

Crime & Safety in Oregon in 2022:

MEDIA REPORTING ON CRIME & CRIME STATISTICS

BY BEATRIX LI & JUSTIN LOW | OCTOBER 2022

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The Oregon Justice Resource Center (OJRC) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit founded in Portland, Oregon, in 2011. We work to promote civil rights and improve legal representation for communities that have often been underserved in the past: people living in poverty and people of color among them. Our clients are currently and formerly incarcerated Oregonians. We work in partnership with other, like-minded organizations to maximize our reach to serve underrepresented populations, train public interest lawyers, and educate our community on civil rights and civil liberties concerns. We are a public interest law firm that uses integrative advocacy to achieve our goals. This strategy includes focused direct legal services, public awareness campaigns, strategic partnerships, and coordinating our legal and advocacy areas to positively impact outcomes in favor of ending mass incarceration.

Introduction

IN THE SPRING OF 2022, the Oregon Justice Resource Center published a primer sharing facts and data related to crime statistics in the state of Oregon. This report was an effort to combat the misrepresentation of crime statistics by news media and the subsequent policy proposals being pushed by candidates and elected officials in the lead up to the May Primary Election of 2022. Since then, crime data from 2021 has been finalized in the Oregon Uniform Crime Report database and new preliminary data has been uploaded for part of 2022—both of which are included in this republished report.

However, the way that news media and elected officials report, analyze, and speak about crime and criminal justice issues has not changed. In fact, it has ramped up as the November General Election of 2022 approaches. Therefore, the updated crime statistics in this report are provided in addition to a new section that discusses the history and impact of media portrayal and elected officials' rhetoric on their understanding of crime and the consequential carceral response to it.

The premise of republishing this report is to explore the glaring disconnect that exists between the narrative from some among the media and elected officials and the reality that comprehensive data provides. Unfortunately, this disconnect is not accidental and draws on a decades-old playbook that relies on poll-tested buzzwords, fear-mongering, and selective use of data. Through the compounding of old and new false narratives, elected officials, media outlets, and other stakeholders have taken advantage of affected communities and the people that live in them, segregating those that seek to insulate themselves from harm and those that are perceived to cause harm.

The result is a divided electorate that is then subjected to manipulated information fed to them by the media and elected officials, both of which rely on peddling sensationalism and the dissemination of misinformation to bolster engagement and attention from their base which ultimately expands their power, wealth, and control. Media outlets and elected leaders need to be held accountable for the polarization that they create and reap benefits from, especially when it results in policy changes that lead to greater harm to all communities.

This report will serve as a guide and resource to push back against these false narratives and to hold the weavers of these stories to account. By revealing recent and past trends in crime statistics and juxtaposing them against research on the way crime is talked about by the media and elected officials, a more honest account can be surfaced, which in turn can pave a path to making more informed decisions about law enforcement budgets, elections, and overall community well-being.

Media outlets and elected leaders need to be held accountable for the polarization that they create... especially when it results in policy changes that lead to greater harm to all communities.

Understanding Statistics Related to Crime

IT MAY BE difficult to reconcile the crime statistics featured in this report when the data is contrasted so starkly with daily news articles and frequent statements made by elected officials. Furthermore, these statistics can be difficult to fully comprehend given the terms and jargon that are used to describe them. Sadly, some entities choose to intentionally lean into this comprehension deficit, allowing them to blur the lines between reality and the staged narrative they wish to push out.

In this section, the differences between the most prevalent crime statistics terms will be explained, which will help with understanding how contradictory reports and information can both be true but tell different stories. For example, one article can say that the total number of shootings and homicides is at [recent highs for one city](#),¹ while the entire state can be [decreasing or plateauing in crime overall](#).²

There is complexity and nuance to crime reports but being able to understand statistical terms and the data, while also understanding the angle behind those sharing the data, is crucial to voters' ability to make decisions about public policy and candidates to elect.

Glossary: Understanding Crime Rates Statistics



Total Crime/Total Offenses:

the absolute number of times a crime being measured occurred within a specific time frame and place.

- **Example:** there were a total of 250 burglaries in State X during 2010.
- **Use:** total crime for a city/state in one year can be easily compared against the total crime that occurred in previous years in the same place or in different cities/states. This statistic can be easily used for headlines and soundbites without having to provide additional context or details.
- **Critique:** total crime doesn't provide additional context that is necessary to make a deeper analysis and can often lead to misleading news headlines or spoken statements. For example, if the total amount of burglaries increased drastically in 2010, that statistic doesn't necessarily reflect how much more likely one is to become a victim of a burglary or any other crime, nor does it tell us anything about the historic record of property crime as a whole and what caused the increase. In 2010, there could have been a major population increase in the city/state, thus increasing the statistical likelihood of more crimes occurring due solely to the existence of more people. So, the total number of crimes compared to the total population in 2010 could be similar to previous years. See *Crime Rate* below for more.



Crime Rate:

the frequency of crime occurring measured against a set population number, usually 100,000 people.

- **Example:** the property crime rate for 2010 was 254.3 per 100,000 people in City X. This means that statistically speaking about 254 individuals experience some form of property crime for every 100,000 people that exist within City X. Another way to read this is that there is a 0.25% chance of experiencing a property crime within that location during 2010.
- **Use:** crime rates help calculate the likelihood of crime occurring in relation to a city or state's population size. This is a more contextualized statistic to use when measuring how prevalent something is occurring in an area since it takes the number of people into account.
- **Critique:** crime rates can be deceiving in areas with large populations because the more people they have means they can absorb more of the impact of whatever is being comparatively measured. Meanwhile, a low population area doesn't have as many people to absorb the impact. Therefore, if total crime is the same in two states (100 crimes in the year) but they have different populations, the state with a large population is predisposed to report a lower crime rate while the state with a low population is predisposed to report a higher rate. Crime rates are not foolproof, but they depict a more contextualized picture than total crime numbers.



Percentage Increase/Decrease:

the numerical difference in change between two different data points from two different time periods.

