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AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO



Violent Crime in 100 U.S. Cities

JEFFREY A. BUTTS

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Introduction

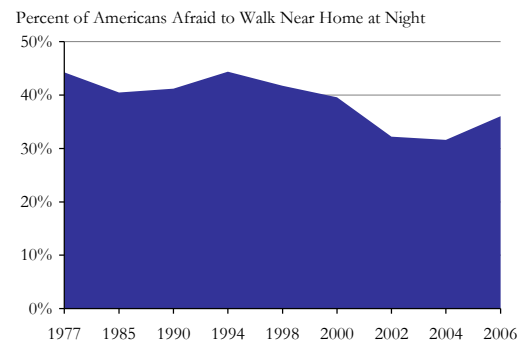
Recent reports from police officials and the news media suggest that violent crime is increasing across the United States. Stories about rising violence confirm the fears of American families who worry that their neighborhoods are becoming less safe (Figure 1).

Concerns about violent crime are always justified, but how valid are reports of growing violence? National surveys about actual crime victimization show that crime rates fell precipitously since 1995 and have not increased in recent years (Figure 2).

Are media stories about violent crime accurate or exaggerated? Is the problem widespread or isolated? Where violence has grown, are the changes likely to be short-term or could they be part of a long-term trend? The best way to answer these questions is to examine crime data for as many communities as possible over long periods of time.

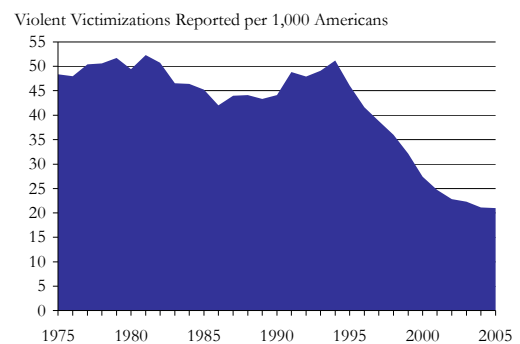
This study examines violent crime trends in 100 U.S. cities. Cities were selected for the study if their police departments released crime data for nearly every year between 1985 and 2007. This time frame covers a period of sharply increasing violence (1985 to 1994), a time of dramatically falling violence (1994 to 2004), and the most recent years for which complete crime data are available (2005 to 2007).

Figure 1
The Fear of Crime Grew After 2004.



Source: Author's analysis of data from the General Social Survey. Chicago: NORC, University of Chicago.

Figure 2
The Actual Risk of Violent Crime Fell to an Historic Low Point Through 2005.*



Source: Author's analysis of data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice.

* Due to changes in NCVS sampling methods, national estimates for 2006 cannot be compared directly with previous years, but a sub-sample analysis showed no significant change in the rate of violent victimizations between 2005 and 2006. (See the *Bureau of Justice Statistics Fact Sheet*, "Criminal Victimization, 2006," December 2007.)

Methods

Violent crime is measured in this study with data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's *Uniform Crime Reporting* program, or UCR. Jurisdictions across the United States participate in the UCR program by providing state and local crime data to the FBI. The FBI aggregates the figures into a national database and releases them for public use. Each year, more than 17,000 police agencies participate in the UCR program, representing more than 90 percent of the U.S. resident population.

The UCR program monitors the four most serious violent crimes—murder, forcible rape, aggravated assault, and robbery—by combining them into a *Violent Crime Index*. The number of Violent Crime Index offenses reported in each jurisdiction is divided by the resident population of that jurisdiction to create a violent crime rate (i.e., violent crimes per 100,000 residents).

This study examines the rate of violent crimes in the largest 100 U.S. cities in which local police departments participated fully in the UCR data program nearly every year between 1985 and 2007. (County police agencies are not included.) The 100 cities had populations of 190,000 or more residents in 2007. Together, the cities represented a total population of 58 million people in 2007, or 19 percent of U.S. residents.¹

Several cities with populations greater than 190,000 are not included in the analysis because they did not participate fully or consistently in the UCR program. Some cities failed to report complete data for 3 or more years between 1985 and 2007. Other cities reported data inconsistently or altered their tabulation approaches considerably, thereby preventing meaningful comparisons across years.²

The following analysis is based on simple, visual inspection of the overall trajectories of violent crime rates in the 100 cities. The analysis focuses on the most recent changes in violent crime in each city, but it considers these recent changes in context by reviewing the direction and magnitude of crime rates during the entire period from 1985 through 2007.

¹ According to estimates from the Population Division of the U.S. Census Bureau, the national population of the United States was 301,621,157 on July 1, 2007 (see <http://www.census.gov/popest/national/>).

² The cities omitted from the study due to data shortcomings include Moreno Valley (California), Akron, Cincinnati, and Cleveland (Ohio), Gilbert (Arizona), Hialeah (Florida), Indianapolis (Indiana), Louisville (Kentucky), Baton Rouge (Louisiana), Detroit and Grand Rapids (Michigan), North Las Vegas (Nevada), and Milwaukee (Wisconsin).

Due to variations in police department reporting practices, the FBI advises researchers to avoid comparing or ranking cities according to the actual scale of crime rates.³ This study analyzes the trajectory of crime trends in 100 cities. Comparisons between cities are limited to the amount, direction, and persistence of change, and do not include the scale of a city's crime rate.

Findings

The results of this study assign each of the 100 cities to one of four groups, according to the overall trajectory of their violent crime trends between 1985 and 2007. The groups represent cities where trajectories in violent crime can be described as *generally increasing*, *increasing somewhat*, *relatively stable or unclear*, and *generally decreasing*.

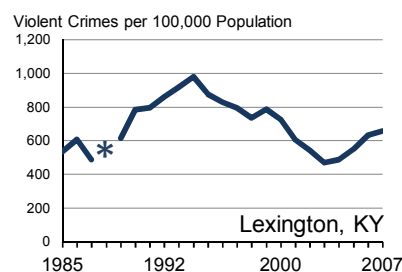
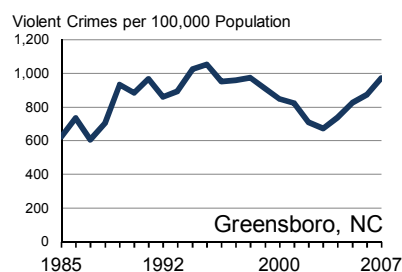
9 Cities Where Violent Crime Trajectories Are Generally Increasing

Anchorage, AK
Birmingham, AL
Fremont, CA

Greensboro, NC
Las Vegas, NV
Lexington, KY

Modesto, CA
Norfolk, VA
Pittsburgh, PA

Examples



In Greensboro, North Carolina, the violent crime rate climbed 45 percent between 2003 and 2007. The crime rate was 671 per 100,000 in 2003 before growing to 971 per 100,000 in 2004. The extent of the increase was nearly enough to bring Greensboro's violent crime rate back to where it was at its high point in the early 1990s.

