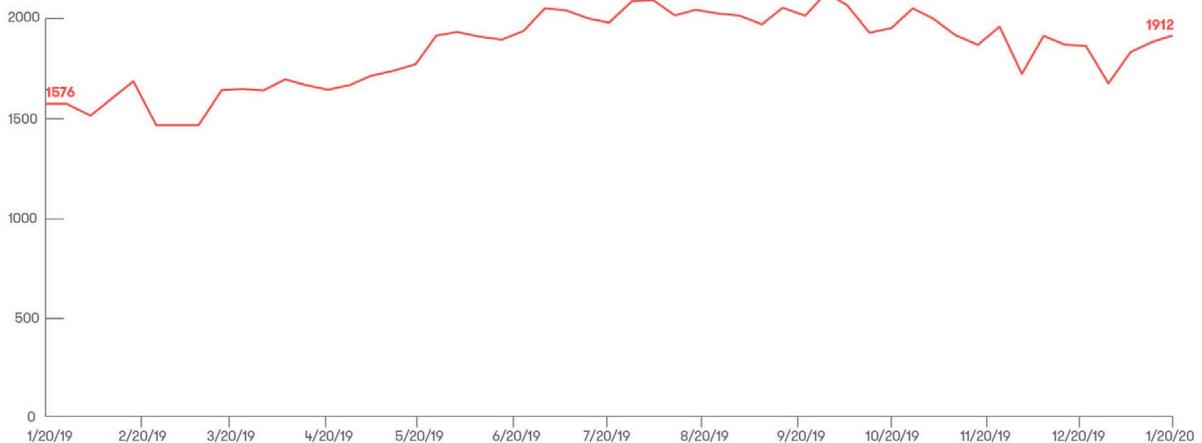


Don't let fearmongering drive bail policy

Crime in New York is at historic lows. Nevertheless, critics of bail reform, which went into effect on January 1, claim that the law has led to a surge in crime. Citing an increase in the number of burglaries, robberies, and car thefts in New York City in the first three weeks of 2020 compared to the same time period in 2019, New York City Police Commissioner Dermot Shea, for example, has asserted that “we’re seeing significant spikes in crime.” But his selective use of short-run statistics doesn’t support this statement.

While it is true that the number of specific crimes he referenced were higher at the beginning of 2020 than during the same three-week period in 2019, other crime rates actually fell. The number of murders and rapes reported in the city dropped. Felony assaults declined. The number of grand larcenies—which accounted for more incidents than robberies, burglaries, and auto thefts combined—rose only slightly. Just as it would be wrong to proclaim that New York City is safer today than it was a year ago just by looking at those statistics, it is also wrong to conclude that New York is less safe based on the statistics Shea cites.

Total reported crime, 2019-2020*



*Total crime includes murder, rape, robbery, felony assault, burglary, grand larceny, and grand larceny auto.

Looking at a crime snapshot when the law has only been in effect for three weeks does little, if anything, to show the impact bail reform will have on crime rates long-term. As any Mets fan who gets their hopes up after a few good weeks at the beginning of April knows, in general, statistics are volatile when measured in the short run. Crime statistics are no different. The fluctuations Shea and others cite are by no means unprecedented (or even uncommon). Looking at the first three weeks at the beginning of January, there was a 43 percent increase in murders between 2018 and 2019—and the following year, the trend reversed. During the first three weeks of 2015, there were 819 felony assaults reported. The following year, that number jumped 25 percent—to 1,020. Grand larceny reports increased by 17 percent between the first three weeks of 2012 and the same period in 2013. None of these seemingly dramatic shifts reflected the city tipping into a period of increased violence and, without the backdrop of bail reform, they did not receive the same kind of attention that we are seeing now. Fluctuations and year-to-year changes in short-term statistics are only meaningful when they are viewed in the context of longer-term trends.

When we look at crime trends over the last year in New York City, we see that the number of robberies, burglaries and car thefts—the crimes cited by Shea—all increased in the middle of 2019, long before bail reform went into effect. The numbers have remained relatively stable since then, with no new increase as bail reform took effect. There are undoubtedly a number of factors contributing to the uptick in those crimes, but the timing of the increase and bail reform simply does not line up. And, even with those increases, New York City remains the safest big city in America.

Opponents of the new law have been hard at work wrongly warning that bail reform endangers public safety. But criminologists and statisticians know it is far too early to reach any conclusion about the impact of bail reform. Fearmongering should have no role in driving policy.

For more information

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