

COVID and Crime: Key Findings
(Updated 8/20/2020)

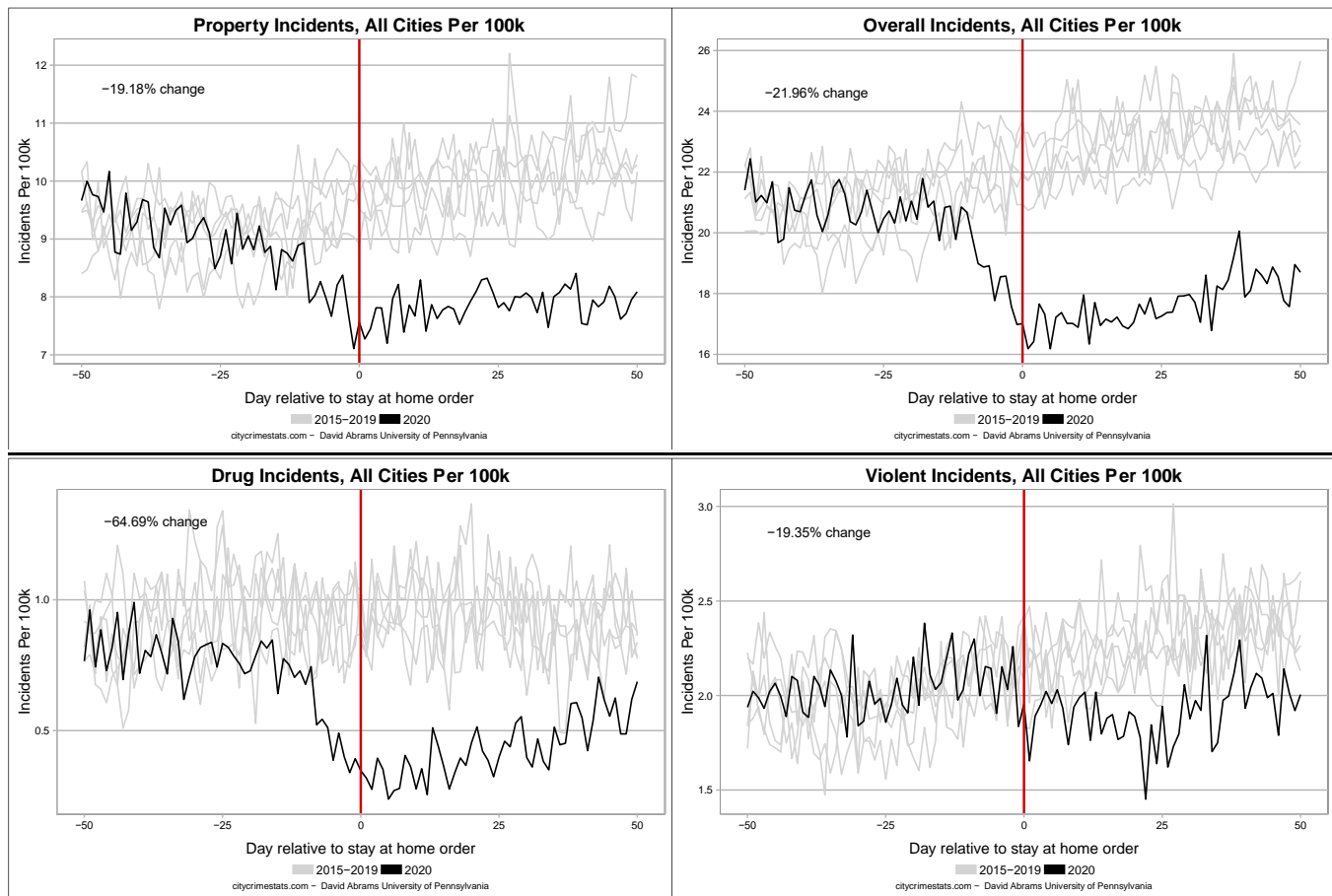
Professor [David S. Abrams](#)
University of Pennsylvania

Since the coronavirus pandemic began infecting large numbers of people in the U.S. in March, 2020 its effect has been felt across society. The immediate impact on crime – even before there were large numbers of infections – was massive. In order to understand this initial impact and help better prepare for future changes due to the pandemic, we assembled data from over 25 cities on crime incidents, arrests, police stops, shootings, and jail populations as well as COVID-19 incidence and mobility data.

This page summarizes the key facts we know so far of the initial impact of the pandemic on crime in large U.S. cities. Much more data and detail is available at citycrimestats.com