Violent crime grew just as sharply in Lexington, Kentucky—from 468 to 656 crimes per 100,000 residents between 2003 and 2007—an increase of 40 percent. The crime rate in Lexington, however, remained considerably below its 1990s peak. The rate of violent crime in Lexington was 980 per 100,000 at its peak in 1994.

³ See the Federal Bureau of Investigation's "cautions against rankings" in the UCR publication, *Crime in the United States, 2006* (http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2006/about/variables_affecting_crime.html).

17 Cities Where Violent Crime Trajectories Are *Increasing Somewhat*

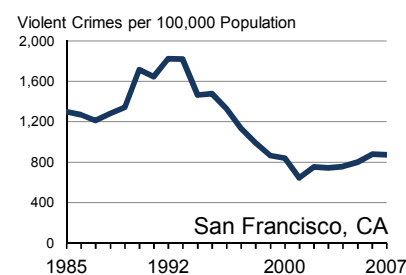
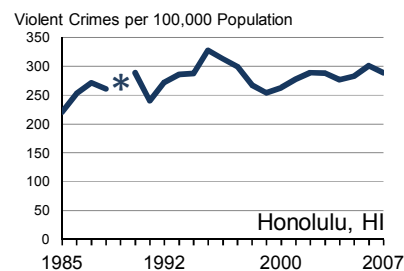
Violent crime has increased in recent years, but the changes are slight, may be temporary, or could be starting to reverse.

Arlington, TX
Bakersfield, CA
Buffalo, NY
Chandler, AZ
Garland, TX
Honolulu, HI

Madison, WI
Memphis, TN
Minneapolis, MN
Oakland, CA
Philadelphia, PA
Rochester, NY

Sacramento, CA
San Francisco, CA
Shreveport, LA
Stockton, CA
Virginia Beach, VA

Examples



In Honolulu, Hawaii, the rate of violent crime climbed 19 percent between 1999 and 2006. The crime rate was 254 per 100,000 residents in 1999 before growing to 301 per 100,000 in 2006. The extent of the increase was enough to bring the violent crime rate close to the 20-year high of 1995 (327 per 100,000). The total variation in Honolulu's violent crime rate, however, was considerably less than in many other cities, and the most recent data shows a slight drop between 2006 and 2007 (301 to 288 per 100,000 residents).

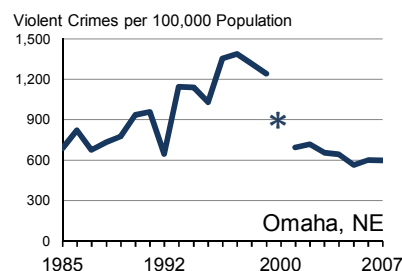
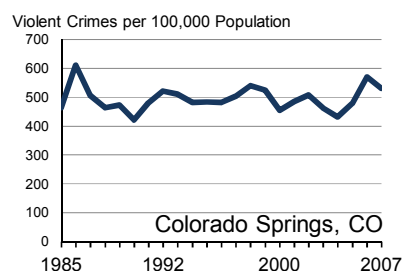
In recent years, violent crime grew 4 percent in San Francisco, California, from 837 to 874 crimes per 100,000 residents between 2000 and 2007. The total crime rate, however, remained markedly lower than the 1992 peak when there were more than 1,800 crimes reported for every 100,000 residents.

24 Cities Where Violent Crime Trajectories Are *Relatively Stable or Unclear*

Trends in violent crime are either stable or not clear because: (1) recent changes are small compared with previous years, (2) the total range of variation in recent decades is not great, or (3) recent trends cannot be interpreted due to interruptions or alterations in a jurisdiction's reporting of data to the UCR program.

Austin, TX	Henderson, NV	Reno, NV
Boise, ID	Laredo, TX	San Antonio, TX
Chesapeake, VA	Lincoln, NE	Savannah, GA
Colorado Springs, CO	Montgomery, AL	Spokane, WA
Corpus Christi, TX	New Orleans, LA	St. Paul, MN
Denver, CO	Omaha, NE	Toledo, OH
Des Moines, IA	Orlando, FL	Tulsa, OK
Glendale, CA	Plano, TX	Wichita, KS

Examples



The rate of violent crime in Colorado Springs, Colorado fell between 2006 and 2007. The slight decline followed a spike of 32 percent between 2004 and 2006, when the rate of violent crimes grew from 431 to 569 crimes per 100,000 residents. This steep increase, however, followed a decline of 15 percent in the crime rate between 2002 and 2004 (from 508 per to 431 per 100,000). The violent crime rate seemed to stay around 500 crimes per 100,000 residents for much of the past 20 years. Thus, it is difficult to characterize overall crime trends as either decreasing or increasing.

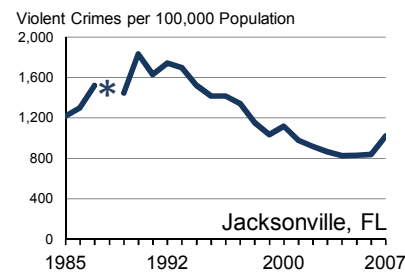
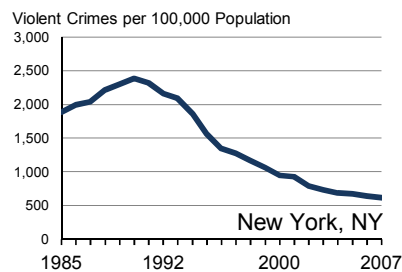
It is even more difficult to describe general trends in violent crime in Omaha, Nebraska because the Omaha Police Department modified its reporting practices in 2000. Crime rate figures before and after 2000 may not be comparable. Although recent trends in Omaha appear to suggest that the rate of violent crime was lower in 2006 and 2007 than in previous years, it is not possible to draw this conclusion given the relatively short time frame of consistently reported data.

