

The End of the World

A person wearing a dark hoodie is seen from behind, standing in front of vertical metal prison bars. The scene is dimly lit, with the person's face obscured by shadow.

Criminal Minded

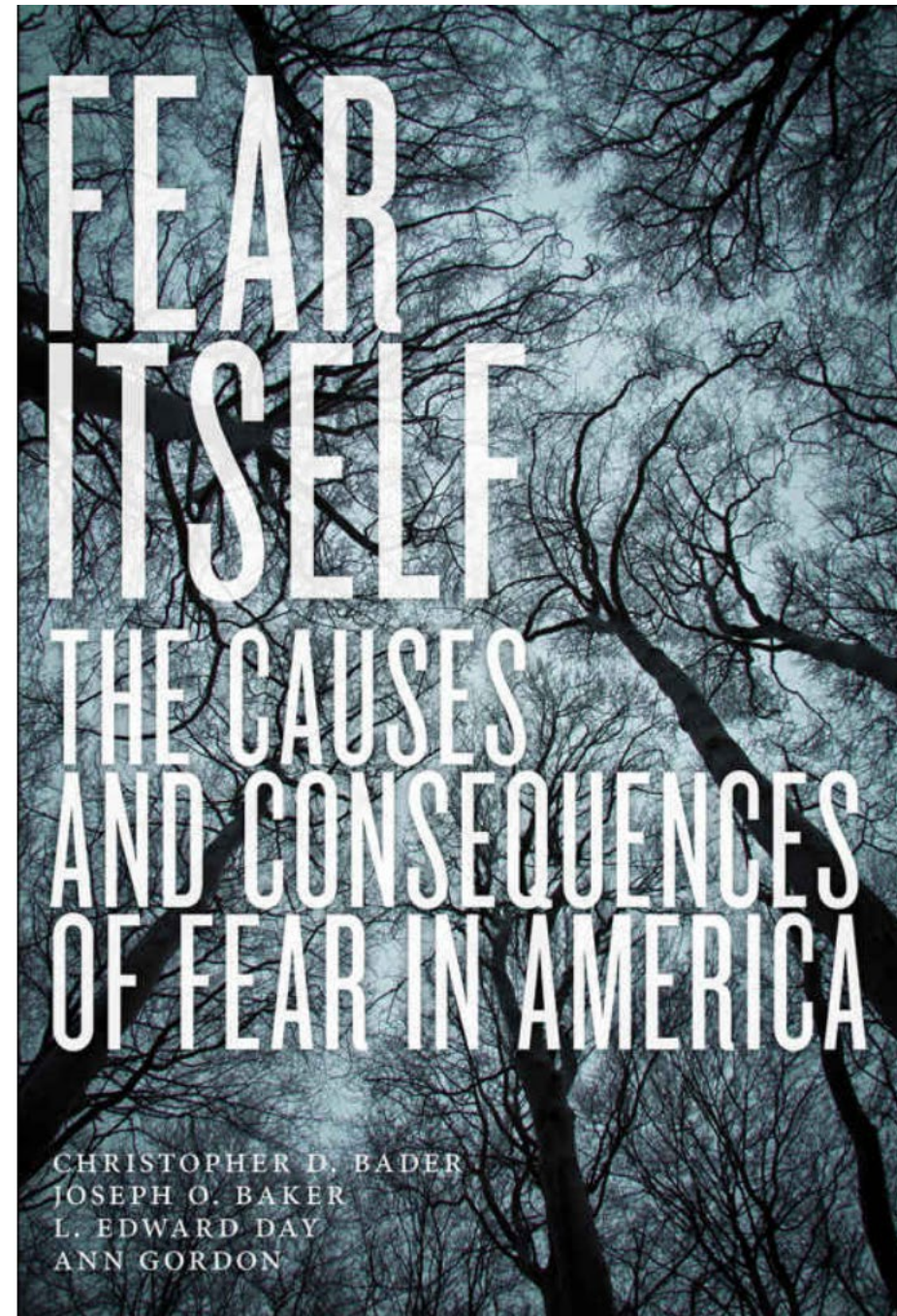
White Fears & Crime Myths in America

Week 7 Lecture | Professor Crews
Religious Studies 357 W

As Christopher Bader, Joseph Baker, L. Edward Day, and Ann Gordon make clear in their 2020 book *Fear Itself: The Causes and Consequences of Fear in America*, researchers are now beginning to gain a better understanding of precisely how fear shapes and informs American cultural beliefs and actions.

The underlying research in the book comes from the annual Chapman University Survey of American Fears (2014-2019), one of the most in-depth sociological study to date looking at a wide range of American fears, what informs these fears, and how these beliefs are affected by everything from race and gender to social media usage and paranormal beliefs.

As they note in the introduction, the goal of the study was to understand “[the patterns and consequences of fear](#)” and “[what kinds of Americans are afraid of certain things and how those fears are related to other beliefs and behaviors.](#)”



Having looked at the general landscape of American fears, this final section turns to public fears about crime and how our warped views on crime have caused many problems in America. Indeed, as our authors point out, “Americans are entirely out of step with the trends when it comes to crime.”

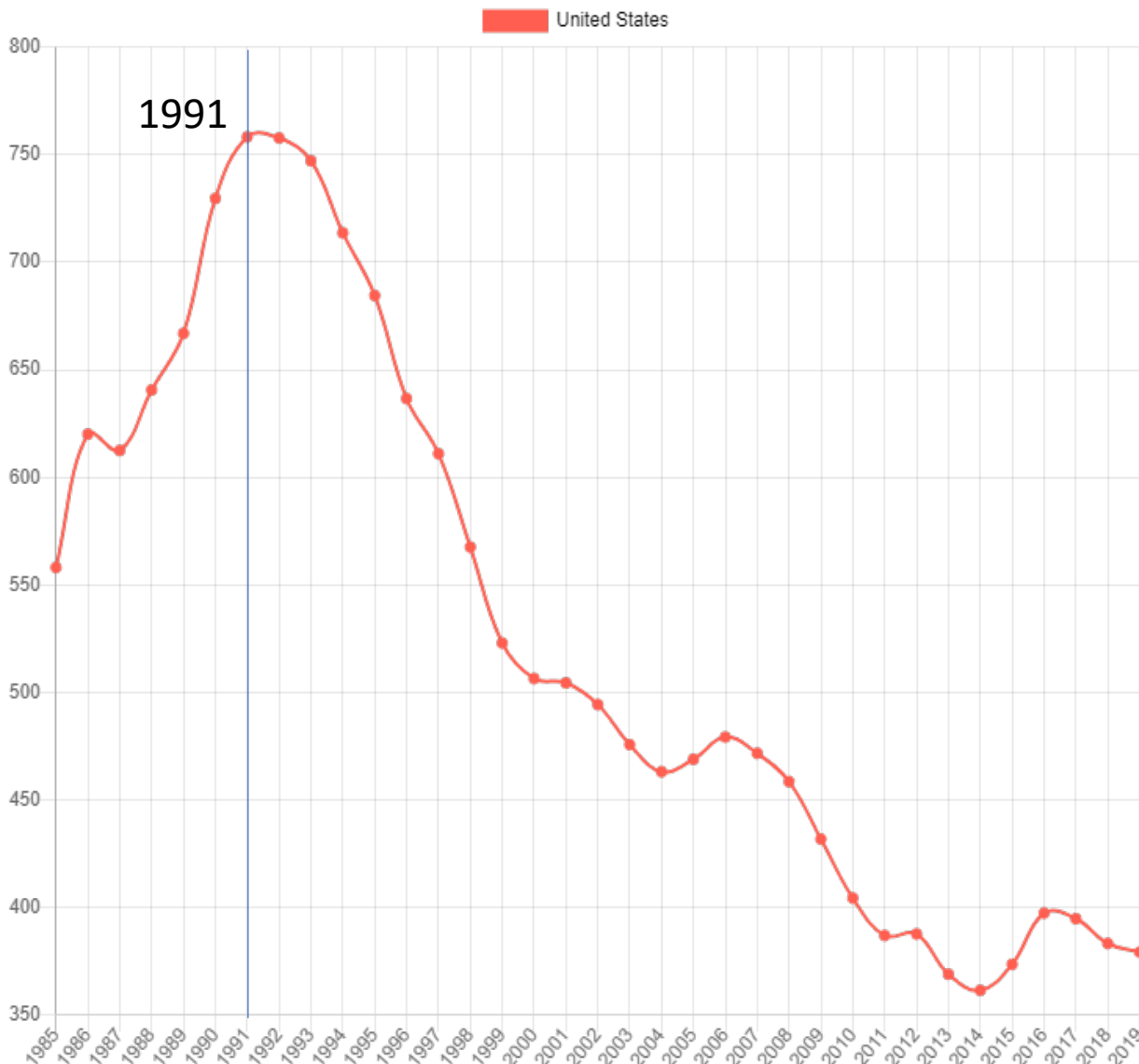
The realization that most Americans’ fears about crime are disconnected from actual reality has important implications for society, from declining civic engagement and a hesitation to help strangers to the ways political messaging about crime drives political behavior. For example, while overall rates of crime dropped nearly 50% from 1993 to 2001, and continue to decline, 2/3 of Americans still believe crime is on the rise.

