

HFG RESEARCH AND POLICY IN BRIEF

Did De-Policing Cause the 2015 Homicide Spike?

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Introduction

In August 2014, Michael Brown, a Black man, was shot and killed in Ferguson, Missouri.¹ This occurred less than a month after Eric Garner, also a Black man, died after being wrestled to the ground by New York City police officers, an encounter captured on cell-phone video and widely viewed. Both incidents sparked outrage in Black communities and beyond. In the months following, additional controversial and highly publicized police killings in Cleveland, Baltimore, Charleston, and other cities augmented mounting anger and motivated protests across the country, strengthening the “Black Lives Matter” movement (which began in response to the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012).

In 2015, the year after the Ferguson incident, the U.S. homicide rate turned up sharply after falling almost continuously for more than two decades. From 2010 to 2014, the big-city homicide rate exhibited small oscillations, but in 2015 it jumped by 15.6 percent over the rate in 2014 and by 12.3 percent over the big-city average of 13 homicides per 100,000 between 2010 and 2014. The national homicide rate exhibited a similar pattern, increasing by 11.4 percent between 2014 and 2015. (See Figure 1.) This uptrend continued into 2016, though less steeply.²

We found no evidence for a “Ferguson Effect” linking police killings of Black citizens to the homicide spike via de-policing.

A number of political figures, leaders of law enforcement, and some political commentators asserted a causal connection—“de-policing”—between the widespread condemnation of police treatment of Black men and the homicide spike. The claim was that police officers’ fear of heightened legal liability or having their identities exposed on social or traditional media led to a pulling back from the kinds of “proactive” enforcement activities, such as stopping and questioning suspicious persons and making arrests for minor offenses, associated with the “broken windows” approach to policing, one that its advocates believe yielded the nation’s 25-year crime drop.

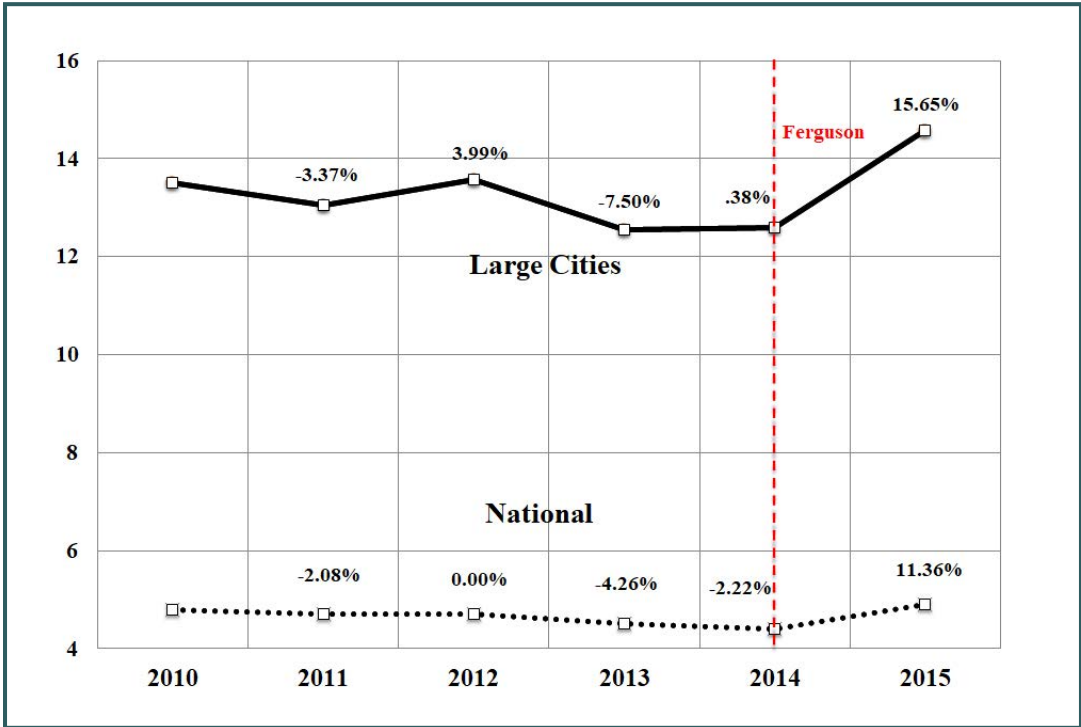
The idea that police in the post-Ferguson period would become less inclined to confront citizens engaged in prohibited behavior is not implausible. To investigate a possible relationship between policing practices and the 2015 homicide spike, we examined rates of arrest, for crimes both minor and serious, in the 53 largest U.S. cities that had at least 20 homicides in 2010. Instead of looking only for possible differences in arrest levels between the pre- and post-Ferguson years, we analyzed

¹ FOLLOWING THE USAGE IN OUR DATA SOURCES, WE USE THE TERM “BLACK” TO REFER TO AFRICAN-AMERICANS.