50 Cities Where Violent Crime Trajectories Are *Generally Decreasing*

Violent crime is generally falling and any recent increases that have occurred are small compared with the high rates of violent crime observed during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Albuquerque, NM	Huntington Beach, CA	Raleigh, NC
Anaheim, CA	Irvine, CA	Richmond, VA
Atlanta, GA	Irving, TX	Riverside, CA
Aurora, CO	Jacksonville, FL	San Bernadino, CA
Baltimore, MD	Jersey City, NJ	San Diego, CA
Boston, MA	Long Beach, CA	San Jose, CA
Charlotte, NC	Los Angeles, CA	Santa Ana, CA
Chicago, IL	Lubbock, TX	Scottsdale, AZ
Chula Vista, CA	Mesa, AZ	Seattle, WA
Columbus, OH	Miami, FL	St Louis, MO
Dallas, TX	Mobile, AL	St Petersburg, FL
El Paso, TX	Nashville, TN	Tacoma, WA
Fort Wayne, IN	New York, NY	Tampa, FL
Fort Worth, TX	Newark, NJ	Tucson, AZ
Fresno, CA	Oklahoma City, OK	Washington, DC
Glendale, AZ	Phoenix, AZ	Yonkers, NY
Houston, TX	Portland, OR	

Examples



The clearest example of decreasing violent crime is the trend in New York City, where the violent crime rate dropped 74 percent between 1990 and 2007. The rate was 2,384 crimes per 100,000 residents in 1990 before plunging to 614 per 100,000 in 2007. Furthermore, the increase was continuous, falling every year during that period.

In Jacksonville, Florida, violent crime trends can be described as *generally decreasing* when recent rates are viewed in context. The violent crime rate actually jumped 22 percent between 2006 and 2007 (from 837 to 1,022 crimes per 100,000 residents). The change cannot be called persistent, however, and the 2007 figure was still 44 percent lower than the crime rate in 1990, when more than 1,800 crimes were reported for every 100,000 residents. The characterization of violent crime rates in Jacksonville would obviously change if the figures were to increase again in 2008 and 2009.

According to this analysis, most Americans are still enjoying the benefits of the decline in violent crime that occurred during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Figure 3). Of the 100 cities examined in this study, only nine are experiencing *generally increasing* violent crime rates (Figure 4). These nine cities accounted for 6 percent of the combined populations of the 100 cities in 2007.

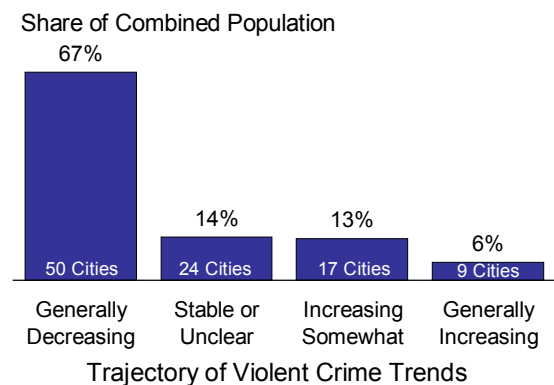
Recent violent crime trends can be described as *increasing somewhat* in 17 cities (Figure 5). In these cities, violent crime may be starting to rise, or at least it is not declining consistently.

In another 24 cities, representing 14 percent of the combined population, violent crime trends are *relatively stable or unclear* either due to shortcomings in the consistency of data reporting or the extent to which crime rates have remained relatively flat in recent years (Figure 6).

In 50 cities, accounting for 67 percent of the total population of all 100 cities, violent crime trends are *generally decreasing* (Figure 7). Violent crime rates in these cities are either falling, or they are relatively steady and remain at levels that compare favorably to the peak crime years of the early 1990s. In many of these cities, the rate of violent crime in 2007 was essentially the same as in 2004 at a time when the nationwide crime drop had reduced violent crime to the lowest level in decades.

This analysis, and the categorization of cities, depends on a simple visual comparison of crime trends in 100 cities. As a result, some of the distinctions between cities may be debatable. Some cities included in the *generally decreasing* category experienced small increases in their violent crime rates in recent years, including Albuquerque (New Mexico), Columbus (Ohio), El Paso (Texas), and Jacksonville (Florida). In most of these cities, however, the rate of violent crime remained far lower than it had been in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Figure 3
Two-Thirds of Urban Residents Live in Cities Where Crime Trends Are Generally Decreasing.



Source: Author's analysis of data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Reports. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.

Similarly, some cities with crime trends that are characterized as *increasing somewhat* experienced falling rates of violent crime in the most recent 1 or 2 years, including Arlington (Texas), Buffalo (New York), Chandler (Arizona), Honolulu (Hawaii), Madison (Wisconsin), Memphis (Tennessee), and Minneapolis (Minnesota).

Summary and Conclusions

This analysis suggests that two-thirds of the residents of midsize and large U.S. cities continue to benefit from historically low crime rates. Some jurisdictions are experiencing increasing violence, and some neighborhoods in those cities are seeing significantly greater violence. Across all 100 cities, however, recent increases in violent crime are small compared with the scale of violence seen in recent decades. America's long period of falling crime may have ended, but it is not accurate to characterize recent trends as a new wave of violent crime or as the beginning of an irreversible trend.

American communities enjoyed sharp declines in violent crime for much of the past 20 years. According to FBI data, the number of Violent Crime Index offenses dropped 29 percent nationwide from 1991 through 2004, from approximately 1,912,000 crimes to about 1,360,000 crimes annually. The positive trends came to an end between 2004 and 2005 when violent crimes grew by more than 2 percent, bringing the total number of violent crimes to about 1,391,000. This 1-year increase was important because it signaled the end of the crime decline, but it does not appear to have started a nationwide trend toward rising violent crime.

In 2007, more than 80 percent of U.S. city residents lived in communities where violent crime trends could be described as *generally decreasing, relatively stable, or unclear*. Even in cities where trends were *increasing somewhat*, the increases observed between 2004 and 2006 did not always continue. In many of these cities, violent crime rates fell between 2006 and 2007.

How can this be? Are the news stories and statements by public officials describing a widespread spike in violence simply wrong? Violent crime trends are misunderstood for at least four 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 when we see what appears to be a never-ending stream of individual crimes.

