

48 YEARS OF CRIME IN CHICAGO:
A Descriptive Analysis of Serious Crime Trends from 1965 to 2013¹

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, the United States has experienced an unpredicted drop in crime. Chicago, while often portrayed as a violent city, has seen sustained drops in violent crime and homicide rates during this time, but particularly recently. Using annual crime data, this report briefly describes temporal and spatial trends of major index crime in Chicago from 1965 to 2013. Overall, Chicago—like other U.S. cities—experienced a significant decline in overall crime and violent crime. Present day levels of violent crime are, in fact, at their lowest rates in four decades. Furthermore, nearly all communities experienced declines in crime, although the rates of decline were greater in some communities than others. Over the past three years, for example, all but ten communities (out of 77) experienced declines in violent crime. Those areas that experienced increases were and continue to be some of Chicago’s safest areas. While the drop in violent crime is shared between low and high crime areas alike, there remain areas of the city where violent crime rates are unacceptably high. Rates of homicide have also decreased over this period following the overall city-wide pattern, with some unique patterns emerging surrounding the contexts of gang homicide. The objective of this report is to simply document these historical trends and not to assign any casual interpretations of the vanguards of crime rates of this period. Directions for future investigation are also discussed.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The objective of this report was to analyze Chicago's crime rates within a historical context so as to better understand longer patterns as well as contemporary rates.

Chicago has seen impressive declines in crime over the last four and a half decades. Based on data from the United States Department of Justice and Chicago Police Department, the overall levels of crime and violence have fallen to record lows as the year 2013 comes to a close. These changes in crime rates – especially recent changes – provide some additional insight into how Chicago fares relative to other big cities. Compared to other cities of similar sizes (250,000 or more people served), Chicago is by no means the “murder capital” or “crime capital” of the U.S. Chicago had a citywide violent rate of 1045.15 per 100,000 in 2012, a rate closer to Houston and Minneapolis, and half that of cities like Detroit and St. Louis.

- Chicago appears to be on track to have both the lowest violent crime rate since 1972, and lowest homicide rate since 1967
- Early data from 2013 indicates that the index crime rate will continue to fall with early estimates suggesting a rate of 4,251 per 100,000, a rate not seen since 1972
- Chicago has seen a strong drop in violent crime over the last two years, with 16 out of 77 community areas (over 20%) reporting 25% or higher declines in violent crime rates from 2011-2013
- From January 1, 2013 to November 30, 2013, 67 out of 77 (87%) of Chicago Community Areas saw a decrease in the rate of violent crime
- Chicago rates 19th in violent crime rates among large cities as of 2012, at similar levels to Houston, Texas and Minneapolis, Minnesota.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 15 years, the United States has experienced what some scholars are now calling “The Great Crime Decline.”^{2,3} Rates of virtually all types of crime—including violent crimes such as homicide and robberies—have plummeted. For example, the rate of aggravated assault decreased by 44% nationwide between 1990 and 2000 and the rate of larceny during the same time period declined by 23%.² Such declines followed on the heels of an equally unprecedented surge in homicide and violent crime during the 1980s often associated with the emergence of crack cocaine.⁴ Despite the well documented rise and fall of crime rates during the Crack Era and The Great Crime Decline, very little empirical evidence exists that can precisely pinpoint the *causes* of the decline. Various theories have arisen that run the gamut from mass incarceration and community policing to changes in the economy and levels of abortion.

This report seeks to (very) briefly document basic crime trends in Chicago over the 48 year period from 1965 to the present. In many ways, Chicago’s crime rates mirror overall trends in other U.S. cities. Crime, and especially violent crime, rose in the late-1960s and then again in the 1980s and 1990s, reaching its apex in 1991. Since 1991, Chicago has been experiencing an unprecedented and steady decline in crime. This report takes a very small step in unraveling these historical trends by presenting basic trend data. In this way, it only begins to scratch the surface of crime trends in Chicago. But, it provides a starting point that allows current debates and future research to place the city’s contemporary crime rates in a much needed historical context. Future research will delve deeper into the differences and inequalities in these rates across social and demographic, motive, and spatial dimensions.

DATA

Data used in this report come from a variety of sources. Incident-level data across years has been provided by the Chicago Police Department. Data on population numbers for Chicago’s Community Area is based on the US Census (1970-2010), but provided disaggregated at the community area level by the City of Chicago for the period 2000-2010⁵ and by Rob Paral and Associates for the period 1970-1999.⁶ Non-official

² Zimring, F. (2008) *The Great American Crime Decline*. New York City: Oxford University Press.

³ Blumstein, A. and Wallman, J. (2006) *The Crime Drop in America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Baumer, E. (1994) Poverty, Crack, and Crime – A Cross City Analysis. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*. Vol. 31 (3): 311-327.

⁵ City of Chicago “Community Area 2000 and 2010 Census Population Comparisons.”

http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dcd/supp_info/community_area_2000and2010censuspopulationcomparisons.html

disaggregation of data has been checked whenever possible but inaccuracies may remain. Historical homicide data in Chicago at the Community Area level is provided by Carolyn Rebecca Block and Richard L. Block through the National Archive of Criminal Justice Data.⁷ Detailed data on homicides from 1995 to 2010 were provided by the Chicago Police Department. Cross-city violent crime rates are taken from the FBI Uniform Crime Reporting Statistics data portal.⁸

Importantly, the present report [as of 9 December 2013] analyzes data from January 1 to November 30 of the year in question except when noted. This is done in order to standardize the sampling frame across time periods. All analyses will be updated as year-end data for 2013 becomes available.

INDEX CRIME RATES IN CHICAGO: A HISTORICAL VIEW

FIGURE 1 displays the rate (per 100,000) of index crimes in Chicago from 1965 to 2013. In this case, index crimes are the total number of murders, criminal sexual assaults, aggravated assaults/batteries, burglaries, thefts, robberies, arson, and motor vehicle thefts. Data for arson were unavailable for the years 1965 to 1980.

