

Analysis of Pennsylvania Crime Trends: An Updated Rural/Urban Comparison

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Crime in Pennsylvania declined substantially between 2013 and 2023, with total offense rates falling by approximately 21 percent statewide (from 2,408 to 1,962 offenses per 10,000 residents). However, this overall decline masks important differences between rural and urban communities. While urban areas experienced consistent decreases across most major crime categories, several categories in rural Pennsylvania—including violent offenses, driving under the influence (DUI), and certain drug-related offenses—have increased or remained elevated over time. These findings suggest that, despite overall improvements, rural communities face a distinct and evolving public safety profile that may require more targeted policy responses.

Methods

This analysis uses county-level offense data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program from 2013 through 2023. Rates per 10,000 residents are calculated to allow consistent rural and urban comparisons. Throughout the report, data on "urban counties" excludes Philadelphia County, which is handled separately. Additional data were obtained from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD), the Pennsylvania Health Care Cost Containment Council (PHC4), the Pennsylvania Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs (DDAP), the U.S. Census Bureau, and the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (DHS). Trends are examined across seven rural regions. Multivariate regression analysis is used to identify county-level associations in 2023 while controlling for demographic and socioeconomic characteristics.

Key Findings

Overall Crime Trends

- Total reported criminal offenses in Pennsylvania declined by approximately 21 percent between 2013 and 2023, with similar declines in rural (21 percent) and urban counties (25 percent, excluding Philadelphia).
- Property crimes, which accounted for roughly one-third of all offenses in 2023, drove much

of this decline, with larceny rates falling by nearly 50 percent across both rural and urban counties.

- Part I offenses (the most serious crimes) declined substantially in both rural (43 percent) and urban (38 percent) areas over the study period.

Rural–Urban Divergence in Violent and High-Risk Offenses

- Despite overall declines, violent crime trends diverged across geographies. While urban violent crime rates decreased over time, rural violent crime rates increased slightly (1 percent) and have exceeded urban rates since 2017. In 2023, rural violent crime rates reached 77 offenses per 10,000 residents, compared to 65 in urban counties.
- Rape rates were consistently higher in rural counties across the study period and increased by 19 percent between 2013 and 2023, compared to a 1 percent increase in urban areas.
- DUI and drug offenses were more prevalent in rural counties throughout the study period, with DUI rates increasing by approximately 5 percent in rural areas. Further detail by year shows that the increase in drug crimes in rural counties occurred until 2020, after which it has declined.

This research was sponsored by a grant from the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, a legislative agency of the Pennsylvania General Assembly. Information in this report does not necessarily reflect the views of individual board members or the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. For more information, contact the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 625 Forster St., Room 902, Harrisburg, PA 17120, (717) 787-9555, www.rural.pa.gov.

Regional Variation Across Rural Pennsylvania

- Crime trends vary significantly across rural regions. The North Central region had the highest overall crime rates, driven largely by higher rates of Part II offenses, particularly public order violations.
- Northeastern Pennsylvania experienced the largest declines in both total and Part I offenses, while the Northwest, Southwest, and Northern Tier regions consistently reported lower crime rates overall.
- Simple assault and protection-from-abuse (PFA) cases varied widely across regions, with several regions reporting rates above 70 incidents per 10,000 residents in 2023.

Co-Occurring Risk Factors and County-Level Patterns

- County-level analysis indicates that several crime types tend to rise together. Counties with higher DUI prevalence also tend to have higher rates of simple assault, rape, and homicide-related offenses.
- Economic stress, measured by SNAP enrollment, is associated with higher rates of PFAs, firearm injury hospitalizations, and multiple violent crime categories.
- Drug offenses are strongly associated with both property crimes and simple assault, suggesting interconnected patterns of substance use and criminal activity across counties.

Policy Considerations

Based on these findings, the research identifies several considerations for policymakers and local stakeholders:

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- **Tailored, region-specific strategies:** Given substantial variation in crime rates across rural regions—particularly in DUIs, drug offenses, and violent crime—policy responses may be more effective when tailored to county-level conditions rather than applied uniformly statewide.
- **DUI and substance use interventions:** The association between DUI prevalence and violent offenses suggests that strengthening treatment courts, expanding access to substance use treatment, and improving transportation options in rural areas may help reduce multiple categories of crime.
- **Strengthening PFA implementation and tracking:** Variation in

PFA cases and associated enforcement practices indicates a need for more consistent data collection, reporting, and implementation across counties, particularly related to weapons relinquishment compliance.

Overall, while Pennsylvania has experienced a sustained decline in total crime over the past decade, the findings indicate that rural communities are experiencing distinct trends in violent crime, substance-related offenses, and regional variation. These patterns suggest that future policy approaches may benefit from greater emphasis on rural-specific conditions, improved data consistency, and targeted interventions aligned with local needs.

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