

Homicide Rates in Israel: Recent Trends and a Crossnational Comparison

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Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel

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Introduction

The number of violent deaths in Israel increased dramatically in 2023. Most of the increase was driven by the events of October 7th: Around 1,150 Israelis were killed on that day; almost 200 soldiers were killed in action between October 7th and the end of the year; and 35 Israelis were also killed in terrorist attacks throughout the year.

Our focus here is on a fourth category of violent death: homicide. In Israel in 2023, 299 people were murdered, more than double the 2022 total. As is well known, these murders were concentrated among Israeli Arabs: 233 were murdered in 2023, up from 109 in 2022, 126 in 2021, and fewer than 75 per year prior to 2019. Yet it is important to note that the increase in the number of homicides in Israel was not limited to the Arab population. The number of murders also increased among Jews and Others. This is after long-term declines in murders in each of these populations.¹

This rising number of homicides has been accompanied by a shift in seasonality, at least in the Arab population. This can be seen in Figure 1. In prior years, the number of homicides in the Arab population has most frequently peaked in summer (2016, 2019, 2021, 2022) or had a double peak in summer and fall (2017, 2020). The number of homicides has then

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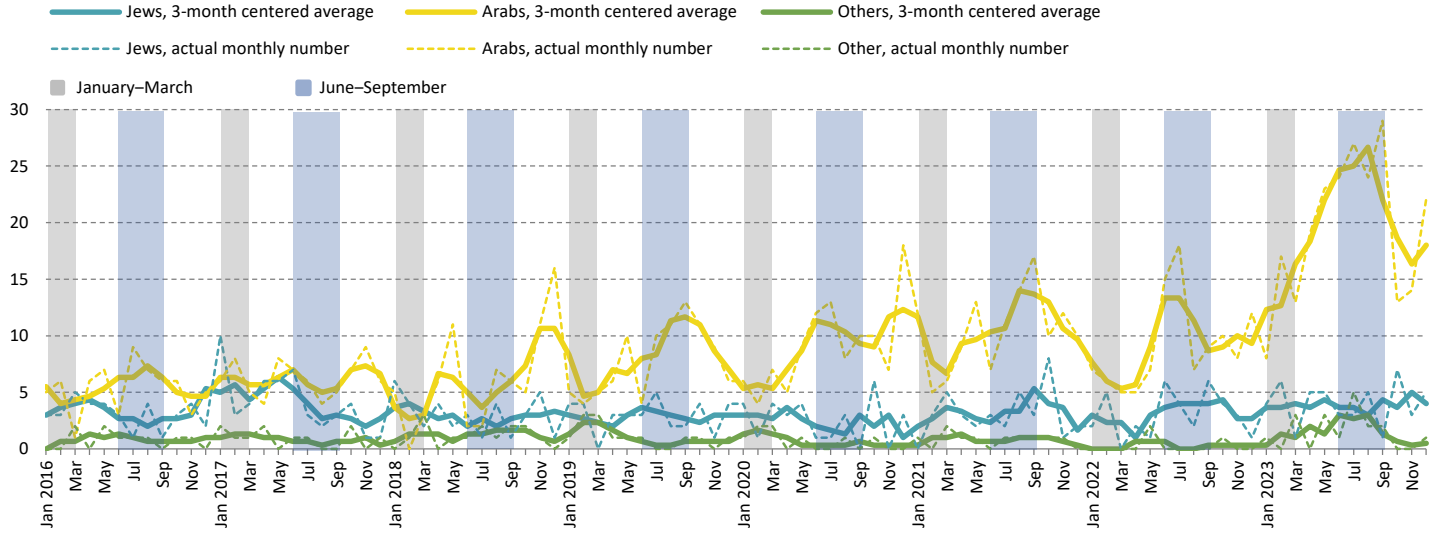
1 Data on the number of homicides from January 1, 2016 to December 31, 2023 are from Israel Police data released under Freedom of Information Law Request No. 949/23, 1106/23, 5/24).

