

Discussion: Crime in COVID Times

Felipe Goncalves

UCLA & NBER

Paper by: Jens Ludwig, University of Chicago & NBER

Four Facts about Crime and Public Safety

- ① Aggregate crime often moves in ways that are hard to explain with economic “fundamentals.”
 - ▶ Late 1960s: crime rose during a strong economy.
 - ▶ Great Recession: crime continued to fall.
 - ▶ Yet micro studies find causal effects of employment, education, etc. on offending.

Four Facts about Crime and Public Safety

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- ② Offending can be *strategic*: incentives depend on the expected behavior of others.
 - ▶ “People sometimes kill simply to avoid being killed.”
O’Flaherty and Sethi, *Homicide in Black and White* (JUE, 2010)
 - ▶ “A credible reputation for payback, or vengeance, [is] strongly believed to deter future assaults.”
Anderson, *Code of the Street* (1999)
 - ▶ **Implication:** Social interactions can generate multiple equilibria; temporary shocks can have persistent effects.

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- 3 Observed crime is a *selected* measure of offending.



- **Implication:** measured crime can change because offending changes, reporting changes, or both.

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- ② Offending can be *strategic*: incentives depend on the expected behavior of others.
- ③ Observed crime is a *selected* measure of offending.
- ④ Crime is not a single phenomenon.
 - ▶ COVID patterns differed sharply across:
 - ★ Domestic violence
 - ★ Property and other “instrumental” crimes
 - ★ Homicide, aggravated assault, and other “expressive” violence

Ludwig (2026): What Caused the 2020 Increase in Violence?

- **Main mechanism:** Generalized stress during COVID increased impulsive and antisocial behavior.
- **Contributing mechanisms:** Greater gun carrying and fewer police stops amplified the consequences of this behavioral change.
- **Smaller role for George Floyd and the ensuing protests.**
 - ▶ Across cities, protest activity does not predict the 2019–2020 increase in homicide.
- **Policy implication:** Interventions that improve decision-making under stress (e.g. CBT) may be especially promising tools for reducing violence.

Comments

① Crime is an equilibrium outcome

- ▶ Individual-level treatment effects need not translate one-for-one into aggregate crime reductions when offending is strategic.
- ▶ Open question: how *concentrated* must CBT interventions be within relevant social networks to generate aggregate public-safety gains?
- ▶ Related approach: *Focused Deterrence* attempts to shift group-level incentives by targeting high-risk networks simultaneously.

Comments

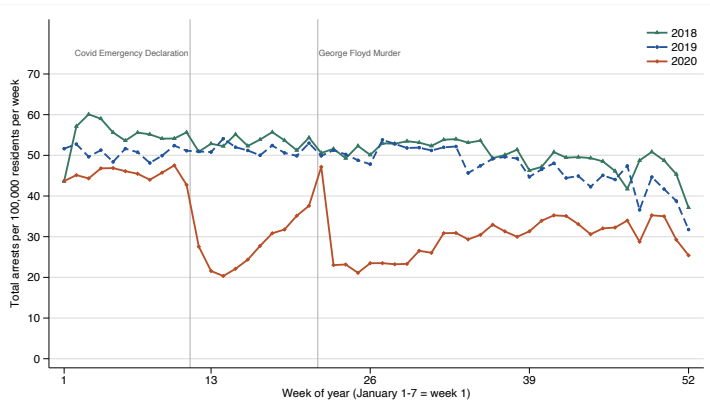
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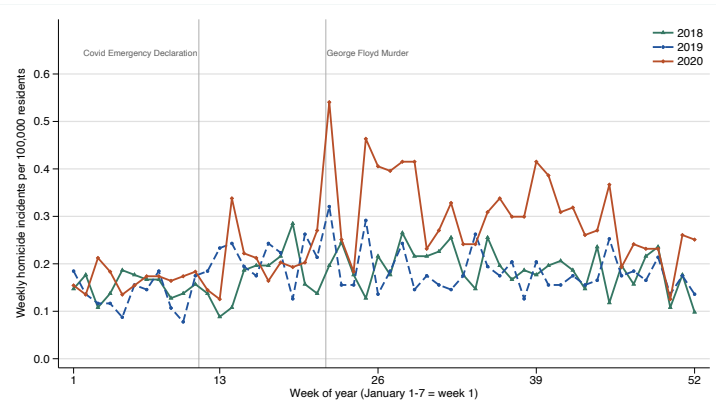
② How much weight should we put on the George Floyd shock?