- **Example:** There was a 100% increase in total reported crimes from 2009 to 2010.
- **Use:** percentage increases and decreases are statistical figures used to show the extent of change over time.
- **Critique:** in order to understand the significance of an increase or decrease, the actual numbers or rates from which the percentage change was calculated must be known. For example, if there was one shooting in a city in 2009 but then two shootings in that same city during 2010, that would be a 100% increase in the number of shootings reported. What this shows is that a large percentage increase may not be as exorbitant in reality when the actual numbers are revealed, and the response that the actual numbers warrant may be different from the response that the percentage increase alone might initially call for. Therefore, in order to be used in a more accurate manner, percentage increases or decreases must be contextualized with actual numbers and compared against the actual numbers of the past.



Additional Factors to Consider

- **Timeframe:** it is essential to know the length of time the data is being measured from. An entity could be comparing entire years to each other or only summer months.
- **Historical Context:** when a timeline of statistics is broadened, increases or decreases could be insignificant to the greater timeline of a city or state. What may seem like significant changes in the span of five years, may only look like a plateau when zoomed out to 20 or 30 years.
- **Location:** a report or individual's argument may try to take local data about one city and make it seem like the entire state shares similar patterns and trends, or vice versa. This commonly occurs in news articles and misrepresents the scope of an issue and can result in inappropriate policy responses when ignored.

Crime Statistics in Oregon from 2019–2021

IN THIS SECTION, rates will be used as the primary statistic to reveal trends related to person crime³, property crime, and homicides in Oregon between 2019 and 2021—2019 marking the last year before the COVID-19 pandemic, and 2021 marking the most recent year that complete data is available for. Crime rates, over total crime, were chosen due to their enhanced ability to demonstrate the extent that offenses occur relative to an area’s population.

Despite the sensationalism from elected officials and media outlets about the alleged rise in crime in recent years, statewide person crime rates decreased from 293.7 per 100,000 people in 2019 to 292.4 per 100,000 people in 2021, notwithstanding the destabilizing effects of COVID-19. This was a 0.4% decrease from 2019 to 2021. This slight decrease also followed two legislative sessions where Salem lawmakers passed significant legislation addressing reforms to the state criminal legal system, law enforcement agencies, and community wellbeing. Notably, the person crime rate remained lower in 2021, after the implementation of significant criminal justice reforms and in the wake of recent national crises (e.g., COVID and the ensuing recession), than in 2000 (350.7 per 100,000 people) when neither of those factors were present. The person crime classification consists of aggravated assault, forcible rape, homicide (recorded as willful murder), and robbery as per the FBI and Oregon Unified Crime Reports.

Statewide property crime rates also hit a historic low in 2021 at 2,687.2 per 100,000 people which was a 3.6% decrease compared to 2019's property crime rate of 2,788.5 per 100,000. Both 2020 and 2021 were two of the lowest property crime rates Oregon has experienced since 1966, which was 2,860.9 per 100,000 people. The property crime classification consists of larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and burglary as per the FBI and Oregon Unified Crime Reports

Oregon's homicide rate, however, was estimated at 4.2 homicides per 100,000 individuals—this was a 50% increase from 2019 (2.8 homicides per 100,000 individuals) to 2021. The FBI and Oregon Unified Crime Reports classify these specific homicides as 'willful murder' and do not include data from the offense categories of negligent homicide or justified homicide.

It should be noted that most Oregon jurisdictions [experienced a leveling or reduction](#) in their homicide rates between 2019 and 2021.⁴ The overall increase in the state's homicide rate is largely attributed to the rise of homicides in Portland — which points to the exponential increase in firearm purchases within those two years,⁵ the socioeconomic pains and harms caused by the pandemic,⁶ and the loss of community resources and supports in large metropolitan and surrounding areas.⁷ Additionally, in 2021, Oregon remained below the [national homicide rate](#) estimated at 6.9 homicides per 100,000 people.⁸

Nevertheless, despite the increase in the state homicide rate, both the person crime rate and property crime rate in Oregon remained at historic lows in 2021.

Notably, the person crime rate remained lower in 2021, after the implementation of significant criminal justice reforms and in the wake of recent national crises...than in 2000, when neither of those factors were present.

Oregon's Historical Crime Rate Record from 1985 to 2020

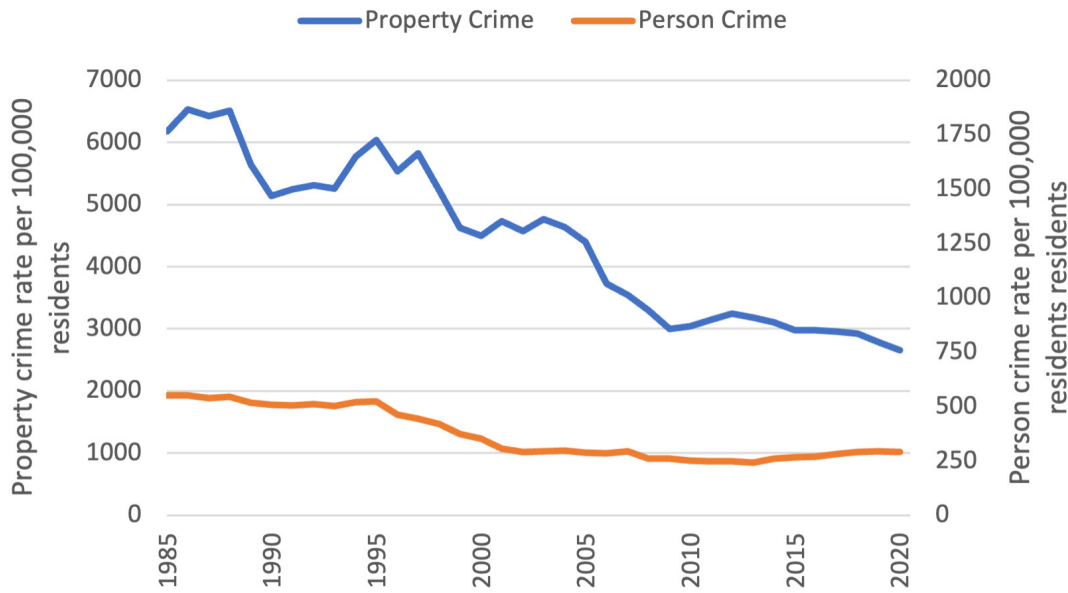


FIGURE 1: Data sourced from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Report 1985-2020. Note that person crime includes homicide, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault; property crime includes burglary, motor vehicle theft, and larceny theft (including non-felonious larceny theft).