“If you are afraid of crime, you are safer now than you used to be in most cases.”

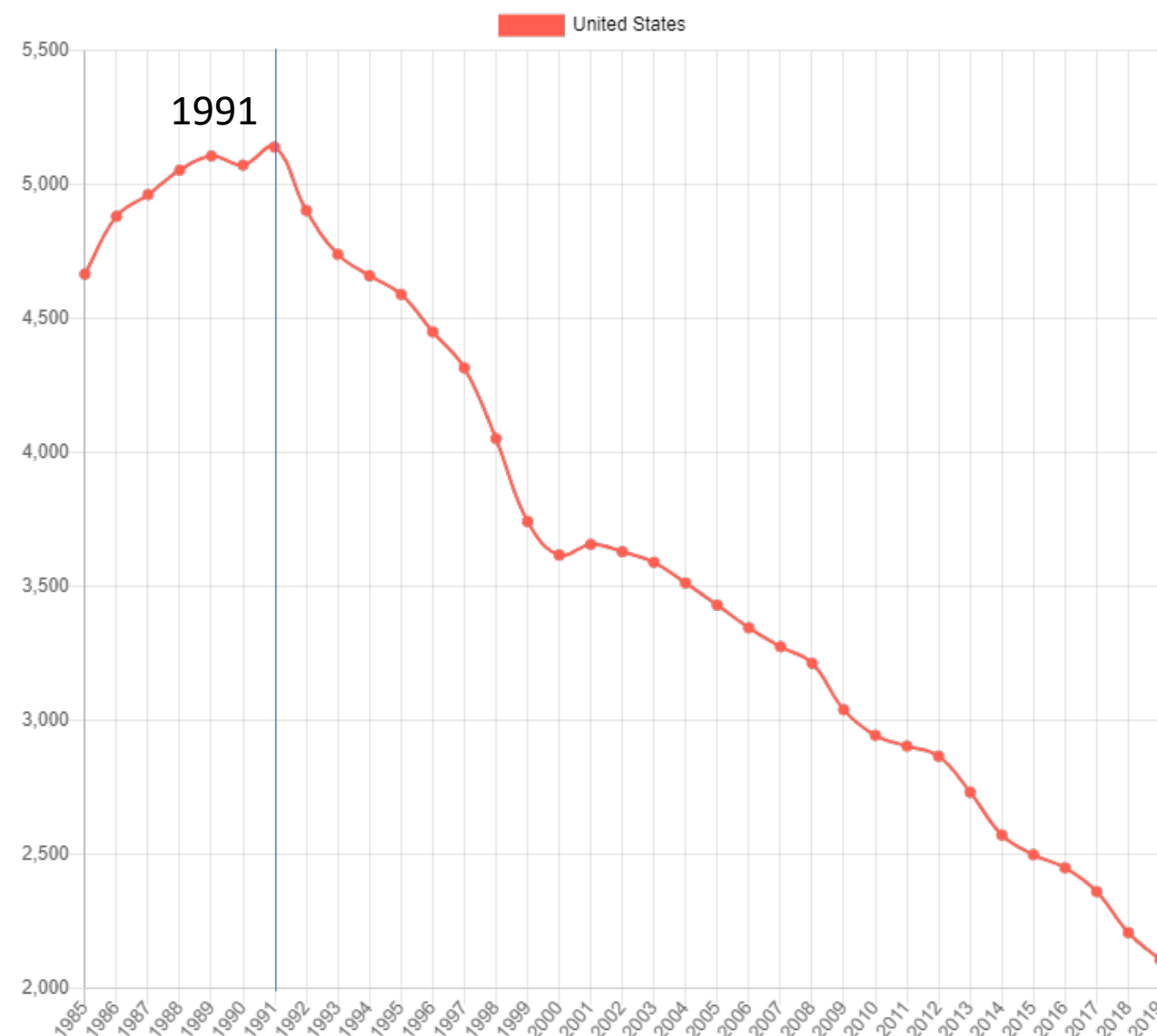
Even though the US is safer now than it has been for decades, most respondents in the Survey of American Fears reported increasing levels of fear across all crimes between 2015 and 2018.

A review of current crime data from the FBI shows we are approaching 30 years of annually decreasing crime rates in the US. The high point for both Violent Crimes and Property Crimes was back in 1991. So for anyone younger than 30, crime has been decreasing a bit more every year since you were born.

