Many Americans Are Convinced Crime Is Rising In The U.S. They're Wrong.

But their fear makes everyone less safe.

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Will you get robbed this year? How would you rate your chances?

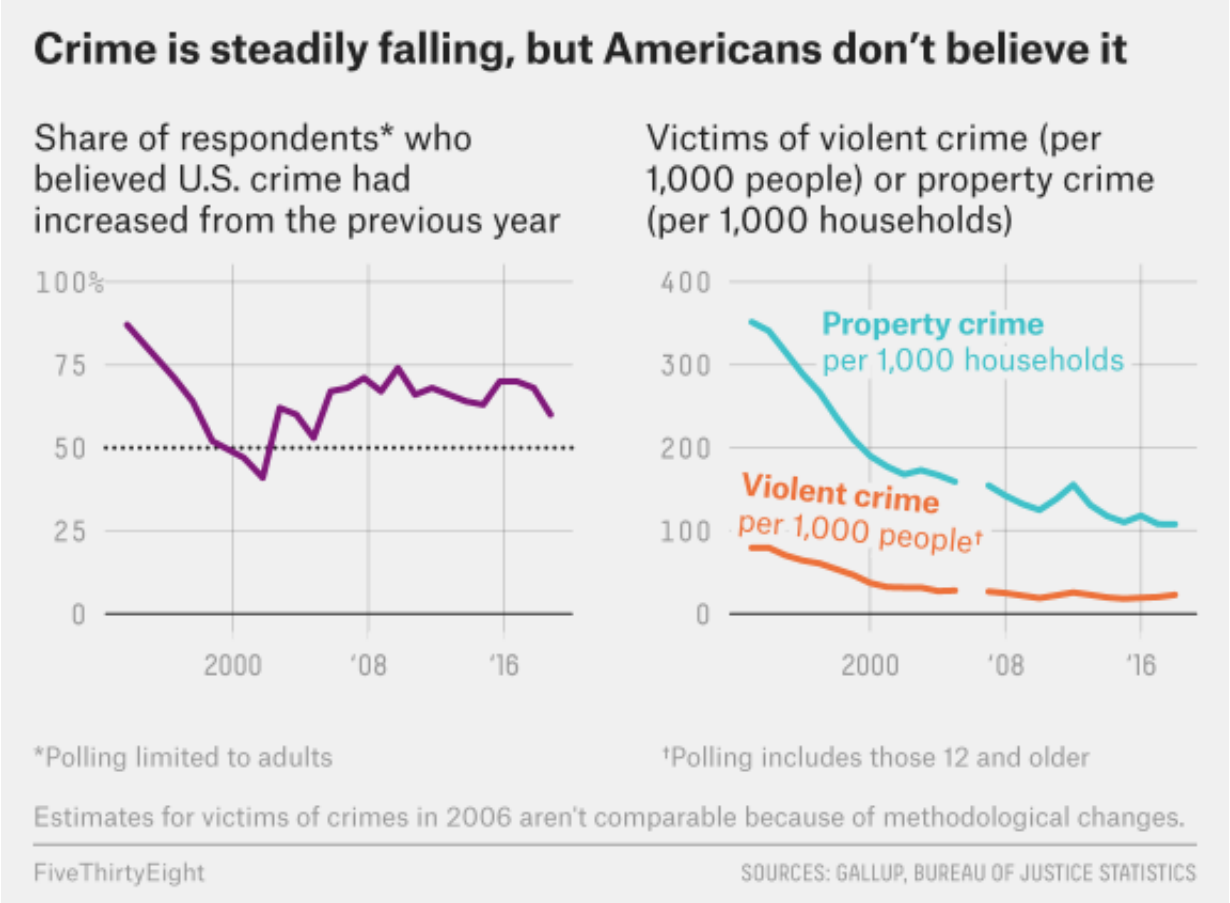
Over 10 years, from 1994 to 2004, the national Survey of Economic Expectations asked respondents to do just that. People estimated their risks for a whole host of bad-news life events — robbery, burglary, job loss and

losing their health insurance. But the survey didn't just ask respondents to rate their chances: It also asked whether those things had actually happened to them in the last year.

And that combination of questions revealed something important about American fear: We are *terrible* at estimating our risk of crime — much worse than we are at guessing the danger of other bad things. Across that decade, respondents put their chance of being robbed in the coming year at about 15 percent. Looking back, the actual rate of robbery was 1.2 percent. In contrast, when asked to rate their risk of upcoming job loss, people guessed it was about 14.5 percent — much closer to the actual job loss rate of 12.9 percent.

In other words, we feel the risk of crime more acutely. We are certain crime is rising when it isn't; convinced our risk of victimization is higher than it actually is. And in a summer when the president is sending federal agents to crack down on crime in major cities and local politicians are arguing over the risks of defunding the police, that disconnect matters. In an age of anxiety, crime may be one of our most misleading fears.