Oregon's Property and Person Crime Rates from 2019 to 2021



FIGURE 2: Author's calculations are based on data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Report 2019-2020, Oregon's Uniform Crime Report 2021, and Portland State University's Population Report 2021. Note that person crime includes homicide, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault; property crime includes burglary, motor vehicle theft, and larceny theft (including non-felonious larceny theft).

Preliminary Crime Statistics in Oregon from 2022

THE STATISTICS PROVIDED in this section of the report are accurate as of October 21, 2022 and make estimates for the entirety of the 2022 calendar year based on averaged preliminary data provided by the Oregon Unified Crime Report spanning from January 1st, 2022 to August 31st, 2022. It should be stressed that these statistics are merely estimates based on evolving and averaged data, but genuinely reflect the trajectory of crime-related trends that Oregonians can reasonably expect as the year concludes. The rates calculated in this section will be based on demographic data from Portland State University's Population Report 2021 and use similar FBI and State of Oregon classifications for person and property crime as in the previous section.

Oregon's preliminary person crime rate for 2022 is estimated to be 248.5 per 100,000 individuals. This estimate indicates a 15% decrease from 2021's person crime rate which was 292.4 per 100,000 people. For a chronologically based comparison, without having to estimate, the total number of person crimes for 2022 during the first eight months is reported at 7,067. The total number of person crimes that occurred from January 2021 to the end of August 2021 came out to 8,253.

Diving deeper into the data, homicides also appear to have decreased based on preliminary data from 2022. The estimated homicide rate for the state of Oregon in 2022, based on averaged data collected from the first eight months of the year is 3.1 per 100,000 people. This estimate indicates a 26.2% decrease from 2021's homicide rate of 4.2 per 100,000 people. For reference, 89

homicides occurred within the first eight months of 2022 compared to the 129 that occurred during the first eight months of 2021.

While Oregon's statewide person crime and homicide rates have experienced preliminary decreases in 2022, property crime data has been less clear in supporting an outright answer. While the preliminary property crime rate for 2022 is estimated to be 2,539.2 per 100,000 people—a 5.5% decrease from 2021's property crime rate of 2,687.2 per 100,000 people—the total property crimes for the first eight months of 2022 (72,224) are higher than the first eight months of 2021 (70,752). Given that the preliminary property crime rate of 2022 is lower than 2021's, this indicates that the last four months of 2021 averaged more property crimes per month than the first 8 months of 2021. If 2021's pattern of increased property crimes in the last four months of the year occurs in 2022's data, then the end-of-year property crime rate for 2022 is set to surpass 2021's property crime rate.

Lastly, to provide a couple more data points that consider the entire sum and impact of all reported offenses that the Oregon Unified Crime Report tracks, there were 207,096 distinct offenses and 198,781 distinct victims that were recorded during the first eight months of 2022. During the first eight months of 2021, 227,066 distinct offenses and 215,812 distinct victims were reported. This indicates that there are fewer total crimes and victims in 2022 than there were in 2021, during the same range of time. These additional data points provide the most unprocessed look at the difference between 2021 and 2022 since it takes into account all offenses, not just the ones that make up the person and property crime classifications.

...there are fewer total crimes and victims in 2022 than there were in 2021, during the same range of time.

Oregon's Property and Person Crime Rates from 2019 to 2021 with Preliminary Data from 2022



FIGURE 3:

Author's calculations are based on data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Report 2019-2020, Oregon's Uniform Crime Report 2021-2022, and Portland State University's Population Report 2021. Note that person crime includes homicide, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault; property crime includes burglary, motor vehicle theft, and larceny theft (including non-felonious larceny theft).

Oregon's Homicide Rate from 2019 to 2021 with Preliminary Data from 2022

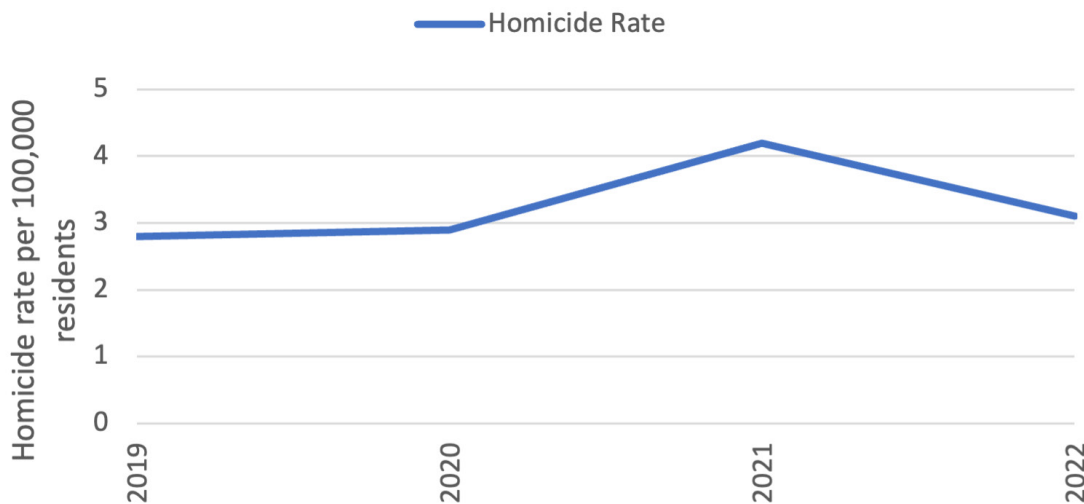


FIGURE 4:

Author's calculations are based on data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Report 2019-2020, Oregon's Uniform Crime Report 2021-2022, and Portland State University's Population Report 2021.

