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TWENTY
YEARS

CRIME TRENDS:1990-2016

Matthew Friedman, Ames C. Grawert, and James Cullen

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines crime trends at the national and city level during the last quarter century.¹ It covers the years 1990 through 2016, as crime rates peaked in 1991. It analyzes data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and from police departments from the nation's 30 largest cities. Data for 2016 are estimated, as full year data was not available at the time of publication.

This report concludes that although there are some troubling increases in crime in specific cities, there is no evidence of a national crime wave. Key findings:^{*}

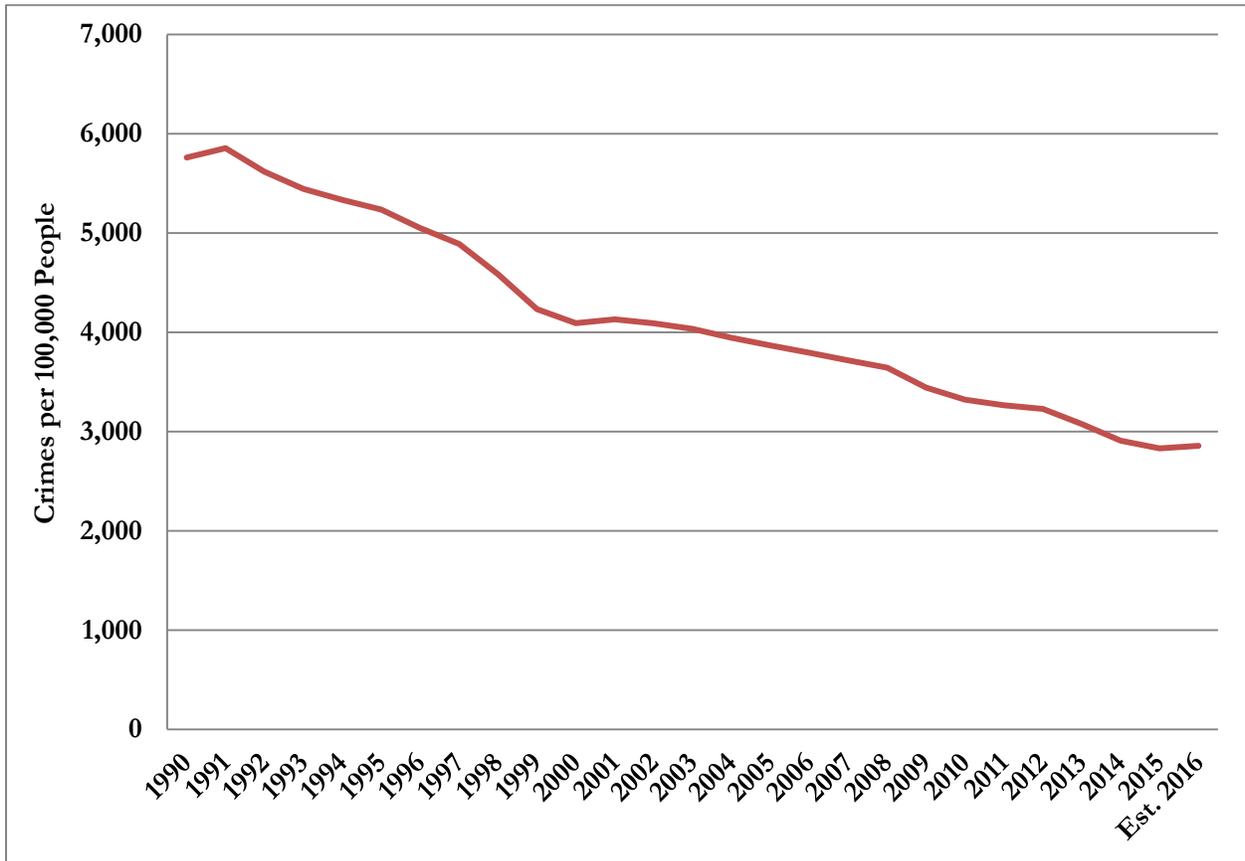
- **Overall Trends:** Crime has dropped precipitously in the last quarter-century. While crime may fall in some years and rise in others, annual variations are not indicative of long-term trends. While murder rates have increased in some cities, this report finds no evidence that the hard-won public safety gains of the last two and a half decades are being reversed.
- **Overall Crime Rate:** The national crime rate peaked in 1991 at 5,856 crimes per 100,000 people, and has generally been declining ever since. In 2015, crime fell for the 14th year in a row. Estimates based on preliminary data for 2016 indicate that the overall crime rate will remain stable at 2,857 offenses per 100,000, rising less than 1 percent from 2015. Today's crime rate is less than half of what it was in 1991.
- **Violent Crime:** The violent crime rate also peaked in 1991 at 716 violent crimes per 100,000, and now stands at 366, about half that rate. However, the violent crime rate, like rates of murder and overall crime, has risen and fallen during this time. For example, violent crime registered small increases in 2005 and 2006, and then resumed its downward trend. In 2015, violent crime increased by 2.9 percent nationally and by 2 percent in the nation's 30 largest cities. Preliminary data for 2016 also show a greater increase in the national violent crime rate, up 6.3 percent, and a smaller jump in the 30 largest cities, 2.4 percent. Crime is often driven by local factors, so rates in cities may differ from national averages.
- **Murder:** From 1991 to 2016, the murder rate fell by roughly half, from 9.8 killings per 100,000 to 5.3. The murder rate rose last year by an estimated 7.8 percent. With violence at historic lows, modest increases in the murder rate may appear large in percentage terms. Similarly, murder rates in the 30 largest cities increased by 13.2 percent in 2015 and an estimated 14 percent in 2016. These increases were highly concentrated. More than half of the 2015 urban increase (51.8 percent) was caused by just three cities, Baltimore, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. And Chicago alone was responsible for 43.7 percent of the rise in urban murders in 2016. It is important to remember the relatively small base from which the percentage increases are calculated.
- **City-Level Analysis:** Appendix A provides detail on crime in each of the nation's 30 largest cities. The data demonstrate that crime rates and trends vary widely from city to city. In New York, for example, crime remains at all-time lows. Other cities, such as Washington, D.C., have seen murder rise and then fall recently, yet the rate is still lower than it was a decade ago. However, there is a small group of cities, such as Chicago, where murder remains persistently high, even by historical standards.

^{*} For national crime data from 1990 to 2013, the authors drew on the FBI's UCR Data Tool; for 2014 and 2015, they used the 2015 edition of the FBI's *Crime in the United States*. Where these sources conflicted, the authors chose to rely on *Crime in the United States*, which contains more updated information. See Email from Federal Bureau of

I. CRIME

Figure 1 shows the national crime rate from 1990 to 2016. This graph includes Part I index crimes tracked by the FBI: aggravated assault, murder, and robbery (collectively, “violent crime”); and burglary, larceny, and motor vehicle theft (“property crime”).[†]

Figure 1: Crime Rate in the United States (1990-2016)



Source: FBI Uniform Crime Reports (1990-2015) and Brennan Center Analysis (2016).²

(continued...)

Investigation, Crime Statistics Management Unit, to the authors (Mar. 30, 2016, 01:49 EST) (on file with the authors). Additionally, national murder rates in this report were rounded to the second decimal point for all calculations, to eliminate the distorting effect of rounding. As a result, national rates and comparisons in this report may not appear to match top-line numbers in older FBI publications. Due to the inclusion of more recent data, data in this report may also not exactly match data in previous Brennan Center reports.

[†] Rape is also a Part I index crime; however, the FBI recently changed the definition of this offense, making historical comparisons difficult. For that reason, rape data is not included in this analysis. Additionally, while the FBI does track some data on some drug offenses, they are considered Part II index crimes, for which only arrest data is available. Since arrest data do not accurately indicate the number of crimes committed, drug crimes are also omitted from this analysis.

Key findings:

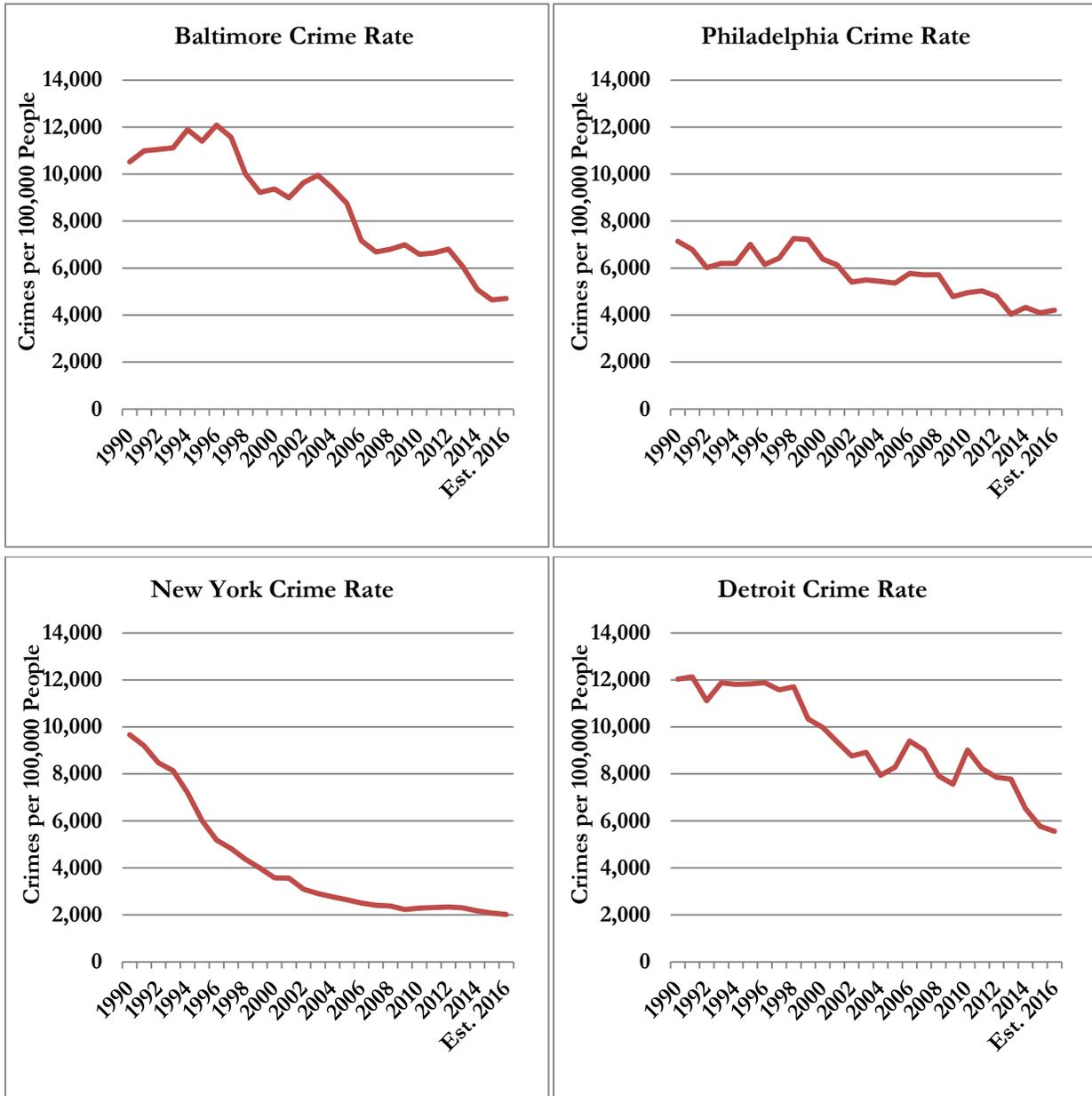
- America's crime rate remains at historic lows after peaking most recently in 1991. (Before that, the highest crime rate recorded since 1960 was 1980, when crime was at about the same level as 1991.) In the ensuing 25 years, crime has largely fallen steadily, and now is about half what it once was, declining from 1991's rate of 5,856 crimes per 100,000 to 2016's estimated rate of 2,857.
- While crime peaked nationally in 1991, in the 30 largest cities, the overall crime rate was higher in 1990, at 10,244 crimes per 100,000 people. Since then, the crime rate in these cities has declined by 63.9 percent, reaching 3,702 crimes per 100,000 people in 2016.
- The overall crime rate has fallen for 14 of the last 15 years. The last increase was in 2001, when the overall rate grew by around 1 percent.
- Estimates for 2016 are similar to the last few years, with the overall crime rate remaining stable (an increase of less than 1 percent).
- Even though the long-term trend since 1991 has been downward, there have been some years of increase. Crime can fluctuate up and down in the short term without disrupting long-term trends.

City trends:

Most cities show a trend toward greater safety, though not all cities have seen crime decline evenly or at the same rate, as illustrated by the examples in Figure 2.

- In many cities, the downward trend in crime has been very rapid. In New York, for example, overall crime declined markedly since 1990, despite a brief swell in 2012. Today, the crime rate in New York is actually lower than the national crime rate.
- Crime has declined at different rates across cities. In Philadelphia, crime has moved downward more slowly, and there have been intermittent increases, such as in 1998 and 2006. In Detroit, crime has fallen dramatically since 1991 despite intermittent spikes, in 2006 and 2010. The history of the past 25 years shows that some annual fluctuations are to be expected without disrupting the overall trend.
- Some cities face unique challenges. In Baltimore, crime continued to rise until 1995, and then fell rapidly. Though Baltimore's murder rate has increased (see Section III), its property crime rate has decreased, leaving its general crime rate barely above historic lows.

Figure 2: Crime in Select Cities (1990-2016)

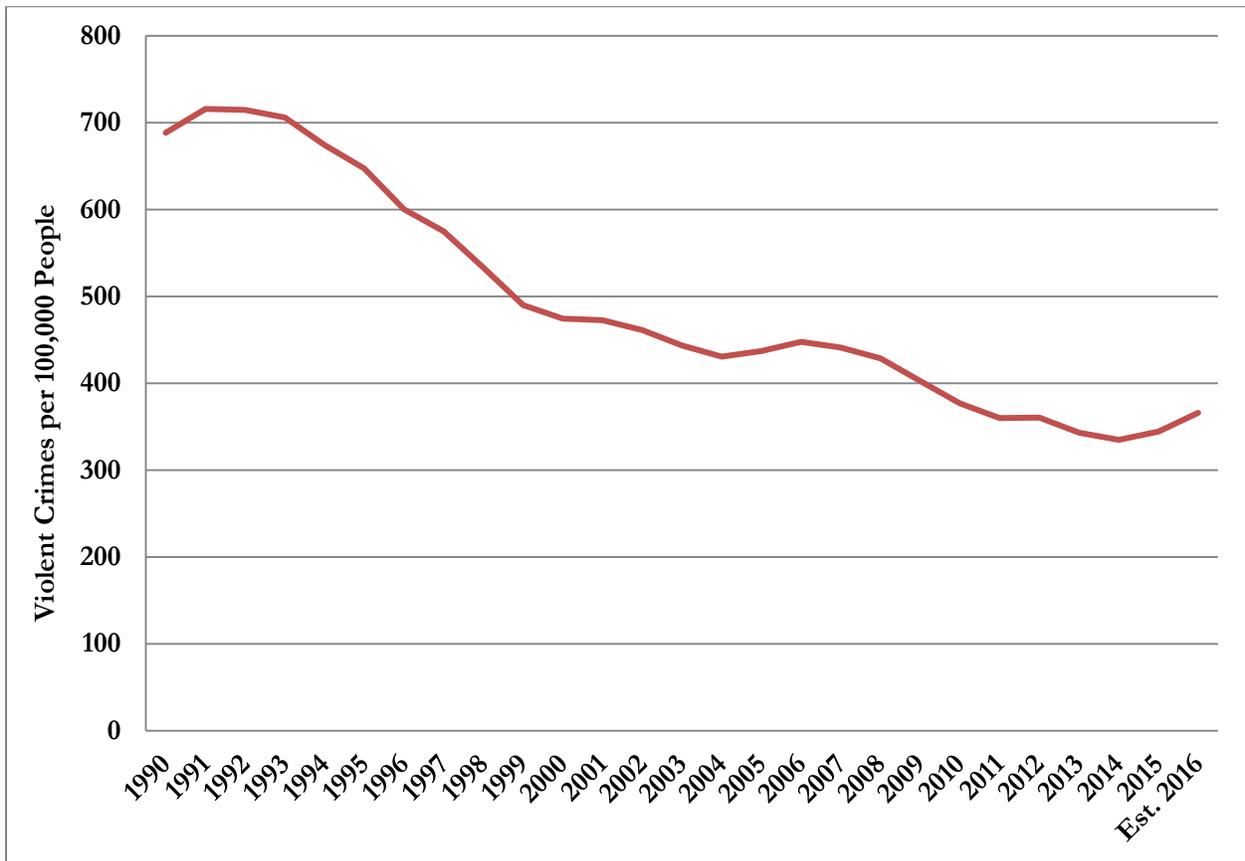


Source: FBI Uniform Crime Reports (1990-2015) and Brennan Center Analysis (2016).³

II. VIOLENT CRIME

Figure 3 shows the national violent crime rate from 1990 to 2016. Violent crime in this report includes three Index I crimes tracked by the FBI: aggravated assault, murder, and robbery.‡

Figure 3: Violent Crime Rate in the United States (1990-2016)



Source: FBI Uniform Crime Reports (1990-2015) and Brennan Center Analysis (2016).⁴

‡ The FBI defines robbery as “taking or attempting to take anything of value from the care, custody, or control of a person or persons by force or threat of force or violence and/or by putting the victim in fear.” Aggravated assault is defined as “an unlawful attack by one person upon another for the purpose of inflicting severe or aggravated bodily injury.” UNITED STATES DEP’T OF JUSTICE, FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, CRIME IN THE UNITED STATES, 2015: VIOLENT CRIME (2016), <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2015/crime-in-the-u.s.-2015/offenses-known-to-law-enforcement/violent-crime>. For additional background on index crimes tracked in this report, see footnote, page 1.