dipped significantly, usually to less than half of the peak monthly number, during the winter months (January–March). These dips can be seen in early 2016, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022. What marks 2023 as different is that the number of murders in Israel’s Arab population climbed every month from December 2022 until September. In the aftermath of October 7, the number of homicides then plummeted to 13 and 14 in October and November, respectively — just above the seasonal average over the prior 3 years — but the number climbed again to 22 homicides in December. Note that in the Jewish and Other population, October 7 had no apparent effect on the number of homicides.²

From a public policy perspective, this rapid growth in the number of homicides in Israel, especially within Israel’s Arab population, points to institutional failure. Our goal here is not to discuss that failure or its sources — we addressed some of the underlying causes in a prior piece of research focused on the Arab population, where we also warned about the coming intensification of violence.³ Rather, our goal here is to simply clarify some aspects of the ongoing debates about numbers in order to help demystify the commentary about the magnitude of these events, disarm some of the surrounding polemics, and direct subsequent policy interventions more effectively.

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- 2 We formally estimate the seasonality using an Unobserved Components model (UCM). In the Jewish and Other population, the estimates do not converge, pointing to an absence of a recognizable pattern. In the Arab population, the cycle (i.e., from peak to peak) is estimated at between 3.8–4.2 months when measured across the first 5, 6, or 7 years of the series. When 2023 is included in the estimates, the cycle leaps to 9 months, confirming a significant shift in the seasonal component.
 - 3 In a study published in December 2021, we described rising homicide rates in Israel’s Arab subpopulation as a “predictable consequence of disequilibria in the Israeli Arab age structure.” We wrote that “just as the weight of the young Israeli Arab population in Israel’s population is hitting its peak, there are increasing gender-differentiated educational trends and falling rates of employment among young Arab men. This combination of demographic disequilibria and rising female educational advantage partly explains the ongoing rise in the incidence of violent crime.” We called on policy makers to address these issues head-on. If they didn’t, we warned “the costs will be borne by Israeli society as a whole ... in terms of ... more violence.”

Figure 1. Monthly number of homicides, January 1, 2016 to December 31, 2023, by subpopulation



Source: Weinreb et al., Taub Center | Data: Israel Police released under the Freedom of Information Law (Request No. 949/23, 1106/23, 5/24)

We do this in two stages. *First*, we talk about different measures used to track trends in homicides. As is widely recognized, this involves distinguishing a rise in *absolute numbers* — the statistics provided above — from the rise in *homicide rates*. Less widely recognized, it also involves differentiating between different types of rates used to track trends in homicides: the most informative measures are not always the most widely used.

Second, we compare homicide rates in Israel to rates in a number of other high and high-middle income countries showing, among other things, that whereas the rates for Israel's mostly Jewish non-Arab population had, by 2022, fallen to within touching distance of levels seen in the UK and Singapore — the lowest among high-income countries — the homicide rate for Israel's Arab population had moved squarely into the Americas' zone — the highest. In fact, even with the rise in homicide rates among Jews, the ratio of Arab:Jewish homicide rates in Israel in 2023 was 13:1. That is 1.6 times as large as the ratio of Black:White homicide rates in the US.

What is the right measure for tracking homicides?

It is widely recognized that using absolute numbers to track changes across time is problematic, since those changes can be wholly driven by fluctuations in population size. This criticism is especially pertinent in the case of Israel, whose population growth has averaged 1.9% per year over the last few decades.

The standard solution to this problem is to use a per capita measure of homicide — usually presented as the number of homicides per 100,000. This is the “homicide rate” that you can find, for example, if you look for cross-national homicide data on [Our World in Data](#). The advantage of this per capita measure — and the reason it is so widely used — is that it is easy to construct. All we need is the number of events, in this case the number of homicides, and the population, preferably at the mid-point of the year. On the other hand, the problem with per capita measure is that it uses the *total* population as the denominator. This makes it what demographers call a “crude” rate. Crude rates are misleading when they are used to describe trends in a behavior that has a distinct age pattern. That is the case with homicide or violent crime in general: both are disproportionately perpetrated by young men.

