

COVID and Crime: Key Findings (Updated 12/31/2020)

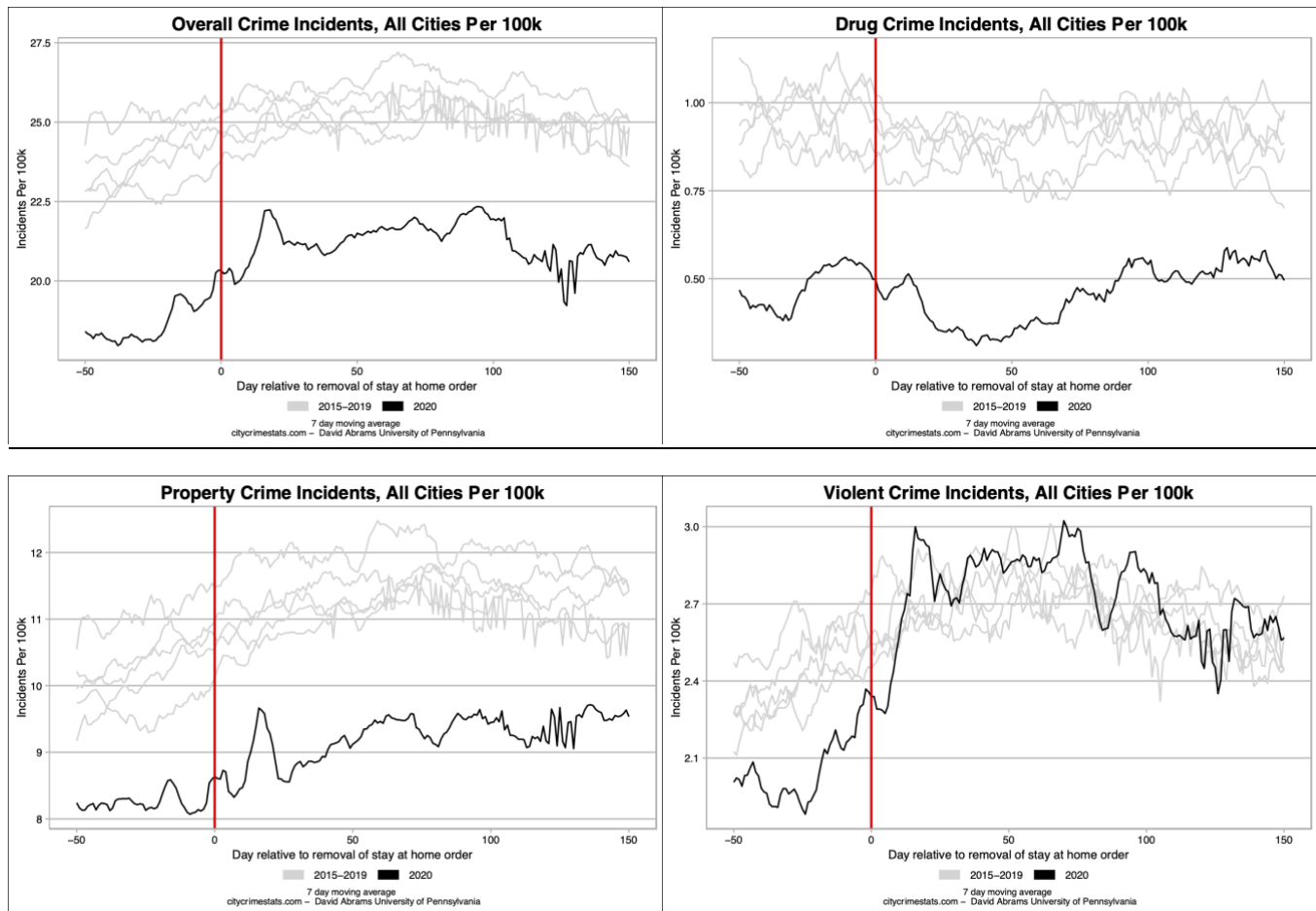
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Since the coronavirus pandemic began infecting large numbers of people in the U.S. in March, 2020 its effect has been felt across society. The immediate impact on crime – even before there were large numbers of infections – was massive. In the months following as people adjusted to the new normal and cities started to ease COVID related restriction, crimes rates in the U.S. have continued to follow very different patterns than in previous years. In order to understand the differences in crime rates in 2020, 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 to the changes in crime rates in large U.S. cities. Much more data and detail is available at citycrimestats.com

