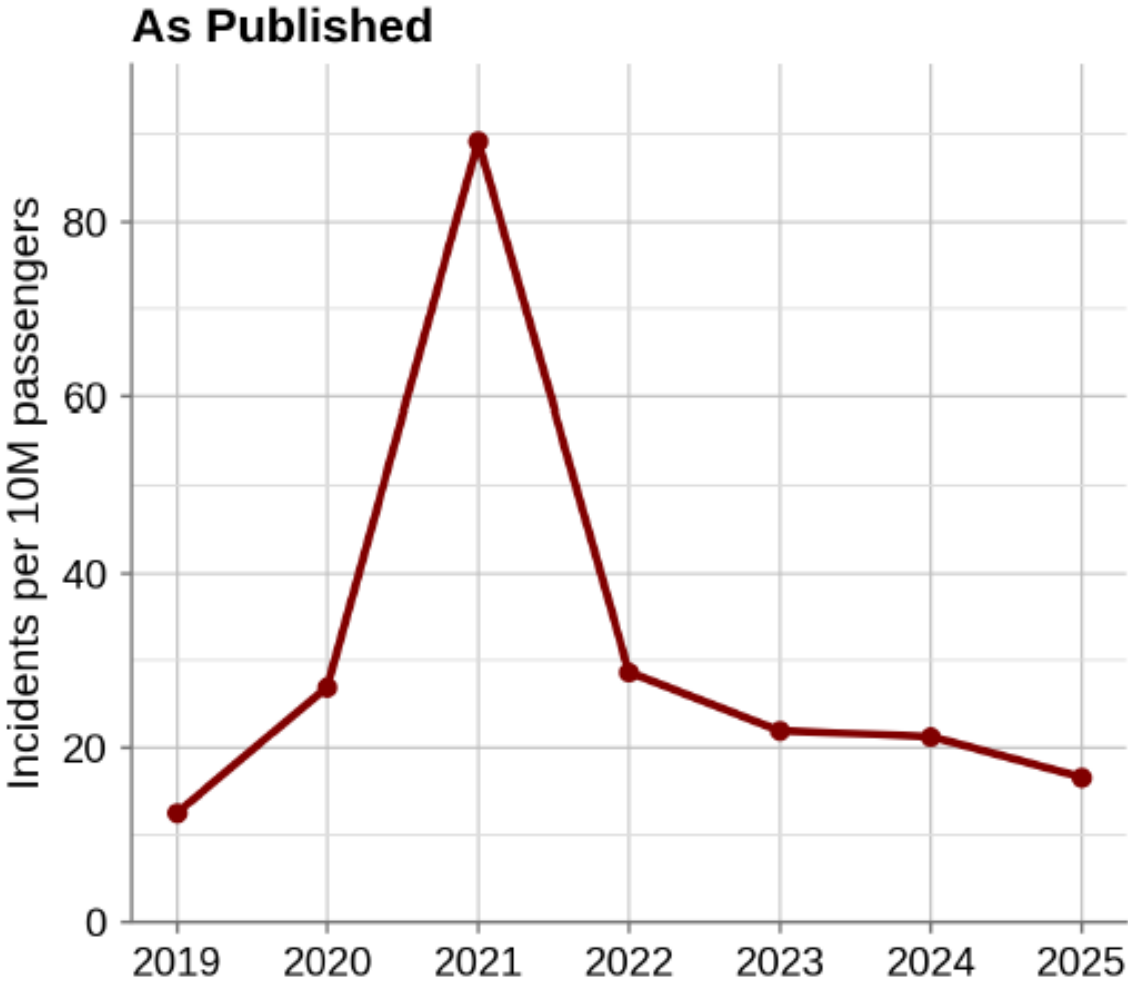


Figure 18: Homicide vs. drug overdose death rates, 2002-2024

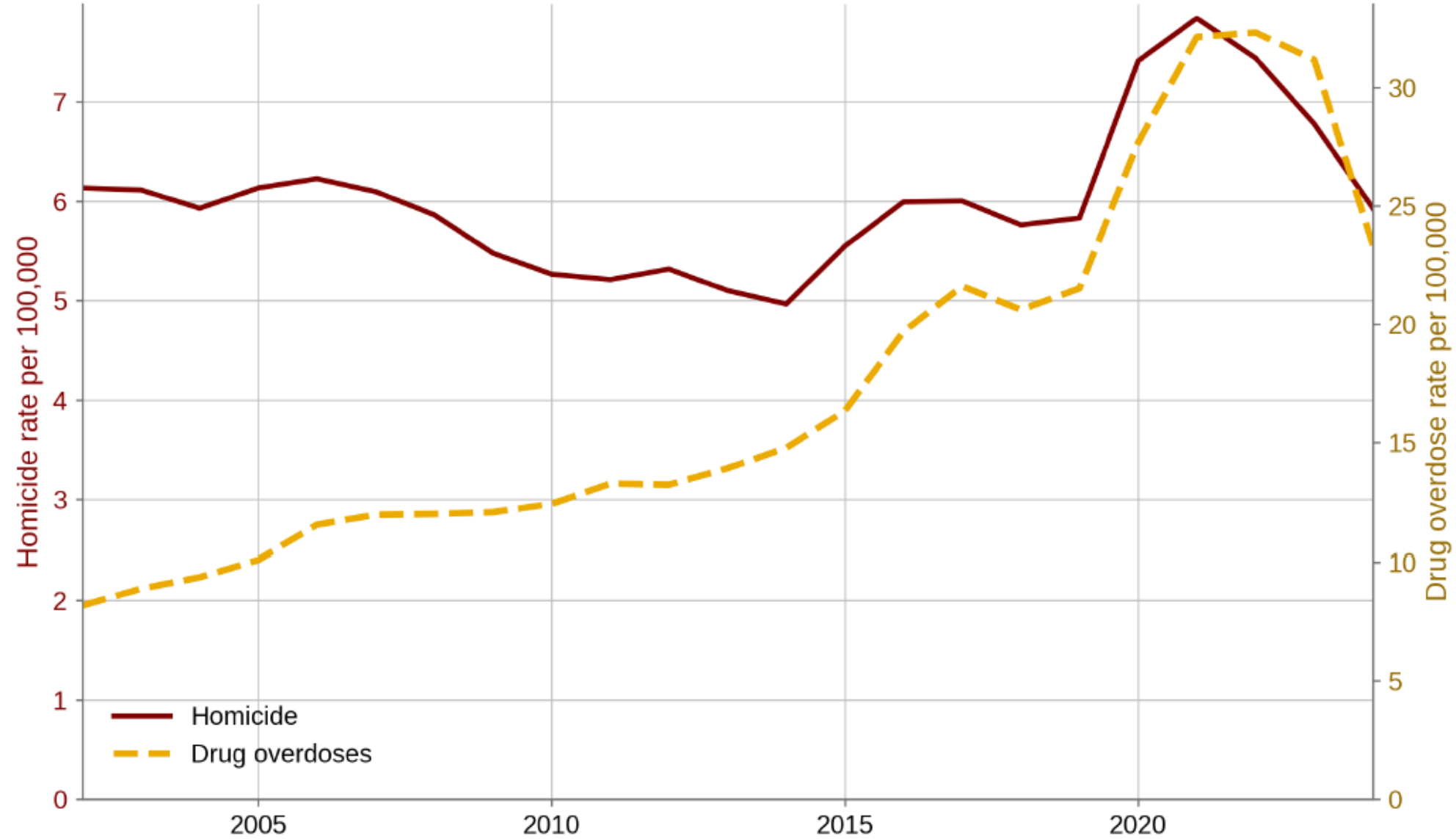


Figure 19: Homicide vs. motor-vehicle traffic death rates, 2002-2024