Second, this analysis tracks changes in four individual offenses: homicide, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. Even if violent crime as a whole is relatively stable, some cities may be experiencing dramatic changes in one or more of these individual

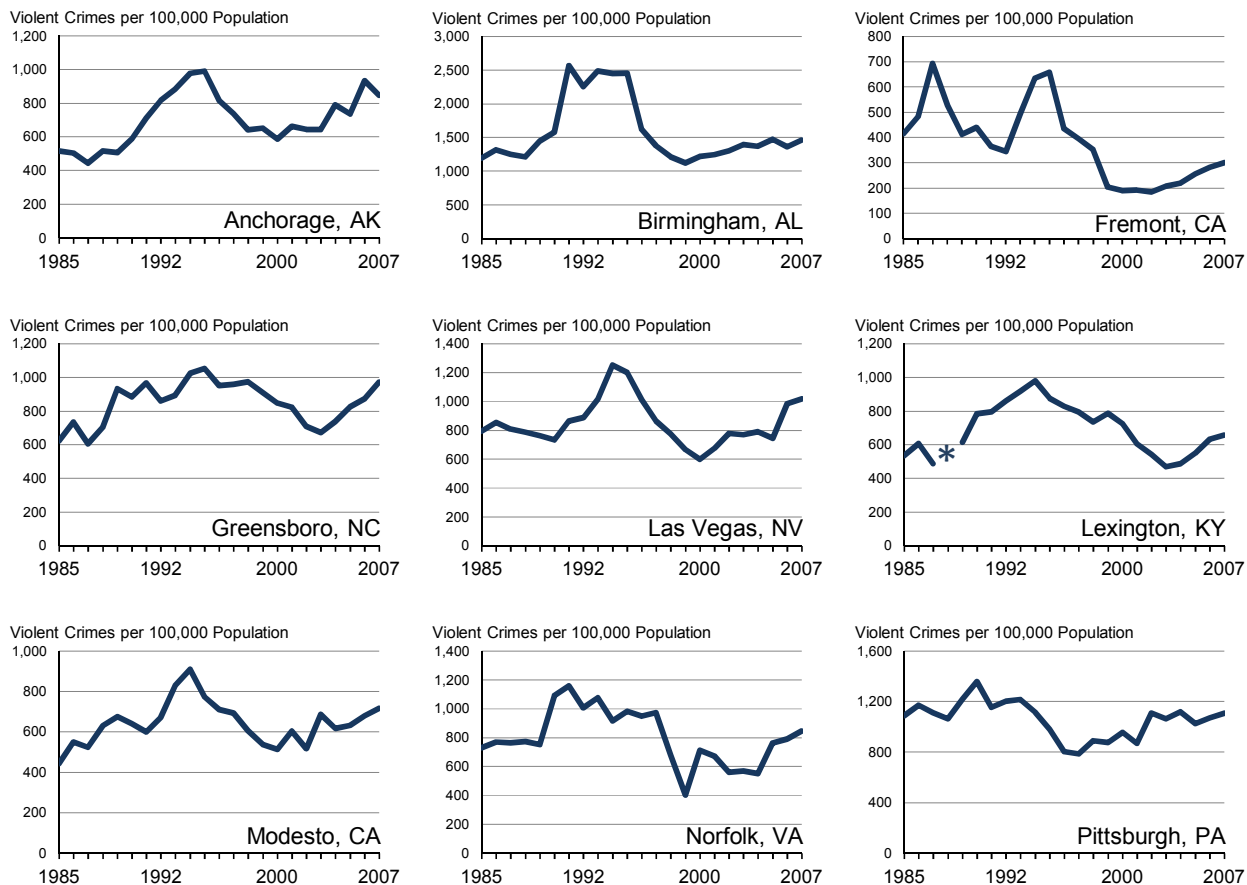
offenses. When the number of murders in a community surges, for example, this fact will dominate public awareness and concern.

Third, most Americans learn about crime trends from the popular news media, and reporters and editors often “cherry pick” when reporting on crime. They follow the story, and in covering crime the story tends to be whatever is going up. If robbery increases, that is the lead story. If robbery goes down, those stories are moved aside to focus on other types of violent crime. The public hears constantly about rising crime but learns much less about crime trends that may be cyclical, flat, or even declining.

Fourth, reports about crime trends sometimes use very short time frames. Because 2004 was a low point in modern crime rates, any analysis that focuses on the percentage change in crime between 2004 and 2007 will find increases, but these increases should be viewed in the context of the past 20 years. A longer time horizon provides a different perspective on violent crime trends.

As of 2007, the news about violent crime was still good in most U.S. cities. Americans should always keep a close watch on violence, but we should try to see the whole picture when we consider the significance of short-term trends.