Rate of All Violent Crimes Offenses by Population

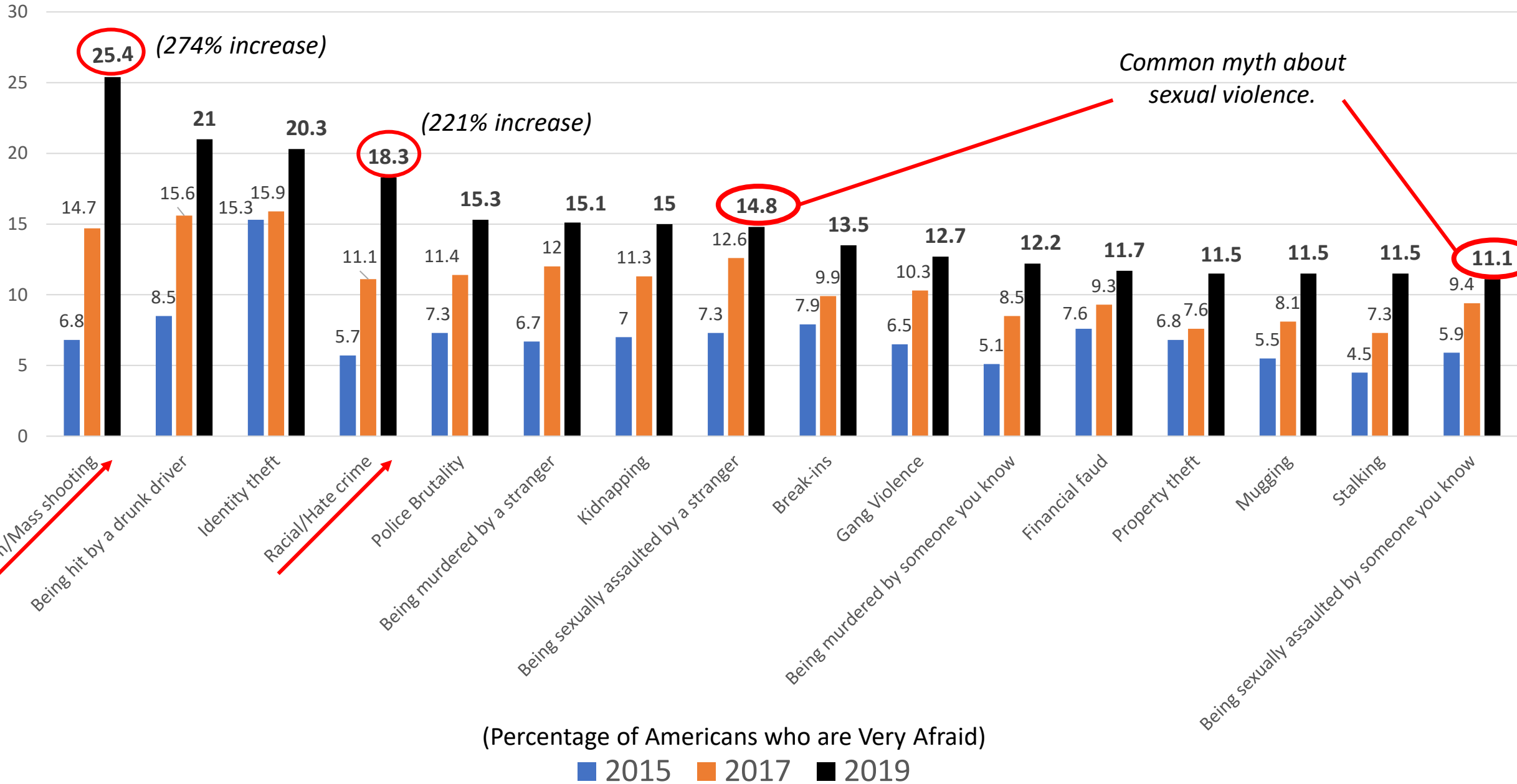


Rate of All Property Crimes Offenses by Population



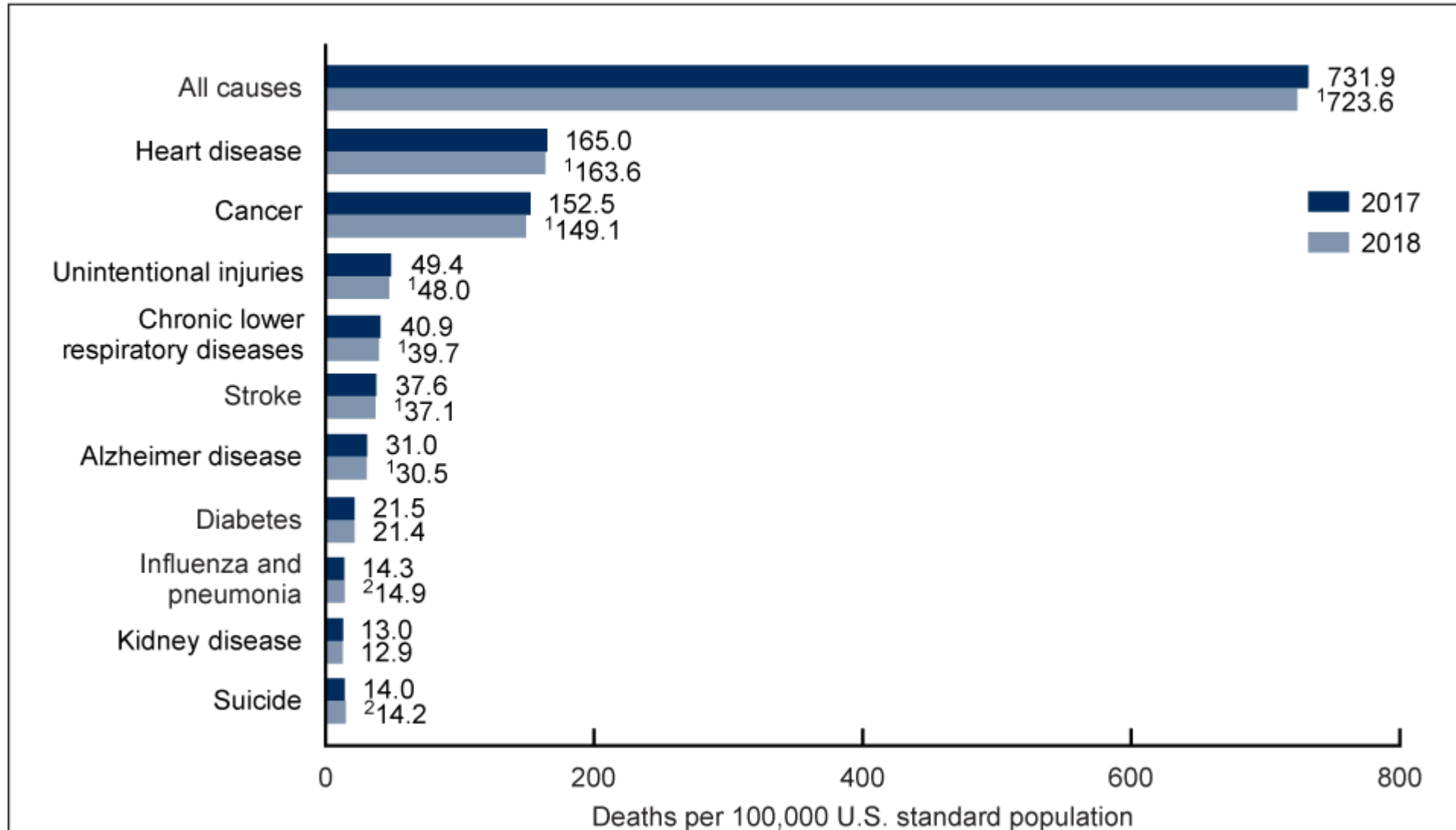
Rate per 100,000 people, by year (Data source: [FBI, Crime Data Explorer](#))

Change in Crime-Related Fears (2015–2019).



Mortality in the United States, 2018

Figure 2. Age-adjusted death rates for all causes and the 10 leading causes of death in 2018: United States, 2017 and 2018



Source: [NCHS Data Brief No. 355, January 2020](#)

Non-Hispanic white¹, Male, by Age Group

	Age		
Rank ²	1-19 years	20-44 years	45-64 years
1	Unintentional injuries 40.7%	Unintentional injuries 43.8%	Cancer 26.4%
2	Suicide 19.4%	Suicide 16.1%	Heart disease 23.6%
3	Cancer 8.6%	Heart disease 8.7%	Unintentional injuries 9.6%
4	Homicide 4.9%	Cancer 6.7%	Suicide 4.5%
5	Birth defects 4.0%	Homicide 2.9%	Chronic liver disease 4.5%
6	Heart disease 2.3%	Chronic liver disease 2.2%	Chronic lower respiratory diseases 3.9%
7	Influenza and pneumonia 1.0%	Diabetes 1.5%	Diabetes 3.4%
8	Septicemia 0.8%	Stroke 1.1%	Stroke 2.6%
9	Stroke 0.7%	Influenza and pneumonia 0.7%	Septicemia 1.3%
10	Chronic lower respiratory diseases 0.7%	Septicemia 0.6%	Influenza and pneumonia 1.1%

