

The Red State Murder Problem Becomes the Blue County Murder Problem

Kevin Dayaratna, PhD, and Alexander Gage

KEY TAKEAWAYS

A recent report claims that homicide rates have been higher in “red” states than in “blue” states for the past 20 years.

Crime, however, is a local issue, and analysis of crime data needs to be undertaken at the local level.

At the county level, the homicide rate has been higher in Democratic-leaning “blue” counties than in Republican-voting “red” counties since 2002.

Homicide rates in the United States have risen in recent years, reaching 6.81 homicides per 100,000 people in 2021.¹ Many commentators have opined on what could explain the rise in crime.²

In a recent report, Jim Kessler and Kylie Murdock of the Third Way think tank claim that “red” states have had higher homicide rates than “blue” states over the past 20 years. This *Issue Brief* takes a closer look at this question and finds a number of critical flaws in the Third Way report.³ Correcting for these flaws produces the exact opposite conclusion.

Failure to Analyze Homicide Data Across Localities

The Third Way authors claim that there is a difference between the murder rates in “red” states

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <https://report.heritage.org/ib5333>

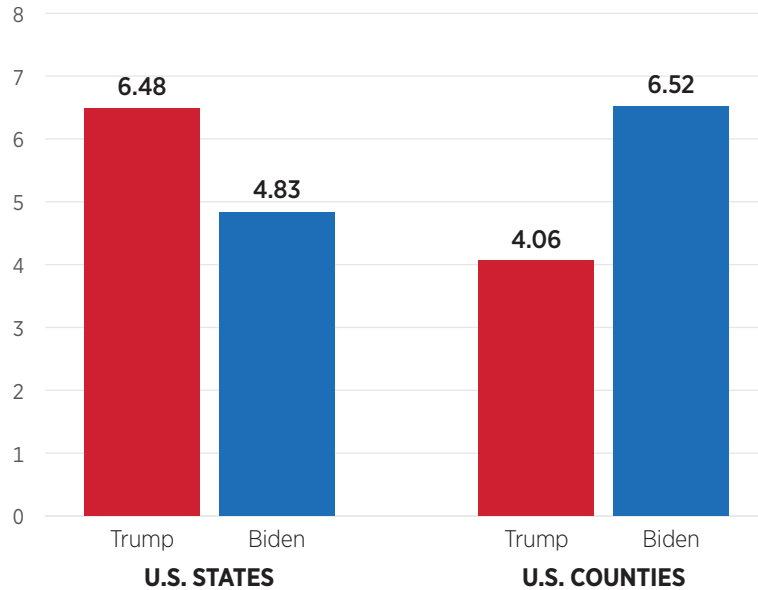
The Heritage Foundation | 214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE | Washington, DC 20002 | (202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

CHART 1

Homicide Rates

HOMICIDE RATES FOR 2014–2020 AVERAGED ACROSS STATE AND COUNTY PRESIDENTIAL PREFERENCES IN 2020 ELECTION (HOMICIDES PER 100,000 POPULATION)



SOURCE: Author’s calculations using data from County Health Rankings and Roadmaps, <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/> (accessed September 21, 2023), and MIT Election Data + Science Lab, “Data,” <https://electionlab.mit.edu/data> (accessed September 21, 2023).

IB5333 heritage.org

and “blue” states. Averaging these rates between the years 2014 and 2020 across states that voted for Donald Trump during the 2020 election yields an aggregate homicide rate of 6.48 per 100,000 people, while averaging across states that voted for Joe Biden yields a homicide rate of 4.83 per 100,000 people.

However, drawing conclusions from state-level homicide data in such a manner is flawed, as each state consists of a combination of federal, state, county, and local law enforcement agencies, as well as prosecutors with different approaches to law enforcement often based on highly divergent political beliefs. Violations of state law are prosecuted largely at the county or city level and, thus, amalgamating data across such units neglects important variation in these different approaches.⁴ Looking at homicide rates by county, states show skewed distributions with many counties having little or no homicides, and a handful of counties with excessively high homicide

rates. Thus, state homicide rates can be heavily influenced by a few counties. When those counties have different politics from the rest of the state, it can flip the conclusion about the association between political identifications and homicides.

