



Progress Report on the Criminal Case Backlog and Violent Crime

Reducing the criminal case backlog and reducing the rate of violent crime are two important priorities of Harris County Commissioners Court. The latest data show meaningful progress, both in terms of the overall results and the implementation of specific programs.

Criminal Case Backlog- Executive Summary

A criminal case backlog exists when there is a substantial number of cases still in the criminal justice system beyond the targeted timeframe for disposition—typically, 180 days for a misdemeanor and 360 days for a felony. Harris County has had a criminal case backlog dating back to 2017, when Hurricane Harvey flooded the downtown judicial facilities. The COVID-19 pandemic then reduced trials and other judicial proceedings, which greatly increased the backlog. We have seen meaningful progress in the backlog thanks to the hard work of the courts and many agencies and with the support of the numerous programs funded by Commissioners Court.

Progress Update

- **58,261 cases overall** or an average of over **2,500 cases per court** disposed in the past year. **Over 19,500 backlogged felony cases (over 360 days old) resolved** since January 2022, with the overall backlog down 23%.¹
- **54,823 cases overall** or an average of over **3,400 cases per court** disposed in the past year. **Over 28,000 backlogged misdemeanor cases (over 180 days old) resolved** since January 2022, with the overall backlog down 26%.²
- **District Court monthly clearance rate**, the number of incoming cases divided by the number of cases resolved, **sits at 120%; 3-month clearance rate is 115%**¹. A clearance rate of over 100% indicates that the overall number of cases in the criminal justice system has decreased.
- **County Court monthly clearance rate sits at 126%; 3-month clearance rate is 133%**.³

Programs Overview

- Commissioners Court recently approved a **\$26.4 million, 12-month budget** for specific Court backlog initiatives using American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding, bringing total ARPA investments in the Court backlog to **\$39.2 million**. The budget for these programs will be reviewed and renewed as needed to continue to reduce the backlog.

¹ Based on data received from Harris County District Court Administration Office.

² Based on data received from Harris County Office of Courts Management.

³ Calculated as an average of clearance rates July through September in the data provided by Harris County Office of Courts Management

- **New court capacity** (additional district court, five emergency response dockets, and six associate judges) is operational and making significant contributions to reducing the backlog. Additional courts and judges—along with funding for the associated prosecutors, bailiffs, clerks and staff—allow the justice system to dispose of cases at a faster rate and decrease the backlog.
- **An overtime program** (called the “Triage Program”) pays District Attorney prosecutors to review cases for dismissal, diversion and plea offers. Cases which can be resolved outside of the courts are either directly removed from the backlog or free up courts to consider other, backlog cases.
- **Evidence management investments**—including over 50 temporary employees, overtime funding, and contractor support—are reducing the wait time for body camera footage, 911 calls and forensics. When all evidence is reviewed and available, it allows attorneys to decide how to proceed with a case and for the case to go to trial, if necessary.
- **Technology investments** in standardized body cameras for Harris County law enforcement and a standardized evidence management system for the District Attorney’s office are in implementation and will lead to substantial efficiency gains, reducing delays due to evidence production and freeing up staff to do other work. The District Courts and Criminal Courts have also published dashboards that provide regular updates on clearance rates and caseloads, increasing transparency to the public.

Violent Crime Reduction- Executive Summary

Progress Update

- Overall Harris County **violent crime rate has decreased by 12%** from 2021.⁴
 - Murder and non-negligent homicide rate has decreased by 13% from 2021.
 - Rape is down 34% from 2021.
 - Robbery is down 11% from 2021.
 - Aggravated Assault is down 11% from 2021.
- The overall violent crime rate, including all of the above four categories, is down 12% from 2021 and is 2% less than 2018 levels. However, the murder and non-negligent homicide rate and aggravated assault rates remain above 2018 levels.

Programs Overview

- A multi-agency effort in executing outstanding warrants for individuals charged with the most serious crimes (**Violent Persons Task Force**) is now operational and on track to clear 150 warrants per month.
- An overtime program the Sheriff’s Office investigative staff to clear the outstanding cases in specific divisions (**Violent Crime Reduction Initiative**) has substantially decreased the time to make contact with victims and decreased the backlog of investigations. The Proposed Budget for fiscal year 2022-23 includes funding for 35 permanent investigators to continue this momentum.