- ▶ 2020 contains several closely spaced shocks; monthly aggregate data make their timing difficult to disentangle cleanly.
- ▶ Weekly city-level data provide additional leverage on timing...

Arrests per Capita

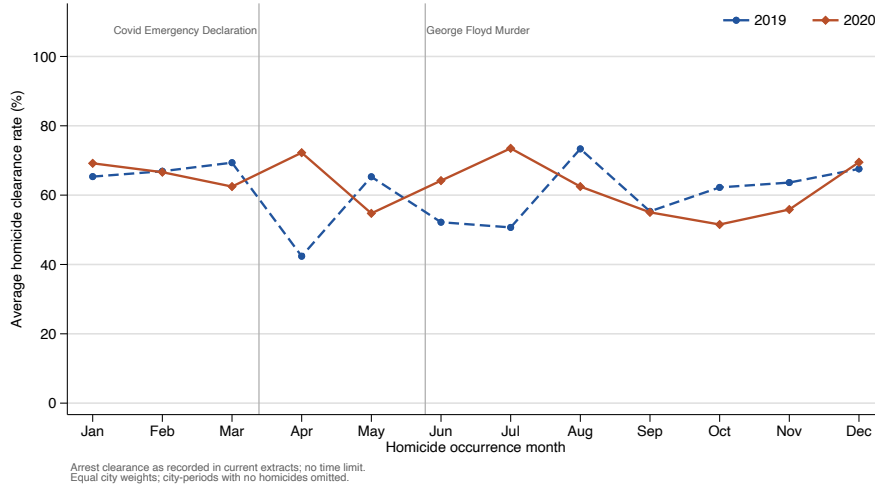


Homicides per Capita



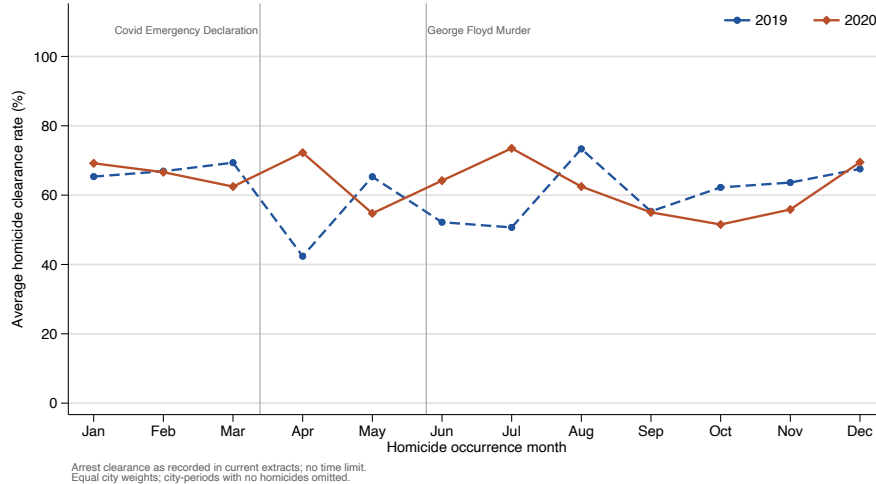
- Arrest cities: Baltimore, Chicago, Colorado Springs, Dallas, New York City, Phoenix
- Homicide cities: Charlotte (Charlotte-Mecklenburg), Chicago, Colorado Springs, Dallas, Fort Worth, Mesa, Oakland, Phoenix, Raleigh, Seattle

