Violent Crime in American Cities 1986-2006

Jeffrey A. Butts
Chapin Hall Center for Children
at the University of Chicago

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Hosted by Representative Robert C. Scott, Chairman
Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security
House Judiciary Committee, United States Congress

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Introduction

According to law enforcement officials and the news media, violent crime is growing across the United States. News coverage of violent crime soared in 2006 and 2007. Dozens of stories about increasing violence confirmed the fears of Americans who believe their neighborhoods are becoming less safe.

Being concerned about violent crime is always reasonable, but recent reports of mounting violence have been exaggerated. In most U.S. cities today, crime rates are similar to the levels of 2003 and 2004 when the nation was benefiting from the lowest violent crime rates in more than 10 years.

Of course, there are some jurisdictions where violence has increased markedly in the past two years. Some city neighborhoods are seeing significantly greater violence.

Nationally, however, recent increases in violent crime are small when compared with the scale of violence we have seen over the past 20 years. America's decade-long crime decline may be ending, but it is not appropriate to characterize current trends as a surge in serious violent crime.

Percent of Americans Afraid to Walk Near Home at Night
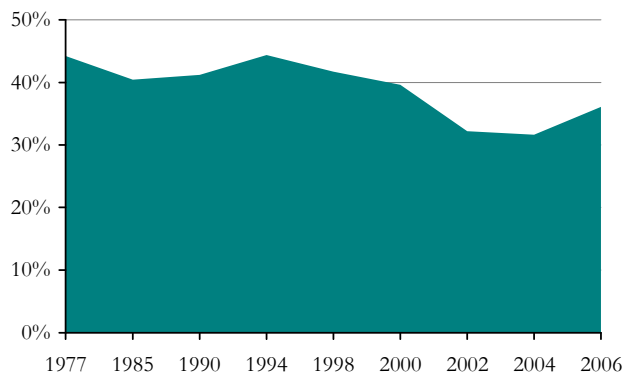
Source: General Social Survey. Chicago: NORC, University of Chicago.

Violent Crime Numbers Remain Low

Between 1991 and 2004, the number of Violent Crime Index offenses reported to police dropped 29 percent nationwide, from approximately 1,912,000 crimes to about 1,360,000 crimes annually.

The long decline ended after 2004 when violent crimes grew by 2.3 percent in 2005, bringing the total number of violent crimes to about 1,391,000. The increase is important because it signals the end of the crime decline, but it does not necessarily presage a new crime wave.

According to the newest data released by the FBI in June 2007, violent crimes increased by one percent between 2005 and 2006, with the growth rate in medium-sized cities of 250,000–500,000 residents outpacing the rise in larger cities.

Does this latest increase represent the beginning of a new spike in violent crime, or is it a small fluctuation in what may still turn out to be an era of relatively stable rates?

Crimes Reported: U.S. Total
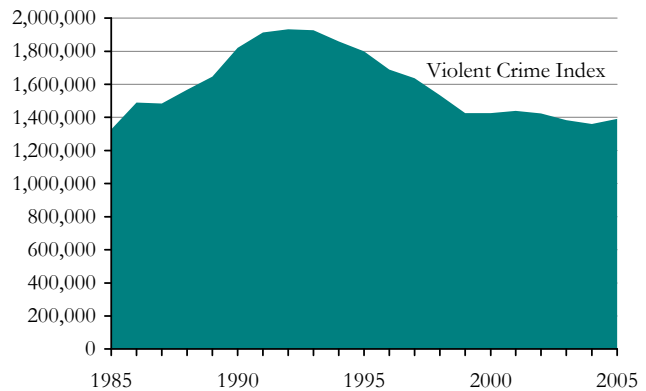
Source: Uniform Crime Reports. Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice.

Note: Offenses in the FBI Violent Crime Index include murder, forcible rape, aggravated assault, and robbery.

## Other Data Suggest Crime is Not Growing

To detect changes in crime, researchers usually rely on data about reported crimes or arrests. Police data, however, depend at least in part on police resources and levels of enforcement, making this information an imperfect measure of long-term crime trends.

Victim surveys are another important source of crime data. The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) is administered by the Bureau of Justice Statistics in the U.S. Department of Justice. In each survey since 1973, a national sample of Americans was interviewed to determine the scale and severity of criminal acts committed against individuals and their families.

The NCVS data show no significant increase in the overall rate of violent crime in the United States (violent victimizations per 1,000). The rate of violent crimes dropped from 1994 through 2004, then flattened and did not increase in 2005.

Could this mean that recent increases in police reports of violent crime are due in part to greater efforts by law enforcement?

Violent Victimizations per 1,000
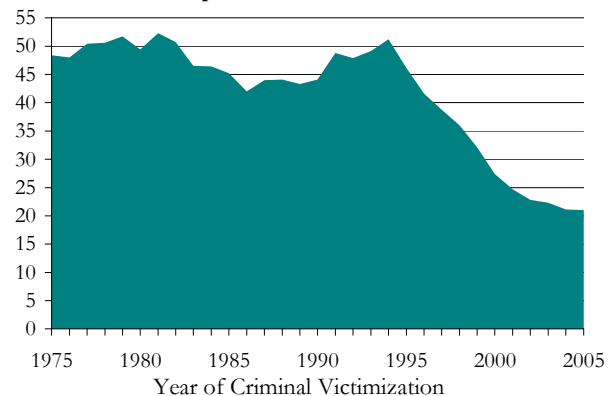
Source: National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice.

Most Cities Have Encouraging Crime Trends

The graphs on pages 6 to 16 of this report present violent crime data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting program (UCR).

Each year, the UCR program receives crime data from jurisdictions containing 70 to 80 percent of the U.S. population. Tracking the number of Violent Crime Index offenses reported by local jurisdictions allows the FBI to monitor levels of violence in cities and counties throughout the nation.

This report presents the latest crime trends for the 61 largest cities in the UCR program. The 61 cities have a combined population of nearly 50 million people, or one-sixth the U.S. population. They include every city with a population of at least 250,000 where police participated in the UCR program for at least 19 years of the 21-year period between 1986 and 2006 (see page 16 for additional information about the jurisdictions analyzed in this report).

Based on the scale and trajectory of their violent crime trends between 1986 and 2006, the 61 cities are divided into three groups:

42 Cities with Encouraging Crime Trends —
The rate of violent crime was still falling through 2006, or recent increases are very small and the rate remains much lower than the violent crime peak of the 1990s.

12 Cities with Troubling Crime Trends —
The rate of violent crime increased in recent years but long-term trends are not clear and/or the recent changes are relatively small compared with the previous 20 years.

7 Cities with Alarming Crime Trends —
The rate of violent crime increased in recent years and the extent of the increase was sharp and sustained or unprecedented, bringing the 2006 violent crime rate to a level near the high point of the 1990s.