Non-Hispanic black¹, Male, by Age Group

	Age		
Rank ²	1-19 years	20-44 years	45-64 years
1	Homicide 35.2%	Homicide 28.9%	Heart disease 26.8%
2	Unintentional injuries 26.1%	Unintentional injuries 22.4%	Cancer 23.4%
3	Suicide 5.4%	Heart disease 12.2%	Unintentional injuries 8.4%
4	Cancer 4.6%	Suicide 6.2%	Diabetes 4.7%
5	Birth defects 3.5%	Cancer 5.0%	Stroke 4.5%
6	Heart disease 3.2%	HIV disease 2.7%	Kidney disease 2.4%
7	Chronic lower respiratory diseases 2.9%	Diabetes 2.3%	Chronic lower respiratory diseases 2.4%
8	Influenza and pneumonia 1.2%	Stroke 1.8%	Chronic liver disease 2.3%
9	Anemias 0.9%	Kidney disease 1.1%	HIV disease 2.2%
10	Stroke 0.8%	Chronic lower respiratory diseases 0.9%	Homicide 1.9%

Hispanic¹, Male, by Age Group

	Age		
Rank ²	1-19 years	20-44 years	45-64 years
1	Unintentional injuries 33.7%	Unintentional injuries 38.6%	Cancer 21.9%
2	Homicide 14.4%	Suicide 11.1%	Heart disease 20.5%
3	Suicide 13.9%	Homicide 10.6%	Unintentional injuries 11.5%
4	Cancer 9.4%	Heart disease 7.9%	Chronic liver disease 8.4%
5	Birth defects 4.5%	Cancer 7.5%	Diabetes 5.5%
6	Heart disease 2.7%	Chronic liver disease 3.6%	Stroke 4.3%
7	Influenza and pneumonia 1.1%	Stroke 2.0%	Suicide 2.4%
8	Stroke 1.0%	Diabetes 1.6%	Kidney disease 1.7%
9	Chronic lower respiratory diseases 0.8%	HIV disease 1.2%	Septicemia 1.5%
10	Septicemia 0.7%	Septicemia 0.7%	Influenza and pneumonia 1.3%

Non-Hispanic white¹, Female, by Age Group

Non-Hispanic black¹, Female, by Age Group

Hispanic¹, Female, by Age Group

Rank ²	1-19 years	20-44 years	45-64 years
1	Unintentional injuries 36.4%	Unintentional injuries 35.6%	Cancer 34.8%
2	Suicide 11.9%	Cancer 14.5%	Heart disease 15.2%
3	Cancer 10.5%	Suicide 9.0%	Unintentional injuries 7.6%
4	Birth defects 6.1%	Heart disease 8.0%	Chronic lower respiratory diseases 6.4%
5	Homicide 4.7%	Chronic liver disease 3.1%	Chronic liver disease 3.7%
6	Heart disease 3.4%	Homicide 2.5%	Diabetes 3.1%
7	Influenza and pneumonia 1.9%	Diabetes 1.8%	Stroke 3.0%
8	Stroke 1.2%	Stroke 1.6%	Suicide 2.5%
9	Chronic lower respiratory diseases 0.9%	Pregnancy complications 1.4%	Septicemia 1.7%
10	Benign neoplasms 0.8%	Septicemia 1.1%	Influenza and pneumonia 1.4%

Rank ²	1-19 years	20-44 years	45-64 years
1	Unintentional injuries 27.0%	Unintentional injuries 18.0%	Cancer 29.8%
2	Homicide 14.9%	Cancer 14.9%	Heart disease 21.6%
3	Cancer 8.1%	Heart disease 14.1%	Unintentional injuries 5.1%
4	Birth defects 6.6%	Homicide 6.7%	Diabetes 4.9%
5	Suicide 5.5%	Diabetes 4.1%	Stroke 4.9%
6	Heart disease 4.4%	Suicide 3.3%	Chronic lower respiratory diseases 3.4%
7	Chronic lower respiratory diseases 2.6%	Pregnancy complications 3.0%	Kidney disease 2.9%
8	Influenza and pneumonia 1.9%	Stroke 2.9%	Septicemia 2.3%
9	Stroke 1.6%	HIV disease 2.8%	Chronic liver disease 1.8%
10	(tie rank) Benign neoplasms Diabetes 1.3%	Kidney disease 1.7%	Hypertension 1.8%

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1	Unintentional injuries 30.8%	Unintentional injuries 24.6%	Cancer 36.0%
2	Cancer 14.5%	Cancer 23.2%	Heart disease 14.0%
3	Suicide 9.5%	Heart disease 6.9%	Diabetes 6.1%
4	Birth defects 7.3%	Suicide 6.1%	Unintentional injuries 5.7%
5	Homicide 7.1%	Homicide 5.3%	Chronic liver disease 4.9%
6	Heart disease 2.5%	Chronic liver disease 3.4%	Stroke 4.5%
7	Influenza and pneumonia 2.1%	Stroke 2.6%	Kidney disease 2.2%
8	Stroke 1.7%	Pregnancy complications 2.5%	Chronic lower respiratory diseases 2.1%
9	Benign neoplasms 1.4%	Diabetes 2.2%	Septicemia 1.8%
10	Septicemia 1.1%	Septicemia 1.2%	Influenza and pneumonia 1.7%

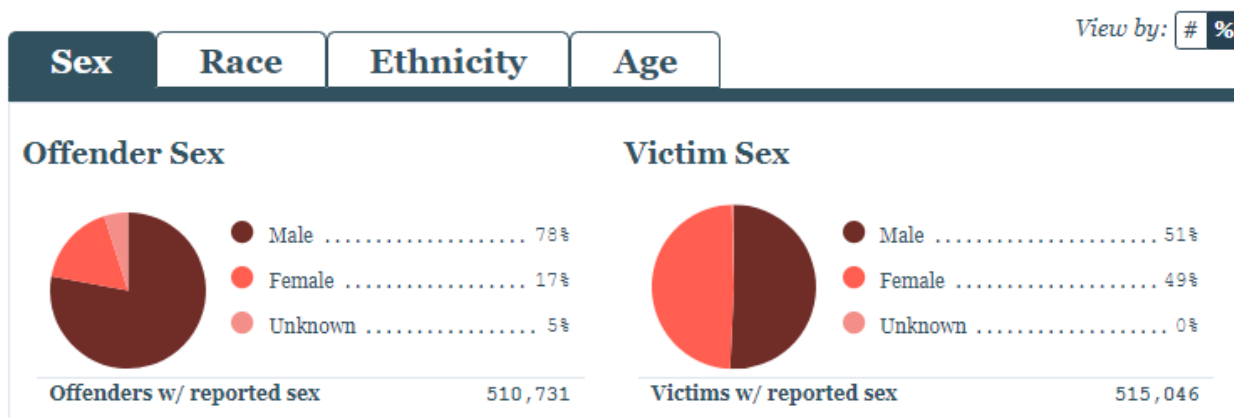
Source: [Leading Causes of Death 2017, CDC](#)

One of the counter-intuitive findings of the Survey of American Fear involving American views on crime is that our experience with actual crimes has very little to do with our fears about crime. In some cases, such experiences make us less afraid of crime and less punitive in our criminal justice views.

