

HFG RESEARCH AND POLICY IN BRIEF

Unsolved Shootings: Why and How to Boost Clearance Rates

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Executive Summary

Approximately 75,000 Americans were shot by a criminal assailant in 2024, including 15,000 fatalities. The police failed to arrest the shooter in almost two-thirds of these shootings, and in many of the successful cases, the arrest did not result in conviction. There is a strong argument for improving police performance in investigating serious crimes of violence. What is at stake is public safety and the basic duty of the police to serve the public.

There is no entirely satisfactory measure of police performance in crime investigation. Case “clearance rates” are widely reported but should be viewed with caution. Nonetheless, the conceptual goal is clear enough: solve more cases, including an arrest with sufficient evidence to convict the perpetrator.

In this HFG *Research and Policy in Brief*, I examine clearance rates, focusing on fatal and nonfatal shootings. I explain how strategic investments by the police can improve investigation outcomes. Priority areas include reducing investigator caseloads for nonfatal shootings, building better relationships with victims to encourage cooperation with police, and coordinating with prosecution to ensure high-quality arrests and convictions.

While violence-prevention strategies outside of policing are important, solving cases through arrest and prosecution is key to making communities safer and providing redress for victims.

Introduction

Approximately 75,000 people were shot by a criminal assailant in the United States in 2024, including 15,000 for whom the gunshot proved fatal. The vast majority of these shooting incidents did not result in an arrest and conviction. Thus, most victims and survivors were left with the knowledge that the shooters would not suffer any legal consequences for their act. Furthermore, the shooters were still at large, quite likely continuing to pose a threat to public safety. For the communities most affected by gun violence—low-income and racial- and ethnic-minority neighborhoods—there is an understandable inclination to interpret this record of failure as the direct result of the authorities' indifference. The police slogan “to protect and to serve” often rings hollow. Given widespread dissatisfaction and distrust among the public, police investigators often find it difficult to secure cooperation from victims and other witnesses, making their job more difficult and helping preserve an unsatisfactory status quo.

Experience and research have identified promising approaches to improve success rates of police investigations. There is no magic here—improved performance is likely to come at a cost and hence requires police leadership and other city officials to be clear about this goal and assign it greater budgeting priority. Any effort to improve investigative outcomes should be approached realistically, knowing that there remains considerable uncertainty about what works and what's worthwhile in this domain—not to mention the fact that police performance may be heavily affected by external events. To illustrate, we need only recall 2020, when the pandemic-related lockdown induced a vast increase in gun violence. The law-enforcement response was impaired by the need to avoid exposure to infection and by problems associated with widespread vilification of the police after the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis officer. Fortunately, since 2023 gun violence rates have dropped sharply, and the effectiveness of police investigations has rebounded. Still, there is much more that can and should be done.

In this brief, I seek to provide useful answers to several related questions:

- Why is it important to arrest and prosecute a high percentage of the perpetrators of crimes of serious violence?
- Is the clearance rate a valid performance indicator for a police department?
- What can be done by police to increase the success rate for criminal investigations?

These questions are of interest for all types of crime, but gun violence will be my focus here, as it imposes the greatest burden on residents in many cities (Cook and Ludwig 2022; Cook, Ludwig, and Jeuland 2025). My particular interest in recent years has been solving the riddle of why nonfatal shootings typically have much lower clearance rates than fatal shootings, how police departments can redress that gap, and why they should do so.

I. Why do we care that police investigations of serious violent crimes are successful?

The police have primary responsibility for solving crimes, arresting perpetrators, and preparing evidence so that courts can convict and punish as prescribed by law. To the extent that the police are successful in this mission, the public is well-served, both by improved public safety for all and by providing victims with a measure of justice.

Any discussion of justice in the context of gun violence in the United States must acknowledge the extraordinary racial disparity in victimization. In 2023, well over half (58 percent) of gun homicide victims were Black, and adjusted for population, the Black victimization rate was 8.4 times as high as for White people. For young men, the disparity was still larger, with Black people making up fully two-thirds of the victims aged fifteen to twenty-nine. Because gun violence is vastly disproportionately a “Black” problem, the priority given to police investigations is a matter of racial equity (Brunson 2020). Jill Leovy, in her seminal *Ghettoside* (2015), asserts that “the system’s failure to catch killers effectively made black lives cheap.”

