

Crime in Oregon Report

June 2010



Criminal Justice Commission

State of Oregon

Crime in Oregon

Violent and property crime in Oregon has been decreasing since the late 1990's. In 2008 Oregon ranked 40th for violent crime and 23rd for property crime; both the lowest state rankings for Oregon since 1960. These declining crime rates are welcome news, but why are they declining? Very few would undertake to predict whether the crime rate will rise or fall in the next year because there are few leading indicators as to whether such will be the case. Explaining changes in crime with a few indicators is an oversimplification. Crime is difficult to explain and predict, and the factors that could possibly affect crime are numerous. By contrast, social science has provided us with an understanding of how best to respond to crime, however predicting or estimating how much crime our systems will be asked to handle has proven to be a humbling experience for criminologists and law enforcement officials alike. This brief provides an overview of crime in Oregon, as well as an exploratory look at three of the most commonly assumed indicators of crime.

How to Measure Crime

Crime rates are typically reported using statistics from the FBI Uniform Crime Reports (UCR). The FBI has collected data on crimes reported to law enforcement agencies around the country every year since the 1930s. The data collection method is consistent each year and provides a uniform measure for looking at crime rates over time. The FBI provides definitions of each crime so that agencies will report offenses in a similar way, regardless of state statutes. The two most common crime indexes are the violent and property crime indexes. The violent crime index includes murder, forcible rape, robbery and aggravated assault. Aggravated assault is the most common crime in this index and usually has the most influence on this measure. The property crime index includes burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson. Larceny-theft is the most common crime in this index, accounting for over 65 percent of all property crimes including shoplifting, pocket-picking, purse-snatching, and theft from motor vehicles. These crime rates are reported on a national, statewide, and city level. The FBI UCRs are collected based on a hierarchical rule. If multiple crimes are reported in a single event, only the most serious crime is reported.

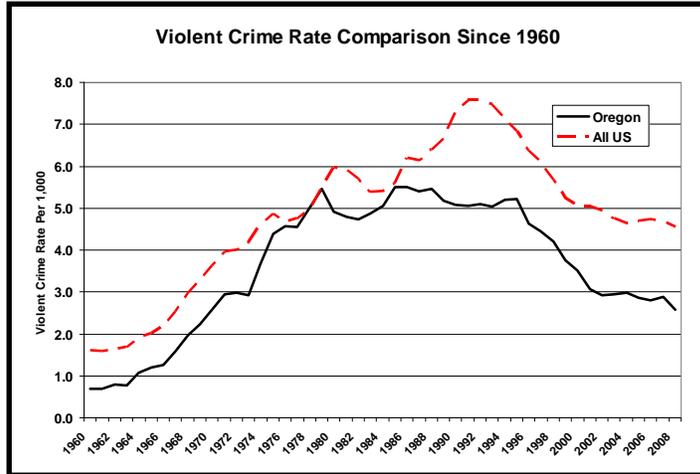
The State of Oregon collects crime data as well through Oregon Uniform Crime Reports (OUCR)¹. This data is similar to the FBI UCR, although not identical. One important difference is that OUCR data does not follow the hierarchical rule. When multiple crimes are reported for a single event, all of the crimes are reported.

¹ Oregon State Police – Law Enforcement Data Systems collects this data through the OUCR Program http://www.oregon.gov/OSP/CJIS/oucr_manual_trmgguide.shtml

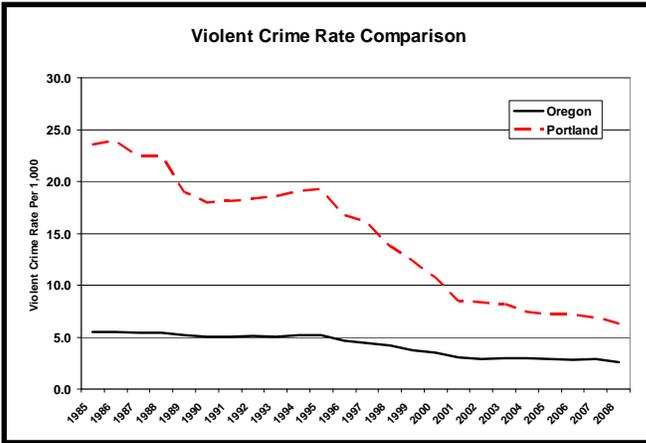
Violent Crime

National and statewide FBI UCR data is available going back to 1960. The graph below shows the national and Oregon violent crime rate from 1960 to 2008. Oregon follows a similar trend as the rest of the nation, and has historically had a lower violent crime rate than the nation as a whole.