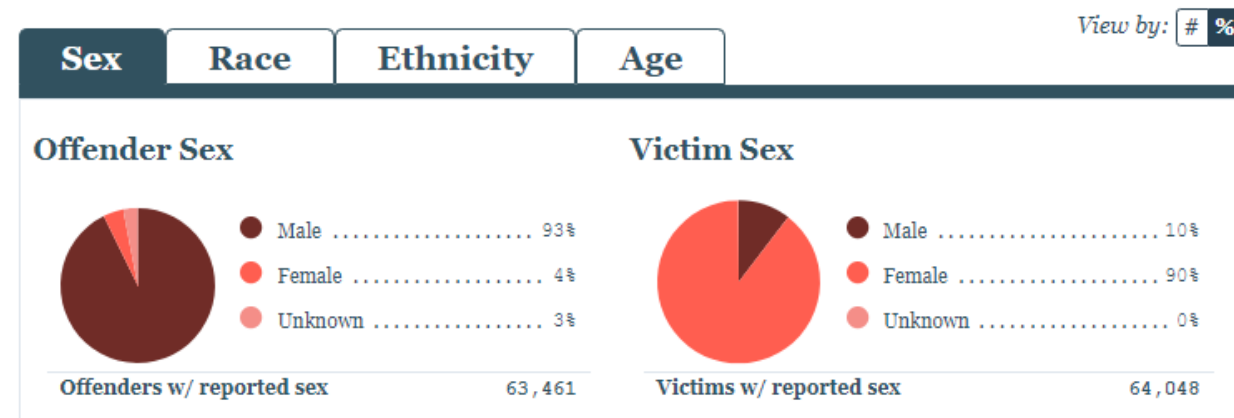
So what's the strongest predictor of fear of crime? The answer is gender, or more precisely, being a woman.

Researchers in this survey, as well as in earlier research, have found that gender is the single biggest predictor of fears about crime, with women consistently being more afraid of crime than men. And as the researchers noted, with the important exceptions of rape and sexual assault (especially intimate partner violence), there are no significant differences in the rates of victimization for men versus women.

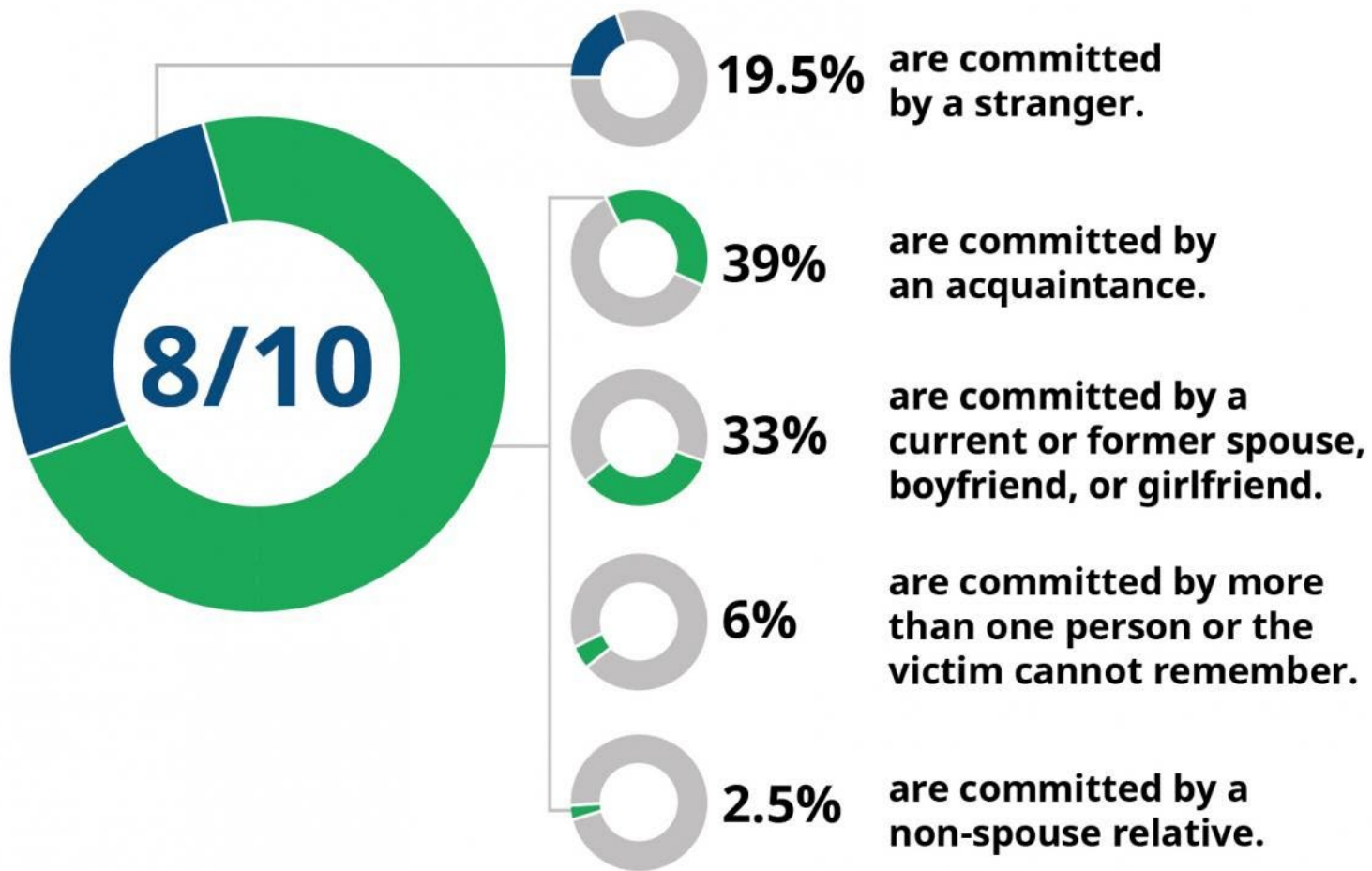
All Violent Crimes Offender vs. Victim demographics



Rape Offender vs. Victim demographics



8 OUT OF 10 RAPES ARE COMMITTED BY SOMEONE KNOWN TO THE VICTIM



As our authors state, women’s fear of being assaulted or killed by a stranger are consistently higher in surveys than fear of people they know, yet we know from looking at the data that this belief does not match reality.

“If a person is going to be murdered [or sexually assaulted], it will most likely be by someone he or she knows.”

(2017 data) National Sexual Assault Hotline | 800.656.HOPE | online.rainn.org

Please visit rainn.org/statistics/perpetrators-sexual-violence for full citation.¹

Vulnerability – Physical and Social

Gender is one important aspect of physical vulnerability that contributes to fear of crime. A second important factor for social vulnerability is race. As our authors note, people of color, and Blacks in particular, having higher levels of fear of crime, which reflects the racialization of crime in America. A third social vulnerability factor is age, with young people being more afraid of crime than older Americans.

When researchers looked at the *LA Times* news coverage of 2,782 murders between 1990 and 1994, the victims reported about were most often white or Asian women younger than 15 or older than 65. But as the researchers note, this was a far cry from the reality in Los Angeles.

“The most common type of homicide occurred in the street between two people who knew one another. Most involved a single victim, and the perpetrator was of the same race as the victim. The majority of victims were men (85 percent), nonwhite (85 percent), and between the ages of 15 and 34 (68 percent). Such homicides rarely made the papers. The deaths of young men of color were tragically not deemed newsworthy.”

This is the law of inverse proportionality, where increased media coverage of a crime (2012 bath salts) often means such crimes are in fact less common. Criminologists call this a “deviance amplification spiral.”

“The media clearly plays a central role in creating a fear of crime that does not match reality. Media is the lens through which perceptions of crime are refracted from reality.”

- Watching local TV news is associated with higher levels of fear of crime (**26% increase overall**)
 - Fear of violent crimes **increased 24%**
 - Fear of property crimes for those who don't watch local news **decreased 30%**
- Fear of crime increases from frequently watching crime dramas (*CSI, Law & Order*)
- Fear of crime increases (**56%**) from watching “true crime” shows (*America's Most Wanted*)
- Fear of crime increases (**30%**) from watching Fox News regularly
- Fear of crime increases (**18%**) from watching MSNBC regularly
- Fear of crime increases (**26%**) for people who regularly get their news from social media

As the authors note, “increased use of social media will also increase public fears about criminal victimization. The fact that media usage has such a profound impact on fear of crime, while actual victimization does not, tells us how important perceptions of danger and crime frequency, as opposed to actual risk or experience, are in determining our fears.”

