**12/20/23; The stretched-too-thin blue line**

**[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]**

**[BILLBOARD]**

NOEL KING (HOST): Every fall, the FBI releases data on crime: what’s happening, where it’s happening, how often it’s happening.

*JEFF ASHER (DATA ANALYST, AH Datalytics): They have data, they have it monthly, they have it annually. They have it going back to 1930. And for nerds that look at crime data like me, it's I hate to call it the Super Bowl of crime data*

NOEL: Baked into that data is another number: the solve rate. Which is exactly what it sounds like. It tells us how well police are doing their jobs.

NOEL: This year when the data dropped, analysts noticed something troubling and puzzling about the solve rate. It’s fallen since 2019.

*JEFF: it wasn't just murder that was having a decline in clearance rates, but it was really across the board to some of the lowest levels ever reported for every crime*

NOEL: We try to find out what’s happening. Coming up on Today, Explained.

**[THEME]**

NOEL: Jeff Asher is a data analyst in New Orleans. Jeff’s speciality is criminal justice agencies. And every autumn, he looks forward to getting his mitts on the Uniform Crime Report that the FBI releases. Within that report, as we’ve said, there are numbers about the SOLVE RATE →

JEFF: More or less it means percentage of cases solved. So if your agency solves a murder from last year or from 1972, that's counted as a this year clearance in the numerator, the denominator is just the number of murders that happened this year or the number of robberies that happened this year. So there's some weirdness, but it more or less is the percentage of of crimes that are solved in a given year.

NOEL: And the data shows that the solve rate is at one of its lowest ever levels?

JEFF: That's correct. And you kind of have to divide the data into the sort of unbelievable 1960s and 1970s and the last 30 years or so.

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JEFF: So in the 60s and 70s, agencies tended to report implausibly high levels of clearance rates. So frequently you'd have 90, 95, 100% of murders from an agency that's reporting 100 murders solved every year.

<CLIP> Josh from Crazy Ex Girlfriend: That's so many

JEFF: And it's kind of not certain why that is. But the best guesses are basically that pre Miranda arrest standards were really low,

<CLIP> NBC News, Debunker | NBC News: Do you even know your miranda rights? You have the right to remain silent.

<CLIP> Running Scared:

Cop: very good! You have the right to remain silent. Now what else?!

Perp: anything i say can be used against me in a court of law.

Cop: That's two doing great!

<CLIP> ROBOCOP: You have the right to an attorney.

JEFF: You got really high robbery and auto theft and all of these these crimes that now are being solved much less frequently were being reported at much higher levels of clearances decades ago. So things kind of they came down in the 70s and the 80s and they kind of hit a plateau.

SCORING OUT

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JEFF: And generally, clearance rates in the 90s, 2000s and 20 tens have been stable. The violent crime clearance rate throughout the mid-nineties was around 45% and in 2019 it was 45%. So we've seen, you know, every year goes up or it goes down and there's certainly fluctuation. But it's something that for the last few decades has generally been relatively stable.

NOEL: Generally been relatively stable. And if it were generally relatively stable until 2023, I don't think we'd be talking to you. What did you notice in the data that Major, you're kind of here, stand up.

JEFF: The first thing I look at is the murder clearance rate. And the murder clearance rate fell from. 60 plus percent in 2019 to just 52% in 2022.

*<CLIP> CBS TEXAS, Homicide clearance rate is at an all-time low: barely half of the murder cases in the united states, in fact, end up being solved. The national homicide clearance rate is at an all time low and that’s according to FBI data.*

JEFF: That's a really large decline considering in the early 2000s, it was at that 60 something percent range. It was reasonably stable at that range for a long time. And then you saw this big decline. It really declined, it declined 7% in 2020.

*<CLIP> CBS, homicide clearance rate at an all-time low: IT HAS NEVER BEEN THIS BAD. DURING THE LAST SEVERAL MONTHS OF 2020, MOST MURDERS WENT UNSOLVED, AND THAT HAS NEVER HAPPENED BEFORE IN AMERICA.*

JEFF: We don't really have good 2021 data. That's a whole different story. But we do have good 2022 data. So we went from 54% to 52% in 2022. So then I started looking at other crimes. And for all violent crimes, the clearance rate went from almost 46%, 45.5% in 2019 to 36.7% in 2022. The same thing happened with property crimes, which are solved significantly less frequently. property crime went from a 17% clearance rate to a 12% clearance rate from 2019 to 2022. And so you look at crime by crime, every crime has seen really a nosedive in the last 3 or 4 years. And so it's alarming not because it's so much lower than it was in 1960, but because it's so much lower than it was in 2019. And you saw relative stability for decades. And that's really been interrupted.

NOEL: Okay. So then the question becomes what happened between 2019 and 2022? What do you attribute this to?

