REPORT

JANUARY 2026

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THE PUBLIC SAFETY CLIMATE IN THE CITY OF ST. LOUIS

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Most types of crime in St. Louis have declined consistently over the past 20 years. The major exceptions are homicide, which has declined from its COVID spike in 2021 but remains on a slightly upward trajectory on a per-capita basis, and motor vehicle theft, which spiked substantially in 2020.

- Although St. Louis once had considerably higher per-capita rates of aggravated assault, larceny, burglary, and robbery than Kansas City or Springfield, the three cities—the largest three cities in Missouri—are now quite similar.

- When compared to similar U.S. cities (Louisville, Cincinnati, Memphis, and Mobile), St. Louis's crime rates (with the exception of homicide and motor vehicle theft) follow similar trends. The one exception is Memphis, which has become more dangerous than St. Louis in recent years.

- Since 2021, St. Louis has improved its clearance rates for homicide, aggravated assault, robbery, and burglary. Clearance rates for homicide have been as high as 70 percent in recent years.

- Motor vehicle thefts largely go unsolved in St. Louis; over the last 10 years, just one out of 10 has been cleared annually.

- Estimates of the number of Missourians who were victims of crime, compared to reported crimes, suggest that as many as 50 percent of violent crimes and 65 percent of property crimes in the state may go unreported. So, although the number of reported crimes has declined in recent years, total crimes committed may not have.

- Although it happened over a decade ago, the shooting of Michael Brown and the subsequent "Ferguson Effect" have had an impact on the relationship between St. Louis police officers and the community. A lack of trust in the police force may still be contributing to crimes going unreported.

- The St. Louis 911 system has been plagued by staffing shortages and other challenges that have left response times below national targets. Construction of a new 911 center is underway, but it has been delayed.

- Media sensationalism around violent crime, and homicides in particular, in St. Louis led to distorted perceptions regarding public safety (or the lack thereof) in the city.

- While violent crimes, including homicides, are concentrated in a few of the poorest neighborhoods in St. Louis, crimes of public disorder, such as vandalism, vagrancy, trash in the street, and aggressive panhandling are concentrated in the downtown and Central West End neighborhoods, where visitors are more likely to spend time. This may contribute to St. Louis's reputation as a dangerous city to visit.

INTRODUCTION

The City of St. Louis is frequently characterized as having high crime rates. It is often cited among the most dangerous cities in the United States and has been colloquially referred to as the "murder capital of the country."[1] While the city's violent crime rate in 2024 was notably higher than the national average, it was substantially lower than it had been just five years earlier.[2] Perhaps it just takes time for negative reputations to change, or perhaps the relationship between perception and reality regarding public safety in St. Louis is complex. This analysis explores that relationship.

Like many cities in the United States, St. Louis has seen a significant decline in crime in recent years, particularly since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this does not mean that the city has "solved" crime. This analysis explores crime and other public safety trends in St. Louis, both in total and per capita, comparing them against trends in other major cities in Missouri—Kansas City and Springfield—and four comparable U.S. cities: Louisville, Kentucky; Cincinnati, Ohio; Mobile, Alabama; and Memphis, Tennessee. This report examines clearance rates for crime by category.

In concert with the actual crime data, this analysis digs into why St. Louis is still perceived as dangerous. In particular, it examines how unreported crime, media sensationalism, distrust in the police, and general public disorder—such as vandalism, aggressive panhandling, and uncollected trash—may affect the perception of public safety in St. Louis regardless of what the crime statistics say.

St. Louis presents a compelling case study of a city grappling with a complex crime narrative where significant reductions in official crime rates, particularly homicides, are being touted by local officials but do not seem to have affected public perception of the city. This creates a challenge for civic leaders attempting to foster a sense of safety and promote urban revitalization. The consistent reporting of recent decreases in homicides and overall crime stands in direct contrast to public polling data indicating high levels of concern, suggesting that policy success in crime reduction does not automatically translate to public confidence.[3]

Throughout this report we have included quotes from one-on-one interviews with stakeholders in St. Louis public safety. The quotes remain anonymous, but the speaker's role is noted.

PART 1: THE REALITY

How Crime Is Reported

Before digging into St. Louis crime data, it is worthwhile to first consider how crime is reported. It should be noted that although St. Louis consistently ranks as one of the most dangerous cities in the nation, this ranking may be inflated due to St. Louis's unusual governmental structure. Unlike most major U.S. cities, which report crime statistics for their entire metropolitan areas, St. Louis's crime data often reflects only the city proper, which has a comparatively smaller population than many other similar cities. When crime rates, particularly homicides, are calculated on a per-capita basis using only the city's population, they appear disproportionately high.[4]

For instance, in 2022, the murder rate in the City of St. Louis was reported as 68.18 per 100,000 residents, beaten only by New Orleans's rate of 71.0.[5] However, if the homicide numbers and populations of both the City of St. Louis (population 279,695 in 2024) and St. Louis County (population 992,929 in 2024) were combined to represent the broader St. Louis metropolitan area, the murder rate for 2022 would have been approximately 22.63 per 100,000 residents.[6] This combined rate is less than one third the city's rate alone and is comparable to other major U.S. cities like Indianapolis (23.92).[7]

"But why wouldn't we have to make the case to the Missouri State Patrol to create an Office of Uniform Crime Reporting just for St. Louis City and St. Louis County? That office wouldn't mean the jurisdictions are one—it would just be for reporting purposes. Because right now, when people compare crime, they're only looking at St. Louis City, which is about 10% of the metro area. And if you look anywhere else in Missouri, there isn't another independent city set up that way."—Business representative

This crucial distinction is often lost in national rankings and media reports, perpetuating a narrative of danger for the entire region. Further, headlines often sensationalize crime data, which can distort reality and intensify public fear. Reports labeling St. Louis as the "Least Safe City in America" based on city-only data are often widely disseminated without proper context, further entrenching the city's dangerous reputation.[8] **However, because of the way crime data are reported, this analysis focuses on the City of St. Louis exclusively—and unless otherwise noted, the term "St. Louis" is used as shorthand for "the City of St. Louis" throughout this report.**

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) maintains two primary systems for national crime data collection: the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program and the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS).[9] The UCR program, initiated in 1930, served as the FBI's long-standing national data collection effort and was designed to provide standardized crime statistics. It traditionally relied on summary data, collecting aggregate counts for eight "Part I" offenses (criminal homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, motor vehicle theft, larceny-theft, and arson) and arrest data for "Part II" offenses such as simple assault, forgery, and fraud. A defining characteristic of the UCR program was the "hierarchy rule," which mandated that only the most serious offense be reported in incidents involving multiple crimes.

The NIBRS was developed to enhance the quality, quantity, and timeliness of crime data collected by law enforcement. The NIBRS captures detailed information on each single crime incident, including all separate offenses within the same incident, thereby eliminating the "hierarchy rule." It provides a richer dataset, encompassing details on victims, offenders, and property involved across 22 crime categories and 46 specific "Group A" offenses. Since 2021, NIBRS has been the primary national standard for crime data collection.

For its official crime statistics, the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department (SLMPD) uses NIBRS. This shift to NIBRS by SLMPD means that direct comparisons with historical UCR data (pre-2021) or with agencies still primarily

reporting under UCR standards require careful consideration of the methodological differences between the two standards. Any attempt to establish long-term trends in St. Louis's clearance rates or crime incidence, particularly across the 2021 transition from UCR to NIBRS, must account for these definitional and methodological shifts. The preliminary nature of CompStat data adds another layer of complexity for real-time analysis versus official year-end reports.

In 2023 SLMPD adopted the CompStat Methodology, a system designed for internal operational review that compiles and analyzes crime statistics at citywide and geographic levels.[10] CompStat reports compare current crime data against seven-day, 28-day, and year-to-date periods for the prior year and earlier years, providing a framework for accountability and resource allocation. However, these CompStat figures are preliminary and subject to change.

This analysis focuses on only a few types of crime: homicide, aggravated assault, robbery, burglary, larceny, and motor vehicle theft. The first three are considered violent crimes, and the last four are property crimes. All reported data on number of crimes and crime rates per capita were obtained from the FBI Crime Data Explorer, a nationwide system of crime reporting that can be filtered by crime type and agency.

Overall Crime Trends in St. Louis (Violent and Property Crimes)

In recent decades St. Louis has experienced a dramatic reduction in both property crime and violent crime incidents. In the 1990s the city recorded nearly 14,000 reported property crimes annually, a figure that has since decreased to approximately 6,000 (Figure 1).[11] Similarly, violent crimes have seen a reduction of over 50 percent, falling from a peak of nearly 4,000 reported incidents in 1993 to under 1,500 by 2023. This sustained downward trajectory demonstrates a significant improvement in the city's overall crime landscape over a prolonged period.

It is important to acknowledge that this long-term decline has been punctuated by more recent fluctuations. A notable increase in crime occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic era, a phenomenon observed across many urban centers nationwide. However, the pandemic represents a short-term anomaly within a broader, decades-long trend of decreasing crime. The focus on recent spikes, while valid for immediate concerns, can obscure the substantial progress made in reducing overall crime volumes within the city over time.