On Media Portrayal & The Politics of Fear and Anger

Introduction to Media Reporting on Crime

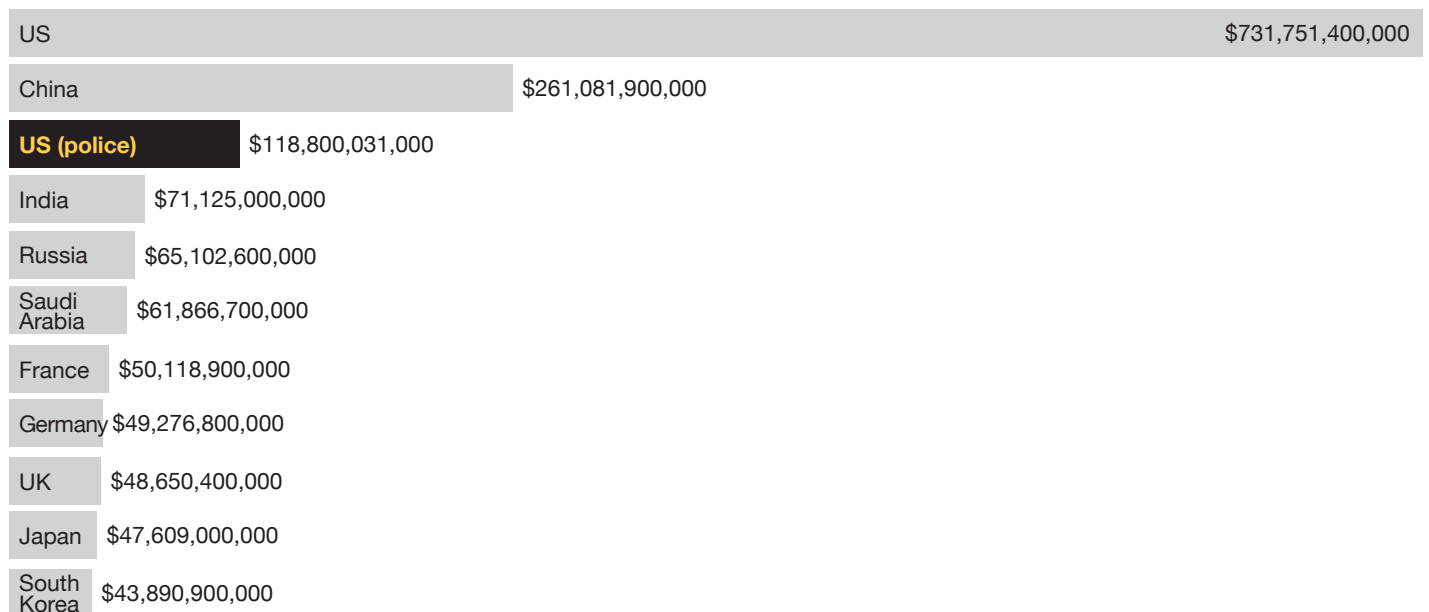
The kinds of stories that we tell matter. News coverage and digital algorithms not only shape public perception, but also inform our elected officials' decisions to either double down on failed and nonsensical "[tough-on-crime](#)" policies or, as we advocate for, invest in pro-social programs and services that promote community health and flourishing.⁹ Historically, media coverage of crime has distorted public perception and contributed to creating and expanding mass incarceration; which stands as the legacy of white supremacy in the U.S.

There are real consequences to the way that crime and criminal justice issues are reported on. In our previous [Crime Statistics Primer](#) report, we emphasized that we are in a cycle of sensationalized over-reporting of crime and consequently, calls to expand the carceral state, including police budgets and the number of police officers. For example, nationally, we see President Biden respond to this distortion with the \$37B [Safer America Plan](#) that calls for 100,000 more police officers,¹⁰ and similarly, locally, Portland Mayor

Ted Wheeler is calling for to [add more officers](#) on the streets.¹¹ Calls to increase police budgets and numbers of law enforcement officers, and generally, expand the carceral system, are based on fear-driven narratives by the media to drive coverage and a political strategy by elected officials to prove that they are not “soft on crime.” However, currently, the U.S. is [the world’s biggest spender](#) on policing, and U.S. policing is the world’s third largest military per expenditures, standing at over \$118 billion in 2019.¹² Yet, we are repeatedly given the perception that we do not have enough resources for law enforcement and that crime rates are at levels that are making society unsafe.

Where US police spending ranks among worldwide military expenditures

US state and local governments collectively spend more on policing than most countries do on their militaries



Military expenditures refer to 2019 (via Stockholm International Peace Research Institute). Police expenditures refer to 2018 (via Census Bureau).

FIGURE 5: Top military spenders from 2019 as per the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute and Census Bureau. U.S. state and local governments collectively rank third in military expenditures.

The poor quality of media coverage of crime and criminal justice issues fuels harmful policies and decisions, with resultant support and affirmation from both the political right and left. As a legal organization that is focused on litigation and advocacy to dismantle mass incarceration and frustrate white supremacy in Oregon, we are aware that the fear-based rhetoric, politics, and narratives have and continue to sustain the most comprehensive carceral system the world has known.

History of Media Portrayal and the Expansion of the U.S. Carceral System

From the founding of this country to the present, there have been fear based, bigoted narratives that targeted Black and Brown communities. These narratives based on a white supremacist value system shaped perception which then resulted in inhumane, cruel, and discriminatory policies and practices, sustaining a racial and social hierarchy. These discriminatory policies and practices repeatedly targeted those most marginalized in the U.S.: Black people, Native Americans, immigrants, refugees, and people of color resulting in enslavement, caging, displacement, segregation and Jim Crow, internment, and the deportation of people of color and poor people.