Population of U.S. Cities by Crime Trends
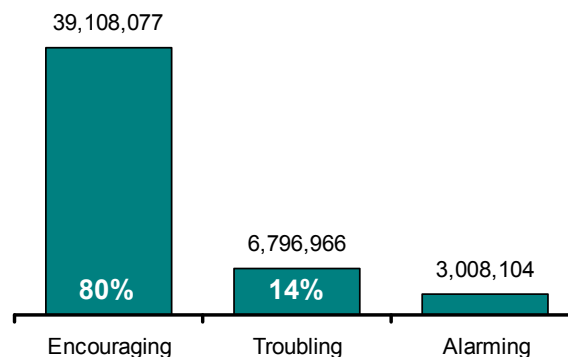
Trend in Violent Crime: 1986-2006

Conclusion

According to the data graphs shown in this report, most Americans are still enjoying the benefits of the violent crime drop that emerged in the 1990s.

Of 61 cities, only 7 experienced "alarming" increases in violent crime between 2004 and 2006, while 12 cities had trends that could be called "troubling."

In the remaining 42 cities– accounting for 80 percent of the population studied here–violent crime rates were "encouraging." In other words, 2006 crime rates were not substantially different from the rates of 2004 when the nationwide crime drop had brought violent crime to its lowest level in decades.

The interpretation of crime trends is, of course, subjective. Some cities listed in the "encouraging" category experienced small increases after 2004, including Boston, Raleigh, St. Louis, and San Francisco. Even with their slight increases, however, violent crime in these cities remained very low.

How can this be? Are the news stories and statements by public officials describing a widespread spike in violence simply wrong? Are we being misled by faulty analysis?

Violent crime trends are misunderstood for four common reasons.

First, there is never a shortage of violent crime in the United States. We are overwhelmed with horror stories about crime. It is easy to lose sight of the true scale of violence and whether rates have changed.

Second, violence has increased sharply in some communities. Naturally, we tend to concentrate our attention on these areas. Concerns about rising crime are pervasive, even if actual changes in crime are scattered and episodic.

Third, the news media "cherry pick" when reporting crime trends. They focus on whatever crimes are increasing. If murder goes up, that is the lead story. If murder goes down, homicide stories are moved aside to focus on other crimes. The public never learns that long-trend crime trends are often flat or fluctuating.

Fourth, many recent reports about crime have used very short time frames. Because 2004 was a low point in modern crime rates, reports that focus only on crime in 2004, 2005 and 2006 will inevitably find increases, but the increases appear large only when viewed out of context.

As of 2006, the news about violent crime was still good in most U.S. cities. Americans should always keep a close watch on violence, but we need to see the whole picture.

Cities with "Encouraging" Crime Trends

City	Population[1]	Crime Rate[2]
New York, NY	8,115,690	638
Los Angeles, CA	3,871,077	787
Chicago, IL	2,873,441	1,196 [3]
Houston, TX	2,045,732	1,169
Phoenix, AZ	1,466,296	738
San Diego, CA	1,272,148	504
San Antonio, TX	1,256,584	617
Dallas, TX	1,230,303	1,206
San Jose, CA	910,528	387
Jacksonville, FL	795,259	837
San Francisco, CA	749,172	876
Columbus, OH	730,329	810
Austin, TX	693,019	500
Charlotte, NC	677,122	1,077
Baltimore, MD	641,097	1,696
Fort Worth, TX	613,261	656
El Paso, TX	601,839	390
Seattle, WA	579,215	711
Boston, MA	567,589	1,339
Nashville, TN	557,034	1,527
Washington, DC	550,521	1,448
Portland, OR	540,389	714
Oklahoma City, OK	531,688	802
Tucson, AZ	529,447	856
Albuquerque, NM	490,631	908
Long Beach, CA	479,729	715
New Orleans, LA	463,072	523
Fresno, CA	460,758	757
Mesa, AZ	452,340	436
Kansas City, MO	447,915	1,444
Atlanta, GA	430,666	1,554
Miami, FL	388,295	1,509
St. Louis, MO	346,005	2,481
Santa Ana, CA	344,991	582
Anaheim, CA	335,992	465
Raleigh, NC	332,084	640
Tampa, FL	329,035	1,158
Aurora, CO	295,888	613
Riverside, CA	290,299	688
Corpus Christi, TX	285,821	710
Newark, NY	281,063	1,011
St. Petersburg, FL	254,713	1,482

Cities with "Troubling" Crime Trends

City	Population[1]	Crime Rate[2]
Philadelphia, PA	1,472,915	1,562
Las Vegas, NV	1,281,698	983
Honolulu, HI	908,521	298
Denver, CO	564,552	761
Virginia Beach, VA	446,448	255 [3]
Tulsa, OK	386,414	1,248
Pittsburgh, PA	330,780	1,070
Bakersfield, CA	285,821	528
Buffalo, NY	283,269	1,411
Stockton, CA	281,747	1,481
St. Paul, MN	278,692	877 [3]
Anchorage, AK	276,109	736 [3]

Cities with "Alarming" Crime Trends

City	Population[1]	Crime Rate[2]
Memphis, TN	678,988	1,988
Sacramento, CA	457,347	1,206
Oakland, CA	400,619	1,896
Minneapolis, MN	376,277	1,702 [3]
Colorado Springs, CO	374,482	568
Arlington, TX	365,380	731
Wichita, KS	355,011	926

[1] City population in 2005.

[2] Violent crimes per 100,000 population in 2006 (violent crimes are homicide, forcible rape, aggravated assault and robbery).

[3] Data for 2006 were unavailable. Data for 2005 were used instead.