⁴ Based on monthly average of year-to-date data from the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) relative to monthly average of previous years.

- Using detailed data about where and when violence occurs, the County has made coordinated **Crime Place Network Reduction investments** to enhance police presence (Harris County Safe Program) and improve the safety of physical infrastructure by abating nuisances, demolishing unsafe structures, and cleaning lots (Clean Streets, Safe Neighborhood Program)
- A program to use trained mental health providers (the **Holistic Assistance Response Team**) is now answering non-violent calls and freeing up police officers to respond to other calls, including those where violence has or is likely to occur.
- Using credible community messengers, the **Community Violence Interruption Program** is now operational and has prevented a growing number of planned gun crimes.
- **Joint gun buyback programs** with the City of Houston have removed the number of firearms on the streets.
- **Enhanced services for victims of domestic violence**—including wraparound services, relocation assistance, protective factors, and support from the multi-agency High Risk Team—aim to remove victims from dangerous situations and decrease the likelihood of violent crime.

Further Information

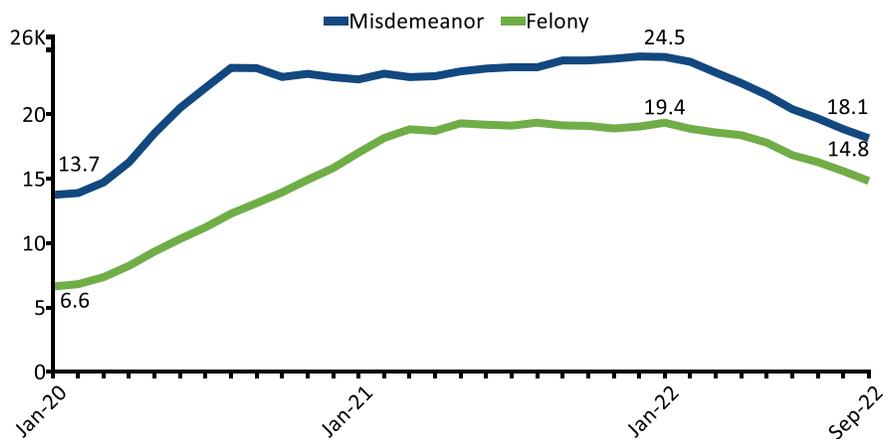
Court Backlog

Additional Data on Results

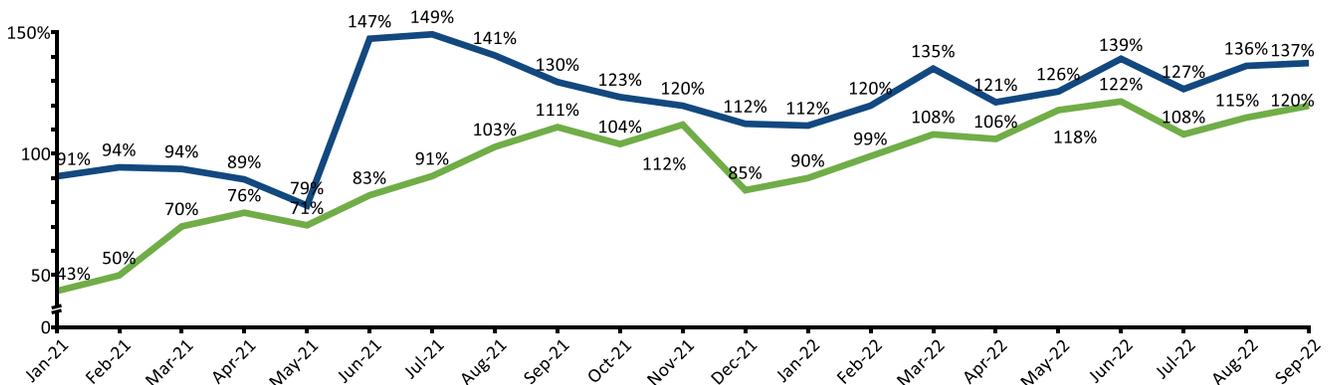
The criminal case backlog is typically measured as the number of active cases beyond the target timeframe for cases to be resolved. For felony cases, that timeframe is 360 days; for misdemeanors it is 180 days.