Key findings:

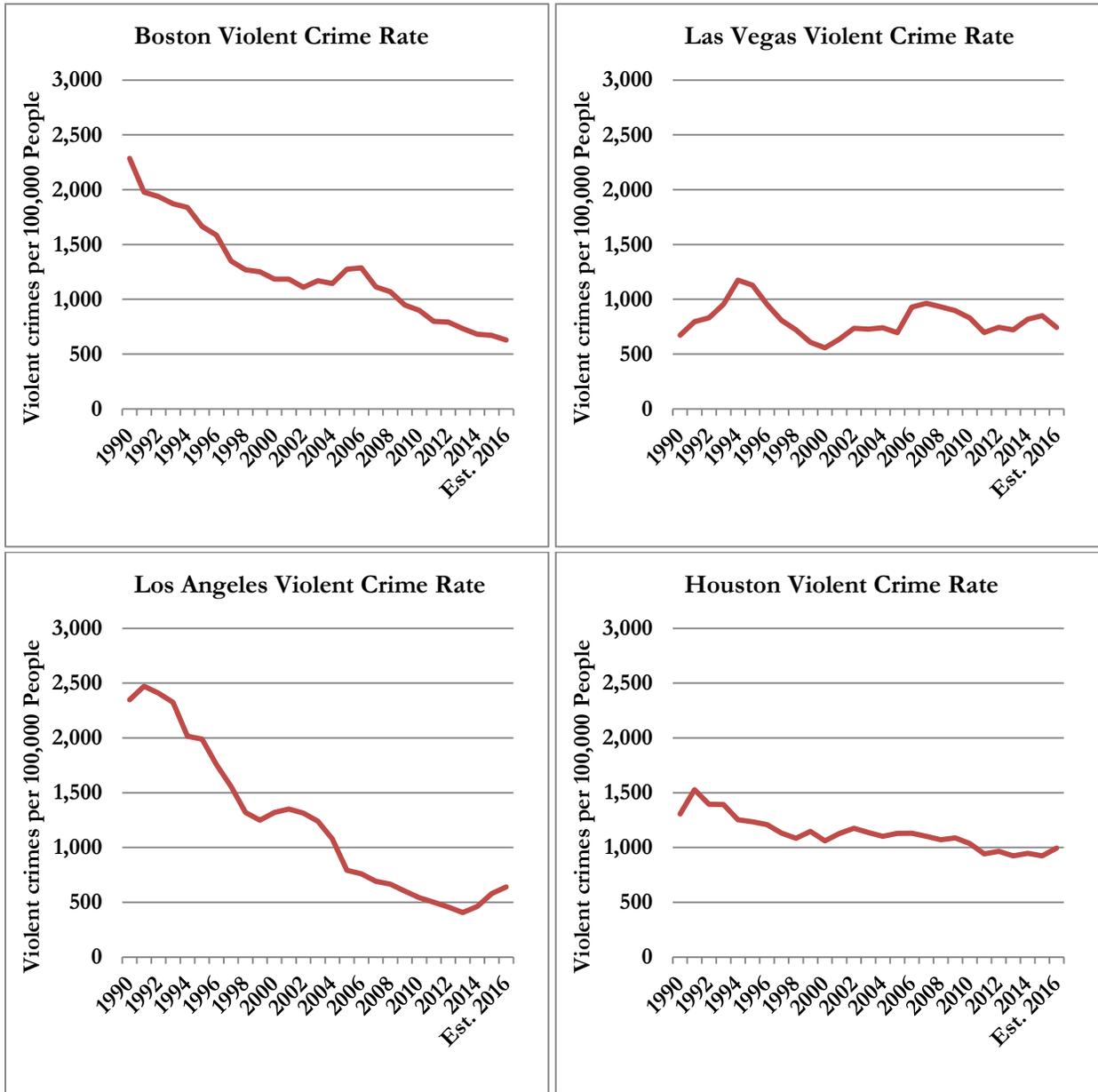
- The national violent crime rate remains near the bottom of a 25-year decline. Violent crime reached its peak in 1991, when the rate was 716 violent crimes per 100,000 people. The estimated violent crime rate for 2016 is 366 per 100,000 — a 49 percent decline from 1991. Today, the national violent crime rate is just below what it was in 1971. Violent crime in the nation's 30 largest cities has declined by 63.6 percent since the 1991 peak.
- Nationally, the violent crime rate increased by 2.9 percent in 2015, and 6.3 percent in 2016. This increase was partially explained by an increase in aggravated assault, which is the most common violent crime tracked by the FBI. Notably, robbery rates actually declined in 2015.
- Violent crime has not declined uninterrupted. Nationally, the rate went up about 1.5 percent between 2004 and 2005, and then another 2.4 percent in 2006. Then, in 2007, it went down 1.5 percent. Similarly, the rate held stable from 2011 to 2012, and then continued its decline in 2013. Annual fluctuations in the overall decline of violent crime are not uncommon.

City trends:

As with overall crime trends, cities have had varied experiences, as shown by Figure 4.

- Several cities have seen violent crime decline significantly, despite isolated increases. In Boston, for example, violent crime was already falling in 1991 and continued to fall until an uptick in 2005 and 2006. Yet, the next year, violent crime resumed its decline in the city.
- Not all cities have seen violent crime decline. In Las Vegas, the violent crime rate has been especially volatile. The rate surged between 1990 and 1994, then steeply declined until 2000. Yet, from 2000 to 2007 crime followed a largely upward trajectory, reaching another peak in 2007. Then crime fell until 2011, and followed another largely upward trajectory until 2015. Yet, the estimated 2016 rate dropped nearly 13 percent from 2015, and now is roughly at the same rate as in 1998.
- Other cities have seen violence rise in recent years: Houston and Los Angeles are two examples. While increases should not be minimized, it is also important to understand how contemporary trends compare to long-term history. Los Angeles is estimated to have a violent crime rate of 640 per 100,000 in 2016, an increase of nearly 60 percent since 2013, when the rate was 406 per 100,000. Yet, 2013 marked the all-time lowest rate in Los Angeles. With the estimated growth in violent crime, the Los Angeles rate in 2016 will be roughly what it was in 2008, and down 74 percent since its peak in 1991. In Houston, too, violent crime rose by 7.8 percent in 2016, but was down 35 percent since its 1991 peak.

Figure 4: Violent Crime in Select Cities (1990-2016)

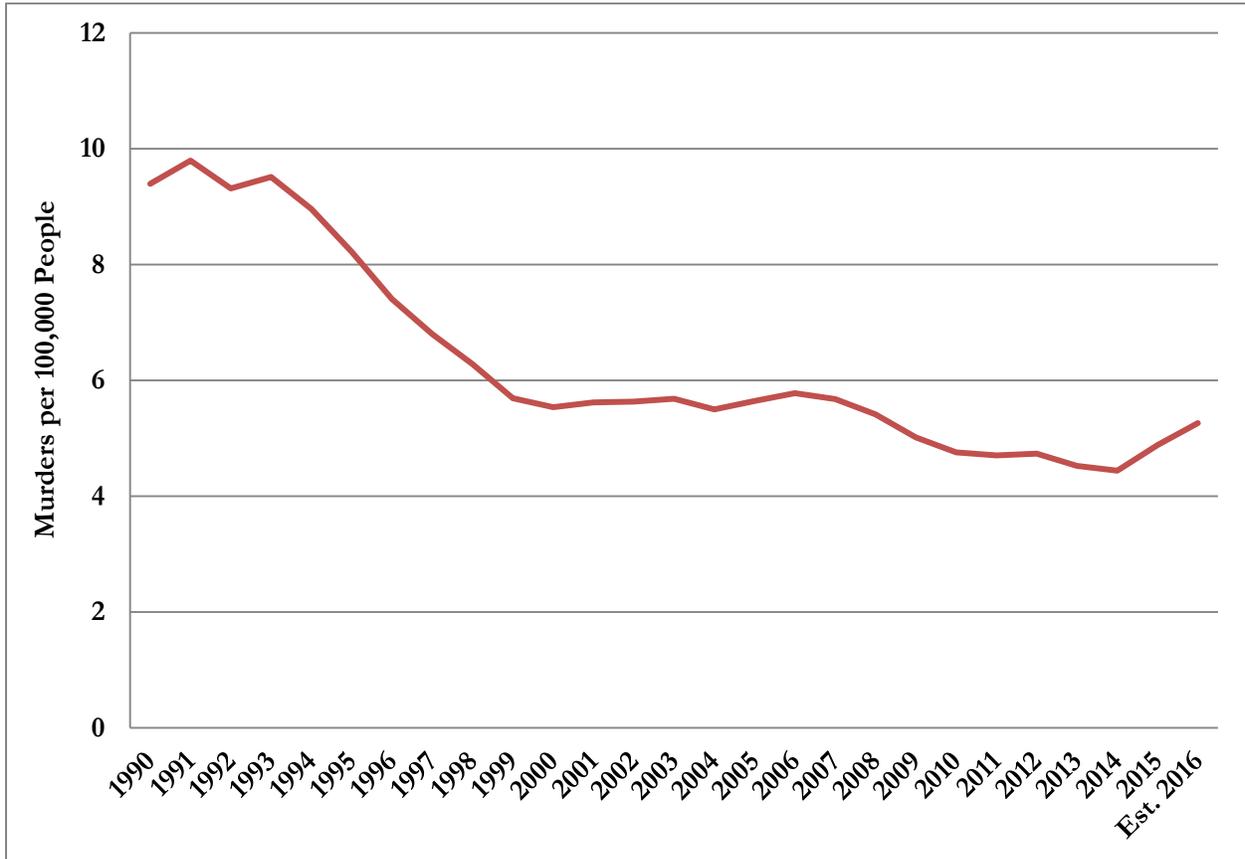


Source: FBI Uniform Crime Reports (1990-2015) and Brennan Center Analysis (2016).⁵

III. MURDER

Figure 5 shows the national murder rate between 1990 and 2016. Murder is defined by the FBI as the “willful (nonnegligent) killing of one human being by another.”[§]

Figure 5: Murder Rate in the United States (1990-2016)



Source: FBI Uniform Crime Reports (1990-2015) and Brennan Center Analysis (2016).⁶

[§] Other types of homicides, such as negligent manslaughter, are not included in this category, because they are not tracked as part of the Uniform Crime Reporting Program. UNITED STATES DEP'T OF JUSTICE, FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, CRIME IN THE UNITED STATES, 2015: MURDER (2016), <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2015/crime-in-the-u.s.-2015/offenses-known-to-law-enforcement/murder>.

Key findings:

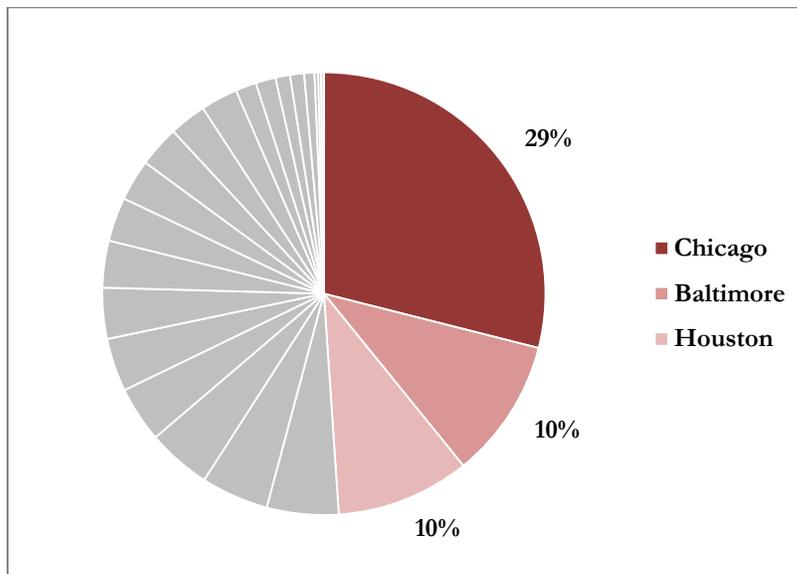
- After peaking in 1991 at 9.8 murders per 100,000, the national murder rate remains near the bottom of a 25-year trend. In 2016, the estimated murder rate was 5.3 per 100,000, a decline of 46 percent. The murder rate in the 30 largest cities has fallen faster than the national rate, declining by more than 60 percent since 1991, from 28.8 to 11.4 killings per 100,000 people.
- The national murder rate rose 10 percent in 2015, to 4.9 per 100,000, and is estimated to increase by around 8 percent in 2016 to 5.3. These increases place the national murder rate around 2008 levels. In the 30 largest cities, murder rates rose by 13.2 percent in 2015, and 14 percent in 2016. Even so, today's "inner cities" are safer than at almost any point in the past.
- Rising murder rates in large cities have also been highly concentrated. In 2015, more than half the increase in murders in the 30 largest cities (51.8 percent) was caused by Baltimore, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. In 2016, killings in Chicago accounted for nearly half (43.7 percent) of the increase. This is indicative of localized problems in some cities, but not evidence of a national crime wave.
- Like overall crime and violent crime, the murder rate has not declined evenly. It fell rapidly from 1991 to 2000, and then did not change much for the next several years. From 2000 to 2007, the rate varied from 5.5 per 100,000 to 5.8. The rate began falling again in 2008, and fell to 4.4 in 2014, the lowest homicide rates since at least 1960.

City trends:

Figure 7, on the next page, shows that while murder rates have declined in major cities, the progress has not always been even.