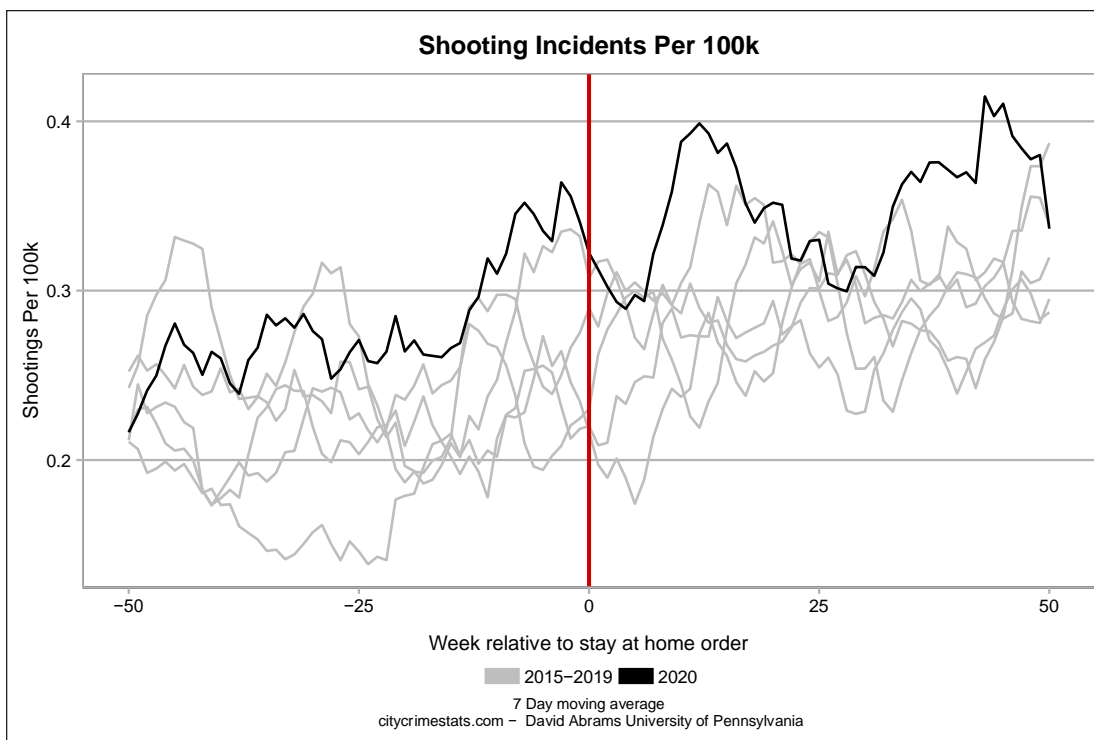
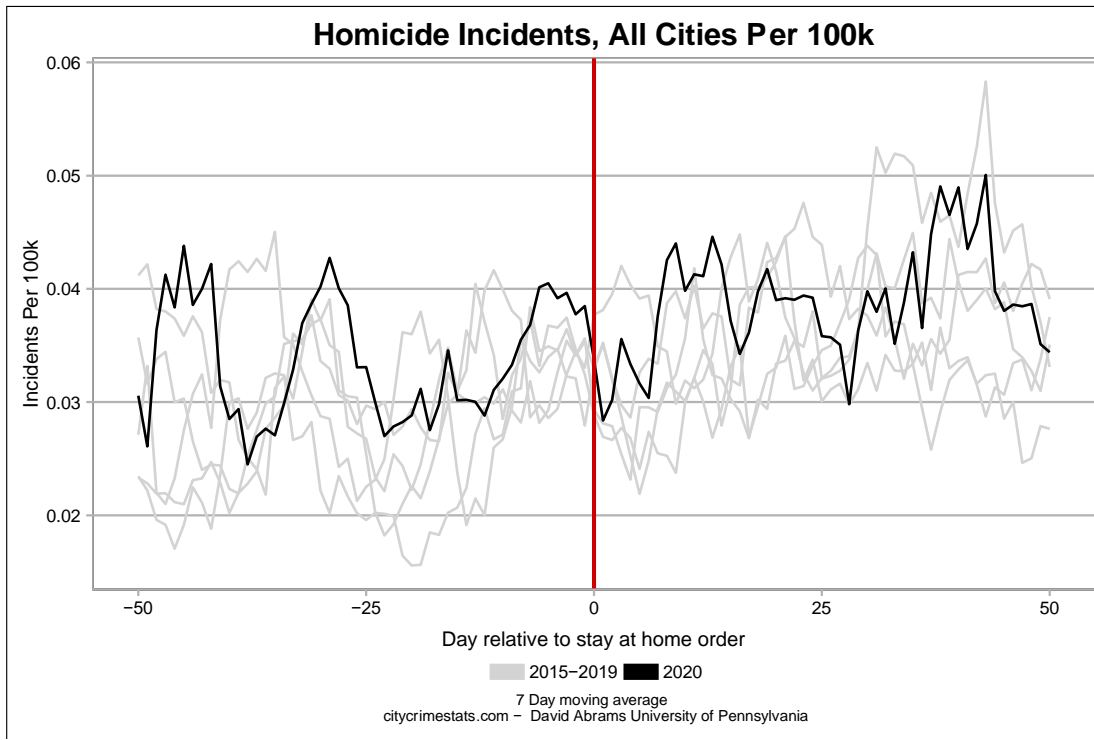
Reported Crime Rates Fell Tremendously

Across almost all of the cities examined, crime fell a tremendous amount in the first month of the pandemic – to overall levels over 22% below the average of the same time period in the previous 5 years. Since types of crime vary so much it is better to consider differences by crime type. Drug crimes fell the most – over 65% relative to prior years. Property crime fell 19.2% and violent crime fell 19.3%. It is important to note that these are *reported crimes* and some of the decline is likely due to changes in reporting during the pandemic.