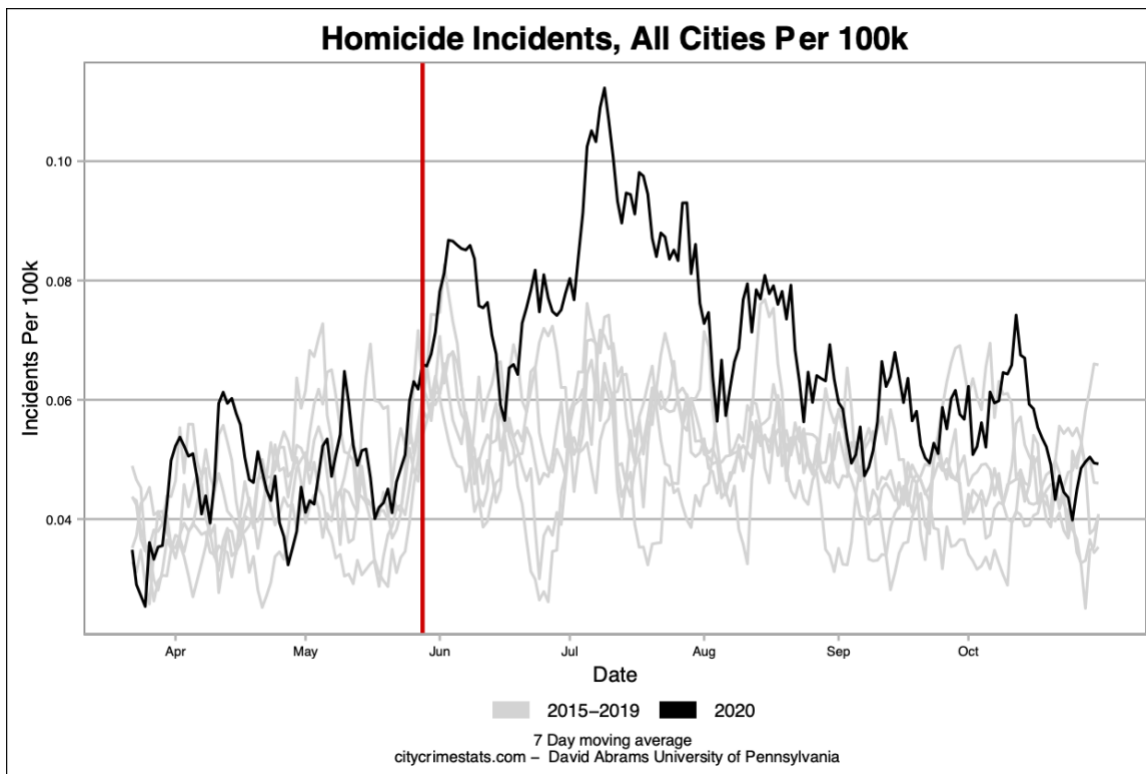
Reported Crime Rates Fell Tremendously and Have Stayed Low

Across almost all of the cities examined, crime fell a tremendous amount in the first month of the pandemic – with overall crime falling by over 22% relative to the average of the same time period in the previous 5 years. However, even after cities eased their COVID restrictions in late spring, crime rates have remained at significantly lower levels relatively to previous years. The one exception is violent crime which started rising even before cities officially eased restrictions and is at the upper range of crime rates of the previous years. The below plots show per capita crime incidents in major categories with the red line marking the removal of stay at home orders. 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.