As a result, after averaging homicide rates across counties during the same time horizon, a markedly different story from the Third Way's narrative emerges. Averaging across all counties that voted for Donald Trump yields an aggregate homicide rate of 4.06 per 100,000 people, while averaging across counties that voted for Joe Biden yields a homicide rate of 6.52 per 100,000 people. These statistics are presented in Chart 1.

Failure to Consider Changing Electoral Results

Third Way held "red" states and "blue" states constant in terms of how they voted in the 2020 presidential election. This approach is fundamentally flawed because electoral sentiment changed across the time period used for the study. For example, although President Biden won Arizona in 2020, the previous Democrat who won the state was Bill Clinton in 1996. Similarly, Donald Trump won Florida in both 2016 and 2020, despite the fact that Barack Obama had won the state in 2008 and 2012.

We repeated Third Way's estimate of homicide rates over time but corrected for changes in voting behavior. Observations of County Health Rankings & Roadmaps data show averages over a period of six years. The most recent dataset provides homicide rates from 2014 to 2020.⁵ We analyzed this, and analogous, time periods going back to 2002 to 2008 in terms of the respective presidential elections corresponding to each time period, using election data compiled by MIT Election labs.⁶ These results are presented in Chart 2.

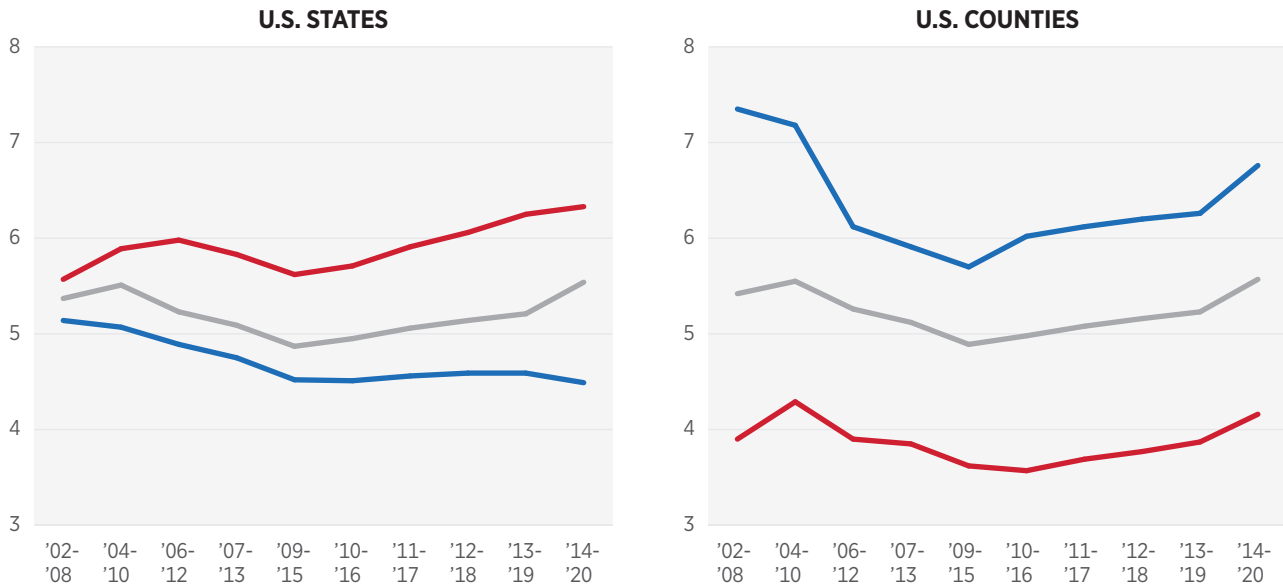
While red states consistently have had higher homicide rates than blue states, blue counties have consistently had higher homicide rates than red counties, as shown in Chart 2. Specifically, homicide rates in red states (as corrected) ranged from 5.57 per 100,000 people between 2002 and 2008 to 6.33 per 100,000 people between 2014 and 2020, while in blue states (as corrected) these rates ranged from 5.14 per 100,000 people between 2002 and 2008 to 4.49 per 100,000 people between 2014 and 2020. Homicide rates in red counties, on the other hand, ranged from 3.90 per 100,000 people between 2002 and 2008 to 4.16 per 100,000 people between 2014 and 2020, while in blue counties these rates varied from 7.35 per 100,000 people between 2002 and 2008 to 6.76 per 100,000 people between 2014 and 2020.

