

# What's behind the record-breaking surge of gun violence in Portland, Oregon?

Shelby Michaels, Kayla Costa  
26 October 2021

Homicides in Portland, Oregon reached an all-time high this year. The current 70 recorded homicides have matched the full-year record reached in 1987, and the number may climb to 72, due to the possible murder of two individuals in Old Town on Sunday. With two more months remaining this year, total homicides may hit one hundred.

These deaths are part of a broader surge of gun violence in the largest city in the state. By the beginning of October, the city surpassed 1,000 shootings this year, accounting for 320 injuries and three-quarters of all killings. For comparison, there were 388 shootings and 36 homicides in 2019. This year's shootings are likely to be three times that of 2019, with double the number of murders.

The Portland Police Bureau (PPB) has attributed many of the homicides to gang violence, with more bystanders caught in crossfire compared to previous years, along with random shootings with no clear motivation. Some of the deaths have been mourners at vigils, people sitting in cars, and even children playing in a park. In addition, many killings were products of interpersonal arguments, familial disputes and domestic abuse.

Makayla Harris, an 18-year-old high school graduate, died in the crossfire of a mass shooting at food carts in downtown Portland on July 17. Alexandra Arb-Bloodgood was allegedly shot and killed by her brother-in-law in May after he got into an argument with her husband about laundry in their North Portland home.

In August, two cousins, Odion and David Turner, known as rappers 12 O'Clock and Murdock of the Wu-Tang Clan-affiliated group "Brooklyn Zu," were shot in an "ambush-style" drive-by shooting in an RV outside a home near Northeast 82nd Street. One couple, 20-year-old Charlie Borbon-Lopez and 21-year-old Jessica Garcia, were shot and killed by an unidentified person on March 1 near K'unamokwst Park in the 5200 block of Northeast Alberta Street.

These and many other tragedies have left a major impact on the victims' family members, as well as the broader community, who are left to grieve and try to make sense of these horrific acts of violence. While the mainstream press, local officials and police officers sensationalize the violent acts to support an expansion of the police to deter "criminals," the

deeper social causes are mentioned only in passing.

A digital tribute to victims of gun violence by the *Oregonian* gives a sense that most of those killed are poor and working-class people, mostly young to middle-aged men from all racial and ethnic backgrounds. The data shows that "more than half of those who have been killed are Black, Latino or Asian," with Black residents outnumbering all others. These demographics correspond with the racial diversity of the poorest layers of the Portland population, who have been hit the hardest by the pandemic, rising social inequality and the daily hardships bound up with the broader social and economic crisis.

Over the past eighteen months, politicians from both major parties and at every level of government advanced a brutal policy of protecting the profits of the banks and big business over human life.

As a result of their decision to reopen businesses, workplaces, and schools as the pandemic continues to rage, over 750,000 people have already lost their lives to the preventable COVID-19 pandemic in the US, with millions suffering from sickness, long-term symptoms, and the death of loved ones. At the same time, the American ruling class forced workers to accept conditions of poverty, debt, and hunger, providing minimal social assistance while handing over trillions to Wall Street and the military.

The result of the capitalist response to the pandemic is the worsening of a massive social crisis, with a myriad of ailments and problems reflected in the working class. Millions of working families have lost their jobs and income, had to rely on food banks to feed their families, and been placed under huge levels of stress and social isolation.

These are the material conditions that gave way to new records of social misery in the United States, including a record 93,000 overdose deaths last year, up to 50 percent of adults reporting depression and anxiety symptoms, and increased rates of domestic violence. A recent report showed that US homicides increased by nearly 30 percent in 2020 compared to the previous year, the greatest one-year increase recorded by the FBI since it began collecting the data in 1960.

Democratic Mayor Ted Wheeler, like his counterpart Lori Lightfoot of Chicago, acknowledged "root causes" of gun violence at a recent press conference, making the usual empty

promises to improve affordable housing and health care. However, the main focus of the city's response has been to call for an expansion of the PPB.