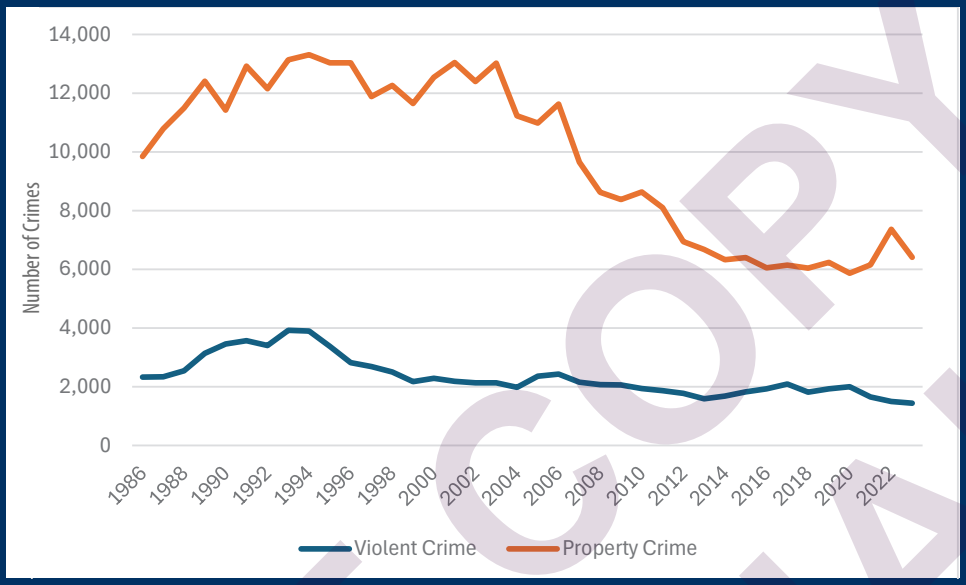
"I've seen too many cases where people have a firearm and they still get robbed, mugged or carjacked—and then their gun gets stolen. It doesn't make sense for everybody to have a gun. It's stupid."—Law enforcement

Despite the decrease in crime rates, homicide is still a major problem that needs to city. The city has had a steady 150 to 200 murders each year for the past 43 years (Figure 2).

Figure 1

Annual Numbers of Crimes in the City of St. Louis by Category: 1986–2023

The number of property crimes has declined significantly since the late 1990s.

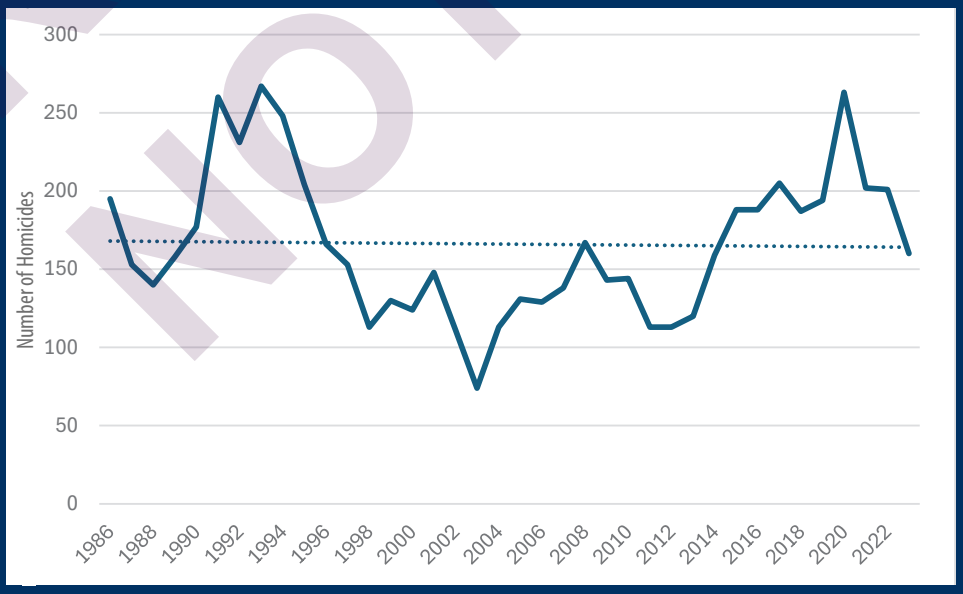


Source: FBI Crime Data Explorer, https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend.

Figure 2

Number of Homicides in the City of St. Louis: 1986–2023

St. Louis has had an average of 160 homicides each year for the past 40 years.



Source: FBI Crime Data Explorer, https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend.

Per-Capita Crime Trends

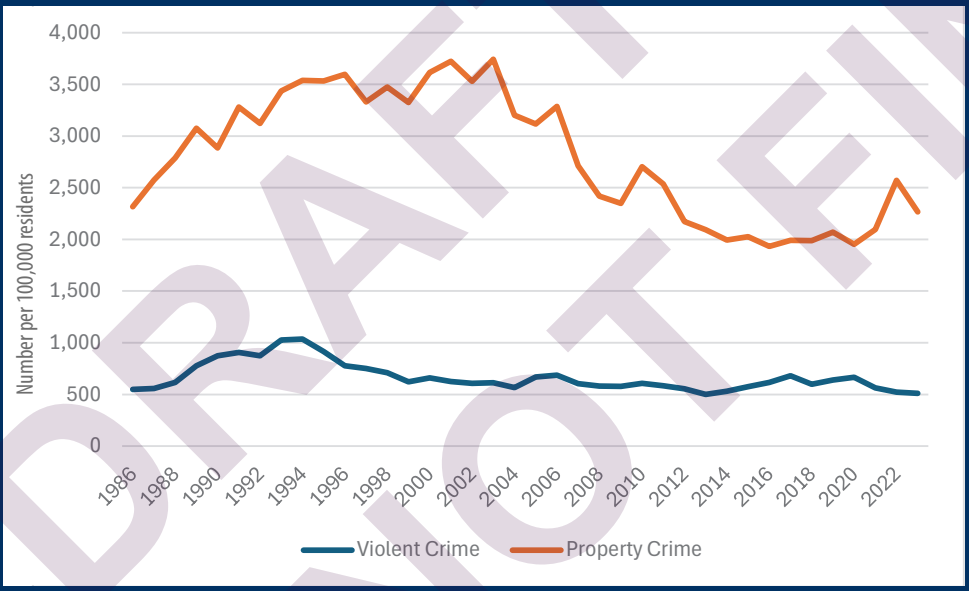
Understanding crime trends requires considering population changes, as raw crime numbers can be misleading in cities experiencing demographic shifts. St. Louis has undergone a significant population decline over the past several decades, which naturally impacts per-capita crime calculations. While total crime numbers have decreased, the per-capita rates provide a more accurate reflection of an individual's risk within the city.

The population of the City of St. Louis in 1986 was 424,981. As of 2023, the number had dropped to 282,772, a 33 percent decrease. The reduction in the number of crimes as the population is decreasing has resulted in per-capita rates of crime that have declined, but not as dramatically as the number of crimes has (Figure 3). Nonetheless, it cannot be said that the City of St. Louis is more crime-ridden than it was 30 years ago.

Figure 3

Per-Capita Rates of Crime in the City of St. Louis by Category: 1986–2023

Per-capita property crime rates have improved in the last 20 years.



Source: FBI Crime Data Explorer, https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend.

Figure 4

Per-Capita Homicides in the City of St. Louis: 1986–2023

Even with recent improvements, the per-capita homicide rate in St. Louis has been on an upward-sloping trend over the past 40 years.

Source: FBI Crime Data Explorer, https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend.

Looking at homicides specifically, there has been an increase in the number of murders per capita over the last four decades (Figure 4). Reduced numbers of homicides in 2024 and year-to-date in 2025 are unlikely to change the direction of the trend line for this type of crime, although they may flatten it.

Comparative Analysis of Crime Trends

To provide a comprehensive understanding of St. Louis's public safety landscape, it is essential to compare its crime trends with those of other cities, both regionally and nationally. This comparative approach helps contextualize St. Louis's performance and identify areas of relative strength or weakness.

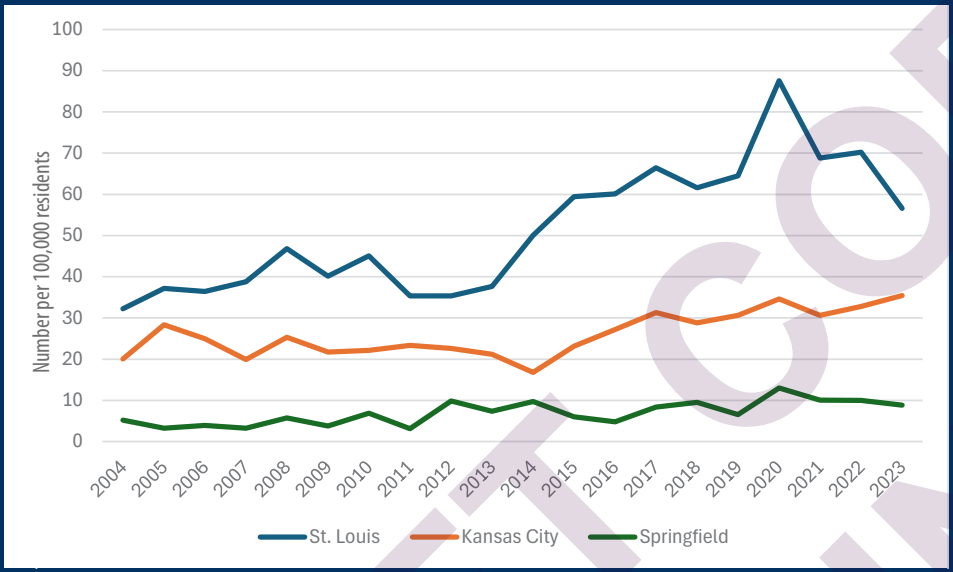
Comparing Crime in St. Louis to Other Missouri Cities

Comparing St. Louis to other major cities within Missouri—Kansas City and Springfield—offers valuable regional context. Kansas City and St. Louis share similar demographics, while Springfield differs. Springfield is predominantly White, with just 12 percent of its population being non-White. St. Louis residents are an even split between White (44 percent) and Black (42 percent). Kansas City's demographic split is 55 percent White and 25 percent Back. Kansas City has the highest Hispanic population share, at 12 percent.

Figure 5

Per-Capita Homicide Rates of St. Louis, Kansas City, and Springfield: 2004–2023

The gaps in per-capita homicide rates between St. Louis, Kansas City, and Springfield have widened in the last 20 years.



Source: FBI Crime Data Explorer, https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend.

In terms of crime, St. Louis tends to rank slightly ahead of Kansas City in most yearly rankings that compare the most dangerous cities, while Springfield hasn't ranked in the top 10 most dangerous cities in the United States. Interestingly, on a per-capita basis, Springfield has caught up to the other two cities in many areas of crime, with the notable exception of homicide (Figure 5).

