Bringing scientific evidence into any beat: crime and public safety

Science reporting quick tips from SciLine and The Open Notebook

Just as police reports and witness accounts provide crucial information and context in stories about crime and public safety, scientific evidence similarly strengthens reporting by substantiating claims, identifying trends, and putting events in broader context.

Five ideas for adding science to crime and public safety stories

If you're reporting on…	Search for relevant research on…
Police use of force	■ Trends in police violence ■ The effectiveness of body cameras in reducing police shootings ■ Police violence and citizens' trust in law enforcement
Policing and technology	■ Evidence behind emerging technologies like AI, drones, facial recognition software, crime scene scanning, and novel DNA analysis techniques ■ How new technologies affect the cost and efficiency of policing ■ How use of militarized technologies affects community trust and perceptions of safety
Jails and prisons	■ How environmental conditions (e.g., heat, water quality, flooding) affect incarcerated people ■ Evidence behind different housing models in prisons ■ Methods for controlling the spread of infectious diseases in prisons
Tough-on-crime policies	■ Whether and how cash bail affects recidivism ■ The psychological and physical risks of trying minors as adults ■ Disparities in sentencing outcomes across racial and socioeconomic groups
Gun violence	■ Evidence (and funders) behind gun-violence prevention efforts ■ The relationship between rising temperatures and gun violence ■ Individual, family, and community risk factors for gun violence

Inform Your Crime Reporting with Data

Here are some data sources you can use to bolster your reporting with evidence. Whenever you're using data, always ask experts how those data are gathered and what their limitations are.

- FBI Crime Data Explorer: interactive platform housing U.S. national and state crime data, searchable by type of crime, state, and more (note: some agencies do not report to this hub.)
- "Decoding FBI Data" by Jacob Kaplan (available for free online): primer on covering the different types of FBI crime datasets.
- National Archive of Criminal Justice Data (University of Michigan): houses several large-scale datasets and a searchable library of studies, reports, and data
- Real-Time Crime Index: aggregates reported crime data from hundreds of law enforcement agencies methods.

- [SPOTLITE](#) (University of Illinois): tracks incidents where police use firearms
- [Center for Gun Violence Solutions](#) (Johns Hopkins University): publishes an annual report of U.S. gun violence
- [Investigate This!](#) (The Marshall Project): gathers data and resources for local journalists covering criminal justice
- [Gun Violence Data Hub](#) (The Trace): comprehensive source for gun violence data in the U.S.
- [CrimeSolutions](#) (DOJ): summarizes and evaluates research on criminal justice interventions in the U.S.
- [National Crime Victimization Survey](#): annual survey of U.S. households on self-reported experiences of both reported and non-reported crime

Common pitfalls to avoid

1. Avoid extrapolating data: Carefully assess what the data you're citing are measuring, how the data were collected, who funds the dataset, and whether there's a certain narrative being pushed.

2. Explore underreported crime: Look for local surveys in your county or city to assess rates of perceived safety and crimes that aren't reported to the police.

3. Don't overlook nonfatal gun violence: Reporting on gun violence tends to focus on mass shootings or homicides when nonfatal gun violence is far more common.

Types of experts to contact and questions to ask.

Ask psychologists about:	Ask epidemiologists about:
- Offender risk assessment - False confessions during interrogation - Mental health and addiction treatment in correctional facilities - Impact of incarceration of families - Early life experiences as a factor in criminal behavior	- Gun violence as a public health concern - Relationships between drug use, mental health, and criminal behavior - Policing practices as a determinant of health - Efficacy of interventions and laws designed to reduce crime
Ask sociologists (e.g., criminologists) about:	**Ask engineers and computer scientists (e.g., biometricians) about:**
- Societal trends in crime - Urban versus rural crime - Role of race in police encounters - How crime statistics are calculated - Community support systems for victims	- Technologies commonly used in policing (fingerprinting, facial scanning, polygraphs) - Methods to combat online scams - Implications of AI in policing and crime data

Real stories including scientific evidence and experts

- [Facial recognition in policing is getting state-by-state guardrails](#) (Ohio Capital Journal, 2025)
- [6 myths about California crime as voters now favor this measure on drugs, retail theft](#) (Cal Matters, 2024)
- [A public health response helped reduce fatal car wrecks in Texas. Can it do the same for gun deaths?](#) (Texas Tribune, 2023)

➤ More resources: [Covering federal involvement in local policing](#), [looking for the evidence behind policing tech](#), and [how to use CDC gun deaths data to report in your community](#).