Chicago's pattern of index crime during this time period is fairly consistent with the overall pattern described above. Rates of index crime remained relatively stable between 1966-1973 at approximately 3,300 per 100,000 and then jumped dramatically around 1973 to 5,882 per 100,000.⁹ Index crime rates fall again until about 1983 when they jump to levels greater than 8,000 per 100,000 during the mid-1980s. The apex of index crimes in Chicago occurs in 1991 when the rate is 10,647.9 per 100,000.

After 1991 FIGURE 1 shows that index crime overall begins to fall at a steady rate throughout the late-1990s into the present day. In 2012, for example, the index crime rate is 4,854.5 per 100,000—slightly lower than the index crime rate in 1973. Early data from 2013 indicates that the index crime rate will continue to fall with early estimates suggesting a rate of 4,251 per 100,000, a rate not seen since 1972.

⁶ Parol, Rob. "Chicago Community Areas."

<http://www.robparol.com/downloads/ACS0509/Historical/Data/Chicago%20Community%20Areas%20Historical%20Data.htm>

⁷ Block, Carolyn Rebecca and Richard L. Block "Homicides in Chicago, 1965-1995 (ICPSR 6399)."

<http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/NACJD/studies/6399>

⁸ <http://www.ucrdatatool.gov/index.cfm>

⁹ Part of this increase in 1973 occurs because the Chicago Police Department began reporting thefts of items valued under \$50. However, as seen in FIGURES 2 and 7, the overall pattern holds for specific crimes even when thefts are not included.

FIGURE 2 takes a closer look at some of the specific index crimes of robbery and motor vehicle thefts (MVT) as a cursory way to assess how sensitive fluctuations in the overall index crime rate are to specific crimes (and potentially crime reporting). Homicides, arguably the most highly stable indicator of violent crime, are given specific attention below. FIGURE 2 shows that, in general, these two major index crimes follow roughly the same patterns: increases during the 1980s and peaking (roughly) in the early 1990s. Robbery peaks in 1991 at 1,439 per 100,000 before beginning its steady decline. Contemporary rates of robbery (between 2010 and 2012) are at levels comparable to those of 1967 (approximately 471 per 100,000 per year) and have been relatively stable. MVT peaks early—around 1986—but also trend downwards beginning in 1991. Contemporary rates of MVT (between 2010 and 2012) are, on average, 617 per 100,000—a rate even *lower* than those in 1965.

In addition, it can be illustrative to compare Chicago to other larger cities. Table 1 presents the violent crime rate reported by law enforcement agencies serving jurisdictions of 250,000 or more in 2012. Chicago was rated 19th, with rates similar in size to Houston or Minneapolis. Though context and location do matter greatly in understanding violent crime (as discussed in the following section), it is also important to locate Chicago as it stands amongst its peers. While there is more work to do, Chicago's overall violent crime rate is not exceptional when compared to other large cities.

COMMUNITY CHANGE IN CRIME

Chicago is, of course, a city of neighborhoods. And, as has been well documented elsewhere, crime rates are by no means equal across neighborhoods.^{10, 11, 12} In fact, recent research suggests that some neighborhoods—especially socially and economically disadvantaged communities—continue to have stubbornly high levels of crime.^{11, 12, 13} To begin to unpack how changes in crime rates varies by community, this report starts with a very simple visual examination of how homicide concentrates in Chicago's 77 community areas and then, briefly, looks at how these crime rates have changed in

¹⁰Kling, J.R., Ludwig, J., and Katz, L.F. (2005) Neighborhood Effects on Crime for Female and Male Youth: Evidence from a Randomized Housing Voucher Experiment. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 120, No. 1 pp. 87-130.

¹¹ Sampson, Robert J. 2012. *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹² Kirk, David S., and Andrew V. Papachristos. 2011. "Cultural Mechanisms and the Persistence of Neighborhood Violence." *American Journal of Sociology* 116 (4):1190-233.

¹³Krivo, L.J. and Peterson, R.D. (1996) Extremely Disadvantaged Neighborhoods and Urban Crime. *Social Forces*, Vol. 75, No. 2 pp. 619-648.

recent years. Again, such an analysis is a modest first step in understanding the complex ways that crime is distributed across time and space. Unfortunately, geographic data on all index crimes are not yet available for all time periods. So, to begin this examination, we rely on more detailed historic data on homicide as well as more recent data on index crimes. As will be shown, homicide, in general is a good proxy for the spatial distribution of other index crimes in Chicago.

FIGURE 3 shows the homicide rate by Community Area averaged across four periods of time: 1970-1979, 1980-1989, 1990-1999, and 2000-2009. Homicide rates are calculated by using the earliest available US Census population figures (for period 1970-1979, for example, the rate is based on US Census population figures for 1970). The total homicide numbers are used in FIGURE 3. FIGURE 4 shows the violent crime rate in 2011 at the Community Area level from January 1st to November 30th so as to provide the most accurate comparison with the violent crime data available year to date.

All of these maps clearly demonstrate the well-documented spatial concentration of homicide and violence in Chicago, with the highest rates of homicide and violence concentrated on the West and South sides of the city in predominately African American communities such as East and West Garfield Park, Englewood, and Fuller Park. For example, the average homicide rate from 2000-2010 in West Garfield Park was nearly 64 per 100,000 residents, whereas the average homicide rate in Jefferson Park, located on Chicago's Northwest side, was only 3.10 per 100,000 residents.

Importantly, FIGURE 3 shows that the disparities in the spatial concentration of crime persist *even as* homicide and violent crime drop as a whole.¹⁴ Put another way the same communities that had the highest homicide rates in 1965 continue to have the highest rates of homicide in 2005, even though the *relative* rates of each community have declined over time. For example, Englewood, which had an average homicide rate of almost 58 per 100,000 residents in 2000-2009 had a homicide rate of 52 during the 1970-1979 period 30 years previously, whereas Irving Park, with an average homicide rate in 2000-2009 of just under 5.0 faced a similarly low average rate of 5.46 in 1970-1979. Although the data are not currently available to present similar data for all index crimes across this time period, FIGURE 4 suggests a similar concentration of violent crime rates.