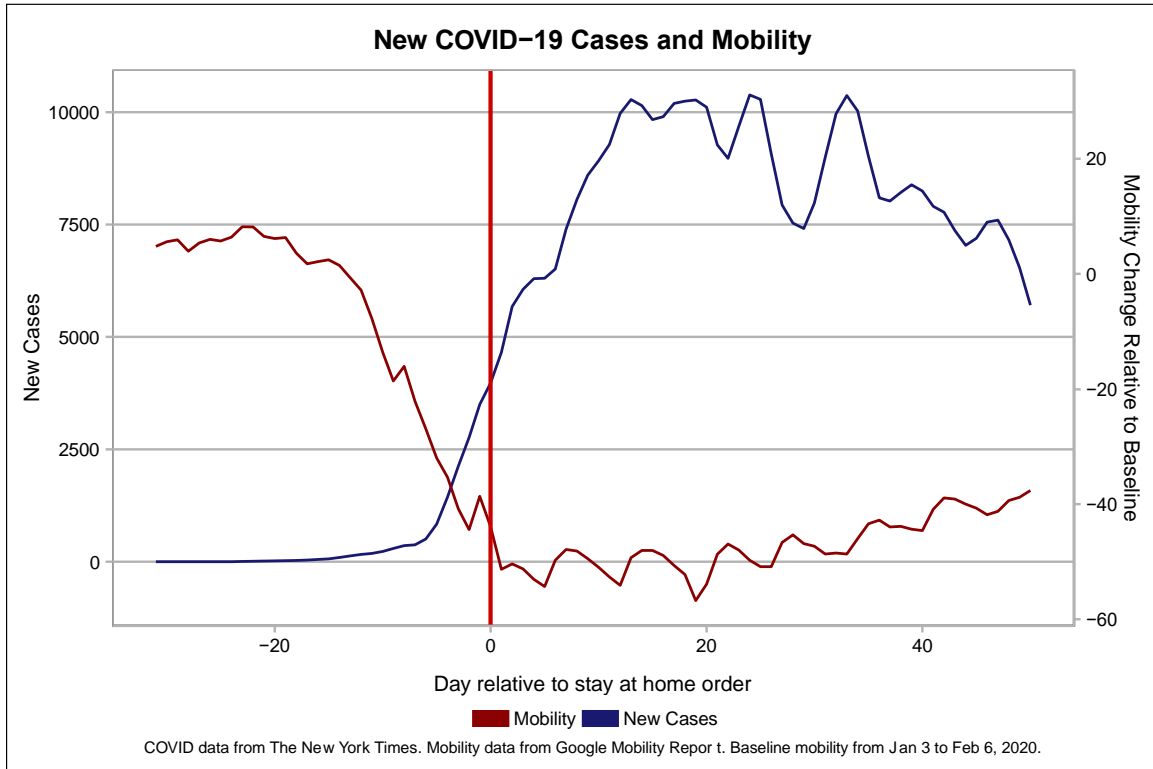
Homicides and Shootings Did Not Rise or Fall Due to the Pandemic Onset

While there has been an increase in shootings and homicides in a number of cities beginning later in the year, this cannot be clearly attributed to the pandemic. In our analysis focused on the first month after stay-at-home orders, and controlling for seasonality, there is no change in the number of homicides or shootings. This may be in part due to the fact that people engaged in these activities are unlikely to be concerned with stay-at-home orders.

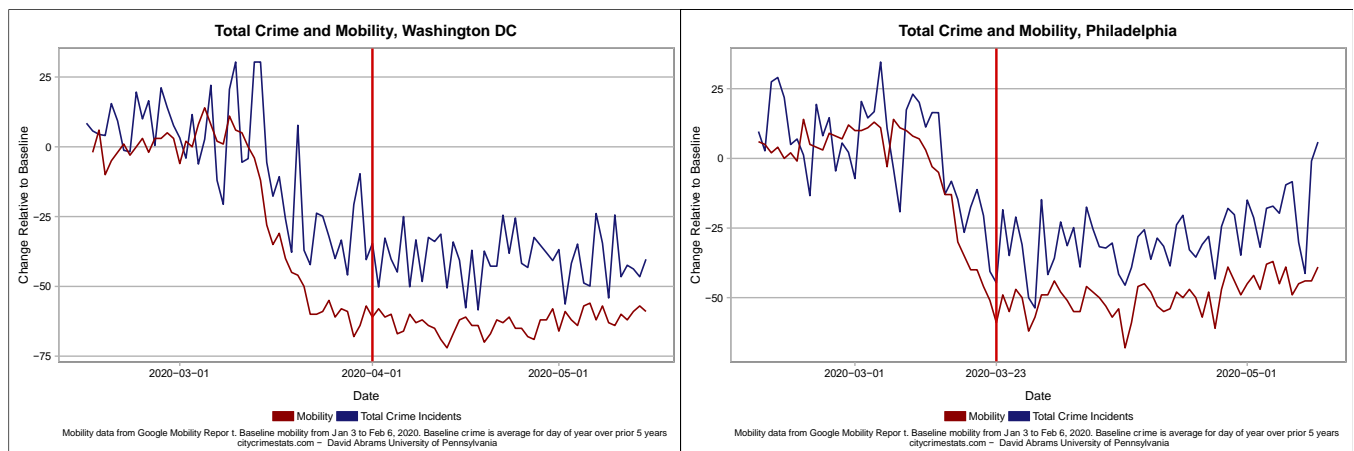


The Crime Drop Happened Before Stay at Home Orders

Before COVID-19 cases even rose appreciably in the spring, people quickly reduced their normal routines and stayed home more. This is reflected in the sharp decline in mobility data (based on mobile phone location) which happens at least 10 days before stay-at-home orders and before much of the rise in COVID-19 diagnoses.