Two questions arise from this. First, to what extent does variation in the crude homicide rate across *time* reflect variation in the share of the national population composed of young men? Second, to what extent do differences in the homicide rate across *countries* reflect differences in the respective national share of the population composed by young men across those countries? That share can change at a very different rate than the overall population growth rate.

Empirical studies that have examined crime data over time in different age groups in a variety of societies have shown that crime rates, especially homicide rates, begin to rise in the late teens and decline towards the late twenties (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Pampel & Gartner, 1995). If the tendency to commit murder peaks among young people, then a simple demographic calculus can predict higher homicide rates in a society with a larger proportion of young people. In addition, the (numerical) size of the age group in the population may also have a significant impact on the homicide rate. Easterlin (1987) compared similarly-aged groups across populations of variable size and showed that in larger populations, as young people enter the working age, it is more difficult for them to find work, advance in their position, and obtain a pay raise. This difficulty in achieving financial success can lead to rising crime rates. In contrast, smaller (young) age groups may have more opportunities, which will lower subsequent rates of crime (Yang, 2008).

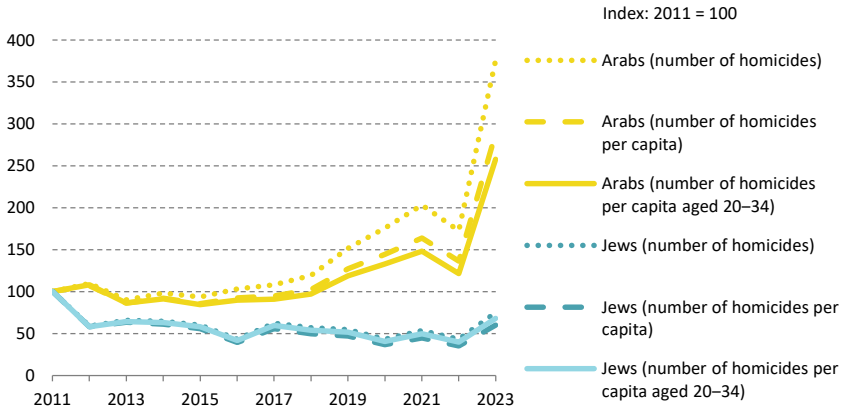
Prima facie, there are grounds for thinking that at least part of the increase in homicide rates in Israel's Arab population stems from rapid growth of young adult cohorts. From 2011–2023, the Jewish and Arab populations grew by 24.9% and 30.3% respectively (their respective annual population growth rates across these 12 years were 1.85% and 2.20%). Yet over the same period, the number of Jewish/Other Israeli males aged 20–34 only climbed by 9.9% (from 665.9 thousand to 731.6 thousand), while the number of Israeli Arab males climbed 45.8% (from 184.9 thousand to 269.6 thousand). These very different age-specific growth rates are related to [irregularities in Israel's age structure](#).

These differential growth rates have implications for homicides rates. If the homicide rate per 100,000 in the Arab population had remained constant at its 2011 levels, the absolute number of homicides would have increased at the same rate as the Arab population grew — by 30.3% by 2023. And if the homicide rate per 100,000 males aged 20–34 in the Arab population had remained constant at its 2011 levels, the absolute number of homicides would have increased by 45.8% by 2023. For Jews, the increases would have been a

more modest 24.9% (per 100,000 population) and 9.9% (per 100,000 Jewish males aged 20–34).

Figure 2 graphs Israeli homicide data since 2011 for Arabs (yellow lines) and Jews (blue lines) using the three measures discussed above. The dotted lines represent the change in the *absolute number* of homicides reported in the opening paragraphs, the dashed lines are the change in the *crude per capita homicide rates*, and the solid lines are the *homicide rates per 100,000 younger men*. To allow for easy comparison across each of these measures' quite different scales, we index them, using 2011 as the baseline year.