² THE 2015-2016 INCREASE WAS SHORT-LIVED, AS THE U.S. HOMICIDE RATE DECLINED BY 2% IN 2017, 5.5% IN 2018, AND, ACCORDING TO FBI PROJECTIONS BASED ON THE FIRST HALF-YEAR, ANOTHER 4% IN 2019.

the more general relationship between arrests and homicide for the period from 2010 to 2015. While the ideal investigation of the de-policing hypothesis would include not just arrests but directed patrols, pedestrian stops, and other forms of police enforcement, statistics on those practices are not available in standardized form for many cities, whereas arrest numbers are.

FIGURE 1. HOMICIDES PER 100,000 POPULATION, LARGE CITIES AND NATIONAL, 2010-2015



SOURCE: FBI UNIFORM CRIME REPORTS.

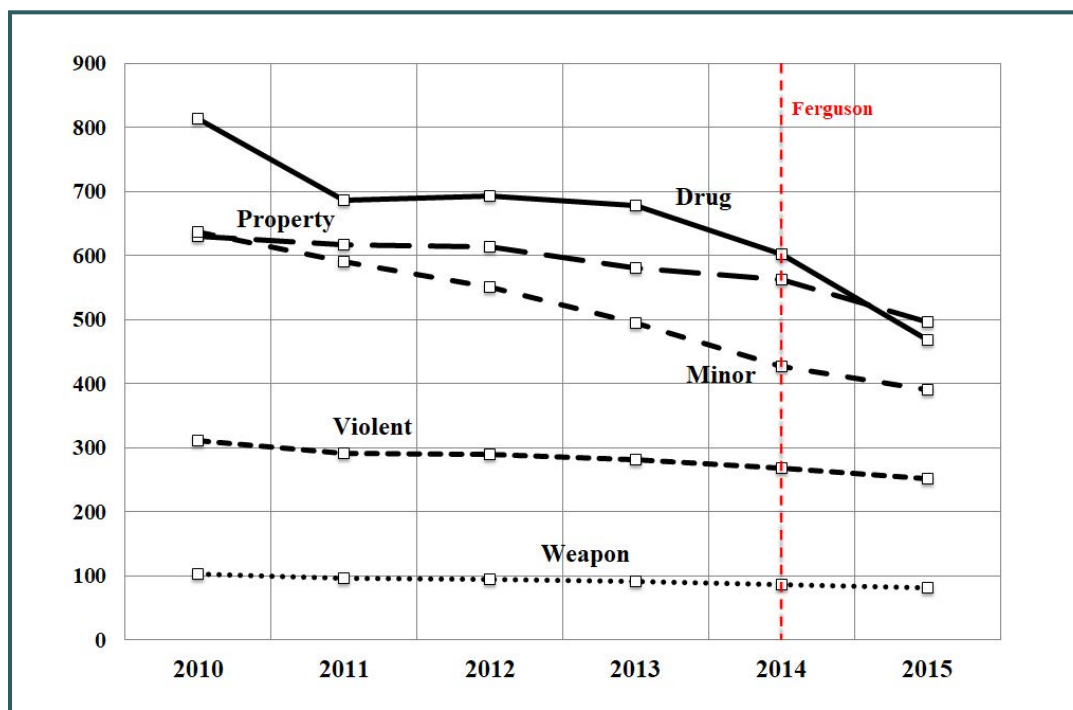
Previous studies of the relationship between crime and arrest rates returned mixed results. Some were vulnerable to the criticism that they hadn’t accounted for the possibility of reverse causality, i.e., that not only might arrest levels influence crime rates but crime rates might, in turn, influence rates of arrest. This was a consideration in how we designed our analysis. We used cross-sectional (53 cities) time-series (6 years) data to estimate the effect of city arrest rates in one year on the next year’s homicide rates for each year between 2010 and 2015, employing a type of regression analysis that statistically controls for the influence of crime levels on arrest rates. Our models also included controls for other factors that have repeatedly been shown to be associated with city homicide rates, such as economic disadvantage. We included year and city “fixed effects” as well to control for other, unmeasured factors that might have affected homicide rates in all cities in a particular year or in a given city across all years.

