

Opinion: Understanding Denver's devastating rise in violent crime in 2020

Denver's homicide rate jumped 50% in 2020, more than other large cities

David Pyrooz

Justin Nix

Scott Wolfe

[The Denver Post](#)

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The pandemic, social unrest, and presidential election upended life as usual in 2020. It was also an unprecedented and devastating year of violence. It is almost certain that the 2020 rise in the homicide rate will go down as the largest on record.

Denver bucked the national trend, but in the wrong direction. The city's homicide rate jumped by 50%--there were 95 homicide victims last year, compared to 63 in 2019. That's well above the 30% rise observed by the [Council on Criminal Justice](#) in 34 large U.S. cities.

Why did violence rise so dramatically in Denver?

Our evidence points to a legitimacy crisis with the criminal justice system. The COVID19 pandemic, with its cascading consequences, was no doubt important. In fact, it's quite possible that the legitimacy crisis wouldn't have taken hold as strongly in the pandemic's absence. But the killing of George Floyd, which shocked the conscience of the country, had ramifications that were swift and substantial.

Diagnosing the causes of violence requires timely data. Unlike most police departments in the country, Denver's open data catalogue makes it possible to replace speculation with evidence. Our conclusions are based on analyzing the Denver Police Department's crime, policing, and traffic data from 2016 to 2020.

Legitimacy crises occur when distrust in the law and its gatekeepers intensifies. Experiencing or witnessing unjust treatment by legal authorities undermines the law's legitimacy. The widely-shared video of George Floyd's killing on May 25 showed the police as judge, jury, and executioner. People everywhere, including here in Denver, saw this as reprehensible, and took to the streets and the tweets to protest.

A legitimacy crisis is consequential for three reasons. The first is depolicing, where officers pull back from proactive policing in response to public criticism. Second, depleted trust in the law means citizens will think twice about calling the police to report crimes or suspicious behaviors. Lastly, delegitimacy of the law emboldens criminal offending populations, as the moral obligation to follow the law is weakened.

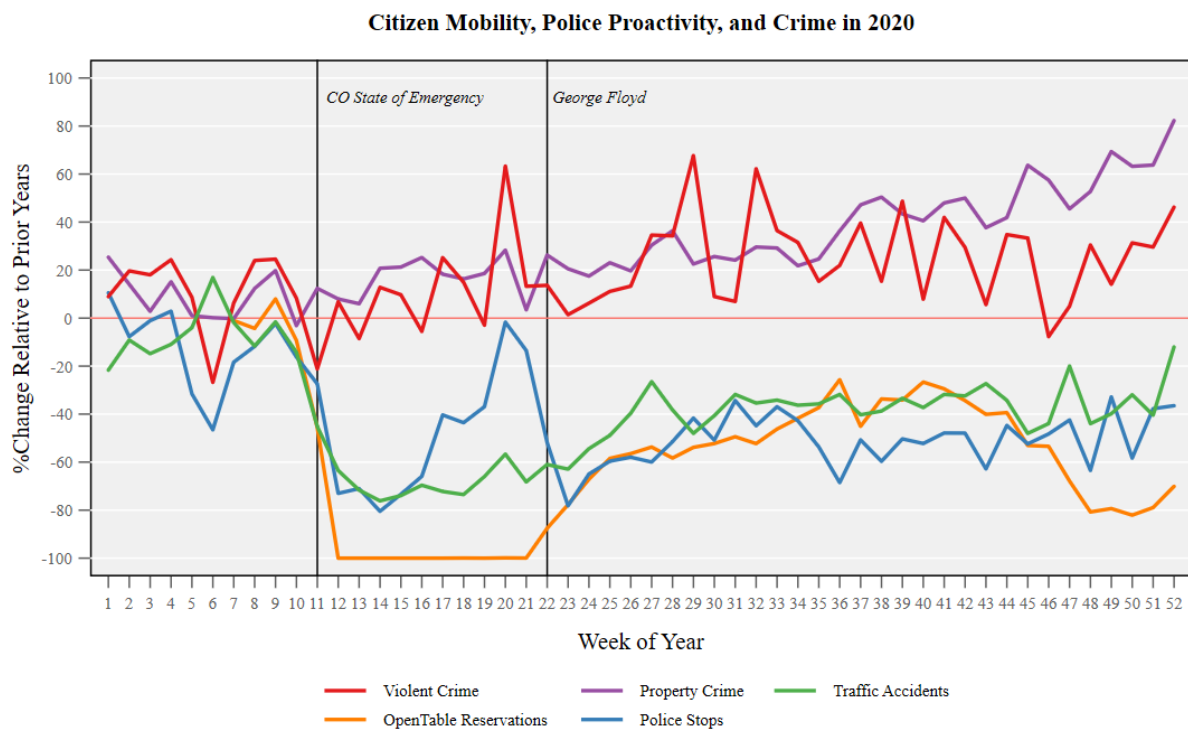
Violence in Denver was already on a bad trajectory before COVID. In the 10 weeks leading up to Governor Polis's March 10th emergency declaration, violent crime was up 12% compared to the average number of homicides, robberies, and aggravated assaults that occurred during the same period between 2016 and 2019.

