

Comparing Recent Crime Trends in Canada and the United States

An Introduction



2024

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CRIME

Comparing Recent Crime Trends in Canada and the United States: An Introduction

Crime and public safety are perennial public preoccupations given not only concerns in the face of recently growing crime rates¹ but also about the cost of policing and protection services.² After a long period of declining crime rates in both Canada and the United States since the 1990s, recent years have seen new disquiet even though overall, crime rates remain at relatively historic lows. In the case of the United States, data from both the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Bureau of Justice Statistics show dramatic long-term declines in US violent and property crime rates.³ Canada, using police-reported crime rate data, also shows a dramatic long-term decline in both violent and property crime rates.⁴

Canada, relative to the United States, with its national identity mantra of “Peace, Order, and Good Government” versus the American counterpart of “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness”⁵ has often felt comfortably self-assured that it is a peaceable kingdom marked by less crime. However, while relative to Canada, crime rates are higher in the United States for homicides and violent crimes (once adjusted for comparability⁶), they historically have been more similar in the case of property crime.

1 See Snow and Audas (2024), and Rocca (2024).

2 Costs are always a concern. See for example media accounts by Freeman (2024), and Chandler (2024).

3 Gramlich (2024) notes: “Using the FBI data, the violent crime rate fell 49% between 1993 and 2022, with large decreases in the rates of robbery (-74%), aggravated assault (-39%) and murder/nonnegligent manslaughter (-34%). It’s not possible to calculate the change in the rape rate during this period because the FBI revised its definition of the offense in 2013. The FBI data also shows a 59% reduction in the U.S. property crime rate between 1993 and 2022, with big declines in the rates of burglary (-75%), larceny/theft (-54%) and motor vehicle theft (-53%).

Using the BJS statistics, the declines in the violent and property crime rates are even steeper than those captured in the FBI data. Per BJS, the U.S. violent and property crime rates each fell 71% between 1993 and 2022.”

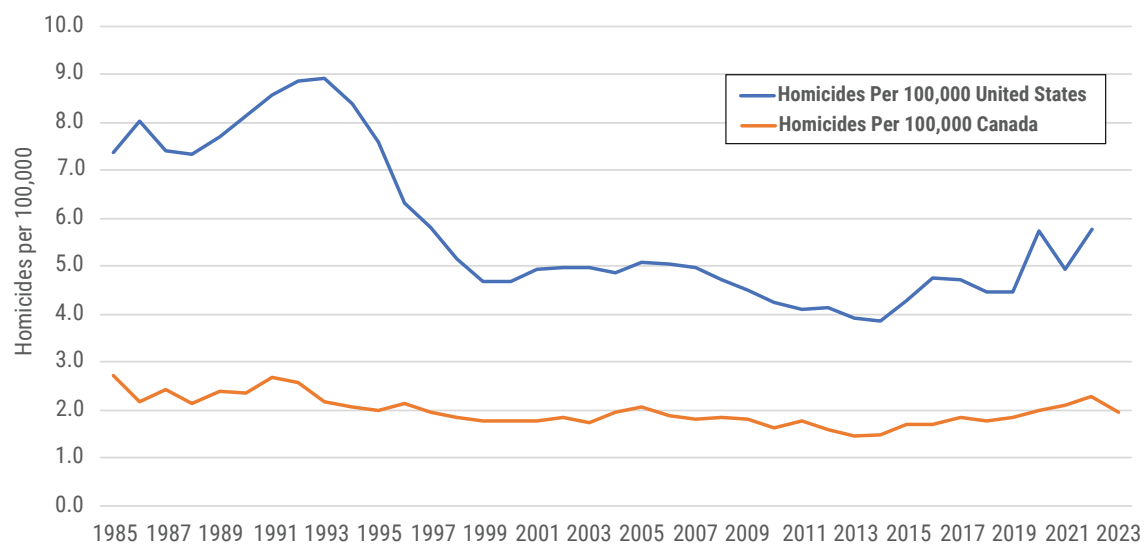
4 See Chart 2, *Police-Reported Crime Rates, Canada 1962 to 2021* in Moreau (2022).

5 See Gall, McLellan, Panneton, and McIntosh (2020).

6 The Canadian equivalent of assault level 1 (not involving serious injury or use of a weapon) is not classified as a violent crime in the United States. Thus, the higher overall rate of violent crime in Canada relative to the United States without this adjustment is attributable to this lowest level of violent crime.

