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Fear of Rampant Crime Is Derailing New York City's Recovery

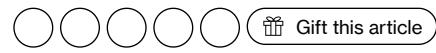
Violent incidents are up since the pandemic began — and New Yorkers are nervous. But widespread anxiety obscures the fact that crime is still at decades-long lows.

By [Fola Akinnibi](#) and [Raeedah Wahid](#)

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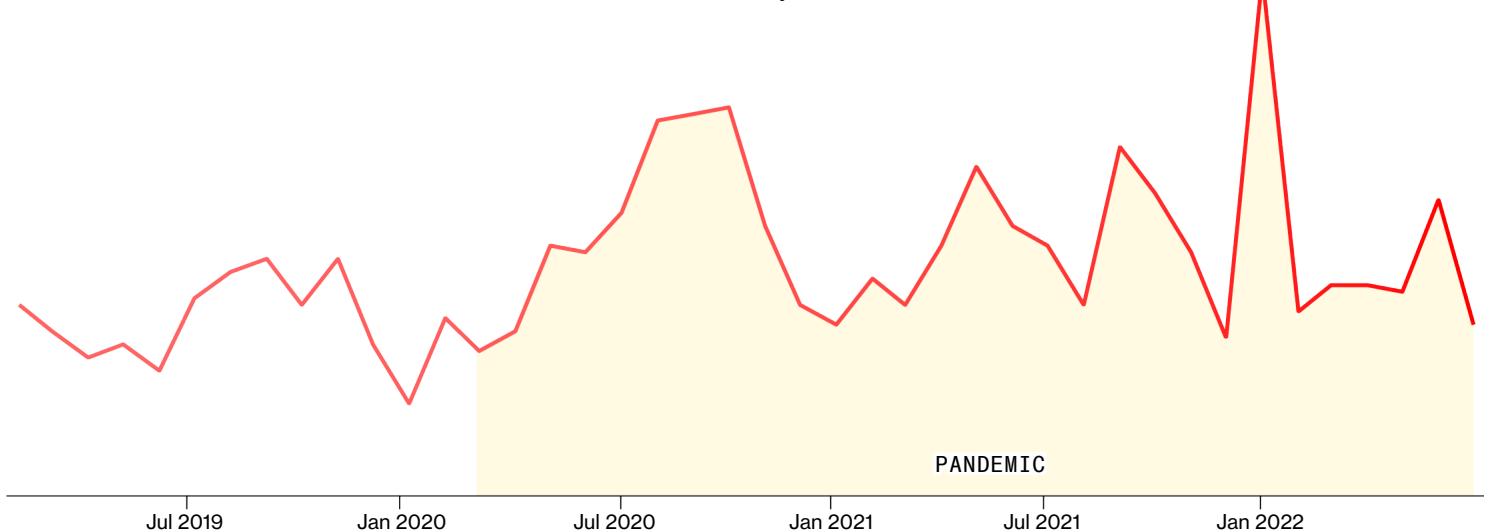
Is NYC Safe? The Reality of Crime Rates in New York

July 29, 2022



Homicides in NYC, by Month

Monthly total



Homicides in New York City have become more common during the pandemic, jolting the perception of a city once called “the safest big city in America.”

Things look a bit different with a wider snapshot. The murder rate today looks much like it did in 2009, when the city was clawing its way back from the last national economic collapse.

Pull back further to New York of the 1980s and early 1990s, and the murder rate was five times higher than today with an average

of six killings a day. Just before the pandemic, the city's murder rate plummeted to its lowest level in decades.

Incidents of violent crime remain at historic lows in New York City. But people's views on guns and crime are often more influenced by what they see and hear, rather than by hard numbers. While homicide is the most high-profile type of crime, larceny, burglary and assault show similar trends.

A rash of high-profile incidents in subway stations and tourist hubs—and an outspoken new mayor who's made crime-fighting his signature issue—has intensified scrutiny on public safety. A generation of younger New Yorkers are seeing a sustained rise in crime, instead of a decline, for the first time in their lifetimes.