While there is a vast amount of literature and analysis dedicated to this area of study, for the purposes of this report, we mention this here to help contextualize the current media narratives and political rhetoric and their intentional disconnect from the data presented in this crime statistics report. There is a well-documented historic pattern of using fear and distortion, playing on the anxieties of the dominant culture, and vilifying segments of our population to sustain a discriminatory and bigoted power structure. We have a responsibility to confront and frustrate this pattern. Denial of the truth and willful ignorance of history perpetuates these insulting false narratives and the erasure of the harms endured by those individuals who continue to fight for their rights and dignity. Oregonians deserve an honest accounting of crime rates and related issues, so that we can begin to reconcile ourselves to that truth and engage in meaningful changes that actually improve community well-being.

There is a well-documented historic pattern of using fear and distortion, playing on the anxieties of the dominant culture, and vilifying segments of our population to sustain a discriminatory and bigoted power structure.

Media coverage today

Post-George Floyd protests, we are seeing a race-based backlash that mirrors the backlashes experienced after advancements made during Reconstruction and the modern civil rights movement.¹³

Today, we are inundated with heightened tough-on-crime rhetoric and slogans by the media. Today's media and dominant narratives, not unlike the past, are defined by fear-based rhetoric and vilification of Black people, people of color, and those who stand for civil rights, through racially coded language or explicitly racist beliefs.¹⁴ Specifically, many media outlets in Oregon have and continue to circulate sensationalized or biased reporting about public safety. This is same tactic that was used to explode our carceral system and marginalize segments of our community.

Media and the Carceral System

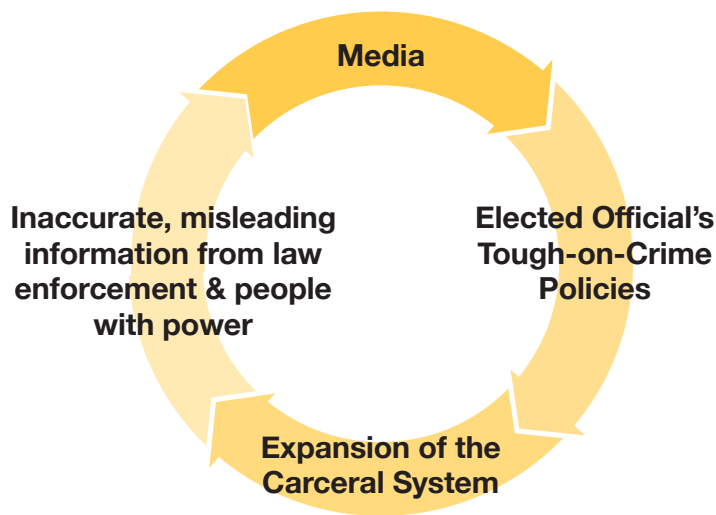


FIGURE 6: *How media influences the carceral system and policy making.*

We have identified the cycle of poor media coverage and how it fits into the positive feedback loop with elected officials and the expansion of the carceral system. The excessive, disproportionate coverage of crime as compared to actual crime rates, negative descriptions of those caught in our criminal legal system, and racist/racially coded and xenophobic language are widespread in media outlets. Included are also those with social media platforms with a large number of followers, such as self-described independent journalists and social media influencers known to

disseminate mugshots, dox, and provide negative descriptions of advocates.¹⁵ The information from the media is then picked-up by elected officials who harness this misleading information to create policies and practices that expand the carceral system. Instead of the media acting as a check on elected officials, media portrayals and fear-based narratives stoke the embers of mass incarceration.

Coverage of Crime

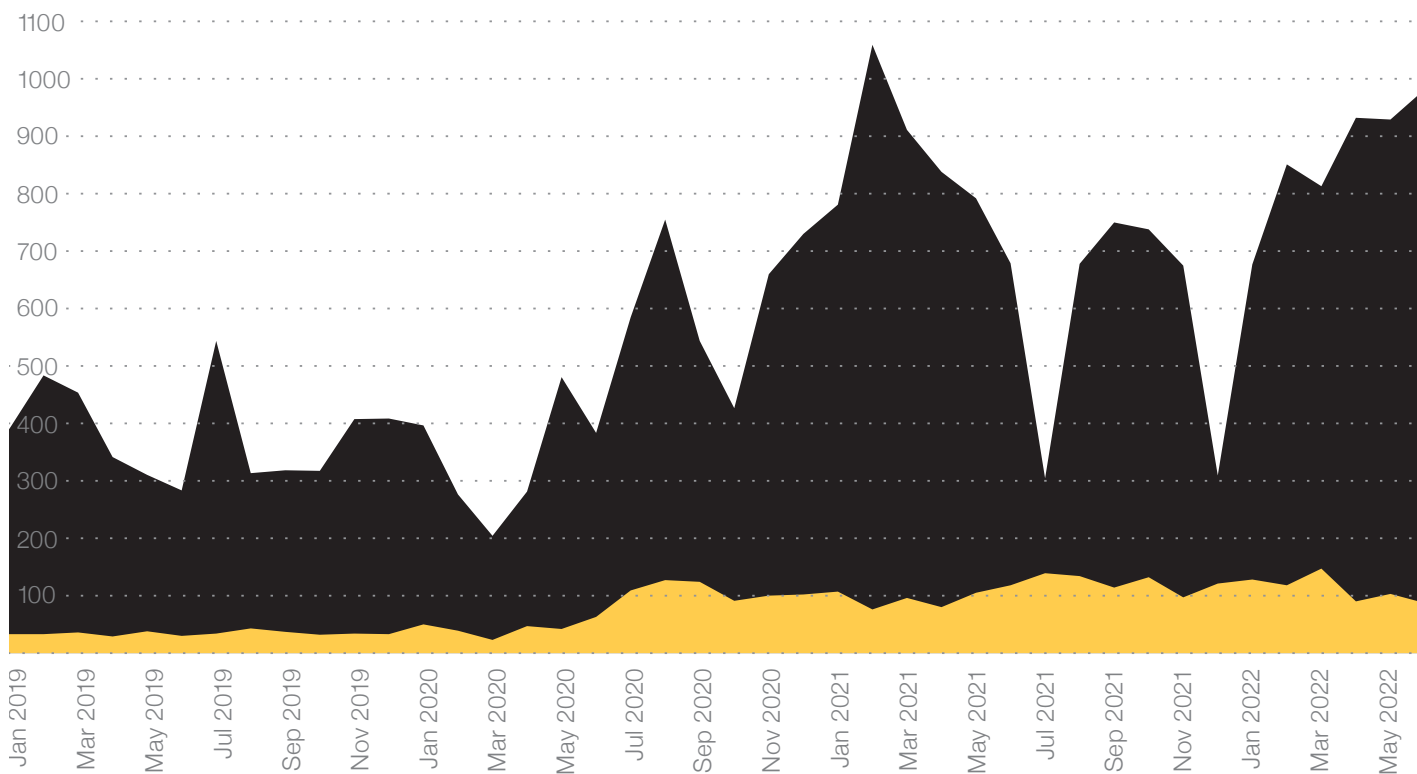
We must remain attentive to our intake of media by interpreting the coverage with data on crime as included above, and evidence-based solutions to prevent harms, particularly gun violence in our [previous report](#). As just one example, a comparison of media coverage of shootings in Portland, OR to number of shooting incidents underscores the need to interrogate how crime is reported. There is a vast difference between the reporting of shootings and the incidents. From 2020 to July 2022, there have been 4,016 incidents in Oregon involving a firearm and a person injured or killed, while the media have reported on gun violence [23,952 times](#).¹⁶ The consequence of the gap between news coverage of shootings and number of incidents is a distortion and reinforces calls by electeds for further investment in law enforcement and ineffective technologies like [ShotSpotter](#).¹⁷

