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Do Oregonians Know About the Crime Drop?

Research In Brief

Criminal Justice Policy Research Institute (CJPRI)

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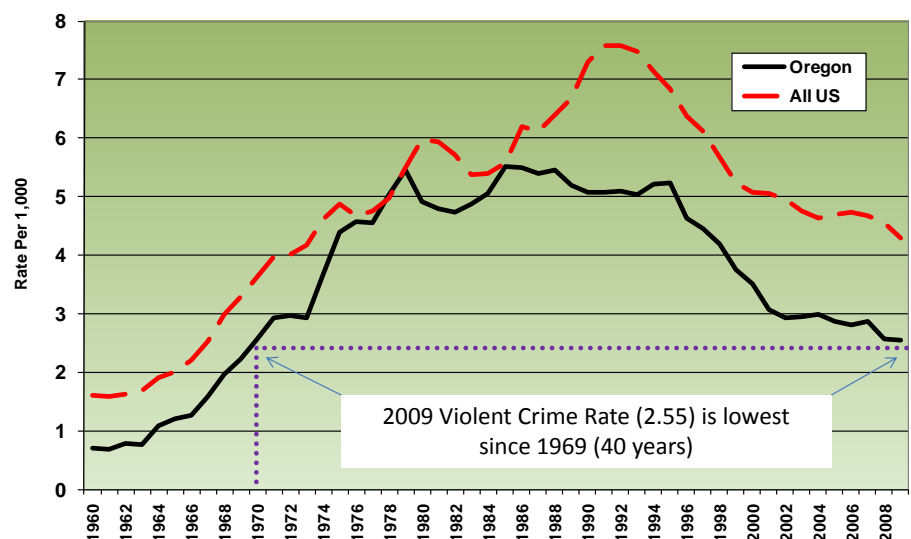
What's Inside

- Oregon's violent and property crime rate trends continue to decline. Crime rates in Oregon are at their lowest level since the 1960's.
- However, a recent statewide survey indicates most Oregonians believed crime across the state increased last year and very few believed crime decreased.
- It appears that personal ideology, educational achievement, and affluence are the strongest contributing factors that shape the public's beliefs about crime trends.
- Beliefs about crime are important because they can influence legitimacy and trust in government, compliance with the law and legal authority, and public empowerment of government.

Crime is Down in Oregon

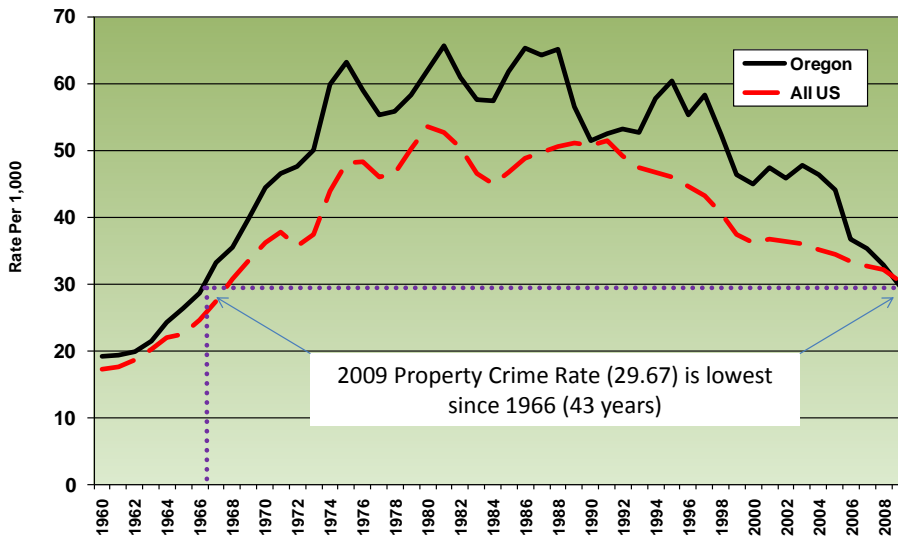
The violent crime rate in Oregon has not been this low since 1969, forty years ago. FBI 2009 Uniform Crime Statistics show Oregon's crime rate continues to drop as does the nation's. Crime rates are at the *lowest levels since the 1960's*. Violent crime in Oregon dropped 2.1% from 2008 to 2009. In 2009, Oregon ranked 38th in the nation for violent crime rate.

Violent Crime Rate Comparison 1960 to 2009



Property crimes in 2009 also dropped 10.2% in Oregon (FBI, 2010). The property crime rate is the lowest since 1966, 43 years ago. In 2009, Oregon ranked 23rd in the nation for property crime rate. The 15-year decline in crime rates, which is supported by a national victimization survey, is substantial. Given the prolonged downward trend in crime rates, *we ask whether Oregonians believe a similar drop in crime occurred.*

Property Crime Rate Comparison 1960 to 2009



Do Oregonians Believe the Crime Drop? . . . No

A recent statewide survey conducted by the Criminal Justice Policy Research Institute (CJPRI) at Portland State University found that most Oregonians believed crime in Oregon increased in the last year and very few believed it decreased.

Beliefs about Oregon crime rates
52% believed Oregon crime increased
38% believed Oregon crime stayed the same
10% believed Oregon crime decreased

Oregonians were more likely to believe crime in their local community stayed the same, but still 25% believed crime increased in their community last year.

