

Homicide Increases in the COVID-19 Era

Bianca Schutz, Kaitlyn Kirt, Kevin Hu, and Marco Stine

Table of contents

1	Introduction	1
1.1	Data Description	2
1.1.1	Primary Data: Los Angeles Crime Data	2
1.1.2	Secondary Data: Geographic and Socioeconomic Data	2
1.2	Hypothesis	2
2	Exploratory Data Analysis	3
3	Modeling	11
3.1	Regression to Examine Weekly Crime Rates	11
3.2	Regression Between Median Income and Crimes per Zip Code	11
3.3	Negative Binomial for Census Block	12
3.3.1	Discussion	12
3.4	Linear Regression Models	12
4	Killer Plot Visualization	13
5	Conclusion	15
	References	16
	Data Sources	16
	Primary Datasets	16
	Secondary Datasets	16

1 Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, homicide rates in Los Angeles increased substantially. A report by the Legal Defense Fund’s Thurgood Marshall Institute found that this increase was associated with both pre-pandemic and pandemic-induced economic instability and inequalities(Moore, Tom, and O’Neil 2022).

Using National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) data, this report will examine the impact of the pandemic and various socioeconomic factors on homicide rates in LA. We aim to compare the effect of these local characteristics on the incidence of homicide in pre-, mid-, and post-pandemic conditions.

1.1 Data Description

1.1.1 Primary Data: Los Angeles Crime Data

We will utilize NIBRS data from 2018-2024 to examine incident-level data, allowing us to fully capture the circumstances of each event. Our data is obtained from the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), who regularly updates Crime Data on the Data.gov website. The data includes all crime data, which we will subset to focus on homicide, and details such as date, location, and offense type.

The codebook for this dataset can be found here: https://data.lacity.org/Public-Safety/Crime-Data-from-2020-to-Present/2nrs-mtv8/about_data.

To group this data geographically, we will organize the crimes by their latitude and longitude into the appropriate Census Blocks and ZIP Code Tabulation Areas (ZCTAs). Additionally, we will examine the impact of latitude and longitude themselves, as humans do not always behave by administrative unit boundaries and latitude and longitude by themselves might suggest a different pattern (Krieger et al. 2002).

1.1.2 Secondary Data: Geographic and Socioeconomic Data

The NIBRS data includes two main geographic identifiers: address and coordinates. Some addresses are poorly coded, such as just listing a street and no number, so we instead used latitude and longitude to examine geospatial relationships. We also used these coordinates to group our data into administrative units (Census Blocks and ZCTAs) to perform different levels of geospatial analysis.

We used shapefiles for the state of California, Los Angeles Police Department Divisions, and the Census units to categorize each crime event and to visualize the spatial distribution of the crimes through maps. To categorize the crime coordinate data, we performed a spatial join where we converted the crime coordinates to a spatial object and then joined them based on the geometries of the shape files.

We additionally used publicly available socioeconomic data from the US Census Bureau, the City of Los Angeles Housing Department (LAHD), CalMatters, and Los Angeles County Public Health. We used median household income data from the American Community Survey 5-Year estimates to get an annual measure of income in LA ZCTAs. We used evictions data from both Calmatters and LAHD to gather longer-term data and more recent data, as LAHD only started tracking evictions data in 2023, while Calmatters has tracked LA County data since 2012.

Due to difficulties in obtaining city-level data, the unemployment rate, COVID cases, and number of evictions are for Los Angeles County, while the crime data is for the City of Los Angeles. The city comprises about a third of the county's population and the greater county area largely reflects the trends in the city itself.

To maximize the amount of data available for analysis, we used LA County socioeconomic data for any correlation analysis and focused on years 2020-2023.

1.2 Hypothesis

Based on the 2022 Thurgood Marshall Institute report, we anticipate that the homicide rates have decreased since the end of the pandemic as society has returned to a more "normal" state. We aim to see how the rate of homicide compares to overall crime levels in the city and identify any patterns between socioeconomic factors such as eviction rates and the homicide count.

Our hypothesis is two-fold; first, we predict that since the pandemic, that socioeconomic conditions have improved in Los Angeles over the past few years. Second, we predict that as these socioeconomic measures have bounced back, the rate of homicide has returned to a more "normal" rate.

Additionally, we believe that we will observe a similar relationship between homicide and the overall crime rate; as the number of crimes decreases, so will the number of homicides.

We will also investigate the relationship between homicide and enforcement factors. In particular, we will look at the LAPD budget in comparison to the homicide rate to determine if increased police funding is effective in reducing the number of homicides.