Take the crime rate. In 2019, according to a survey conducted by Gallup, about 64 percent of Americans believed that there was more crime in the U.S. than there was a year ago. It's a belief we've consistently held for decades now, but as you can see in the chart below, we've been, just as consistently, very wrong.



Crime rates do fluctuate from year to year. In 2020, for example, murder has been up but other crimes are in decline so that the crime rate, overall, is down. And the trend line for violent crime over the last 30 years has been down, not up. The Bureau of Justice Statistics found that the rate of violent crimes per 1,000 Americans age 12 and older plummeted from 80 in 1993 to just 23 in 2018. The country has gotten much, much safer, but, somehow, Americans don't seem to feel that on a knee-jerk, emotional level.

"The biggest challenge really, and we're seeing this as a society across the board right now, is that even though our organizations, our businesses, our government entities are becoming more data driven, we as human beings are not," said Meghan Hollis, a research scholar at the Ronin Institute for Independent Scholarship.

That's not to say that Americans are completely clueless about crime. When we spoke to John Gramlich, a senior writer with the Pew Research Center and one of the people who has been tracking and writing about this

disconnect for years, he was quick to clarify that Pew didn't like to frame Americans' apparent inability to register their own increased safety as a product of being uninformed or misinformed. The reality, he told us, is that the nature of data collection makes it hard for the public to really assess crime rates *and* for experts to assess what the public knows or feels about crime rates.

Even the concept of a "crime rate" is messy. When we talk about crime rates in the context of an article like this one, what we're actually discussing is the number of crimes, in a set of particular categories, that get reported to the police and, from there, to the Federal Bureau of Investigation — or results from a government survey about whether people have experienced crime. These stats document murder, rape, robbery and assault, among others, as well as several property crimes, including burglary, theft, car theft, and arson. That covers a lot of ground, and it gives us a pretty good idea what the crime rate truly looks like — enough that experts feel comfortable saying things like "Hey, look, the crime rate has been going down for 30 years."

But those statistics don't tell the whole story, and that matters in ways that become important when you're trying to understand the difference between how people feel and what the data say. Not all crimes are reported to the police. Sexual assault, in particular, is notoriously underreported. And there are plenty of crimes we don't really track well in data — like vandalism, drug use and sales, or public intoxication — which can affect how safe people feel in their neighborhoods, even if the crimes aren't serious.

Wesley Skogan, professor emeritus of political science at Northwestern University, spent much of the 1990s attending neighborhood-level public meetings around Chicago and documenting the issues that residents told police were problems they wanted solved. Some of these issues weren't even, strictly speaking, crimes, at all. In 17 percent of the meetings, residents asked police to do something about litter. Loud music or other noise-related problems were discussed in 19 percent of the meetings.

Residents complained about abandoned cars more often than they complained about gang problems. Skogan thinks about these factors as measurements of social disorder, and has found evidence that these things affect how safe people feel. If violent crimes are down, but there's still a good deal of social disorder in an area, people's responses to a survey might reflect how they feel about litter more than how they feel about a reduced murder rate.

The way the polls are worded also don't help. "The polling tends to be pretty generic," said Lisa L. Miller, a political scientist at Rutgers University who studies crime and punishment, which makes it hard to capture the difference between how Americans think about murder and litter when it comes to how safe they feel. More importantly, she said, questions like "Do you think crime has gone up or down?" is not the same thing as measuring fear. "When people are genuinely worried about crime and really fearful, it tends to be in relation to violent crime. That's the thing I've found really drives public pressure for the government to do something," she said.

This whole thing is further complicated because crime is extremely localized — and estimates about the national crime rate are, well, not.

"All the homicides in Chicago occur in about 8 percent of the city's census tracts," Skogan said. For almost everybody, he said, that means "the crime you hear about is crime somewhere else." And that matters because research suggests people are a lot better at estimating the crime rate in their own backyard than they are at estimating what it's like across town, or across the country.

Finally, there's the question of race, which permeates and complicates everything surrounding crime. It's not just trash and loitering that make people perceive a neighborhood as more dangerous regardless of the crime rate. When Lincoln Quillian, a professor of sociology at Northwestern University, analyzed data from three surveys of crime and safety in cities across America, he found that people perceive their neighborhood as more

dangerous — regardless of the actual crime rate — if more young Black men live there. That was true for both Black and white respondents of the surveys, but in some cities the effect was significantly more pronounced in white people.

This is all a long-winded way of saying the situation is messy on many levels, but it remains true that people's personal fear of being victims of crimes and their perceptions of national crime rates are far from accurate.

So why do Americans still think crime is high?

Turns out, the local news may be responsible for convincing Americans that violent crime is more common than it really is. Researchers have consistently found that "if it bleeds, it leads" is a pretty accurate descriptor of the coverage that local television broadcasters and newspapers focus on. For years, rarer crimes like murders received a lot more airtime than more common crimes like physical assault. And that hasn't changed as the crime rate has fallen.