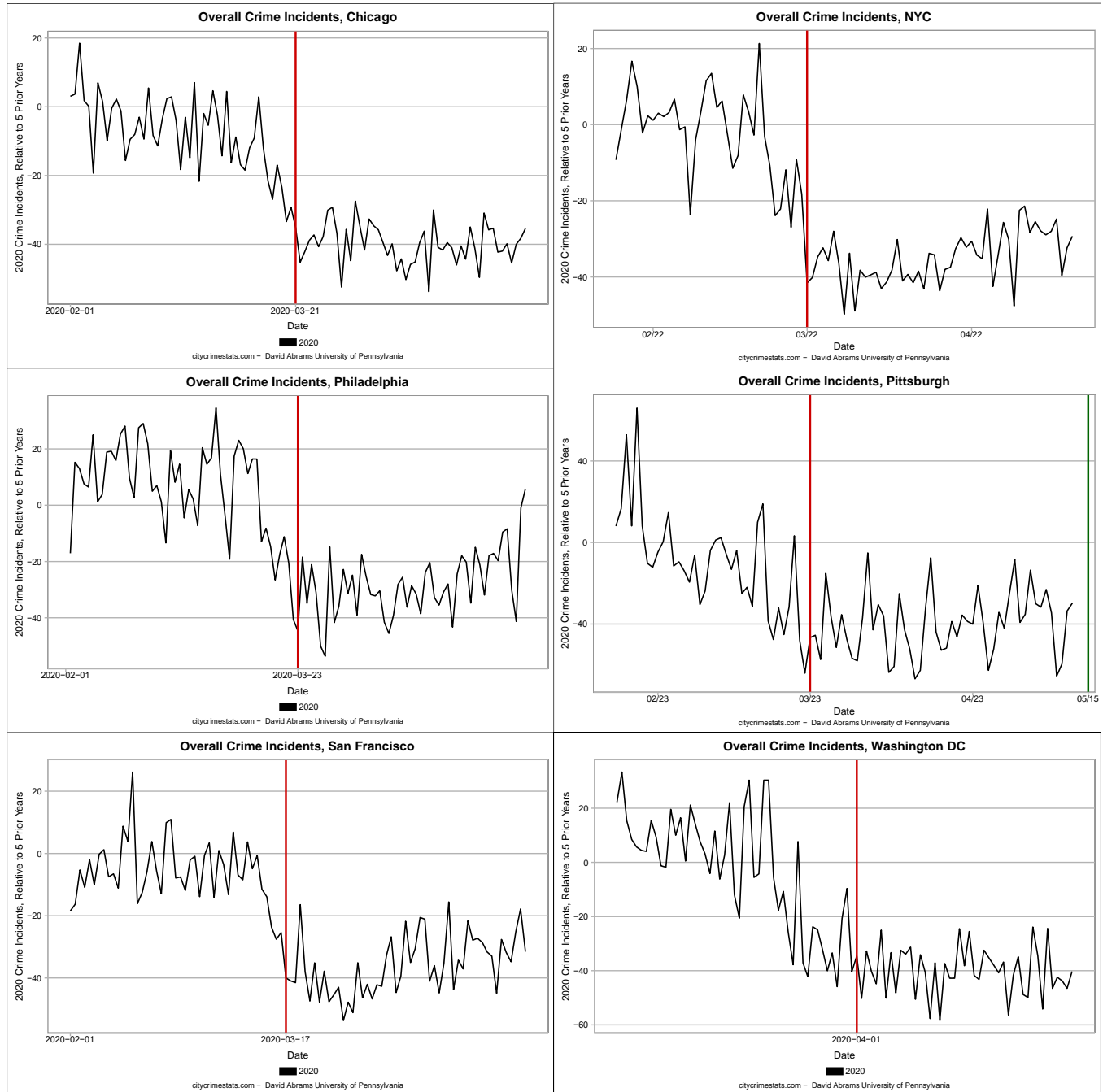


What does this mean for crime? *It also fell* well before stay-at-home orders, right around the time of the decline in mobility, as can be seen here for Washington DC and Philadelphia.