2 Exploratory Data Analysis

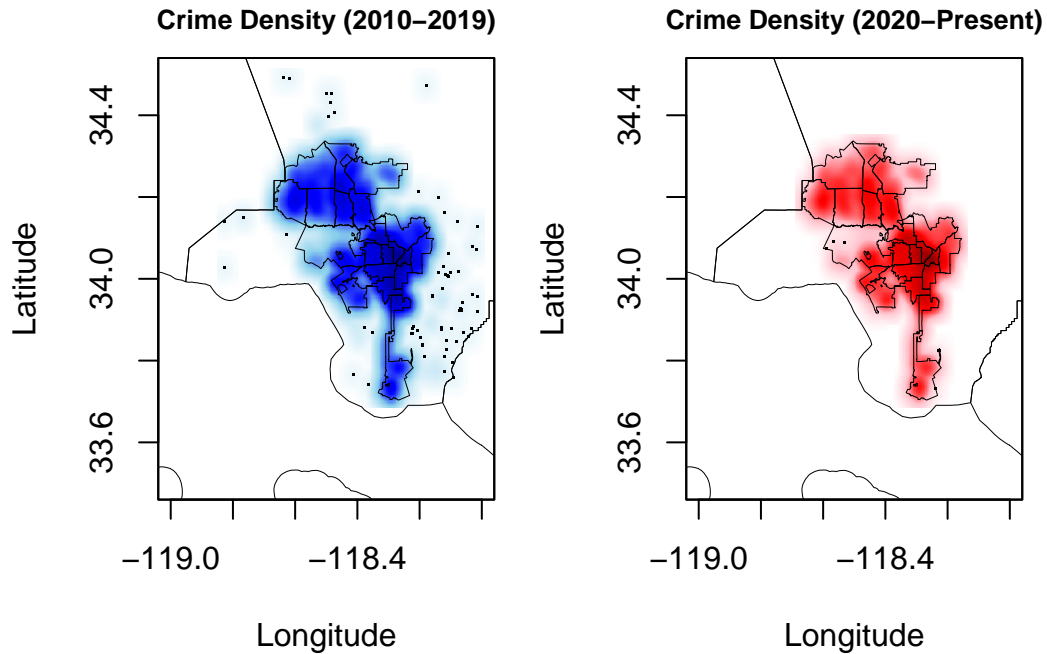


Figure 1: Crime densities in Los Angeles by LAPD Division, 2010-2019 and 2020-Present

Figure 1 shows that both time periods show major clusters of reported crimes in central LA. The 2020–present data appears slightly more dispersed to the north, but overall, the density of crimes has remained the same over time. The West LA and Foothill LAPD divisions seem to have the lowest density of crimes. West LA Division has crimes mostly located in the south of its area. Beverly Hills, which is not one of the LAPD divisions and has its own police force, explains the whiter spot in central LA.

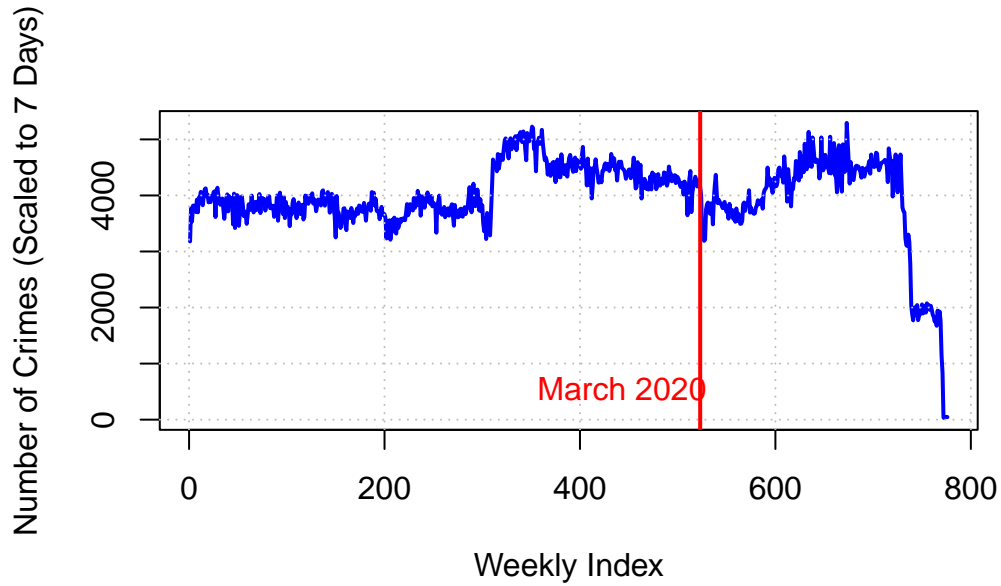


Figure 2: Weekly Crime Counts in Los Angeles from 2010 to present

Figure 2 analyzes the number of crimes over time using time series. The time series shows stable weekly crime counts with occasional large spikes. One large increase occurs around Weekly Index 300, which is around 2016-17. This spike was attributed to a resurgence in gang violence and the growth in homelessness. The red line, which denotes March 2020, shows a decline in crimes, likely during the shutdown and quarantine, but it returned to normal levels quickly. Since then, crimes have decreased recently, but this could be caused by some issues with 2024 data, as the LAPD said they changed their reporting standards: “Records Management System for reporting crimes and arrests” and that they were experiencing issues in 2024.

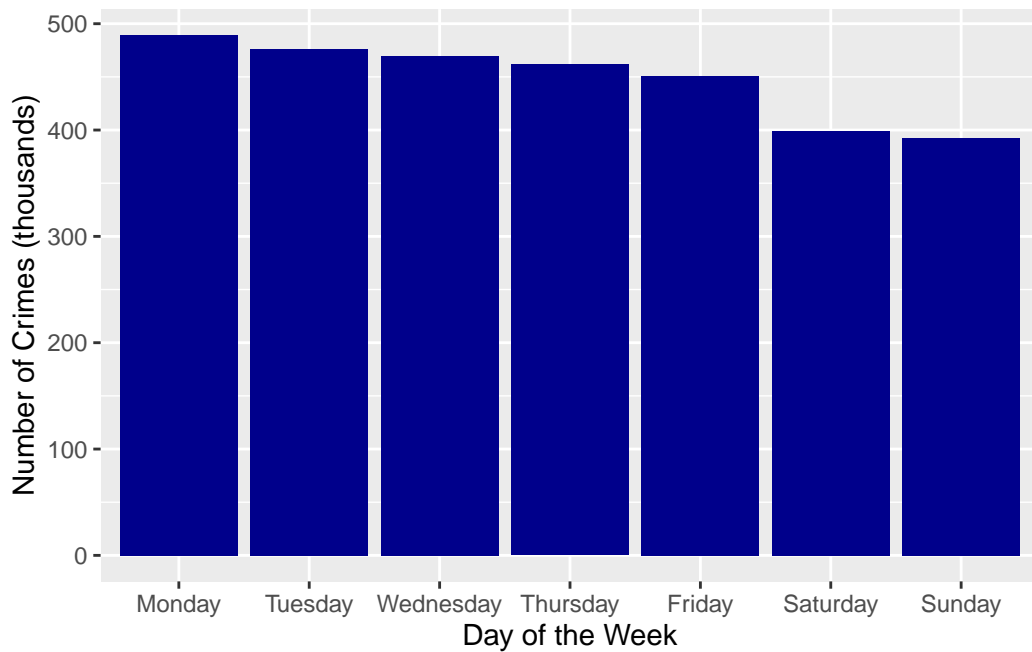


Figure 3: Los Angeles Crimes by Day of the Week

In Figure 3, the number of crimes are rather evenly distributed, with the weekends having slightly lower crime

compared to week days, which may be a result from more people around during weekends which indirectly supervises people’s behavior. Most crimes occur on Mondays, and the fewest crimes occur on Sunday. The plot analyzes the crime rate frequency frequency by day of the week using a bar graph.