In recent years, crime rates across communities continue to fall—even in the highest crime communities that continue to have relatively high rates of homicide and violent crime. To illustrate this point, FIGURE 5 shows geographically the change in violent

¹⁴ Hertz, D. (2013) We've Talked About Homicide In Chicago At Least One Million Times But I Don't Think This Has Come Up. *City Notes*, Accessed: <http://danielhertz.wordpress.com/2013/08/05/weve-talked-about-homicide-in-chicago-at-least-one-million-times-but-i-dont-think-this-has-come-up/> on December 6, 2013.

crime from the years 2011 to 2013 from January 1 to November 30 of each year.

FIGURE 5 shows that, spatially, nearly all communities across the city experience large declines in crime. Also of note is that those communities that generally have the highest rates of crime experienced some of the greatest declines in crime. For instance, the neighborhood of Avalon Park faced violent crime rates of 2,071 per 100,000 across January 1 to November 30, 2011 but faced a violent crime rate of 1,453 during the same period in 2013. While this is still a generally high rate of violent crime, the drop from 2011-2013 was nearly 30%.

Only ten communities in FIGURES 5 experienced *increases* in crime from 2011 to 2013. Many of those communities—Lincoln Square, Lake View, North Park, Jefferson Park, and Montclare—are traditionally low-crime communities. It is important to note that many of these communities experience such low annual rates of crime that large percentage changes in crime rates may be subject to higher error rates due to the lower statistical power of the sample. For example, Montclare’s 50.00% growth represents a change of only 12 violent crimes between 2011 and 2013. In seven of the ten community areas, there were less than 100 violent crimes each in 2013 (as of November 30) and in most cases, less than 50. Three community areas, did experience a higher amount of violent crime (Washington Heights faced 393, Lake View faced 435 counts, and South Lawndale faced 497 counts in the first 11 months of 2012). However, violent crime rates, which control for population, are much lower; only two communities faced violent crime rates of over 500 per 100,000 (South Lawndale and Washington Heights).

Things are getting better in the city, in general—even in those highest crime communities crime is going down. However, the rate at which things change is not evenly distributed across the city. Some neighborhoods saw greater crime declines than others. But despite such declines, the “highest” crime neighborhoods remain the highest crime neighborhoods relative to other communities.¹⁵

Taken together, such community level trends show that nearly all communities in Chicago experienced a decline in murder and overall crime over the past several decades. At the same time, however, crime remains persistently in particularly communities, especially in socially and economically disadvantaged parts of the city. As has been documented elsewhere, the highest crime communities during the height of the Crack Era remain the highest crime communities today even though their absolute levels of crime have dropped significantly. The object of the present report is to simply highlight such patterns. Additional research should explore the complex reasons such inequality in crime rates persist across time and place persists in Chicago communities.

¹⁵ Hertz, *op cite*.

HOMICIDE

Perhaps the most discussed—and researched—crime in Chicago is homicide. FIGURE 6 displays the homicide rate per 100,000 in Chicago from 1965 to 2013. This graph clearly shows that homicide follows the same patterns seen in FIGURES 1 and 2. Homicide increases rapidly around 1967 before leveling off in the mid-1970s and early-1980s (with some peaks and valleys throughout that time period). Homicide reaches its apex in 1992 with a rate of approximately 32 per 100,000. After that point, homicide declines drastically over time despite some periodic spikes until 2004. Between 2004 and the present, homicide rates hover around 14 per 100,000, though they jump in 2012 to approximately 17.6 per 100,000. Assuming the 2013 pattern continues throughout the last month of the year, the homicide rate in 2013 should be roughly 14 per 100,000—the lowest overall rate since 1967.

Gangs in Chicago have and continue to play an important role in the city's homicide problem.^{16, 17, 18} FIGURE 7 plots “gang member-involved” homicides in Chicago between the years 1995 to 2010, a time period for which detailed data on gang membership was available to the author. For the sake of the present analysis, a homicide is classified as “gang member involved” if *either* the victim or offender was identified by police as a member of a street gang.

FIGURE 7 shows an important trend in homicides. Consistent with the overall homicide trend, total and non-gang homicides follow a steady decline from 1995 to the present. Gang member involved homicides show a similar steady decline from 1995 to 2002, but then remain relatively stable from 2001 to 2010. This has an important implication for the overall composition of homicide in Chicago: as non-gang homicide falls and gang homicides remain stable, it means that a *greater proportion of all homicides in the city involve members of street gangs*. In short, homicides are more likely to involve a gang member than not. This in no way means the homicides are *motivated* by gangs or gang-related disputes, but rather that homicides simply involve members of street gangs.

Furthermore, the context of gang homicides also appears to have changed over the last 15 years. FIGURE 8 differentiates gang homicides down from those in which the victim and offenders were members of the same gang as opposed to those in which victim and

¹⁶ Block, Richard, and Carolyn R. Block. 1995. "Street Gang Crime in Chicago." in *The Modern Gang Reader*, edited by Malcolm W. Klein, Cheryl L. Maxson, and Jody Miller. Thousand Oaks, CA: Roxbury.

¹⁷ Papachristos, Andrew V., and David S. Kirk. 2006. "Neighborhood Effects on Street Gang Behavior." in *Studying Youth Gangs*, edited by James Short, F. and Lorine A. Hughes. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.

¹⁸ Papachristos, Andrew V. 2009. "Murder by Structure: Dominance Relations and the Social Structure of Gang Homicide." *American Journal of Sociology* 115(1):74-128.

offender were members of the same or related gangs. In this figure, the vertical axis represents *the percentage of all gang member involved* homicides.

FIGURE 8 shows an important change in the context of gang homicide away from inter-gang homicide and towards a greater proportion of intra-gang homicide. In 1995, roughly 80 percent of all gang homicides involved members from different gangs while only 15 percent involved members of the same gang. The percentage of inter-gang homicides declines to about 40 percent in 2004 and fluctuates thereafter, but never attaining its highest levels. Intra-gang homicides appear to trend in the opposite direction, increasing steadily up until 2004 and then fluctuating between 25 and 40 percent of all gang homicides thereafter. As can be seen in FIGURE 9, these two types of gang homicide converge over time and, up until 2010, are much closer in terms of the proportion of all gang homicides that they represent respectively. While further research is needed to determine the exact nature of this trend and how it relates to changes in the dynamics of streets gangs in Chicago, it does lend some descriptive support that the nature of gang homicides in Chicago has changed from one between warring distinct gangs to one between related or affiliated gangs.