Besides providing victims and their families some sense of relief and closure, successful police investigations are arguably a key contributor to public safety. Criminologists identify several mechanisms by which convictions reduce subsequent violence, including incapacitation of recidivistic violent offenders, deterrence of would-be offenders, and interruption of tit-for-tat conflicts.

The incapacitation mechanism is transparent. If a shooter is not caught, convicted, and incarcerated, then he remains free to shoot again. Ethnographic evidence suggests that there are some youths, often gang members, who take on the identity of “shooter” and are likely to persist in that role while they are at large (Kang 2025). Leovy’s account, based on her many years as a *Los Angeles Times* crime reporter, makes the case vividly: “If you don’t incapacitate violent actors, they keep pushing people around until someone makes them stop. When violent people are permitted to operate with impunity, they get their way.” While such qualitative accounts are meaningful, it would help sharpen the point if there were a good estimate of the number of shootings prevented by imprisonment of shooters, but we lack a large-scale empirical study in that regard.

It should be noted that in the case of gun violence, incapacitation is not just the result of imprisonment but also of a legal consequence of conviction: federal law bans gun possession by those with serious criminal records. Arrest is not enough—the federal ban on purchase and

possession is conditioned on a felony *conviction* (or a misdemeanor conviction for domestic violence). The ban is, of course, not entirely effective, but it does appear to limit convicted felons' access to the firearms market (Cook and Smart 2026).

Unlike with incapacitation, I've found that the notion of a deterrence mechanism is often met with disbelief. The basic idea is that some of the would-be shooters will be aware of the legal consequences (or lack thereof) in other shooting instances; if they perceive a real possibility of imprisonment, they may be deterred from criminal misuse (Cook 1980). Those of us who have never been part of a violent network or community should probably not trust our intuition on this matter, whatever that may be. Fortunately, there is some strong objective evidence in support of the belief that even members of persistently violent gangs may be persuaded to desist if a threat of legal consequences is credible. I'm referring especially to the extensive evidence on gang takedowns by the police and the focused deterrence programs run on gangs by a number of police departments (Braga and Cook 2023; Chalfin et al. 2021; Kennedy, Piehl, and Braga 1996; Braga, Weisburd, and Turchan 2019).

In sum, effective police investigation of violent crime is an important service to victims and the larger community. Too often, learned discussions of gun-violence prevention simply ignore the role of police investigation or minimize it. In particular, commentaries that begin with the premise that gun violence should be addressed as a "public health problem" usually focus on firearms regulation, interventions with at-risk youth, and the socioeconomic causes of violence—all approaches that deserve our attention, but not to the exclusion of considering the important roles of the police and criminal justice system (Rivara et al. 2025; Cook and Ludwig 2019a and 2019b; Ludwig 2025).

Similarly, commentaries about the value of "proactive" policing sometimes privilege "prevention" activities over the traditional role of the police in solving crimes (Weisburd and Majumdar 2018; Leovy 2015). The usual argument is that it is better to prevent crimes before they occur (through such strategies as hot-spots policing, "stop, question, and frisk," and "problem-oriented policing") than to "react" to crimes after they occur. But that argument ignores the preventive effects of convicting perpetrators, including deterrence and incapacitation. This is not the place to resolve the tradeoffs among alternative uses of police resources. But I do want to make the case for investing in effective police investigation.

II. Problems of definition and measurement

If the goal is improving police investigations of violent crime, it is useful to have one or more reliable performance measures. The usual indicator is some version of a “clearance” rate, meaning the percentage of cases “solved” by the police with an identified perpetrator. Most reports on crime clearance rates use the data and definitions from the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reporting Program (UCR). As with any statistical indicator, the FBI’s clearance rate has limitations and should be interpreted with care.