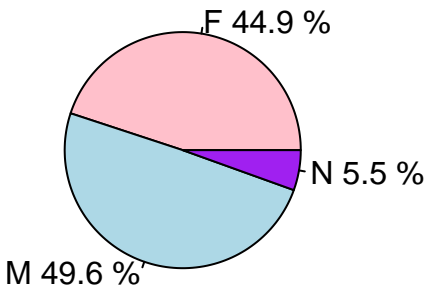


Figure 4: Percent of crime victims by gender, 2010 to present

From the pie chart shown in Figure 4, we can see that around 50% of crime victims are male, 45% are female and 5% are non-binary. This shows that the distribution of crime victims by gender is relatively even, though men do account for a plurality of the victims.

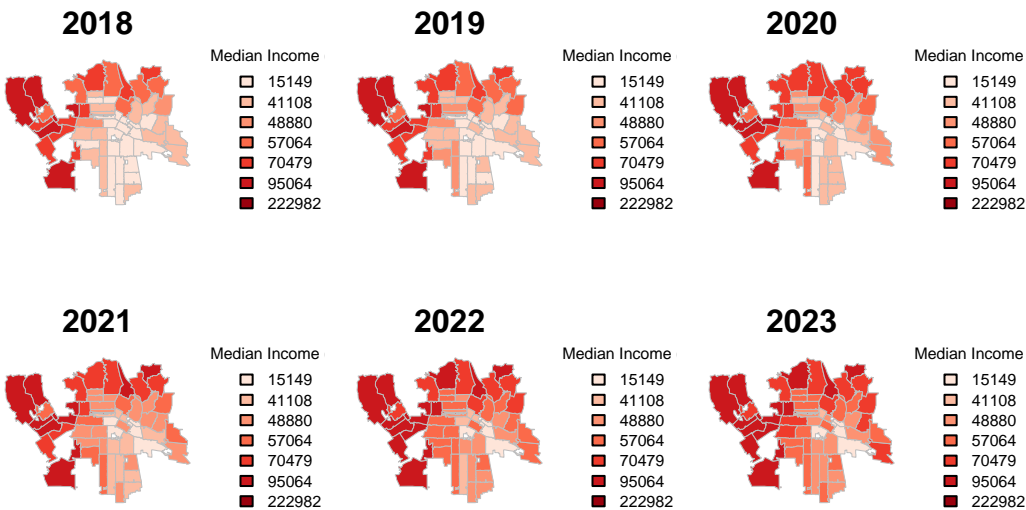


Figure 5: Median household income by year and by ZIP Code Tabulation Area (ZCTA) in Los Angeles

The maps in Figure 5 demonstrate that median income in certain LA zip codes (particularly those to the west) have a much higher median household income than the rest of the city, but over the last six years, the median income in most other LA zip codes has increased. However, there are some that a typical family is at or below the poverty line. We intend to investigate if there is a spatial correlation between these poorer zip codes and the incidence of crimes, particularly homicide, and whether this is affected by pandemic conditions.

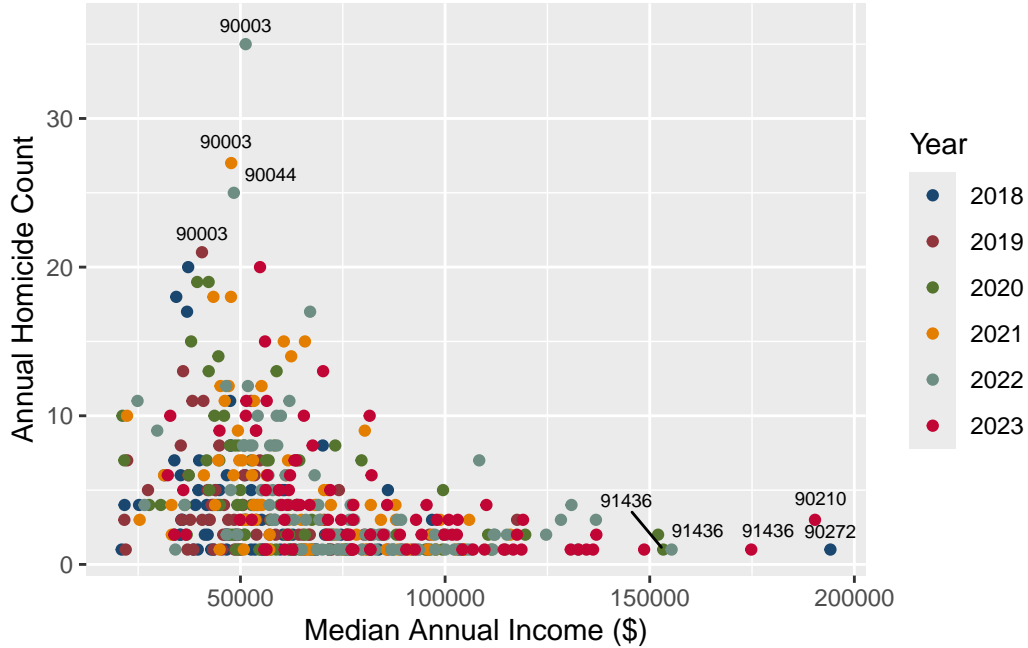


Figure 6: Annual Median Income and Homicide Count by ZCTA in Los Angeles with top 1% income and top 1% homicide rates labelled