The criminal case backlog was near its peak in January 2022 – a culmination of delays dating since Hurricane Harvey which were significantly exacerbated during the pandemic. As of September 2022, **the felony backlog was down 23%** since January 2022, with **19,721 backlogged felony cases** disposed during that nine-month period. As of end September 2022, **the misdemeanor backlog was down 26%** since January 2022, with **28,297 backlogged misdemeanor cases** disposed during that nine-month period. The **September clearance rates are 120% for the Criminal District Courts and 137% for the County Courts at Law.**

Number of cases in Backlog (thousands)



Clearance Rates (%)



Program Updates

Commissioners Court has supported and funded many different initiatives to reduce the backlog. Investments have been made at various points in the funnel – from the intake of cases, to the processing of evidence, to adding courts, judges and jury access. Below are updates on some of the key investments, primarily funded through the American Rescue Plan

<u>Program</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Impact</u>
<i>Felony Emergency Response Dockets (ERDs)</i>	Added 3 ERDs using ARPA funding. ERDs are a means to temporarily expand Court capacity by referring cases from the Court where the case was filed (home court).	Since their inception in September of 2021 to July 2022, the ERD courts have been referred 4,204 cases , of which 2,254 cases have been disposed--a 54% clearance rate. Of the disposed cases 1,628 (72%) were backlogged cases . The average time to disposition since referral has been 76 days.
<i>Felony Associate Judges (AJs)</i>	Added 6 AJs using ARPA funding. These Judges help ready a case to bring it to disposition in the home court.	Since their inception in January 2022 to July 2022, the AJ courts have been referred 947 cases of which 354 cases have been disposed, either by the AJs or by the home court. 556 cases have been returned to home courts and are pending disposition. 105 jury selections have been docketed with the Associate Judges.
<i>Misdemeanor Emergency Response Dockets (ERDs)</i>	Added 2 ERDs using ARPA funding. ERDs are a means to temporarily expand Court capacity by referring cases from the Court where the case was filed (home court).	Since their inception in November of 2021, the ERD courts have been referred 327 cases of which 206 cases have been disposed, 63% clearance rate. Of the disposed cases 312 (72.8%) were backlog cases. The average time to disposition since referral was 19 days . 27 out of 327 referred cases were either entered into or disposed through pretrial intervention.
<i>District Attorney – Triage Project</i>	Created an overtime program to review one-time, low-level offenses and bringing them to disposition faster.	The DA’s office identified 78,690 misdemeanor and felony cases to review. Of these 49,321 have been reviewed and 37,803 cases have been disposed. Of the disposed cases, 28,089 or 74% of the cases were in the backlog.
<i>District Attorney – Evidence Management Project</i>	39 additional temporary staff provided to process evidence; 3 programmer positions provided to support integration of evidence with other agencies.	25 agencies are either online or are pending integration with the DA’s evidence system, including the Sheriff’s office. HPD’s Motorola bodycamera system is awaiting testing to integrate with the DA’s system. 5 constable agencies are awaiting migration to a new system to start integrating with the DA’s system. HC Constables Pct 1, 4, and 6 have indicated that they will remain with their current bodycam provider which has ongoing issues with video transfers.

Sheriff's Office Evidence Management Project	Temporary positions and technology support provided to the Sheriff's office to help process 911 calls and Bodyworn (BWC) cameras.	<p>~9,100 open 911 requests at the inception of the project have been reduced to 5512 ending September 2022.</p> <p>Outstanding BWC requests dropped from 11,468 in December, 2021 to 4,640 as of October 10, 2022.</p> <p>The move to a new BWC camera vendor will allow automatic tagging and limited manual support will be necessary once the conversion is complete.</p>
Public Defenders	Added public defenders using ARPA funding.	Number of cases being currently handled by these public defenders is 692 and 372 cases have been disposed since they were hired.
CJC Jury Relocation	Moved jury operations back downtown to the Criminal Justice Center (CJC).	Operations were relocated back downtown with some infrastructure changes in January to increase the scale of jury operations. Number of panels filled weekly is up 90% from 13.4 from April '21 to January '22 when operations were at NRG to 25.4 from February '22 to August '22 which is the period post relocation to downtown.
The Children's Assessment Center (CAC)	Funding to address child abuse through converting VHS tapes to digital evidence, upgrading medical equipment, implementing single session therapy, hiring new staff, enhancing training for staff, and expanding child abuse prevention education.	Following implementation in October 2022, expected impacts include a decrease in the ~3,000 backlogged criminal abuse cases and reduced client wait time for medical services and subsequent gathering of evidence. Single session therapy will serve up to 1,200 victims annually .
Institute of Forensic Sciences (IFS)	Funding to support IFS staff retention efforts, including paying overtime for personnel and funding pathology and decedent transport contractors.	After implementation in October 2022, expected impacts include improvement of IFS staff recruitment and retention efforts, continued reduction of the court backlog, and reduction in case processing times.