Encouraging Trends — 42 cities where rates of violent crime are falling or remain low and any recent increases are very small compared with the past 20 years
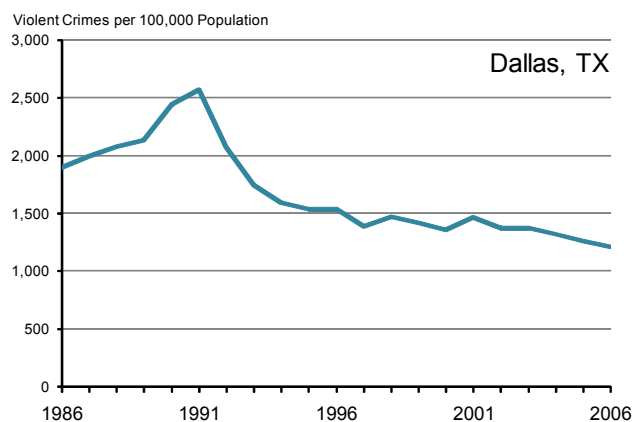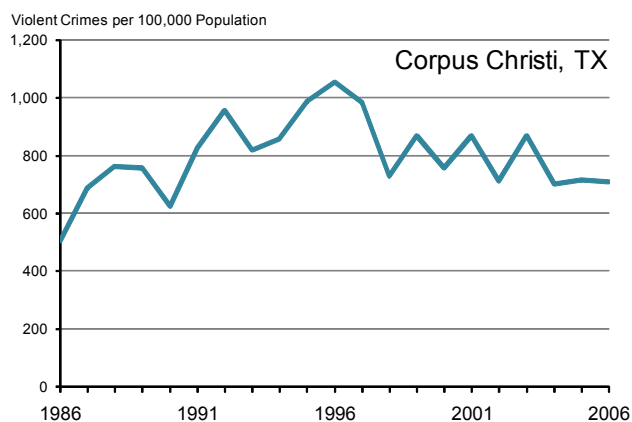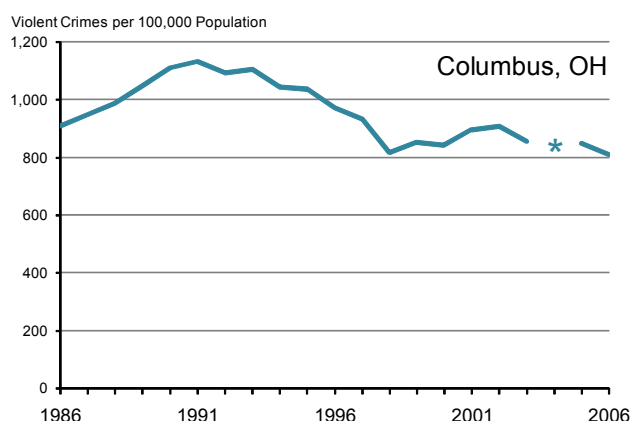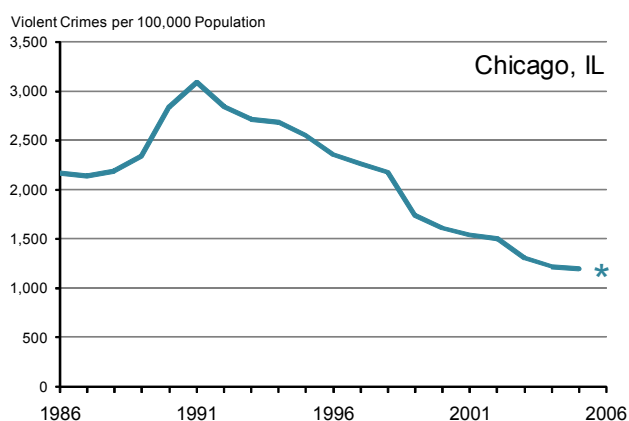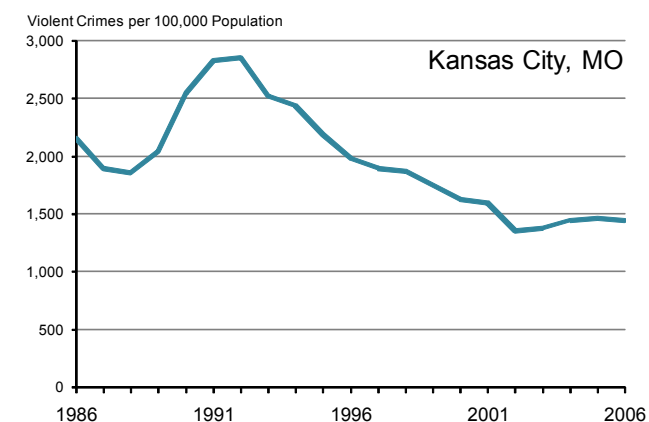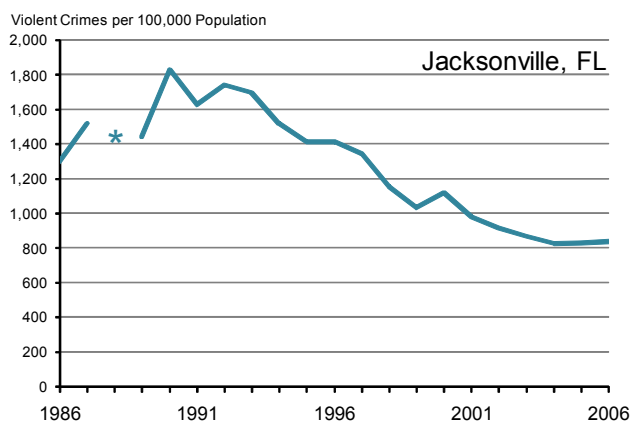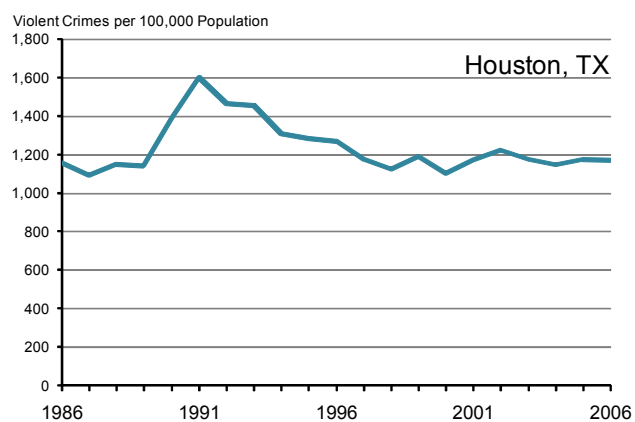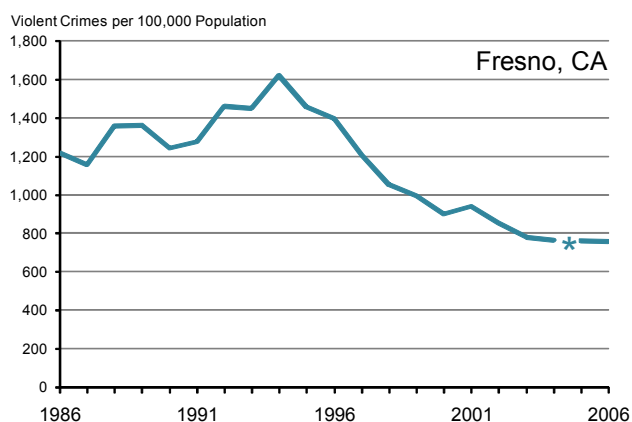
Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Albuquerque, NM

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Anaheim, CA

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Atlanta, GA

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Aurora, CO

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Austin, TX

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Baltimore, MD

* Data missing for a particular year.
  See other footnotes on page 16.

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Encouraging Trends — 42 cities where rates of violent crime are falling or remain low and any recent increases are very small compared with the past 20 years
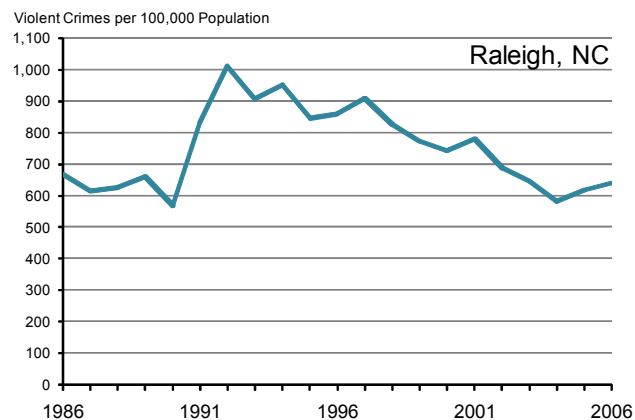
Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Boston, MA

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Charlotte-Mecklenburg, NC

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Chicago, IL

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Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Columbus, OH