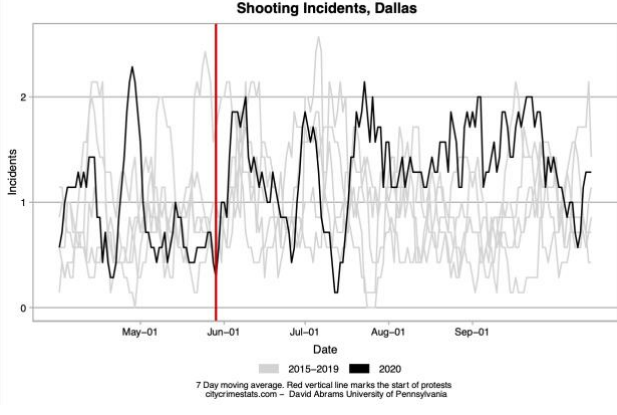
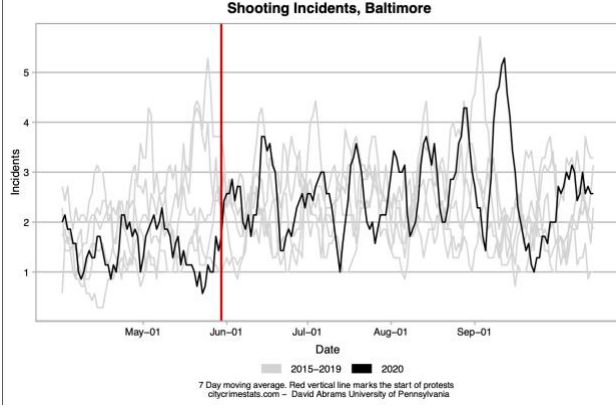
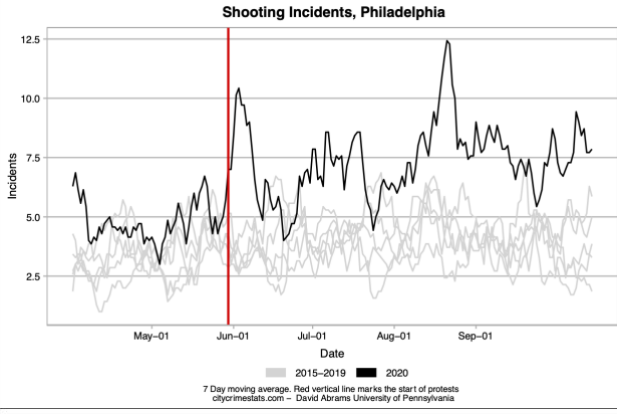
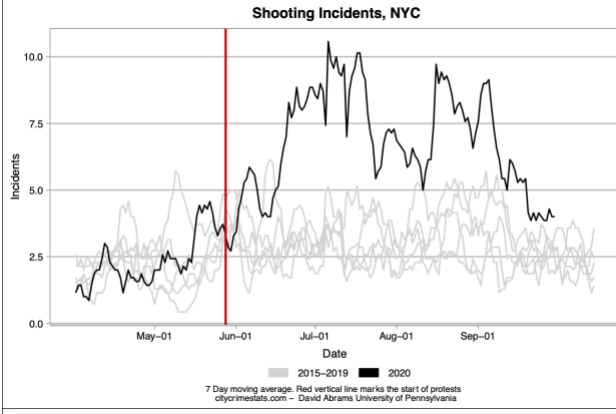
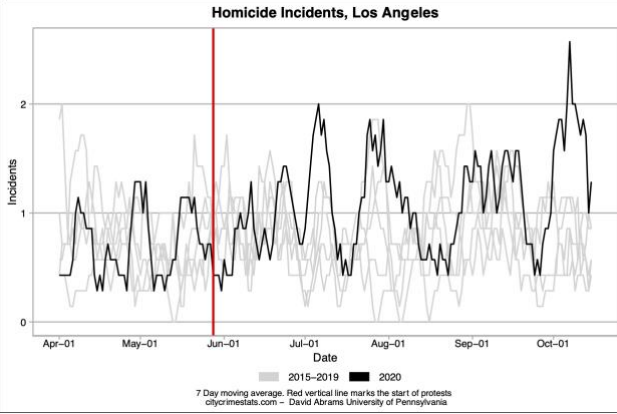
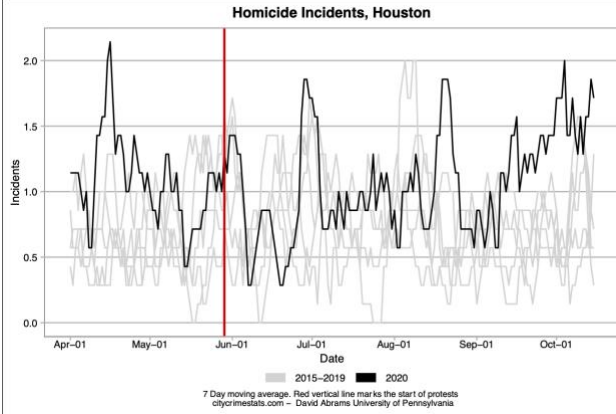
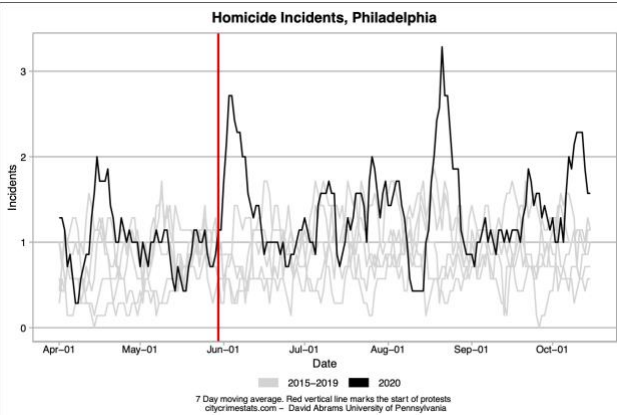
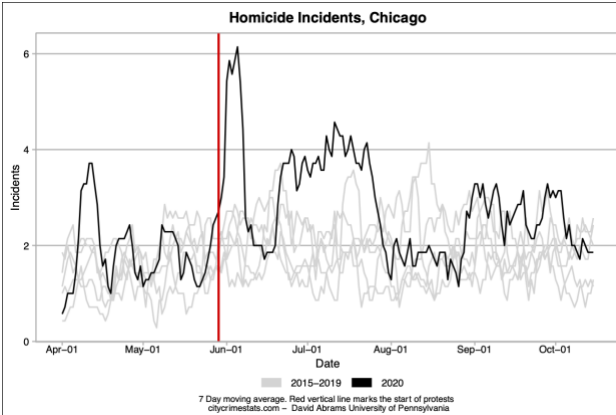
Homicides and Shootings Spiked Over the Summer

Unlike most other crime categories which we looked at, homicides and shootings appeared to be initially unresponsive to changes as a result of COVID-19. However, over the summer there was an increase in shootings and homicides in a number of cities beginning later in the year. The start of this spike coincided with the protests associated with the police killing of George Floyd (marked by the red vertical line in the below plot) and persisted throughout the summer. However, given the pandemic has also led to many societal changes such as an increasing unemployment as well as the closure of schools and summer programs it is difficult to isolate a precise cause. While homicide rates remained elevated for much of the summer they have declined in recent months and are now roughly in line with the average for the prior 5 years.