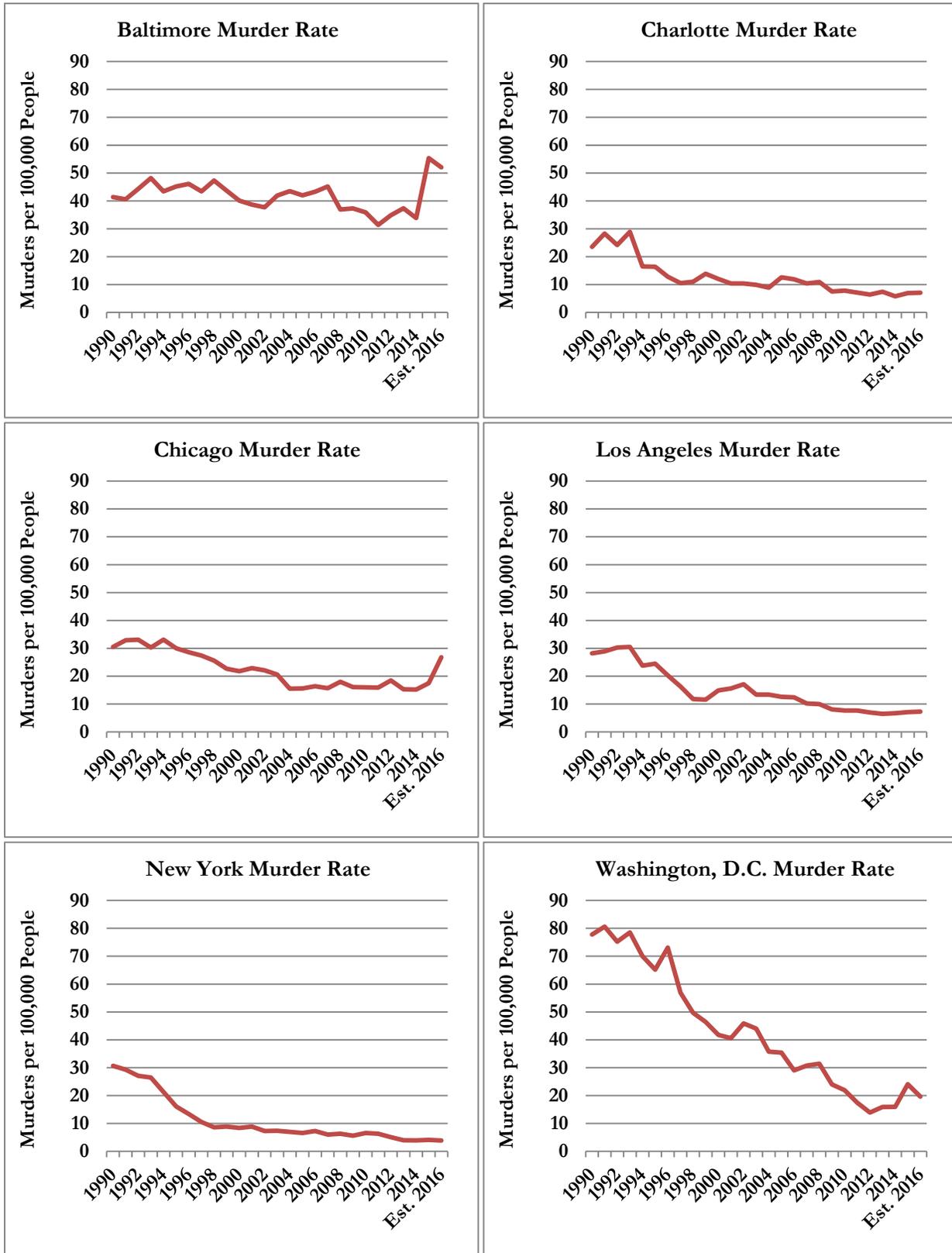
- Even when murder rates have generally declined, they have varied from year to year, increasing at some times and decreasing at others. For example, in Baltimore and Washington, D.C., murder increased significantly in 2015, before declining in 2016. In other cities, such as Charlotte, murder decreased consistently, despite isolated increases. This variation makes it difficult to determine whether increases in any given year represent normal fluctuations, or a reversal of long-term trends.
- In some cities, murder rates have decreased significantly and remain low. New York continues to be one of the safest large cities. Murder rates were already declining in 1990, and have fallen by 87.3 percent since then. Today, New York’s murder rate is well below the national average. In Los Angeles, the murder rate is also down 74.7 percent since 1991, despite a slight increase in 2016. And in Washington, D.C., even with increases in 2015, the murder rate is down 75.7 percent since 1991.
- In 2015 and 2016, several cities — especially Chicago — saw their murder rates increase significantly. The distorting effect of this concentrated increase is illustrated in Figure 6, which breaks down the total increase in murders between 2014 and 2016 by city. As shown below, Baltimore, Chicago, and Houston together account for around half of the increase in murder in major cities between 2014 and 2016.

Figure 6: Breakdown of 2014-2016 Murder Increase, by City



Source: Brennan Center analysis.

Figure 7: Murder in Select Cities (1990-2016)



Source: FBI Uniform Crime Reports (1990-2015) and Brennan Center Analysis (2016).⁷

CONCLUSION

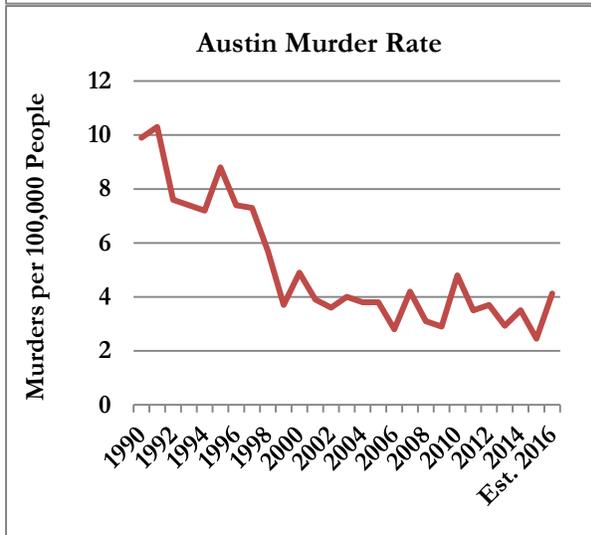
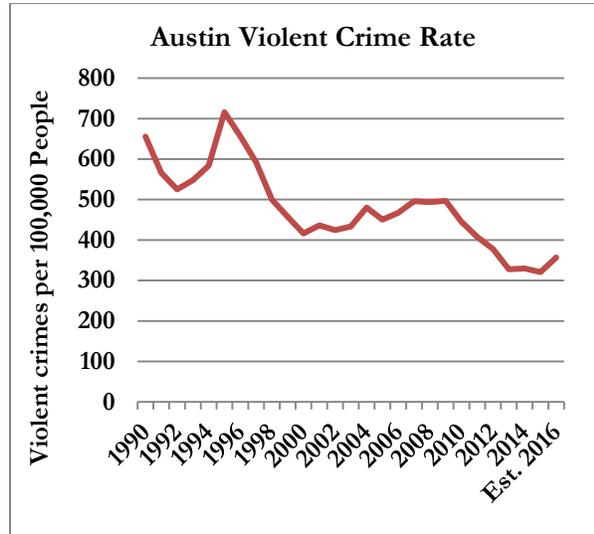
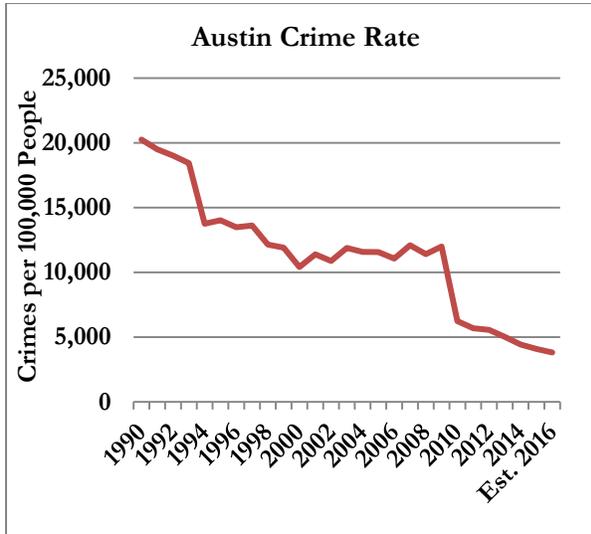
Americans today are safer than they have been at almost any time in the past 25 years. Since 2014, some cities have seen increases in murder, causing increases in national rates of murder and violence. These spikes in urban violence are a serious cause for concern. But history shows these trends do not necessarily signal the start of a new nationwide crime wave, and even with these increases, crime and murder rates remain near historic lows. There is no evidence of a national crime wave.

APPENDIX A: CRIME, VIOLENCE, AND MURDER BY CITY

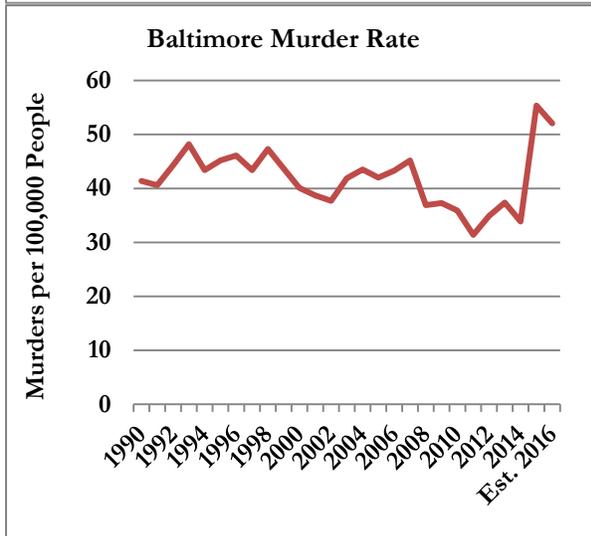
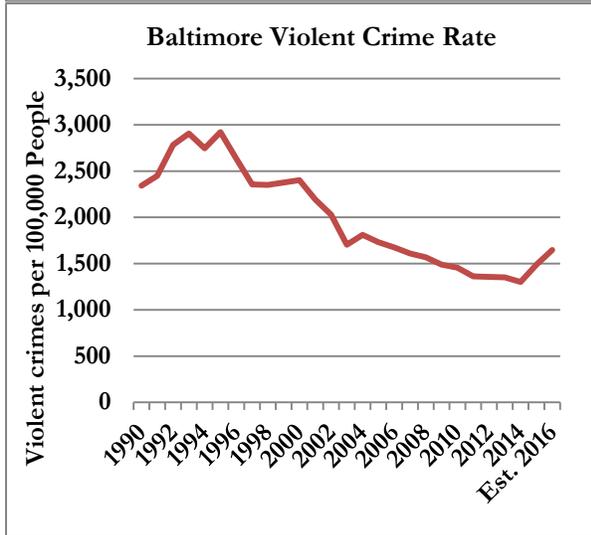
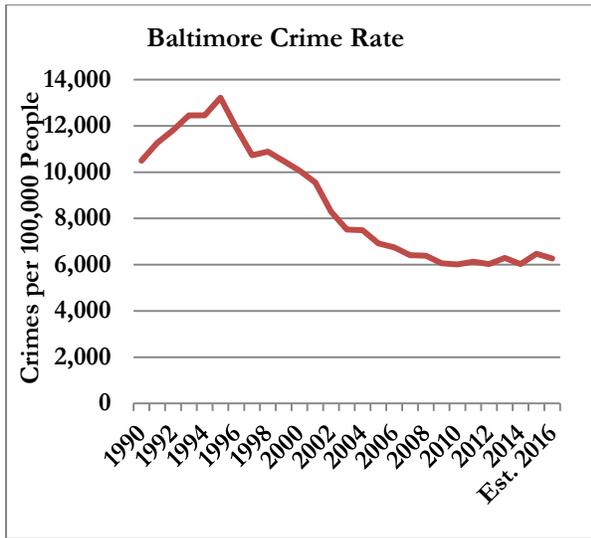
This section collects detailed graphs on crime trends in each of the 30 major cities studied in previous Brennan Center reports. For some cities, graphs stop at 2014 or 2015, as more updated data were not available.

For an explanation of the data underlying these graphs, see the Methodology.