Understandably, seeing stories about violent atrocities on the news every night seems to make people afraid that the same thing could happen to them. According to one study conducted in California, consumption of local television news significantly increased people's perceptions of risk and fear of crime. "The news is not going to report on things that are going really well very often," Hollis said. "It's not like 'Hey Austin, Texas doesn't have a whole lot of crime and that's our news for the day!'" Stories about gun violence grab attention, so you get more stories about rare, but serious, crimes. "You can have people perceiving areas of cities as much more violent than they actually are because that's what they see in the news," she said. "It really amplifies that view of criminal activity beyond what it really is."

There's a significant amount of evidence, too, that reporting on crime can prop up harmful stereotypes: Studies have found that local news media disproportionately portray Black people as perpetrators of crime, and white

people as victims.

There's also plenty of fodder for this kind of coverage because even though crime has fallen a lot over the past few decades, the U.S. is still a pretty violent country, at least compared to other developed nations. "Violence remains an American problem," Miller said. "Just think about mass shootings. So in that sense it's not irrational for people to be somewhat fearful of violence."

But often, those fears can be blown out of proportion — not just by wall-to-wall murder coverage on the news, but also by politicians who bring up the crime rate in press conferences and interviews. President Trump is far from the first president to paint a dark vision of crime in American cities, but he is singularly obsessed with the topic, especially now. According to a HuffPost analysis, the vast majority of the ads his campaign aired in the month of July dealt in some way with public safety. In one ad, an elderly woman is robbed as text flashes across the screen reading, "You won't be safe in Joe Biden's America."

And a recent study suggests that Trump's words could have an effect. Researchers found that news coverage and political rhetoric — as measured by mentions of crime in presidential State of the Union speeches — were significant indicators of whether Americans thought crime was a pressing issue facing the country. The actual crime rate was not. A HuffPost poll conducted from July 22 to 24 found something similar: Only 10 percent of Americans correctly believe that crime has fallen over the past decade, while 57 percent think crime has increased.

Some Americans may be more receptive to tough-on-crime rhetoric than others, of course. Republicans are generally more apt to say that crime is a serious problem facing the country than Democrats. And although Pew analysis of polling data doesn't uncover big racial differences in perceptions of crime, white and Black Americans likely think about crime very differently because criminal justice has become so inextricably tied to race.

Hakeem Jefferson, a political scientist at Stanford University who studies race and justice, told us that Black people's views on criminal justice are complex, in part because they're likelier than other demographic groups to actually live in high-crime neighborhoods and to be victims of crime. In other research, he's found that some Black people have also internalized negative stereotypes about who commits crime, and may be more likely to embrace punitive solutions as a result. Those perceptions and experiences are hard to capture in public opinion data, but they can do a lot to shape what Black people mean when they tell a pollster that they think crime is a serious issue facing the country. And that's important, because as the past few decades have shown, Black people are also much likelier to be mistreated by police, experience incarceration or grapple with the challenges of a criminal record.

Regardless of what's driving fear of crime, though, the fact that it is so out of whack with reality can make it really hard to change people's minds or reform the criminal justice system. It's not that an out-of-proportion fear of crime automatically leads people to support more punitive policies — right now, for instance, Americans are mostly not in favor of *more* money for policing. But these misperceptions can make it harder for reforms to gain traction, particularly if politicians with a big national platform — like Trump — are talking about out-of-control crime at every turn.

It's not hard, for instance, to imagine that kind of rhetoric being used as a wedge against efforts to restructure local funding for the police. Especially considering that in the past, a fear of crime has been used politically as a reason to oppose criminal justice reforms like reducing incarceration or changing the bail bond system — even though research suggests those reforms don't increase crime in the long term.

The history of "law and order" campaigns is riddled with dog whistles, and Trump's recent rhetoric about sending federal agents to combat crime in cities like Chicago arguably falls into this category, according to Justin

Pickett, a criminologist at the University of Albany who studies attitudes toward crime and justice. Talking about the dangers of crime, he said, can turn into a cover for racist attitudes.

None of this has made us safer. And ironically, fear of crime can actually lead to other behaviors that put us at greater risk, like buying and carrying guns. If anxiety about crime keeps Americans from embracing different ways of thinking about criminal justice, that may be doing more harm than good, too. For instance, there's no real evidence that putting more people behind bars contributed to the decrease in crime or that imprisoning fewer people will raise crime. Instead, a mountain of research points in the opposite direction to problems and inequalities linked to mass incarceration.

The trouble is that fear about crime isn't rational, and it's hard to convince people to think differently about a problem that they don't experience on a day-to-day basis anyway. "You can tell Americans that the crime rate is lower today than it was in the 1990s, but it won't feel real to them," said Kevin Wozniak, a sociologist at the University of Massachusetts Boston. "That is, unless politicians stop drumming up the crime rate and people stop hearing about murder every night on the local news."

And that seems unlikely to happen in 2020.