Figure 2. Indexed trends in the absolute number of homicides and two types of homicide rates, by type of measure and subpopulation



Source: Weinreb et al., Taub Center | Data: On number of homicides: 2011–2015 — Press reports; 2016–2023 — Israel Police data released under the Freedom of Information Law (Request No. 949/23, 1106/23, 5/24). On population: Assorted tables on mid-year population from Central Bureau of Statistics, Statistical Abstract of Israel, including population projections for 2023.

A number of things can be observed in Figure 2. First, the absolute number of homicides and homicide rates fell very sharply among Jews from 2011 to 2012 and then continued to fall, albeit at a much slower pace. As a result, by 2022, homicide rates among Jews were 60%–65% lower than their 2011 levels, though in 2023 they returned to their 2013–2014 levels. Even if we begin the index in 2012, thereby discounting the unusual single-year reduction from 2011–2012, rates in 2022 were 30%–40% lower than their 2012 levels. In either case, those are substantial reductions.

Second, trends among Israeli Arabs are clearly very different, but in terms of underlying homicide rates, they only became notably different, rising fast, after 2017. Between 2013 and 2017, homicide *rates* among Israeli Arabs were actually lower than they had been in 2011 or 2012, even as the absolute number of homicides was ticking upwards from 2016.

Given the sharp increases in both the number of homicides and the number of Israeli Arabs in the 20–34 age group, there are much larger differences between the different measures of homicide in the Arab population than in the Jewish population. In 2023, there were 233 homicides in the Arab population alone. In absolute terms, that is 3.8 times as many as in 2011 (and 3.6 times as many as in 2016). In terms of the per capita rate, this is a 2.9-fold increase. And in terms of the measure per 100,000 young Arab males, that is a 2.6-fold increase since 2011.

In fact, starting the trend from 2011 is also somewhat misleading, especially in the Arab population, since homicide rates were lower until around 2018. Using 2018 as the index year, there has been a 2.8-fold increase in the homicide rate in a five-year period. That is a massive increase.

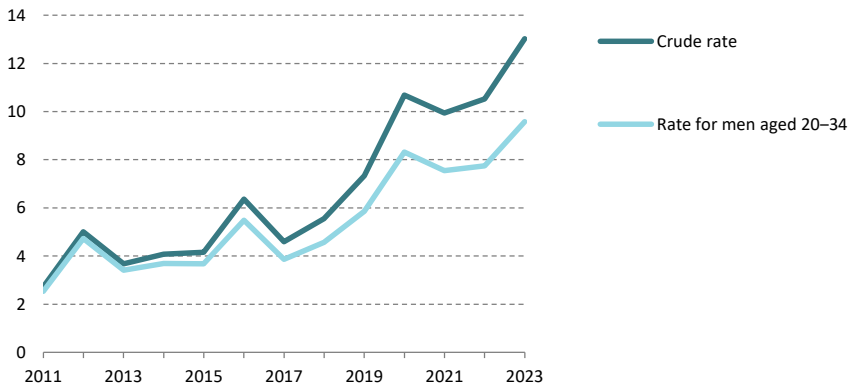
The sharp reduction in homicide rates in 2022 back to 2019 levels is also worth noting. We cannot ascribe that reduction to any single factor, but given that societies do not change drastically in a single year (absent calamities), it suggests that the policy or enforcement environment vis-à-vis violence in the Arab population was different in 2022.