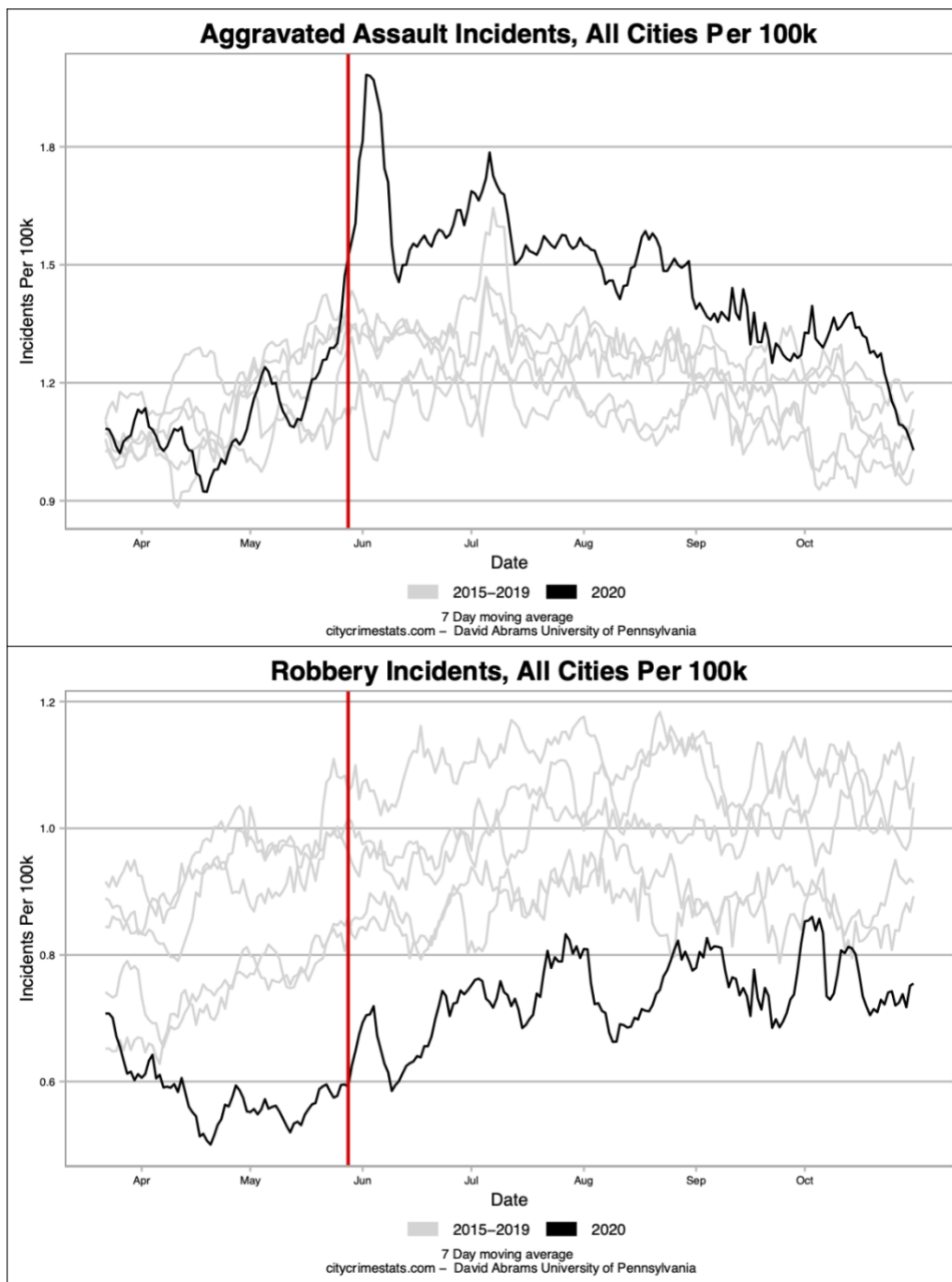
The Increase in Homicides and Shootings Was Not Seen in All Cities

While we have seen a statistically significant increase in homicides across the US, there is a lot of heterogeneity. Cities such as Chicago and Philadelphia saw large increases which appear to coincide with the beginning of the protests (marked by the vertical red line in the plots below). Meanwhile, Baltimore and Los Angeles actually saw a decrease in homicides in the weeks following the protest. There is similarly divergence in trends for shootings with NYC and Philadelphia seeing spikes at the start of summer with shootings remaining elevated while in Dallas and Baltimore shootings stayed within the historical range throughout the summer.