Figures 1 to 3 are an overview of long-term trends that provide a comparison of national level rates. Figure 1 illustrates the national homicide rates⁷ per 100,000 from 1985⁸ to 2023, and the US rate on average over this period has been nearly three times the Canadian rate. Figure 2 plots property crimes (burglary, theft, motor vehicle theft)⁹ per 100,000 over the same period and illustrates a decline for both countries over time, with Canadian rates generally above those of the US. Figure 3 plots violent crimes (murder, robbery, assault with a weapon, etc.) per 100,000, and American rates until more recently have been above the Canadian rate (adjusted by removing Assault Level 1 crimes). However, recently, Canada has moved above the American violent crime rate.

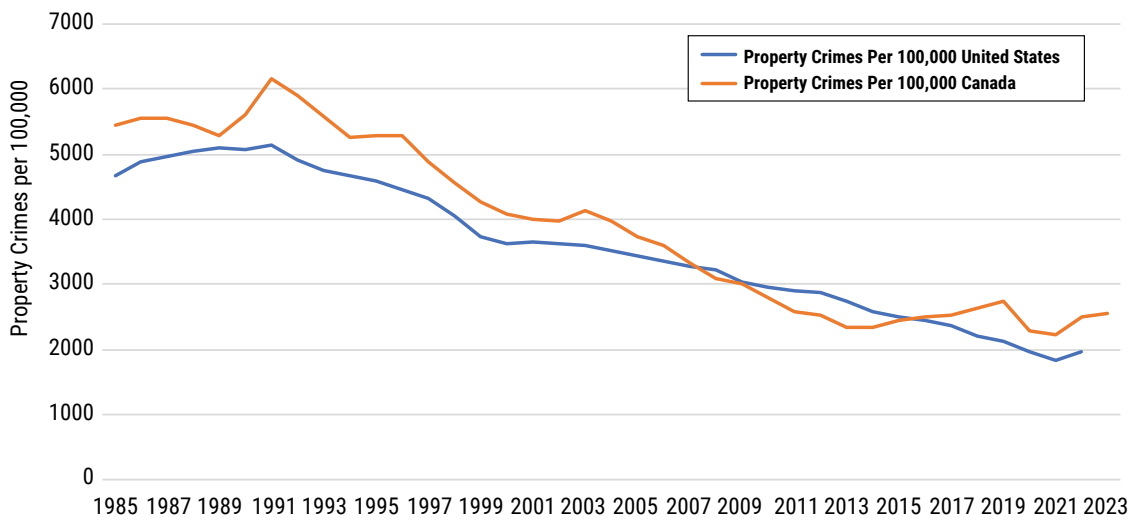
Figure 1: Homicides Per 100,000 Population, Canada Versus the United States, 1985–2023



Source: FBI Crime Data Explorer; Statistics Canada, 2024a, Author's calculations

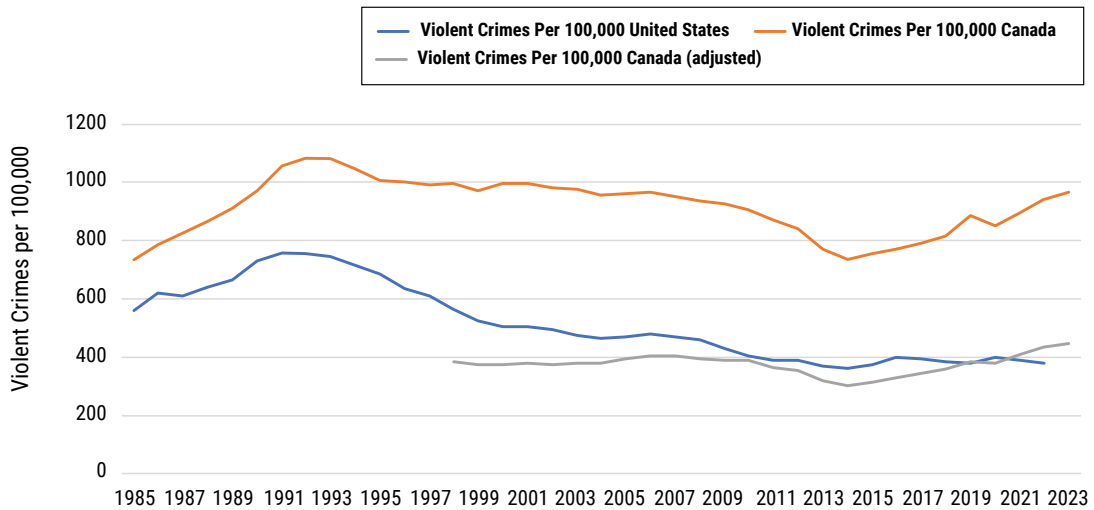
- 7 Homicides are the killing of one human being by another, but definitions of what is included vary somewhat between Canada and the United States. Even within the United States, there are differences across states. In general, in the United States, homicides include first-degree murder and felony murders, followed by second-degree murders and third-degree murders, which in some states are divided into voluntary and involuntary manslaughter. In Canada, homicides are divided into culpable and non-culpable, with culpable homicide encompassing murder (first and second degree), manslaughter, or infanticide. See <<https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2016/crime-in-the-u.s.-2016/topic-pages/murder>>, and <<https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-46/section-222.html>>.
- 8 Data for the US homicide rate was obtained from the FBI Crime Explorer Data. Since the data begins in 1985, the plots for both Canada and the United States start from that year.
- 9 In Canada, property crimes include burglary, robbery, breaking and entering, theft, larceny, shoplifting, motor vehicle thefts, vandalism, and arson; see <<https://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en/gazette/property-crime>>. In the United States, property crime generally includes burglary, larceny, theft, and arson; see <<https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2010/crime-in-the-u.s.-2010/property-crime>>.