JEFF: That's an excellent question and it's very easy to describe the trend. It's much harder to explain the trend.

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JEFF: All we can really point to is that there was a substantial decline beginning really in the summer of 2020.

*<CLIP> WOOD TV8: protesters chanting “hands up don’t shoot.*

JEFF: So we can relate it to everything that's happened in American criminal justice, in policing,

*<CLIP> Sacramento Bee: protesters chanting “Black lives Matter”*

JEFF: in attitudes towards police since the murder of George Floyd in May of 2020.

*<CLIP> The Telegraph, George Floyd protests: i’m tired of my black men and black women being shot!*

*<CLIP> News4JAX The Local Station: It was the worst thing i’ve ever had to witness in my life. To watch a man die on television, no human should have to die this way.*

JEFF: What the exact mechanism is there, what the exact causes there, I think is really difficult to explain. It's probably something that criminologists will be trying to figure out for decades.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: I think, Jeff, that people are going to sort of knee jerk ask the question, are police officers, are police departments getting worse at what they do? What do you think about that?

JEFF: I think that's a very difficult question. And I don't want to describe a profession in sort of generalities and a professional performance. One, we ask police to do a lot of things and solving crime, I think, logically makes sense that that if you were to design what your law enforcement does, you would say, oh, well, solving crime is going to be, you know, the top or the top three, one of the top three things. But in reality, we ask police to do so much that solving crime, even murder, tends to take a backseat to other tasks. So I think it's hard to say our police are doing worse. Are they performing less effectively because of specifically clearance rate data? That said, it is important and clearly these things are falling. So it's hard to say whether or not you'd put the lion's share of the blame on the police performance or is it community trust and community relations, which is leading to fewer people coming forward, leading to fewer witnesses, leading to less evidence being collected, which makes it harder to solve these cases? I think it's really hard to say. You're also seeing throughout a lot of agencies, police officers leaving

*<CLIP> WFAA,Police officers across America are quitting over defund the police*

*Reporter: resignations and retirements are a concern nationally:*

*Police: we’ve had more police officers retire this year at this point than we have in the past 30 years. Just last year, we saw a 60% decrease in the number of applications around the nation to become police officers. And we know it’s gonna be far worse this year.*

JEFF: the majority of big cities, 100,000 or more had fewer officers in 2022 than they did in 2019.

*<CLIP> Dr. Phil, He Quit Police Force Because “It’s No Longer Worth it”:*

*Former Cop: i was making a six figure salary as a police officer. Most officers in big cities make six figures. It’s very hard not to, right. It wasn’t worth it.*

*Dr. Phil: right.*

*Former Cop: politicians, counselors, police experts that have never done the job will tell you how police need reform, police need education, police need to de-escalate, police need to learn better, police need to talk better. But they never talk about the culture of violence that police face every single night.*

JEFF: And so if you have fewer officers, you have fewer resources to dedicate to solving crime, which means lower clearance rates. And we do have lots of research that shows that. And it makes logical sense. The more resources you dedicate, the more officers that are working on solving cases, the better your clearance rate is going to be.

NOEL: Okay. So again, causation, correlation. It's up in the air at this point. You said people will be looking into it. But one of the things we factually can say is that police departments, and tell me if I'm wrong here, Jeff, police departments since 2019 have shrunk. There are fewer police officers across the country. Is that right?

JEFF: The best data that we have from the FBI suggests that, yes. We don't have 2023 data. But yeah, seven of the ten agencies, over a million people, that reported how many officers they had to the FBI in 2019 and 2022 reported fewer officers in 2022 than 2019. The big cities like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, all these departments lost officers over that span. And then you had the smaller declines, the smaller the agency gets. But for the most part, the majority of agencies lost officers, especially sort of mid and big agencies.

NOEL: I read your piece in The New York Times and then I read the comments below. Did you do that at all?

JEFF: No. I'm a firm believer in never read the comments.

NOEL: Okay. Fair play. Well, I read them this morning. And what I saw was a lot of this since George Floyd was murdered, people don't trust the police. They don't respect the police. They don't want the police around. There have been calls to eliminate police departments entirely. What do you people expect? You know, speaking to speaking to the broader public, you're a data guy, and I understand that. But I'm wondering if you have any thoughts about this. I don't know how widespread the belief is, but there does seem to be a belief in this country that we stopped respecting the police in 2020. And that's the problem. What do you think about that?

JEFF: I tend to like to deal in sort of the hard numbers rather than sort of more vague concepts. We do have polling that shows that trust in police has fallen over the last few years.

*<CLIP> VPM, More Than a Quarter of Americans Don’t Trust the Police: 31% of Americans have little to no trust in police officers. A 2021 Pew Research Center poll found*

JEFF: But I don't think it's necessarily just police. I think we see that with a lot of public institutions. It wasn't something that you can kind of point to. One answer or people in one place did one thing, and that's the cause. I think it's a big national effect, which suggests that I do think that there's some value in the sort of broader idea of that community. Trust in policing may have fallen post George Floyd. But I think that's something that's very difficult to measure and very difficult to understand in the concept of falling clearance rates.