The language that news outlets use to report on crime and criminal justice related issues is another concern. People are often characterized as “the worst thing that they have done,” rather than focusing on the behavior and circumstances that caused harm.¹⁸ Descriptors like “criminal” or “felon” are problematic as there is no context

Media Coverage of Shootings vs. Incidents

Portland, OR

● Media mentions of shootings ● Shooting incidents



Sources: (Shooting Incidents) City of Portland, Portland Police Bureau; (Media mentions) MediaCloud.org

FIGURE 7:
Media coverage
of shootings
versus incidents.

given or acknowledgement of social, economic, or psychological factors that may have contributed to the underlying offense and harm. These terms mislead the public about what may have occurred and emphasizes or reaffirms the false belief that societal well-being is furthered by the individual being imprisoned with a lengthy, harsh sentence. There is a body of social science that concludes otherwise but is not understood as the common narrative in conversations about public safety.¹⁹ The distorted message to the public is that people who may have committed harm should be in prison and incapacitated, rather than addressing the root causes and conditions that led the individual to producing the harm, which would actually lead to a better outcomes as it relates to community safety and well-being. Later in this report, we recommend that media and elected officials should use people-first language instead, to help humanize those involved in our criminal legal system. An example of poor choice of language is a recent [Oregonian](#) article headline, “Commutations granted to 1,000 felons by Oregon Gov. Kate Brown were lawful, appeals court say,” which is a negative, problematic depiction of people granted clemency.²⁰

The title emphasizes individuals as defined by their legal history, no matter how long ago they were convicted, rather than providing them with the dignity of being identified as individuals or as Oregonians, members of our community. Additionally, using the term “felons,” which is understood to stigmatize those with legal histories, suggests nefarious action by the governor. This seems intentional.

These distortions, both in substance and language, intentionally create misperceptions about the reality of what is happening, playing into the fears and anxieties of the dominant culture. Again, this is not new, but rather consistent with our history.

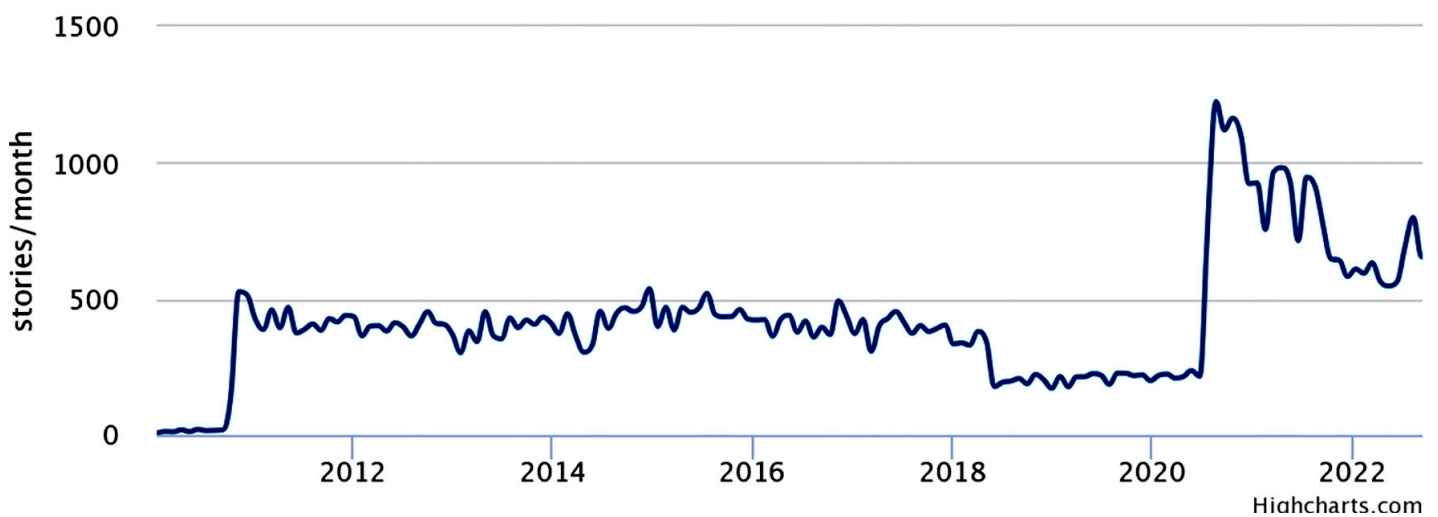


FIGURE 8: Media mentions of the words “criminal, crime, felon” in news outlets in Oregon (January 2011 to September 2022).