St. Louis is a clear outlier in homicide rates within Missouri. Kansas City and Springfield have had mostly consistent homicide numbers, with Kansas City seeing a slight uptick in the last nine years. St. Louis, meanwhile, has had a steady increase, albeit with a decline in the most recent years. It is interesting to note that all three cities had upticks in 2020 during the COVID lockdowns.

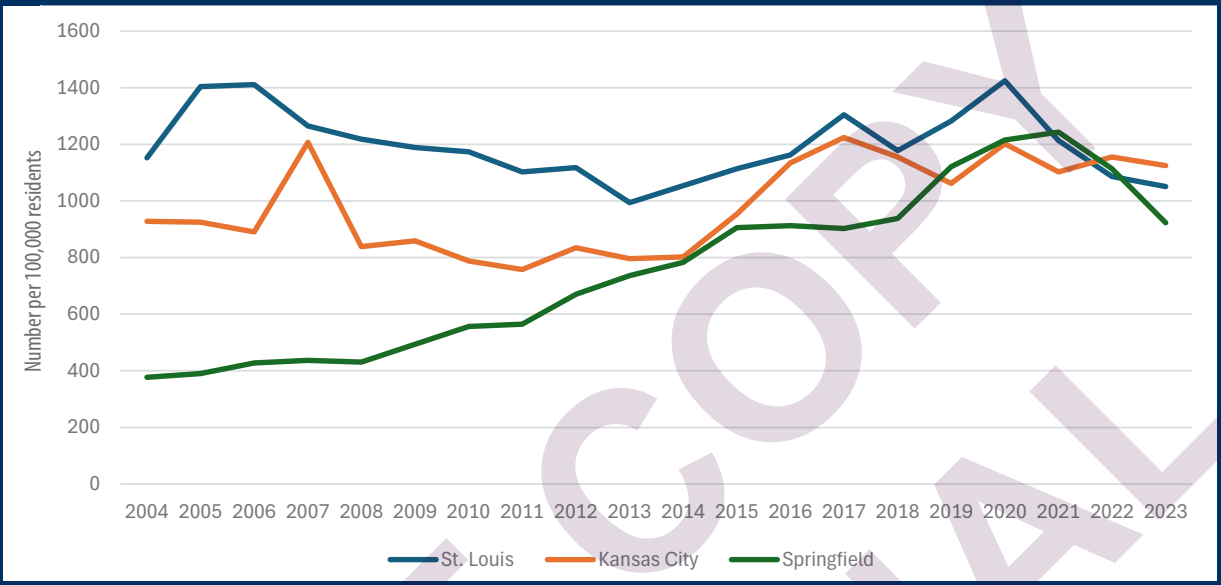
"Like, they just focus on homicide. It seems like every crime statistic—how bad your crime problem is—always comes back to homicide numbers. So yes, I think there's been a lot more attention on that lately, and a little more strategic focus over the last, I'd say, two years."—Victim advocate

Twenty years ago there was a noticeable difference in the rates of aggravated assault among the three cities (Figure 6). However, Springfield and Kansas City have experienced a steady increase while St. Louis has remained consistent. Springfield has more than doubled its per-capita aggravated assault rate since 2004.

Figure 6

Per-Capita Aggravated Assault Rates of St. Louis, Kansas City, and Springfield: 2004–2023

Due to increases in per-capita aggravated assault rates in Springfield, the three cities are now quite similar by this metric.

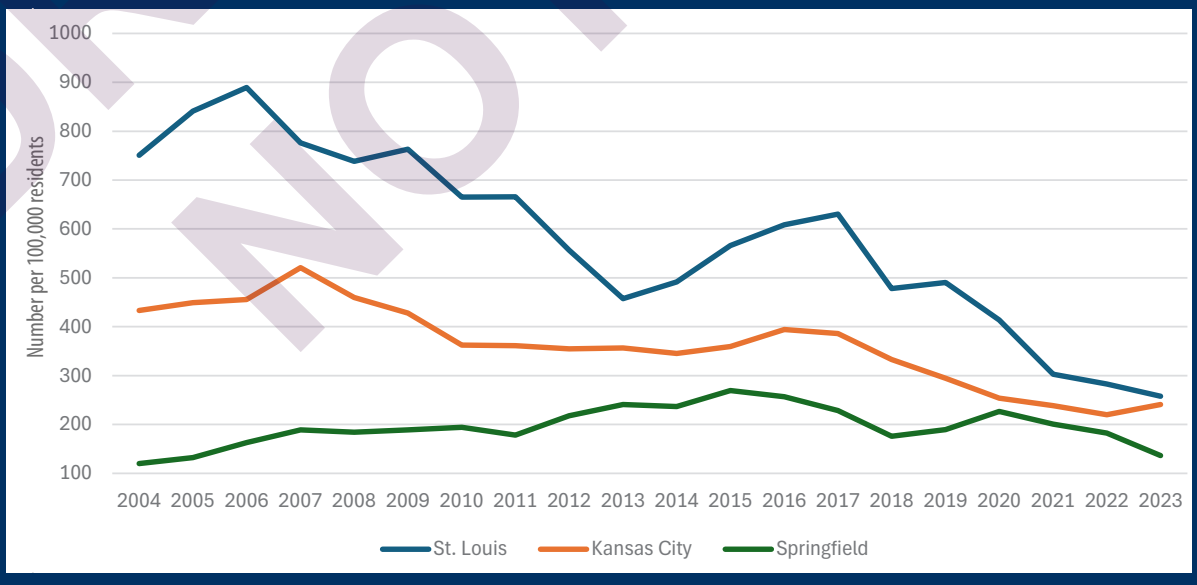


Source: FBI Crime Data Explorer, https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend.
Note: Aggravated assault is defined as an unlawful attack by one person up another for the purpose of inflicting severe or aggravated bodily injury.

Figure 7

Per-Capita Robbery Rates of St. Louis, Kansas City, and Springfield: 2004–2023

While St. Louis used to have much higher robberies per capita, the three cities are now quite similar.



Source: FBI Crime Data Explorer, https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend.
Note: Robbery is defined as the 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 and/or by putting the victim in fear.

Robbery is another category in which the three cities used to be quite disparate and are now similar (Figure 7). Fortunately, this is due to reductions in rates of robbery in St. Louis and Kansas City rather than increases in Springfield. In fact, these numbers are one of the most promising trends for St. Louis, as its robbery rates have been cut in half in the last 20 years.

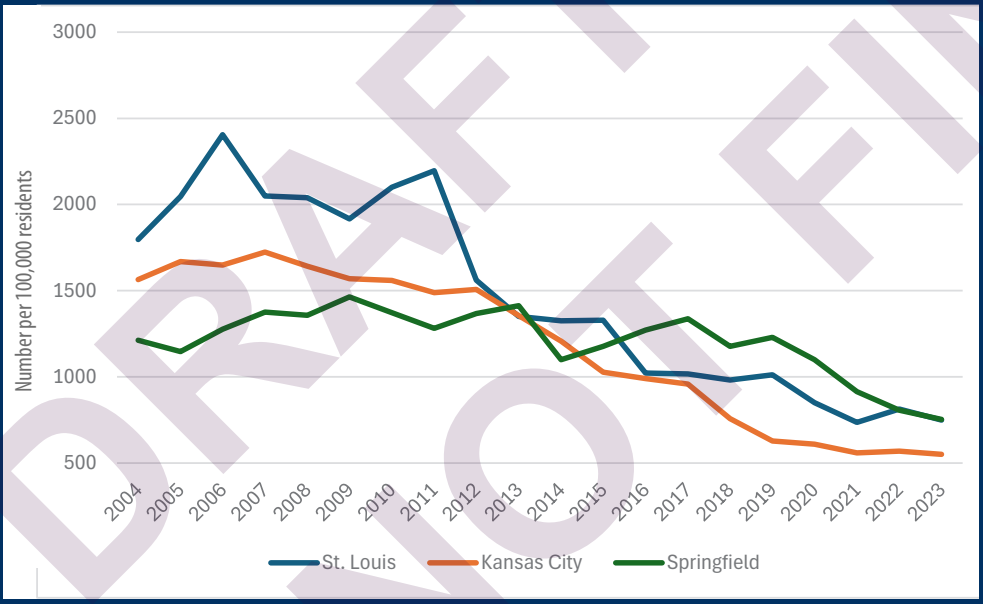
"I mean, it's not just guns, it's carjacking. I mean, they think it's fun to go out on the weekends and carjack people, and then they just joyride the car and abandon it. Sometimes they get caught, sometimes they don't, sometimes we don't know who did it."—Law enforcement

Burglary rates have decreased for all three cities (Figure 8). There have been some slight upticks in certain years, but overall the trend is positive for the major cities in Missouri.

Figure 8

Per-Capita Burglary Rates of St. Louis, Kansas City, and Springfield: 2004–2023

All three cities have seen improvements in per-capita rates of burglary.



