

Crime in COVID Times: Discussion

Brookings Papers on Economic Activity, Fall 2026

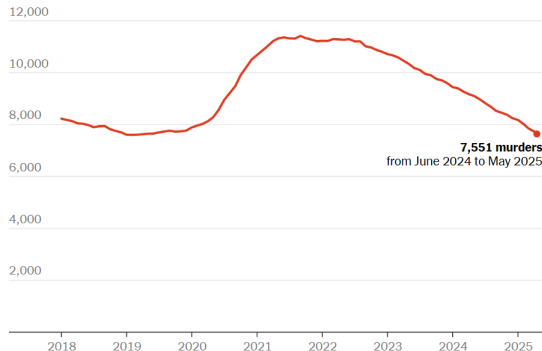
Marcella Alsan

Stanford and NBER

After Surge During Pandemic, Homicides Fall Significantly

Murders in the United States

Total murders over the preceding 12 months, plotted monthly



Note: Chart represents sample of 421 police agencies with available data. Source: Real-Time Crime Index By The New York Times

- Enduring puzzle: why variation in crime rates, particularly perplexing of late.
- NYT (July 2025): Whipsaw-like shifts in crime of recent years.
- *It feels like what's happened over the last five years has upended some long-held beliefs about crime.*

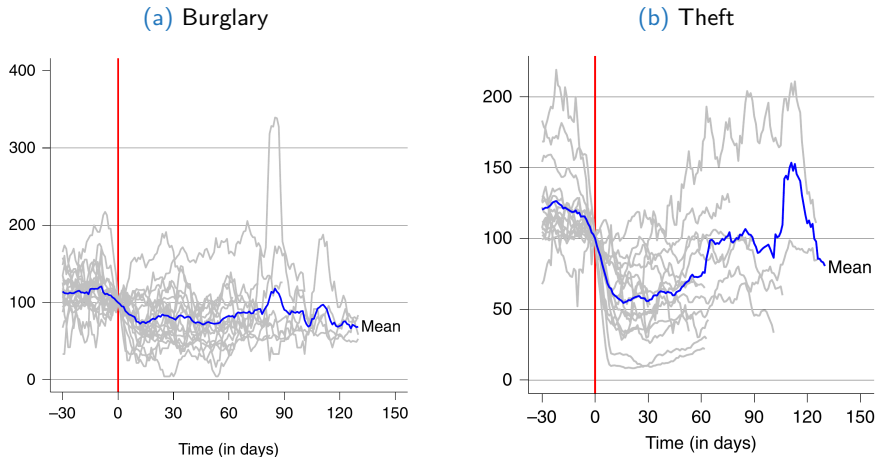
Adam Gelb, the president and chief executive officer of the Council on Criminal Justice

Crime in COVID times

- ▶ Not just homicides – other forms of violent crime (Figure 5: Trends by crime type)
- ▶ Not limited to a particular subgroup (Figure 3: Trends by subgroup)
... or to a particular U.S. city (Figure 4: Murder-rate change of 46 cities)
- ▶ What **doesn't** appear strongly supported in the data?
 - Lack of compelling evidence for theories favored by Left: (poverty, unemployment)
Right: (family structure, law and order) given the time scale of change and the evidence amassed (→ mapped into Beckerian model).
- ▶ Where do the data lead us instead?
 - Mental health stress (→ mapped into behavioral model). Firearm prevalence (essential businesses, new users + carrying).

- ▶ Impressive and inventive array of data.
 - Persuasively (and entertainingly!) makes the case for economists to be thinking about crime completely differently.
 - Aptly applies System I vs. System II thinking (Mullianthan and Shafir (2013)).
- ▶ Curious about international experience.
 - What was the same and what was different and how that might help us refine our models further.
- ▶ Treat it as a tax: Understand the incidence and economic burden better.
- ▶ American exceptionalism: Why the lethality?
 - Psychology of choosing to (not) own a lethal firearm.

Property crime in cities around the world



Notes: Seven-day moving average time series plots of daily numbers of crimes. Each time series is indexed to 100 on the day the first stay-at-home restrictions were implemented. Blue line indicates average trend. *Source:* Nivette, A., et al. (2021), Fig. 1.