NOEL: So what are police departments doing to try to handle these challenges?

JEFF: The smart departments, I think, are investing in civilians.

SCORING IN <03 Neutral Betty (neutral, podcast, moving along, marimba, pizzicatos, hand claps, box drumming, found sound, organic drums)>

JEFF: Civilians are easier to hire. They're less expensive, they're easier to put on a bunch of tasks and they free up officers.

*<CLIP> 12 News, What civilian investigators will do for the Phoenix Police Department: like helping with paperwork, background checks or interviews. These wouldn’t be sworn positions and they wouldn’t be able to make arrests.*

JEFF: So if you hire a civilian, they can take calls over the phone. They can respond to non-injury traffic accidents.

*<CLIP> FOX8 WGHP, Civilian traffic investigators: typically our officers would respond with two officers to any type of vehicle incident. And now, with our bmap program they are able to respond with just one officer and a bmap volunteer which frees up that other officer to respond to other pressing needs within the city.*

JEFF: They can help the civilian investigators.

<CLIP> ABC15 Arizona: by 11 am civilian investigator Kathleen Norega has already been out on a few calls. Norega writes up a report, gathers evidence and then looks for prints back at the station.

JEFF: They're not going to go out there and make an arrest and carry a badge and a gun. But they can collect evidence. They can assist in the investigative process. I think that that's probably the most promising solution because your solutions are one. Hire more officers so that you can put more resources into investigations. And it's just really hard to do that right now. It's not something that a lot of agencies are succeeding with. Or you can hire civilians, which is a lot easier and a lot cheaper and a lot faster. And it's a sort of, I think, a commonsense no duh solution to a really difficult problem.

NOEL FORWARD THROW: Jeff Asher, crime data analyst. How might police respond to the suggestion that they’re not doing their jobs as well as they once were?

Coming up: we call the cops.

**[BREAK]**

**[BUMPER]**

EDDIE: My name is Edgardo Garcia, although I go by Eddie Garcia, the police chief of the Dallas Police Department.

NOEL: Chief Garcia, we're chatting today because of an annual FBI report that comes out in the fall. One of the data points in that report has to do with the solve rates for violent crimes. And this year, what the data suggest is that that solve rate fell from about 46% to about 36.7% since 2019, meaning fewer violent crimes are being solved. What do you think is happening here? What do you think is causing this drop?

EDDIE: One thing that we have to say that, you know, to solve a violent crime is not easy. I mean, it's not an easy task. And as departments face staffing shortages now, the number one responsibility of any police department is to answer the number one call for service. I know that there are other chiefs as as am I, that are very reticent to move bodies out of patrol, as that's the number one priority of any department. And so you have amazing detectives doing amazing job that are working a lot that they're you know, they're overworked in some areas. As departments face, you know, obviously with the backdrop of staffing, you know, we always look at that patrol, there's no question about it. But, you know, most of us also have a lot of holes to fill in our detective bureaus. And so that, that is one of the major issues, I believe that that if some agencies are seeing drops in their solve rates, I believe we could start there.

NOEL: Why do you think you're having staffing problems, personnel shortages?

EDDIE: What is often not talked about is really in these last few years, you know, beginning in 2010, 2020, honorable police officers have not felt supported.

*<CLIP> katv.com - they feel vilified: we have this constant vilification of the profession. People are constantly being told the police are the problem. Police are dangerous.*

EDDIE: They have not felt supported by at times their community.

*<CLIP> ABC News, Nightline - Police officers work to mend relationship between communities: the law enforcement should be held at a higher accountability than a normal person, because you’re there to uphold the law.*

EDDIE: They haven't felt supported by their administration at times, and they haven't felt supported by their city governments.

*<CLIP> CBS Chicago, department struggles: I think i just kind of fell out of love with the job. I was working 12-plus hour days. The days off, canceling, and shift changes kinds seemed to become the new norm.*

EDDIE: There's probably not another profession of honorable men and women, and I say honorable because I'm not going to sit here and tell you that every police officer deserves to wear this uniform. They do not. But most of our men and women that are working in this profession are honorable men and women. And I don't I don't care what field you go into if you don't feel supported, if if if you don't if people don't honor the work that you do and sacrifice in your life every day, you know, I don't know if there's many other professions that have had a defund movement that's going to have an impact on on honorable men and women joining any profession,   
  
NOEL: Hmm

EDDIE: much less law enforcement. That's important.