Crime Fell the Most in Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, SF and Washington DC

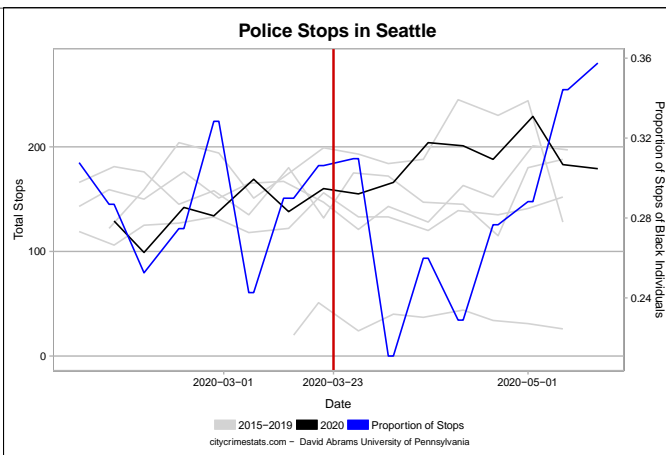
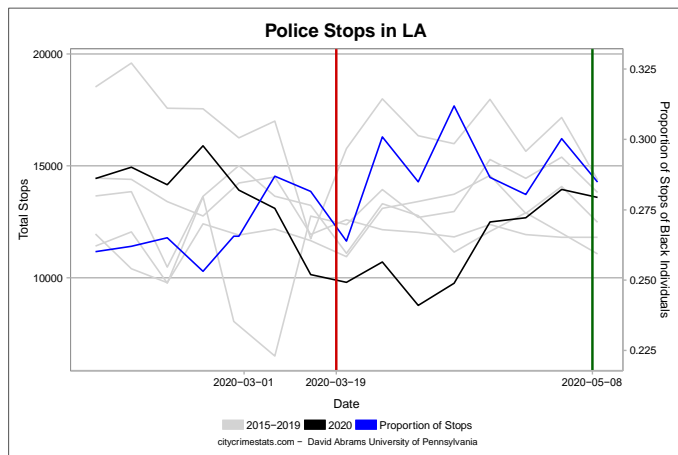
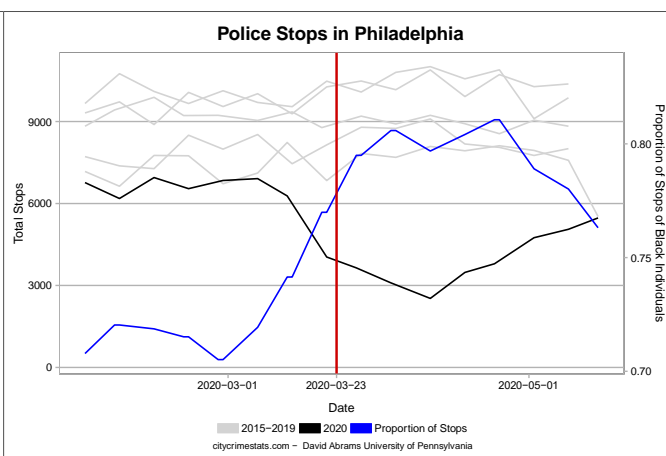
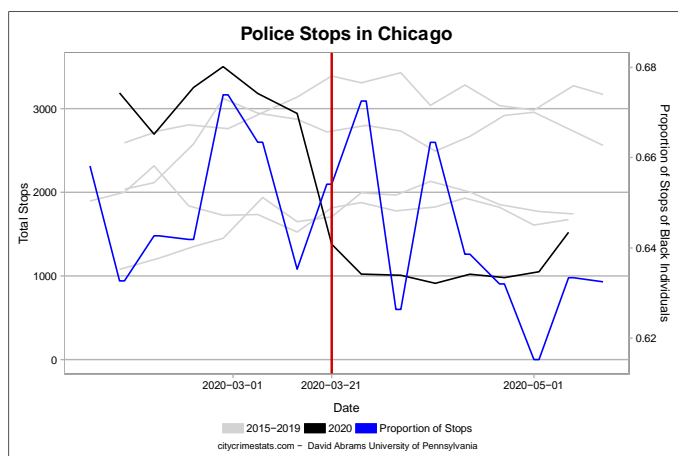
Reported crime fell dramatically across the country. There does not seem to be an obvious predictor of where it fell most, as none of the following factors predicted larger drops: median household income, police officers as a proportion of the population, proportion of African Americans, location within the US or the political affiliation of the city based upon the 2016 election.