The FBI clearance rate (CR) combines two investigative outcomes, clearance by arrest and clearance by exceptional means. The FBI’s homicide clearance rate for, say, 2024 (61 percent), is the ratio of the number of homicides cleared in 2024 by at least one arrest or exception divided by the number of homicides in that year.¹ “Cleared by exceptional means” denotes instances that were not cleared by arrest but in which the investigating agency believed that it had nonetheless solved the case. Examples of exceptional clearances include the death of the suspect or refusal of the district attorney to prosecute the suspect identified by the police (usually due to a judgment about the strength of the evidence). Such exceptional clearances constitute about one in ten total homicide clearances nationwide.

While cases cleared by exception do indicate that the investigation was in some sense successful, they cannot be said to have contributed to preventing future violence. Even a measure limited to clearance by arrest is problematic. Given that the public interest in improving clearance rates is linked to concern with justice and crime control, arrest is only an intermediate stage in that quest. If an arrest is not followed by conviction and punishment, then the police may have arrested the wrong person, and in any case, that arrest will not deter, incapacitate, or bring satisfaction to victims. There are pragmatic statistical reasons for the focus on arrest rather than conviction, however, as court cases may drag on for years, and court outcomes are not as well-documented as police actions. So arrest is best viewed as an available outcome measure that is an imperfect surrogate for conviction and appropriate punishment.

In an analysis of over 1,000 criminal shooting instances in Durham, North Carolina, Audrey Vila and I documented the fact that many arrests do not result in conviction. We found that

¹ There is a tricky issue of timing. Since homicide investigations can persist for months or even years, some of the arrests in 2024 were for homicides that occurred in earlier years—and some of the homicides occurring in 2024 were cleared in subsequent years. The year-to-year variation in clearance rates may be affected by the number of current arrests for crimes occurring in previous years. A police department that was aggressive about clearing cold cases could boost its nominal clearance rate for the current year without improving its performance for current cases.

46 percent of gun homicides between 2017 and 2021 resulted in at least one arrest, but only 42 percent resulted in both an arrest and a prosecution. The corresponding statistics for nonfatal shooting incidents were 16 percent (arrested) and just 11 percent (prosecuted) (Cook and Vila 2025). Furthermore, not all prosecuted cases resulted in conviction. The ultimate conviction rate could not be determined because even years later, many cases had not yet been disposed of in the courts.

In sum, the FBI's clearance rate is an indicator of success, but far from perfect. Users beware!

III. Is the clearance rate a reliable performance indicator?

Clearance rates are used as police-performance measures, for better or worse. As such, they should be questioned. When a police department records a year-over-year increase in its CR, does that indicate that its detective unit deserves kudos, or is there something else accounting for the increase besides “performance”? What about cities such as San Diego, Austin, and Charlotte, which consistently outperform the average with respect to the homicide clearance rate—does that give them bragging rights? The answer begins with a resounding “maybe.” Before we celebrate such accomplishments, it’s important to understand what’s really going on.

In addition to the technical issues with the CR noted above, there is also the intrinsic problem of comparing apples and oranges. A useful measure for evaluating performance should adjust observed outcomes for intrinsic difficulty. Even if the performance comparisons are based on a single category of crime, such as homicide, the CR will be affected by the mix of cases within that category with respect to “solvability.”

Certain case circumstances lend themselves to ready solution—a victim found in her home who had called the police numerous times about her husband, or a bank-robbery shooting recorded on video and witnessed by several people who are eager to cooperate with the detective. Such cases are in contrast to a drive-by, gang-related shooting, where, if there are surviving witnesses, they may not know much or may be reluctant to share what they know with the cops. Every large city has a variety of homicide cases, but cities differ with respect to the proportions that are more and less solvable. To the extent that the case mix tends to be more challenging in Chicago than San Diego, say, then the fact that San Diego has a higher CR does not demonstrate that San Diego’s police department has performed better than Chicago’s. The usual CR measure confounds performance with degree of difficulty.²

Comparability problems are not limited to case mix. A potentially important problem is what it means in practice for a case to be cleared by arrest at a particular time and place. There is a story here that goes back to the early 1960s, when the FBI homicide CR was over 90 percent. The CR