Based on Figure 6, we observe a weak inverse relationship between median annual income and homicide count. Specifically, we see that higher homicide rates occur in ZCTA areas with lower median annual income, though most observations are still near or at zero, meaning few homicides typically occur. However, there are no observations with a median annual income of over \$100,000 where the homicide rate is greater than 10, whereas there are several of those observations for ZCTA/year combinations under \$100,000. The zip code which stands out most on this figure is 90003, which has 3 of the 4 highest homicide counts in the data. This suggests that there might be a relationship between median income and homicide count, though the relationship might be non-linear or weak, suggesting there are other factors at play.

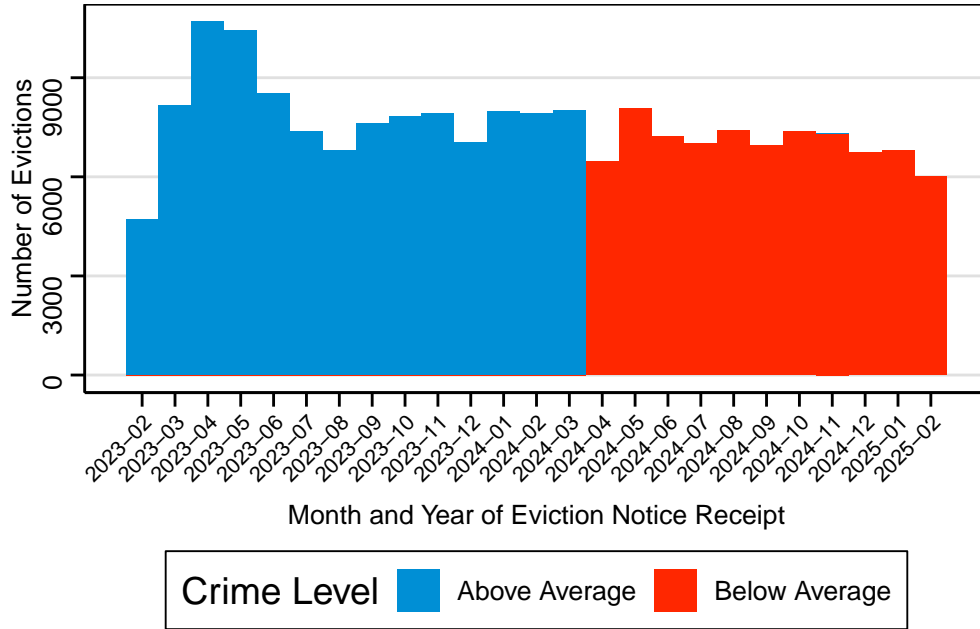


Figure 7: Monthly Frequency of Evictions and Crimes in the City of Los Angeles, February 2023 to February 2025

Figure 7 plots the frequency of evictions in Los Angeles from February 2023 to February 2025, where the City of Los Angeles Housing Department has published case data. By summarizing both the crime and the evictions datasets by month, we see that the number of evictions was highest in early-mid 2023, and since, there have typically been slightly lower frequencies of evictions. Additionally, we split the number of crimes per month based on the average number of crimes of 14,439 to denote above and below average number of crimes per month. There is a clear split between March and April of 2024, as all months before that had above average crime, and all after had below average. Interestingly, the months where there is below average crime, seem to be the ones with slightly lower numbers of evictions.

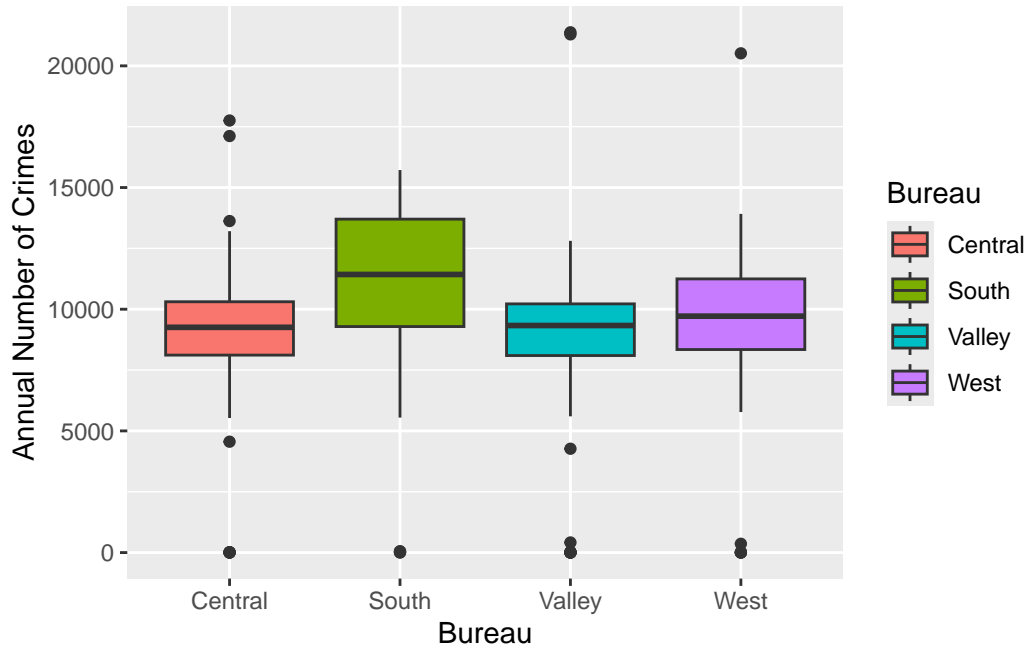


Figure 8: Annual Number of Crimes by Los Angeles Police Department Bureau

Figure 8 shows the number of crimes in the four different bureaus of Los Angeles annually. We categorized the areas into their respective Central, South, Valley, and West Bureaus. The South Bureau has the highest median number of crimes, as well as the largest variability, while the Central, Valley, and West bureaus have relatively similar distributions with lower crime counts. The outliers suggest some years had significantly lower crime counts than others. This visualization helps us understand how crime is distributed across different regions, with the South experiencing the highest fluctuation and overall crime levels.