CONCLUSIONS

Chicago has seen impressive declines in crime over the last four and a half decades. Though the most distressed neighborhoods in the city remain the highest crime areas, the overall levels of crime and violence have fallen to record lows as the year 2013 comes to a close, with the homicide rate at its lowest point since 1967. These changes in crime rates—especially recent changes—provide some additional insight into how Chicago fares relative to other big cities. Compared to other cities of similar sizes (250,000 or more people served), Chicago is by not the “murder capital” or “crime capital” of the U.S. As we see in TABLE 1, for example, Chicago had a citywide rate of 1,045.15 per 100,000 in 2012. This 2012 violent crime rate is closer to Houston or Minneapolis and half that of cities like Detroit and St. Louis. Nonetheless, as seen in the Community Area maps and rates, much work needs to be done as rates of crime and violence remain stubbornly high in some communities.

The analyses presented here are descriptive—they say nothing as to the *causes* of these changes in crime. The objective of this report was to analyze Chicago’s crime rates within a historical context so as to better understand longer patterns as well as contemporary rates. Starting from such a contextualized view, future research should begin to explore how different social, demographic, political, and economic changes in the city may contribute to these observed trends. Many such changes are worth considering, including: the demolition of high-rise public housing, the gentrification and

development of particular neighborhoods, shifts in patterns of employment and jobs, changes in policing strategies and tactics, the development of new community-based interventions, the creation of and subsequent overturning of the city's ban on guns, and larger shifts in the composition and size of the city's population. Undoubtedly, the relationship between crime and factors such as these as these are as complex and diverse as the population of Chicago itself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Data were provided to the author by a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Chicago Police Department. The views and opinions in this report represent those of the author and not those of the Chicago Police Department or the City of Chicago.

