

Don't Fear Monger Over Narrow Measures of Crime



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It is hasty and reckless to warn of a coming crime wave and blame it on cops becoming tentative in face of criticism over police shootings of unarmed black citizens. Termed the "Ferguson effect," Heather Mac Donald and others are suggesting that, because of growing animosity toward law enforcement in minority communities, the police are retreating from the proactive tactics that for years were so successful in suppressing the crime problem all across America.

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Recent spikes in homicide and other violent crimes in several major cities, including Baltimore, Milwaukee, St. Louis, Chicago and New York are [highlighted, while nothing is said](#) about places where crime remains low. And the reported jump in crime reflects only a few months, a statistically unreliable indicator of trend.

In addition, a year-to-year increase in the crime rate may say more about past success than present-day failure. For example, homicides in [Chicago](#) may be up 17 percent so far this year, but the total for all of 2014 happened to be the lowest since 1965. And New York City's murder toll through May 31, may be up 19.5 percent over last year, but it is down 27.8 percent over the comparable time frame in 2010. Statistically, New York, Chicago and other cities are largely victims of their own success.

There is no doubt that many Americans are increasingly angry and distrustful of the police. That sentiment was clearly seen in the retaliatory shooting of two N.Y.P.D. officers last December. But police are not facing an increased level of violence. It has been noted that the number of officers killed in the line of duty rose from 27 in 2013 to 51 in 2014, a whopping 89 percent. But that 2013 figure was the lowest over the four decades for which such data are available, and by a large margin. Essentially, the 2013 number was a spike downward, followed by the 2014 figure that was exactly the [average of the prior 10 years](#).

When a city's homicide count suddenly surges by a double-digit percentage, people invariably look to place blame. However, sometimes the "cause" is just a matter of statistical aberration. The subsequent year will usually see a return to a safer level. Of course, then someone can claim credit for solving a crime wave that didn't exist.