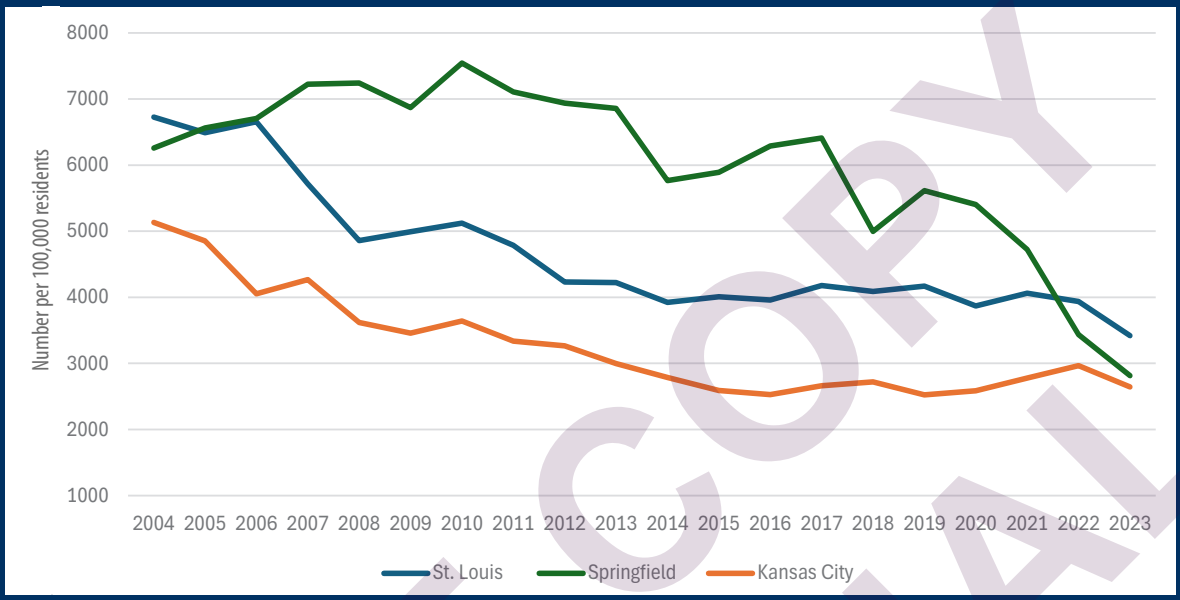
Source: FBI Crime Data Explorer, https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend.

Larceny is one of the only crime categories for which the rate in Springfield has been significantly above that in St. Louis for any extended period, although recently Springfield's rate has fallen below St. Louis's (Figure 9). The rate in Kansas City has slowly decreased and has remained below the rates of both Springfield and St. Louis.

Figure 9

Per-Capita Larceny Rates of St. Louis, Kansas City, and Springfield: 2004–2023

From 2006 through 2021, Springfield had higher per-capita rates of larceny than St. Louis or Kansas City.

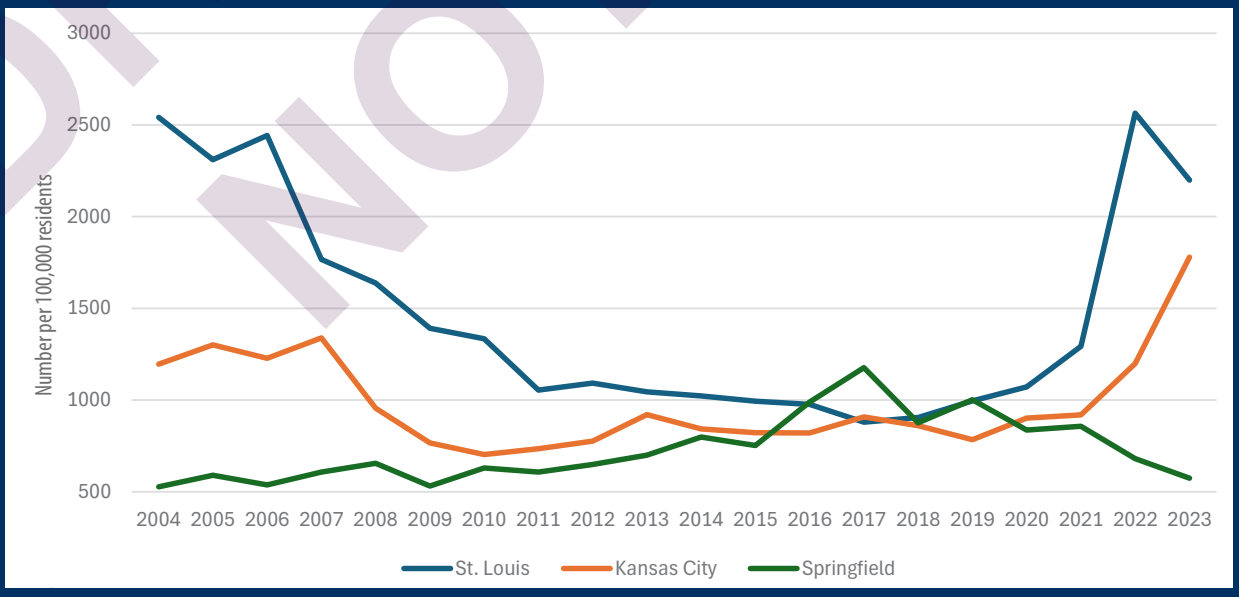


Source: FBI Crime Data Explorer, https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend.
Note: Larceny is defined as The unlawful taking, carrying, leading, or riding away of property from the possession or constructive possession of another.

Figure 10

Per-Capita Motor Vehicle Theft Rates of St. Louis, Kansas City, and Springfield: 2004–2023

Decreases in per-capita motor vehicle theft rates were reversed in 2021, when thefts of Kias and Hyundais caused a spike.



Source: FBI Crime Data Explorer, https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend.

The rates of motor vehicle theft in all three cities converged about 10 years ago at around 1,000 per 100,000 residents (Figure 10). After remaining unchanged for quite a few years, rates in both Kansas City and St. Louis experienced spikes in 2021. This was likely due at least in part to social media trends involving the theft of Kias and Hyundais.

Summarizing the comparison of St. Louis to its Missouri neighbors Kansas City and Springfield yields some interesting conclusions. With the exceptions of homicide and motor vehicle theft (but only recently), the three cities are not that different. In some cases, such as aggravated assaults, Springfield has, unfortunately, caught up to the other two with an increase in its per-capita rate. In others, such as robbery and burglary, improvements in St. Louis have brought it in line with the other two. Perhaps the public is slow to recognize that St. Louis is not the dangerous outlier it once was. Or perhaps the high murder rate and high motor vehicle theft rate, and the accompanying media attention, drown out public perception of improvements in other crime categories.

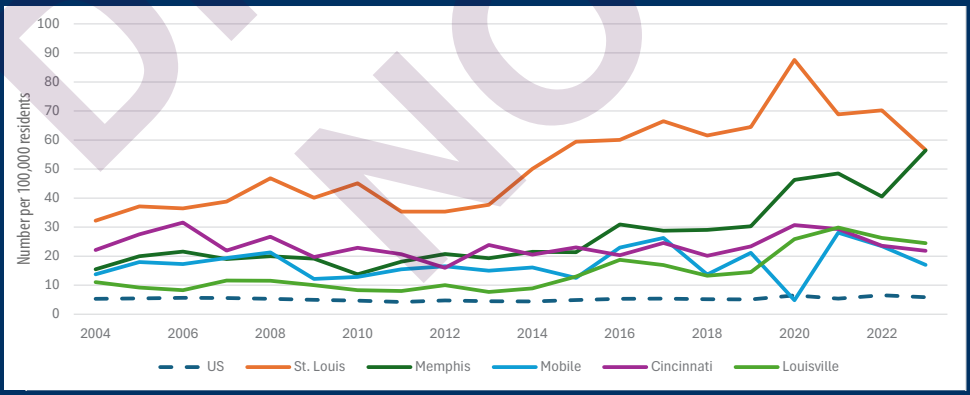
Comparing Crime in St. Louis to Other, Similar U.S. Cities

In addition to comparing St. Louis to its Missouri peers, it is helpful to see how the city compares to similar cities in other states. For this analysis, St. Louis will be compared to Memphis, Tennessee; Mobile, Alabama; Cincinnati, Ohio; and Louisville, Kentucky. Appendix 1 contains a table of demographic and other variables that indicate how good a fit each of these cities is for comparison to St. Louis. They range in size from 183,000 people (Mobile) to 625,000 (Louisville), with St. Louis in the middle at 283,000 people.

Figure 11

Per-Capita Homicide Rates of St. Louis, Memphis, Mobile, Cincinnati, and Louisville: 2004–2023

Although St. Louis has been an outlier in its per-capita homicide rate, Memphis has recently joined it.



Source: FBI Crime Data Explorer, https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend.

Note: Burglary is defined as the unlawful entry of a structure to commit a felony or theft.

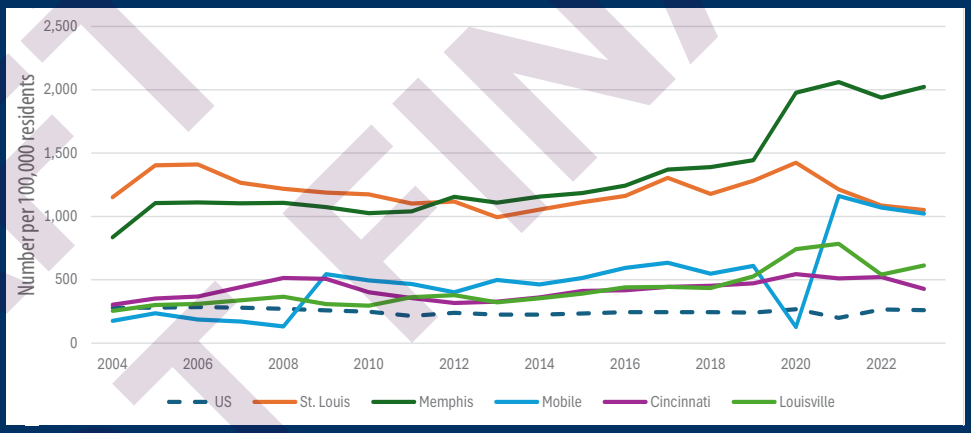
It is interesting in Figure 11 to see how far St. Louis is above the other cities in homicide, although recently Memphis has caught up. Memphis is notorious for having a high homicide rate, but the graph shows that its numbers were similar to those of the other cities (aside from St. Louis) up until 2019. All cities experienced an increase in 2020. St. Louis has begun to trend down since its spike in 2020.

St. Louis and Memphis have had significantly higher per-capita aggravated assault rates than the other cities for the last two decades (Figure 12). Mobile has had a sudden increase since 2020 and hasn't returned to previous levels. Memphis and St. Louis have diverged since 2020, as Memphis's rate of assaults has skyrocketed.

