Are US cities getting more or less violent? New database offers mixed picture

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AmericanViolence.org currently provides city-level figures on murder rates in more than 80 of the 100 largest U.S. cities. Credit: New York University

Violence has fallen in nearly all major U.S. cities since 1991, according to a new analysis by researchers at New York University. However, recent fluctuations in violence in selected cities point to temporary disruptions in this 17-year decline.

"American cities are much safer than they were in the early 1990s," explains Patrick Sharkey, a New York University sociologist who led the study. "While violence rose in many cities from 2014 to 2017, the most recent data indicate that, overall, cities have turned a corner and this recent rise in violence may have come to an end."

The study was conducted using crime statistics gathered by AmericanViolence.org, a newly launched project whose database will serve as a public resource. It makes data on violence—specifically, murder rates—accessible to public officials, journalists, researchers, and the public, allowing users to visualize and analyze trends in violence at multiple geographic levels (neighborhoods and cities) and over different time frames (month to month, year to year, decade to decade).

The inaugural report based on these data, "Are U.S. Cities Getting More or Less Violent?" may be downloaded here.

AmericanViolence.org, supported with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is based at NYU's Marron Institute of Urban Management and is directed by Sharkey, author of Uneasy Peace: The Great Crime Decline, the Renewal of City Life, and the Next War on Violence.

"Are U.S. Cities Getting More or Less Violent?" describes trends in violence over three time periods: from 1991 to the present; from 2014 to the present; and from April 2017 through March 2018. The findings point to three primary conclusions:

- Since 1991, American cities have become dramatically safer; violence has fallen in almost all major cities.
- Since 2014, many American cities have become more violent; a small number of cities have become much more violent.
- Over the last year, most American cities have become less violent; the recent trend of rising violence appears to have ended.

"It is a mistake to make firm conclusions or projections based on short-term changes in violence," explains Sharkey. "However, over the past year, we can say that the rise in violence that took place in many cities after 2014 has not continued in the past year. Whether the recent drop in violence will persist, or expand to more cities, is an open question."

Sharkey and his colleagues intend for AmericanViolence.org's database to be used by others in multiple ways:

- To allow public officials to understand, through maps and charts, the distribution of violence, and trends in violence, within communities or cities;
- To help public officials, nonprofit organizations, and other actors within a city plan strategies to confront violence;
- To provide data that can be used by public officials, nonprofit organizations, researchers, and others to evaluate the effectiveness of strategies to confront violence;
- To provide comprehensive, clean, accurate, updated, and easily accessible data for researchers and journalists studying and writing about violence.

"Some form of data on violence is now available in most major cities, but there is no single repository that collects, processes, analyzes, and presents data on violence in a form that is updated regularly and accessible to public agencies, policy makers, researchers, journalists, and the broader public," notes Sharkey.

Provided by New York University

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