To that end, three quarters of New Yorkers said crime was a “very serious” problem in a February Quinnipiac University poll. That’s the highest number since the question was first asked in 1999, when the murder rate per capita was 50% higher. Back then, only 35% of respondents ranked violence as a major concern.



Note: The poll asked about crime sporadically over two decades.

Source: Quinnipiac University

It's not just New York. Crime fell in cities around the world in the early weeks of Covid-19 shutdowns. But then, violence began ticking up in urban centers as residents dealt with the economic and health fallout from the pandemic.

Washington D.C., Los Angeles, Chicago and other US cities saw murder rates climb to the highest point in over a decade, driven by gun violence. In Chicago, where homicides rose to their highest level last year since 1995, billionaire Ken Griffin cited safety fears in his decision to relocate his hedge fund firm to Miami. Meanwhile, public safety and guns have already featured prominently in campaign ads in Georgia, Ohio, Florida and other battleground states ahead of the November midterm elections.

“We didn’t see people using crime [politically] at the local level a whole lot over the past 10 to 15 years because crime levels were historically low,” said Lisa Miller, a political science professor at Rutgers University. “What politicians do and whether

they're successful at it depends on how much people are generally frightened about walking around their communities."

While gun crime dominates in the US, where the number of guns outnumber people, cities in other parts of the world are seeing crime manifest in other ways. In London, where gun violence is rarer than in the US, more teenagers were killed last year than at any point in the last 18 years. They died from stabbings, arson and other types of violence. In the first quarter of 2022, Paris saw an increase in domestic and sexual violence from pre-pandemic levels. Lagos, Nigeria, has grappled with an uptick in robberies, kidnappings and mob violence.

Perception vs. Reality

Perhaps nowhere has the perception of rampant crime overpowered the reality more than in New York City, where the murder rate has certainly increased in recent years but is nowhere near where it was in the 1980s and 1990s.

Fears of violence have now surpassed Covid concerns when it comes to why workers say they won't return to their Manhattan offices or ride on public transit in the financial capital of the world. Besides the impact on the residents of New York, there are far-reaching implications for the tourists, investors and other people who bring business and capital to the city's economy.

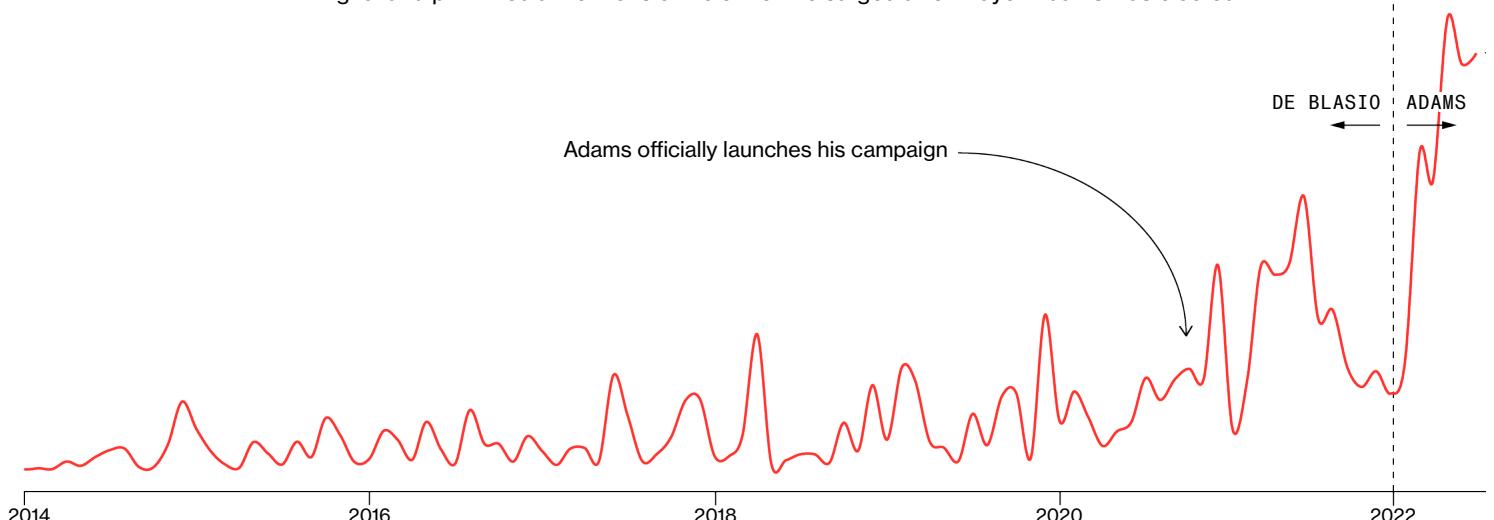
Part of the outsized perception can be traced to the city's new mayor, Eric Adams, whose focus on crime helped propel the 22-year veteran of the New York City Police Department into the job.