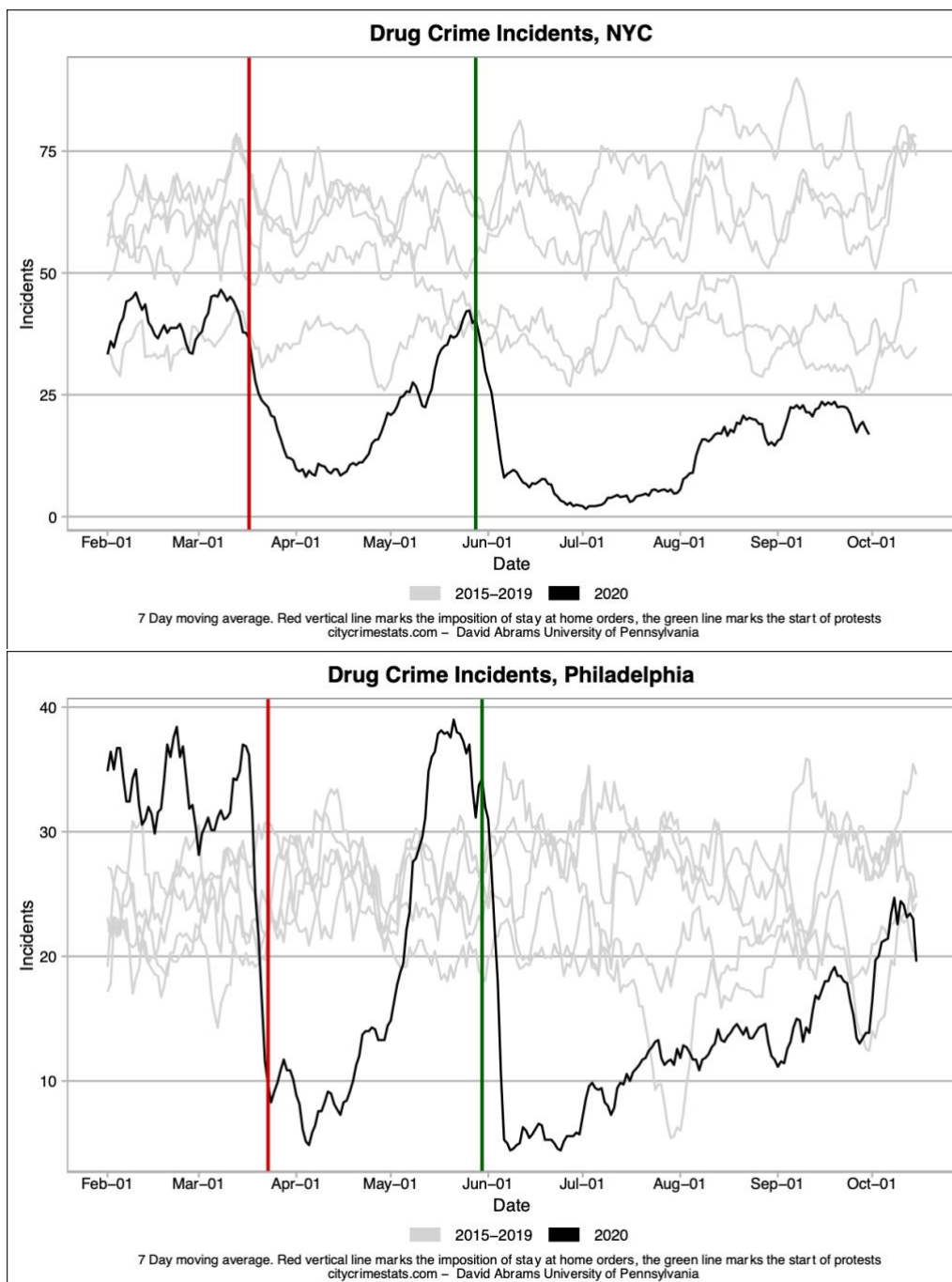
Aggravated Assault and Robbery Show Divergent Trends Over Summer

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. While aggravated assaults and robberies both declined by 13-15% at the onset of the pandemic, their trends diverged over the summer with aggravated assaults spiking around the time of the protests (marked by the red vertical line), similar to what has been seen in homicides, while robberies had no such spike and remain below the historic average.