"The reality is more Portlanders are saying they don't feel safe in their community," Wheeler told KGW reporter Mike Benner in an interview on Thursday. "The way we make sure people are safe is making sure we have a police bureau with the adequate tools, resources, training and staffing required to do the job effectively."

The Portland Police Association (PPA) and local government are claiming a direct link between a \$27 million decrease in police funding last year and the increase in murders. Executive director of the PPA Daryl Turner claims that the increase in violence is directly related to budget cuts and that the city needs to hire 840 officers over the next five years to implement proper community policing and "keep Portland safe." About 200 officers have voluntarily left the department in the past year, claiming low morale, lack of support from city officials, and burnout. As of October 10, there were 790 sworn members on the city's police force.

Mayor Wheeler's specific proposals include filling vacancies by rehiring recently retired officers and developing recruitment efforts. Wheeler and City Commissioner Jo-Ann Hardesty are also promoting new initiatives like the PPB's "community oversight" Focused Intervention Team (FIT) to target gun violence, as well Portland Fire & Rescue's Portland Street Response (PSR), which currently sends a team of social work professionals in response to mental health crises and homeless issues in the Lents neighborhood. These agencies came out of the "police reform" policies adopted by the Democratic Party after the George Floyd protests in 2020 to counter the calls to "defund the police." Over this same period, Wheeler has supported the police department's crackdown on left-wing protesters.

The Portland mayor's actions follow the decision of President Joe Biden's administration in September to allow for pandemic relief aid to be used to increase funding for local police departments. Under the announcement, states and localities are allowed to use any amount of the \$350 billion they were allocated for community violence intervention programs, new equipment purchases, and hiring additional officers to either reach or surpass pre-pandemic staffing levels.

Behind their "progressive" rhetoric and promises, the Democratic Party is incapable of implementing a genuine program to end gun violence, because it would require alleviating the dire social conditions that it has helped to create through decades of budget cuts, corporate handouts, militarism, and war.

According to the Oregon Center for Public Policy, income inequality was the greatest economic challenge facing the state in 2020. The report showed that median income was \$38,800 in 2018, only \$3,400 higher than in 1980, after adjusting for inflation. Meanwhile the top 1 percent's average income was

\$1,139,000 that year, which is more than triple its inflation-adjusted average income in 1980 of \$348,000.

This inequality is reflected in the neighborhoods of Portland, with many wealthy families residing in West Portland and poorer families living in North and East Portland. The highest homicide counts exist in Parkrose, with a poverty rate of nearly 7.9 percent, and Kenton, with a poverty rate of nearly 10 percent. Old Town, known colloquially as Chinatown, has the next highest number and contains a large homeless population and a poverty rate of 6 percent. These are also neighborhoods that have been impacted by gentrification, where profit-driven urban development has dislocated long-time working-class residents.

Inequality is the strongest indicator of violent crimes. A 2019 report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime found that countries with large gaps between rich and poor are likely to have higher homicide rates than those with less pronounced income inequality: "The link holds over time, meaning that increased levels of violence correlate with increased levels of inequality." The authors continue, "If the benefits of economic growth are not evenly distributed, those who miss out may well decide to resort to violent and criminal activities. In fact, economic growth that exacerbates income inequality drives criminal violence even more."

Mayor Wheeler, along with the rest of the Democratic Party, serves the interests of the capitalist system and thus defends the social inequality it produces. Unable to go against their own interests, they are using this year's violent tragedies as a pretext to beef up police departments that exist to brutalize and repress the working class in defense of private profit interests, as evinced in the approximately 1,000 people killed by police each year.

The reality is that gun violence, like other actions of social desperation, can only be addressed when the masses of working-class people are provided an environment conducive to a happier and more stable life. Every worker has the right to affordable housing, a good job, safe work conditions, free education, universal health care, and protection from COVID-19 infection and death. The working class is the only social force able to carry out a political struggle for its own rights and interests, overturning the profit-based capitalist system and establishing socialism.



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