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The Up hot

PULSE OF THE PEOPLE

Perceptions Haven't Caught Up to Decline in Crime

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Here's a narrative you rarely hear: Our lives are safer. This message is so rarely heard that half of all respondents to a recent YouGov poll suggested that the violent crime rate had risen over the past two decades. The reality, of course, is that it has fallen enormously.

The decline in violent crime is one of the most striking trends over recent decades; the rate has declined roughly by half since 1993.

To be precise, the F.B.I.'s count of violent crimes reported to law enforcement has declined from a rate of 747 violent incidents per 100,000 people in 1993 to 387 incidents per 100,000 people in 2012, which is the most recent year for which it has published complete data. This reflects the fact that over this period, the homicide rate has fallen by 51 percent; forcible rapes have declined by 35 percent; robberies have decreased by 56 percent; and the rate of aggravated assault has been cut by 45 percent. Property crime rates are also sharply down.

These trends aren't caused by changes in our willingness to report crime to the police. We see an even more significant decline in violent crime in data derived from surveys asking people whether they've been the victims of certain crimes over the past year. The National Crime Victimization Survey reports that the rate of violent victimizations has declined by 67 percent since 1993. This reflects a 70 percent decline in rape and sexual assault; a 66 percent decline in robbery; a 77 percent decline in aggravated assault; and a 64 percent decline in simple assault. This survey has nothing to say about the decline in homicide, for obvious reasons.

The gap between perception and reality is particularly large when it comes to New York City. The same YouGov survey also asked people to assess the relative safety of 10 large cities. New York was, after Chicago, the city most likely to be rated as "fairly unsafe," or "very unsafe," while Dallas/Fort Worth and Houston were most likely to be rated as "very safe," or "fairly safe." The reality, of course, is that the actual violent crime rate in New York is around half that in either Dallas or Houston, and lower than that in other big cities.

It's an unfortunate fact that media reporting on individual crimes yields a relentlessly dismal drumbeat of downbeat news. But even as each reported crime yields a story that is terrifying enough to shape our perceptions, the truth is that none of them tells us much about the broader trends. Far better to ignore the anecdotes and focus instead on the big picture, and the hard data tells us: There's been a remarkable decline in crime.

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