Once in office, he staked his administration on the idea that he's uniquely suited to provide a quick fix to the complex problem of eradicating violence in the city. Crisscrossing the city to show up at crime scenes big and small, he became well-known for delivering sermon-like admonitions in apocalyptic terms. "We're in a real scary place," Adams said in a May police briefing where he likened the NYPD's work to war deployment.

Media coverage has followed Adams's lead. There were nearly 800 stories per month across all digital and print media about crime in New York City following Adams's inauguration, according to an analysis of data compiled by Media Cloud. That compares to an average 132 stories per month during the eight-year tenure of the previous mayor, Bill de Blasio.

Sounding Alarms

Digital and print media mentions of violent crime surged after Mayor Adams was elected



Note: Monthly mentions of “violent crime” includes assault, homicide, shootings and guns localized to NYC print and digital media headlines.

Source: Media Cloud

Even as shootings and homicides have decreased slightly, the perception of New York City as a dangerous place has persisted. And it’s already taken a toll on the mayor’s popularity: Only 29% of New Yorkers rated Adams favorably in June, down from two-thirds when he was elected, according to a Spectrum News NY1/Siena College poll.

There are also early signs that Adams’s penchant for highly visible crime-fighting tactics is already exacting a cost on communities of color and low-income neighborhoods, where he’s adding more officers. Adams has also touted more arrests for low-level infractions like fare evasion, which accounts for nearly 80% of police enforcement in the subway system, according to transit officials.

“Mayor Adams has made clear that public safety and keeping New Yorkers safe is his top priority,” Fabien Levy, the mayor’s press secretary said. “We are being honest with New Yorkers about the work that there is left to do.”

Violence is a potent political issue and people are highly susceptible to what politicians and the media say about crime, says John Gramlich, who studies crime statistics at the Pew Research Center. “That may not be reflective of all crime or what the actual crime rate in a particular area is,” he said.

Still, that sense of unease is keeping some workers from returning to the Manhattan offices of asset management firm Neuberger Berman. For the first time in his 13 years as chief executive, George Walker IV, 53, says employees are telling him that they’re scared to come back into work because of crime, especially at transit hubs like Penn Station and Grand Central Terminal.

“Three years ago my employees were more focused on traffic, what we were doing to reduce commute time,” said Walker, who moved to New York in 1992 from Philadelphia. “Now they’re more concerned about safety on the subway and at Penn Station.”

High-Profile Events

If you simply go by the statistics, the reality is that very few of Walker’s white-collar employees will ever be victims of a crime: A person was 37% more likely to be injured at work than to be the victim of violent crime in 2020, according to federal data.

Nearly two-thirds of homicides in D.C. occurred in two of the city’s wards in 2021. Almost half of the killings in Los Angeles in the last two years were in four police divisions. In New York, nearly a quarter of all homicides and shooting incidents are concentrated in five of the city’s 77 police precincts, located in mostly low-income neighborhoods in Brooklyn and the Bronx. In 2021 there were 5.7 homicides per 100,000 people in New York City, compared to a rate of 35 in Philadelphia and 55 in New Orleans.



Law enforcement officers at the scene of an April shooting at a Brooklyn subway station.