Figure 12

Per-Capita Aggravated Assault Rates of St. Louis, Memphis, Mobile, Cincinnati, and Louisville: 2004–2023

Memphis has overtaken St. Louis as having the most aggravated assaults per capita, and Mobile has caught up.



Source: FBI Crime Data Explorer, https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend.

Note: Aggravated assault is defined as an unlawful attack by one person up another for the purpose of inflicting severe or aggravated bodily injury.

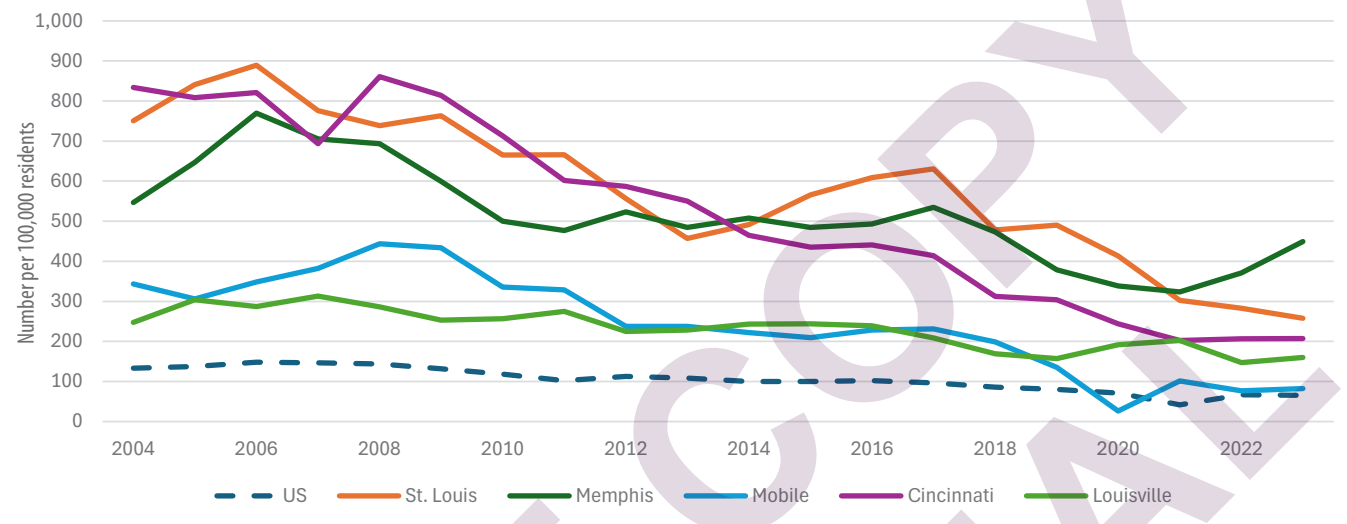
Robbery rates have decreased in each of the five cities since 2004 (Figure 13). Memphis has had an uptick in the last few years, but it is still far below its 2003 rate.

Burglary rates (Figure 14) tend to follow the same downward trajectory as robbery rates. Burglary rates in Memphis are like robbery rates in the sense that they have had a small jump in the last few years that bucks the trend of the other cities in the graph.

Figure 13

Per-Capita Robbery Rates of St. Louis, Memphis, Mobile, Cincinnati, and Louisville: 2004–2023

All five cities have seen their per-capita robbery rates improve.

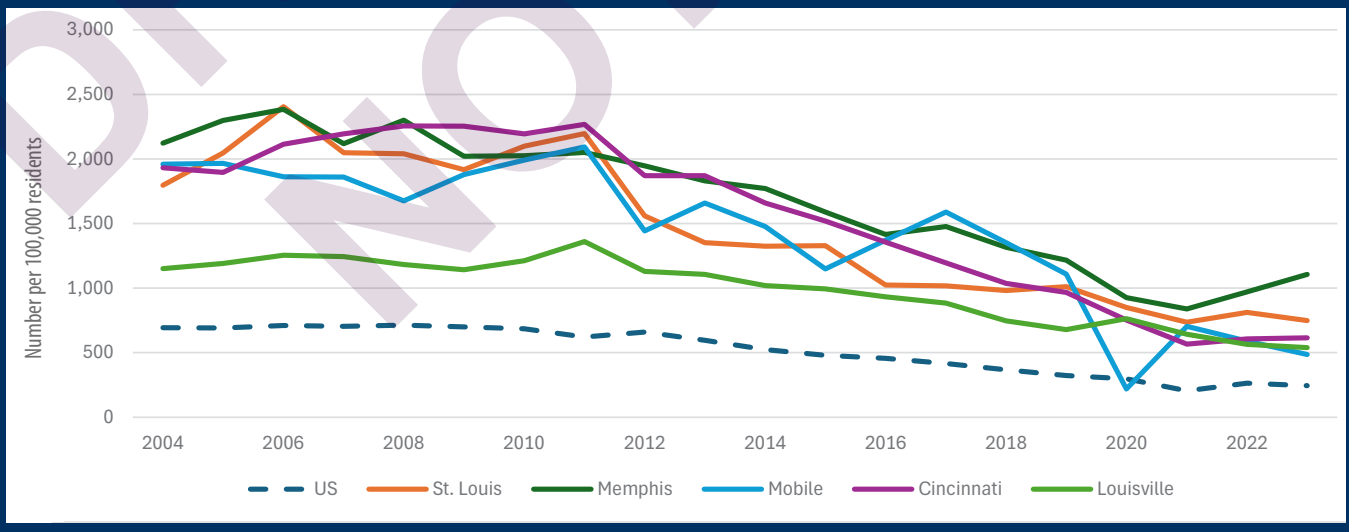


Source: FBI Crime Data Explorer, https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend.
Note: Robbery is defined as the taking or attempting to take anything of value from the care, custody or control of a person or persons by force or threat of force and/or by putting the victim in fear.

Figure 14

Per-Capita Burglary Rates of St. Louis, Memphis, Cincinnati, Mobile and Louisville: 2004–2023

All five cities have seen their per-capita burglary rates improve.



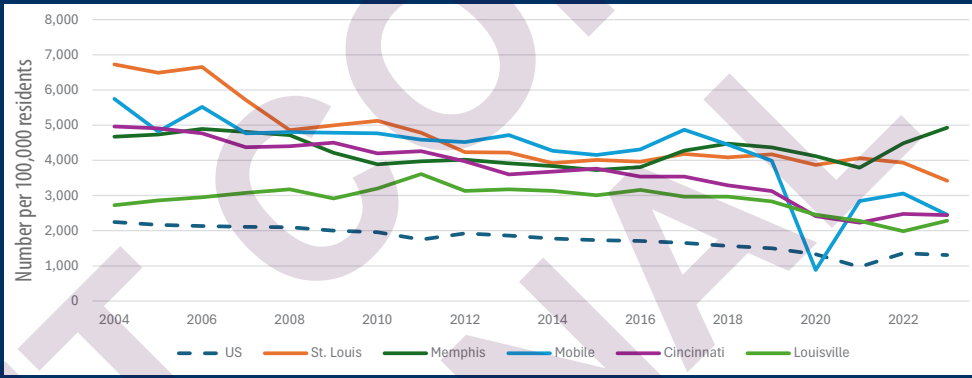
Source: FBI Crime Data Explorer, https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend.
Note: Burglary is defined as the unlawful entry of a structure to commit a felony or theft.

Larceny rates don't show the same substantial drops as robbery and burglary, but most cities have improved, with the exception of Memphis (Figure 15). Memphis yet again has had a steady increase in this crime category since 2020. St. Louis and Mobile have made the most progress since 2023.

Figure 15

Per-Capita Larceny Rates of St. Louis, Memphis, Mobile, Cincinnati, and Louisville: 2004–2023

St. Louis used to have the highest rate of larceny, but now it is in line with the other four cities.



Source: FBI Crime Data Explorer, https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend.

Note: Larceny is defined as the unlawful taking, carrying, leading, or riding away of property from the possession or constructive possession of another.

Motor vehicle thefts remained steady for most cities other than St. Louis until 2021 (Figure 16). The 2021 spike in vehicle thefts was largely attributable to the social media trend that involved stealing Hyundais and Kias. All cities other than Mobile seemed to be affected by this trend. Memphis and St. Louis had the greatest increases in 2021 and received significant media attention as a result.

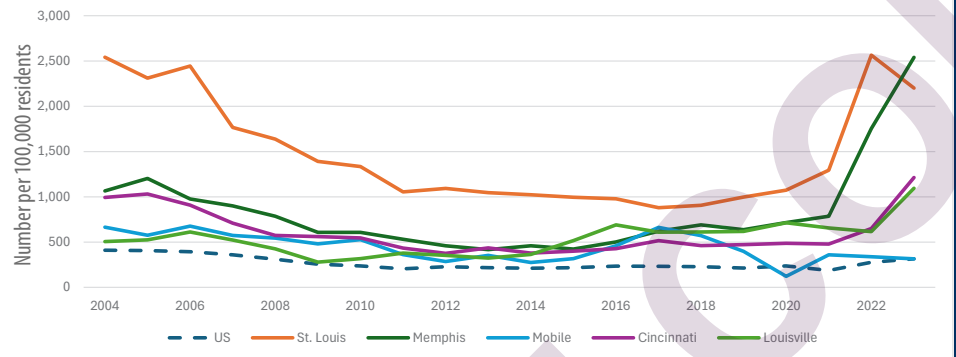
"I mean, even at the park—I live near Forest Park—the basketball courts they put in recently had some flash pickup game that led to ridiculous fights. I don't know how bad the injuries were, but there were a couple of arrests. I think it was between women too. That kind of thing is not good for the city's reputation."—Academic researcher

When comparing St. Louis to these four similar cities, some patterns emerge. The first is that Memphis has become increasingly crime ridden in the last decade and has surpassed St. Louis in per-capita rates of most types of crime. Secondly, homicide continues to set St. Louis apart, as it did in the regional comparison. Even with the decline of the past few years, St. Louis's per-capita murder rate is triple those of Cincinnati, Louisville, and Mobile. Finally, while St. Louis has been experiencing improvements in crime rates similar to those of the other cities for most categories of crime, the same cannot be said for motor vehicle thefts.