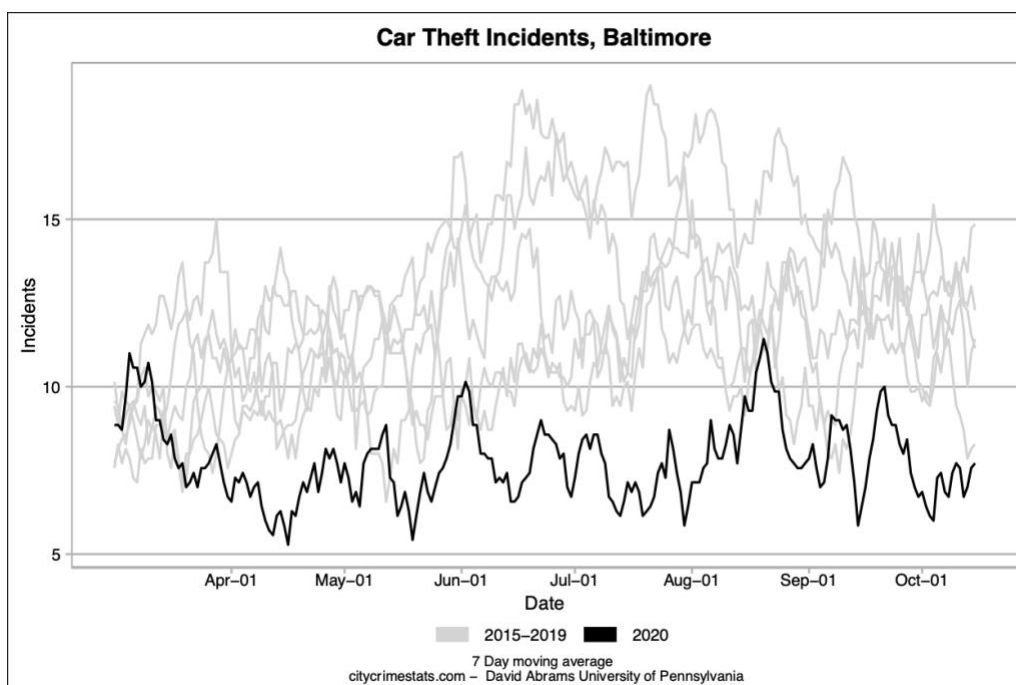
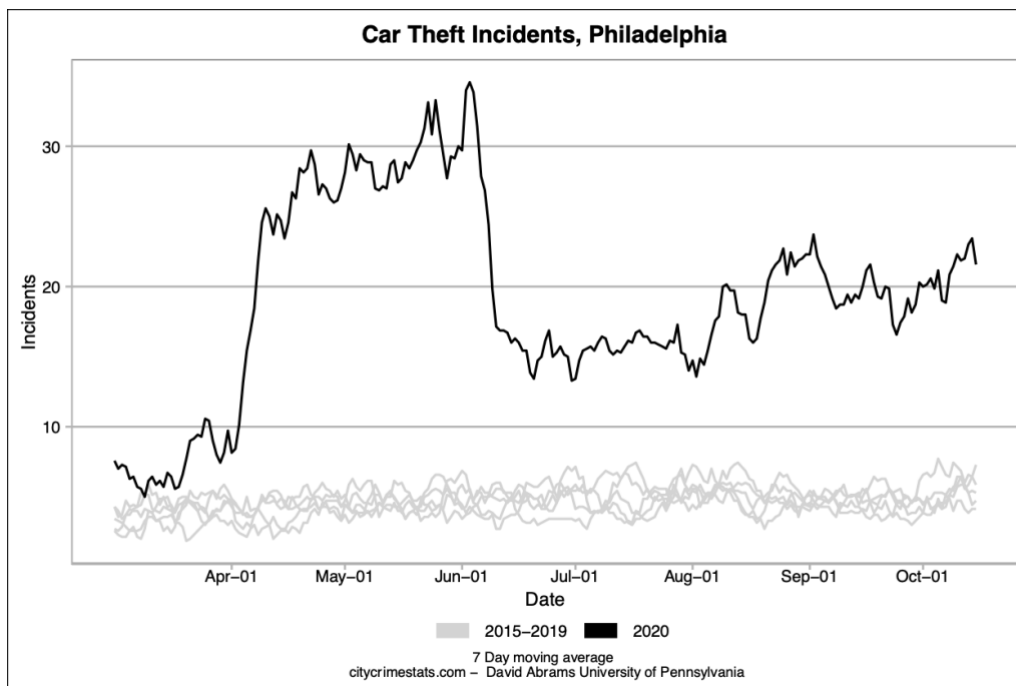
Drug Crimes Dropped the Most at the Pandemic Onset and Fell Again During Summer

Drug crimes saw the biggest decline of any category at the onset of the pandemic (marked by the vertical red line), in almost all cities for which we have data – 65% on average. While reports did start to revert at the end of Spring, there appears to have been a second drop at the start of summer coinciding with the George Floyd Protests (marked by the vertical green line) and possibly reflecting a change in the policing of these crimes. Below are figures for two representative cities, NYC and Philadelphia, 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, a quick reversion and then a second drop at the end of May.