Violent Crime Reduction

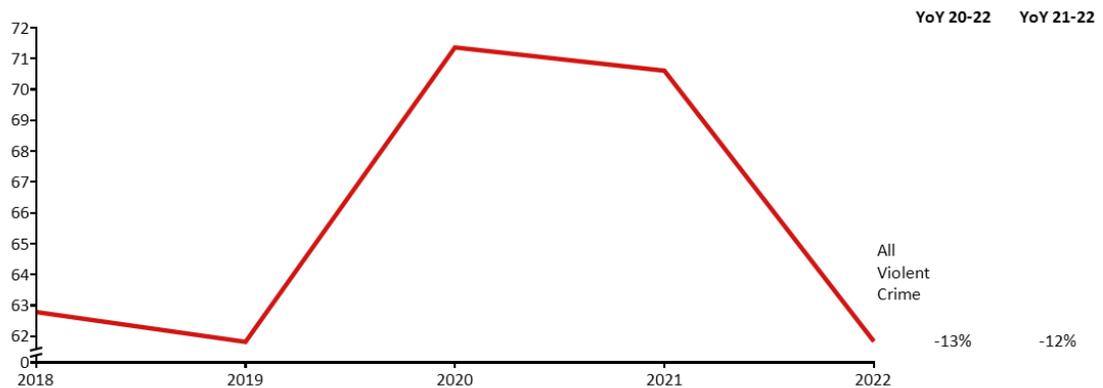
Additional Data on Results

Overall, the violent crime rate has reduced 13% since 2020 and 12% since 2021.

- Murder and non-negligent homicide is down 2% from 2020 and 13% since 2021
- Rape has declined 30% since 2020 and 34% since 2021
- Aggravated assault is down 8% from 2020 and 11% from 2021
- Robbery is down 22% from 2020 and 11% from 2021

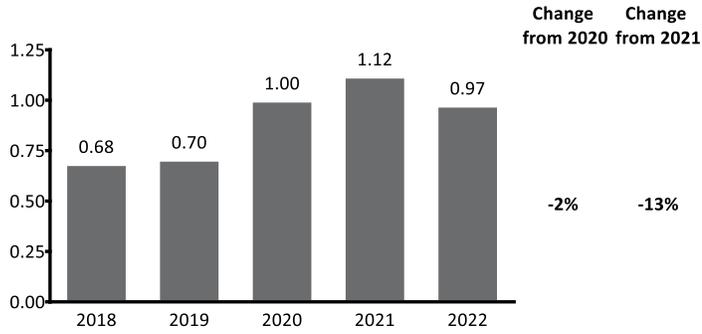
For rape and robbery, the rates are now below 2018 levels.

Average Monthly Violent Crime per 100,000 residents⁵

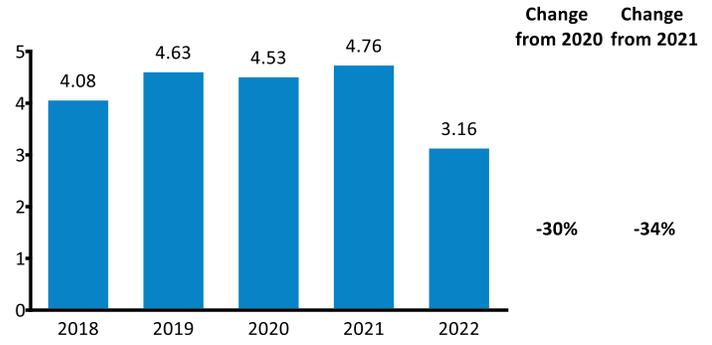


⁵ Source is TX DPS. Includes rates for Murder and non-negligent homicide, Rape, Aggravated Assault and Robbery.

