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Critique of “[As Murders Spiked, Police Solved About Half in 2020](https://www.themarshallproject.org/2022/01/12/as-murders-spiked-police-solved-about-half-in-2020)” by The Marshall Project

In this January story by The Marshall Project, a nonprofit criminal justice news publication, reporters detail how in 2020, police nationwide solved murders at a historic low rate, even as the number of murders increased. The report hinges on an FBI unit of measurement called “clearance rate” which is the rate at which killings are solved. Through data analysis, the reporters found that even though, “police across the nation solved more murders – in absolute numbers – than in any year since 1997” the clearance rate, “declined to a little below 50%.”

One thing I like about this story is the simple clarity of the data visualizations throughout the article. The first graphs shown in the article represent the rate of new murders, cleared murders, and the murder clearance rate. I appreciate that the takeaway of each graph is clear and that all three graphs use identical time range as their x-axis. This means that the reader is required to spend little time deciphering the data and the flow of the story continues at a steady rate.

Chart, histogram

Description automatically generated

I also appreciate that these graphs add to the story without the reporters having to spend extra words explaining the historical context of both the “new murder” rate and the rate of “cleared murders.” A reader can quickly glean that, while new murders were high in 2020, they were even higher in the 1980s and 1990s. Similarly, with cleared murders, while the number of clearances is relatively low compared to 1980s and 1990s, the rate at which murders are cleared as stayed relatively stagnant since 2000s.

Another thing I like about this story is the abundance of data offered. While the article is focused on the spike and clearance rate of murders in 2020, the reporters offer a look into the clearance rate for a variety of violent crimes and property crimes, including assault, robbery, theft, and arson. Providing this data for other types of crimes provides context about what the standard behavior is for solving crimes and shows that clearance rates are low across the board, not just for murder cases. (See below.)

Chart, line chart

Description automatically generated

Finally, I really liked the inclusion of an interactive, searchable database at the bottom of the article (see below). Readers can plug in their own state or a state of interest and immediately access information about police departments within that state and their clearance rate. This interactive component of the story made the entire report feel like a conclusive lesson, where the reader starts by learning the concepts, seeing examples of those concepts in action, and then finally taking those concepts into practice and investigating how they apply in the reader’s life. I also imagine compiling this database and creating a user-friendly embedded search form was a time-intensive task, and I appreciate that the Marshall Project took that extra step to empower the reader.

Table

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One area of improvement I would suggest for this story is to increase interactivity throughout the article. It would be helpful for the reader to have the ability to hover over the “new murder,” “cleared murders” and “murder clearance rate” graphs and be able to see exactly what the rate of each has been since 1980. As is, the graphs are helpful for seeing the big picture and essentially comparing the 2020 rate to previous rates based on visual size comparison alone, rather than comparing exact numbers to numbers.

Another criticism I have of the article is about the meaning of the concept at the center of the article: clearance rate. In the fourth paragraph of the story, the reporters provide a quasi-disclaimer about the term, saying “the FBI uses blunt math to calculate a clearance rate, dividing the number of crimes that were cleared – no matter which year the crime occurred – by the number of new crimes in the calendar year” which means “a department’s rate in any given year could exceed 100%” and “leaves the numbers prone to statistical ‘noise’.” The reporters go one to say that the clearance rate data can still “be useful for examining trends over the long term.”

This gentle disclaimer raised a tiny red flag in my mind and made me hesitate before trusting the report entirely because I believe readers should be skeptical of “statistical noise” in data stories. Additionally, throughout the article, the reporters describe various ways that police departments inflate their clearance rate and explain how unethical practices in police departments prior to 2000 may have caused higher clearance rates. All of this gave me pause while reading the article and made me wonder if “clearance rate” as a unit of measurement is even something The Marshall Project should be reporting on if it’s subject to “statistical noise” and the practices around it have changed significantly over the years studied.