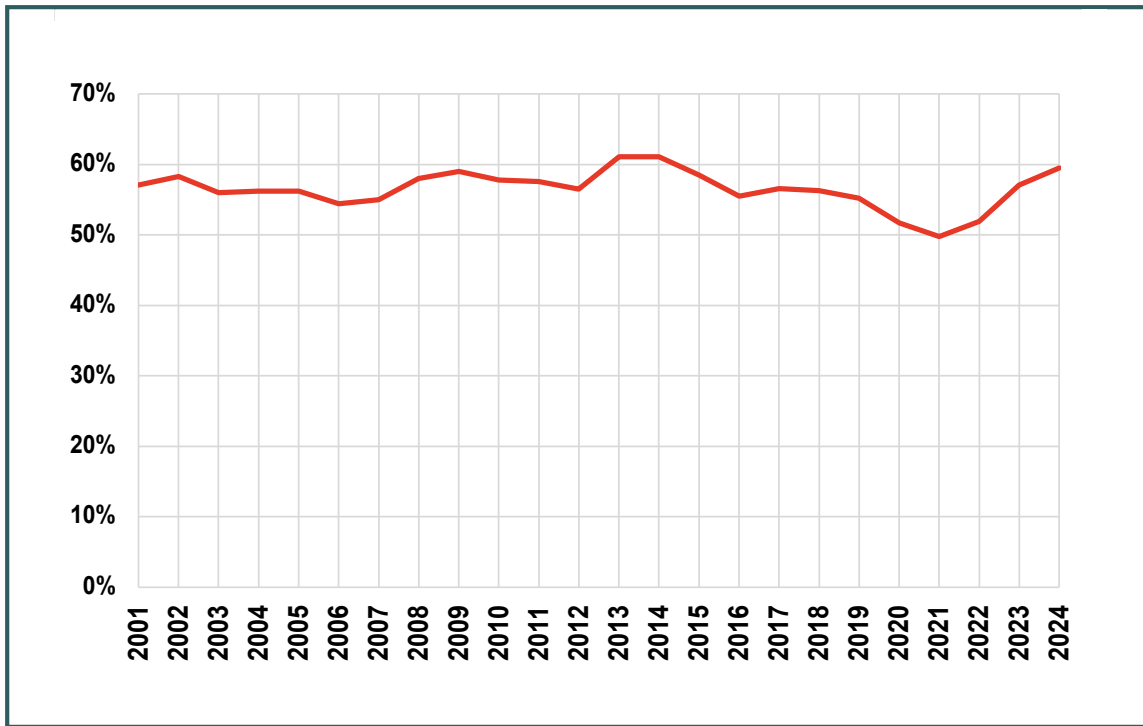
² There are analogous problems with other performance measures. Football fans will acknowledge that a college football team with a 6-2 record in the Ivy League Conference has not “performed” at the same level as a team with the same record in the SEC. Or take the case of rating golfers’ performance. Shooting a 5-over par at a local country club is not as impressive as a 5-over at a more challenging course, such as Augusta National, where the Masters is played. Golf, incidentally, has developed a system for adjusting individual scores for the difficulty of the courses on which they were made to produce a standardized “handicap.” There’s no entirely satisfactory adjustment scheme for comparing investigative performance across police departments, although to some extent it’s possible to create an index that standardizes for some aspects of the case mix (Cook and Mancik 2024).

dropped steadily through the 1970s and 1980s and, in the 1990s, plateaued around 60 percent. This “great decline” has long been a mystery, but Ashley Mancik and I believe we finally found the explanation (Cook and Mancik 2024), and it is *not* that the police performance deteriorated between 1960 and 1990. In fact, it appears that the arrest rates declined because the standards for making an arrest became more rigorous. The police were seemingly rather casual about whom they arrested in the 1960s, especially for homicides with Black victims (a group that accounts for almost all of the great decline). An important clue is that when we tracked convictions rather than arrests, the trend was *upward* through the 1990s; that is, the fraction of homicides resulting in arrest was declining, but the fraction of homicides resulting in conviction was increasing. A logical implication is that the likelihood that any one arrest would result in conviction trended strongly upward. Our speculation is that the police became much more restrained over that period, increasingly refraining from arresting suspects until they had developed a strong case that would satisfy the prosecutor and potential jury during a period when legal assistance for indigent criminal defendants became more widely available.