Meta-regression

Summary effect sizes from meta-analyses by crime category

	Overall ES (1)	95% CI		N (4)
		Lower (2)	Upper (3)	
Burglary	0.72	0.61	0.85	20
Robbery	0.54	0.45	0.64	24
Theft	0.53	0.42	0.66	16
Homicide	0.86	0.74	0.99	21

Notes: This table reports overall summary effect sizes (ES) from random-effects meta-analyses using cities with any available data for each crime category. Values below one indicate declines in crime relative to expected levels following stay-at-home restrictions. Columns (2) and (3) report the lower and upper bounds of the 95% confidence interval. Column (4) reports the number of cities included in each meta-analysis. *Source:* Nivette, A., et al. (2021), Table 1.

- Daily police data from dozens of cities in 23 countries, including European cities, showed COVID policies associated with declines of:
 - 28% in burglary,
 - 46% in robbery, and
 - 47% in theft.

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Property vs. person crimes

- ▶ **Property crime:** theft or destruction of physical goods (FBI, 2018).
 - Theft and robbery require accessible targets and opportunities for gain.
 - Oftentimes stealing from a stranger (Stein, 2013).
 - Commercial activity and transportation nodes create such opportunities.
- ▶ **Interpersonal crime:** direct physical or psychological violence (WHO, 2002)
 - Scholars have shown homicides tend to be concentrated in hot spots (Braga et al., 2010; Ludwig, 2025).
 - Gun homicides are concentrated in small social networks: 41% occur in a network comprising less than 4% of the community's population (Papachristos and Wildeman, 2014).

$$\text{Choose crime if } U_j = B_j(A_j) - C_j - p_j F_j \geq w_i \quad (1)$$

B =crime benefit, C =private psychic cost, pF =punishment, A =availability,

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$$A_K \neq A_L$$

Stay-at-home $\Rightarrow A_K \downarrow \Rightarrow$ property crime $\downarrow$

Stay-at-home $\Rightarrow A_L \uparrow \Rightarrow$ interpersonal conflict $\leftrightarrow$

- ▶ Fewer people in commercial areas $\rightarrow$ fewer opportunities for theft and robbery.
- ▶ More people at home $\rightarrow$ fewer unsupervised houses $\rightarrow$ less residential burglary.
- ▶ More time spent together at home/community $\rightarrow$ more opportunities for contact: does this lead to interpersonal crime?

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Choose crime if} \quad & U_j = B_j(A_j) - C_j - p_j F_j \geq w_i \\ & A_K \neq A_L \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

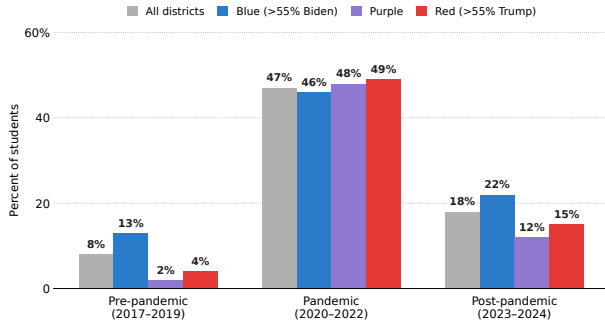
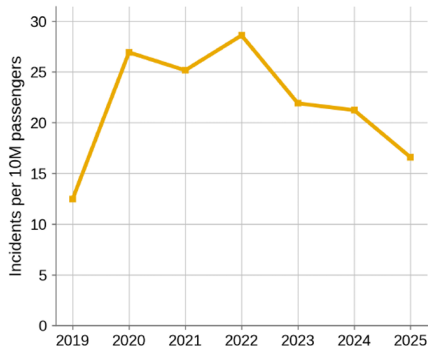
A bandwidth tax $t_j > 0$ lowers the effective cost of escalating a conflict to violence from C_j to $C_j - t_j$:

$$B_j(A_j) - (C_j - t_j) - p_j F_j \tag{3}$$

Thus, more contact *and* a lower threshold (tolerance) for interpersonal crime.

