

The Effect of Police Layoffs on Crime: A Natural Experiment Involving New Jersey's Two Largest Cities

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Key Takeaways

- The economic crisis of 2008 led both Newark and Jersey City officials to strongly consider police officer layoffs
- During fiscal year 2009, officials from both cities negotiated with their respective police unions on a revised contract in an attempt to avert layoffs
- Negotiations failed in Newark, leading to the termination of 13% of the police force
- No layoffs occurred in Jersey City
- The police layoffs were associated with significant part 1 crime increases in Newark as compared to Jersey City
- Effects were strongest for violent crime

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Research Summary:

This study tests the effect of police layoffs on crime through a natural experiment involving Newark and Jersey City, New Jersey's two largest cities. In early 2008, the United States economy began a significant downturn, representing the 10th economic recession since World War II. Like many cities throughout the United States, Newark and Jersey City considered police officer layoffs in response to budget shortfalls resulting from the recession.

Newark and Jersey City had 2010 populations of 277,140 and 247,597, respectively, according to the decennial census. Ethnic minorities accounted for the majority of the citizenry, with only 12.2% of residents in Newark and 22.6% of residents in Jersey City identifying as White alone. In 2010, Newark and Jersey City boasted the two largest police forces in the state, employing 1,308 and 831 officers, respectively. Both cities exhibited 2010 overall part 1-, violent-, and property-crime rates well above average for New Jersey municipalities with at least 50,000 residents.

In early 2009, officials in both Newark and Jersey City seriously considered police layoffs as a means to offset budget deficits, leading to prolonged negotiations between city officials and their respective police unions. The police union and city officials in Jersey City came to a contract agreement to avert officer layoffs. No such agreement occurred in Newark, leading to the termination of 13% of the Newark Police Department (NPD) on November 30, 2010.

The loss of officers adversely impacted the NPD's crime prevention practices. Focused, place-based interventions that were a mainstay in Newark were discontinued owing to the layoffs, as officers were needed for general patrol and response to citizen calls for service.

The unique timing of the budget crisis, budget negotiations, and officer terminations provided the necessary conditions for a natural experiment to test the impact of the police layoffs on crime. Our analysis used monthly uniform crime report data from 2006 through 2015 to test the effect of police layoffs on monthly crime rates. We measured both the immediate and gradual effect of the layoffs on crime.

Findings indicate that monthly crime rates for overall crime, violent crime, and property crime each significantly increased in Newark as compared to Jersey City following the police layoffs. Effects were strongest for violent crime, with the monthly violent crime rate increasing by 2.30 standard deviations (as compared to increases of 1.10 standard deviations for overall crime and 0.71 standard deviations for property crime) following the police layoffs. For both overall crime and violent crime, the gradual effects analysis found the crime increases became progressively more pronounced over the 5-year post-layoff period. In total, approximately 108 additional violent crime incidents and 103 additional property crime incidents occurred per month in Newark following the police officer layoffs.

This study contributes to the body of research on the relationship between police force size and crime. For the most part, prior research has analyzed the effect of *incremental* changes in police force size, typically finding little effect. The results of our study indicate that sudden changes brought about by the termination of officers may generate significant crime increases.