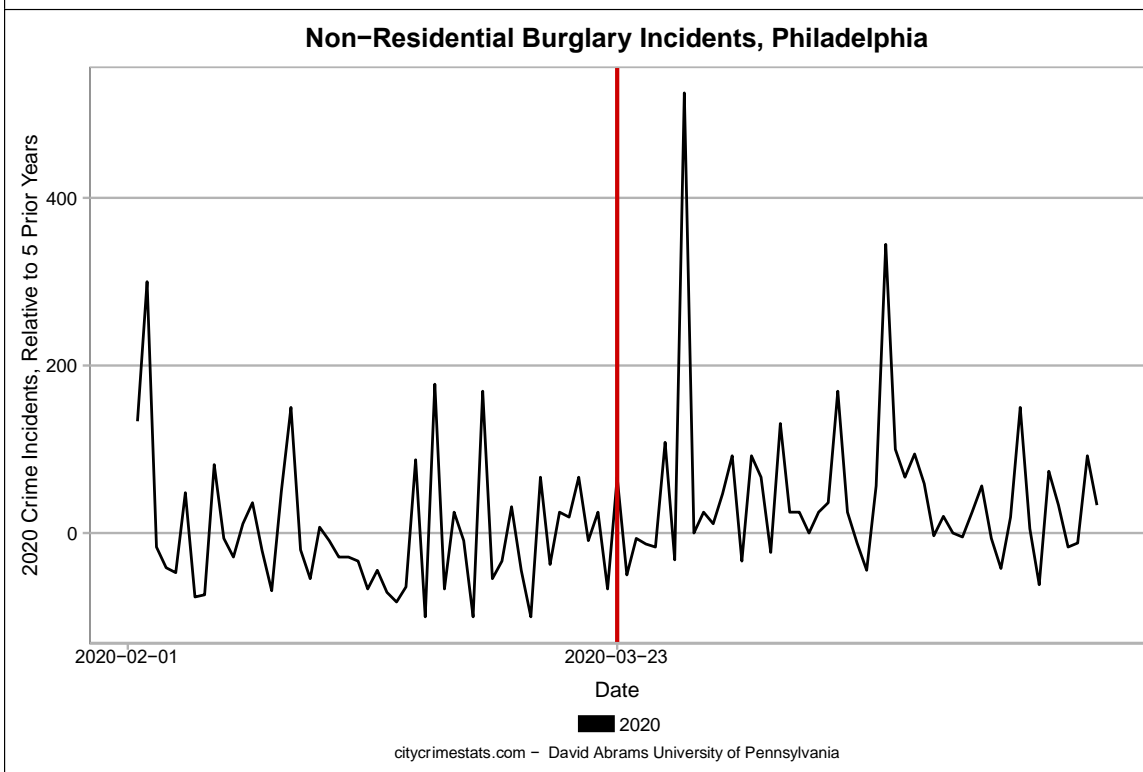
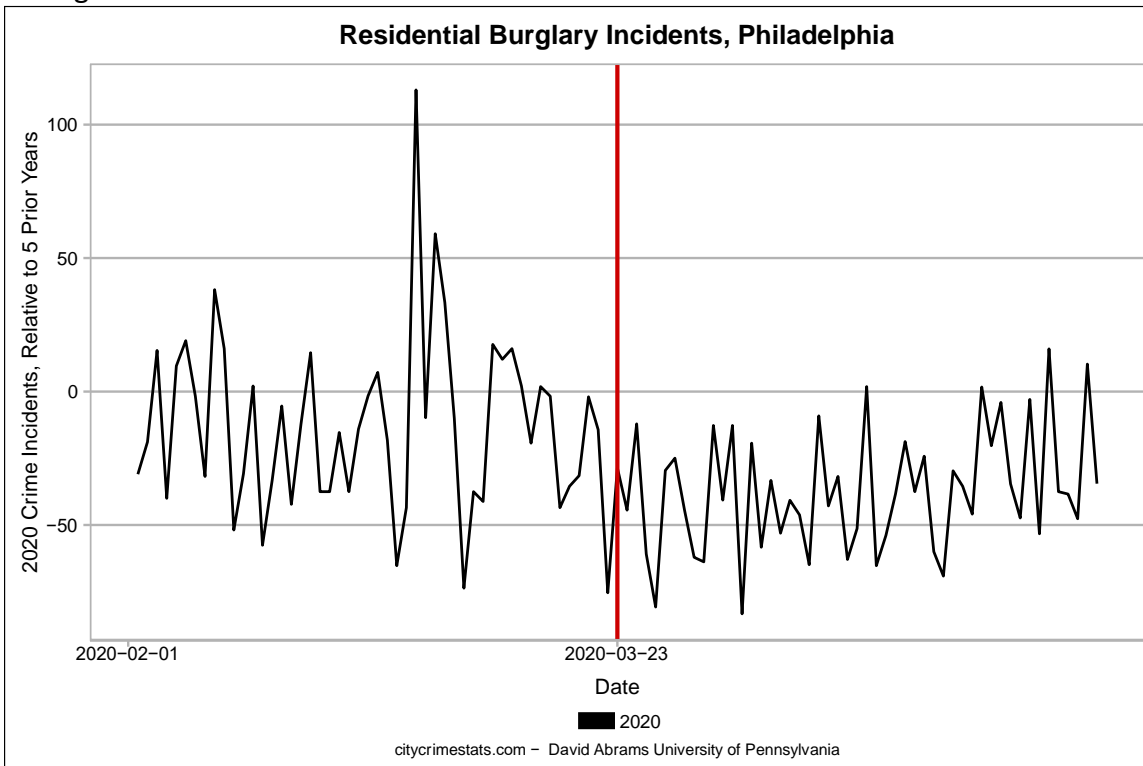
Car Theft Rose Dramatically in Philadelphia and Has Stayed Elevated