The long term violent crime rate trend shows continuing increases through the 60's, 70's, and 80's and decreases starting in the early to mid 90's and continuing through 2008. Violent crime in Oregon fell by 11 percent from 2007 to 2008 and by 14 percent from 2004 to 2008, both the largest percentage drops of any state.



City level FBI UCR data is available going back to 1985. When looking at Oregon's violent crime trend, it's of interest to know how the major cities in Oregon affect that trend.

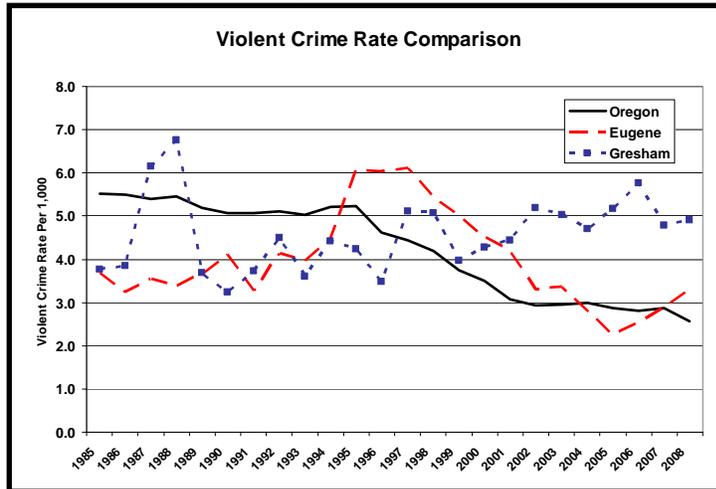


When looking at the city level data it is apparent that a substantial amount of the decreases in violent crime in Oregon can be attributed to decreases in Portland. Portland had a 73 percent drop in violent crime from 1985 to 2008. In 1985 Portland accounted for 58 percent of the violent crime in Oregon, however by 2008 that percentage represented 35 percent of violent crime in Oregon.

Oregon's three largest cities are Portland, Salem, and Eugene and in 2008 these cities accounted for 38 percent of the total index crime in the state. Also, the eight largest cities in the state accounted for 50 percent of the total index crime. Oregon's larger cities have a large impact on crime, although the proportion of the effect has gone down since 1985.

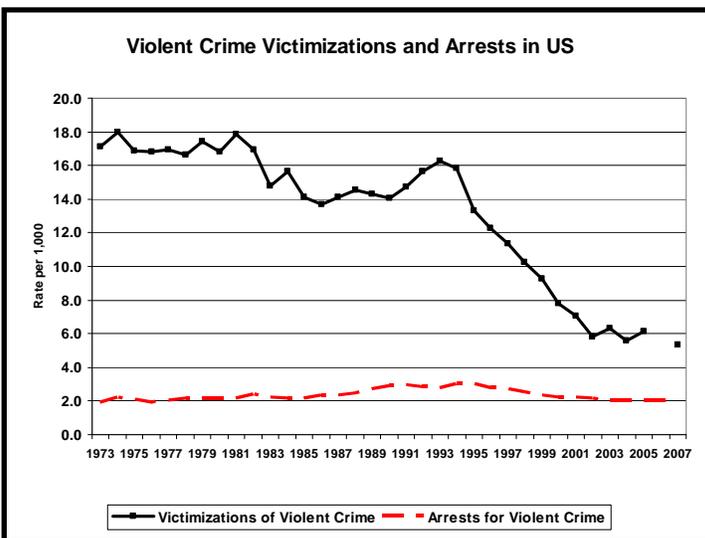
Oregon as a state is enjoying a downward trend in violent crime, although that is not the case in all of Oregon's cities. Some of Oregon's larger cities are showing the reverse, an increase in violent crime.