Beliefs about local community crime rates
25% believed local crime increased
63% believed local crime stayed the same
12% believed local crime decreased

Oregon collects crime data through the Oregon Uniform Crime Reports (OUCR) managed by the State Police. The OUCR crimes represent a single criminal event (even if multiple crimes occurred during the event). The OUCR data is turned over to the FBI's UCR crime reporting program. UCR crime data are broken out into two indexes, a violent crime index and a property crime index. The violent crime index includes murder, forcible rape, robbery and aggravated assault. The property crime index includes burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson. *When this report discusses the crime drop in Oregon we are referring to these major violent and property crimes.* Drug crimes, less serious assaults, DUII, and other disorderly types of crime are not included in the UCR measure of crime. The tables presented in this report show crime rates per 1,000 persons in the population. Standardizing crime counts into rates allows us to compare crime over time and with other states by taking into consideration the size of the population, which has vastly expanded over time.

To learn more about how crime officially known to the police is recorded in Oregon you can download the following Oregon Criminal Justice Commission report here:

http://www.oregon.gov/CJC/docs/Crime_Report_2010.pdf

ABOUT THE SURVEY

Results for this report are based on telephone interviews conducted June 15 – July 27, 2010 among a random sample of 1569 adults 18 years of age or older living in the state of Oregon. The Portland State University Survey Research Laboratory conducted the interviewing in English and Spanish.

Racial and ethnic minorities were oversampled to obtain more reliable results from members of these subgroups. Women were overrepresented due to their higher participation rates. The subsamples are weighted so that the results accurately reflect the proportion of women in the population of Oregon.

The error attributed to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for the sample as a whole is plus or minus 2.47 percentage points.

For more information about the research methodology contact: Dr. Brian Renauer, CJPRI Director, renauer@pdx.edu.

Who Believed Crime Increased?

The table below shows that the top factors related to those who believed *Oregon* crime increased. Beliefs about Oregon crime trends appear to be based on *personal ideology, educational achievement, and affluence*. Respondents who believed crime increased were dissatisfied with the criminal justice system, more conservative, do not have Bachelor's degrees, report family income less than \$50,000, and are more likely to support punishment and enforcement approaches to control crime. In contrast, 51% of persons who believe crime decreased had a Bachelor's degree, 59% made more than \$50,000, and only 25% believed punishment and enforcement should be top priorities.

Top factors related to belief that Oregon crime increased

1. Oregonians who express more *dissatisfaction with CJ system*
(49% of respondents who believed crime increased)
2. Oregonians who define self as *more conservative*
(57% of respondents who believed crime increased)
3. Oregonians *without a Bachelors degree*
(70% of respondents who believed crime increased)
4. Oregonians with *less income*
(60% of respondents who believed crime increased have family income less than 50K)
5. Oregonians who rank *punishment or enforcement* as top crime control strategies
(45% of respondents who believed crime increased)

Four new top factors were related to those who believed *local* crime increased. Beliefs about local crime trends appear to be based upon *personal experience* more so than ideology, education, and social class. Those who believed local crime increased report less feelings of safety and greater fear of crime, and experienced household or personal victimization within the last year.

Top factors related to belief that local crime increased

1. Oregonians who *feel less safe* in community
(26% of respondents who believed crime increased)
2. Oregonians who *feel more fear of crime*
(64% of respondents who believed crime increased)
3. Oregonians who *experienced household property victimization*
(40% of respondents who believed crime increased)
4. Oregonians who define self as *more conservative*
(58% of respondents who believed crime increased)
5. Oregonians who *experienced a personal victimization*
(14% of respondents who believed crime increased)

Why are Beliefs about Crime Important?

A Commentary from the Director

"If situations are defined as real, they are real in their consequences."

The best data available demonstrate conclusively that crime in Oregon declined steadily over the last 15 years. Indeed, crime is at levels not seen since the 1960's. Despite this fact, the majority of Oregonians believe that crime increased last year. Many citizens also express deep dissatisfaction with the criminal justice system, a view seemingly at odds with the high objective levels of public safety. In sum, there is a significant gap between public perceptions and objective measures of crime.

Disconnect between crime data and citizen's beliefs are more than an interesting oddity or conundrum. Research finds that beliefs about crime, fear of crime, and perceptions about the effectiveness of crime control measures have important consequences. Beliefs affect:

- Legitimacy and trust in public officials and government institutions
- Compliance with the law and legal authority
- Public empowerment of government (e.g. endorse passage of laws, budgets or levees)

Distinguished criminologist Dr. Lawrence W. Sherman identified three important "domains" that affect public trust and confidence in criminal justice: 1) the conduct and practices of the criminal justice system, 2) changing values and expectations of the culture, and 3) images of the system presented in electronic media. Changes in each domain affect the others.

Our survey cannot fully explain the gap between crime data and citizen's beliefs about crime. The results indicate, however, that political beliefs, levels of education, social class, and personal experiences account for some of the variation in perceptions. Other research also points to the important influence that media and popular culture have on shaping public attitudes about crime and criminal justice. Efforts to address public safety should give careful attention to how perceptions are formed in an effort to better educate the public about the nature of the crime problem in Oregon. A better understanding of citizen's beliefs can assist in the creation of policies that enhance the public's sense of wellbeing and increase public trust and confidence in criminal justice.



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What's Inside

Oregon crime trends

Public perceptions of crime trends



The Criminal Justice Policy Research Institute (CJPRI) is a multi-disciplinary research unit within the Criminology and Criminal Justice Department of Portland State University. CJPRI conducts research for criminal justice and community organizations, improves the body of literature pertaining to criminology and criminal justice through independent research projects, and provides policy makers throughout the state with a forum in which issues of policy and practice may be explored, using objective, performance-based criteria.

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