*

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Corpus Christi, TX

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Dallas, TX

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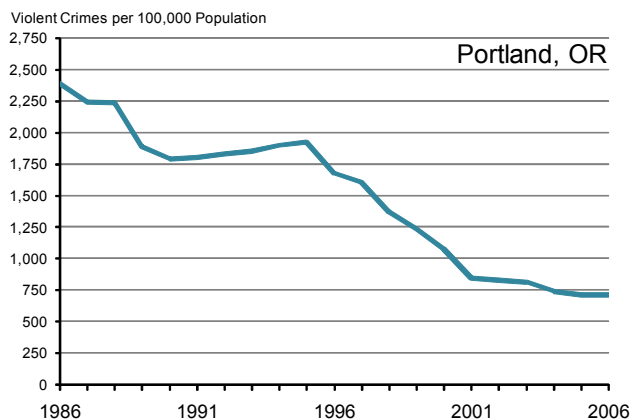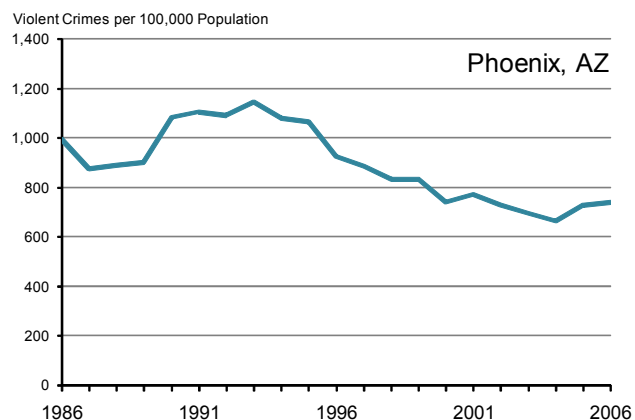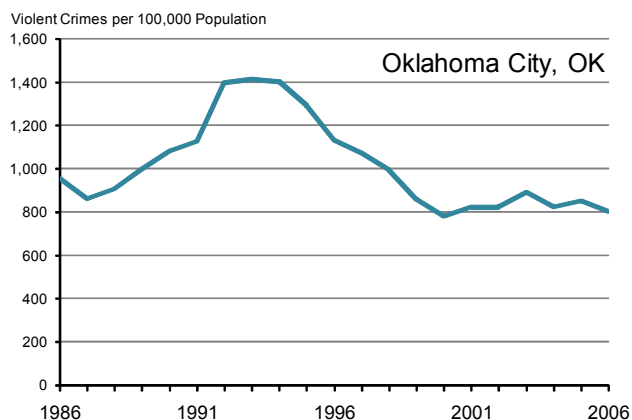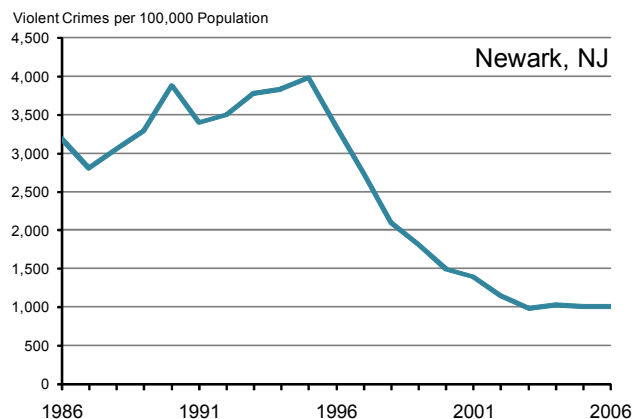
Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

El Paso, TX

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Fort Worth, TX

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Fresno, CA

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Houston, TX

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Jacksonville, FL

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population
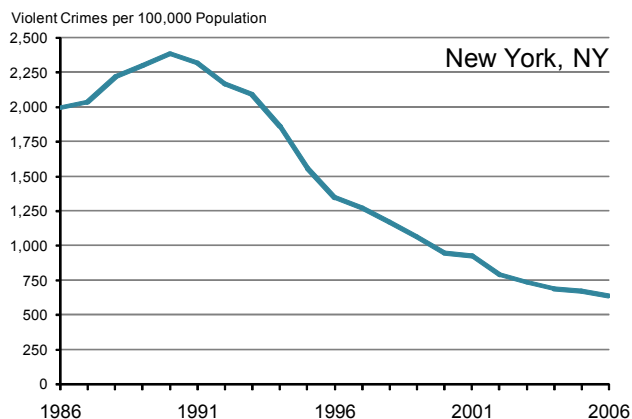
Kansas City, MO

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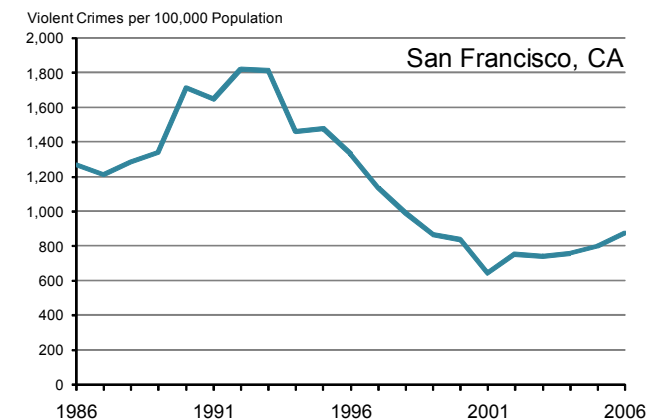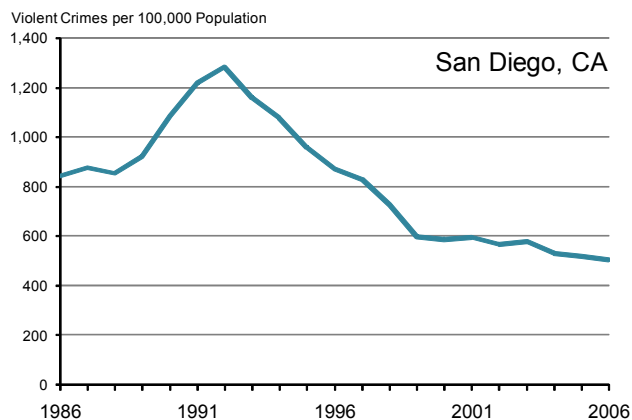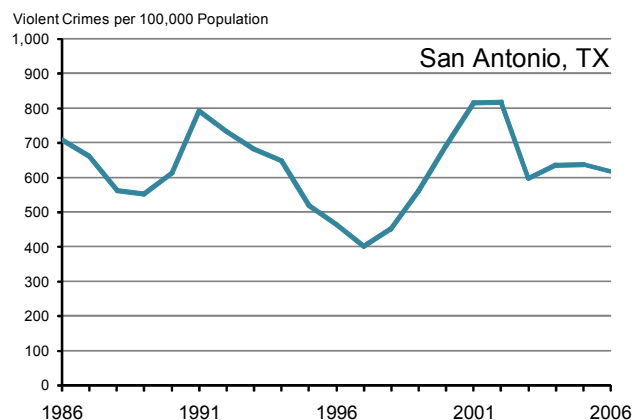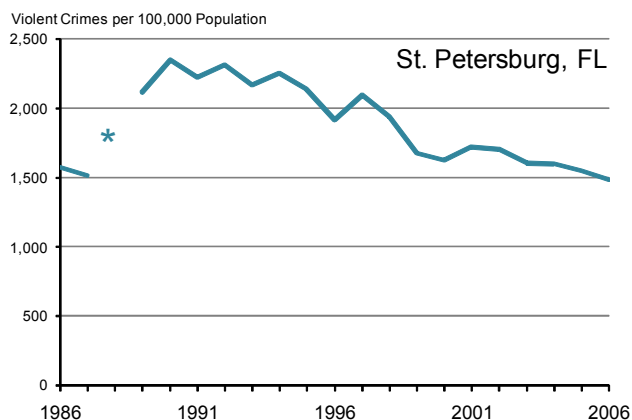