Even in recent years, it is reasonable to suppose that departments and jurisdictions differ with respect to standards for making an arrest. That possibility, coupled (as noted) with the issue of case mix and various technical issues relating to exceptional clearances, weakens the link between the CR and actual performance. That does not mean that the CR is worthless as a performance indicator, but it does reinforce the need for care in interpreting CR statistics.

Despite all the caveats, criminologists have not been inclined to challenge recent national trends in homicide clearance rates, as illustrated in Figure 1. As shown, the homicide CR varies from year to year, but with a particularly sharp drop in 2020–2021 (the COVID-19 years) followed by a rebound. While the data for 2025 are not final, it appears that the CR increased further in that year.

**FIGURE 1. HOMICIDE CLEARANCE RATES
2001-2024**



Source: FBI Crime Data Explorer; clearance-rate analysis by Jeff Asher, <https://jasher.substack.com/p/a-murder-clearance-rate-mystery>

IV. How to improve success rates for investigations of homicides and nonfatal shootings

Regardless of the challenges of measurement, police departments should seek to improve their actual performance. It is a compelling aspiration to solve more of the crimes of serious violence and bring the perpetrators to justice. One place to begin is reducing the caseload of investigators—that is, increase the number of detectives assigned to investigating crimes of serious violence. As a matter of common sense and available evidence, the time and other resources devoted to the investigation of each case affect the chances of success. How these resources are deployed is also important.

Anthony Braga, a criminologist at the University of Pennsylvania, advised the Boston Police Department on a major investment in improving homicide clearance that began in 2011. Here’s his conclusion, based on a thorough evaluation: “The Boston Homicide Clearance Project provides rigorous evidence that enhanced investigative resources, improved management structures, and oversight processes can increase homicide clearance rates and improve the chances that murderers

are apprehended in even the most difficult cases to clear. More gang- and drug-related gun homicides that plague most urban areas can be cleared with a focused investigative strategy” (Braga 2021). The key ingredients included increasing the number of homicide detectives, providing more-than-usual training and oversight, and standardizing investigative procedures.

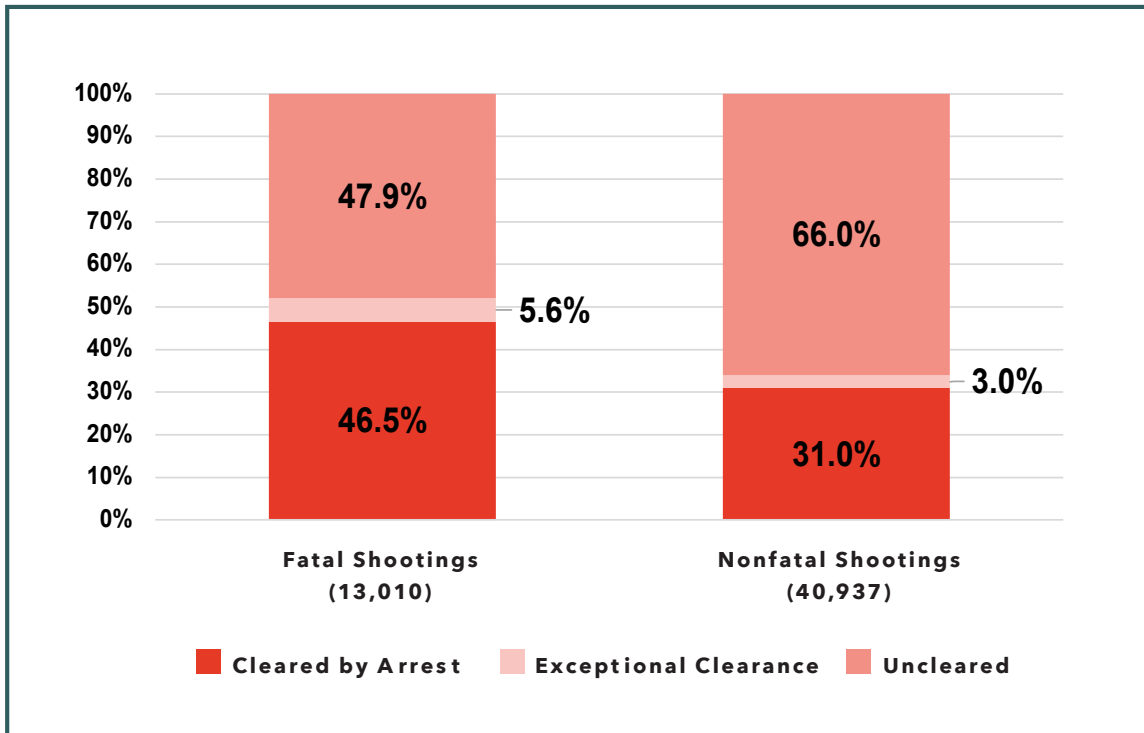
For nonfatal shooting investigations, we have the notable example of the Denver FAST program. In 2019, the Denver Police Department took decisive action to control gun violence. Noting the historically low clearance rates for nonfatal shooting cases—far lower than those for fatal shootings—Chief Paul Pazen decided to expand the resources allocated to investigate such cases. A new unit, called FAST (for Firearm Assault Shoot Team), was created and provided with the resources needed to investigate nonfatal shootings as thoroughly as if they were homicides. The increase in the arrest rate during the first year of FAST operations suggests that the program was successful in its proximate goal. (Whether it has succeeded in reducing gun violence is not easy to determine and awaits evaluation.)