The graph shows increases in violent crime in two of Oregon's cities. Violent crime in Eugene has been increasing since 2005 and violent crime in Gresham has trended upwards since 1999.



When measuring crime, it is important to seek information from different sources, as each measures

crime from a different perspective. Since UCR data is obtained from offenses reported to law enforcement, another measure of crime is the number of victimizations. The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) collects data from households about their victimizations from crime each year. These include offenses reported and not reported to law enforcement. This gives us another measure of crime at a national level. The graph below shows the rate of victimizations from violent crime (from the NCVS)² and arrest rate for violent crime (from FBI UCR). The victimization rate has also generally been decreasing since 1995.



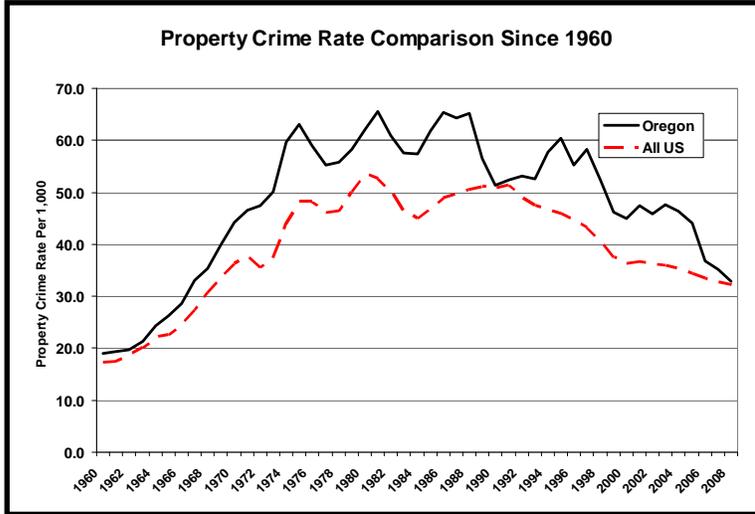
It is difficult to measure criminal offenses that are not reported to law enforcement. Because of this, another measure of crime that is commonly used is homicide and motor vehicle theft offenses. Homicide is more likely to be reported due to the seriousness of the crime and motor vehicle theft due to insurance requirements. These two offenses provide another measure of crime, while also providing more confidence that

they are consistently reported. From 1995 to 2008 homicides in Oregon have fallen 36 percent and motor vehicle thefts by 48 percent.

² A number of methodological changes were implemented in the NCVS in 2006 that impacted the victimization rate. Analyses of the data by the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the Census Bureau suggest the 2006 data is a temporary anomaly and has therefore been excluded here.

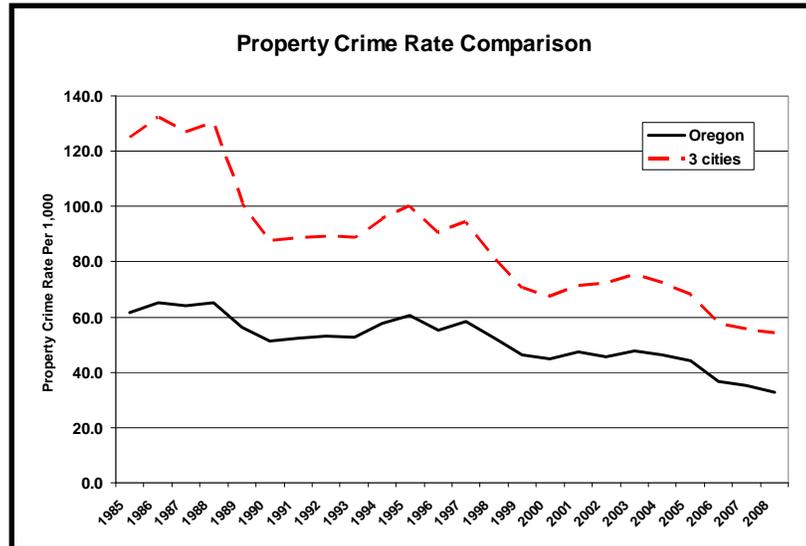
Property Crime

Oregon has also experienced decreases in the property crime rate. From 2007 to 2008 property crime in Oregon fell by seven percent. From 2004 to 2008 it fell by 29 percent, which was the largest drop of any state.