Figure 4
9 Cities Where Violent Crime Trends Are *Generally Increasing*

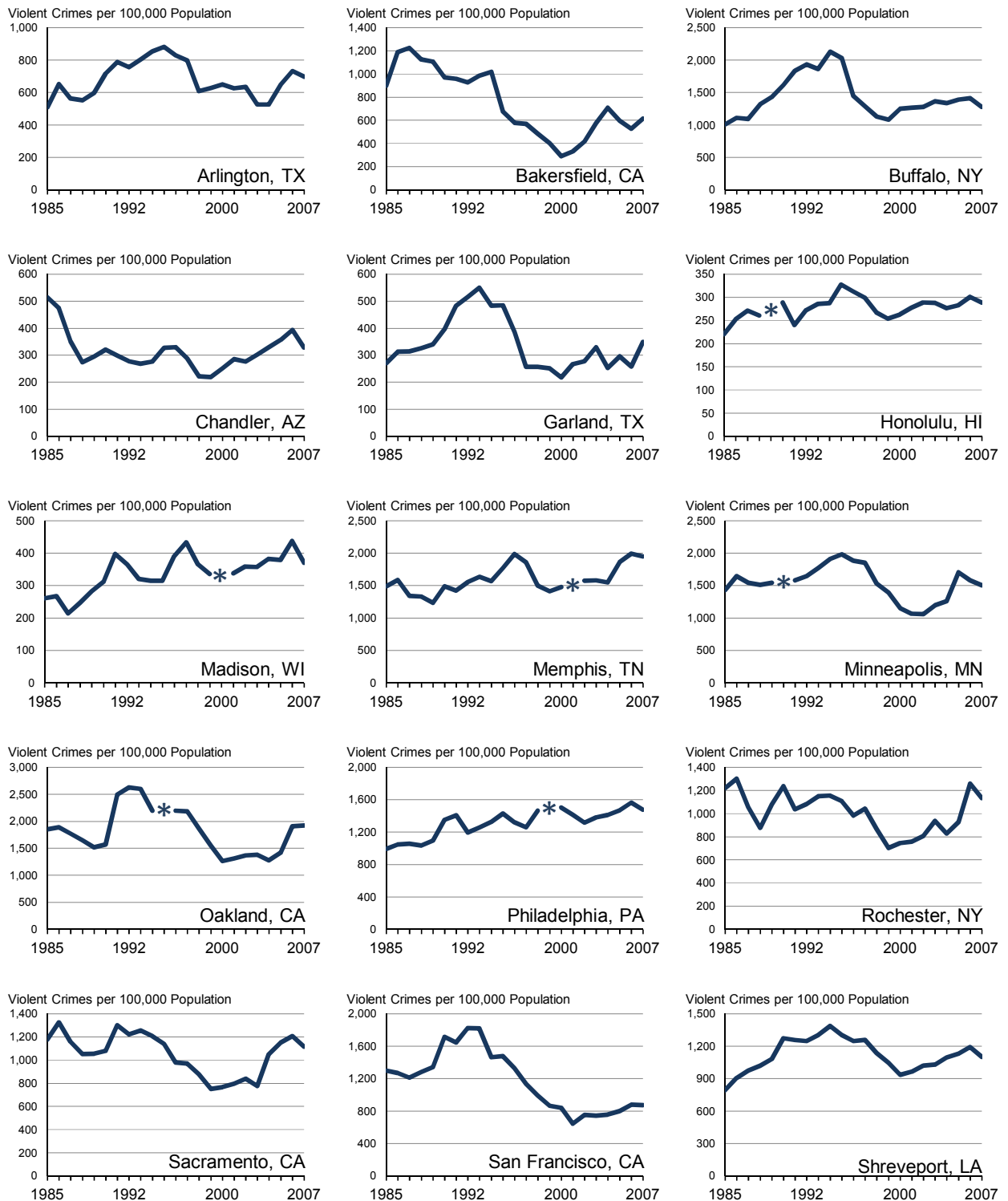


Data Sources for Figures 4, 5, 6, and 7:

Crime rates for 1985-2006 are from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) as published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics [<http://bjsdata.ojp.usdoj.gov/dataonline/Search/Crime/Local/LocalCrimeLarge.cfm>], U.S. Department of Justice. Crime rates for 2007 are from the FBI publication, *Crime in the United States 2007*, Annual Uniform Crime Report, September, 2008 [Table 8, http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2007/data/table_08.html].

* The jurisdiction may have failed to report complete data for a given year or the data before and after this point may not be completely comparable due to changes in reporting practices.

Figure 5
17 Cities Where Violent Crime Trends Are *Increasing Somewhat*



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Figure 5
17 Cities Where Violent Crime Trends Are *Increasing Somewhat*

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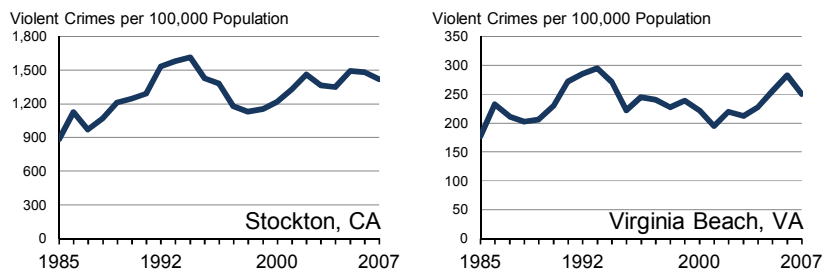
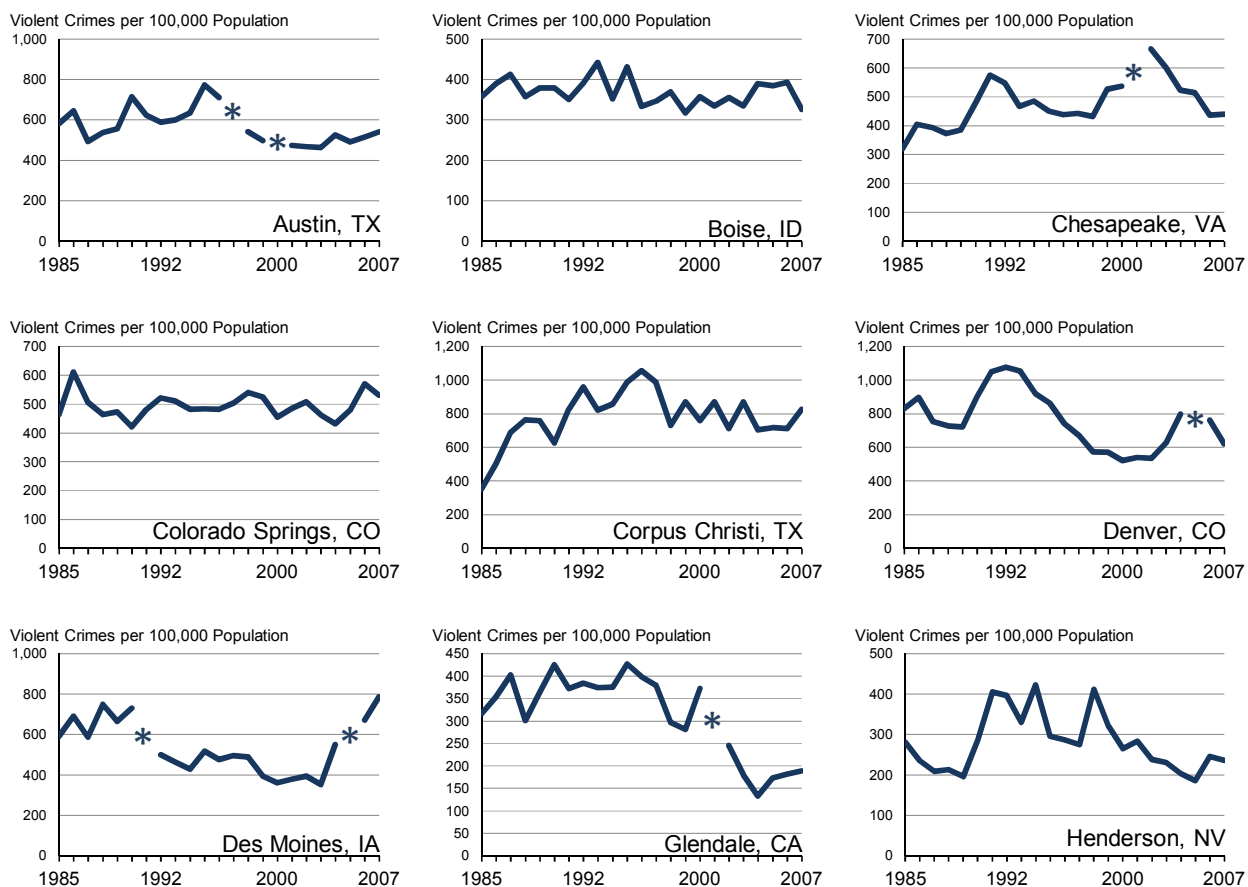