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 car thefts quickly fell in early summer, incidents have started to pick back up over fall and remain at elevated levels. While nowhere near as dramatic, Austin, Denver, and LA also saw significant rise in car theft, while Baltimore was the one city that saw a substantial decline.



Home Burglaries Dropped while Commercial Burglaries Rose

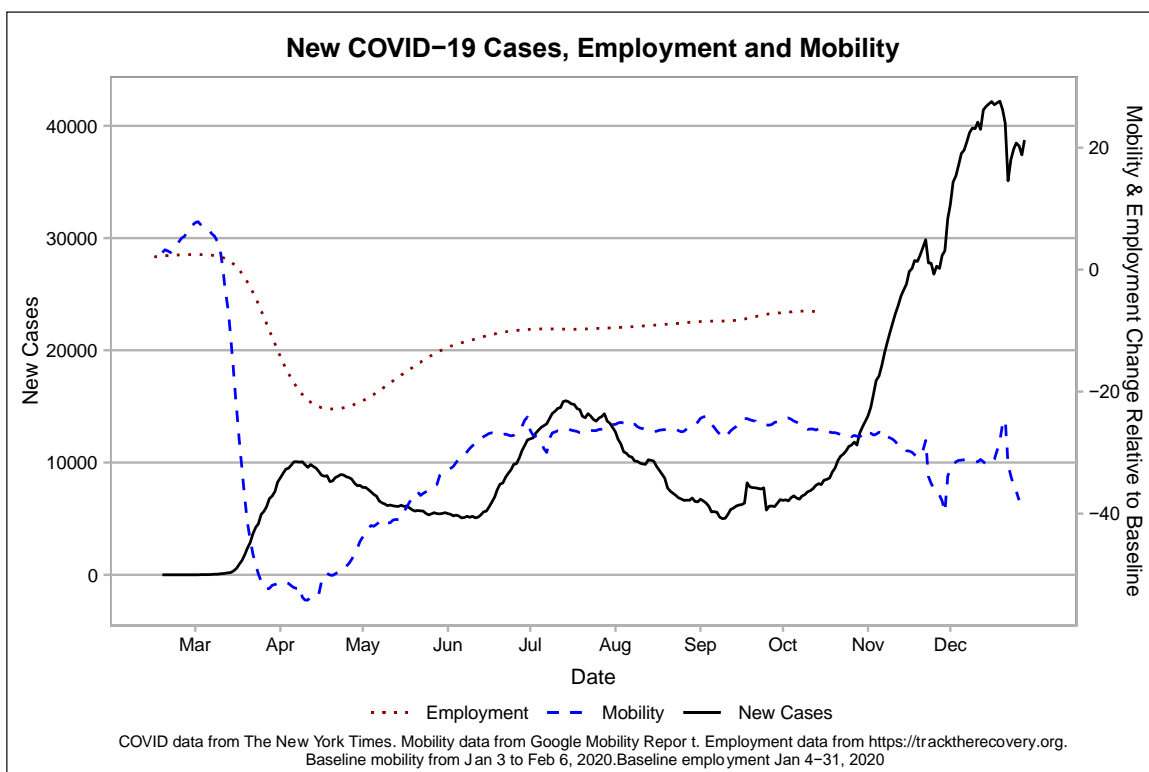
As the pandemic hit, people began spending far more time at home. We can see one result of this is the large decline in residential burglaries as in Philadelphia. With people at home, that also mean there were fewer eyes on non-residential buildings, which led to an increase in those burglaries – by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



Mobility Remains Low in Major Cities

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.

One reason why the easing of COVID related restrictions appears to have had limited impact upon crime rates may be due to the fact that mobility in cities has remained subdued. While mobility picked back up from the lows seen in March, it remains well below pre-COVID levels as expected given that people have still not been able to return to their normal routine.



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.