Homicide Clearance Rate

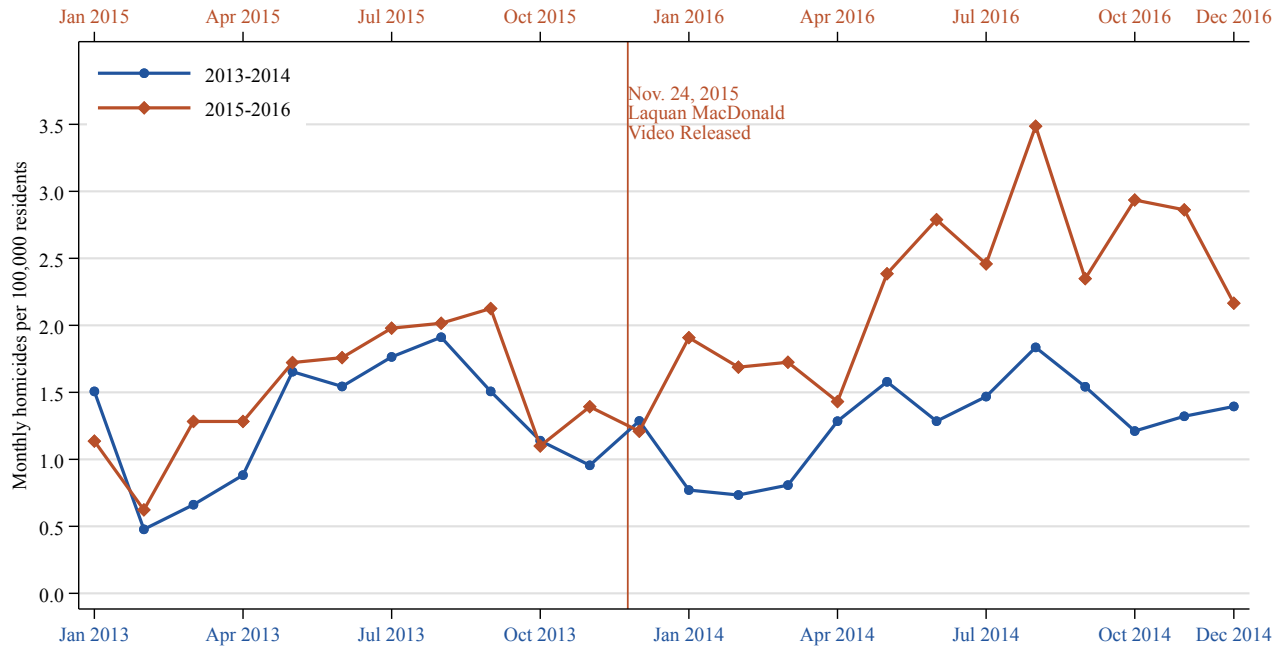


- Cities: Austin, Charlotte (Charlotte-Mecklenburg), Chicago, Colorado Springs, Dallas, Nashville
- **Punchline:** homicide spike coincides with George Floyd murder but cannot be explained by clear decline in apprehension probability.

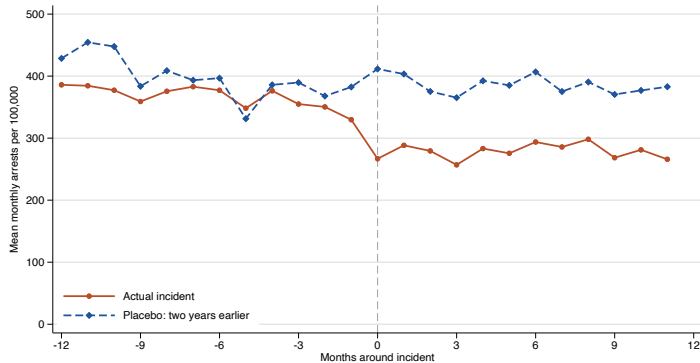
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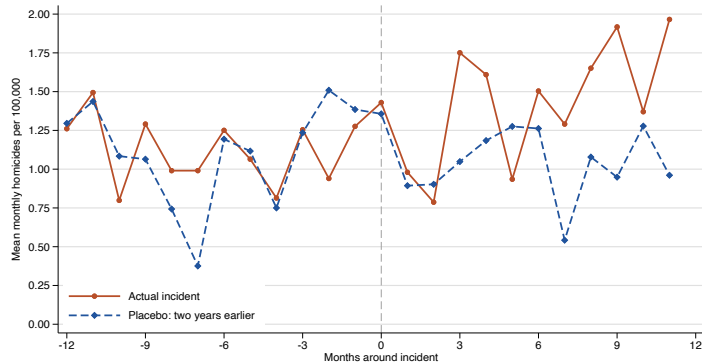
- Cities: Austin, Charlotte (Charlotte-Mecklenburg), Chicago, Colorado Springs, Dallas, Nashville
- **Punchline:** homicide spike coincides with George Floyd murder but cannot be explained by clear decline in apprehension probability.
- We have seen this kind of pattern before...