The graph shows the property crime rate in Oregon and nationally from 1960 to 2008. Oregon and the US show a similar trend with property crime increasing through the 60's, 70's, and 80's and decreasing from the mid 90's through 2008. Oregon's property crime rate has historically been higher than the national rate.

Oregon's three largest cities of Portland, Eugene, and Salem have higher rates of property crime than the rest of the state. As with violent crime, we see that Oregon's larger cities have a large impact on the property crime rate.



Preliminary 2009 Crime Data

Change in Index Crimes from 2008 to 2009 (Oregon's four largest cities)		
City	Violent Crime Change	Property Crime Change
Eugene	-5%	-12%
Gresham	-23%	3%
Portland	-10%	-9%
Salem	0%	-14%
4 City Total	-10%	-10%

In May 2010 the FBI released UCR data for 2009 for cities over 100,000 people. This includes four cities in Oregon: Portland, Eugene, Salem, and Gresham. The table shows the percent changes in violent and property crime from 2008 to 2009. Taken aggregately, Oregon's four largest cities experienced drops in violent and property crime.

Oregon UCR data for 2009 is available for other cities in Oregon. The table shows the change in violent and property crime from 2008 to 2009 for the larger cities in Oregon. Again, most cities experienced decreases in property and violent crime. The exception is Corvallis, with a 21 percent increase in property crime.

Change in Index Crimes from 2008 to 2009 (Larger Cities in Oregon)		
City	Violent Crime Change	Property Crime Change
Beaverton	-6%	-23%
Bend	-6%	-19%
Corvallis	0%	21%
Hillsboro	-10%	-26%
Medford	-17%	0%
Springfield	-3%	-27%
6 City Total	-8%	-15%

Change in Index Crimes from 2008 to 2009 (Selected Rural Areas)		
City	Violent Crime Change	Property Crime Change
Albany	6%	4%
Baker City	-75%	19%
Coos Bay	9%	-7%
Grants Pass	3%	-25%
Hermiston	0%	-8%
Klamath Falls	16%	23%
Ontario	-64%	-18%
Prineville	-48%	10%
St. Helens	-29%	-14%
The Dalles	-44%	12%
10 Area Total	-21%	-7%

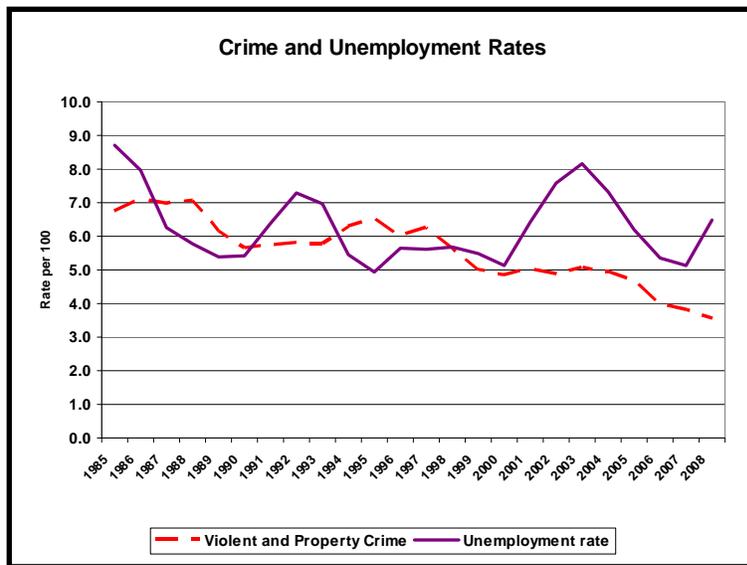
The same data is available for selected rural areas in Oregon. Since the population is lower in these areas, we see larger percent changes in the crime rates. For the most part, rural areas experienced decreases in violent and property crime.