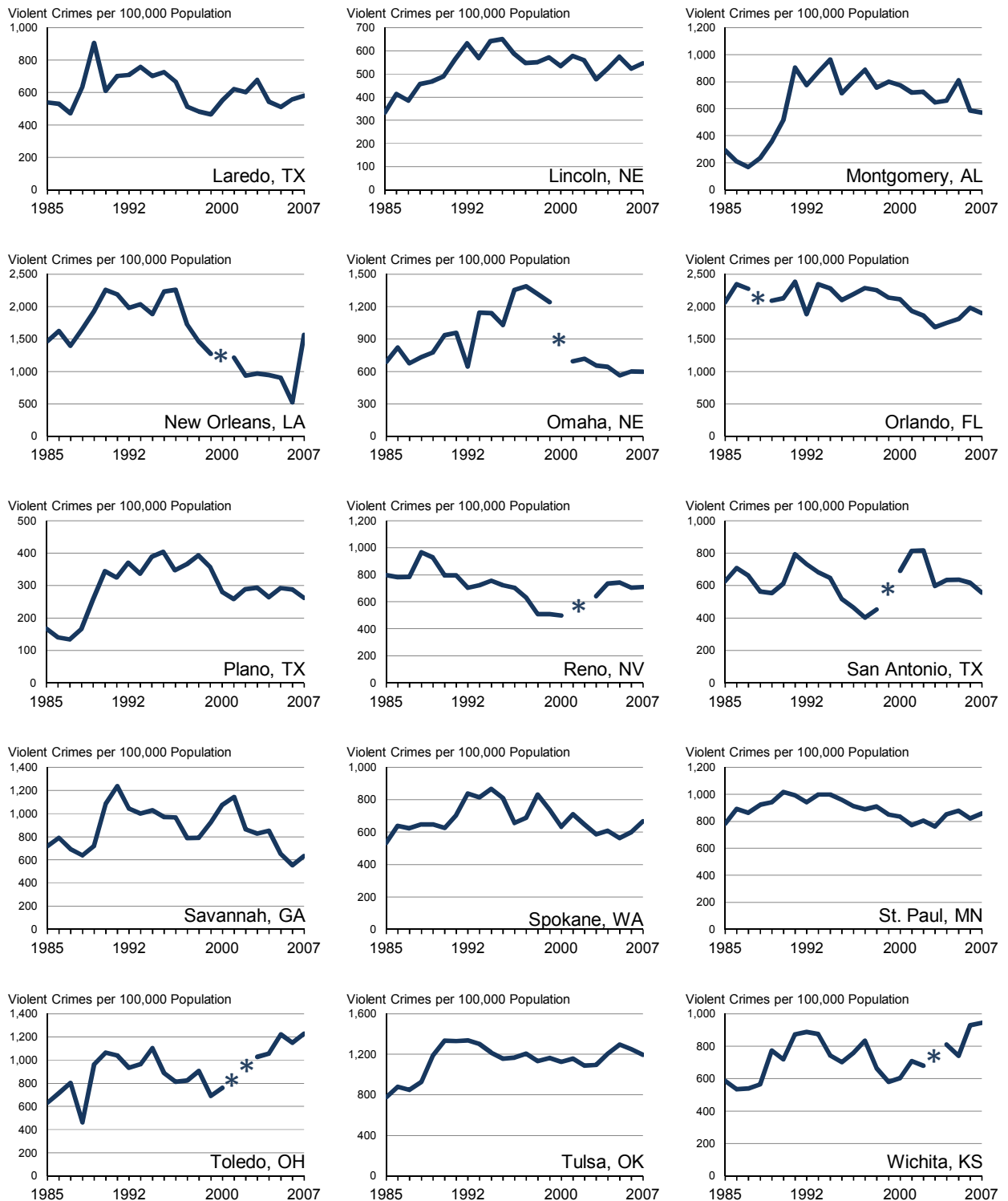
Figure 6
24 Cities Where Violent Crime Trends Are *Relatively Stable or Unclear*