Figure 2: Property Crimes Per 100,000 Population, Canada vs the United States, 1985–2023



Source: FBI Crime Data Explorer; Statistics Canada, 2024b, Author’s calculations

Figure 3: Violent Crimes Per 100,000 Population, Canada vs the United States, 1985–2023



Source: FBI Crime Data Explorer; Statistics Canada, 2024b, Author’s calculations.

These national level results are revealing. American homicide rates are higher than Canadian ones and the usual basis of our beliefs about differences in Canadian and American crime rates. Crucially, homicides are on the rise in Canada with the number of murders increasing from 1.5 per 100,000 in 2014 to 2.3 in 2022—a 53 percent increase. The homicide rate in the US remains higher than in Canada at 5.8 per 100,000 people in 2022 and increased 49 percent from 2014 to 2022. From 2014 to 2022, the violent crime rate in Canada increased by 44 percent to 434.11 violent crimes per 100,000 people. That's now higher than the violent crime rate in the US, which only increased five percent over the same period to 380.7 violent crimes per 100,000 people. In addition, the rate of property crimes is also now higher in Canada than in the US, with 2491.0 crimes occurring per 100,000 people in Canada in 2022—a seven percent increase from 2014. By contrast, the property crime rate in the US declined by 24 percent over the same period to 1954.4 crimes per 100,000 people.

After decades of declining crime rates in both Canada and the United States, the period since 2014 has seen some increases in both violent and property crime rates in Canada, while the United States has seen an increase in violent crime but a continued decline in property crime, though both remain at historic lows.¹⁰ These are national-level trends, and given the high rates of urbanization in both countries,¹¹ as well as community-focused preoccupations with crime, a useful comparison is one focused on major urban areas. Indeed, when Canadian and American urban areas are compared the results are quite revealing.

The research objective of future releases is to ultimately present and compare via rankings recent violent and property crime rates across major urban areas in Canada and the United States at the census metropolitan area (CMA) level in Canada and the metropolitan statistical area (MSA) level in the United States. This is designed to place both Canadian and American urban areas within a North American context to facilitate comparisons and provide rankings both overall as well as regionally. These comparisons are done given the ongoing debate about rising crime rates in both countries.

10 There is a large criminology literature on these trends including reasons for them for Canada and the US and indeed other countries that also examine issues of crime statistics. For some examples, see Rosenfeld (2024), Ariel and Bland (2019), Tonry (2014), Conklin (2023), and Kennedy and Veitch (1997).

11 As of July 1, 2023, 74 percent of Canadians lived in its 41 CMAs while 86 percent of Americans live in 387 MSAs. See <<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/240522/dq240522b-eng.htm>> and <<https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-total-metro-and-micro-statistical-areas.html>>.

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Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful input. Any remaining errors or omissions are the sole responsibility of the author. As the researcher has worked independently, the views and conclusions expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect those of the Board of Directors of the Fraser Institute, the staff, or supporters.