

False Alarms About a National Crime Wave

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- The headlines are alarming: Murder is up around the country, caused by anything from more guns to a heroin epidemic to the so-called “Ferguson Effect” — the disputed idea that police officers have become less aggressive out of fear that their actions will be recorded by civilians and criticized after the fact.

- As with so many debates about crime in America, it helps to examine the actual numbers.

- It is true that in many cities, murders in 2015 are on pace to surpass 2014 totals.
- In a new analysis of murder and crime rates in the country's 30 largest cities, the Brennan Center for Justice projected that the average murder rate will be 11 percent higher this year than last.
- New York City, which had 333 murders in 2014, is predicted to have 357 murders by the end of 2015.

- While that is troubling, it is not evidence that America has fallen back into a lawless pit of chaos and death.
- A more meaningful way of looking at data is comparing it with unmistakable longer-term trends: The rate of violent crime, including murder, has been going down for a quarter-century, and is at its lowest in decades.
- On average, it is half of what it was in 1990, and in some places even lower.

- In New York City, for example, the number of murders reached 2,245 in 1990. Even in 2010, the city logged 536 murders, or 50 percent more than this year's projected total.
- This long-term decline has been well reported, but increasingly, it is getting overlooked in the rush to identify a new crime wave.

- As the Brennan Center analysis shows, overall violent crime — which includes not just murder, but robbery, larceny, assault and burglary — is projected to be 1.5 percent lower in 2015 than 2014.
- For understandable reasons, murders get the most attention, but they accounted for only 1.2 percent of all violent crime in 2014.

- Two lessons emerge from this data. One is that when crime rates are so low, even small changes can appear large.
- The other is that small sample sizes based on arbitrary time frames are nearly always nonrepresentative.

- The report does, however, single out five cities — Baltimore, Detroit, Milwaukee, New Orleans and St. Louis — where murder rates remain far higher than the national average and have reached levels not seen since the 1990s.

- But these cities also share several economic and demographic characteristics, including extremely high rates of unemployment and poverty, along with shrinking populations.

- The murder spikes in these cities do not represent a sprawling national epidemic of violence.

- Instead, they appear rooted in what the report calls “profound economic decline” and, as elsewhere, the violence in those places falls most heavily on communities of color.

- Misunderstanding crime rates — or worse, using them for political purposes — makes it hard to have an informed debate about which policies will be most likely to keep violence down.