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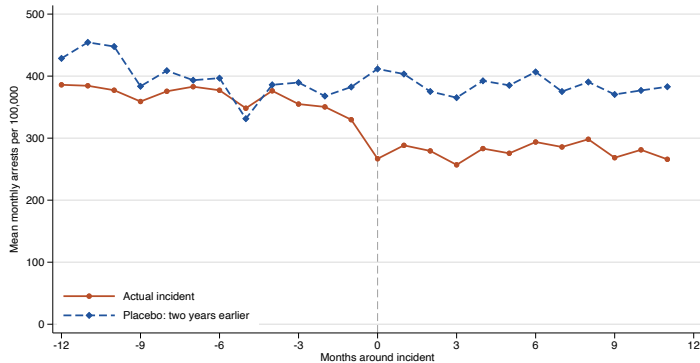
“Viral” police shootings, identified by Devi and Fryer (2020):

2014: Tamir Rice. **2015:** Walter Scott; Samuel DuBose[†]; Christian Taylor.

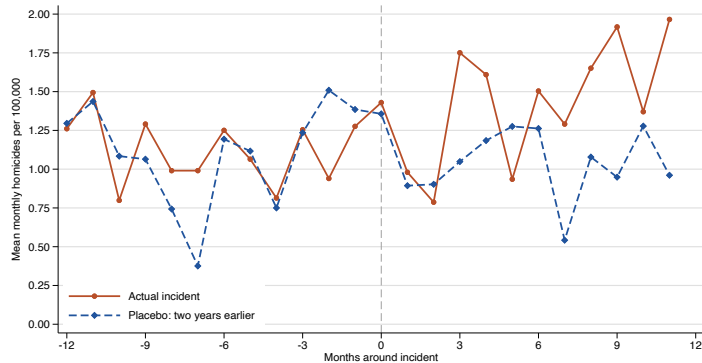
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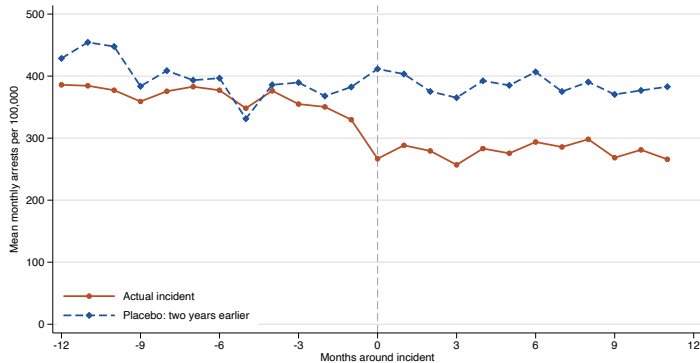
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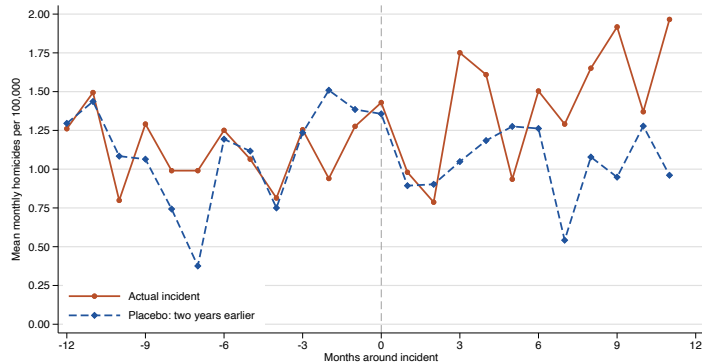
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Tyler, *Why People Obey the Law* (1990): “Because one feels that the authority enforcing the law has the right to dictate behavior.”

Policy Takeaways

- CBT and other decision-making interventions are promising complements to conventional incentive-based crime policy.
- What does this imply for the Becker (1968) view of offending?
 - ▶ Standard economic “fundamentals” have limited power to explain large historical fluctuations in aggregate crime.
 - ▶ But there is substantial causal evidence that both *carrots* (education, employment) and *sticks* (police presence, expected sanctions) affect offending at the margin.
- *Legitimacy* may be another important determinant of public safety: how do shocks to police legitimacy affect offending, cooperation, and enforcement?