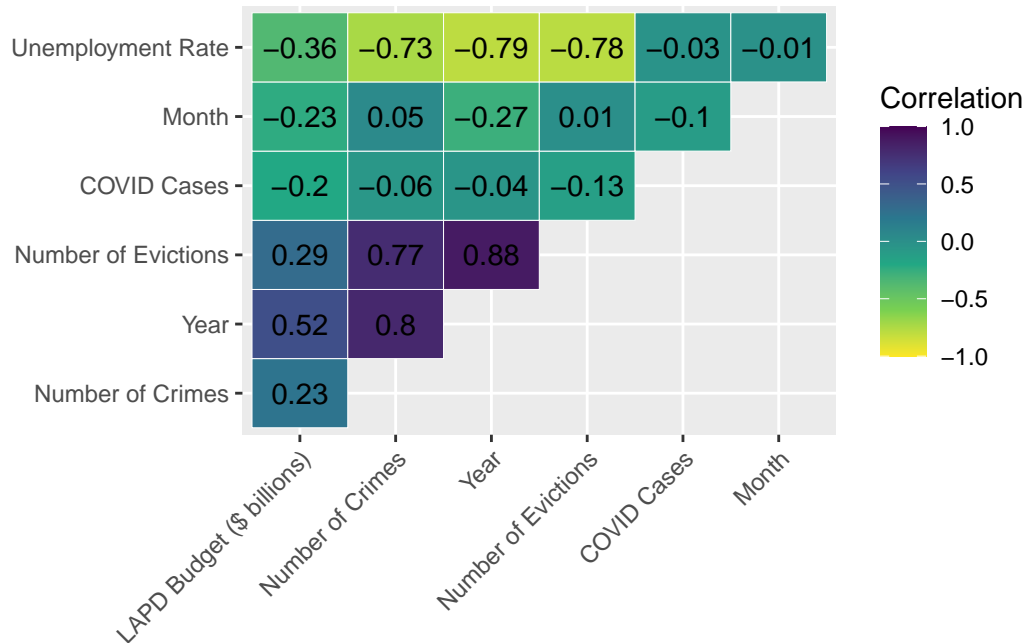


Figure 9: Strength of Correlations Between the Number of Crimes and Different Law Enforcement and Socioeconomic Factors

Figure 9 shows the correlations between different variables that could affect the number of crimes committed. We see that the most significant correlations for the number of crimes are the unemployment rate, year, and number of evictions. Years is positively correlated with number of crimes, meaning that as time passed, the number of crimes increased. Similarly, as the number of evictions increases, so does the number of crimes. Interestingly, as the unemployment rate increases, the number of crimes decreases, which is the opposite effect of what was expected (one would anticipate that higher unemployment would result in more crime). Studies have shown that crime often increases during periods of low unemployment and that employed people commit many crimes (Tarling 1982). The LAPD budget interestingly had a weak-strength positive correlation with number of crimes.



Figure 10: Homicide Victims by Age and Gender in Los Angeles 2010-Present

The jitter plot in Figure 10 shows us both the frequencies and the demographics of homicide victims in Los Angeles from 2010 to present. Based on the density of the points, we see that most homicide victims in the last 15 years have been men between the ages of around 15 to 65. Additionally, we see that there are not many victims who are toddlers and younger children, but there is a good number of babies who have been killed. This is an intricacy in our data that might be interesting to look into further, particularly into the circumstances of those deaths and potential correlations between reports of child abuse and/or domestic violence and infanticide.

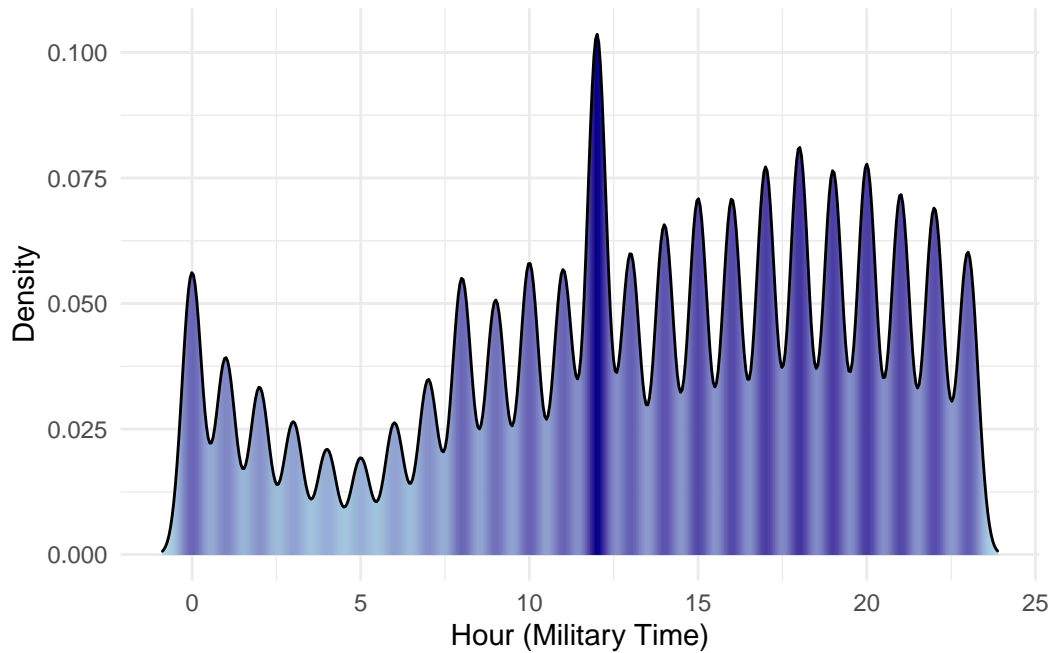


Figure 11: Frequency of Crimes in Los Angeles Throughout the Day

The density plot in Figure 11 shows the frequency of crimes depending on the hour (in military time) that they occurred. Based on the plot, we see that fewer crimes occur early in the morning (with the lowest at 5 AM). The data peaks at noon, meaning the most crimes occur in that hour of the day. Crimes are more frequent after that, until the early morning. The second most common crime occurrence is 6 PM, or 18 hours.