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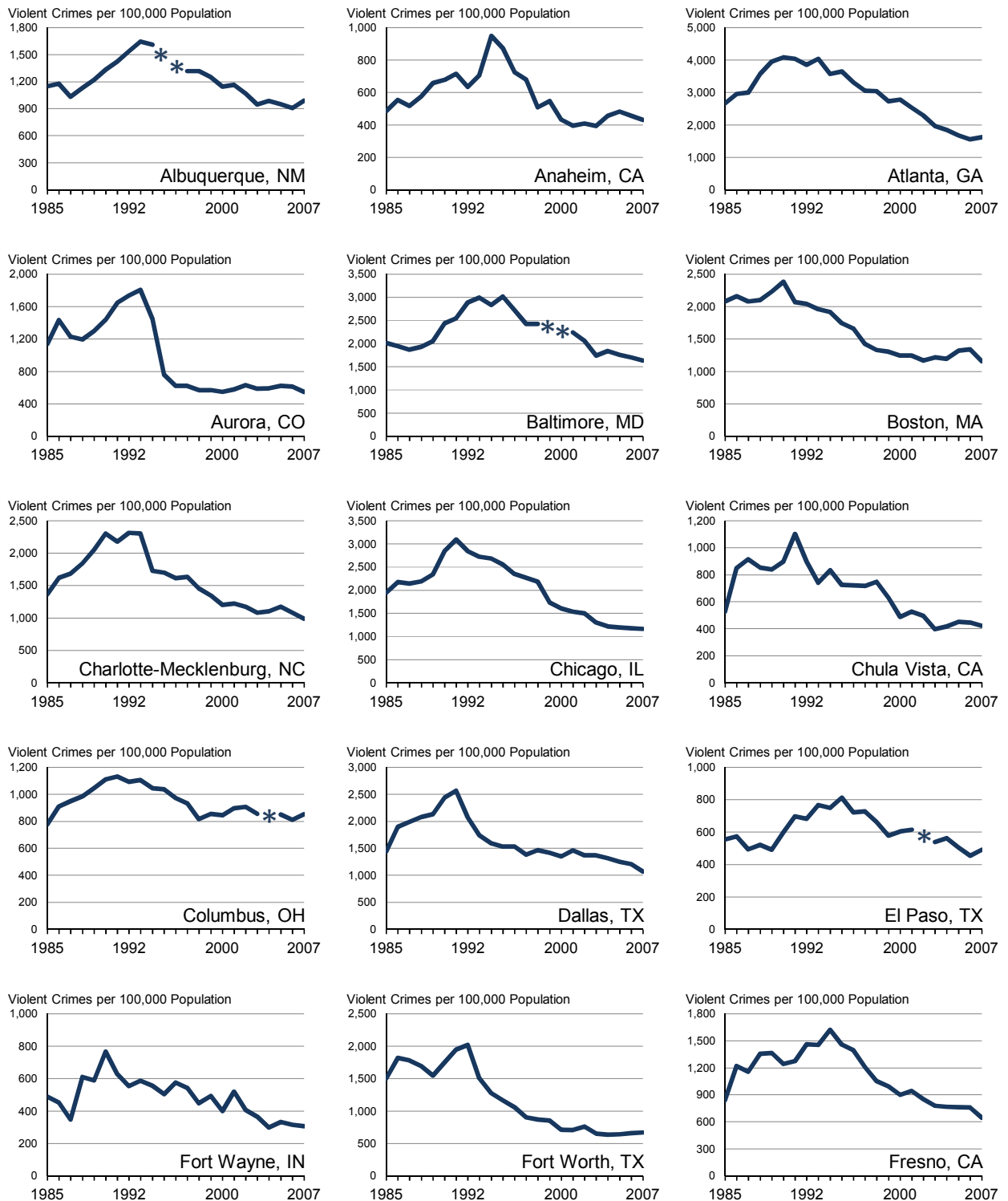
Figure 6
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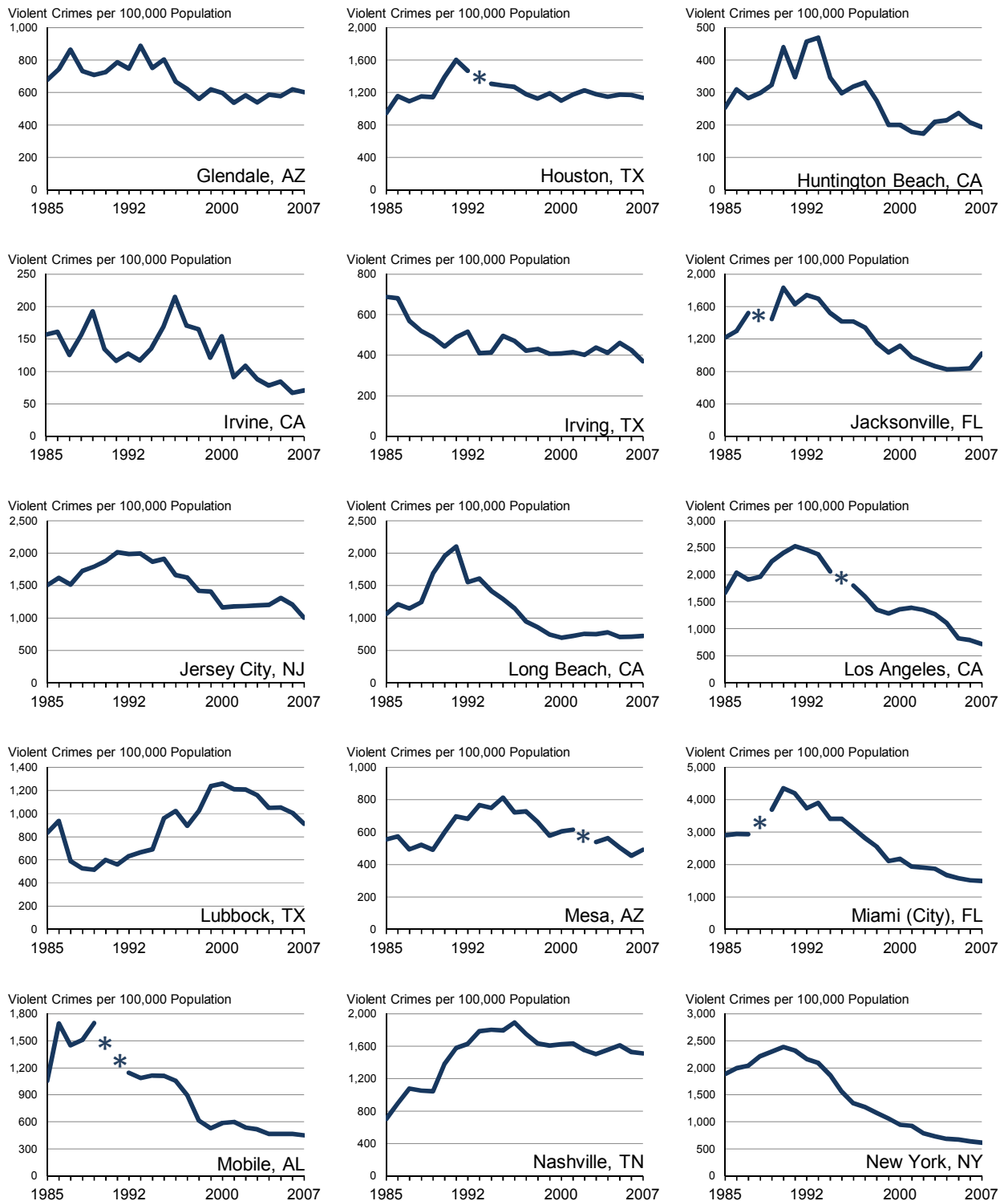
Figure 7
50 Cities Where Violent Crime Trends Are *Generally Decreasing*



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Figure 7
50 Cities Where Violent Crime Trends Are *Generally Decreasing*