But the impacts of our media consumption is only one factor feeding into American fears about crime. Another key factor is religion, and in particular, religious belief in supernatural evil.

- **42%** of Americans are entirely certain that the devil exists
- **21%** of Americans thinking the devil probably exists
- More than half of Americans say that demons definitely (**36 %**) or probably (**24 %**) exist

“The effect of evil is quite pronounced. A person who scores the maximum on the beliefs in supernatural evil measure (absolute belief in the devil and demons) has, on average, a 22 percent higher level of crime-related fear than does someone who has the minimum score (complete disbelief in both). Belief in Satan and demons was the second-strongest predictor [after gender] in our models.”



TABLE 5.2. A Profile of Fearing Crime (2018).

Characteristic	Influence on fear of crime
Woman	Increased fear
Belief in the devil and demons	Increased fear
→ Religious service attendance	Decreased fear
Hispanic	Increased fear
Other race (not white, black, or Hispanic)	Increased fear
Younger	Increased fear
Watching daytime television	Increased fear
Black	Increased fear
Watch local TV News	Increased fear
Watch MSNBC	Increased fear
Watch Fox News	Increased fear
→ Biblical literalist	Decreased fear
Get news from social media	Increased fear
Conservative politically	Increased fear

One of the interesting findings from the researchers was that past victimization factors, being a victim or knowing a victim of crime, “have no effect on fear of crime...fear of crime is about the things people believe about crime (and the sources of these beliefs, whether religious or media-based) more than the reality of crime. Americans think that crime is increasing when it is not and correspondingly develop fears about crime that are disconnected from experience.”

One important impact of these mismatched fears is how it shapes our views on crime and punishment.

Researchers found three key factors that contribute to more punitive criminal justice views:

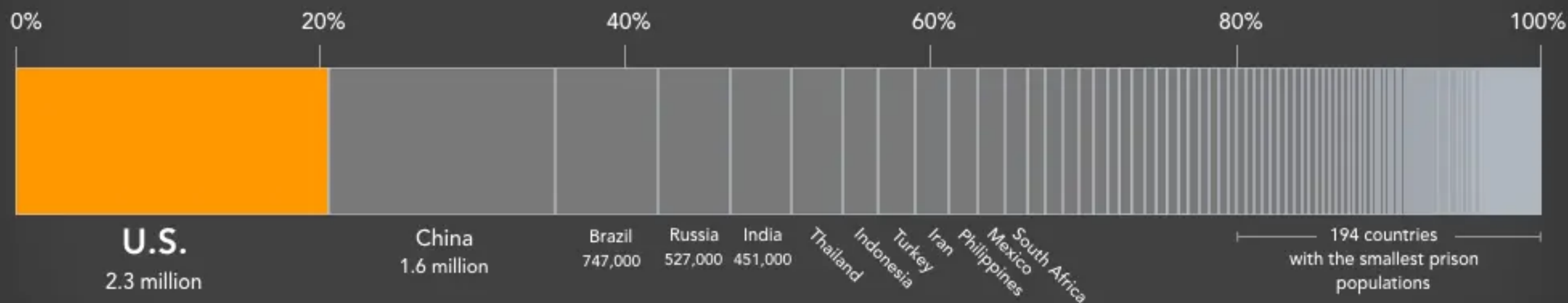
- Holding conservative political views
- Believing that Satan is real
- Higher overall levels of fear of crime

Researchers also found three key factors that contribute to less punitive criminal justice views:

- Higher levels of education
- Being African American
- Frequently attending religious services

1 out of 5 prisoners in the world is incarcerated in the U.S.

Eleven million people around the world are in prisons and jails. The U.S. locks up a larger share of these people than any other country, with as many prisoners as the 194 countries with the smallest incarcerated populations combined.

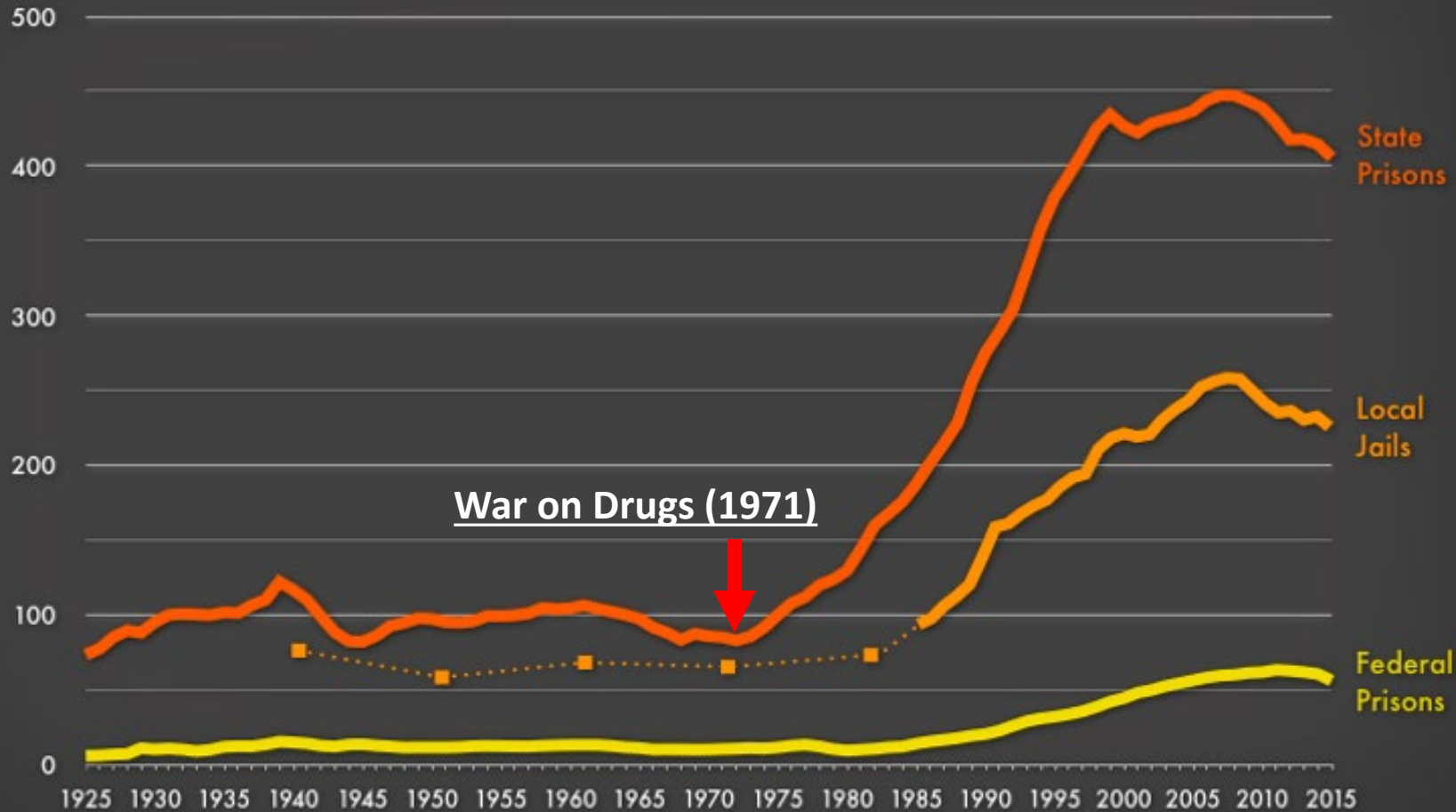


Sources: U.S. incarcerated population from Prison Policy Initiative, *Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2019*, and all other data from Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research, *World Prison Brief* downloaded January 2020.