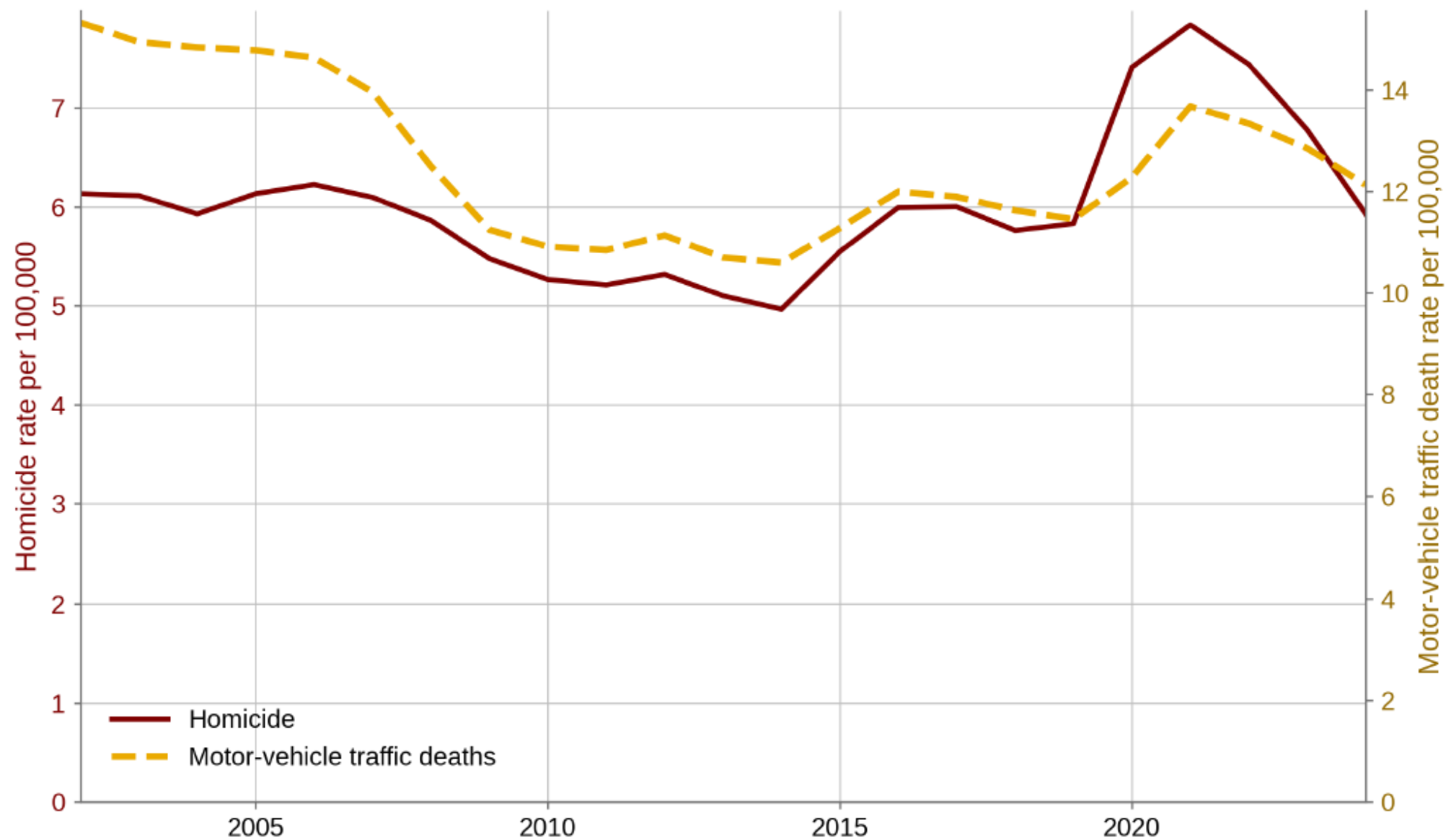
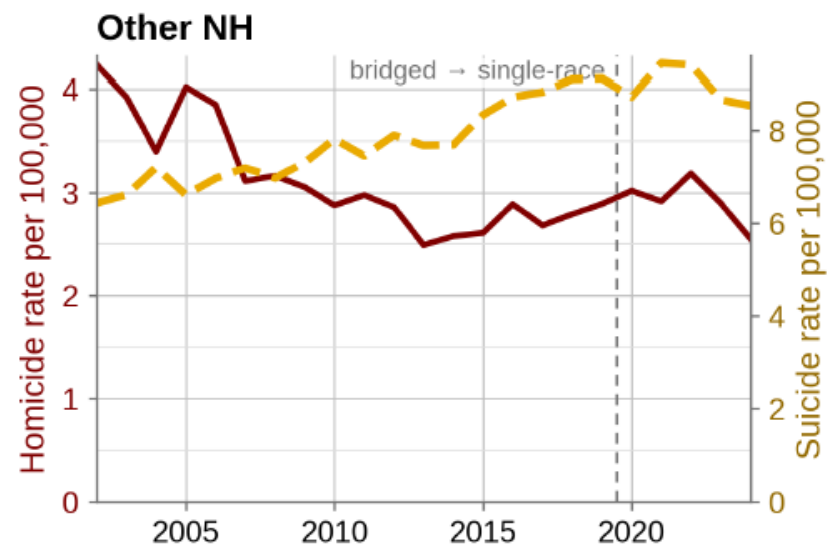
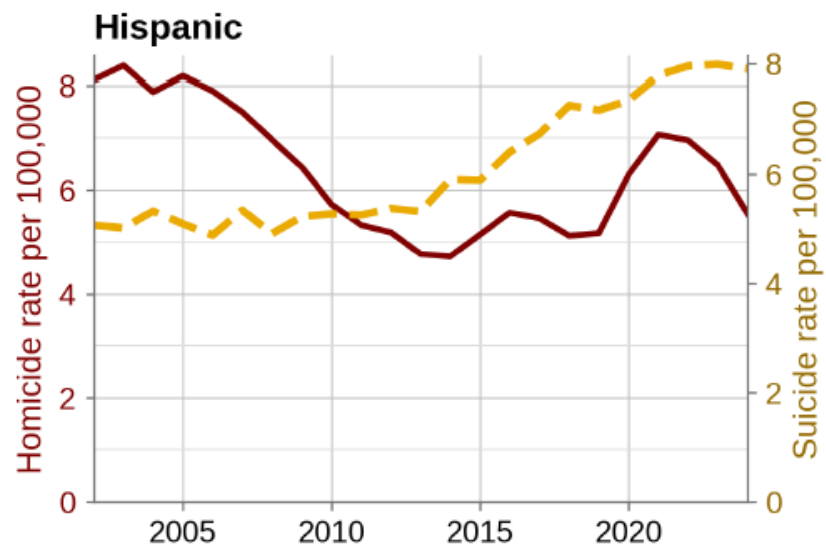
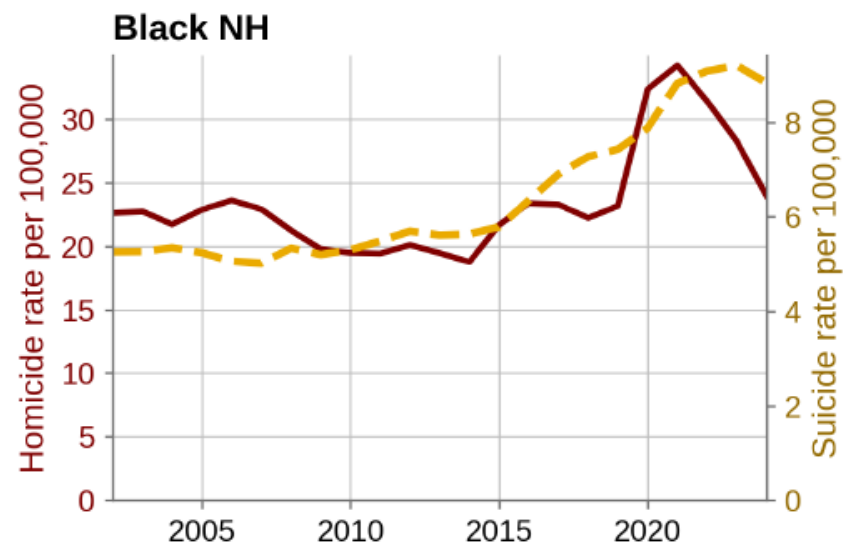
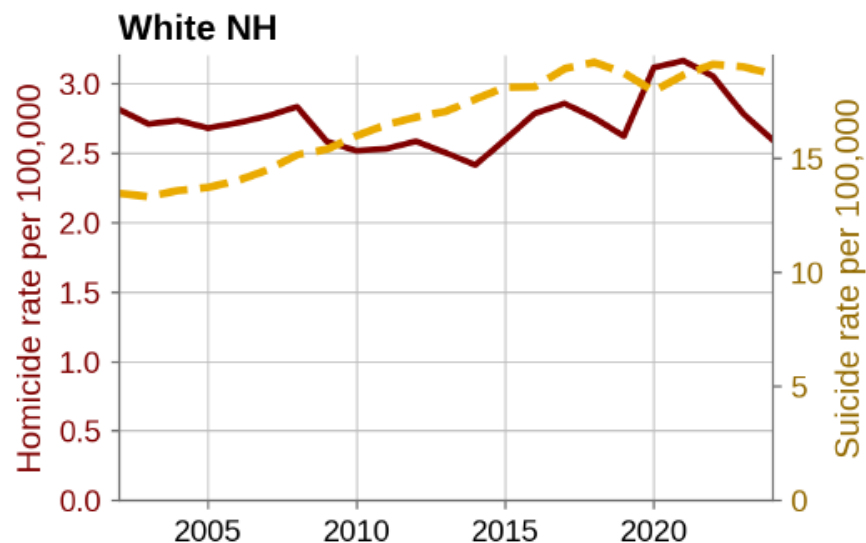
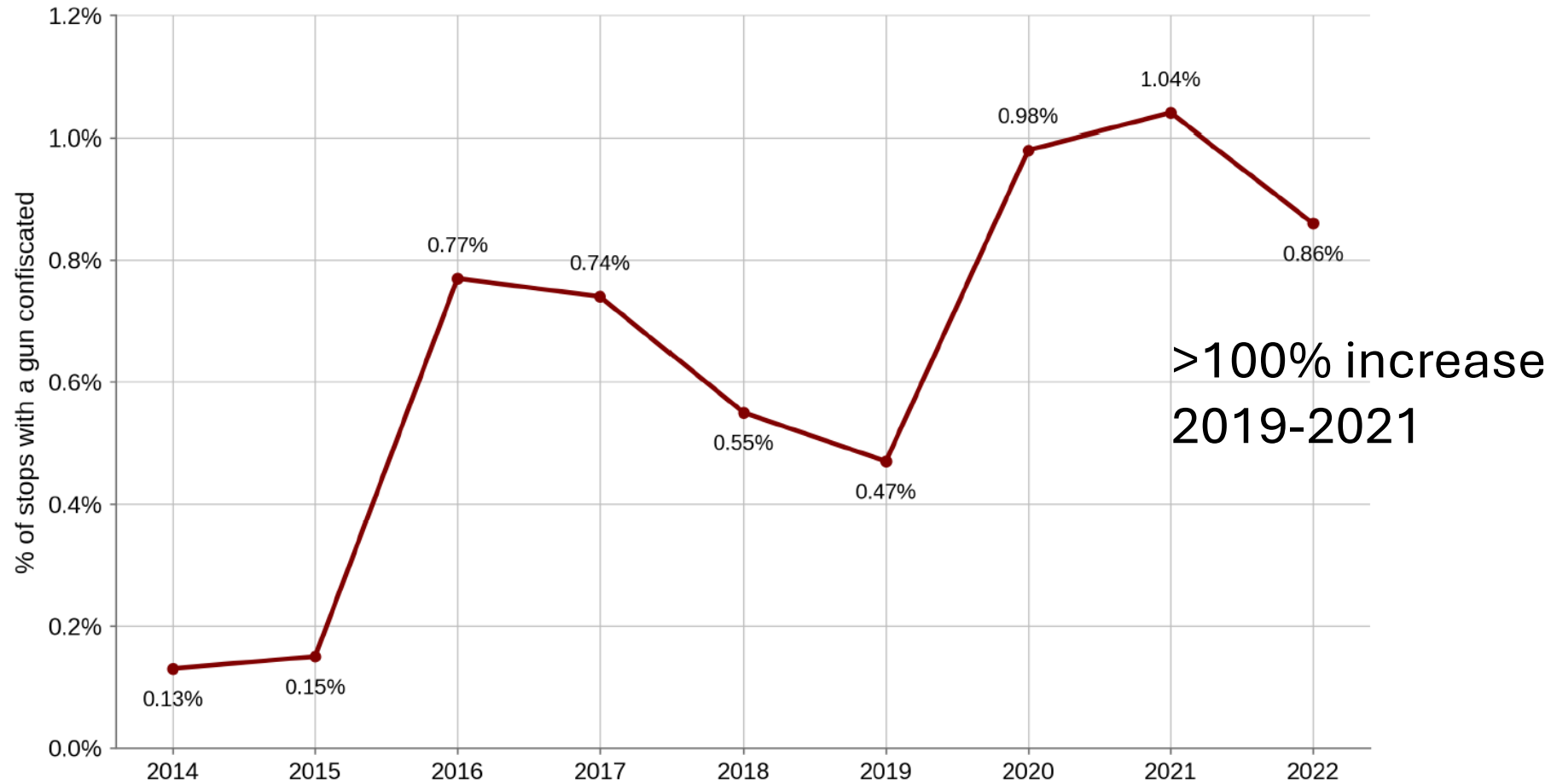


Figure 21: Homicide vs. suicide death rates by race/ethnicity, 2002-2024



— Homicide - - - Suicide

Gun carrying in Chicago (proxy: % police stops resulting in gun confiscation)



Potentially due to Beckerian mechanisms? (at least in part?)

1. Big temporary rise in handgun sales
2. Big decline then rebound in police stops

What gun violence problem *is*:
Arguments settled with guns

Cognition we're *not* aware of

SYSTEM 1

Intuition & instinct

95%

Unconscious
Fast
Associative
Automatic pilot



What we've *imagined* U.S.
gun violence problem to be

Cognition we're aware of

SYSTEM 2

Rational thinking

5%

Takes effort
Slow
Logical
Lazy
Indecisive

No long-term progress