Police Stops Declined in Chicago, LA and Philadelphia

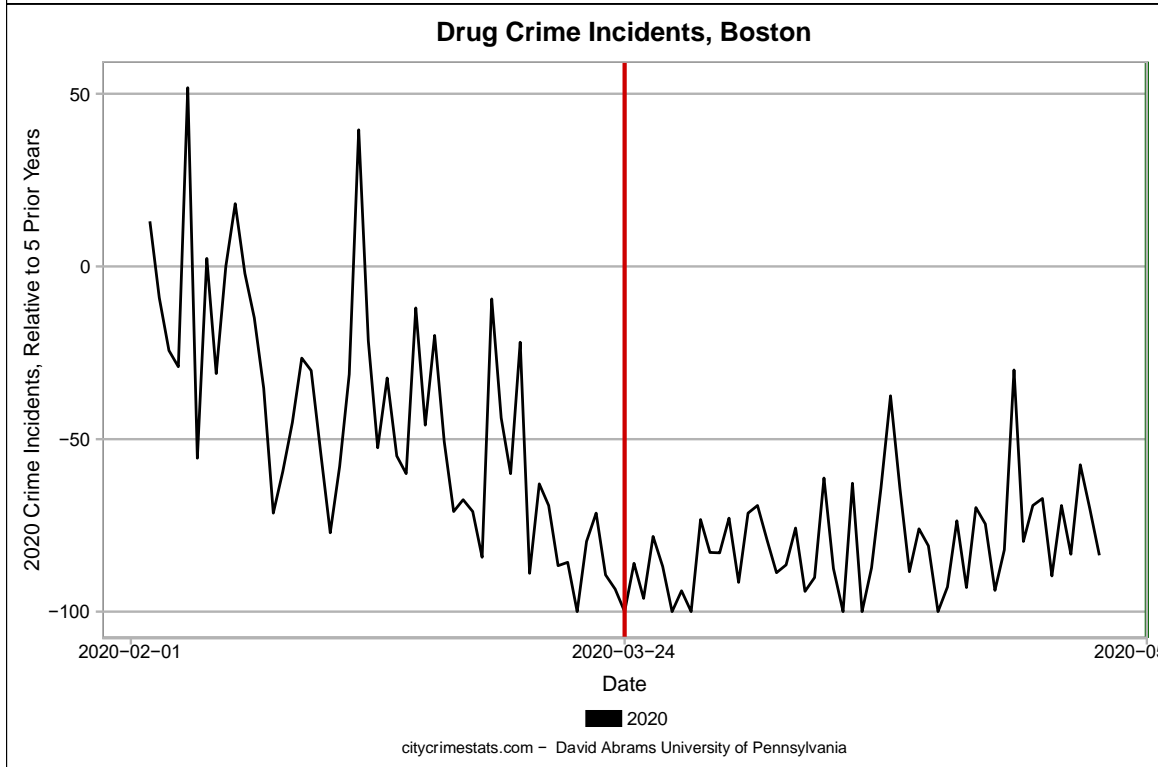
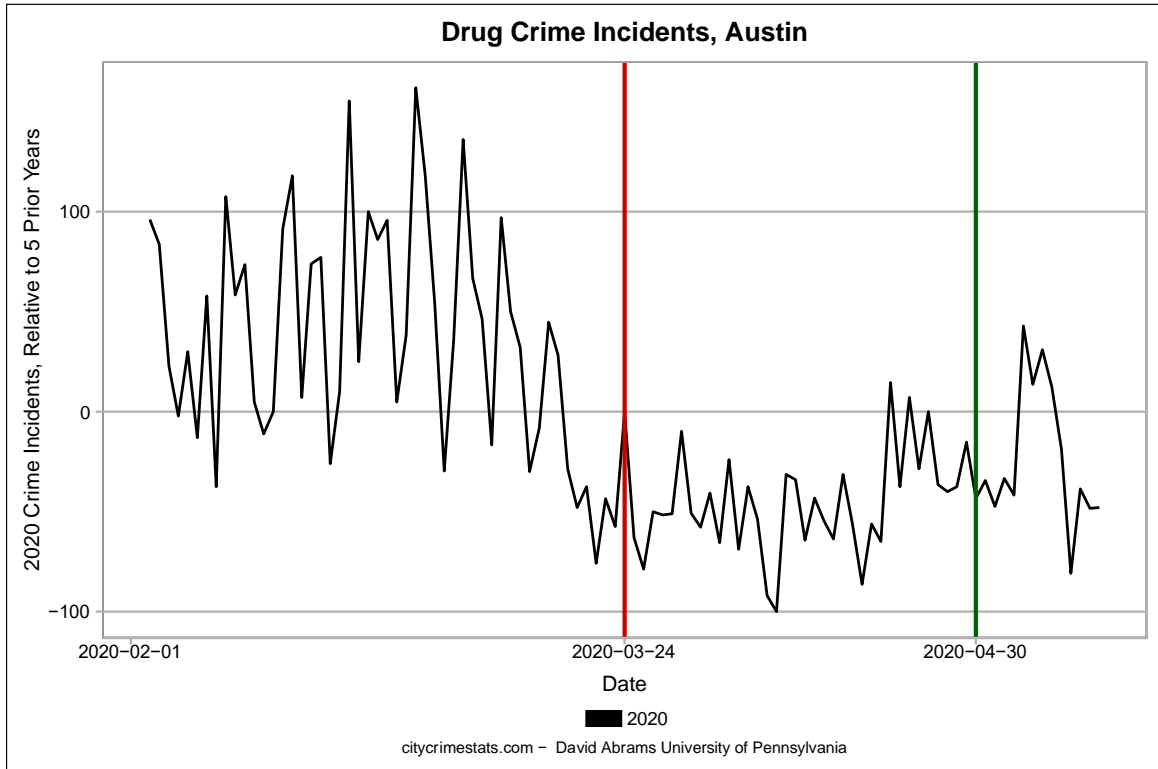
Along with a decline in crime, police officers stopped fewer people on the street or in vehicles immediately after the pandemic hit. In Chicago the number of stops fell to about one-third of what it had been prior to the stay-at-home order; in Philadelphia they dropped by over 50% and by about one-third in Los Angeles. This certainly reflects the fact that more people were staying home, and likely also changes to policing practices.