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Long Beach, CA

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Los Angeles, CA

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Mesa, AZ

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Miami, FL

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Nashville-Davidson, TN

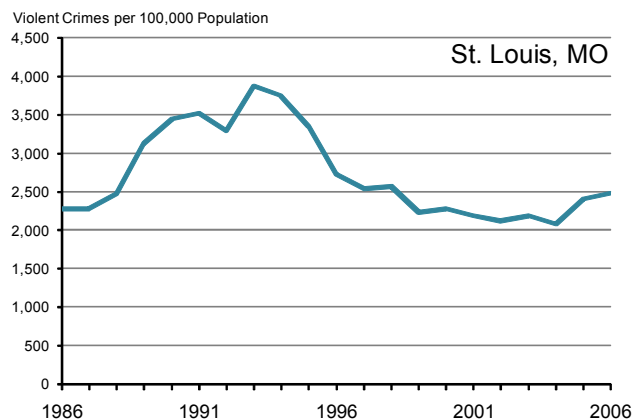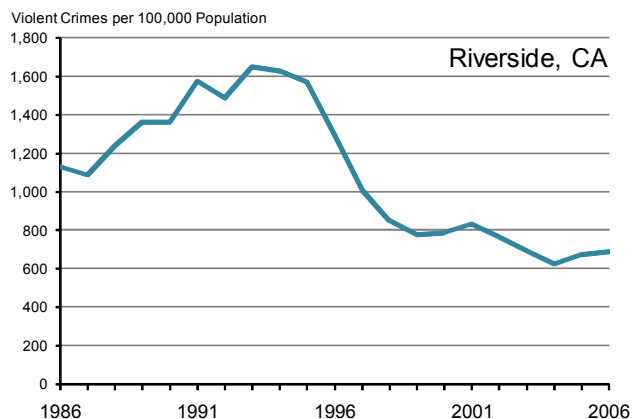Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

New Orleans, LA

* Data missing for a particular year.
  See other footnotes on page 16.

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Encouraging Trends — 42 cities where rates of violent crime are falling or remain low and any recent increases are very small compared with the past 20 years

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

New York, NY

Newark, NJ

Oklahoma City, OK

Phoenix, AZ

Portland, OR

Raleigh, NC

* Data missing for a particular year.
See other footnotes on page 16.

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Encouraging Trends — 42 cities where rates of violent crime are falling or remain low and any recent increases are very small compared with the past 20 years
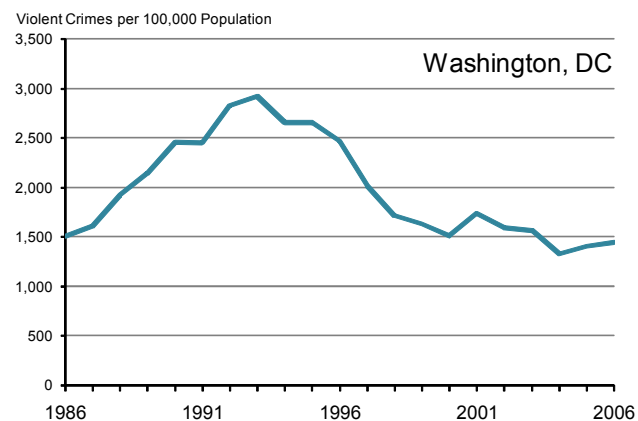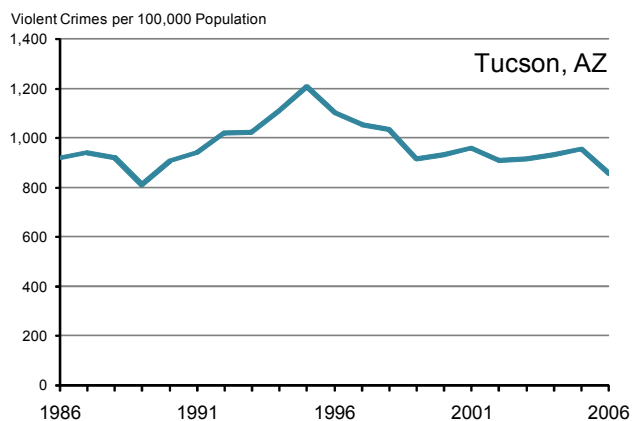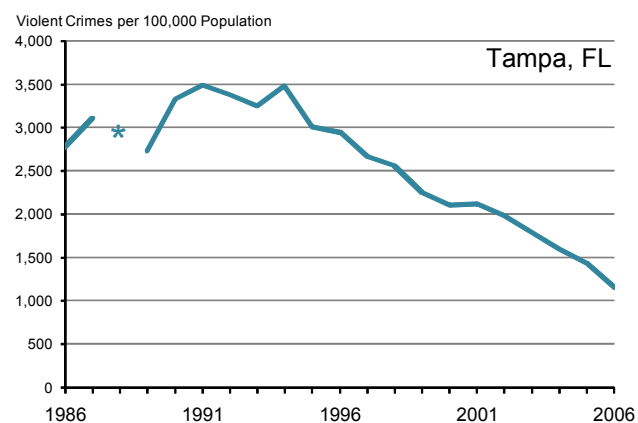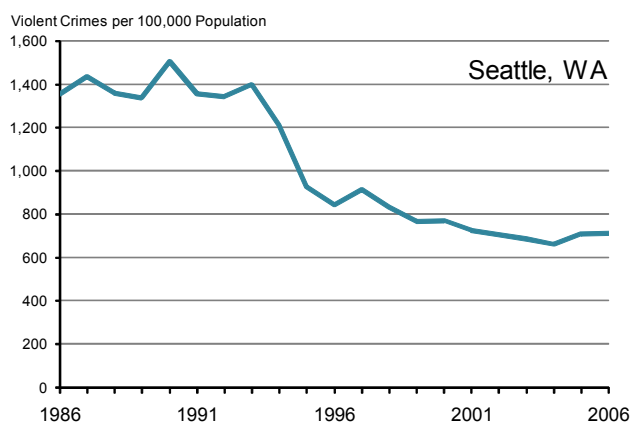
Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Riverside, CA

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

St. Louis, MO

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

St. Petersburg, FL

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Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