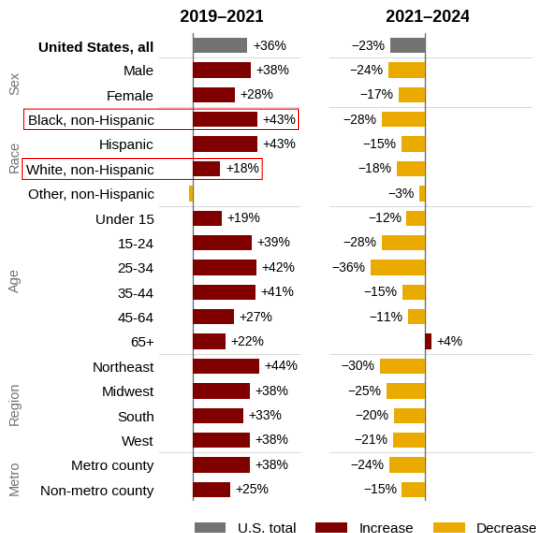
Airplanes and school boards

Signs of limited bandwidth



Notes: Airplanes — Figure 25, Unruly passenger incidents reported to the FAA, 2019–2025, from Jens Ludwig (2026). Face-mask violations in 2021 are excluded. *School boards* — Pre-pandemic N=865, Pandemic N=874, Post-pandemic N=875. Responses to survey item Q45 presence of “a lot of conflict” between school board and community. *Source:* Brookings school boards survey, fielded October 2024 to January 2025, NCES’ Common Core of Data, and 2020 presidential election results from MIT Election Lab.

Regressive bandwidth tax: uneven economic incidence



- ▶ Statutory incidence same - economic incidence differs.
- ▶ Non-fatal injuries estimated 2-3x as large (Everytown, 2021).
- ▶ Non-fatal injuries extend beyond physical harm:
 - 40% ↑ in physical pain; 50% ↑ psychiatric disorders; 85% ↑ substance use disorder.
 - \$2,495 medical spending **per month** in year following non-fatal shooting (Song et al. 2022).

Other forms of interpersonal violence - also regressive

- ▶ Homicide and assault outside the home.
- ▶ Violence against women:
 - Femicide ↑ by 20% (Ludwig, 2026).
1/5 women experienced IPV in last five years: 54% vs. 31% if FPL < 200% and 2-3 ppt ↑ for Black/Hispanic. KFF data.
 - ↑ reliance on abusive partners
 - “survivors who were enduring abuse, poverty, housing insecurity...[COVID] worsened these problems in their lives and made them more vulnerable to continued reliance on abusive partners” (Sweet, 2024).
- ▶ Violence against children:
 - As noted in the Brookings report, school closures and economic stress ↑ of child maltreatment while ↓ reporting (Welch & Haskins, 2020).
 - Parents experiencing income reductions had 7.7 times higher odds of very severe physical assaults towards children (Wong et al., 2021).

Interpersonal violence is costly

- ▶ Ludwig rightly points out that homicide is socially costly – but if businesses shuttered, streets empty, migrating out of city already during COVID, how much economic damage could interpersonal violence pose during this time?
- ▶ What recent research shows:
 - Intimate partner violence (IPV) victims have lower employment and a 12% ↓ in earnings after living with an abusive partner (Adams et al., 2024).
 - Child maltreatment carries a lifetime cost of roughly \$831,000 per nonfatal victim, and a \$428 billion annual U.S. economic burden. (Peterson, Florence & Klevens, 2018).
 - New work from by Emily Nix and colleagues causally identifies the inter-generational transmission of IPV.

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⇒ Even if private, even if for a short-lived, interpersonal violence spurred by COVID-19 could leave lasting scars and increase inequality.

Anke Hoeffler & James D. Fearon

WORSE THAN WAR

The
Global Costs
of Violence

TABLE 5.1. Global average annual costs of violence (rough) estimates using global average VSL

	Intangible	Tangible (billions \$)	Total	Per person/yr (\$)
1. Collective violence				
Armed conflict (direct deaths)	277	17.2	295	38
Terrorism	42	4.1	46	6
Assault/injury, indirect deaths	?	?	?	?
GDP growth losses/year, 2000–2019		833.1	833	107
NPV of future growth lost/20		2,547.5	2,548	328
Sum for collective violence	319	3,401.9	3,721	480
2. Interpersonal violence				
Homicide	1,534	229.6	1,764	227
Assault (out of home)	2,174	95.3	2,270	293
Violence against women				
Intimate partner violence	6,482	59.4	6,542	843
IP sexual assault	7,639	48.6	7,688	991
Nonpartner sexual assault	1,534	21.5	1,555	200
Violence against children				
Severe punishment	7,986	83.4	8,070	1,040
FGM/C	199	1.1	200	26
Child marriage (before 15)	672	2.8	675	87
Child marriage (15–17)	814	7.7	821	106
Econ. growth effects of interpersonal violence		?	?	?
Sum for interpersonal violence	29,035	549.4	29,584	3,814
3. Suicide	2,297	378.4	2,675	345