Findings

The de-policing explanation of the homicide rate rise posits that the abrupt increase in levels of homicide resulted from a pull-back in policing in response to the protests and unrest surrounding police violence against Black citizens in late 2014 and 2015. Such a dynamic, if present, should have been particularly pronounced in Black communities. Accordingly, we performed analyses of the relationship between arrests—a measure of police activity—and homicide rates, both at the aggregate level and separately for Black and White arrests.

In nearly every city in our analysis, arrest rates did decrease between 2014 and 2015, when protests over police violence were escalating, a finding that is consonant with the de-policing account. However, as can be seen in Figure 2, arrest rates declined in every year after 2010. Moreover, with the possible exception of drug arrests, particularly among Whites, there is no evidence of a sharper drop in arrest rates in 2015 than in earlier years, as would be expected if de-policing occurred as a result of criticism of police following the Eric Garner and Michael Brown incidents in mid-2014. As well, if the homicide increase had been produced by de-policing, we might expect to observe a greater falloff in Black than in White arrest rates in 2015, resulting from heightened tensions and police disengagement in Black communities. But we found no such racial difference.

FIGURE 2. ARRESTS PER 100,000 POPULATION, LARGE CITIES, 2010-2015



SOURCE: FBI UNIFORM CRIME REPORTS.

As for the more general question of whether arrests are negatively associated with homicides—more arrests, fewer homicides—our regression analysis found homicide rates were not negatively associated with rates of arrest for any category of crime in the period of our study, 2010–2015. This was true at both the aggregate level (all-races) and when assessed separately for Black arrests and White arrests. And, crucially, we found no such association across cities within any single year, including 2015, the year in which homicide abruptly turned up.

We conclude that arrest rates for violent, property, drug, weapon, and minor offenses are unrelated to homicide rates.

In summary, we found no evidence for a “Ferguson Effect” linking police killings of Black citizens to the homicide spike via de-policing. Arrest rates for violent, property, drug, weapon, and minor offenses are unrelated to homicide rates, at least in the largest U.S. cities in the period between 2010 and 2015. Whether other forms of de-policing, such as a possible drop in police stops or in targeted patrols in high-crime urban areas, underlay the homicide increase would need to be examined in future research.

There is an alternative conception of a Ferguson Effect, however, in which high-profile police killings *could* result in a spike in homicide—not by way of reduced policing but through damage to the public’s attitudes toward the police, that is, their regard for the legitimacy of police. It is plausible that mounting distrust and declining police legitimacy could reduce reliance on the police for protection and justice and a corresponding turn to “self-help”—often lethal—in the settling of interpersonal disputes. However, this conception of a Ferguson Effect, which posits a loss of police legitimacy among Black Americans, is challenged by the fact that the 2015 upsurge in homicides was not limited to Black Americans—homicide victimization among Whites, too, increased substantially, by nearly 9 percent, compared to about 15 percent among Blacks. (Nearly all of these additional homicides were “within race,” as is almost always the case with homicide.)

Policy Implications

Policy reforms are difficult to recommend when the practice or condition under consideration, in this case a reduction in arrest rates, does not seem to be responsible for the problem the practice is supposed to have caused—an increase in homicide. We did not find homicide levels to be associated with rates of arrest, but it should not be concluded that arrests play no role in crime control. Arrest

activity can have a main effect on crimes other than homicide, and it can also bolster the effect of proactive (pre-arrest) policing, which has been shown to be highly effective in reducing crime when targeted to geographic areas where crime is heavily concentrated, known as hot spots. If would-be offenders believed their chances of arrest for engaging in crime were slim to none, it is likely that the effects of hot-spots patrols, vehicle and pedestrian stops, and other proactive strategies would diminish rapidly.


But hot-spots policing cannot be the only response to the recent rise in homicide rates or future increases in crime, especially those that might be causally related in some way to controversial police violence and community protest. The hot-spots strategy should be nested in a broader policy designed by a coalition of stakeholders, including community groups, policy makers, and the police, whose chief objective should be to reduce avoidable police violence against citizens and address community concerns about the incidents that do occur. The primary task as far as crime is concerned would be to keep lines of communication between the police and affected communities as open as possible, make certain that all instances of police use of deadly force were investigated thoroughly and without prejudice, and ensure that illegal conduct by officers was brought to light and dealt with justly.

Positioning hot-spots enforcement strategies in supportive coalitions of community partners devoted to preventing unwarranted police violence against citizens—that rest in turn on widespread police-community engagement—is a promising way to address the spikes in crime, such as the 2015-2016 rise in homicide rates, that accompany and possibly result from contentious incidents of police use of force.

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