San Antonio, TX

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

San Diego, CA

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population
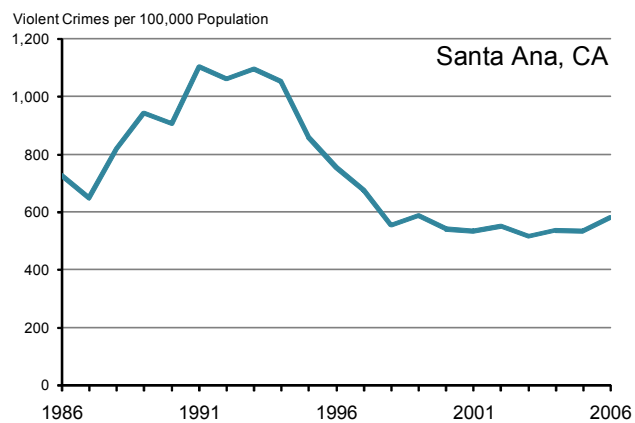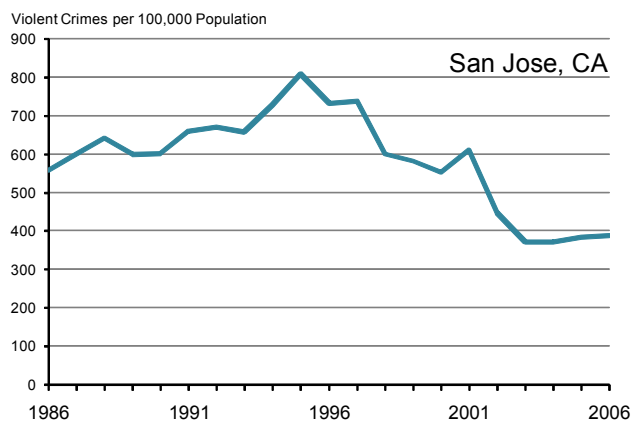
San Francisco, CA

* Data missing for a particular year.
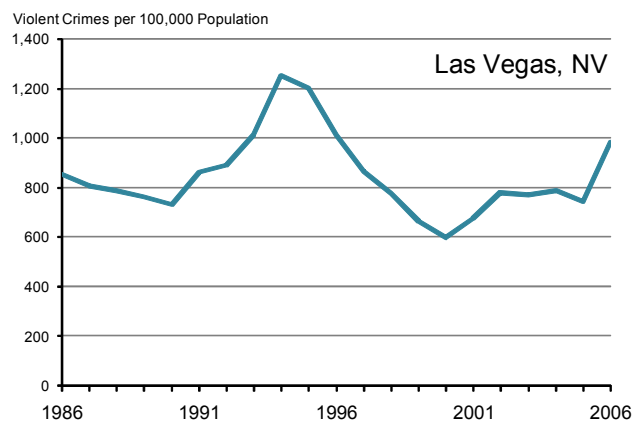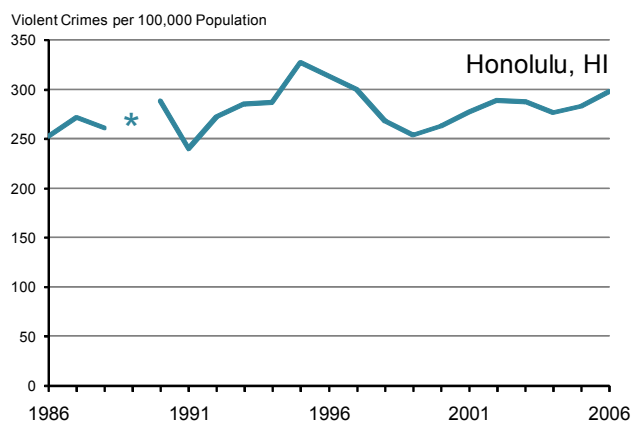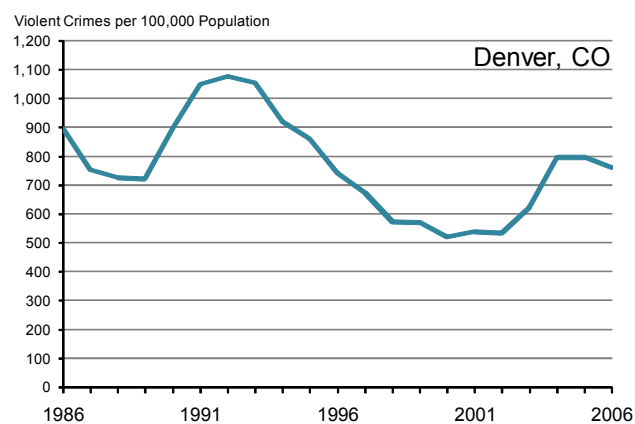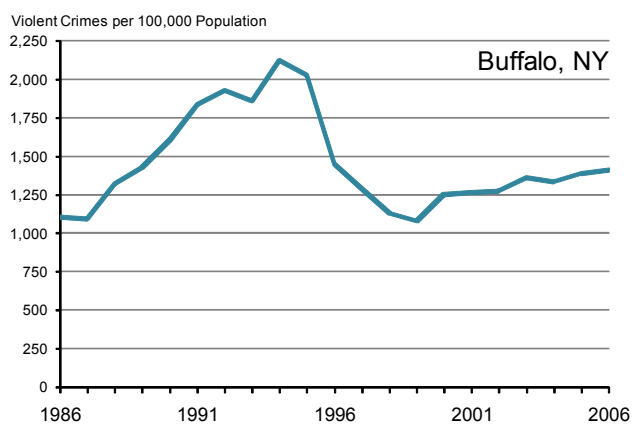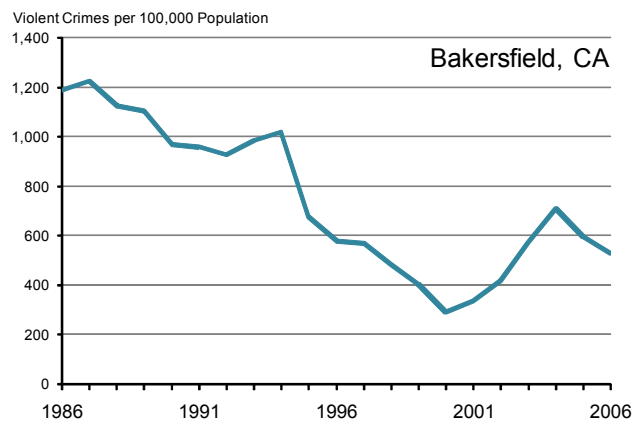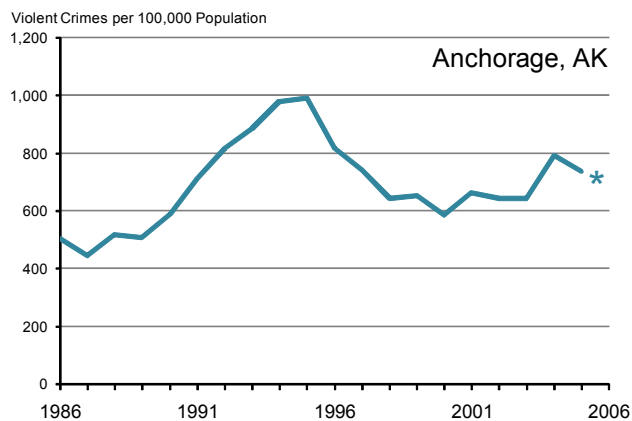 See other footnotes on page 16.