FIGURE 1. Index Crime in Chicago (rate per 100,000), 1965 to the present

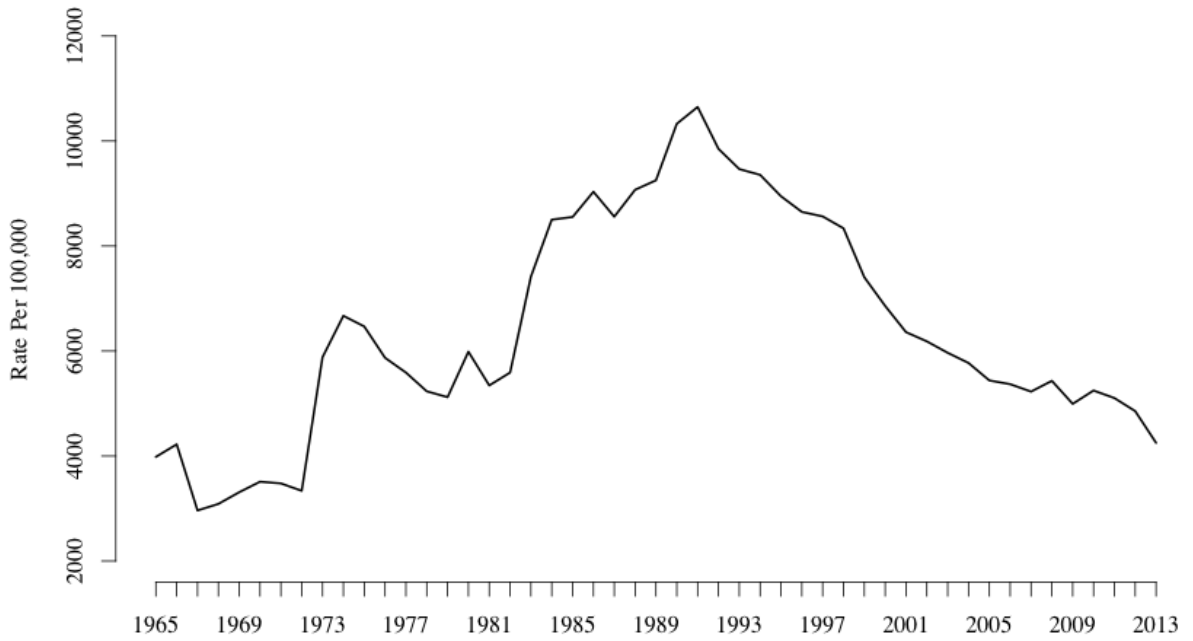


FIGURE 2. Motor Vehicle Theft and Robbery Rates in Chicago, 1965 to 2013

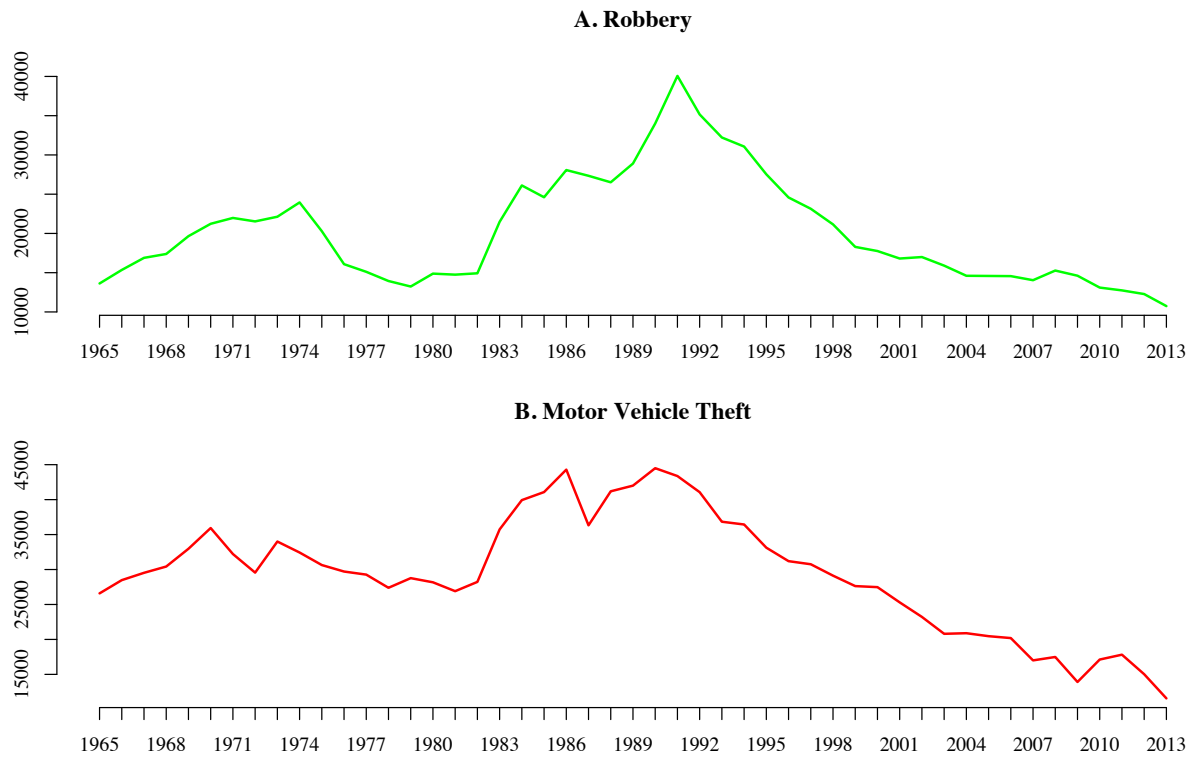


FIGURE 3. Average Homicide Rates in Chicago by Community Area (1970-1979, 1980-1989, 1990-1999, 2000-2009)

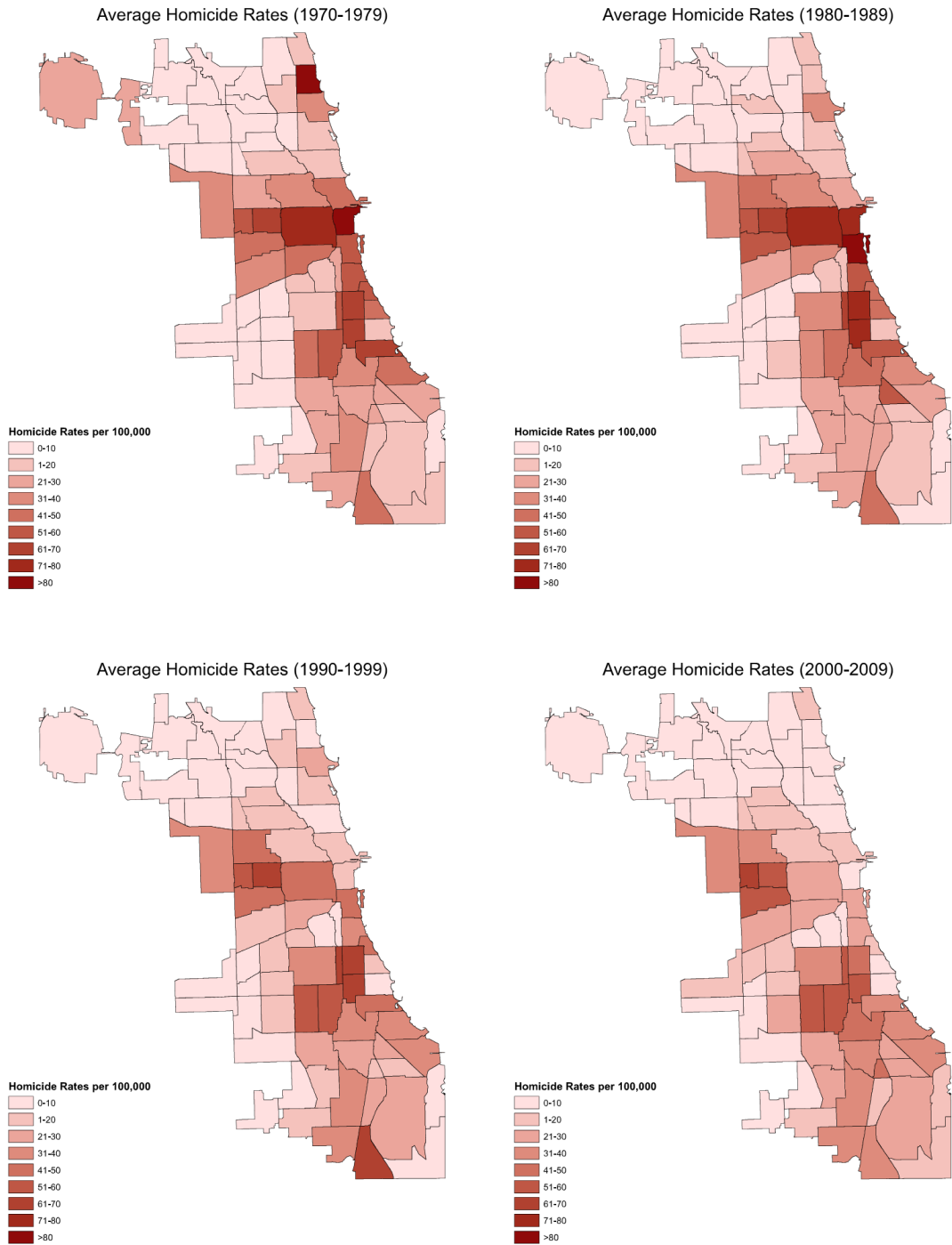


FIGURE 4. Violent Crime Rate (per 100,000) by Community area, January through November 2011