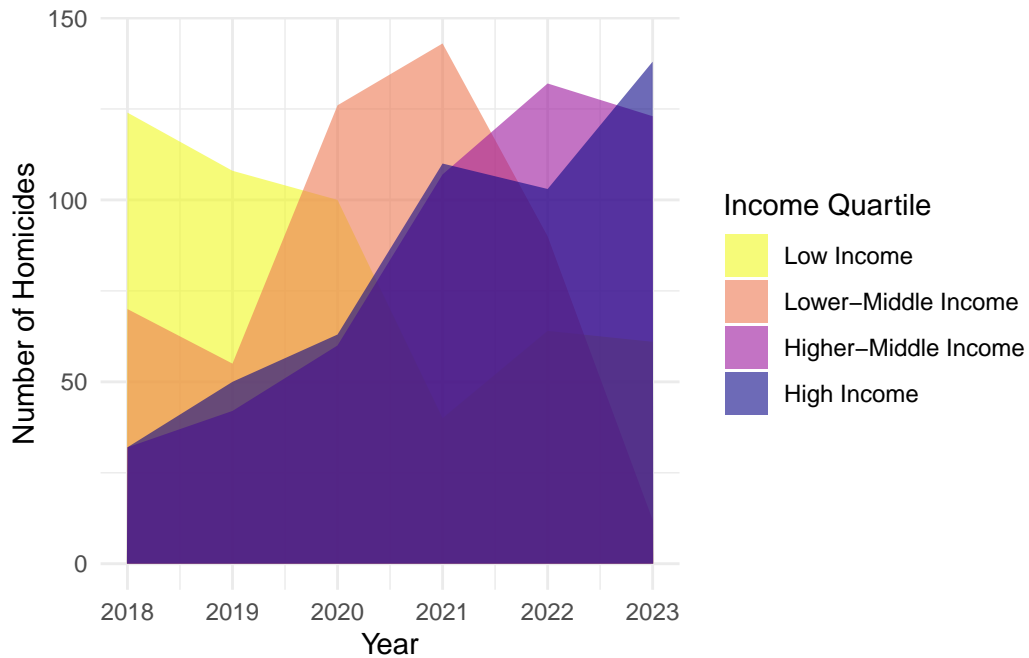


Figure 12: Time series analyzing homicide rate trends over time by median income quartiles

Figure 12 shows that homicide rates were low pre-pandemic and had a sharp increase since the pandemic,

except in areas of low income, where homicide rates were high before the pandemic. In lower income areas, the rates of homicide have decreased significantly since the end of the pandemic. On the other hand, areas of higher-middle and high income have seen large increases in homicide in the six years shown.

3 Modeling

To examine the relationship between the number of homicides and various socioeconomic and enforcement factors, we will use a variety of models to see if certain factors are more influential in causing increases or decreases in homicide rates.

For the purposes of this analysis, homicide rate is quantified as the annual number of homicides in a particular entity, whether that is ZIP Code Tabulation Area (ZCTA) or Census Tract. Additionally, we will examine the influence of general geographic location through the latitude and longitude where the homicide was committed.

3.1 Regression to Examine Weekly Crime Rates

$$\text{Crimes}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Index}_i + \beta_2 \text{CrimesLag}_i + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

Table 1: Linear Regression Model Results Estimating Crimes Per Week			
Predictors	Estimates	CI	p
(Intercept)	130.85	37.41 – 224.29	0.006
Index	-0.05	-0.12 – 0.02	0.149
CrimesLag	0.97	0.95 – 0.99	<0.001
Observations	775		
R ² / R ² adjusted	0.907 / 0.907		

The lagged crime coefficient (0.81949) suggests that a high crime week is often followed by another high crime week. Since the trend term is not significant, there is no clear drift in weekly crime over time.

3.2 Regression Between Median Income and Crimes per Zip Code

$$\text{HomicideCount}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{cali_median_income}_i + \epsilon_i \quad (2)$$

Table 2: Linear Regression Model Results Estimating Crimes Based on Median Income			
Predictors	Estimates	CI	p
Intercept	8.10	7.12 – 9.08	<0.001
Median Income	-0.00	-0.00 – -0.00	<0.001
Observations	467		
R ² / R ² adjusted	0.129 / 0.128		

Based on the p-value, we observe that median income is not significant at a 0.05 level, meaning it does not significantly decrease the amount of crimes committed. The \hat{r}^2 value additionally tells us that the income only explains a small portion of the variation in the number of crimes. As stated with the scatterplot, a larger sample and considering other factors might yield different results.