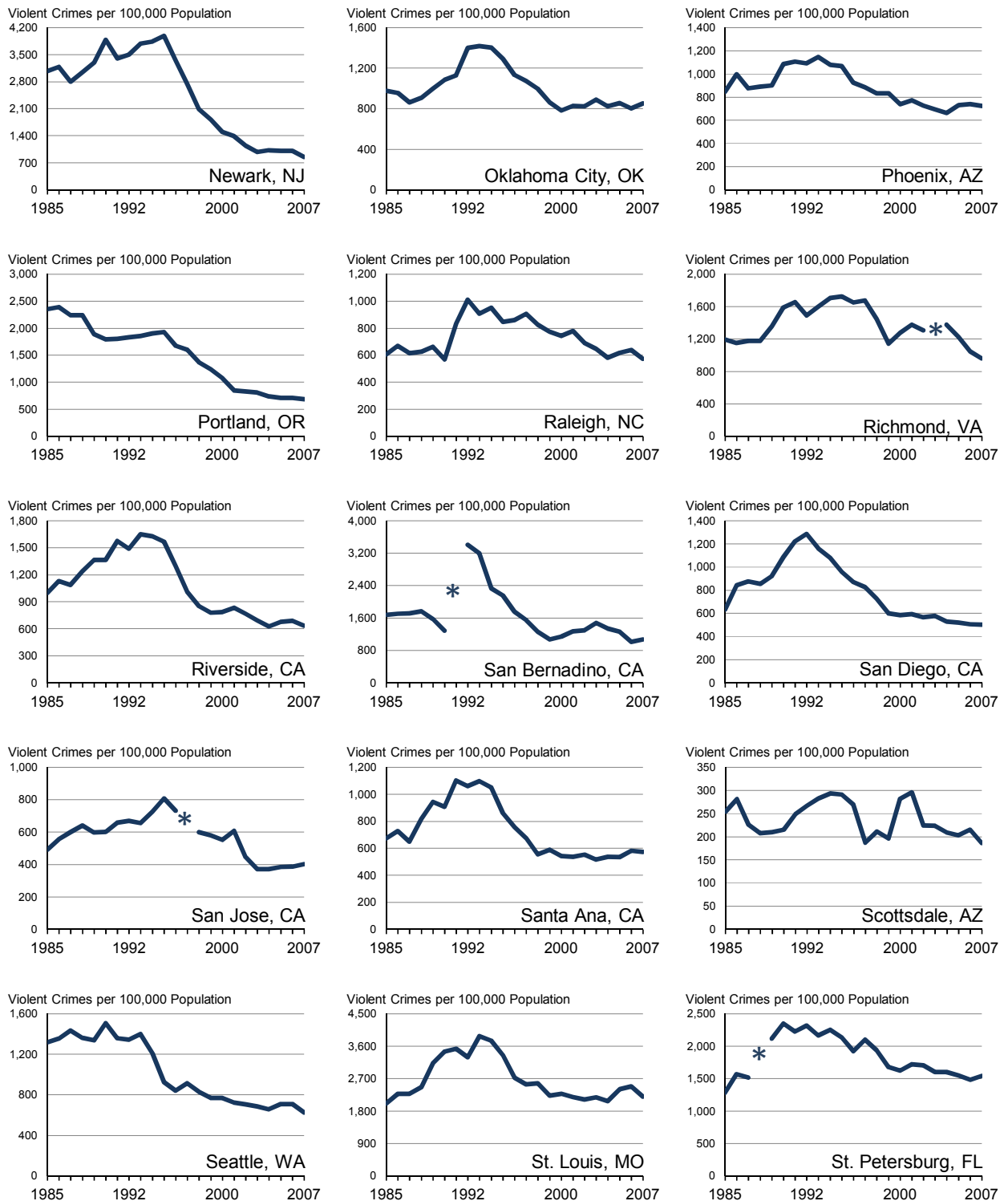
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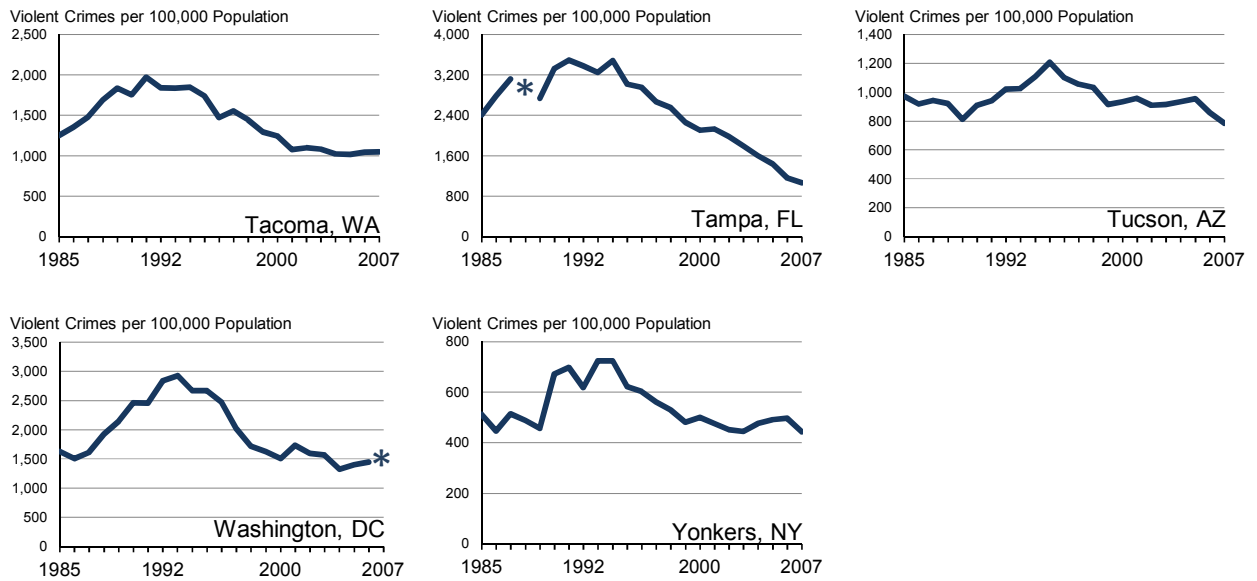
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Figure 7
50 Cities Where Violent Crime Trends Are *Generally Decreasing*

(continued)



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Chapin Hall Center for Children

Established in 1985, Chapin Hall is an independent policy research center whose mission is to build knowledge that improves policies and programs for children and youth, their families, and the communities in which they live. Our multidisciplinary research encompasses the needs of all children and adolescents, and devotes special attention to those experiencing significant problems, such as maltreatment, poverty, delinquency, and mental and physical illness.

Chapin Hall research looks across human service systems to understand the experiences of the families they serve. Our aim is to learn more about how systems and programs interact with one another, and to inform decision makers seeking to improve their institutions, policies, and initiatives. At the neighborhood level, Chapin Hall documents and evaluates community-building resources and activities, and analyzes the role and practice of philanthropy in these efforts.

To better comprehend how families use public systems, Chapin Hall pioneered strategies for collecting, linking, and analyzing administrative (case record) data and now employ these strategies with other quantitative and qualitative methods. We also develop analytic tools for monitoring outcomes of children and youth, and provide technical assistance to agencies implementing the new approaches.

The concept of Chapin Hall has been replicated in many other locations within and outside of the United States, often with the help of Chapin Hall research fellows. In developing relationships with these centers and individuals, Chapin Hall serves as a fulcrum for interchange among the communities of public policy and child-family research, both nationally and internationally.



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