STATE POLICY DRIVES MASS INCARCERATION

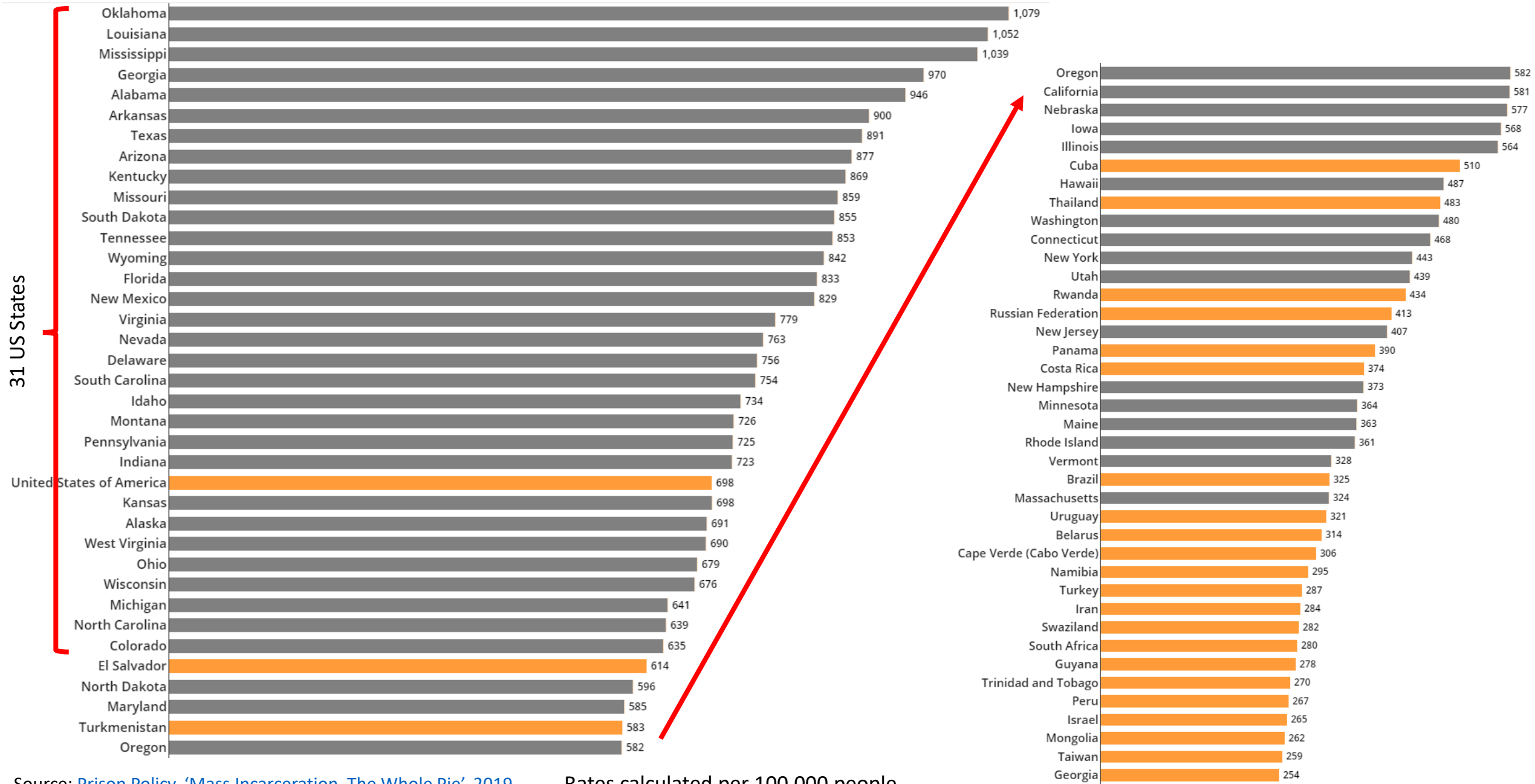
(Number of people incarcerated by federal, state or local governments, 1925 – 2015)



In the summer of 1971 President Nixon declares drug abuse to be "public enemy number one," leading to an increase in federal funding for drug enforcement.

This marked the start of the "War on Drugs" and an escalation of the 1960s "Law and Order" rhetoric which continued under President Reagan in the 1980s.

World Incarceration Rates If Every U.S. State Were A Country



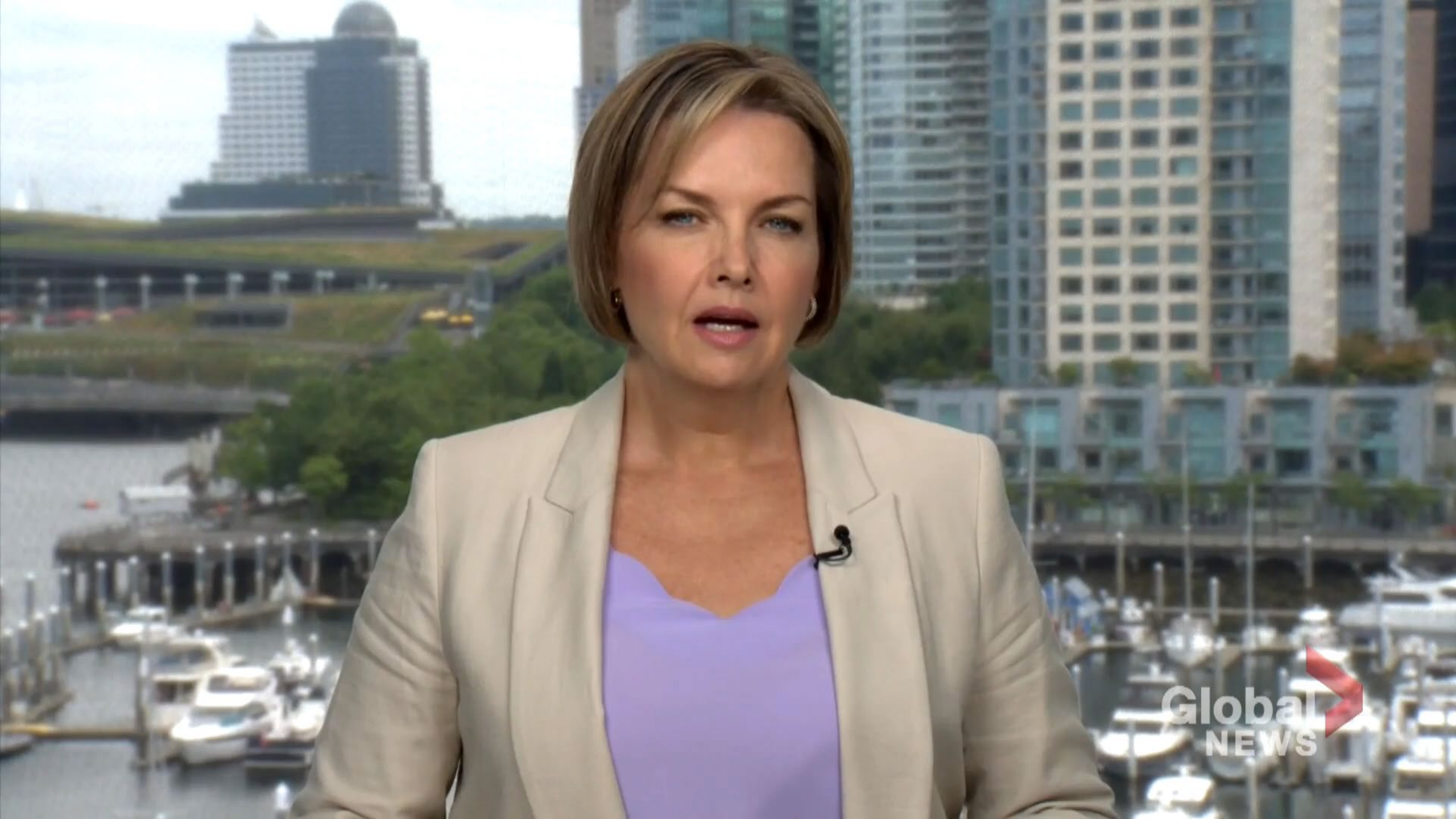
Source: [Prison Policy, 'Mass Incarceration, The Whole Pie', 2019](#)

Rates calculated per 100,000 people.