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Encouraging Trends — 42 cities where rates of violent crime are falling or remain low and any recent increases are very small compared with the past 20 years

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

San Jose, CA

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Santa Ana, CA

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Seattle, WA

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Tampa, FL

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Tucson, AZ

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Washington, DC

* Data missing for a particular year.
  See other footnotes on page 16.

Troubling Trends— 12 cities where violent crime rates have increased but where long-term trends are not clear and/or recent changes are relatively small compared with the past 20 years

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Anchorage, AK

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Bakersfield, CA

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Buffalo, NY

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Denver, CO

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Honolulu, HI

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Las Vegas, NV

* Data missing for a particular year.
See other footnotes on page 16.

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Troubling Trends— 12 cities where violent crime rates have increased but where long-term trends are not clear and/or recent changes are relatively small compared with the past 20 years
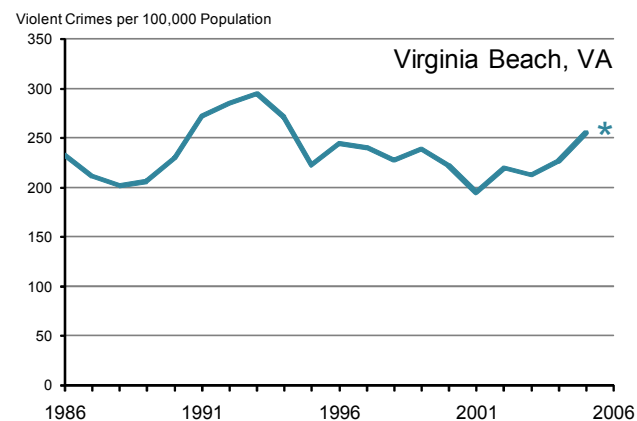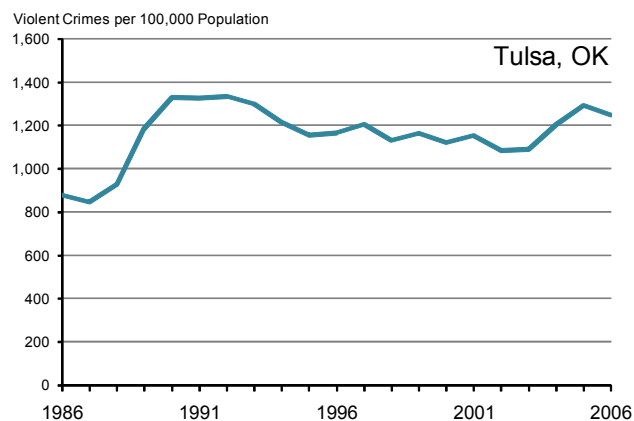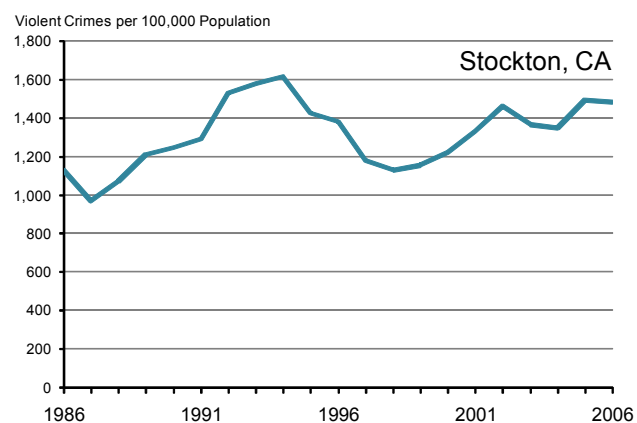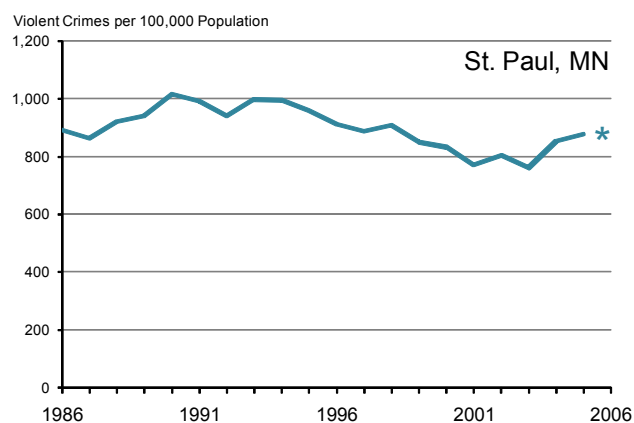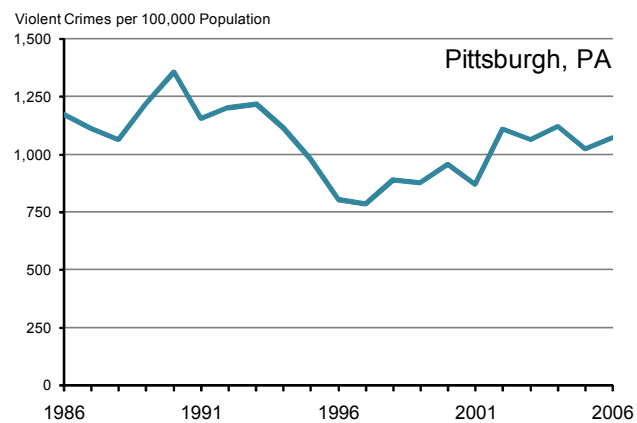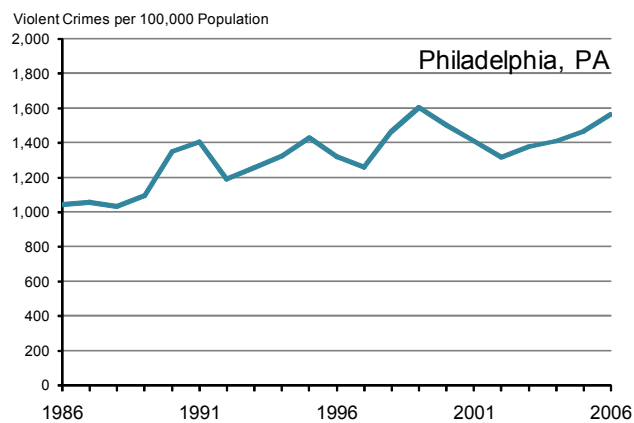
Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Philadelphia, PA

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Pittsburgh, PA

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

St. Paul, MN

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Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Stockton, CA

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Tulsa, OK

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Virginia Beach, VA

*

* Data missing for a particular year.
  See other footnotes on page 16.