For these cities, the racial composition of detained individuals is also available. The share of Blacks that were stopped didn't change much except for in Philadelphia where there was a substantial rise in the month of April. This may reflect the fact that essential workers in Pennsylvania are more likely to be Black.



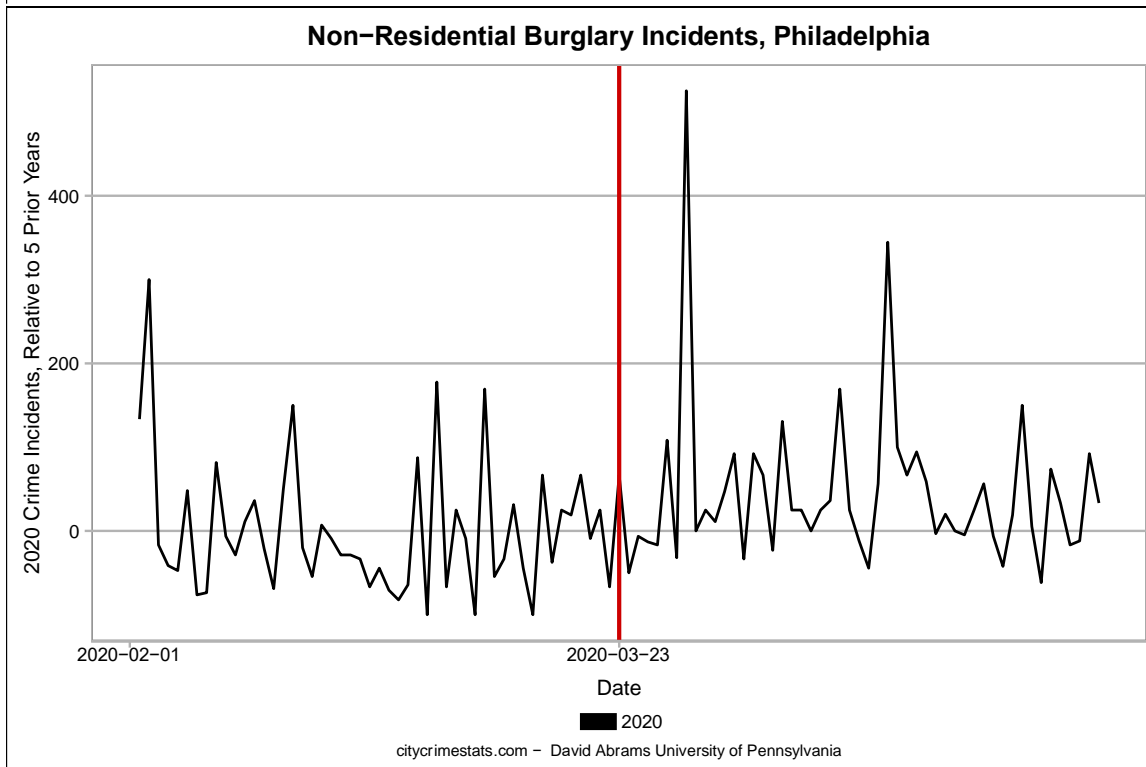
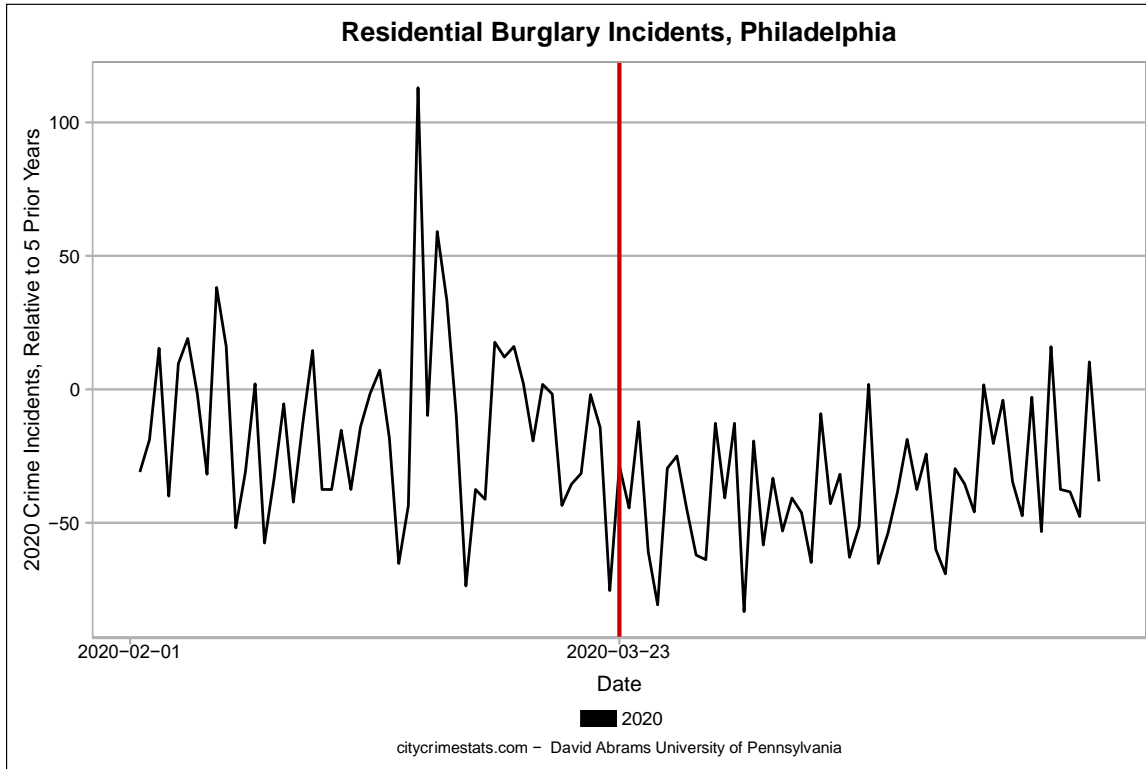
Drug Crimes Dropped the Most