Chief Pazen’s focus on nonfatal shootings was inspired by the belief that solving nonfatal shooting cases had nearly the same preventive effect on serious violence as solving fatal cases—a belief well-grounded in evidence. That evidence begins with a discovery by Franklin Zimring (1972), then a law professor at the University of Chicago. His research demonstrated that the mix of nonfatal shooting cases is very similar to the mix of fatal shooting cases with respect to the circumstances, motivation, and backgrounds of the shooter and victim.³ Thus, whether a shooting victim dies or (more likely) survives is largely a matter of chance rather than the intent of the shooter. One implication for law enforcement is that solving nonfatal shooting cases has approximately the same prevention payoff as solving fatal ones. (There’s no reason to think that perpetrators in nonfatal shootings are less dangerous than those in fatal ones.) In practice, however, fatal shootings—that is, homicides—are much more likely to be solved than nonfatal shootings.

³ There are systematic differences in the case fatality rate with respect to caliber of the weapon and the number of wounds, but those features are not highly correlated with intent (Cook and Braga 2018).

Figure 2 illustrates this gap using FBI data for fatal and nonfatal shootings in 2024. The statistics in the bar chart approximate national patterns as closely as possible given that the data is somewhat incomplete.⁴ The main takeaway is that investigations of fatal shootings had a 50 percent higher arrest rate than did those for nonfatal shootings.

**FIGURE 2. 2024 CLEARANCE RATES:
FATAL VS NONFATAL SHOOTINGS**



Source: Original calculations from FBI National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) data

⁴ I am grateful to Dr. Susan Parker for making the relevant computations from online National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) data. In 2024, almost all law enforcement agencies, covering 95.6 percent of the US population, used NIBRS to report crime data to the FBI. "Fatal shootings" are those included in the FBI's category of murder and non-negligent manslaughter. Nonfatal shootings were identified in NIBRS records as aggravated assaults and robberies with a firearm in which there was a serious injury, including the categories "other major injury," "possible internal injury," and "severe laceration." The counts understate the true totals somewhat due to reporting problems.

That disparity is especially notable given that nonfatal shootings leave an important witness alive. Victims often know their shooters or know something about them that is useful to the investigation (White et al. 2020)—so why aren't nonfatal shootings *more* likely to be solved? One explanation is that police departments typically give much higher priority to shooting cases if the victim dies. Compared to investigators assigned to aggravated assaults, homicide investigators have relatively light caseloads and the strongest claim to securing support from other officers and evidence labs. As a result, they have more time to pursue evidentiary leads and attempt to persuade witnesses to cooperate.