Consequential media coverage

Biased Reporting and Bothsideism: Poor coverage of events has detrimental effects on our community. For example, there were problematic news stories that covered the Normandale shooting (a shooting in Portland in which a protestor was killed), with [headlines](#) such as “Portland Police: Clash Between Armed Homeowner and Protesters Sparked Shooting.”²¹ This stemmed from media using the Portland police press statement instead of investigating the situation. The person who killed June Knightly, also known as T-Rex, was given a positive description as a “homeowner” while the protesters were reported in a manner that suggested they provoked the violence or engaged in a “clash.” There are many other examples, but it has been most widely observed in high profile killing of Black and Brown individuals by law enforcement or vigilantes, where the media coverage often describes the victims as

responsible for their deaths.^{22 23 24} This biased reporting leads the public to reaffirm bigoted perceptions and feeds into the politics of fear.

A common media narrative is “bothsidesism,” or a false balance. Bothsideism was most visible when President Trump made comments at a [press conference](#) on white nationalists who killed a protester and injured 19 others at Charlottesville, Virginia, when he said, “you also had people that were very fine people, on both sides.”²⁵ We saw this phenomenon often during the racial justice protests of 2020 and specifically with many local media outlets during the coverage of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in Portland. Headlines from multiple news outlets characterized the protests as unequivocally violence that came from demonstrators, rather than focusing on the historical patterns and practices of law enforcement misconduct, abuse, and violence that, in part, motivated the protests, and the [6,000 uses of force](#) that Portland Police Bureau and other law enforcement agencies committed during the 2020 protests.²⁶ It was common to see biased [headlines](#) covering the protests, such as “*Portland Fires, Vandalism, Looting as Protest Turns Into Riot; At Least 13 Arrests.*”²⁷ Images used were hyper focused on limited property damage, rather than the profound harms caused by teargas, chemical weapons and impact munitions disbursed in historic record levels, and countless injuries sustained by protesters from law enforcement. By drawing the public’s attention to property damage rather than the harms caused by law enforcement, those advocating for Black lives were vilified and suffered adverse consequences. Bothsidesisms, generally, results in denying the harms created by the legacy of white supremacy and continuing to marginalize segments of our population who are advocating for greater rights and dignity. It works to make impotent those seeking change and challenging oppressive and discriminatory systems.

Racism and Bigotry: Finally, we see today a continued harmful media portrayal of Black and Brown individuals. The media disproportionately uses mugshots and images of Black people in distressing environments when they are alleged to have committed a crime or when they themselves are victims of law enforcement violence or racial terror.²⁸ This is done intentionally and is a his-

torical tactic to immediately redirect suspicion to the victim and away from the actual perpetrator of violence. This is deeply rooted in white supremacy and the racial narratives that have dominated our history. Further, in descriptions of individuals in coverage of crime and criminal justice related issues, we see a narrow, one-dimensional representation of Black and Brown individuals, defined as “criminals” or “felons,” whereas white individuals are often given a backstory and factors of mental illness, family, and other social conditions. Since the inception of this country, racist and bigoted portrayals of Black and Brown individuals have been used to legitimize the dehumanizing treatment of individuals. By defining or characterizing individuals as other than human, it makes it easier for the dominant culture to subject these communities to what would be otherwise inhumane and cruel.

Elected officials’ “tough-on-crime” rhetoric today

Policy makers and elected officials have long been responsible for creating and implementing “tough-on-crime” laws and policies that negatively affect people of color and actually undermine safety. As a current example, former Oregon Senator Betsy Johnson, who is running for governor in 2022, posted a chart on Twitter (included) that displayed her opposition to criminal justice reform measures with negative, dehumanizing language for those involved in the criminal legal system. Additionally, Johnson openly [supports the death penalty](#) being returned to use in Oregon, “As governor, I will enforce Oregon’s death penalty in cases where a judge or jury deems it appropriate for a heinous crime. Oregonians have twice voted on and affirmed our death penalty. It’s time for liberal politicians to stop trying to overturn it or subvert it by letting dangerous criminals out of prison.”²⁹ By doing so, Johnson engages in many of the pro-carceral and dehumanizing tactics discussed. Statements from elected officials such as these continue to stoke fears, playing on the racist and bigoted fears of the dominant culture, and contribute to devastating consequences in misinforming the public.

Another prominent example is the vilification of Portland following the 2020 protests, as was seen in the media and from elected officials alike. As examples, Washington County District



Betsy Johnson is the **ONLY**
Law and Order Candidate for Governor

Bill	Description	Tina Kotek	Christine Drazan	Betsy Johnson
House Bill 2928 (2021)	Restricts Police Use of Anti-Riot Methods and Tools	YES	YES	NO
House Bill 3273 (2021)	Keeps Criminal Mug Shots a Secret from the Public	YES	YES	NO
House Bill 3164 (2021)	Reduces Crime for Rioters or Criminals for Interfering with an Officer	YES	YES	NO
House Bill 3355 (2021)	Discloses Officer Identities to Antifa/Anti-Police Groups	YES	YES	NO
Senate Bill 1008 (2019)	Juvenile Murderers, Rapists, Armed Robbers and Child Molesters Must be Released by their 25th Birthday	YES	WALKED OUT	NO

FIGURE 9: *Betsy Johnson's Twitter account.*



FIGURE 10: *Fox news headline “Portland Plagued by Violent Clashes, Riots.”*



FIGURE 11: *KOIN News segment “Is Portland Over?”*

Attorney Kevin Barton, in his 2022 [campaign ad](#) said, “Why does safety matter? Because I don’t want our county turning into Portland.”³⁰ And the [slogan](#) circulated in Gladstone, OR, “Don’t Portland my Gladstone.”³¹ We saw national coverage of Portland, from liberal to conservative news outlets, using fear-based language and images to inaccurately and inappropriately warn the public about what happens with a “progressive” district attorney, or what happens when police are “defunded.” The policies and practices of the local District Attorney in Portland have had very little correlation with crime rate increases in specific categories and the Portland police budget in 2020 had nominal cuts, but they were short-lived, with the funds since then returned and increased, reaching a record budget of \$249 million per annum (i.e. Portland Police was not “defunded”).