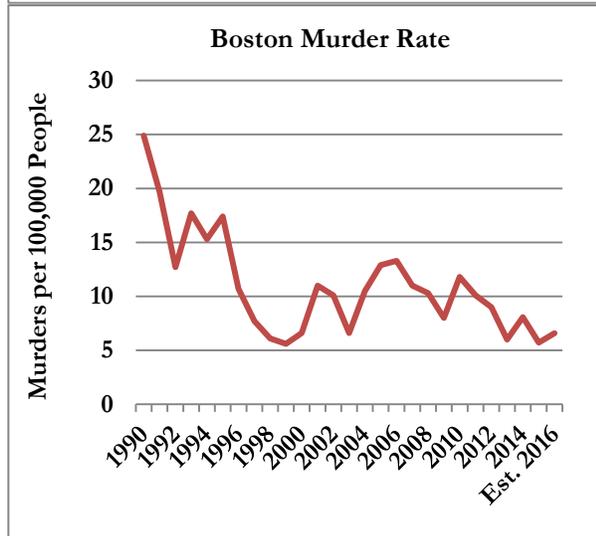
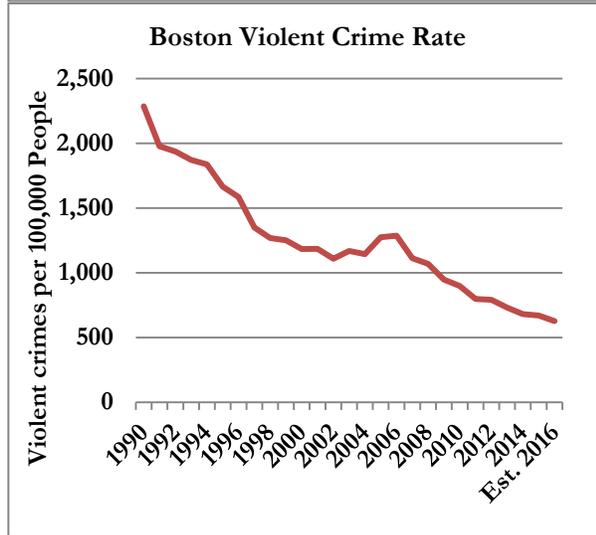
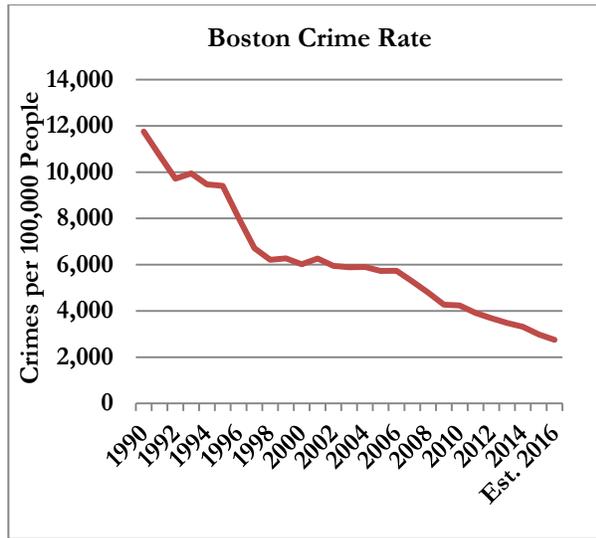
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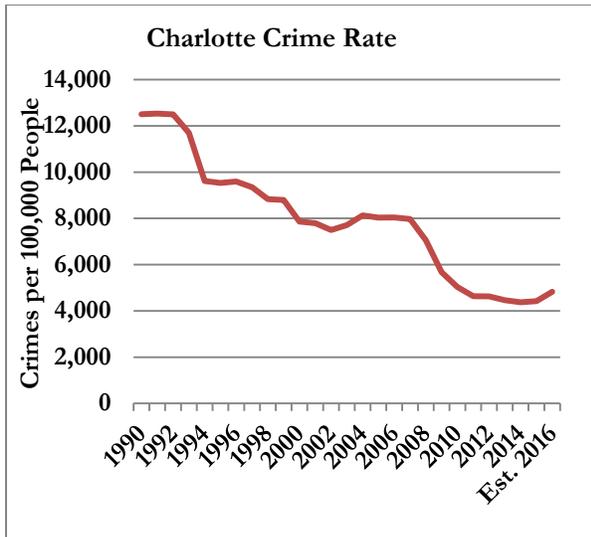
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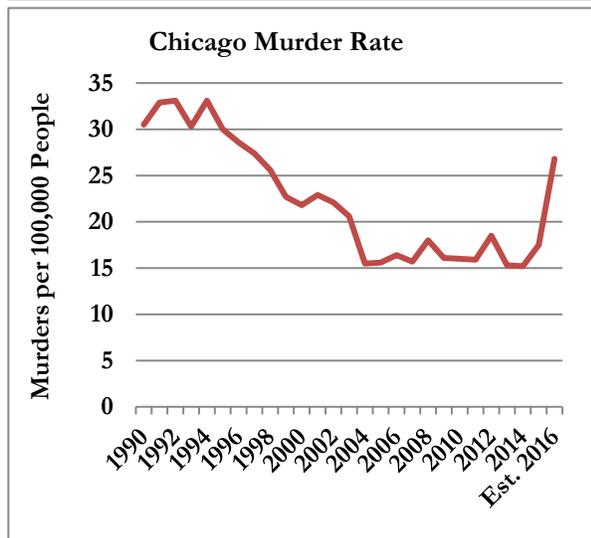
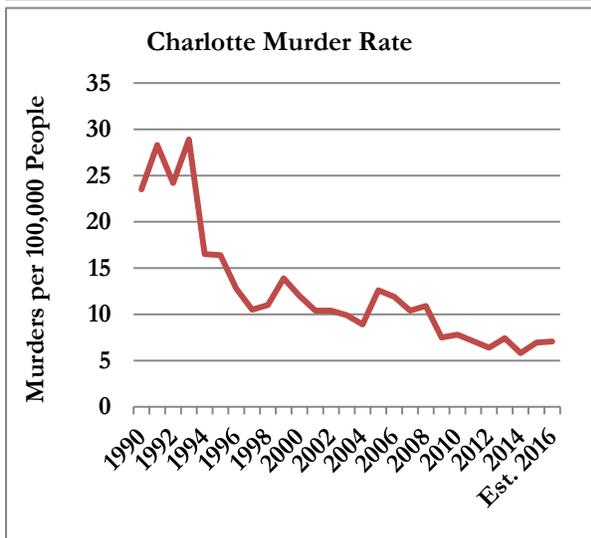
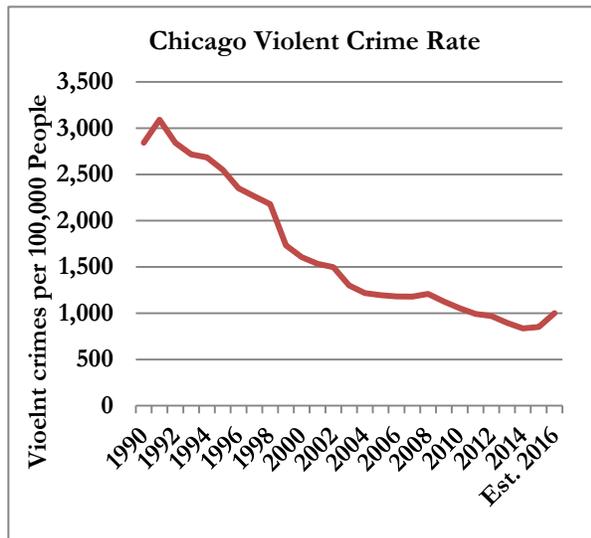
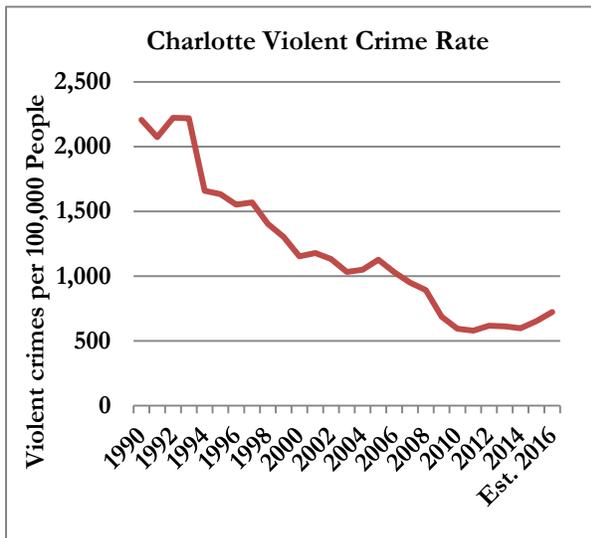
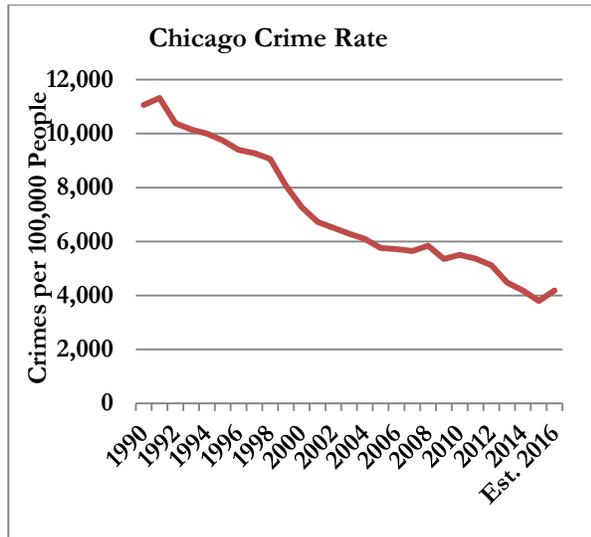
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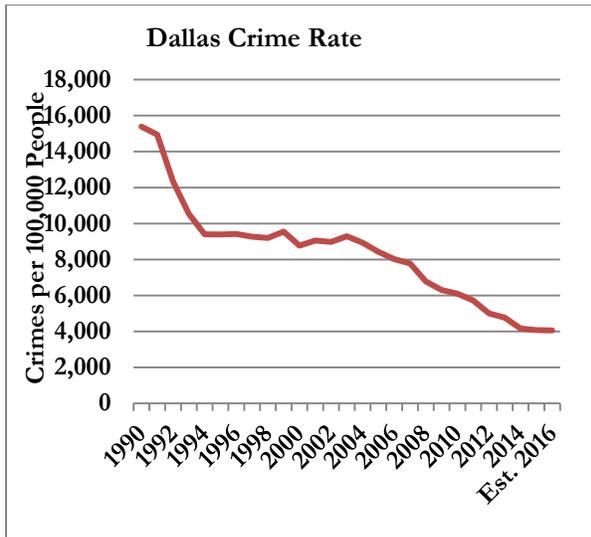
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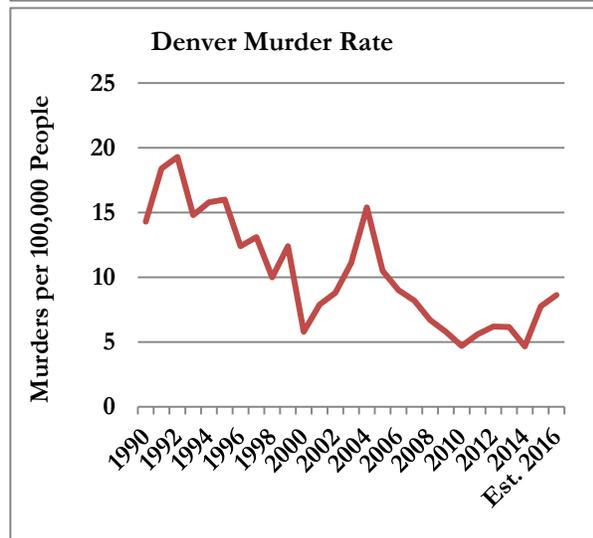
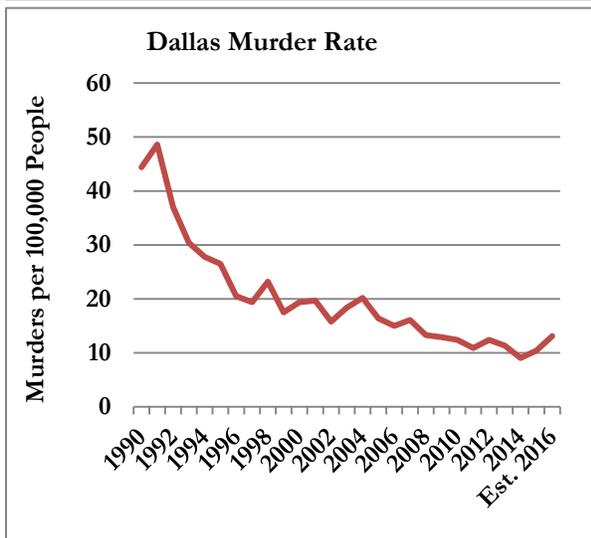
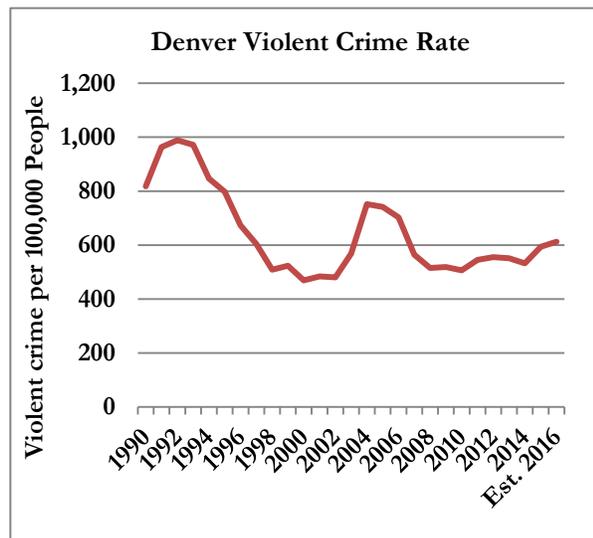
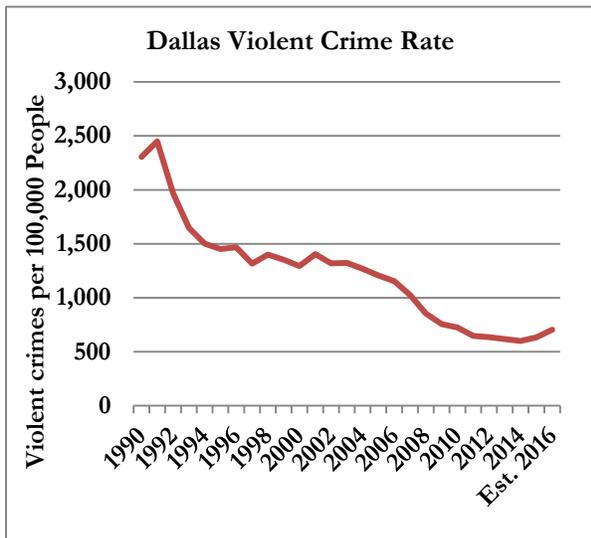
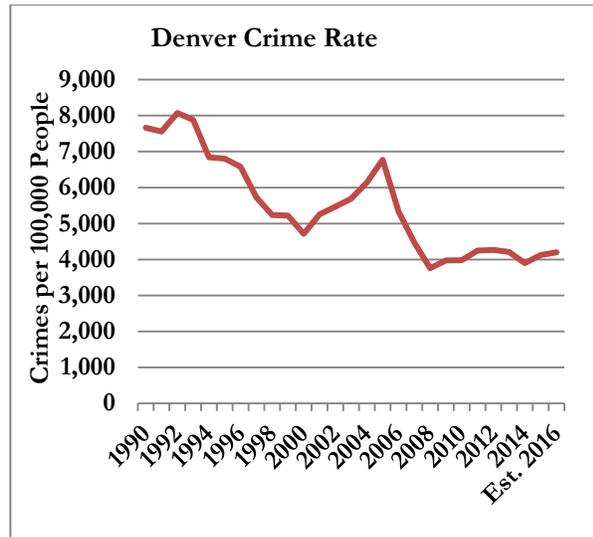
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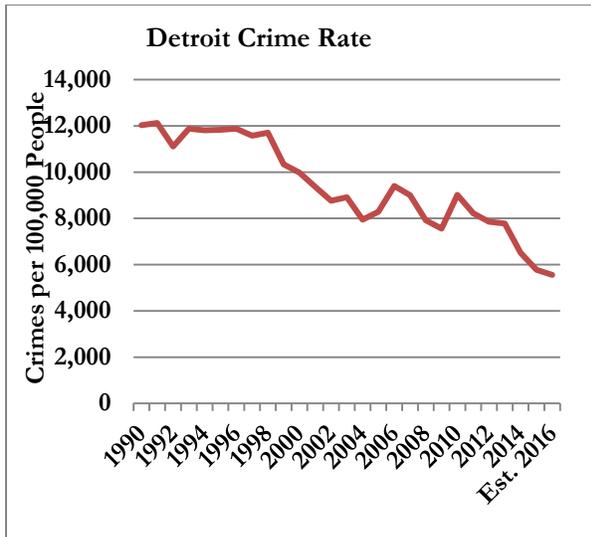
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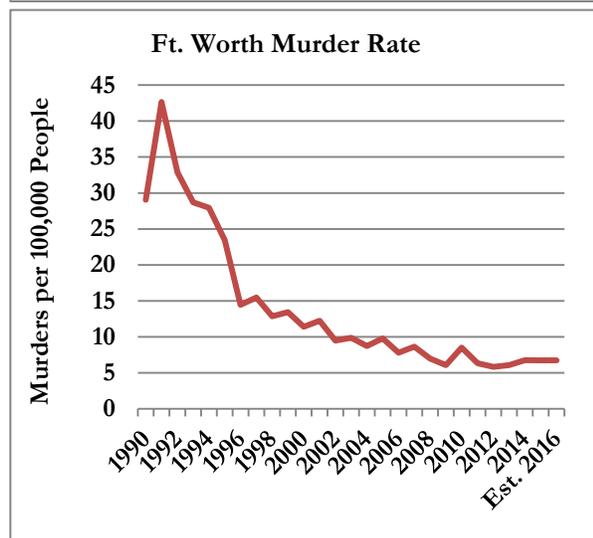
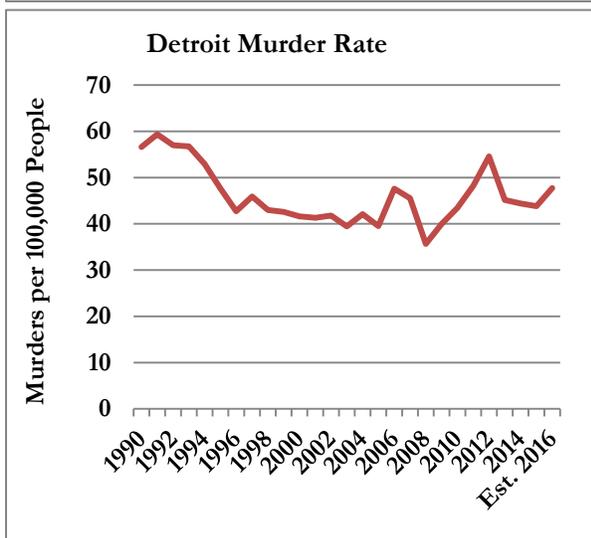
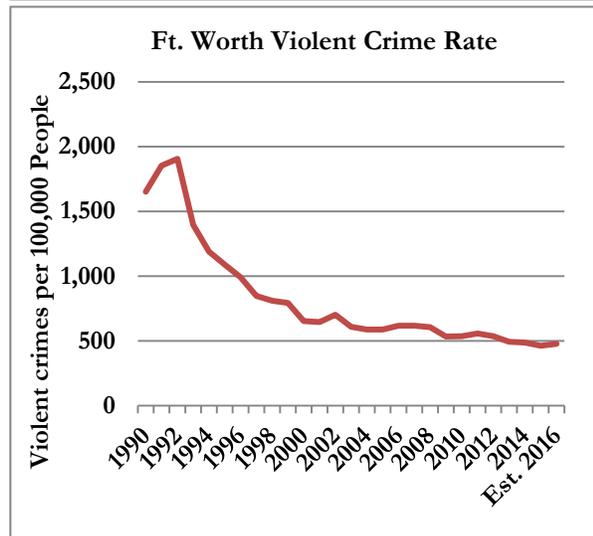