Drug crimes saw the biggest decline of any category, in almost all cities for which we have data. Below are figures for two representative cities, Austin and Boston, showing the number of 2020 drug incidents relative to the average level on the same day for the 5 prior years. Both cities saw very significant declines in reported drug crimes when the pandemic hit.



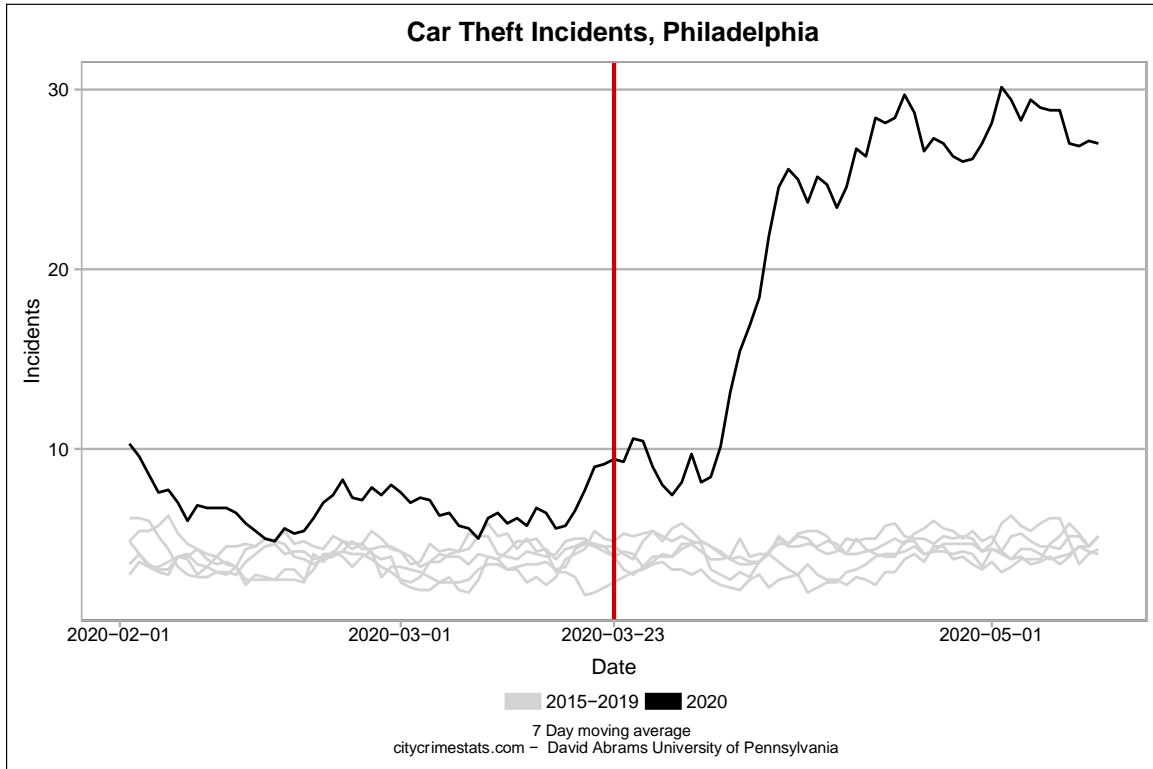
Home Burglaries Dropped while Commercial Burglaries Rose

As the pandemic hit, people began spending far more time at home. We can see one result of this is the large decline in residential burglaries as in Philadelphia. With people at home, that also mean there were fewer eyes on non-residential buildings, which led to an increase in those burglaries – by around 37% on average across the cities examined.



Car Theft Rose Dramatically in Philadelphia, with Variation in Other Cities

The change in car theft in Philadelphia is one of the most dramatic figures we have produced. There was a massive spike in car thefts in the city, where the rate after the pandemic hit was over 2.5 times as high as before. While nowhere near as dramatic, Austin, Denver, and LA also saw significant rise in motor vehicle theft, while Baltimore was the one city that saw a substantial decline.



Aggravated Assault and Robbery both Declined 13 – 15%

Violent crimes perpetrated on strangers are impacted in at least two ways when there are fewer people on the streets, as in the pandemic. There are fewer targets, and there is also less chance of being observed and reported. Both aggravated assaults and robbery fell in most cities, an average of 15.9% for aggravated assaults and 20.3% for robbery.

