

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/safety-and-the-eye-of-the-beholder>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

As violent crime rates continue to decline nationally, they have remained comparatively high in Chicago. Overall, reductions in violent crime in Chicago have been modest, dropping 9 percent from 2009 to 2010. That's why the [city's recent 32 percent drop in homicide rates](#) caught the national media's attention in June.

Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel attributed this drop in homicides to policing strategies. He declared that the city could bring down the rates even further through the use of intense police presence in what the police department calls crime impact zones. Aside from questions about whether a financially strapped city can sustain the high costs of impact-zone policing, Mayor Emanuel's statements sidestepped the question of how much the recent drop in homicides has altered Chicagoans' sense of their safety.

The ripple effects of decades of violent crime and a history of tense relationships with the police in economically disadvantaged communities and communities of color persist, even after crime rates go down. The way residents experience fear, safety, and the presence of police may be just as important as actual declines in the rate of crime. For example, we know that women and older people are less likely to feel safe, although they are less likely to be victimized than young men. Saturating neighborhoods with police without telling residents why they're there or how they will operate can backfire and cause residents to be more, not less, afraid. [Professor David Weisburd](#), who developed the concept of crime hot spots and has studied the outcomes of hot-spot policing, argues that, unless it is practiced in a way that emphasizes procedural justice and legitimacy, crime reductions may be short-lived.

While analyses of national crime trends have offered a clearer picture of current crime rates, disadvantaged communities are experiencing these trends in more complex ways than numbers can convey. For that reason, it is essential that policymakers, practitioners, community members, and researchers expand their knowledge beyond the numbers and critically analyze the concept of safety in order to make informed decisions about improving public safety and sustaining those improvements in the long term. In communities where elected leaders and police officials communicate and partner with residents about public safety, the atmosphere can change for the better.

Vera's [mixed-methods study of the New York City Police Department's stop, question, and frisk practice](#) looks into some of these complexities and how they affect community members' willingness to work with the police on public safety issues. Vera's [Center on Youth Justice](#) will share the study's findings in a report which will be released in the summer of 2013.

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