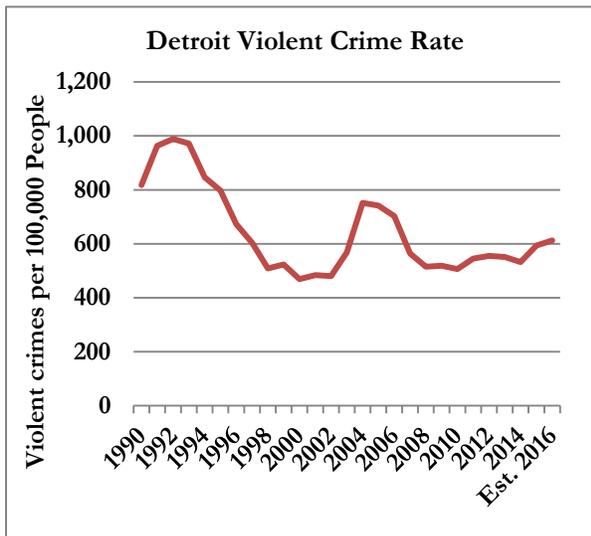
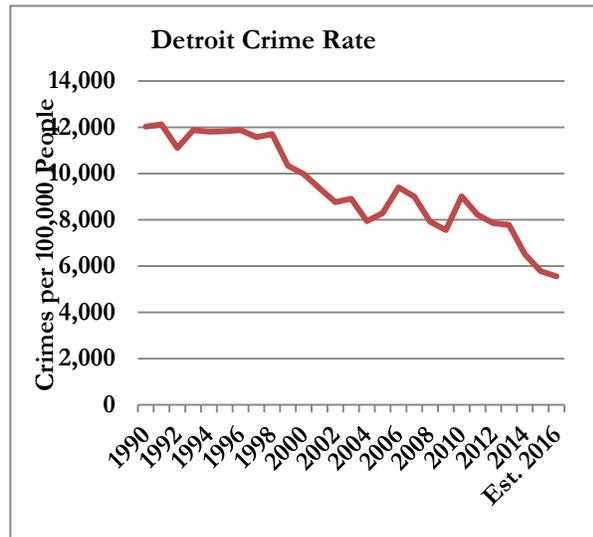
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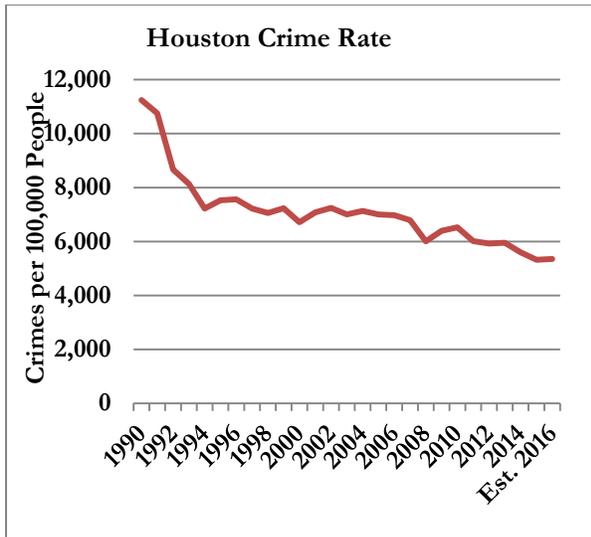
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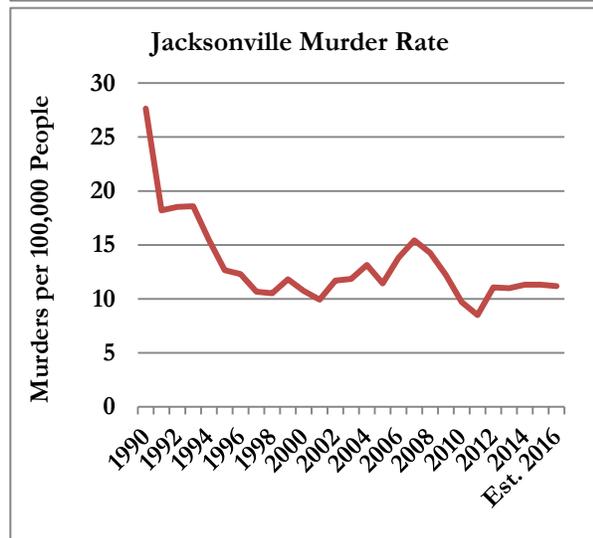
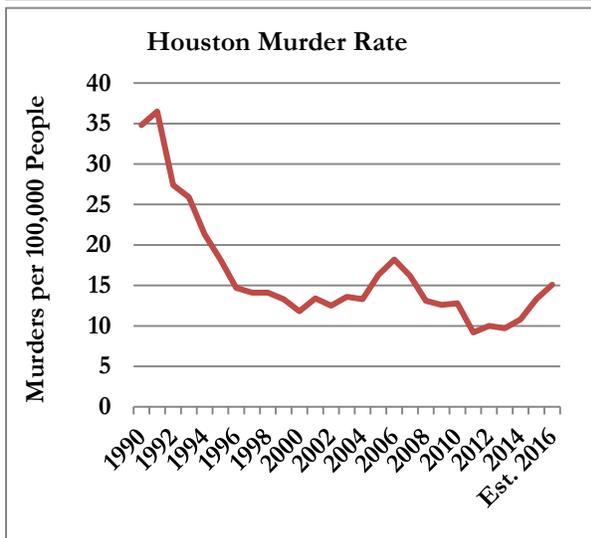
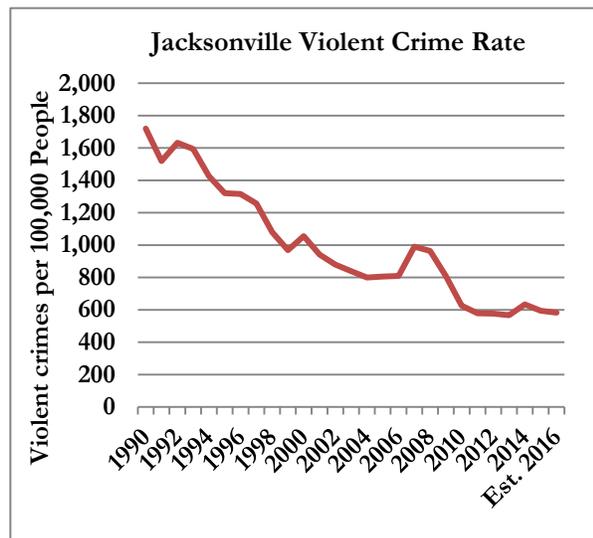
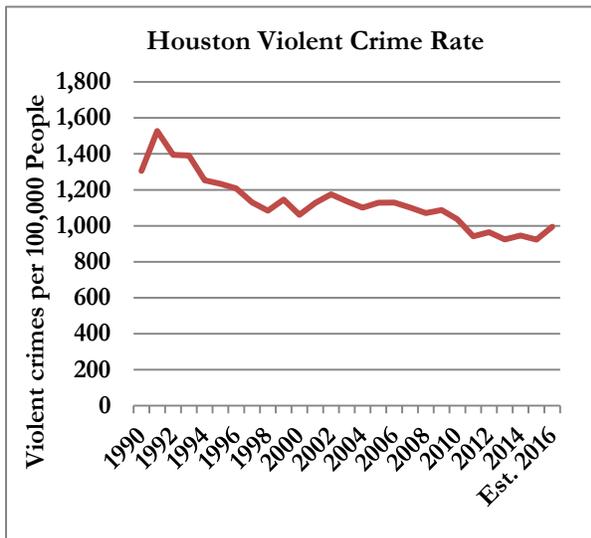
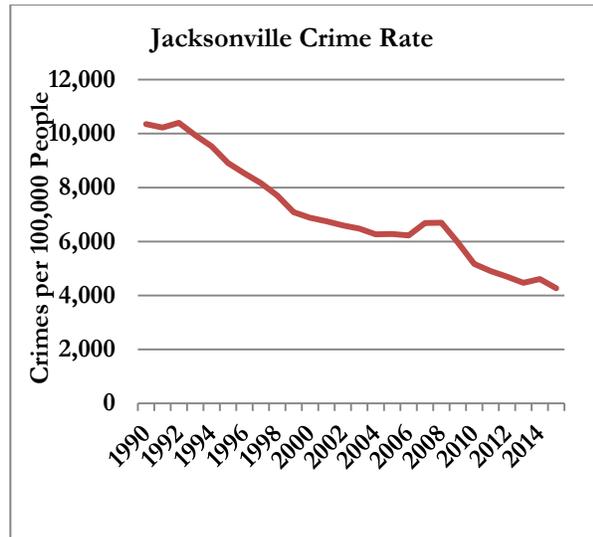
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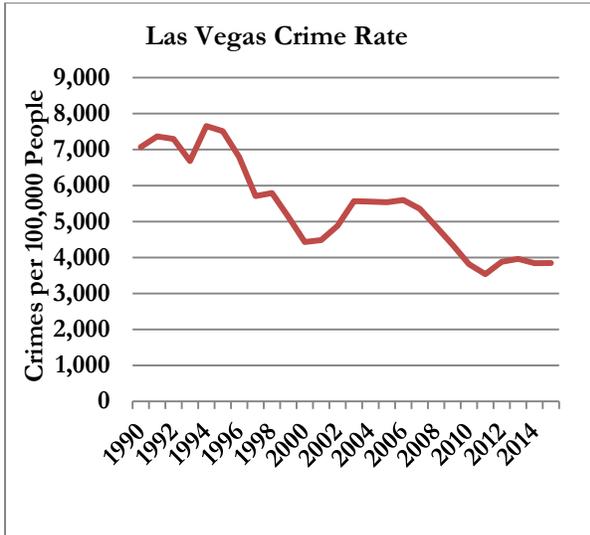
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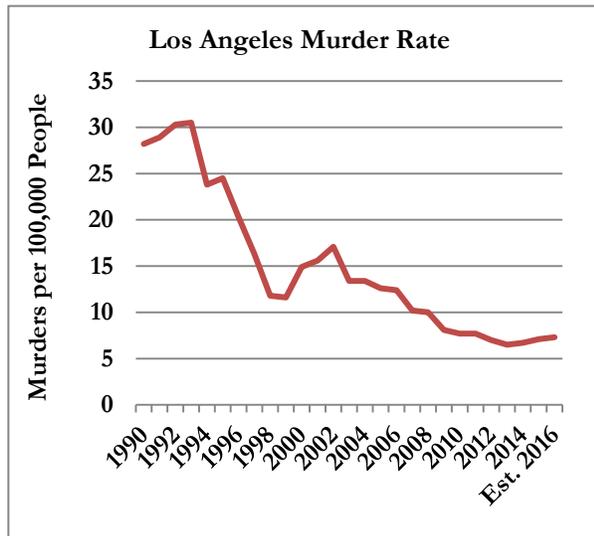
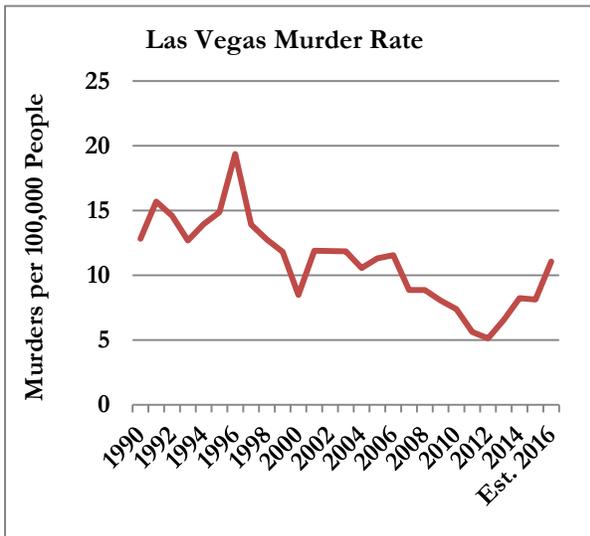
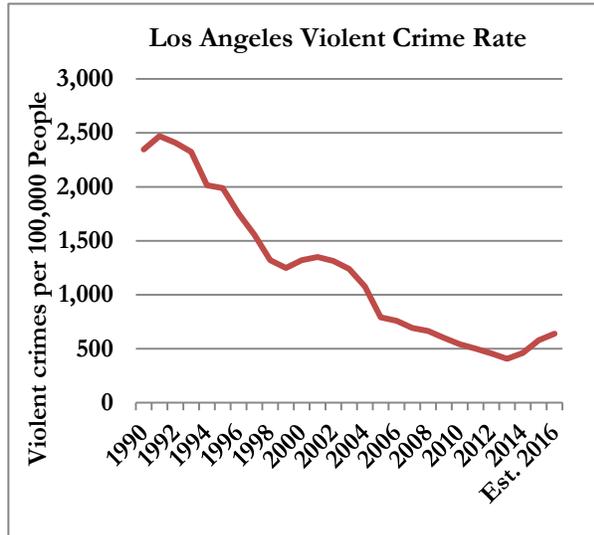
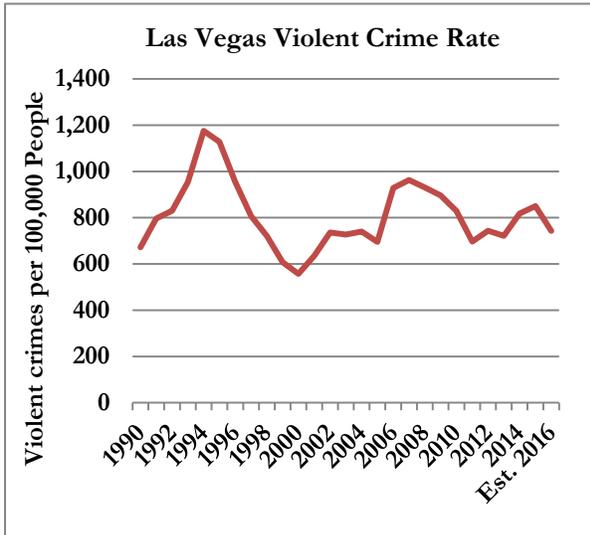
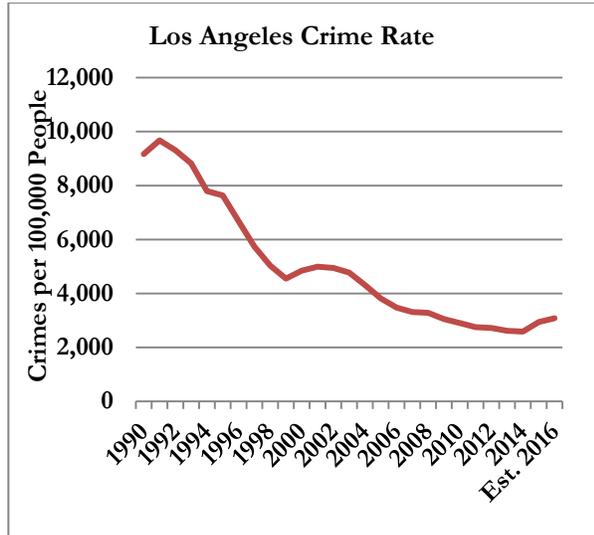
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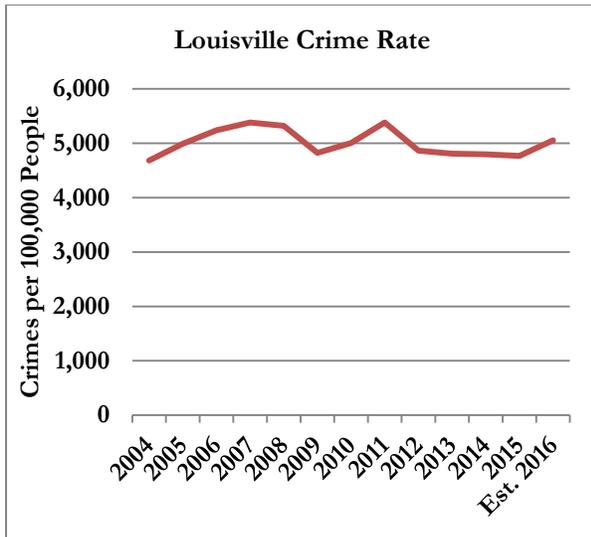
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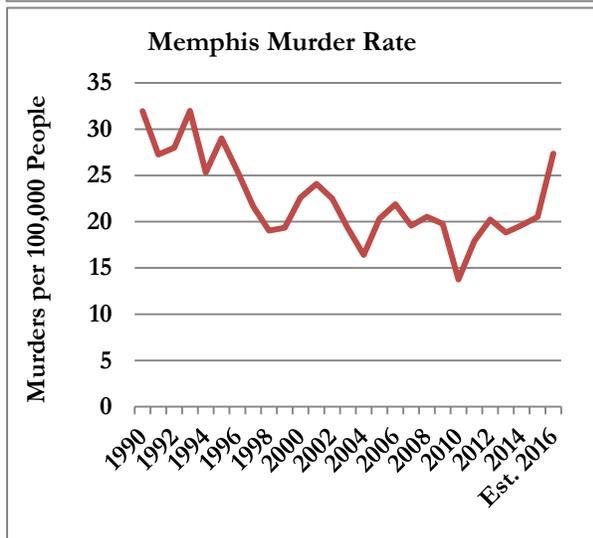
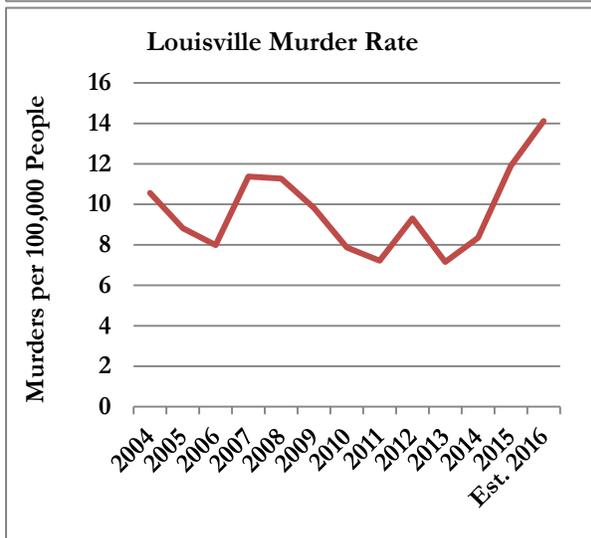
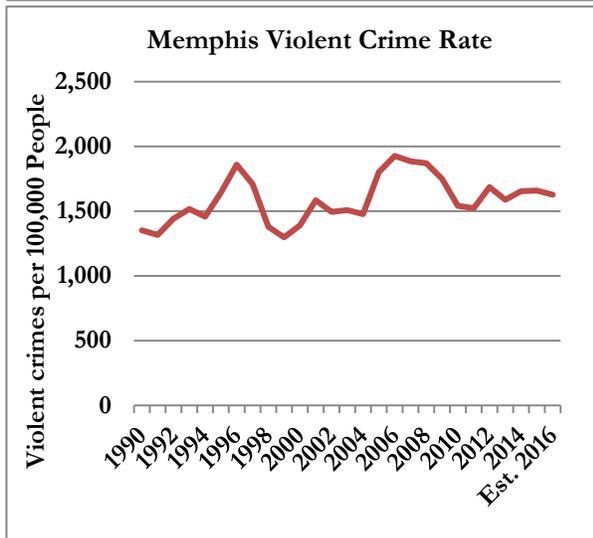
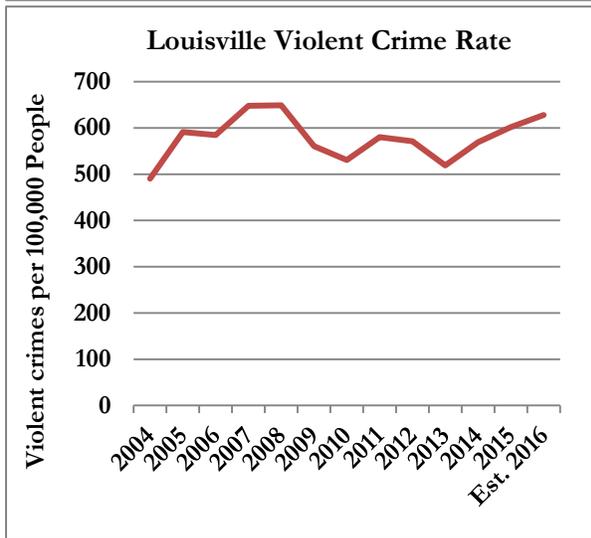
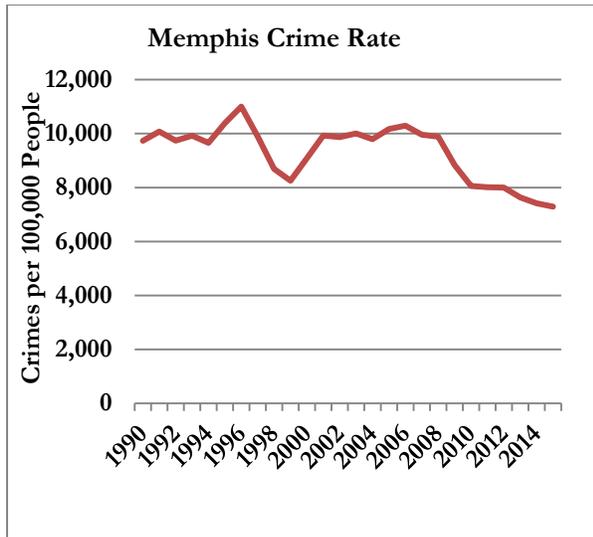