Note: Using data from 2000–2019, these are estimated average annual costs for direct deaths and injuries for collective and interpersonal violence, in billions of 2019 USD for columns 2–4. Column 5 divides column 4 by 2019 global population. This table uses a global average VSL of \$2.8 million for all intangible costs, 100% for deaths and about 1% and 2.2% for assaults and sexual assaults, respectively (see text). GDP growth losses from collective violence are based on counterfactual growth paths assuming regional median growth rates in high-violence countries. Tangible costs are based on lost years of per capita income for deaths and tangible-cost fractions of this for assaults (see text). ?s indicate a category with plausibly significant costs for which we are not able to produce estimates.

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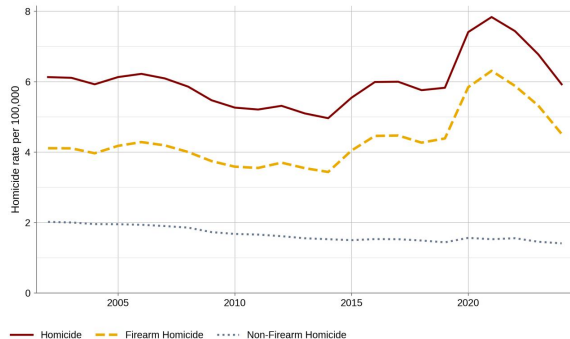
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How does conflict turn deadly?

U.S. homicide rate by firearm involvement, 2002–2024



Notes: Homicide deaths per 100,000 U.S. residents, shown in total and split into firearm and non-firearm homicides according to the injury mechanism coded on the death certificate. *Source:* Ludwig (2026), Figure 2.

How does conflict turn deadly?



How does conflict turn deadly?

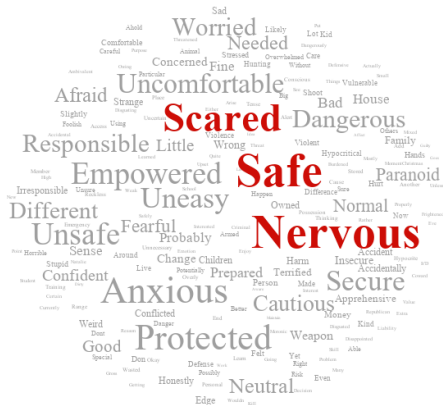


- ▶ Almost all differences in murder rate between the U.S. and other high-income countries are due to firearm murders (Ludwig, 2026).
- ▶ Why do Americans own guns? (Alsan, Schwartzstein & Stantcheva, 2026)

How does/would owning a gun make you feel

Word cloud: Non-gun owners vs. gun owners

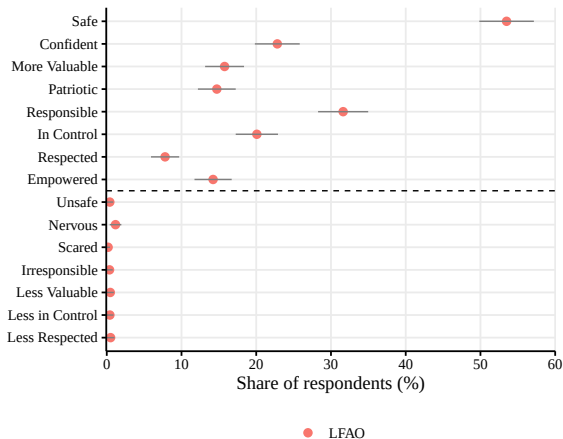
Word cloud: Non-gun owners vs. gun owners



Notes: Word clouds generated from open-ended responses. Gun owners were asked: "In one or two words, how does owning a gun make you feel?". Non-gun owners were asked: "In one or two words, how would owning a gun make you feel?". Word size is proportional to response frequency. *Source:* Alsan, Schwartzstein & Stantcheva (2026).

How do lethal firearms make people feel?