CHART 2

Homicide Rates Over Time by Presidential Vote Preference

HOMICIDE RATE PER
100,000 POPULATION

— Voted for GOP presidential candidate
— Voted for DEM presidential candidate
— Nationwide homicide rate



NOTES: Since presidential elections occur every four years and the homicide data spans six years, the homicide data spans more than one presidential election. To determine which election's vote percentages to analyze with respect to homicide rates, we chose the presidential election immediately preceding the midpoint of the dataset. For example, the midpoint of the 2014–2020 homicide data is 2017, thus we choose the 2016 presidential election between Hillary Clinton (D) and Donald Trump (R) as our reference election. Similarly, the midpoint of the first time period of our data set, 2002–2008, is 2005, and thus the 2004 presidential election between John Kerry (D) and George W. Bush (R) is the appropriate reference. Time horizons for each dataset are specified in the individual data files on CountyHealthRankings.org. Additionally, MIT Election Data + Science Lab provides county-by-county data for all 50 states except Alaska, for which it provides voting district data. As a result, for the county-by-county analysis, Alaska is excluded from the computations while it is included for the state-by-state analysis. We ran analyses including and excluding Alaska from both state-by-state and county-by-county analysis and neither meaningfully altered the results.

SOURCE: Author's calculations using data from County Health Rankings and Roadmaps, <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/> (accessed September 21, 2023), and MIT Election Data + Science Lab, "Data," <https://electionlab.mit.edu/data> (accessed September 21, 2023).

Conclusion

Statistical analysis is useful for analyzing data to inform public policy. It is crucial, however, to analyze data carefully while taking into account critical factors influencing trends of interest. Proper analysis of the question posed by the Third Way suggests that the nation has a blue county murder problem that has persisted for the past 20 years.

Kevin Dayaratna, PhD, is Chief Statistician, Data Scientist, and Senior Research Fellow in the Center for Data Analysis at The Heritage Foundation. **Alexander Gage** is a former Research Assistant for Economic Policy in the Center for Data Analysis.

Endnotes

1. World Bank, "Intentional homicides (per 100,000 people)–United States," <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5?end=2021&locations=US&start=1990&view=chart> (accessed August 17, 2023).
2. The Sunday Show, "Experts Breakdown Why Violent Crime Is on the Rise," June 6, 2021, <https://www.msnbc.com/the-sunday-show/watch/experts-breakdown-why-violent-crime-is-on-the-rise-114401349607> (accessed August 17, 2023).
3. Kylie Murdock and Jim Kessler, "The Two-Decade Red State Murder Problem," Third Way, January 27, 2023, <https://www.thirdway.org/report/the-two-decade-red-state-murder-problem> (accessed April 29, 2023). The Third Way also published another report in 2022 on 2020 homicide rates and voting patterns: Kylie Murdock and Jim Kessler, "The Red State Murder Problem," Third Way, March 15, 2022 <https://www.thirdway.org/report/the-red-state-murder-problem> (accessed April 29, 2023).
4. Charles D. Stimson, Zack Smith, and Kevin D. Dayaratna, "The Blue City Murder Problem," Heritage Foundation *Legal Memorandum* No. 315, November 4, 2022, <https://www.heritage.org/crime-and-justice/report/the-blue-city-murder-problem>.
5. County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/> (accessed November 2, 2022).
6. MIT Election Data + Science Lab, "Data," <https://electionlab.mit.edu/data> (accessed April 29, 2023). Since presidential elections occur every four years and the homicide data spans six years, the homicide data spans more than one presidential election. To determine which election's vote percentages to analyze with respect to homicide rates, we chose the presidential election immediately preceding the midpoint of the dataset. For example, the midpoint of the 2014–2020 homicide data is 2017, thus we choose the 2016 presidential election between Hillary Clinton (D) and Donald Trump (R) as our reference election. Similarly, the midpoint of the first time period of our data set, 2002–2008, is 2005, and thus the 2004 presidential election between John Kerry (D) and George W. Bush (R) is the appropriate reference. Time horizons for each dataset are specified in the individual data files on CountyHealthRankings.org. Additionally, MIT Election Data + Science Lab provides county-by-county data for all 50 states except Alaska, for which it provides voting district data. As a result, for the county-by-county analysis, Alaska is excluded from the computations while it is included for the state-by-state analysis. We ran analyses including and excluding Alaska from both state-by-state and county-by-county analysis and neither meaningfully altered the results.