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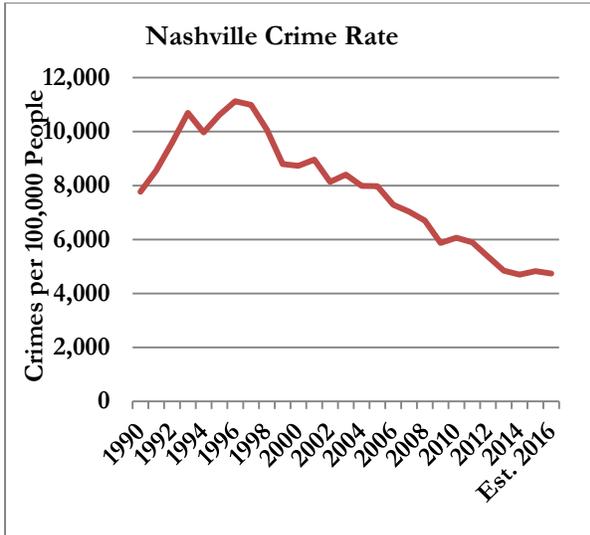
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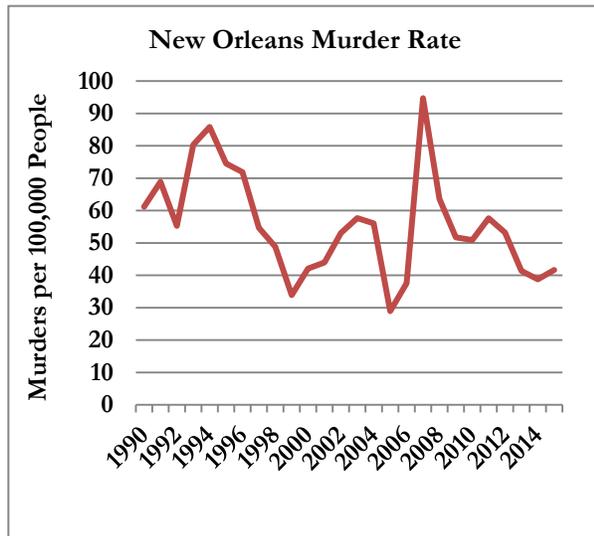
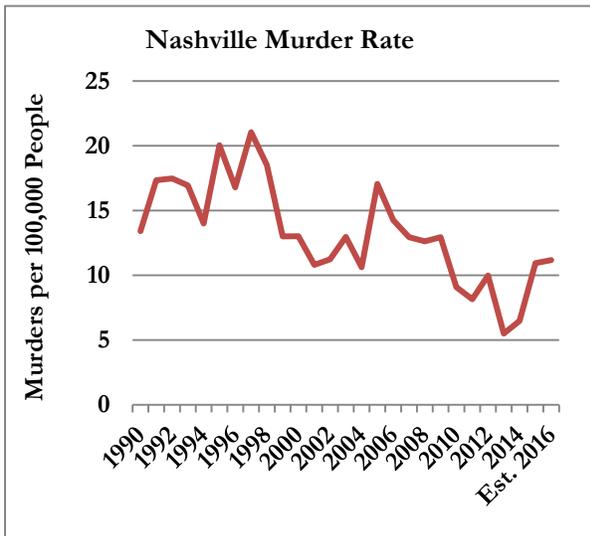
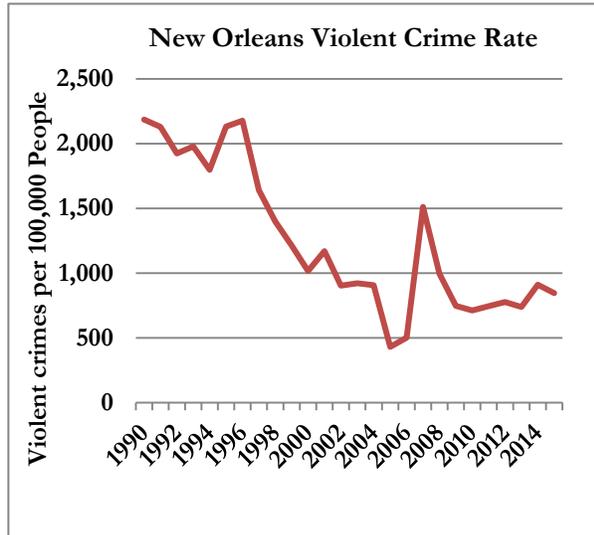
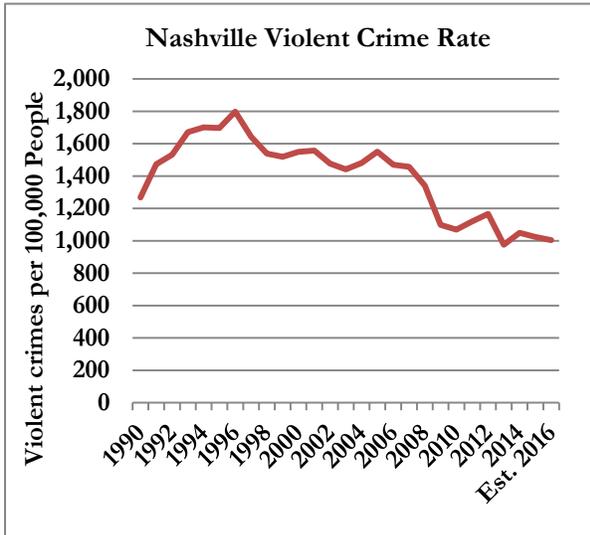
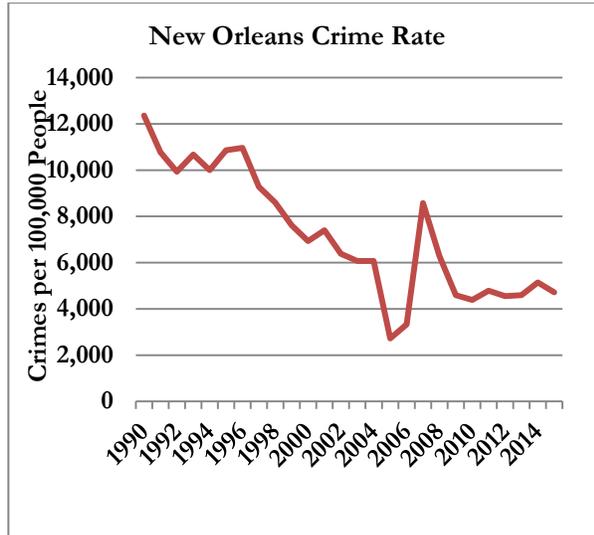
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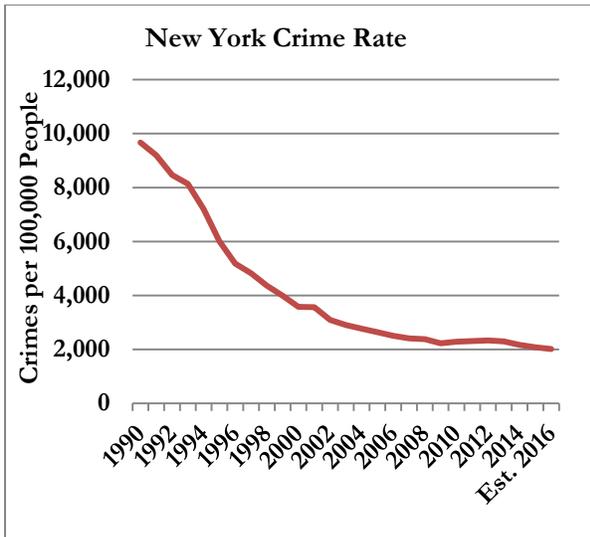
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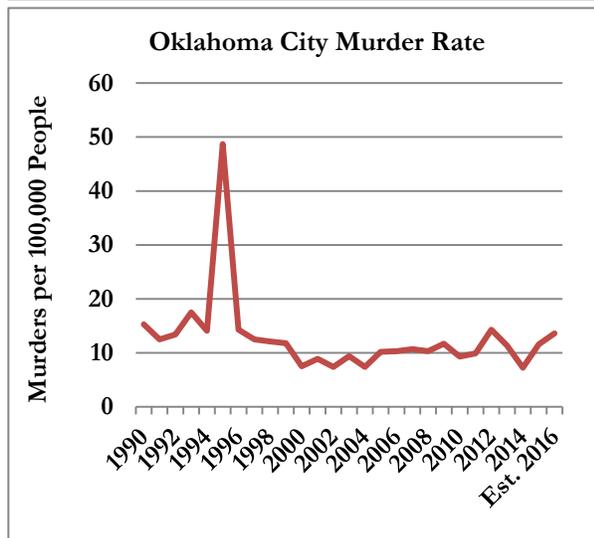
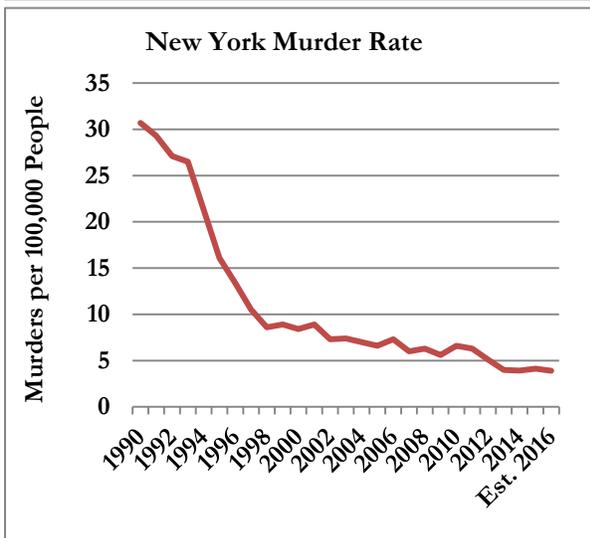
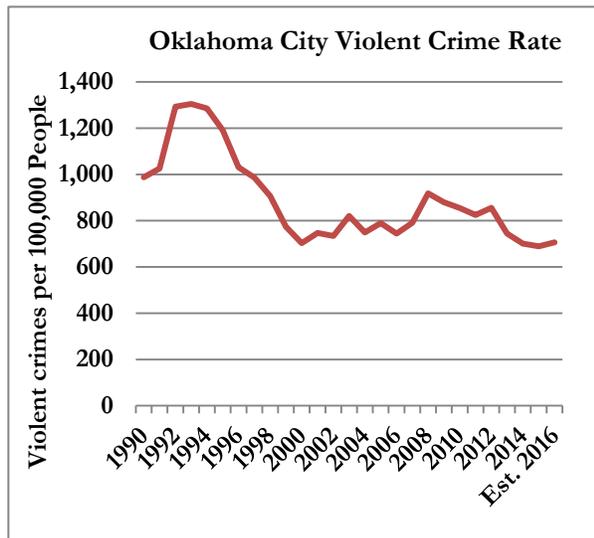
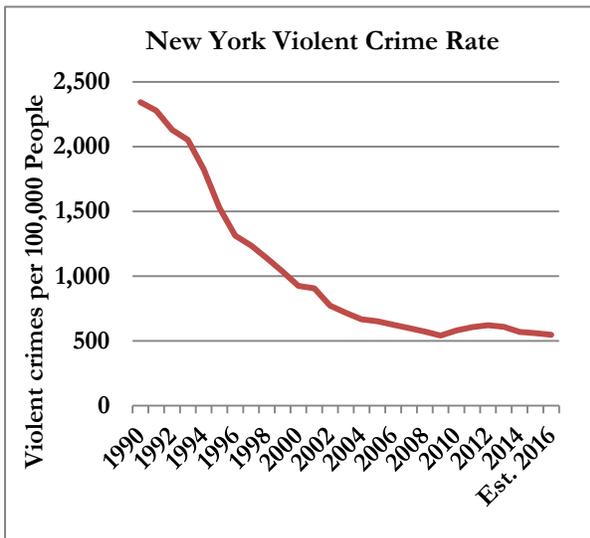
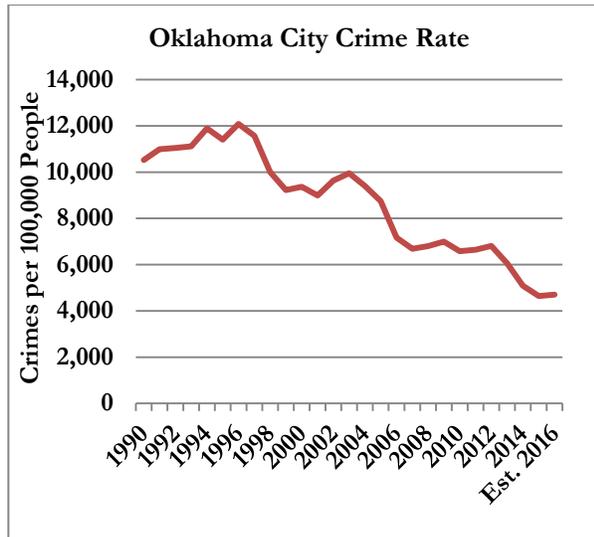
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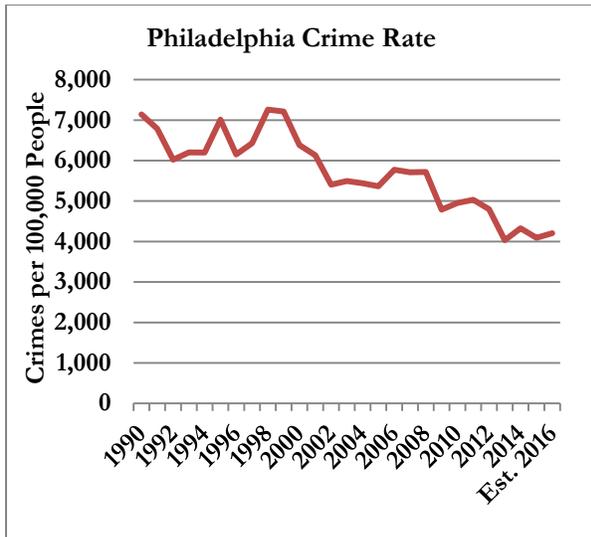
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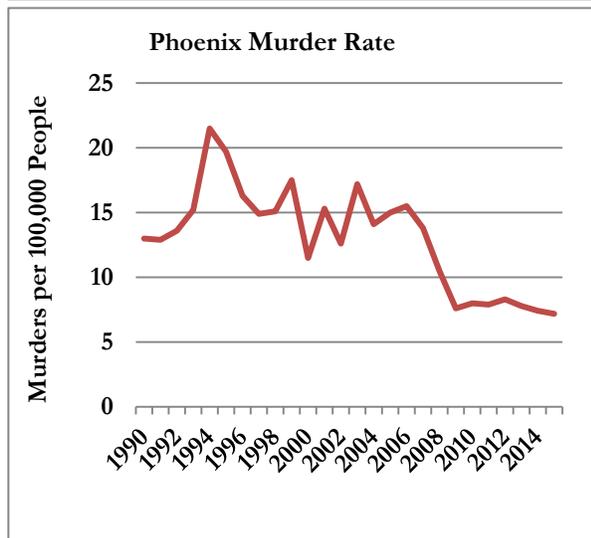
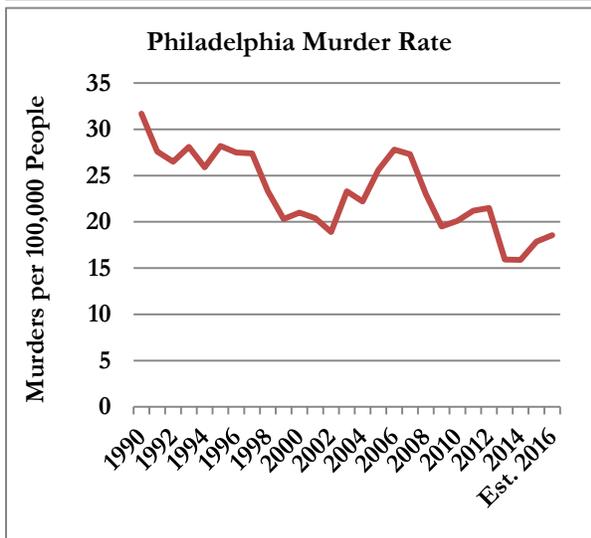
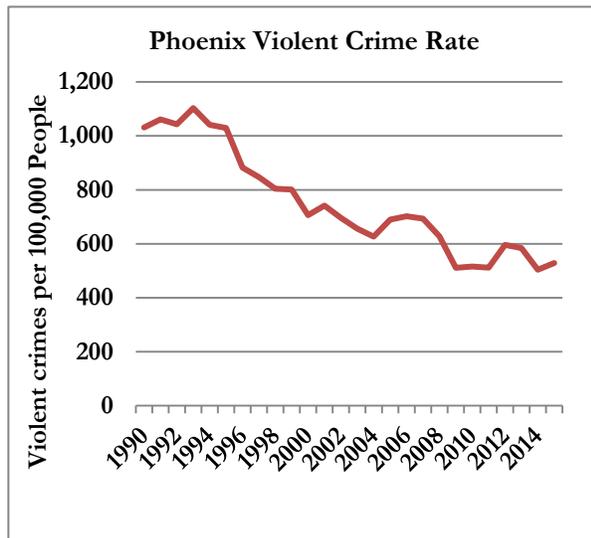
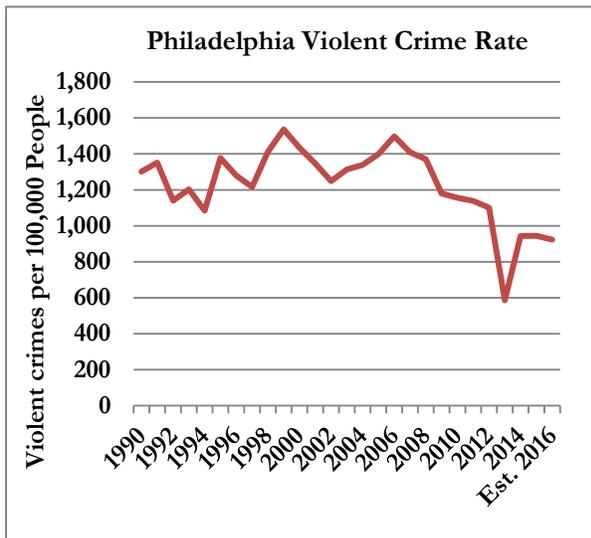
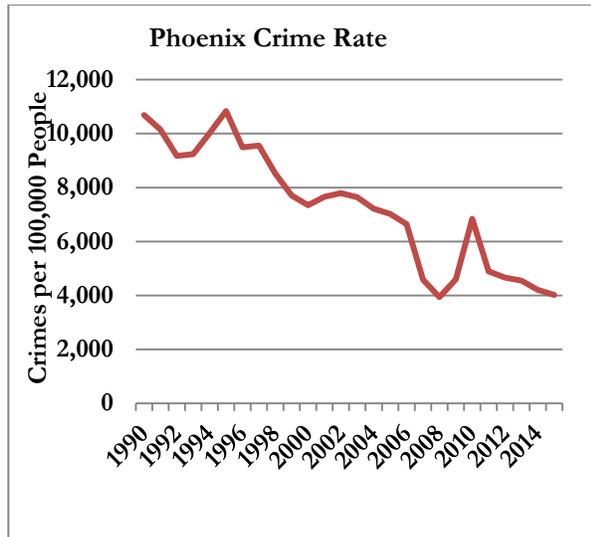
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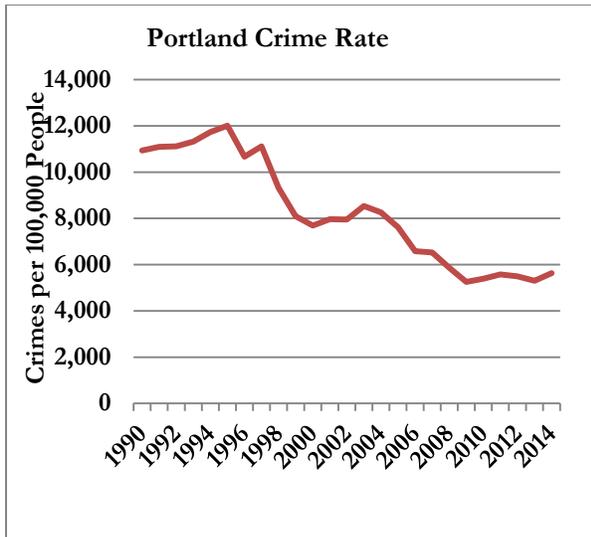