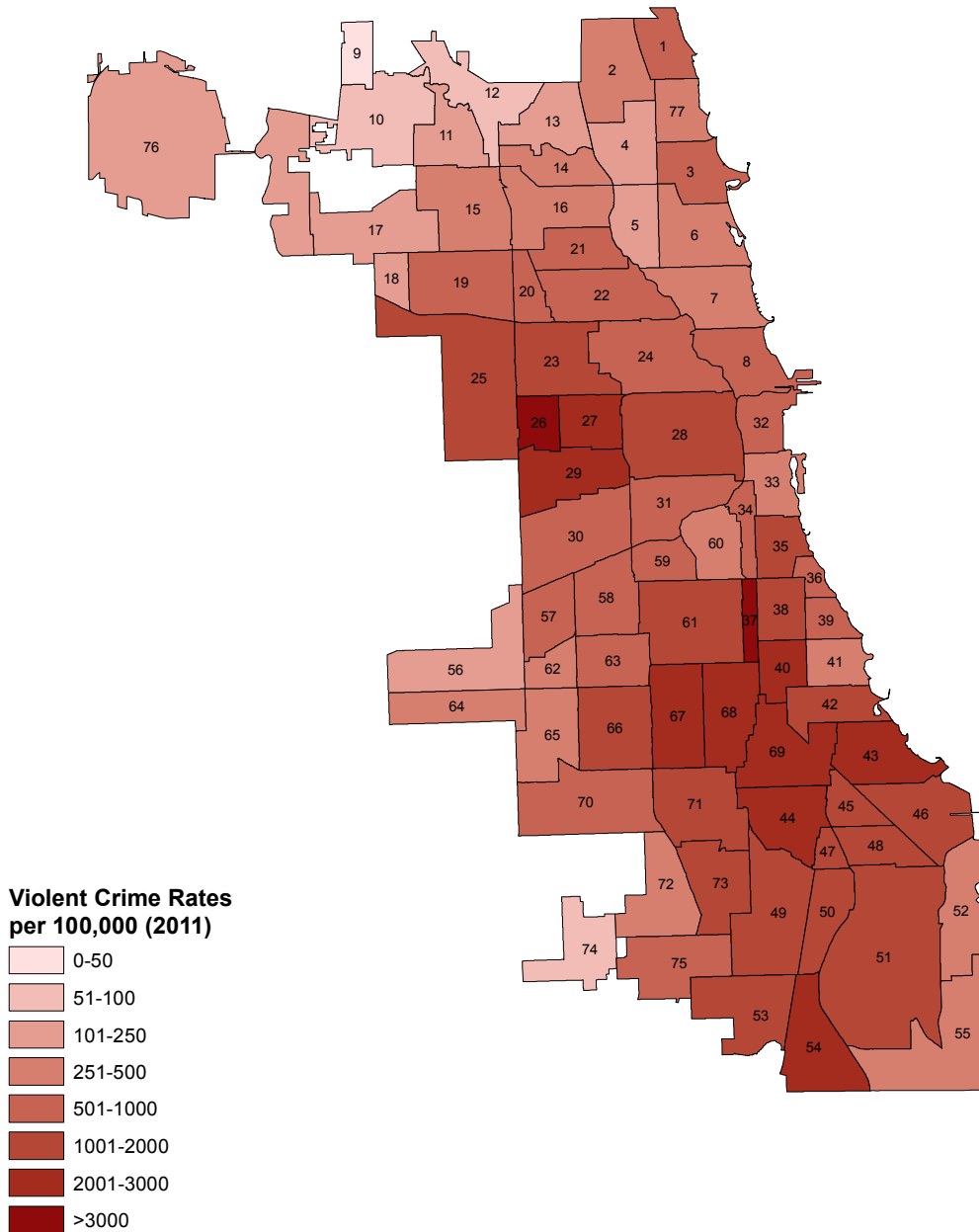


FIGURE 5. Percentage Change in Violent Crime Rate in Chicago by Community Area (2011 to 2013 – Period from Jan 1 to Nov 30)