Alarming Trends— 7 cities with sharp, sustained or unprecedented increases in violent crime

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Arlington, TX

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Colorado Springs, CO

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Memphis, TN

Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Minneapolis, MN

* Data missing for a particular year.
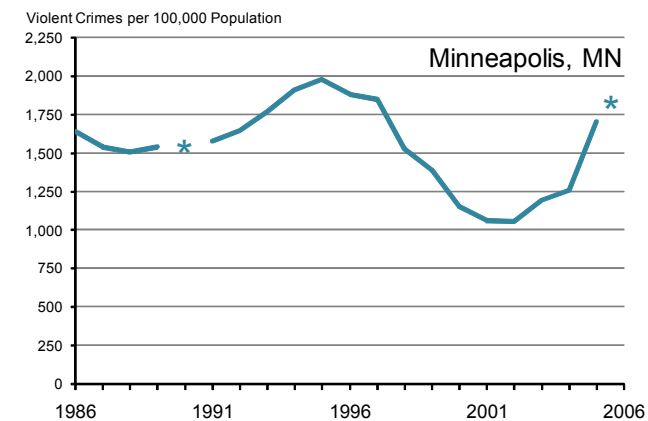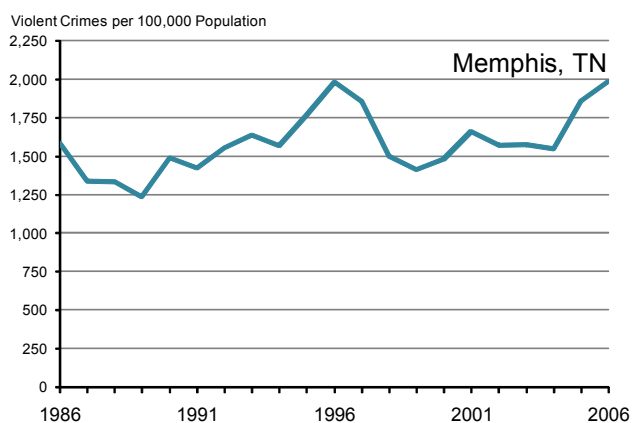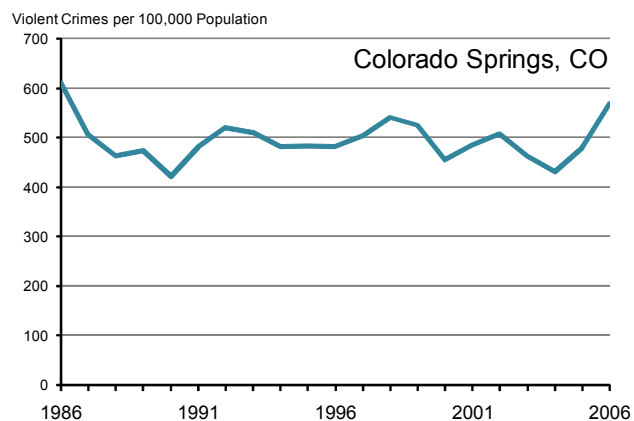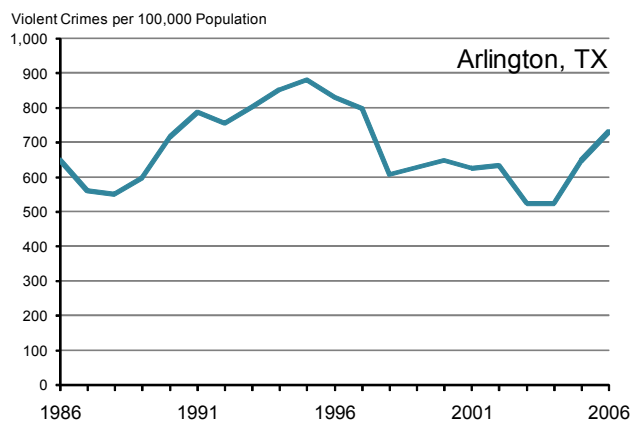 See other footnotes on page 16.

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Alarming Trends— 7 cities with sharp, sustained or unprecedented increases in violent crime

Oakland, CA — Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Sacramento, CA — Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

Wichita, KS — Violent Crimes per 100,000 Population

* Data missing for a particular year.

Note: Data about Violent Crime Index offenses (i.e., murder, forcible rape, aggravated assault and robbery) are provided for all police agencies in United States cities with populations of 250,000 or greater. County police agencies are not included. Several cities with sufficient populations are not included because they did not participate fully in the FBI data program. Some cities failed to report data for three or more recent years. Other cities reported data inconsistently, preventing meaningful comparisons across years. Cities omitted for these reasons include three jurisdictions in Ohio (Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Toledo) as well as Indianapolis, Indiana, Louisville, Kentucky, Detroit, Michigan, Omaha, Nebraska and Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Data Source: Violent crime rates for 1986-2005 are from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) as published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice [see "Crime trends from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports" at http://bjsdata.ojp.usdoj.gov/dataonline/]. Rates for 2006 are from the FBI's *Crime in the United States 2006*, Preliminary Annual Uniform Crime Report; released on June 4, 2007 [Table 4: http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/06prelim/index.html].
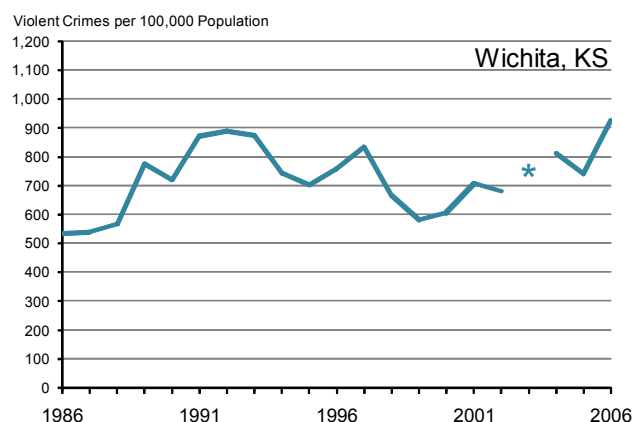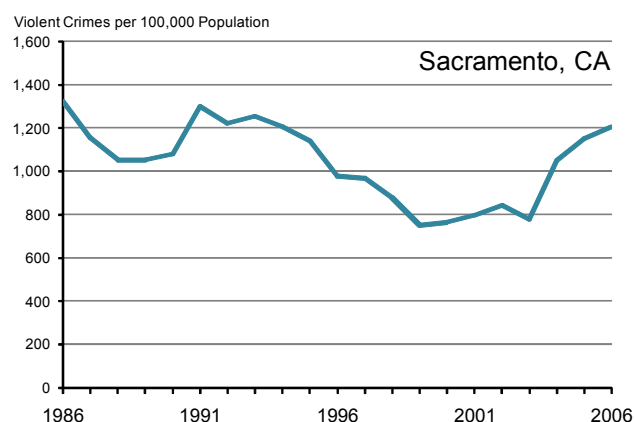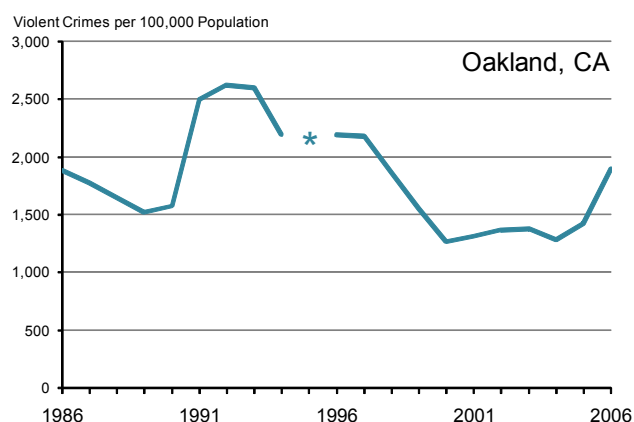
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