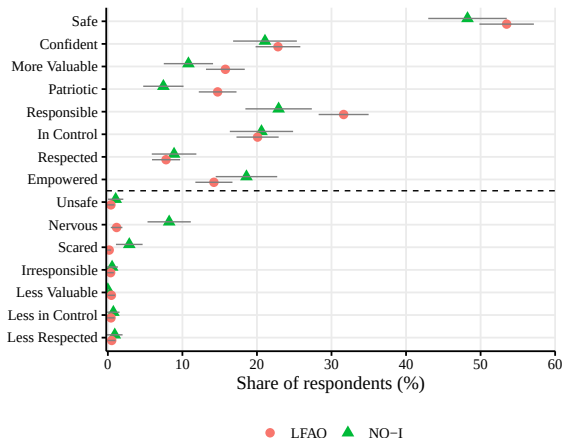
Feelings attached to (the idea of) owning a gun (Alsan, Schwartzstein and Stantcheva)



Notes: Share of respondents answering "A great extent" (4-point scale, from "No extent") to: "To what extent does/would owning a gun make you feel:", by firearm ownership status. Control group only. Source: Alsan, Schwartzstein & Stantcheva (2026).

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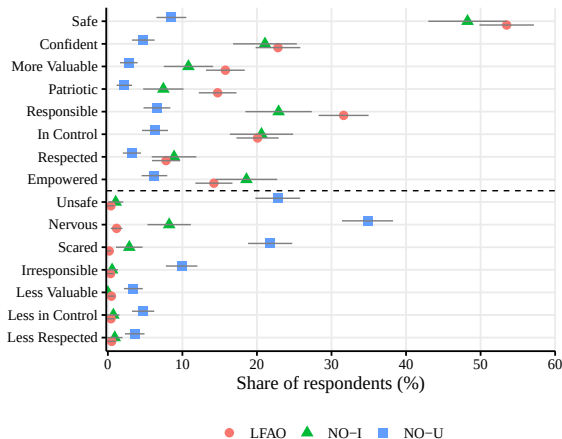
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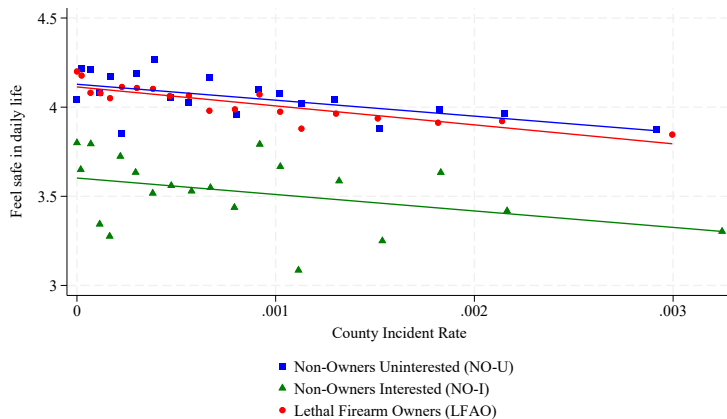
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Perception vs. reality

Perceived safety vs. county violent crime rates



Notes: Bin scatter plots of feeling safe in daily life (5-point scale, "very unsafe" to "very safe") against county-level violent crime incidence (FBI UCR violent crimes per capita). Each dot is the average within an equal-sized county bin. Source: Alsan, Schwartzstein & Stantcheva (2026).

How might lethal firearms enter into the Becker-Ludwig framework?

- ▶ Reduce the outside option $\rightarrow$ coercion
 - A gun affects the participation constraint from $\bar{u}$ to $\bar{u} - g$ (Acemoglu & Wolitzky, 2011).
- ▶ The presence of firearms could lower the threshold for conflict.
 - Similar to the bandwidth tax t , the security subsidy s , could make escalation cheaper. ?Distortionary: embolden some, silence others.
- ▶ “Weapons effect”
 - Controversial (but difficult to replicate in today’s IRB environment) psychological studies suggesting this effect exists: mere exposure to a firearm increases aggressive and hostile behavior (Berkowitz & LePage, 1967).

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$\Rightarrow$ Emotions important for decision to own, to carry and to shoot a lethal firearm. In turn, ownership status affect reasoning and emotional state.

Concluding remarks

- ▶ Creative and valuable analysis of what causes violent crime and how to help remedy it.
- ▶ **Becker meets bandwidth tax:**
 - Incidence of “bandwidth tax” on those least able to bear it which contributes inequality.
 - Still a role for structural violence (social structures that lead to the deprivation of individuals, aka that lead to scarcity) for predicting who will be affected and as a target for public policy.
- ▶ **How does interpersonal conflict turn deadly in the U.S.? Firearms.**
- ▶ **Homicide = Arguments + Firearms?**
 - Firearms are bought (or not) for emotional reasons yet may affect which “system” is doing the information processing: Hypothesis $\Rightarrow$ Firearms $\downarrow$ reliance on System II.