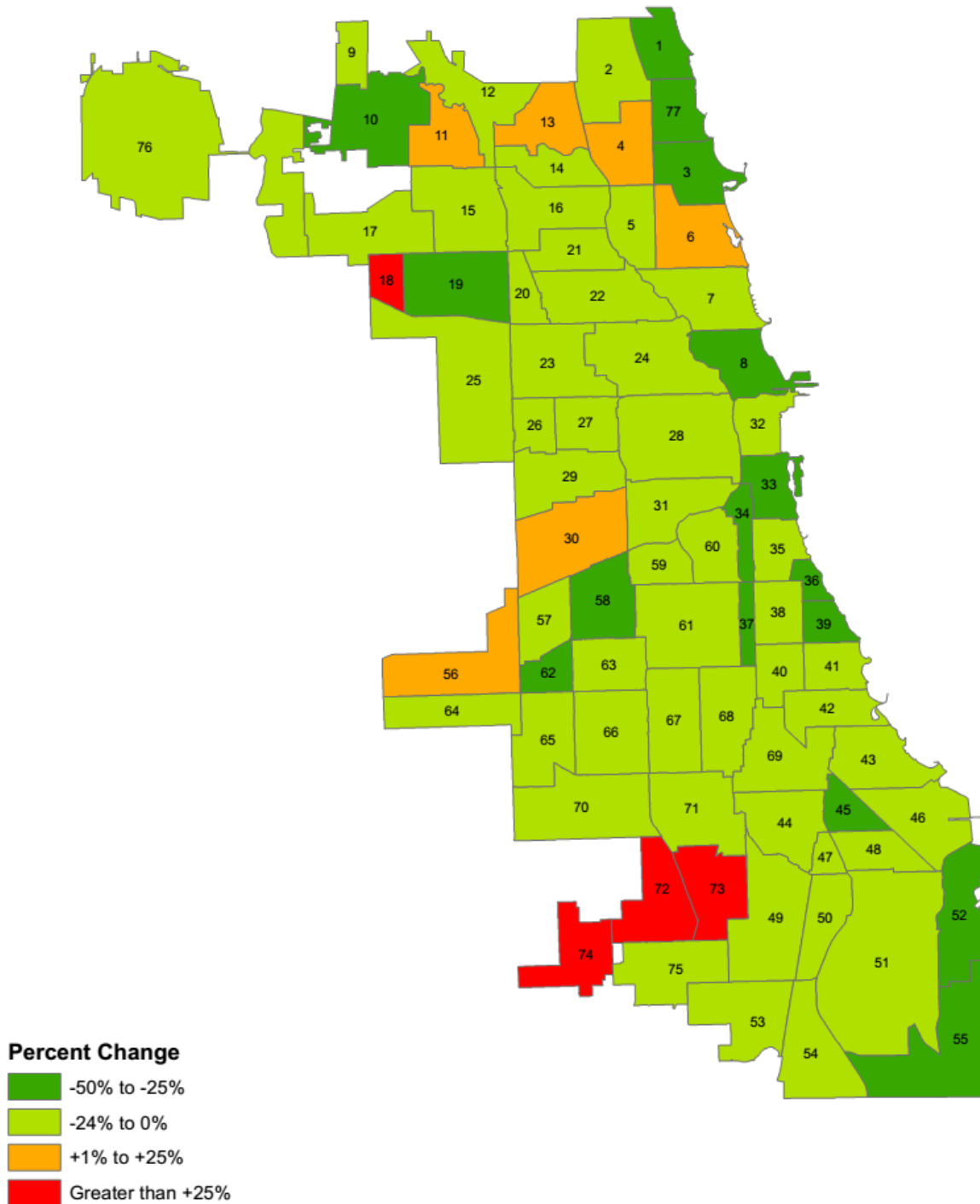


FIGURE 6. Homicide Rate (per 100,000), 1965 to 2013

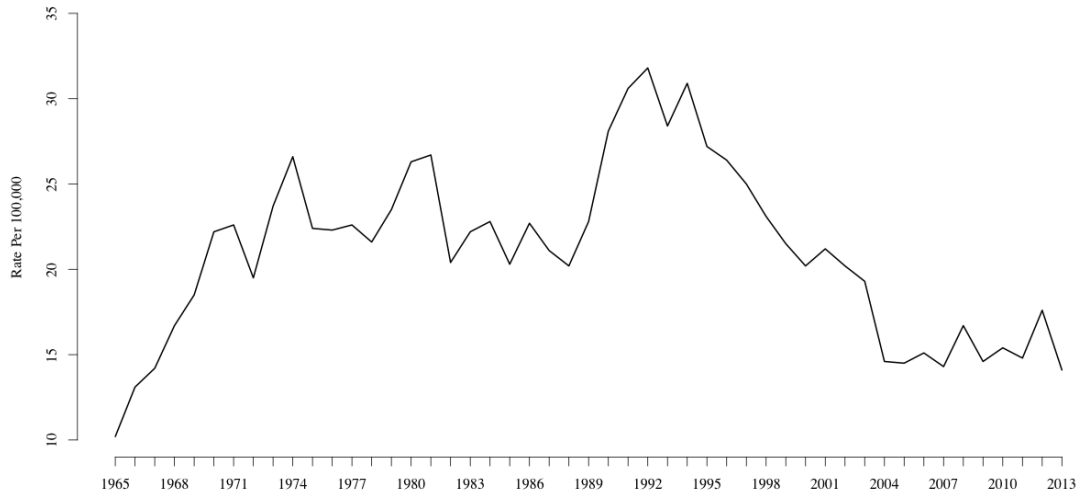
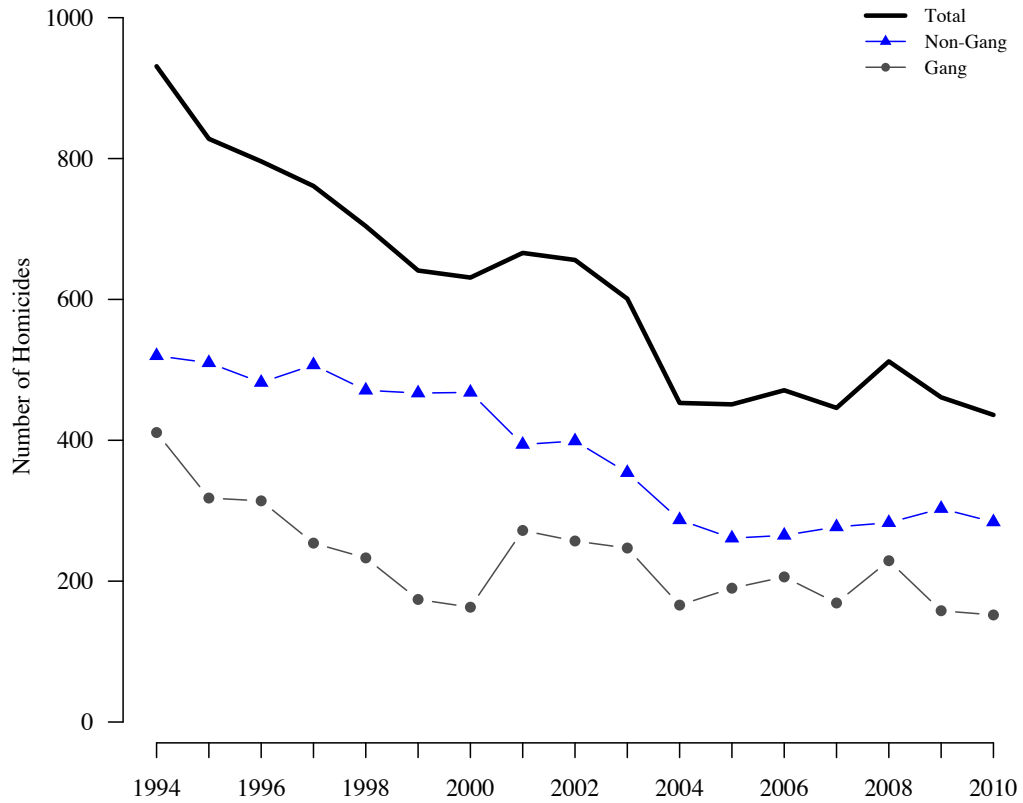
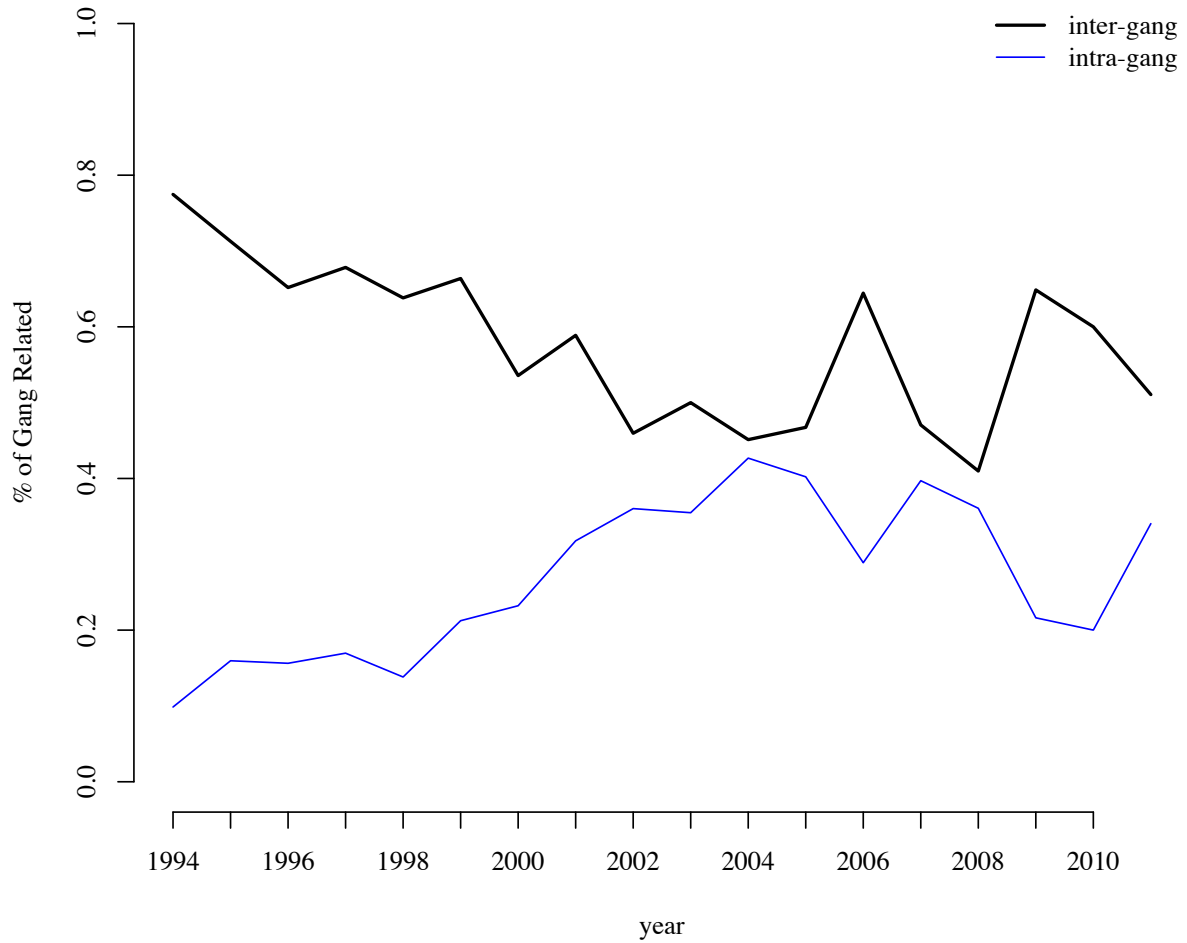