3.3 Negative Binomial for Census Block

$$\text{HomicideCount}_i = \beta_0 + \sum_{j=1}^k \beta_j \text{Factor}_j + \epsilon_i \quad (3)$$

Table 3: Annual Homicide Count by Census Block			
Predictors	Incidence Rate Ratios	CI	p
(Intercept)	120.27	104.87 – 138.62	< 0.001
Census Block 2	0.89	0.73 – 1.08	0.230
Census Block 3	0.39	0.32 – 0.48	< 0.001
Census Block 4	0.11	0.09 – 0.14	< 0.001
Census Block 5	0.02	0.01 – 0.03	< 0.001
Census Block 6	0.01	0.00 – 0.04	< 0.001
Observations	77		
R ² Nagelkerke	1.000		

3.3.1 Discussion

The results of this model show a significant relationship between Census Block and the homicide rate, except for Census Block 2. Census Block 2 experiences a higher incidence of homicides, but it is not significantly different. The other Census Blocks show a statistically significant decrease in homicide rates. However, the R2 might suggest overfitting.

3.4 Linear Regression Models

Model 1 is defined as:

$$\text{HomicideCount}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{LAT_rounded}_i + \beta_2 \text{LON_rounded}_i + \epsilon_i \quad (4)$$

Model 2 is defined as:

$$\text{HomicideCount}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{year}_i + \epsilon_i \quad (5)$$

Model 3 is defined as:

$$\text{HomicideCount}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{LAT_rounded}_i + \beta_2 \text{LON_rounded}_i + \beta_3 \text{year}_i + \epsilon_i \quad (6)$$

Model 4 is defined as:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{HomicideCount}_i = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{LAT_rounded}_i + \beta_2 \text{LON_rounded}_i + \beta_3 \text{year}_i \\ & + \beta_4 (\text{LAT_rounded}_i \times \text{LON_rounded}_i) + \beta_5 (\text{LAT_rounded}_i \times \text{year}_i) \\ & + \beta_6 (\text{LON_rounded}_i \times \text{year}_i) + \beta_7 (\text{LAT_rounded}_i \times \text{LON_rounded}_i \times \text{year}_i) + \epsilon_i \end{aligned} \quad (7)$$

Table 4: Table 4: Geospatial Linear Regression Models Predicting Homicide Count

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
Predictors	Estimates	p	Estimates	p	Estimates	p	Estimates	p
(Intercept)	254.07	< 0.001	-104.25	0.008	142.22	0.010	-62425.36	0.247
Latitude	-1.05	0.001			-1.05	0.001	-1147.08	0.060
Longitude	1.83	< 0.001			1.85	< 0.001	-596.80	0.240

Year		0.05	0.007	0.06	0.003	46.28	0.068
Latitude:Longitude						-7.63	0.056
Latitude:Year						0.12	0.533
Longitude:Year						0.43	0.078
Observations	1237	1237		1237		1237	
R ² / R ² adjusted	0.057 / 0.055	0.006 / 0.005		0.064 / 0.061		0.069 / 0.064	

Table 4 shows the results of four different linear regression models that were run using homicide counts by year and by latitude and longitude. Longitude and latitude were rounded to two decimal places to summarize the counts but maintain a good level of granularity in the coordinates data. Model 1 looked only at the geospatial aspect of the data and found that both latitude and longitude were significant predictors of homicide rate. As latitude increases, homicide rate decreases, meaning that homicides are more common towards the south and as you move north, homicide counts drop. As longitude increases, the number of homicides increases as well, meaning that homicides are more common to the East.

The second model finds that year is significant as a predictor of homicide rate, and a model looking at both spatial and temporal characteristics also finds year to be significant.

The fourth model, which also considered the interactions between these three features, did not find any significance.

4 Killer Plot Visualization

The killer plot visualizes crime spatially and over time, stylized based on the Hollywood Walk of Fame since that's an iconic part of Los Angeles. The plot shows the average homicides by latitude and longitude, and you can select a different year. You can see that the rates have remained higher in the southeastern areas than the rest of the city, similar to the density map earlier. Still, the rates in the northwestern areas are higher in 2023, relative to the rest of the city, compared to previous years where there was a clear difference.

Walk of Crime

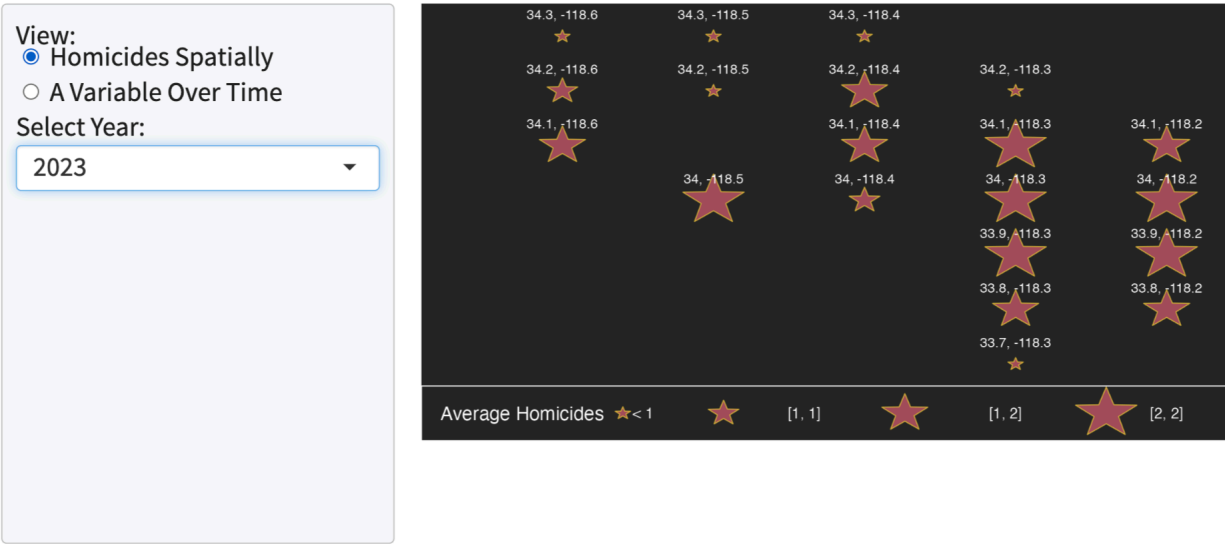


Figure 13: Understand crimes spatially through the killer plot.