Figure 16

Per-Capita Motor-Vehicle Theft Rates of St. Louis, Memphis, Mobile, Cincinnati, and Louisville: 2004–2023

St. Louis has typically had much higher rates of motor vehicle theft than the other four cities, although Memphis spiked more than St. Louis in 2021.



Source: FBI Crime Data Explorer, https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend.

Clearance Rates of Reported Crimes in St. Louis

In law enforcement terminology, a crime case is deemed "cleared" when it has been resolved.[12] The primary method of clearance is "cleared by arrest," which occurs when at least one person involved in the commission of the offense has been identified, arrested, formally charged, and subsequently turned over to the court for prosecution. This signifies a successful investigative outcome leading to legal action. A case can also be "cleared by exceptional means." This applies when all investigative leads have been exhausted, the identity of the offender is definitively established, there is sufficient evidence to support an arrest and charges, and the offender's exact location is known, but some element beyond law enforcement's control prevents formal charges. Examples include the death of the offender, a victim's refusal to cooperate in prosecution, or the denial of extradition. It is important to note that clearance rates, particularly for homicides, often include cases solved in the current calendar year that may have originated in previous years. This standard practice, aligned with FBI guidelines, allows for a more comprehensive view of investigative success over time.

"I'm not really sure what's going to lead to case clearance. . . . I did a bunch of work with [former St. Louis circuit attorney] Kim Gardner a couple of years ago, and what we found was that a lot of people don't want to participate in prosecution. They don't want to go to court, they don't want to speak out, they don't want to be the person who knocks on somebody, or whatever you want to call it."—Academic researcher

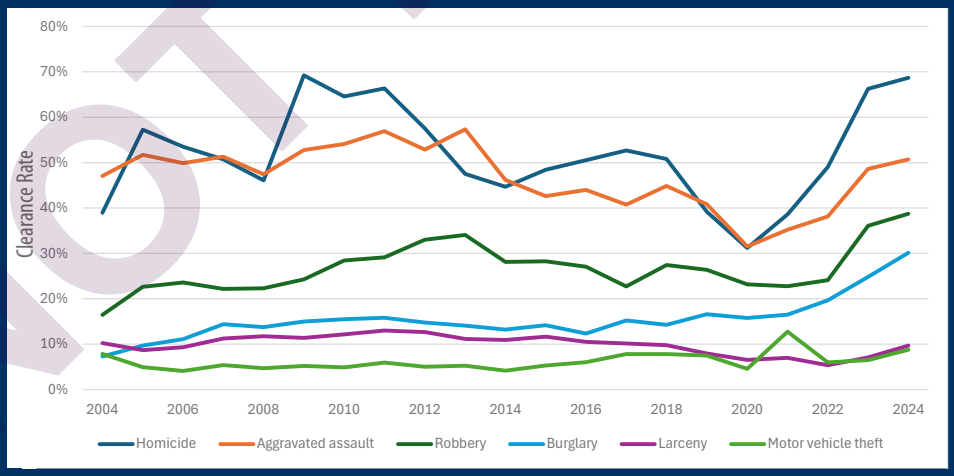
Clearance rates are a vital metric for assessing the effectiveness of law enforcement agencies in solving crimes and bringing perpetrators to justice. High clearance rates can indicate successful investigative strategies, potentially deterring future criminal activity and bolstering public confidence in the justice system. Conversely, persistently low clearance rates for serious offenses can suggest that dangerous individuals remain at large, contributing to a sense of insecurity and eroding community trust. These rates reflect not just police effort but the entire criminal justice chain's ability to resolve cases from initial investigation to prosecution.

Homicide clearance rates in St. Louis have shown notable fluctuations over time (Figure 17). After a period of decline, reaching a low of 38 percent in 2020 amidst a national crime surge, the city has demonstrated a substantial rebound. Rates improved to 66 percent in 2023 and remained strong at 69 percent in 2024. Early data for 2025 indicate an impressive 80 percent homicide clearance rate as of August 2. These recent figures significantly surpass the national average, indicating enhanced investigative success. One thing that should be noted is that homicides that are cleared may not have happened in the year that the crime was reported as cleared. In other words, if SLMPD is able to clear homicides from prior years, the clearance rates for the current year will improve. Further investigation would be needed to see if that is what has happened since 2020.

Figure 17

St. Louis Metro Police Clearance Rates by Crime Type: 2004–2024

Clearance rates have improved in St. Louis for violent crimes, but they remain quite low for property crimes.



Source: FBI Crime Data Explorer, https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend.

Other violent crime year-end clearance rates in St. Louis since 2004 have generally fluctuated in the range of 30 percent to 50 percent. Improvements in clearance rates may be due to specific operational changes and strategic shifts within the St. Louis criminal justice system. The proliferation of surveillance cameras and the establishment of the Real Time Crime Center in St. Louis in 2015 have provided crucial evidence for investigations, significantly enhancing the capacity of detectives to gather leads and identify suspects.[13]

Property crime clearance rates have, in general, not improved. In particular, the one category with stubbornly low clearance rates is motor vehicle theft. Fewer than 10 percent are resolved, and given that there were over 6,000 vehicles stolen in the city in 2024, that leaves many victims with unresolved losses of their cars. It's possible that the low clearance rates actually add to the number of vehicle thefts if perpetrators do not expect to be caught.

PART II: THE PERCEPTION

While statistics suggest that crime has been going down substantially in St. Louis, particularly since the late 1990s, it still may not be the case that residents and visitors feel safe in the city. There are several potential reasons for a disconnect between reality and perception. This analysis examines how unreported crime, distrust in the police, media sensationalism, and general public disorder such as uncollected trash, vandalism, and panhandling may be affecting the perception of public safety in St. Louis regardless of what the crime statistics say.

> ***"St. Louis is kind of a small big city where people know each other. . . . We have multiple moms who've lost multiple sons to homicide, or a husband and two sons. There are families who've lost several members. So I'd think they wouldn't say they're feeling that difference yet."—Victim advocate***

Unreported Crime in St. Louis

One potential reason for the perception of a lack of public safety in St. Louis is that crime statistics may not accurately reflect reality. If sufficient numbers of crimes go unreported, it is possible that crime isn't declining at all. Unreported crime, often referred to as the "dark figure of crime," may represent a significant gap between the actual number of criminal incidents and those officially documented by law enforcement.[14] Crimes may go unreported for both victim-centric reasons, meaning the victim of a crime chooses not to report it to law enforcement, and system-centric reasons, meaning administrative and other challenges that make it difficult or impossible to report or accurately count criminal incidents.

Researchers attempt to quantify unreported crime through victimization surveys such as the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) administered by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), in which respondents are asked whether they were a victim of crime.[15] These responses can then be compared to actual crime statistics to estimate unreported crime.

"Or looking at law enforcement differently, I guess, is another way to consider it. . . . I think there are certain populations and areas where people don't call the police. They just handle it themselves—they retaliate as their way of getting justice and dealing with the crime how they prefer to."
—Victim advocate

While the NCVS has been strictly a national-level survey since its inception, a subnational breakdown for 22 states became available in 2025. According to this new breakdown, from 2020 to 2022 it was estimated that 2.53 percent of Missourians ages 12 or older were the victims of violent crime.[16] The same survey estimated that 47.3 percent of violent victimizations were reported to the police over that period. By contrast, FBI data report that just 0.46 percent (or one-fifth of 2.5 percent) of Missourians were the victims of reported violent crime.[17] (Crime rates are often reported for each 100,000 residents. In this case, the reported violent crime victimization rate was 2,530, while the reported violent crime rate was 459.) Similarly, the 2020–22 NCVS analysis estimated that 39.4 percent of property crimes in Missouri were reported to police.[18] While these numbers are for the full state of Missouri, there is no reason to assume that St. Louis has less unreported crime than the rest of Missouri. Thus, reported crime data may be missing about half of the violent crimes and 60 percent of the property crimes.

Although they can provide some insight into unreported numbers, victimization surveys have inherent limitations. The NCVS, for instance, explicitly excludes murder from its scope for obvious reasons. There is also inherent skepticism regarding the accuracy of self-reported data due to issues of recall bias or possible unwillingness to disclose sensitive experiences.[19] Critically, NCVS data can sometimes diverge significantly from data in the UCR system. For example, the NCVS showed a substantial 75 percent increase in serious violent crime in the U.S. from 2021 to 2022, whereas UCR data indicated a two percent *decrease* over the same period.[20] This divergence may be partly attributed to a decline in crimes being reported to the police, highlighting a fundamental challenge in accurately assessing the true crime rate. It may also be an indication of the limitation of self-reported victimization.

Unwillingness to Report a Crime

A primary victim-centric reason that crime may go unreported is fear. Victims may fear retaliation from the perpetrator, especially in cases of domestic violence or sexual assault. BJS estimated that between 2006 and 2010, three in 10 crimes involving a weapon were unreported to police and in 42 percent of those cases it was due to fear of retaliation by the offender.[21] There is also a common apprehension about not being believed or taken seriously by authorities, as well as a fear that those who report a crime will inadvertently get into trouble themselves, particularly if they were engaged in "risky behaviors" or criminal activity at the time of the victimization.

"I would assume that community members do not think crime is getting better. . . . The numbers that are decreasing—I believe in 2020 we had over 200 homicides, and this year I think it's going to average out like 130 or so. But that's still 130 people, right, who are shot and killed. And so I think we're still feeling that."—Victim advocate

A pervasive, chronic distrust of law enforcement in some communities can also be a major factor in underreporting.[22] Low public trust in the police is not merely can directly lead to lower reporting rates. This dynamic creates a cycle where underreporting perpetuates a lack of accurate data, which in turn hinders effective policing and further erodes community trust, making it even less likely for future crimes to be reported.