FIGURE 7. Gang Member Involved and Non-Gang Member Involved Homicides in Chicago, 1995 to 2010



NOTE: A homicide was defined by the author as “gang member involved” when either the victim or offender were identified as a member of a known street gang by the police. This definition does not consider the *motive* of the homicide (e.g., turf, narcotics, argument, etc.).

FIGURE 8. Inter-gang vs. Intra-gang homicides in Chicago, 1995 to 2010



NOTE: A homicide was defined “inter-gang” was the victim and offender were from distinct (non-affiliated) gang groups or factions and “intra-gang” when the victim and offender were from either (a) the same gang/faction or else (b) affiliated gangs/factions.

TABLE 1. Top 30 Violent Crime Rates Across Major Metropolitan Areas (2012)

Ranking	Agency	State	2012
1	Detroit Police Dept	MI	2,122.90
2	Oakland Police Dept	CA	1,993.30
3	St. Louis Police Dept	MO	1,776.50
4	Memphis Police Dept	TN	1,750.30
5	Stockton Police Dept	CA	1,548.00
6	Baltimore City Police Dept	MD	1,405.20
7	Cleveland Police Dept	OH	1,383.80
8	Atlanta Police Dept	GA	1,379.00
9	Milwaukee Police Dept	WI	1,294.50
10	Buffalo Police Dept	NY	1,288.70
11	Kansas City Police Dept	MO	1,263.20
12	Nashville-Davidson Metro Police Dept	TN	1,216.00
13	Indianapolis Police Dept	IN	1,185.50
14	Washington Metropolitan Police Dept	DC	1,177.90
15	Miami Police Dept	FL	1,172.00
16	Toledo Police Dept	OH	1,171.90
17	Philadelphia Police Dept	PA	1,160.10
18	Newark Police Dept	NJ	1,154.50
19	Chicago Police Dept	IL	1045.15
20	Houston Police Dept	TX	992.5
21	Minneapolis Police Dept	MN	992.2
22	Tulsa Police Dept	OK	990
23	Cincinnati Police Dept	OH	974.7
24	Oklahoma City Police Dept	OK	919.1
25	Boston Police Dept	MA	835
26	Anchorage Police Dept	AK	828.7
27	New Orleans Police Dept	LA	815.2
28	Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department	NV	784
29	Pittsburgh Police Dept.	PA	752
30	Albuquerque Police Dept	NM	749.7

NOTE: This data is taken from the FBI Unified Crime Reporting Statistics¹⁹ data portal, listing the crime rate for Index Part 1 violent crimes per 100,000 residents for law enforcement agencies serving 250,000 people or more. As the Chicago Police Department does not report forcible rape according to UCR guidelines, we impute the violent crime rate for 2012 from our data at hand.

¹⁹ <http://www.ucrdatatool.gov/index.cfm>