Exogenous shocks are unexpected events that influence the norms, routines, and outputs of our core institutions. Both COVID and Floyd's death fit the bill, albeit in different ways.

In the 11 weeks separating the COVID emergency declaration and Floyd's death, violence was up by 9% compared to the same period between 2016 and 2019. That's inconsistent with pinning Denver's rise in violence on COVID, since it was indistinguishable from before COVID. And robberies actually further decelerated, a reflection of people staying home.

While COVID did not seem to influence violent crime, it did property crime. Motor vehicle theft was flat before COVID, yet jumped by 37% in the 11 weeks before Floyd's death. Larceny theft went the other direction: it was up 18% pre-COVID and then returned to 2016-19 levels.

The killing of Floyd, and the legitimacy crisis it created, accelerated violence in Denver.



*Comparison period for OpenTable is 2019

**Comparison period for police stops, crime, and traffic data is the 2016-19 average

From the end of May through the rest of 2020, all of the crimes we analyzed increased dramatically--violent crime by 25% and property crime by 39%, compared to the same period 2016-19. Homicide spiked in this period by 54%, as did robberies (11%), aggravated assaults (31%), and motor vehicle theft (87%). Like many U.S. cities, Denver was a different place in the latter half of 2020, and not for the better.

We focused on two of the three consequences of the legitimacy crisis to explain Denver's rise in violence: depolicing and emboldenment. Depolicing occurs when police officers engage in fewer discretionary actions, such as traffic and pedestrian stops. Why stop a suspicious person or vehicle when citizens are calling for abolishing the police?

Before COVID the police pulled back by about 12% from previous years, making roughly 280 fewer stops per week. For the rest of the year stops fell by over 50%. There were around 1,000 fewer stops occurring each week than in previous years--a remarkable reduction in police activity.

Stops were returning to normal leading up to Floyd's killing, but plummeted almost immediately with the Denver protests of police brutality. This is significant for the 2020 rise in violence because, as the National Academy of Sciences has established, proactive policing lowers crime.

It is important to understand the causes of depolicing. When COVID started, police stops became less frequent because the public moved indoors and the police pulled back out of an abundance of [caution](#). Violent crime did not rise substantially. Depolicing occurred again after Floyd's death, but this time it coincided with a rise in public activity, according to OpenTable reservations and traffic accident data. And violence surged.

The emboldened offender offshoot of the legitimacy crisis has less merit for explaining Denver's rise in violence. We focused on changes in resistance and aggression to police officers, finding little difference other than the most intense week of the Floyd protests.

What does this all mean moving forward?

A recent [Gallup](#) poll showed public confidence in the police is at its lowest point in the past quarter-century. Already the legitimacy crisis has resulted in drastic changes to policing across the country. Colorado's [SB217](#) results in sweeping changes to police accountability across the state. The search is on for the best training to improve officers' [social interaction](#) and [de-escalation](#) skills. Many of these changes will be good for policing and communities.

Yet, some people are pushing for more, and want the police defunded or entirely [abolished](#). In their eyes, the 31,000 fewer stops by Denver police officers in response to protests was a good thing. And, to the extent that those stops would have unfairly impacted residents who have long cried foul at heavy-handed police practices, it probably was.

But, we can't forget one thing. A pullback of police activity, especially traffic and pedestrian stops, results in fewer illegal guns being taken off the street and fewer violent offenders incarcerated. The result is more Denver residents being murdered, robbed, and assaulted. This is certainly not a good thing.

Neighborhoods that have endured high rates of violence bore the brunt of these trends, often Denver's Black and Latino communities. For example, after Floyd's death, police stops declined by 62% in Northeast Park Hill while violent crime rose by 69%, while East Colfax saw stops fall by 59% only for violence to jump by 28%. Residents of communities that suffer from violence regularly say that they don't want *less* policing, but better policing.

This legitimacy crisis requires a course of action. This may include alternatives to policing that are more effective and less harmful. That is a worthy goal. But, police activity still matters. The solution is to use policing strategies that strike an appropriate balance between effectiveness and fairness.