NOEL: What do you hear specifically from officers? I imagine you sit and you talk to them and you're alluding to a couple of things. Some some, you know, some real issues that have arisen since 2020. The nation goes through an uprising. We see calls to, you know, abolish the police altogether. We see slogans like acab. I won't, of course, say what that means. But people know when you sit with officers and they tell you it's harder. What are the specifics? What are they talking about?

EDDIE: I started 32 years ago. And I'll tell you what, being a police officer 32 years ago is different than it is today. There's a lot more on officers plates, quite frankly. Officers are asked to do too much to deal with a lot of the social ills that are impacting crime. And officers want to get compensated fairly. They feel they're overworked, oftentimes. And so those are some of the issues that I hear. But, you know, one of the disconnects that I really believe is occurring now and I say this because I'm not a stay-in-the-office chief. And so a lot of this division is not being driven by neighborhoods. There's not a neighborhood in the city of Dallas. And I can I speak for my other colleagues as well, regardless of language spoken racial makeup or economic status that I have ever heard the words, ‘we want to see less of you’. It never happens.

NOEL: Hmm

EDDIE: And in fact, oftentimes it's our communities of color that plead with me for more officers. I have invited people to come to community meetings with me where they will hear my community let me have it if they are not seeing patrol officers and presence in their neighborhood. And oftentimes it's our most vulnerable communities, and it's not often, but sometimes they'll accuse police departments of providing more police services to other more affluent areas than the areas of need. And so there's there's a real big disconnect. And I think people need to get out of their offices and go into neighborhood meetings with police chiefs to hear the same information that I hear at every community meeting that I go to.

NOEL: I think the reason that FBI data struck a chord, Chief Garcia, is that there is a sense in this country, in parts of this country, that police have stopped doing their jobs. Even if you understand why you kind of feel like the police are doing less now, if morale is low, that certainly can happen. Do you think there's any truth to the sentiment that police are pulling back because they feel overworked, they feel disrespected? And they feel like doing this job is is just going to get you in trouble. I mean, what are you hearing?

EDDIE: You hit the nail on the head. That is absolutely an issue. They want to ensure that when chaos ensues, that they're going to be judged fairly. And one of the dynamics if the pendulum swings too far oftentimes, officers will feel, is this worth it? Listen, I'll tell you this, proactive policing is absolutely necessary. I can make an officer answer a 911 call for service that I can do, but I can't make officers be proactive. And the only reason honorable men and women will be proactive is if they feel supported. So when officers don't feel supported, when they don't have morale, what it causes oftentimes is a community to go to their corner, the police go to their corner, and yet there's no one in the middle keeping us safe. And those are things that not just come from my officers or other people that I've spoken to, but that from community members themselves. And so certainly that exists that, you know, we have a crime plan here in the city of Dallas and in our offices. I go around the country and I talk to individuals about what we're trying to do different in Dallas with the crime plan. The first thing that I say to people is, please do not screw up a perfectly good crime plan that you don't have your finger on the pulse. Your men and women don't feel supported if they don't feel they're going to be treated fairly once chaos ensues. There's no crime plan that's going to work. So your point is 100% valid. And that's something that that that we need to work hard on.

NOEL: What do you think it’s going to take to turn this around?

EDDIE: It takes strong leadership. It takes strong support from city government. I have a very supportive city council, which absolutely is necessary. I have an incredibly supportive city manager. And quite frankly, I have arguably the most supportive mayor of public safety, I think there is in the country, quite frankly. And it starts with that. It starts with great community trust and great community understanding. We have to build the department. We can't lose sight of the fact that we need to grow. nothing will ever amount to having a human being sitting at a desk, sitting in patrol car, offering that and provide that service. So we need to grow and solve rates will then increase by that. and to your point 90 to 100% on all is is definitely something we should strive more strive for. Not necessarily realistic. There's several reasons communities don't speak to us. One of the reasons is lack of accountability in the system, in keeping criminals and violent criminals in custody. We have witnesses in the city of Dallas that fear for their lives when they come forward, only to see the individual that they come forward to be a witness against. To see them back out on the street does not lend to credibility in the system. And it certainly doesn't make them feel safe when they come forward. So we have that to worry about, which is a humongous issue. We need accountability. And that's that's hugely important. That trust the community has in its police department will have people come forward to speak to us about what's occurring because we can't solve these crimes alone oftentimes. you know, the community is not a monolith. Obviously, we have to get better as professionals. Little question about it. But in my experience, at nearly 32 years and now going into the new Year, I'll be in my ninth year as a police chief, whether in California, here in Dallas, our communities have never and still do not want us to go away.

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NOEL: That was Dallas Police Chief Eddie Garcia. Today’s episode was produced by Hady Mawajdeh and edited by Matthew Collette. Laura Bullard is our fact-checker and David Herman is our engineer. Special thanks to Chief Art Acevedo of the Aurora Colorado police department for his insights, and Brian Higgins at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. I’m Noel King. It’s Today, Explained.

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**