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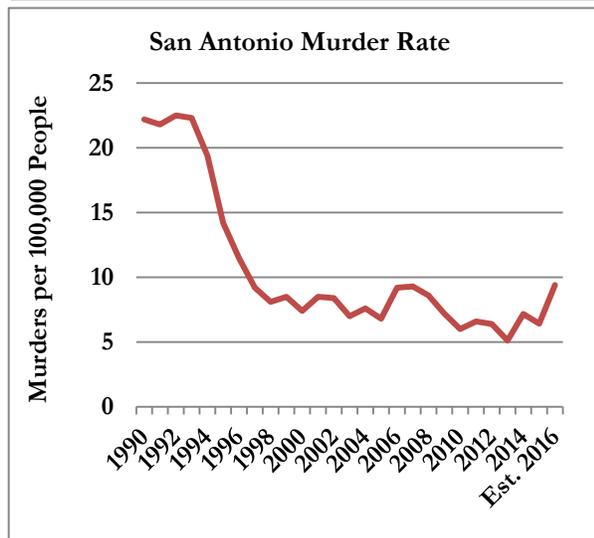
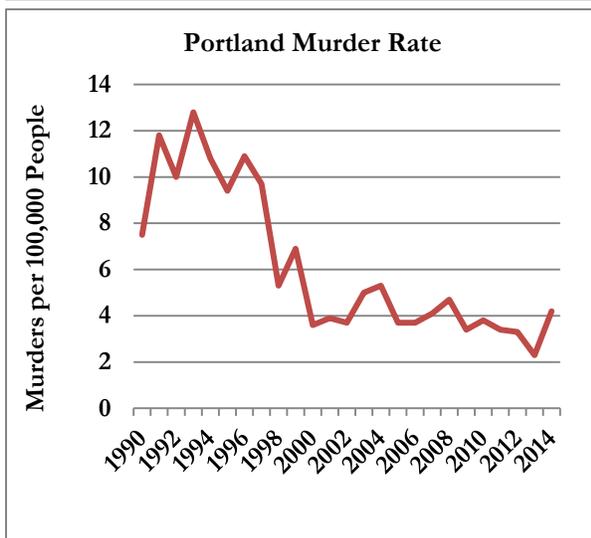
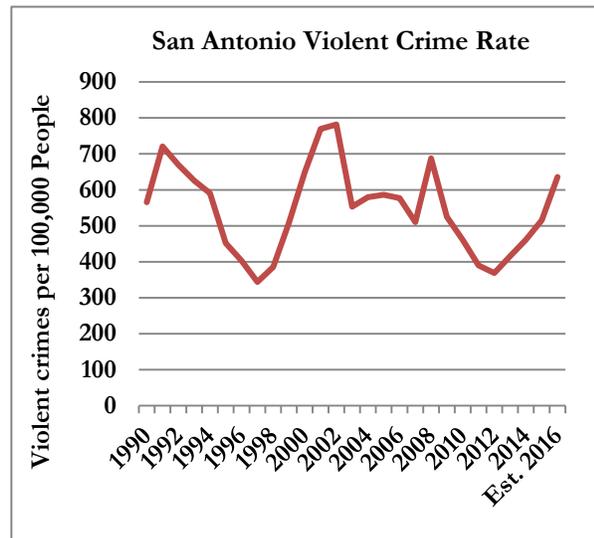
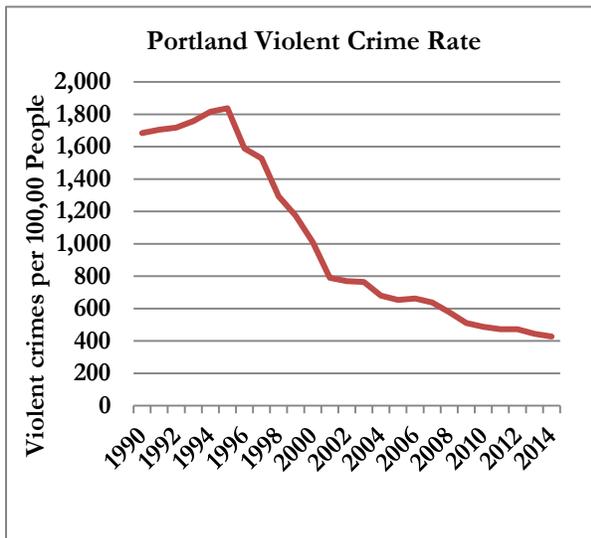
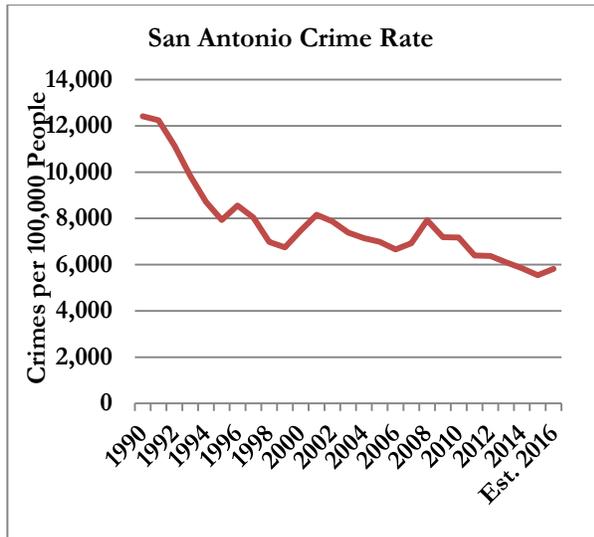
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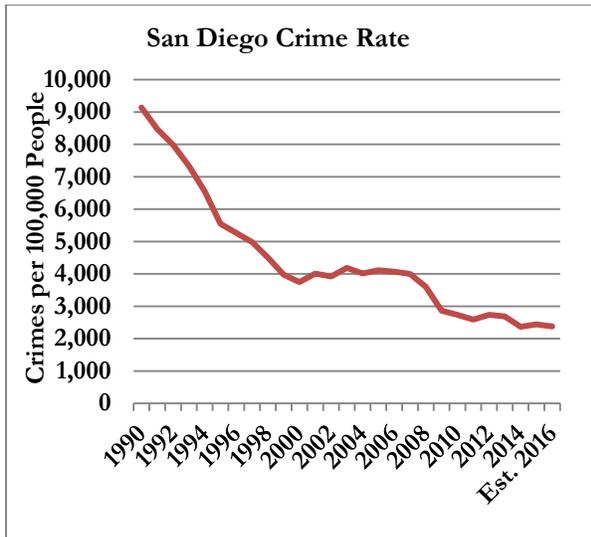
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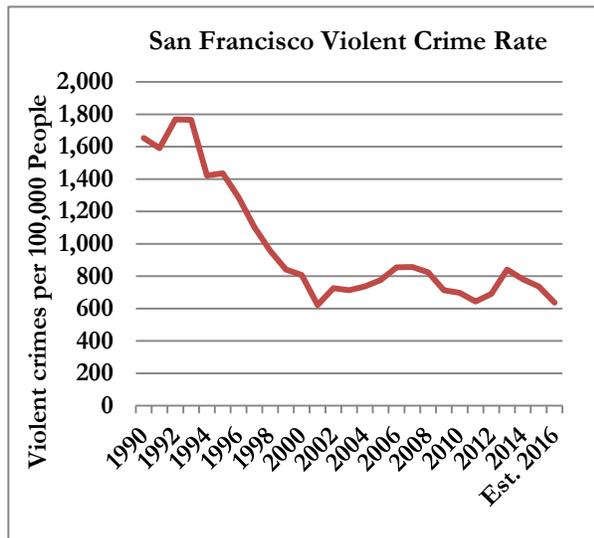
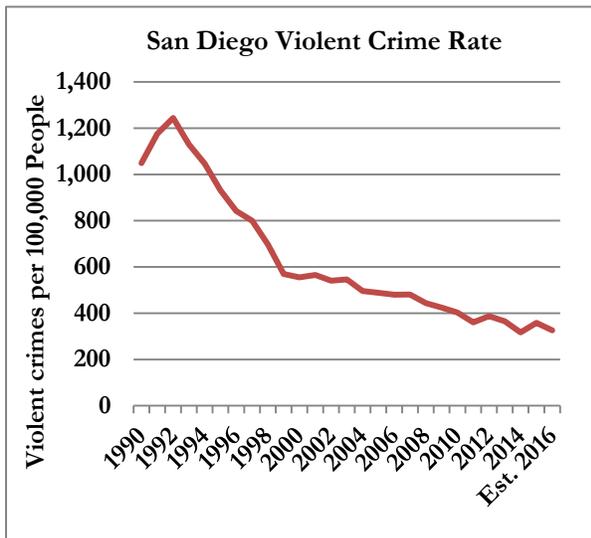
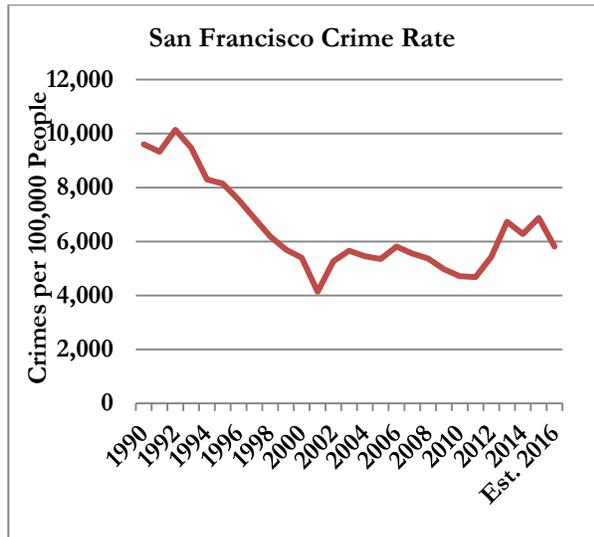
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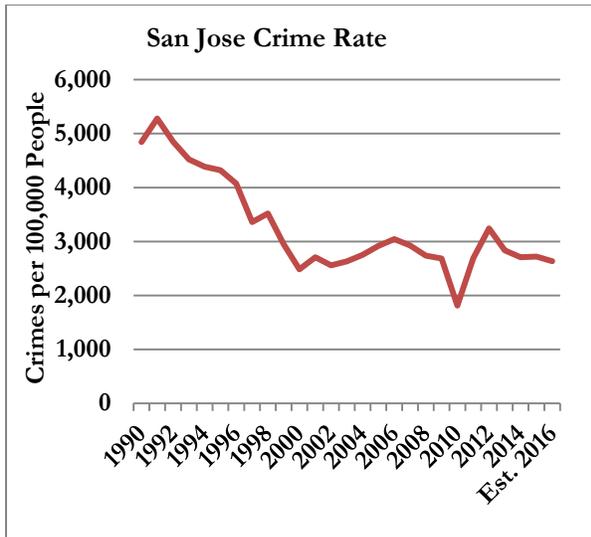
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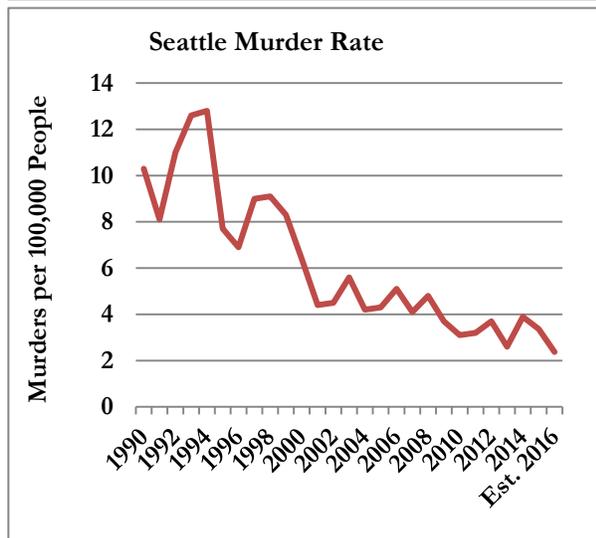
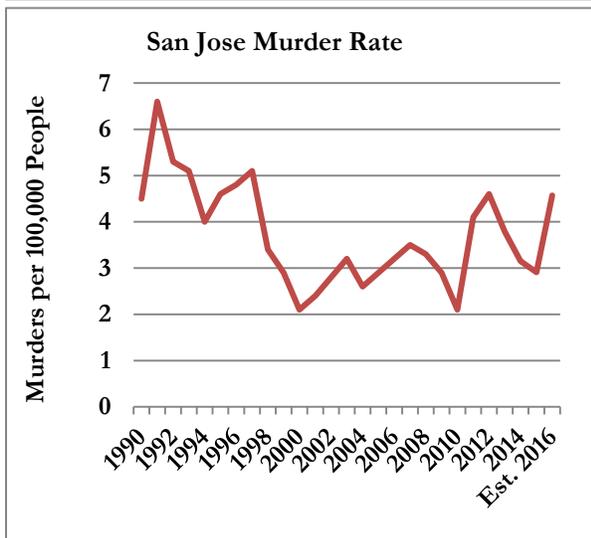
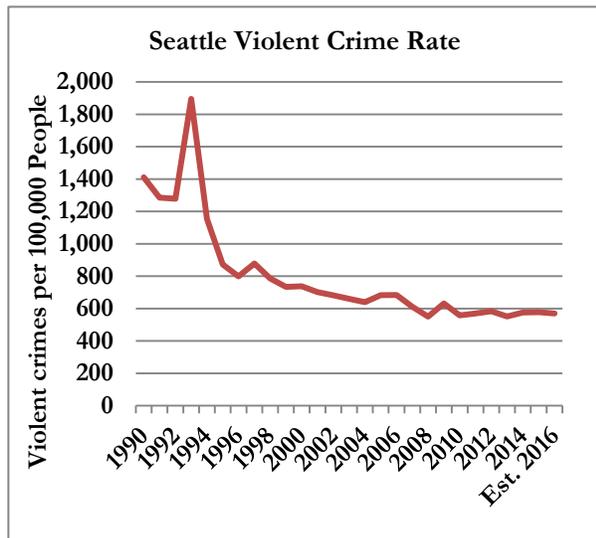
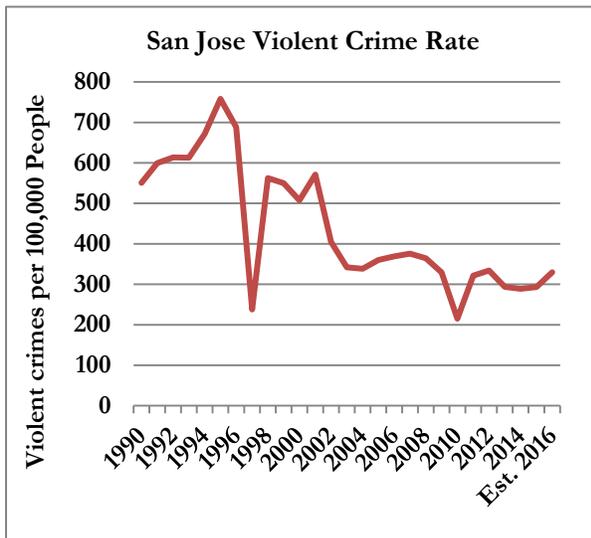
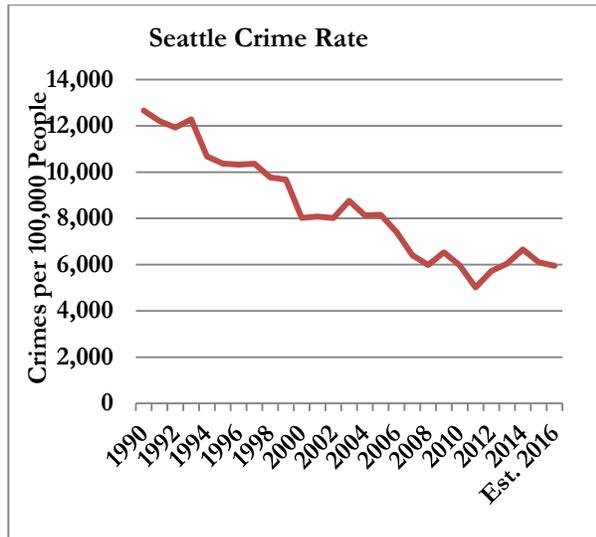
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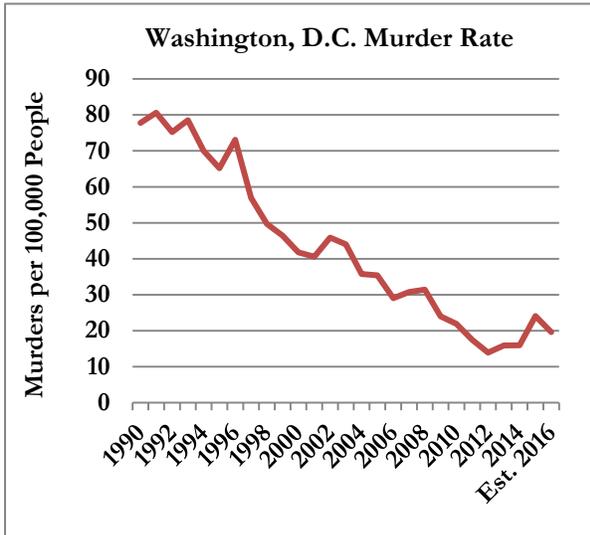
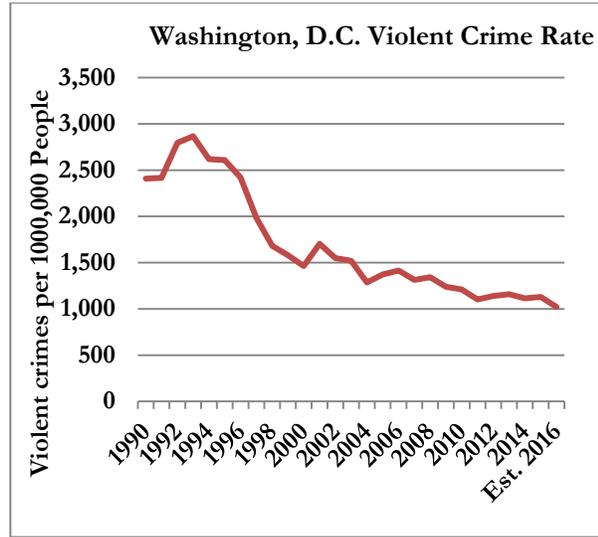
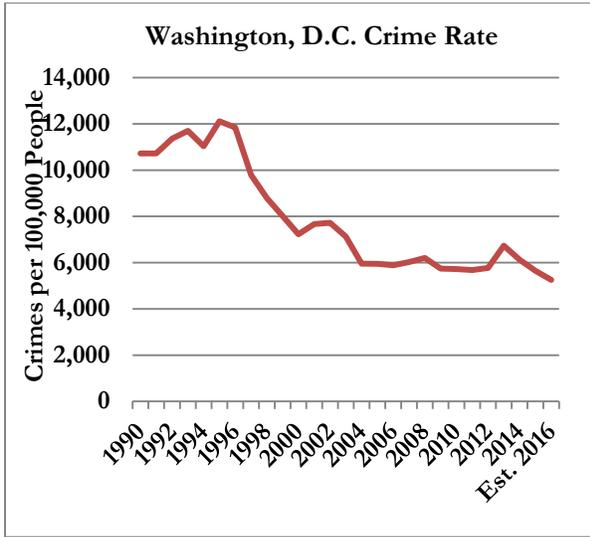
San Jose, California