The attempt to falsely correlate criminal justice reform and increased crime rates has been regularly used by local elected officials and those running for office to elect “tough-on-crime” candidates and to support pro-carceral decision making.

The vicious cycle that exists between exacerbated, inaccurate, and racist reporting by the media and local elected officials using that reporting to affirm pro-carceral and racist policies has been existence since the inception of this country. It is a well-understood formula to sustain white supremacy and asymmetric systems in which Black and Brown communities, poor people, and others are intentionally kept on the margins. If we are to disrupt white supremacy and the structures that sustain it, then we must disrupt this cycle.

Recommendations for media coverage of criminal justice related issues

The OJRC offers the following guidelines for journalists on coverage of crime and criminal justice related issues. Below you will find do's and don't's for media coverage.

Don'ts	Dos
Blame crime squarely on individuals with as little acknowledgement as possible of mitigating factors.	Acknowledge complex societal factors that promote or deter crime.
Amplify false or unsupported claims from police, persecutors, and legislators.	Use facts and evidence-based information. Investigate the situation, center those who were harmed, and fact-check law enforcement and elected officials.
Use labels like “felon”, “criminal” and “sex offender” to stigmatize people as one characterization only for the rest of their lives.	Use people-first language (included below), Recognize that people are more than the worst thing they've ever done and that blurring their behavior and their person is harmful.
Make isolated shocking incidents the major focus of your coverage of crime and justice.	Offer context to your audience that helps them situate a crime in broader trends and patterns.
Use of mugshots, images of people in distressing environments.	Use caution with images and descriptions used for those impacted by the criminal legal system.
Report only on crime done by those in poverty, low level offenses, and engage in click-bait, sensationalized forms of reporting. Demonize marginalized individuals for crimes even when mental illness and/or addiction influences their behavior.	Understand what kinds of incidents over-reported, and what issues or solutions are under-reported. (Example: report on how many people die every year from the climate crisis, on corporate fraud and wage theft is overall under-reported.) Provide at least as much coverage of crimes committed by big business such as wage theft which outstrips burglary and robbery.

Don'ts	Dos
Immediately platform anyone willing to mischaracterize anything less than a hefty increase in police funding as “defunding police.”	Highlight how much is spent on policing and incarceration versus health, housing and education and demand justification.
Fuel backlash to reform by allowing opponents to fearmonger without evidence.	Require facts and research from <u>all</u> sides when changes to criminal justice policy or law are proposed. Understand the correlation of, or lack of correlation between criminal justice reforms and crime.
Reinforce racism through your decisions about which crime stories to cover and how to present the people involved.	Implement policies for journalists to require a racial equity analysis to prevent over-representation of Black and Brown individuals.
Require victims of police violence to have never made a mistake to have any hope of sympathetic coverage of their death.	Avoid allowing law enforcement to escape scrutiny and consequences when they kill or injure by pressuring police to answer tough questions.
Assume every victim wants sentences to be as harsh as possible.	Recognize the complex and even conflicting feelings of victims about sentencing that tend to shift over time.
Provide no solutions to decreasing crime or make implicit a call for more police officers or for more people to be put in prison.	Include evidence-based solutions and practices to address crime, rather than calls for continued, failed investments in policing and prisons.

Examples of people-first language:

Don't use	Use
“Criminal”	Individual, their name if applicable
“Prisoner”	Adult in custody, incarcerated individual, person in prisonw
“Felon”	Oregonian / person convicted of a felony
“Offender”	Returning community member
“Convict”	Individual w/ conviction
“Crime”	Harm
“Prisoners in Oregon”	Oregonians in prison

Journalists and news outlets should consider the following questions from the [Sentencing Project](#), “Is the uptick unique to one form of crime and is it attributable to a change in crime reporting or recording? How does the uptick compare to historical crime peaks and lows, and how does it compare with crime trends in other jurisdictions? What broader policy shortcomings does the crime uptick point to and what broader solutions are being implemented? (E.g., access to mental health care, access to effective drug treatment programs, underinvestment in community violence intervention programs, prevalence of guns, under-resourced youth programs, unaddressed residential segregation, unemployment/underemployment, and lack of affordable housing, etc.)”³²

Conclusion

Understanding crime rates, the history of media portrayal of crime, and knowing the current political climate are important while reading the news with a critical lens. It is essential that we recognize the economic, social, and psychological impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic when analyzing crime rates from 2020 to the present. We are calling for solutions that do not further invest in a carceral system that has failed to ensure community well-being. In our previous [Crime Rates Primer](#), we offered evidence-based solutions that are proven to decrease crime by investing in community-based services in neighborhoods and populations that are often neglected and withheld from adequate social services.

We see widespread over-reporting of crime, fear-based narratives based in unreality, and stories about Portland as a city characterized by chaos and crime, rather than focusing on solutions like Portland Street Response, mutual aid efforts for the houseless and vulnerable populations, and larger socioeconomic patterns, especially after the onset of the pandemic. In this report, we have compared crime rates and the coverage of crime, seeing a vast difference in irresponsible, poor journalism and reality. From the history of media in the printed press, television news, news available online, and social media, we see the white supremacy written into our country being put on full display in our media. The OJRC remains committed to fact-check false, misleading narratives and is dedicated to putting out data-driven information and dismantling white supremacy. ■

If you are a reporter and would like more recommendations for media coverage on crime and criminal justice issues, contact our Director of Communication, Alice Lundell at alundell@ojrc.info

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