Denver's FAST program is intended to remedy this disparity, assigning enough investigators to nonfatal cases to ensure light caseloads and providing the same resources that are available to the homicide squad. This approach serves as a model for other police departments. The problem is that it is costly, especially during this era when police departments are having trouble replacing the many retirements and resignations that occurred during the COVID-19 era.

There is a second explanation, not so obvious, for why shooting cases are much more likely to be solved if the victim dies. The surviving shooting victims are all too often an *impediment* rather than a help to the investigators. Many victims dislike and distrust the police and may be influenced by the "no snitching" norm. If they refuse to cooperate, that effectively dooms the investigation (Cook, Ho, and Shilling 2017). Even if the police nonetheless pursue the investigation and are able to solve the case without the victim's input, prosecutors are reluctant to prosecute if the victim is unwilling to testify. Needless to say, detectives do not have to deal with this problem if the victim dies.

It is reasonable to suppose that if detectives have the time, they may find a way to "convert" an uncooperative victim. There are also other resources that may be helpful. If the police have the capacity to protect victims against retaliation, that may be effective in some cases. Another approach is to provide a tangible indication to victims that the police are invested in helping them. Police departments often have staff devoted to victim services who are not directly involved in enforcement. In some departments, staff are proactive in contacting gunshot victims and offering help. If the victim-service officer can form a positive relationship in this fashion, one result might be an increased chance that the victim cooperates with the investigator. The Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department has been a leader in victim advocacy, and a systematic study of their data suggests that a proactive outreach program has indeed improved gunshot victims' cooperation with the police (Parker, Magee et al. 2026).

In sum, investments in caseload reduction and fostering victim cooperation are promising avenues to improving investigative performance. There are also a variety of technological assists available. Indeed, high-priority investigations now make routine use of methods that were not available a few decades ago, such as the extensive use of DNA and ballistics testing, various databases, and video and other digital evidence. But while such advanced methods can make an important contribution, it has proven surprisingly difficult to demonstrate that they enhance productivity (Koper and Lum 2019; Lum, Koper et al. 2025). One interesting example is provided by the Chicago Police Department's Area Technology Centers.

Chicago Police Department's Area Technology Centers

Following a surge in gun violence in 2016, coupled with a drop in the arrest rate for fatal shootings to a rock-bottom 26 percent and nonfatal shootings to just 5 percent, the Chicago Police Department committed to expanding capacity in the Bureau of Detectives (BoD). In addition to increasing the number of detectives assigned to the Violent Crimes Section, the BoD created three Area Technology Centers (ATC) to support investigations of homicides and nonfatal shootings. The goal was to make better use of the video data that is routinely available in a city with 35,000 public surveillance cameras and many more private cameras in commercial places and residences. The ATCs also processed digital evidence from phones and other sources.

Working with the University of Chicago Crime Lab (which was able to provide financial support thanks to a gift from a private donor), the ATCs acquired state-of-the-art equipment and software for analyzing video and other digital evidence. The ATCs were staffed by Chicago Police Department officers who volunteered to receive training in the use of the new equipment. The first ATC opened in February 2019, followed by two others in August, at which point there was complete coverage of the city. The ATC staff were and are dedicated to assisting the detectives in four tasks involving digital video and other sources: obtaining access and downloading, processing, and creating compilations that help tell the story of the crime. Before the creation of the ATCs, individual detectives attempted to do these tasks themselves but lacked the training, equipment, and time necessary to make the most of these sources. Unlike some technological innovations, the ATCs were embraced by the detectives and incorporated into their routine activities from the outset.

I headed up an evaluation of the ATCs, working with colleagues at the University of Chicago Crime Lab (Cook and Berglund 2021). We conducted in-depth interviews with detectives and

ATC staff, with a strong finding that the detectives found the ATCs very helpful to their work and that the staff believed they were making an important contribution (Cook et al. 2023). The Department embraced the ATCs and incorporated them into its regular budget. One tangible indicator of success is that the number of pieces of video evidence doubled by the end of the first year of operation. Essentially every homicide investigation was supported by ATC staff (at the detectives' request), and a large minority of the nonfatal-shooting investigations were as well.