Seattle, Washington



Washington, D.C.



METHODOLOGY

National Crime Data

National data in this report are collected from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR). "Overall crime" includes the following UCR Part I offenses: aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, murder, and robbery. "Violent crime" is defined as aggravated assault, murder, and robbery. "Property crime" includes burglary, larceny, and motor vehicle theft.

Rape is also a Part I index crime; however, the FBI recently changed the definition of this offense, making historical comparisons difficult. For that reason, rape data is not included in this analysis. Additionally, while the FBI does track some data on some drug offenses, they are considered Part II index crimes, for which only arrest data is available. Since arrest data do not accurately indicate the number of crimes committed, drug crimes are also omitted from this analysis.

For national data on crime, violent crime, and murder rates between 1990 and 2013, the authors drew on the UCR Data Tool; for 2014 and 2015, they drew on the 2015 edition of *Crime in the United States*. Where these sources conflicted, as in 2014, the authors chose to rely on *Crime in the United States*, which has been more recently updated.⁸ As a result, national rates and comparisons for 2014 and 2015 reported here may not appear to match top-line numbers in FBI publications.

UCR data have not been released for all of 2016; instead, the FBI has only released preliminary data covering the first six months.⁹ Because some jurisdictions do not report data at the midyear mark, and then submit full-year data later on, year-end crime and murder rates are different from, and generally higher than, crime rates reported at midyear. To account for this divergence, the authors calculated the average deviation between previous midyear and final reports for the last five years, and applied that to the 2016 midyear figure to estimate a final year figure.

To calculate all crime rates, the authors used population data from the UCR through 2015. For 2016 population estimates, the authors applied the average growth rate over that last five years to the 2015 population for each city.

City Level Crime Data

Crime data comes from the UCR for the years 1990 through 2015. Data for 2016 were collected by the authors from city police departments, or from reports by the Major City Chiefs Association.¹⁰

At the time of publication, only some of these cities reported full-year data; others released data only through the first half of the year, or through the third quarter. To estimate city crime rates for 2016, first, the authors divided the number of crimes that occurred in each city in 2015, according to the UCR, by the number of crimes committed year-to-date in 2015 according to city CompStat sources. That ratio helps "standardize" city data against the FBI baseline. Next, that ratio was multiplied by the number of crimes that have been committed in the city by the same point in 2016. For example, suppose a city reported 100 murders in 2015, according to FBI data. If the same city experienced 60 murders between January 1 and November 1, 2015, according to local police data, and 70 murders between January 1 and November 1, 2016, this method would project a year-end murder count of 116.67, rounded to 117. This method is an empirically accepted way to create rough projections, but is influenced by last year's crime trends.

ENDNOTES

¹ For previous Brennan Center research on crime in the United States, see MATTHEW FRIEDMAN, AMES GRAWERT, & JAMES CULLEN, BRENNAN CTR. FOR JUSTICE, *CRIME IN 2016: UPDATED ANALYSIS* (2016), <https://www.brennancenter.org/analysis/crime-2016-updated-analysis>; AMES GRAWERT & JAMES CULLEN, BRENNAN CTR. FOR JUSTICE, *CRIME IN 2015: A FINAL ANALYSIS* (2016), <https://www.brennancenter.org/analysis/crime-2015-final-analysis>; OLIVER ROEDER ET AL., BRENNAN CTR. FOR JUSTICE, *WHAT CAUSED THE CRIME DECLINE?* (2015), <https://www.brennancenter.org/publication/what-caused-crime-decline>.

² For data through 2013, see UNITED STATES DEP'T OF JUSTICE, FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, UNIFORM CRIME REPORTING STATISTICS, STATE AND NATIONAL CRIME ESTIMATES BY YEAR (1985-2014), <https://www.ucrdatatool.gov/Search/Crime/State/StateCrime.cfm> (select "State by state and national estimates," and on the next page, select "United States-Total" from the first list, "Violent crime rates" and "Property crime rates" from the second, and "1990" to "2013" from the third). For crime data on 2014 and 2015, see UNITED STATES DEP'T OF JUSTICE, FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, *CRIME IN THE UNITED STATES, 2015* tbl. 1 (2016), <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2015/crime-in-the-u.s.-2015/tables/table-1>. For crime data on 2016, see the Methodology. The authors chose to rely on *Crime in the United States, 2015* for data on 2014 and 2015 because it has been more recently updated. See Email from Federal Bureau of Investigation, Crime Statistics Management Unit, to the authors (Mar. 30, 2016, 01:49 EST) (on file with the authors).

³ Unlike the national data discussed in the previous footnote, agency-level data in *Crime in the United States* does not include revisions to the previous year's totals. Therefore, for data through 2014, see UNITED STATES DEP'T OF JUSTICE, FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, UNIFORM CRIME REPORTING STATISTICS, LOCAL LEVEL REPORTED CRIME (1985-2012), <http://www.ucrdatatool.gov/Search/Crime/Local/LocalCrime.cfm> (for each city, first select "Single agency reported crime," and then select the corresponding state from the drop-down box, and the municipality size from the list. On the next page, select the specific city agency, "Violent crime rates" and "Property crime rates" and "1990" to "2012."). For crime data on 2015, see UNITED STATES DEP'T OF JUSTICE, FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, *CRIME IN THE UNITED STATES, 2015* tbl. 8 (2016), <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2015/crime-in-the-u.s.-2015/tables/table-8/table-8-offenses-known-to-law-enforcement-by-state-by-city-2015.xls/view> (for each city, select the appropriate state and navigate to the relevant row). For crime data on 2016, see the Methodology.

⁴ See footnote 2.

⁵ See footnote 3.

⁶ See footnote 2.

⁷ See footnote 3.

⁸ See Email from Federal Bureau of Investigation, Crime Statistics Management Unit, to the authors (Mar. 30, 2016, 01:49 EST) (on file with the authors).

⁹ See UNITED STATES DEP'T OF JUSTICE, FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, *CRIME IN THE UNITED STATES, PRELIMINARY SEMI-ANNUAL UNIFORM CRIME REPORT, JANUARY-JUNE, 2016* (2017), <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2016/preliminary-semi-annual-uniform-crime-report-january-june-2016>.

¹⁰ See MAJOR CITIES CHIEFS ASSOCIATION, *VIOLENT CRIME SURVEY – TOTALS: THIRD QUARTER COMPARISON* (2016) (on file with the authors).

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