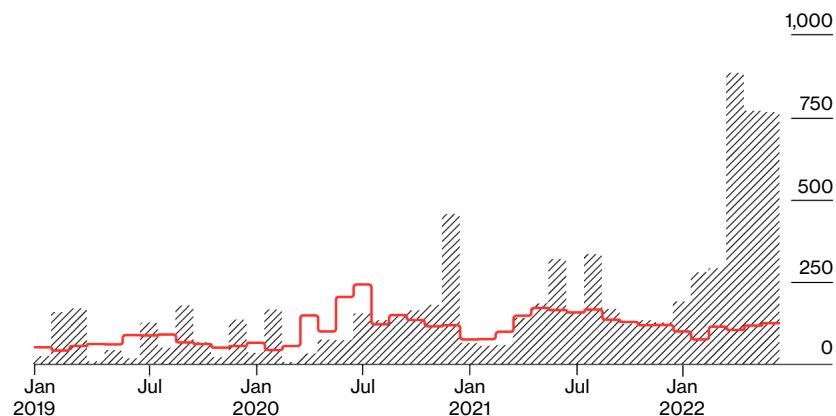
Photographer: Victor J. Blue/Bloomberg

But a number of particularly obscene incidents have left New York City on edge. In January, a Deloitte consultant was shoved in front of a train at Times Square and killed. In April, a man fired a handgun at least 33 times on a packed subway car traveling from Brooklyn to Manhattan. In May, a Goldman Sachs Group Inc. employee was shot and killed while riding the Q train on the way to brunch. There were 639 shooting incidents in the city in the first six months of 2022, nearly double the same period in 2019.

Media Mismatch

Coverage about shootings outweigh the number of incidents

Number of shootings Number of times shootings were mentioned in media



Note: Monthly media mentions of shootings are localized to NYC print and digital media headlines.
Sources: New York City Police Department, Media Cloud

A tendency to focus on the most lurid or sensational crimes gives people a distorted sense of what's actually going on in their communities, said Michael O'Hear, a professor at Marquette University Law School. The proliferation of social media has meant even more eyes on incidents when they happen.

"The average person's risk of encountering one of these crimes is pretty low," leaving the media and politicians to shape people's perceptions, O'Hear said.

Generational Shift

To be sure, murder, assaults and other type of violent crime that began increasing during the pandemic haven't dropped back to pre-pandemic levels. That change appears to be more jarring to younger residents who don't have the same frame of reference as older New Yorkers.



Dylan Adler, 25, was punched repeatedly during a run in Manhattan in 2020. *Photographer: Michael Nagle/Bloomberg*

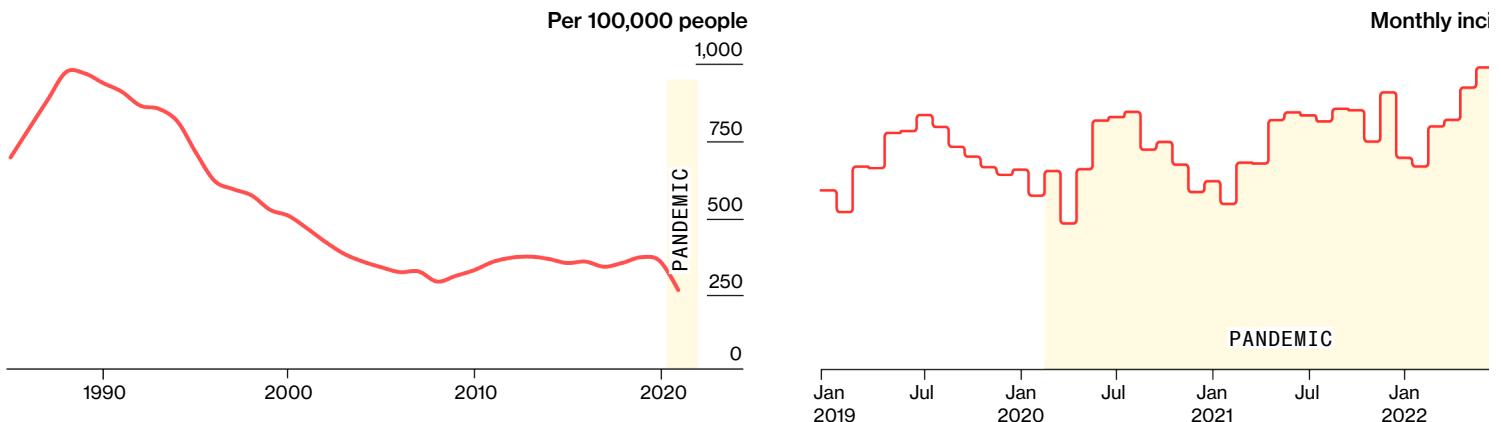
New York's crime spike came as a shock to Dylan Adler, a 25-year-old comedian and musician who moved to Manhattan from the San Francisco Bay Area in 2014 to study music composition at New York University. Murder rates had been steadily declining for over two decades and gentrification had transformed large swaths of a gritty city into a shiny playground for plucky careerists like Adler.