Crime Indicators

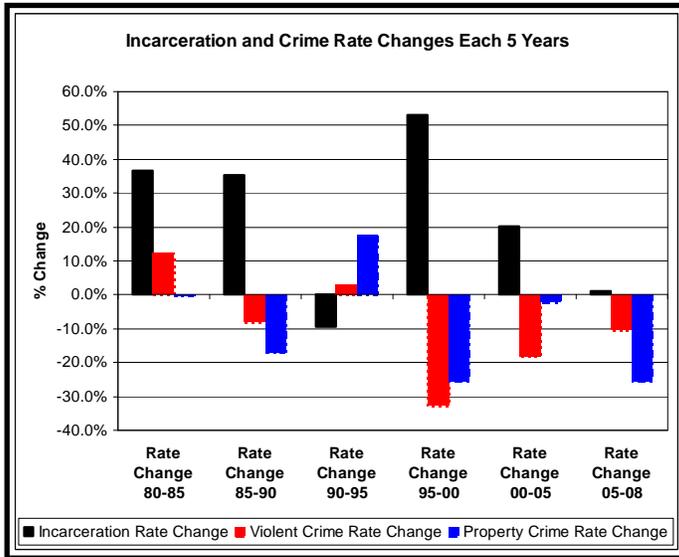
The declining crime rates in Oregon are welcome news, but why are they declining? There are three indicators that are commonly looked to when predicting an increase or decrease in crime: the economy, incarceration, and demographics. In the late 1990's these three indicators were favorable and the crime rate decreased. When all three of these factors are favorable as to predicting less crime, it is impossible to say which individual factor is salient. More recently, in the last decade the unemployment rate increased and the incarceration rate flattened, eliminating the assumed favorable impact of these two factors, while the crime rate has continued to drop.

The graph below shows the yearly average unemployment rate in Oregon along with the combined violent and property crime rate. In the late 1990's the unemployment rate was relatively low and the crime rate was decreasing. This is the relationship commonly assumed between the unemployment rate and the crime rate. The graph also shows relatively high unemployment rates in 2002-2004 and again in 2008. During these times of higher unemployment the crime rate continues to decrease. The commonly assumed trend between the two does not hold here.

The same is true if we look at the rates in 2009. The unemployment rate in 2009 had the largest percent increases since data were available in 1976. It more than doubled from the previous year. The preliminary crime rate data summarized earlier shows that the crime rate is continuing to fall. This shows the relationship between crime and unemployment is inconsistent. Researchers continue to debate the link between the two with no definitive answers.



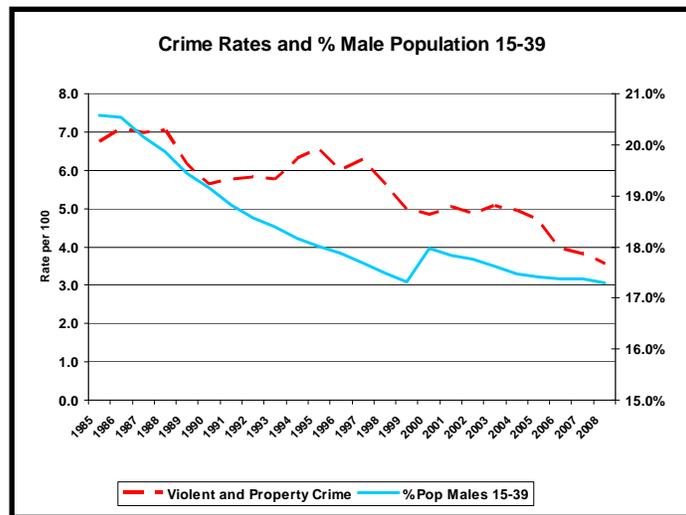
The next common predictor of crime is incarceration. The graph below shows the rate of change for violent and property crime rates and the incarceration rate in Oregon for five year intervals. The rate changes for 1995-2000 show the relationship that is commonly assumed between incarceration and crime. The rate of incarceration increased by over 50 percent, while violent crime decreased by over 30 percent and property crime by over 20 percent.