American fears of crime are not only out of touch with reality. These fears are also deeply racialized, with white fear driving more punitive prison sentencing, increased rates of mass incarceration, heightened anxiety about “law and order,” and a state of social distrust where whites view Blacks and other people of color as more likely to commit crimes and acts of violence against them. While Black fear of crime is higher than whites, this has not translated into a greater desire to punish criminals, whereas it has for whites.

As the authors point out, “punitiveness among white respondents increases steadily and significantly with fear of crime. Furthermore, this relationship between fear of crime and punitiveness among white Americans is completely mediated by another fear: xenophobia. In other words, fear of crime increases punitiveness by increasing white Americans’ fears about foreigners and immigrants— those who are socially “other” compared to whites. Put simply, white people have less to fear from crime than do black people, but when white people are afraid, they are far more likely to want to punish those they label as rule breakers. In this sense, a general fear of crime is not driving harsh views of criminals and support for the policies of mass incarceration, but rather, white fear is.”

As we have seen, there are many factors behind American fears, from crime and violence to government corruption and increasing climate change. One important factor which the Chapman Survey of American Fears did not look at, but which needs to be added to our analysis, is the changing face of America.



Global
NEWS 

These growing partisan fears in America are not only making it harder for Americans to agree about the future of the country, but it is also tearing apart the civic culture that has held the nation together. This dynamic was evident in the Survey of American Fears when the researchers examined the relationship between heightened public fears and decreased civic participation.

Researchers found that a moderate level of fear motivates civic participation, but once those fears reach a certain level, then civic engagement drops significantly.

Trends like this have led criminology researchers like Jonathan Jackson and Emily Gray to argue for complicating our understanding of fear as only bad, and have proposed two types of fear:

- **Functional Fear**
- **Dysfunctional Fear**

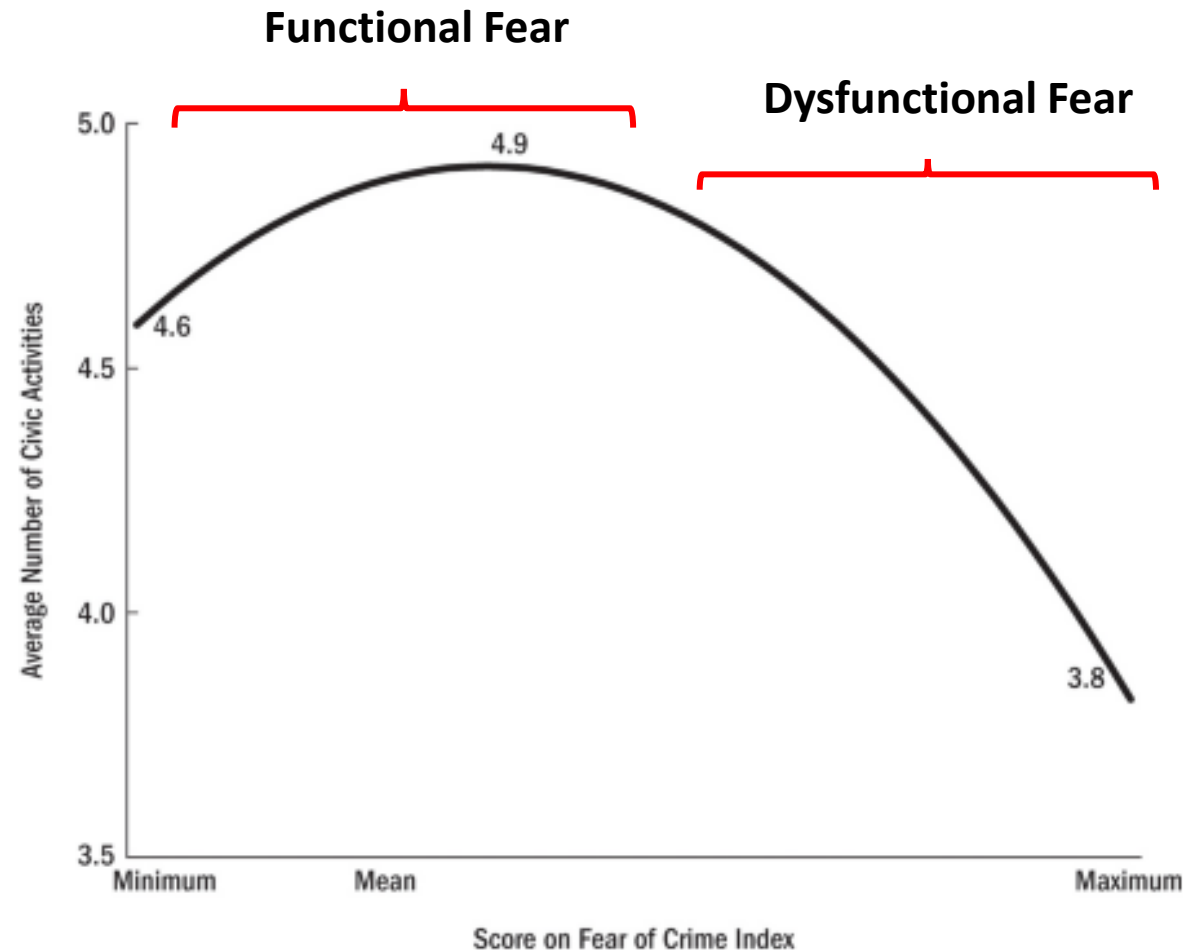


Figure 5.1. Curvilinear Relationship - Fear of Crime & Civic Engagement (2015).

So what does all of this mean for our focus on the End of the World?

Our authors suggest a few of the deeper social implications that fear in America is producing:

“Fear can also be functional, as a small amount leads us to provide greater resources for victims, develop educational programs about minimizing risk, and encourage citizens to take sensible precautions and engage with their neighbors in crime prevention programs. But the greater our level of fear, it seems, the more harmful the gap between fantasy and reality becomes. If we believe that evildoers hide behind every corner and we see malice in the face of every stranger, we will retreat rather than engage.”

But I think there is another dynamic at work which goes beyond fear, and this relates to a deeper and more existential issue about the future. As America changes and becomes more diverse, many Americans have begun to feel that old systems are coming to an end, and a “new normal” is emerging.

For some, this is an opportunity to cast off old prejudices and outmoded ways of thinking and acting and a chance to redefine what it means to be American and American values. Change is something to embrace.

But for others, these dynamics have led to a defensive push back against these changes and efforts to hang on to the tradition and look to America’s past as a model for its future. Change is something to resist.



Weekly Assignment Reminder

- Remember to check our class Blackboard regularly for updates, announcements, and other related class information...
- Have you done the weekly readings and watched any associated videos? Weekly readings are listed on the Class Schedule page.
- Complete the weekly discussion post response. Initial post due **Wed, Oct 7** by end of the day, and peer response post due **Fri Oct 9** by end of the day.
- Reminder that our **Test #1** will be available this weekend (Fri 10/9) and should be completed by the end of the weekend (Sun 10/11).