Certain types of crimes are consistently and significantly underreported compared to others. These include domestic violence, sexual assault, and lower-level property crimes such as larcenies from cars. In contrast, more severe crimes like homicide are generally considered to have much higher reporting rates, though even these can have definitional nuances and it is clearly impossible for victims of homicide to report them.

Inability to Report a Crime

A major systemic factor for unreported crime is difficulty in reporting crime. The St. Louis 911 system, a critical pillar of the city's public safety infrastructure, has demonstrated significant and well-documented shortcomings.[23] These issues manifest across several key domains: operational inefficiencies leading to delayed or failed emergency responses, an aging and vulnerable technological backbone, persistent challenges in staffing and retaining qualified personnel, and questions surrounding the efficacy of accountability mechanisms. Despite recent efforts by city leadership to invest in new facilities, upgrade technology, and improve dispatcher compensation and training, the system continues to grapple with these foundational issues.

The SLMPD Communications Division functions as the city's primary Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP), handling over 800,000 calls annually and triaging requests for all emergency services. However, it should be noted that within just St. Louis County there are 90 municipalities, 52 police departments, and 15 different PSAPs, which can lead to inconsistency and misrouted calls.[24]

In early 2023, less than 60 percent of city of St. Louis 911 calls were answered within 10 seconds.[25] This figure is notably below the national standard, which generally aims for 90 percent of calls to be answered within 10 seconds and for 90 percent of those to be processed within 60 seconds.[26] While improvements have been reported, with 84.4 percent of calls answered within 10 seconds by April 2024, the system still falls short of the national standard.[27]

"I mean, things have gotten better, so I hate to harp on how they were. But even just a couple years ago—I called 911 once because people were fighting outside our building, and the line was busy for 30 minutes before I got through."—Victim advocate

There may be issues that extend response times, such as concerns about the quality of interaction and initial assessment by dispatchers. Public-complaint mechanisms exist for callers who feel a call evaluator acted inappropriately or that their call was not handled properly. St. Louis County instituted a feedback system in 2024. The 9-1-1 Call Evaluation Survey is a text sent to the caller's number within hours of the call.[28] The St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department has not yet implemented a similar system. However, callers with complaints can go to the department's internal affairs web page or they can fill out a survey form on the department's communications page.[29]

One explanation for the slow response times is that St. Louis has grappled with significant challenges in staffing, recruitment, and retention of its 911 dispatchers. A national survey of 911 emergency response systems found that the average vacancy rate was about 25 percent from 2019 to 2022.[30] At that same time, the vacancy rate in St. Louis was as high as 37 percent.[31] The city has been trying to address the shortage by having police cadets work in the 911 dispatch center and by relaxing the requirement that dispatchers must be residents of the city.

The construction of a new, consolidated 911 Dispatch Center is a major public safety investment aimed at improving response times and centralizing services. Construction of this new center was to begin in June 2025 and to finish in 2026. However, this project has been plagued by significant delays and transparency concerns.[32] The total project cost is projected at $45 million, of which $10 million is to come from American Rescue Plan funds.

In addition to shortcomings in its 911 system, the SLMPD is confronting a profound and multi-dimensional staffing crisis. The department's workforce shrank from approximately 1,600 officers in 1995 to a historic low of 912 by December 2022.[33] This represents a nearly 40 percent reduction in uniformed personnel, a decline that is significantly more severe than the city's population decrease of 22 percent over the same period. There has been some improvement recently, with the police commissioner claiming that at the end of 2023 there were approximately 980 sworn officers, and that this number represents about 80 percent of capacity.

A major component of the staffing crisis is attrition. The rate of officers leaving the department outpaces the rate of new hires. In 2023 alone, the St. Louis Police Officers Association (SLPOA) reported that 116 officers resigned or retired from the force.[34] This trend is not new; nearly 120 officers left the department between January 2022 and January 2023, with approximately 100 more leaving in the months that followed. This rapid turnover is not unique to St. Louis but mirrors a

broader national trend in which police departments have seen a significant increase in resignations (up 18 percent) and retirements (up 45 percent). As a large agency, the SLMPD has experienced some of the most dramatic reductions in hiring and the most significant increases in attrition among its peers nationwide. This rapid turnover in a high-stress environment puts additional pressure on the remaining officers, creating a feedback loop of increased workload, stress, and further departures.

The St. Louis Police Officers Association has directly attributed high attrition rates to "unreasonable workloads" and a "lack of support from politicians." A report from the Center for Policing Equity (CPE) confirmed that the distribution of officer workload is "unequal across St. Louis." Officers in Districts 4 and 5, which cover downtown and parts of North St. Louis, are severely understaffed and spend nearly their entire shifts responding to calls.[35] This is in stark contrast to officers in other districts, who have time for proactive community engagement and traffic stops.

This unequal burden creates a vicious cycle. The high vacancy rate leads to an increased workload for the remaining officers. This workload is managed through massive overtime expenditures, which provide extra pay but at the cost of increased stress and burnout. Officers have stated that they are leaving the profession entirely because of this exhaustion and a feeling of being unappreciated by the community and department leadership. This sustained pressure on the existing workforce is a significant driver of attrition, which, in turn, exacerbates the initial staffing shortage, making the situation progressively more difficult to resolve. While the staffing shortage clearly affects the city's ability to solve crime, it could also easily be affecting the public's ability to report it.

It's difficult to determine how many crimes go unreported because the victim chooses not to report or because they find themselves unable to report. Both circumstances cloud the reported crime numbers and could account for some of the disconnect between official crime statistics and the perception of safety in the city.

Public Trust in the Police

Another reason that the public perception of safety in St. Louis hasn't improved in response to decreased crime rates could be that the public hasn't changed the degree to which they trust the police. St. Louis has grappled with an erosion of trust since 2014, when St. Louis became an epicenter of police scrutiny after the fatal shooting of Michael Brown by a Ferguson, Missouri, police officer. The concept of the "Ferguson Effect" emerged in the aftermath, and it describes increased scrutiny of policing, less proactive engagement by police with criminals, and declining trust in the police force.[36] As a result of the Ferguson Effect, it is hypothesized, crime rates went up and policing went down.

"I think you can build some trust in certain communities. . . . but in the crime-ridden neighborhoods that keep lacking resources, where politicians seem not to care, people aren't going to trust the police. That's mostly my opinion—but there is some research to back it."—Academic researcher

A Pew Research Center survey of nearly 8,000 police officers found that in the wake of the Michael Brown shooting they were less willing to stop and question suspicious individuals.[37] In addition, they reported lower morale, reduced motivation, and a perception that being a police officer had become a less desirable profession. Then FBI Director, James Comey, described it as "a chill wind that has blown through law enforcement."[38]

The potential erosion of trust in the police, it has been argued, may lead community members to be less inclined to report crimes or seek police assistance, potentially encouraging them to "take matters into their own hands."[39] Criminologist Richard Rosenfeld articulated this perspective, noting that when the perceived legitimacy of the police declines, community members may resort to self-policing because they believe law enforcement will not provide adequate protection.[40] Anecdotal evidence suggests that both proposed mechanisms—officer reluctance to engage proactively and a decrease in public trust—have occurred simultaneously in some communities.

"So a lot of it goes back to our social structure, and I'm a strong believer in the literature that talks about that. If we're not putting resources into an area, people are going to feel trapped and isolated. And if they don't trust the police or the politicians, they stay isolated. What tends to happen then is they take matters into their own hands—because why call the police?"
—Academic researcher

These two concepts related to the Ferguson Effect could create a mutually reinforcing cycle. Reduced proactive policing, potentially stemming from officers' fear of scrutiny, can further diminish community trust. Conversely, existing community distrust and hostility towards police can make officers even more hesitant to engage, thereby exacerbating the initial disengagement. This creates a negative feedback loop that can deepen the challenges in police–community relations. Given that Ferguson is within St. Louis County, it is not far-fetched to imagine that the City of St. Louis experienced the Ferguson Effect firsthand. And although the initial incident happened over a decade ago, it is difficult to say how long such an effect might linger.

Media Sensationalism

Media hyping of high-profile violent crimes is another reason that St. Louis may be perceived as more dangerous than it actually is. Also known as media sensationalism, this is the practice of using shocking, dramatic, and emotionally charged language and imagery to attract viewers and readers. It often prioritizes news stories about violent crimes, especially homicides, regardless of their frequency compared to other, more common offenses like property crime.[41] The goal is to create a sense of urgency and danger, even if the overall crime rate is stable or declining.[42]

"What people know is what they see on the 10 o'clock news—which, by the way, is so understaffed now. Local news doesn't have the investigative journalists it used to. So they just follow police reports, send a camera out where there's yellow tape and flashing lights . . . and that's what gets people to watch. But it also reinforces the perception that it's dangerous."—Business representative

Media sensationalism around crime and violence can cause predictable reactions in readers or listeners. The first type of reaction is referred to as "cultivation theory." Cultivation theory suggests that repeated exposure to violent crime on local news can cultivate an exaggerated fear of crime in viewers.[43] Audiences who frequently watch local news are more likely to perceive a higher personal risk of victimization, independent of actual crime rates, than those who do not watch the news.

Secondly, there is a psychological principle that suggests that if crime stories are frequently and dramatically aired, they become more "available" in a person's memory, leading the person to overestimate the likelihood of crime and their personal vulnerability. This "availability heuristic" changes our ability to make accurate judgements about risks as we put more weight on things we can easily recall, such as a sensational media story, rather than on facts or empirical evidence.[44]

In St. Louis, a city with a complex history of racial and socioeconomic issues, media sensationalism compounds existing tensions and influences how residents feel about their safety. Research indicates that crime reporting often follows the "law of opposites," meaning that the characteristics of crime, criminals, and victims represented in the media are often the reverse of what is shown in official data.[45] For example, violent crime is overrepresented compared to nonviolent offenses. This creates a public narrative of crime that is not a true reflection of the community's experience.