By the time Adler graduated in 2018 and began pursuing his acting dream, there was fewer than one murder per day in the city. Homicides in New York City dropped to 3 per 100,000 people, down from 20 in 1985, when the Federal Bureau of Investigation

began collecting the data. Assaults per 100,000 people dropped to 357 from 700 over the same period, according to the FBI.

Pandemic Increase

Felony assaults had dropped to decades lows before rising in 2020



Sources: Federal Bureau of Investigation, New York City Police Department

After late-night comedy performances and Off-Broadway shows, the theater aficionado thought nothing of walking home alone with headphones in his ears blasting showtunes. Between hustling for gigs and paying rent on time, crime was simply not a thing he thought about.

A few weeks into the March 2020 Covid lockdown, that all changed. While jogging near Hudson Yards along mostly empty Manhattan streets, a man started chasing Adler and then repeatedly punched him in the face and body.

Adler, who is Asian, says he believes the incident was among the hundreds of hate crimes that occurred after the pandemic struck. He said he reported the attack to the police but never heard back from the NYPD.

In the months following the assault, Adler says he dreaded trips to the gym or grocery store. He considered leaving the city. He stopped walking alone at night and began taking cars home from late shows. While much of the immediate trauma eventually subsided, Adler says he's just a lot more aware of his surroundings. "What it gave me was hyper-vigilance about other people who might be in danger too," he said.

That intense situational awareness harkens back to the New York City of the 1980s and 1990s, when people like Steven Hall took care to avoid the seats closest to the door when riding the subway—they were prime targets for thieves who would rush on and snatch a bag or necklace and then rush off the train as the doors closed.

Hall, a 62-year-old restaurant publicist, said being on high alert was just a habit people developed at the time.

"You learn how to walk really fast and you learn how to keep your eyes in front of you," Hall said, explaining the "sixth sense" you had to acquire living in New York during that period.

Now, the fear of going back to those days has underpinned a sense that the city is headed in the wrong direction—even as crime remains at generational lows. And that unless the city can address both the reality—and the perception—of crime, there will continue to be economic, political and social costs.

"If somebody feels unsafe, they're probably not going to be comforted by the fact that overall crime in New York is lower today than it was 20 years ago," Pew Research's Gramlich said. "The feelings are important because it can translate into how people ultimately choose their leaders or vote on policies."

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With assistance from: Kate Krader, Max Abelson, Alan Katz and Olivia Fletcher

Notes on Data: Annual New York City crime data dating back to 1985 was collected by the Federal Bureau of Investigation through its Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program. Data is voluntarily reported every month by the New York City Police Department to the state UCR program, centralized in the state's data repository, and then vetted by the FBI UCR program for its validity and adherence to established standards.

Per capita homicide and felony assault rates were calculated using the FBI's data and the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene population numbers. The 1990 decennial census population number was used to calculate the per capita rates between 1991 and 1995.

Bloomberg gathered data on media mentions of "crime" using Media Cloud, an open-source media content analysis tool. The query for "crime" was restricted to headlines from local and national print and digital outlets about shootings, transit incidents, murder, grand larceny, and felony assault and only in the story context of crime and/or violent crimes and based in New York City. The query results were checked for duplicates. Media Cloud's database of print and digital media sources is continuously expanding and there is room for error in the historical analysis.

New York City Police Department data was sourced from monthly press releases. Transit and shooting incident data was supplied by the NYPD to Bloomberg for December 2021 because the data wasn't available online.



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