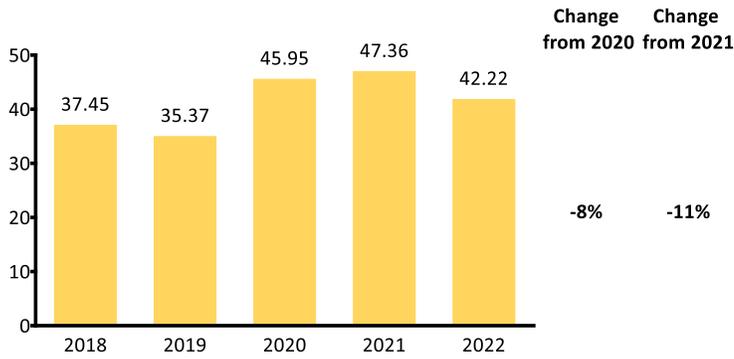
Average Monthly Murder & Non-Negligent Homicide per 100,000 residents⁴



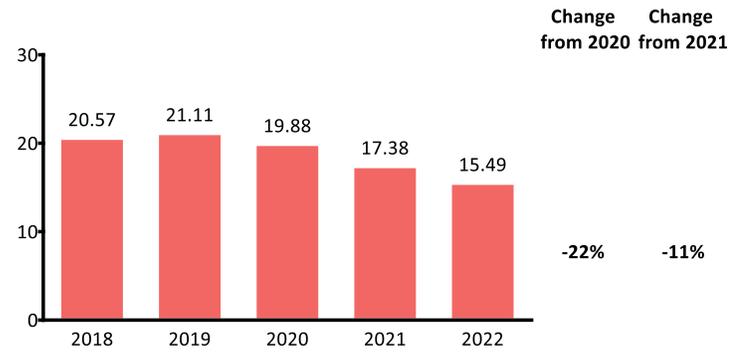
Average Monthly Rape per 100,000 residents⁴



Average Monthly Aggravated Assault per 100,000 residents⁴



Average Monthly Robbery per 100,000 residents⁴



Program Updates

<u>Program</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Impact</u>
<i>Violent Crime Reduction Initiative (VCRI)</i>	VCRI program provided overtime funding for HCSO investigators to clear outstanding cases in key divisions.	25% decrease in the overall investigative backlog in the Crimes Against Persons Division, and a 100% decrease in the backlog in the Family Crimes and Violent Crimes Units.
<i>Violent Persons Task Force (VIPER)</i>	Multiagency task force focused on executing felony warrants, prioritizing individuals with multiple and recent charges for violent crimes	Cleared 75 warrants since launching in September and expects to be clearing 150 open warrants per month by November.
<i>Harris County Safe program</i>	Proactive policing strategy that places deputies in the County’s most violence-prone areas at the times of day and week when violence is most often reported.	710 felony arrests and 342 firearms seized , and initial data show a promising impact on rates of violent crime.
<i>Community Violence Interruption Program</i>	This pilot program utilizes credible messengers to interrupt violence and defuse immediate tensions in effort to help build long-term peace while creating a safer community for everyone. This is achieved by employing members of the community who have had similar life experiences to those at highest risk of committing acts of violence or becoming a victim of violence.	Interrupted 5 imminent acts of gun violence and developed over 500 specific community relationships in the neighborhoods covered by the program; established hospital partnerships and received a \$2M Department of Justice grant to expand program.
<i>Holistic Assistance Response Team</i>	HART aims to reduce gun violence in communities and dispatching health-based first responders to non-emergent 9-1-1 calls, to address behavioral health and social welfare concerns	Responded to nearly 1,000 calls for service , or 17% of calls in the area covered by the program, freeing up 675 police hours to respond to other calls and do proactive policing. 385 people have been connected with social services.
<i>Clean Streets, Safe Neighborhood Program</i>	A research-based crime prevention and neighborhood safety program that uses data to target county neighborhoods where decay and abandonment are driving violent crime. The program will improve street lighting, sidewalks, and visibility in residential areas, address longstanding blighted and abandoned structures, restore vacant lots, and implement other improvements shown to enhance public safety.	Abating 59 nuisances , demolishing unsafe structures and cleaning lots, prioritizing vulnerable neighborhoods with higher rates of violent crime
<i>Joint gun buyback programs</i>	Joint gun buyback programs in collaboration with the City of Houston with a goal of reducing gun-related accidents, suicide, and violent crime.	More than 2,000 firearms taken off the street.