Media coverage can also reinforce negative stereotypes, particularly related to race and socioeconomic status. Sensationalized reporting on crime can intensify racial tensions and lead to the public's heightened fear of specific neighborhoods or groups, regardless of actual data.[46] The focus on a few high-profile, violent crimes can overshadow the reality that most people are not victims of such offenses.

"I personally have a love-hate relationship with the media . . . because reporters are not trauma-informed. They'll show up on somebody's doorstep the day after their son was murdered, saying, 'Hey, you want to talk to me?' And it's like, no—of course I don't want to talk to you. People need to be further along in their healing before they're comfortable talking to a news reporter."—Victim advocate

Social media platforms often amplify the effects of traditional media sensationalism. Content from news outlets can be shared rapidly and out of context, often without the nuance of the original report. Research indicates that online news outlets used more sensationalism than traditional media.[47]

Media sensationalism actively shapes the public's understanding and fear of crime. In St. Louis, this has led to a situation where residents' feelings of safety can be deeply influenced by a media-driven narrative that may not align with reality, reinforcing existing social divisions and contributing to a pervasive sense of unease.

Public Disorder

When considering the perception of safety in St. Louis, it is necessary to look beyond homicides and other violent crimes. Public disorder may also be a contributing factor. Public disorder encompasses a broad spectrum of conditions and behaviors that violate social norms and negatively affect environmental conditions. It may be physical or social in nature.

Physical disorder refers to the observable deterioration of the urban landscape. Examples include broken windows, accumulated trash and empty bottles, dilapidated or vacant buildings, or widespread graffiti. Social disorder encompasses behaviors including public alcohol or drug use, aggressive panhandling, loitering, disturbing the peace, public urination, public intoxication, or individuals sleeping on or around commercial properties.

Public disorder is important because visible physical decay can act as a signal that conveys vulnerability and a lack of safety. The "broken windows theory" (BWT), popularized by James Wilson and George Kelling, suggests that visible signs of minor crime, antisocial behavior, and civil disorder—such as broken windows, vandalism, loitering, public drinking, or fare evasion—create an urban environment that actively encourages more serious crime and overall disorder by implying a lack of oversight, accelerating the erosion of community cohesion and weakening informal social control. As a result, residents may withdraw from public spaces, contributing to a "slow deterioration of a community." Conversely, according to BWT, a well-maintained and orderly environment signals that an area is monitored and that criminal behavior is not tolerated, thereby deterring potential offenders.

"I think one of the bigger issues in St. Louis is a lack of regard for your neighbor, as I'd put it. And that shows up in a lot of different ways. We have a lot of people who feel like, for whatever reason, nobody cares about them—so they don't care either, and they just do what they want without regard for anyone else."—Academic researcher

It is critical to note that perceptions of disorder are highly subjective and can vary significantly based on demographics, the specific type of disorder, and neighborhood characteristics. For instance, Black residents in St. Louis are more likely to identify graffiti and vacant buildings as problems compared to White residents, and older residents tend to report noise and interpersonal disturbances more often.

The City of St. Louis's 311 system, managed by the Citizens' Service Bureau (CSB), processes over 400 types of service requests that directly impact the quality of life in neighborhoods. Common requests include those related to animal services, high weeds, junk motor vehicles, and various other code-compliance issues. Requests

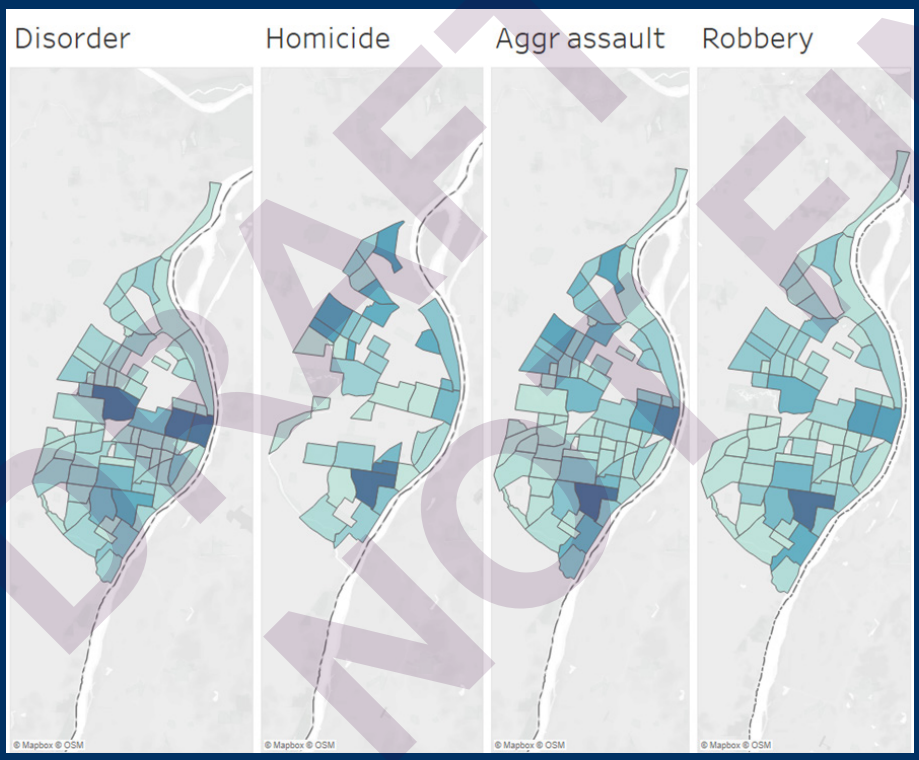
concerning streets and mobility, such as street and pothole repair, are also often reported, as are environmental issues like water conservation and air-quality complaints.

As with violent crime, reports of public disorder are not evenly distributed throughout the City of St. Louis. In fact, public disorder is more likely to be reported in neighborhoods that don't have the highest rates of violent crime. Figure 18 shows the number of reported incidents in 2023 by NIBRS type. The map of reported public disorder includes prostitution, loitering, vagrancy, vandalism, property destruction, disorderly conduct, liquor law violations, pocket-picking, and trespassing. The other maps show only the crime listed.

Figure 18

Figure 18: Comparison of Crime Type by Neighborhood, 2023

Reports of public disorder are more likely in the shopping and entertainment areas of St. Louis, while violent crime is concentrated in a few neighborhoods outside these areas.



Source: St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department Crime Statistics, National Incident-Based Reporting System Crime Files, 2021[en dash]2023. https://slmpd.org/stats.

"Neighborhoods have been neglected. They're known for high crime, but they are working neighborhoods where people are trying to raise their kids. The problem is abandoned properties, overgrown brush that's been there 30 or 40 years. Drug use or violence happens deep in that brush."—Business representative

While violent crimes are heavily concentrated in the Dutchtown neighborhood and a few neighborhoods on the north end of the city—areas with longstanding problems with poverty and urban decay—these are not the areas with the most reported public disorder (Figure 18). Rather, reports of public disorder are highly concentrated in the Downtown, Downtown West, and Central West End neighborhoods. These areas contain the highest-traffic visitor attractions and entertainment districts, as well as several professional and collegiate sports facilities. The high concentration of public disorder in these areas likely contributes to the widespread perception that St. Louis is not a safe town. Of course it is possible that, because of tourism and shopping, these are the areas where incidences of public disorder are more likely to be reported.

Downtown St. Louis presents a particularly difficult problem. Writers have suggested it is stuck in an "urban doom loop" characterized by crime, widespread vacancies, the condemnation of historic buildings, and general economic decline, a trend exacerbated since the COVID-19 pandemic.[48] This has led to drastically decreased leasing activity for residential units and significant vacancies in commercial properties.

One issue that likely contributes to a perception of public disorder, even though it may not be reflected in crime data, is homelessness. Homelessness increased nationally by 12 percent between 2022 and 2023, reaching a record high.[49] In 2023, the City of St. Louis reported 1,235 homeless people, and St. Louis County reported 452. Between 2018 and 2023, St. Louis had a 40 percent increase in overall homelessness and an 89 percent increase in chronic homelessness. The rising homelessness figures and prevalent quality-of-life issues contribute to a visible sense of disorder and neglect that directly affects residents' subjective feeling of safety, regardless of official crime statistics.

CONCLUSION

St. Louis has clearly experienced a reduction in crime on a per-capita basis across several categories: aggravated assault, robbery, burglary, and larceny. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for homicides or for motor vehicle thefts. Even though St. Louis has begun to draw even with both the other two major cities in Missouri and with similar cities across the United States, its crime rates are still above the national averages across the board. The homicide rate, even with recent improvements, remains at 10 times the national average.

St. Louis has demonstrated significant and sustained progress in reducing violent crime, particularly homicides, since 2020, achieving rates not seen in over a decade. Despite these objective improvements, a substantial gap persists between official

crime statistics and public perception of safety. This discrepancy is influenced by highly visible quality-of-life issues (e.g., homelessness, litter, abandoned properties), high potential for unreported crime, and media sensationalism around crime in the city. The persistent perception–reality gap remains a critical hurdle, indicating that crime reduction alone is insufficient to restore a widespread sense of safety. But in any case, despite recent improvements St. Louis continues to stand out for its high rates of homicide and auto theft. In these two cases it is reality, not perception, that is the problem. St. Louis has become somewhat less dangerous, but it is still far from a safe place.

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Appendix 1: **Quality of Fit Variables for St. Louis and Comparison Cities**

City	Population	Percent younger than 18	Percent older than 65	Percent living in poverty	Percent Black	Percent with a high school degree	Unemployment	Labor Force Participation	Median Household Income
St. Louis	282,772	18%	16%	20%	43%	92%	3%	64%	$56,245
Memphis	618,639	25%	15%	23%	62%	87%	4%	63%	$51,399
Cincinnati	311,097	20%	14%	21%	41%	92%	3%	65%	$54,314
Louisville	624,444	24%	14%	28%	33%	86%	4%	63%	$47,180
Mobile	182,595	20%	18%	15%	51%	86%	3%	58%	$50,156

Source: US Census Bureau.

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