You can also view different variables over time. For example, you can select a range of years to view a particular crime over time, such as homicide. You can see that homicide rates have been higher in the last few years. You can also look at the decrease in COVID cases since the pandemic, the variability in the number of evictions over time, the increase in the LAPD budget, and the decrease in the unemployment rate since the pandemic.

Walk of Crime

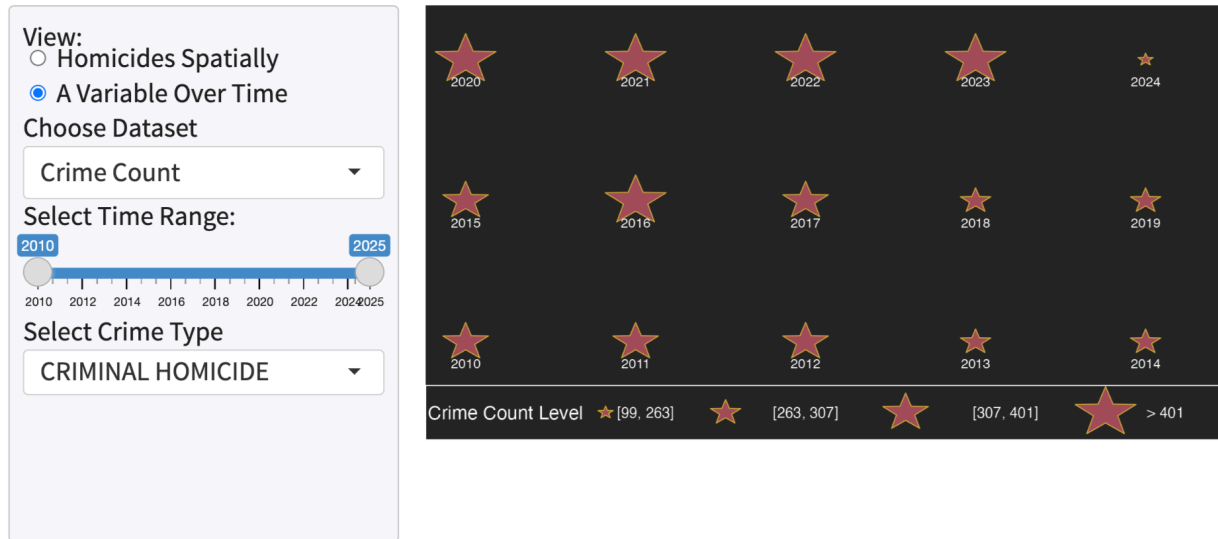


Figure 14: Understand crimes and other variables over time in a timeline-style view.

5 Conclusion

Through data visualization and modeling, we have discerned some interesting spatiotemporal patterns in crimes over the last 15 years. Figure 2, for example, showed that there have been two spikes in crimes since 2010, one in 2016-17 and one a few weeks after March 2020. The increase in 2016-17 is explained by difficulties managing gang activities and a growing homeless population in Los Angeles (Chang and Lau 2016). The second increase can likely be attributed to the pandemic factors described in the Thurgood Marshall Institute report.

Correlations found that evictions were strongly correlated with the number of crimes, suggesting that as the number of evictions increased, crimes also increased. This aligns with the finding of the report about homicides, that “social and economic instability and heightened inequalities generated by the COVID-19 pandemic” explains the increase in homicides. While evictions in Los Angeles in mid-2020 were lower due to renter protections, by November 2020 the levels once again increased, and reached pre-pandemic levels by 2022 (“COVID-19 Renter Protections – LAHD,” n.d.). However, there was no evidence that COVID-19 case levels had a strong relationship, and unemployment rate had a strong negative relationship with crime rate, suggesting that as unemployment decreases, the number of crimes increases. This, while surprising, aligns with past findings in the literature that employed people commit more crimes.

The Thurgood Marshall Institute report also noted that increased police funding was not effective in reducing homicide rates. The increase in LAPD funding over the years was a moderately strong positive relationship between time and funding, while crime had a strong positive relationship over time. Additionally, a linear model found year to be a significant predictor of homicides, suggesting that over time, the number of homicides has increased. This, combined with the weak correlation between crime and LAPD budget, supports this assertion and suggests that increasing police funding might not be an effective strategy.

Finally, we found evidence of spatial trends in crime and homicide rates. Table 4 shows that, even when controlling for year, latitude and longitude are significant predictors of homicide rate. Namely, homicides are more common in the south and eastern parts of Los Angeles.

In conclusion, we found that crimes have increased through the pandemic years, like the findings in the Thurgood Marshall Institute report. We found that in contrast to our initial hypothesis, socioeconomic conditions have not necessarily improved in LA. Namely, evictions have returned and surpassed pre-pandemic levels and income inequality appears to be worse than before as more of LA becomes wealthier but certain neighborhoods remain below the poverty line. Higher homicide counts occur in areas with lower income, though we’ve found evidence that this pattern is changing as homicides have decreased in lower income areas and increased in higher income areas in the past few years. Ultimately, in order to reduce homicide and crime levels, the City of Los Angeles must do more to combat socioeconomic factors that are associated with increases in crimes, like housing insecurity.

References

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Data Sources

Primary Datasets

- Crime Data From 2010-2019: https://data.lacity.org/Public-Safety/Crime-Data-from-2010-to-2019/63jg-8b9z/about_data
Crime Data From 2020-Present: <https://catalog.data.gov/dataset/crime-data-from-2020-to-present>

Secondary Datasets

- Los Angeles County Eviction Data: <https://calmatters.org/housing/homelessness/2023/11/california-evictions-post-pandemic/>
City of Los Angeles Eviction Data: <https://housing.lacity.gov/residents/renters/eviction-notices-filed>
Median Income Data: <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2023.S1903?q=income>