So did the ATCs make shooting investigations more productive? Focusing on homicides, the “success” rate (as defined by the percentage of cases that resulted in at least one arrest that was prosecuted) did shift upward by about 7 percentage points between 2018 and 2020 (the year before implementation and the year after). That increase, from 18 percent to 25 percent, is all the more impressive given that 2020 was the year Chicago, like other cities, experienced a huge surge in gun violence associated with the COVID-19 lockdown and civil unrest—and other cities experienced a general drop in clearance rates during this time. It can't be proved that the increased rate was due to the creation of the ATCs: because conditions were volatile, it is hard to make a confident estimate of investigation success in the absence of the ATCs. But the observed result is encouraging.

Arrest, as mentioned earlier, and even “arrest with prosecution,” are intermediate outcomes, surrogates for conviction and appropriate punishment. In our interviews with detectives, we heard a lot about the quality of evidence, especially in the context of their relationship to the state's attorney's office. Assistant state's attorneys decide whether to prosecute homicide cases brought to them by the detectives. In the detectives' experience, the prosecutors raised the evidentiary bar following the creation of the ATCs. They grew to expect that an arrest would come with a compilation of video clips that would tell much of the story—an obvious help in gaining a conviction from judge and jury. While creating that compilation was not always possible, it is plausible that the ATCs had the effect of increasing the strength of those cases that were prosecuted and a higher win-loss record for the prosecution. In effect, the benefits of the ATCs might have been clearer if we had had conviction data rather than prosecution data.⁵

⁵ As mentioned above, it may take years to process cases of serious violence in the courts, and so it is difficult to use conviction as an endpoint until long after the intervention that is being evaluated.

Looking ahead

The FBI's homicide clearance rate dropped from 61 percent in 2014 to 50 percent in 2021, during the surge in homicides associated with COVID-19 and the vilification of police following George Floyd's murder. It rebounded to 60 percent by 2024, with another big jump projected for 2025 (Asher 2025). A CR of about three in five, coupled with lower rates for other types of serious violent crime, has been the twenty-first-century norm nationwide. The conviction rate is unknown but markedly lower.

In solving crimes of serious violence, the police are providing a vital service to the victims and jurisdiction as a whole. The service, when performed well, may lead to a reduced rate of crime, coupled with an increased chance that the victim is satisfied knowing that some measure of justice has been done. But overall, the performance of police investigations falls short of the reasonable expectation that for most homicides and attempted homicides (nonfatal shootings), there will be an arrest and conviction.⁶ That would further both public safety and justice.

So there's much to be done. Promising approaches are not cheap, but there is a strong case for investing more in the investigation of serious violence, providing investigators with the time and tools needed to develop each case, together with adequate training. Given the uncertainty of just what reforms are worthwhile, research and development remains key, and, with the support of private philanthropy, is quite active. It is important to learn what we can about how to secure the cooperation of witnesses to serious crimes and how police departments can make the most cost-effective use of available technology, among other essential questions.

The ultimate goal is to prevent violence and deliver justice to survivors and victims. Of course, there are a variety of other violence-prevention measures that deserve public support. But selling at-risk youths on abstaining from gun violence is always going to be more difficult if shooting someone is unlikely to result in arrest and conviction.

⁶ It is relevant that some European nations have much higher homicide clearance rates than does the United States (Liem et al. 2018).

Key takeaways

This brief discusses several ways cities and their police departments can increase public safety and community trust by solving a larger share of reported shootings. Those strategies include:

- Upgrading the police investigation capacity for nonfatal shootings to equal that of homicides. In particular, investing in detective staffing, training, and access to technology.
- Developing alternative methods for improving cooperation in nonfatal shootings, including systematic use of victim assistance programs.
- Fostering better communication and coordination between the police and prosecution in cases of serious violence.

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