

increase of 74% in Polk. (The Polk number is off a 2019 base of just 23. Among Florida counties that typically have murder totals in the triple digits, Broward in 2020 had the highest increase, with the number of murders rising 34% to 149.)

Nationally, some observers see the increased murders and assaults as fallout from a few highly publicized incidents of police misconduct. The arguments are many-fold: Police resources were devoted to civil unrest rather than dealing with crime. Scrutiny of police actions by the public, political leaders and the media led police to pull back from communities and limit their actions not only made police less proactive but also emboldened criminals.

Judd and others in law enforcement say it's no coincidence that cities where criticism and unrest were loud also saw increased crime. But Florida wasn't at the forefront of the social unrest, calls to defund the police or demands on limiting police procedures; police leaders doubt much police pull-back occurred here. "I think it's going on to some degree," says Gualtieri. "To a significant degree? No, I wouldn't say it's significant." He adds, "The cops are concerned. They want to see they have the tools and the ability and the support to do their job. I think you would be naive, to say the least, if you're a cop in today's environment and you weren't at least somewhat concerned about how people are viewing what you're doing. But at the end of the day, the absolute majority of the cops are doing the right thing."

The pandemic, however, did impact policing.

With physical distancing, police had less community interaction and sometimes followed up on cases by phone rather than in person, Gualtieri says.

Florida law officers say that while Florida courts curtailed hearings in the pandemic at least for a time, they kept running, while other jurisdictions closed or saw "prosecutorial and judicial activism" that resulted in pre-trial release of people arrested for violent crimes. Some of those people migrated to Florida or were left free to engage in interstate crime tied to violent crime locally.

The early months of the pandemic also saw a high volume of gun purchases. Murders by firearm in Florida grew in 2020 by 20.2%, faster than murders overall. Murder by knife also was up, by 18.4%, more than the category overall. Aggravated assaults involving firearms increased in 2020 by 5,840 to 23,034, a 34% increase, compared to 9.5% for the assault category overall. (Assaults with hands/kicks/fists etc. were down.)

Aguilar says through the first part of 2021, Miami police seized 545 "crime guns" — guns used in



The *Washington Post* keeps a nationwide database of police fatal shootings. For 2020, it lists five cases of police shooting to death unarmed people in Florida — three white men and two black men — among the 93 shot and killed by police that year. So far this year, there have been no police shootings and killings of unarmed suspects.

## HIGHEST CRIME RATES

County	Crime Rate per 100,000
Baker County	3,208
Duval County	3,508
Escambia County	3,181
Leon County	3,059
Taylor County	3,071
<b>Florida</b>	<b>2,152</b>

Note: Crime rates fell in each of these counties except Taylor between 2019-20.

## LOWEST CRIME RATES

County	Crime Rate per 100,000
Union County	869
Sumter County	881
Santa Rosa	937
St. Johns	979
Liberty County	699
Lafayette County	540
Gilchrist County	662
Flagler	997

Note: None of the 25 most populous counties in Florida had a crime rate under 1,000 per 100,000 population.

Source: FDLE



Much of the pandemic gun-buying surge has been by first-time buyers, who are often are untutored in gun security, leaving weapons where thieves steal them.