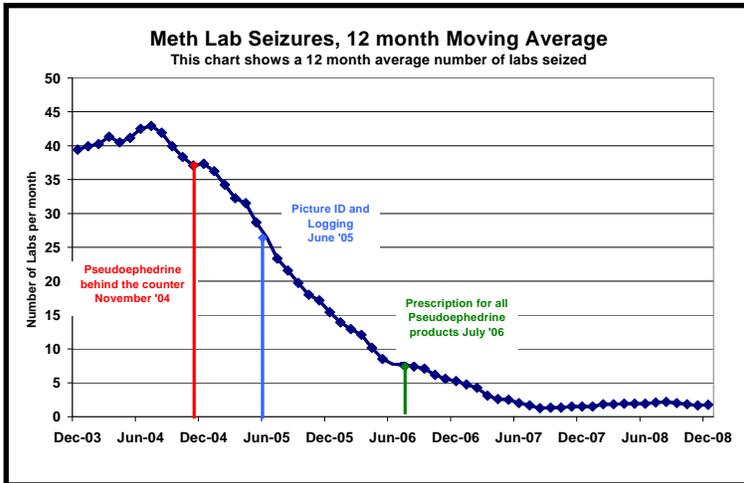
From the graph we can see that this relationship is not always true. The changes from 2005-2008 show that incarceration was flat, while violent and property crime continued to fall. Research has shown that increasing incarceration does have a part in reducing crime, but the relationship is not consistent and the setting is more complex than just looking at these two factors.

Another common indicator of crime is demographics. Most crime is committed by males age 15-39, and the proportion of this group in the total population is used as a predictor of crime.

The graph shows the percentage of Oregon's male population age 15-39 and the combined violent and property crime rate. In general, as the percentage of the male population age 15-39 falls, crime also tends to fall. While this relationship is fairly consistent, again the setting is more complex than just looking at these two factors.



If the recent crime decreases can't be explained by the economy or incarceration, are there other indicators that can explain crime trends? Criminal justice experts and researchers have several theories on what can be used to predict crime, but it is a well known issue in criminal justice that crime is very difficult to predict. Oregon has made substantial changes in the criminal justice system, and it has been suggested that these changes can help explain the crime rate decreases. Our ability to quantify these effects is very limited at best, but these changes should be mentioned when substantial reductions in crime can be observed, so that the likelihood of a correlation can be explored.



These changes include increased community policing, the use of evidence based practices through Senate Bill 267³, increases in collaborative specialized law enforcement teams, and changes in the control of pseudoephedrine⁴ that have resulted in the reduction of meth labs and meth arrests. The graph shows the reduction and near elimination of meth lab

seizures in Oregon since December 2003. Additionally, from March 2007 to March 2009 meth arrests in Oregon fell by 40 percent.

In closing, Oregon has enjoyed a reduction in crime that has lasted for nearly two decades. This has meant that Oregonians are much safer today than they were in 1990 with the violent crime rate falling by 49 percent, and has been broad enough to mean less crime from homicide to shoplifting. The pessimism with which criminologists looked at crime control in the 1970s has been replaced with optimism about crime control in line with this improved trend. However, crime is still very difficult to predict and there are no simple indicators of crime. The commonly assumed relationships between incarceration, the economy, and crime are not consistent. As researchers continue to debate crime indicators and causes, we seek to inform Oregonians of the crime reductions in their state.

³ Senate Bill 267 passed in 2003 and stipulates that public safety agencies spend a percentage of their budget on evidence based programs. http://www.leg.state.or.us/bills_laws/

⁴ Senate Bill 907 and House Bill 2485 passed in 2005 and applied tighter controls on pseudoephedrine. <http://www.leg.state.or.us/05reg/measure/sb0900.dir/sb0907.en.html>