Finally, the very different trajectories of the Jewish and Arab homicide rates up to 2022 have clear implications for shifting patterns of inequality in mortality. We graph these directly in Figure 3 using the ratio of the Arab homicide rate to the Jewish homicide rate. The dark blue line is the ratio of the crude rate. The light blue line is the ratio of the rate weighted by younger males. Whereas the ratio averaged around 4:1 on both rates until around 2015, and was around 10:1 and 8:1 on the crude rate and younger men rate, respectively, in the 2020–2022 period, it was 13:1 and 10:1, respectively, in 2023. To put that in perspective, the ratio of Black to White homicide rates in the US in the years before the COVID-19 epidemic was around 8:1.⁴ In other words, even though

4 CDC/National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System, 1999–2015, Mortality. CDC Wonder online database. (Accessed 22.5.2023). [QuickStats: Age-Adjusted Homicide Rates, by Race/Ethnicity — National Vital Statistics System, United States, 2015–2016. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2018;67:462.](#)

the underlying homicide rates are much higher in the US — we will see this below — the Arab:Jewish difference in homicide rates in Israel in 2023 was 1.6 times as large as the Black:White difference in homicide rates was before the pandemic in the US.

Figure 3. Ratio of Arab:Jewish homicide rates



Source: Weinreb et al., Taub Center | Data: On number of homicides: 2011–2015 — Press reports; 2016–2023 — Israel Police data released under the Freedom of Information Law (Request No. 949/23, 1106/23, 5/24). On population: Assorted tables on mid-year population from Central Bureau of Statistics, Statistical Abstract of Israel, including population projections for 2023.

International perspective

To get a different perspective on the homicide rates of Israel's two major subpopulations, we compare them to rates in 32 other OECD countries for which we have data on both age structure and the number of homicides (from 2019, the latest available across a large sample of countries).⁵

Israel's crude national homicide rate in 2019 was 1.56 per 100,000 people, the 10th highest rate (it was 1.59 in 2020, 1.84 in 2021, 1.50 in 2022 and 3.04 in 2023). In the same year, the crude rate for Arab Israelis was 4.9 homicides

⁵ We use data from Our World in Data. It combines data from multiple sources. Across the OECD countries, which is our focus, the data are reported directly by each country to the WHO Mortality database, UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and IHME Global Burden of Disease Project. Variability across these organizations in coding, data processing, and smoothing leads to somewhat different levels of mortality across data sources. However, Israel's ranking across countries, which is our focus here, is much more consistent.

per 100,000 and for Jews it was 0.67 homicides. These rates would place Arab Israelis just below the US on the crude rate — with the 5th highest homicide rate — and Jewish Israelis between Spain and Switzerland, with the 5th lowest crude homicide rate.

Since Israel has a relatively high number of young adults — in 2019, 21.3% of the population was aged 20–34 (20.0% among Jews/others and 24.9% among Arabs), relative to an average of 19.1% of the population in the other 32 countries in this list — it makes sense to also compare Israel to those countries using the alternative rate that is weighted by the number of people aged 20–34. On that measure, Israel, with 7.7 homicides per 100,000 people aged 30–34 drops to the 15th highest. However, Israeli Arabs, with 20.3 homicides are in the 6th highest place, and Israeli Jews, with 3.5 homicides, are the 4th lowest, just below Japan.

When we insert Israel's 2023 rates into this table — assuming, for the sake of argument, that these other countries' rates remained stable — the differences become even more pronounced. Israeli Arabs, with a current rate of 11.1 homicides per 100,000 people and 43.9 homicides per 100,000 people aged 20–34, climb to the 3rd highest position, far surpassing the US and trailing only Mexico and Colombia. Meanwhile, the rate among Israeli Jews, with 0.85 homicides per 100,000 people, is now higher than that of France, Italy, and the Netherlands, but still considerably lower than that of Sweden, New Zealand, South Korea, and other states with reputedly low rates of violent crime; and with 4.6 homicides per 100,000 people aged 20–34, they remain in the bottom third of the table. It is also worth noting that if Israeli Jews had maintained their 2022 homicide rates, they would have ranked bottom in terms of 2019 data.

Table 1. Homicide rate across 33 OECD countries, 2019, by denominator

Rank	Country	Homicides per 100,000 (all ages)	Rank	Country	Homicides per 100,000 (ages 20–34)
1	Colombia	35.71	1	Colombia	144.3
2	Mexico	24.55	2	Mexico	101.0
	ISRAEL: ARABS (2023)	11.11		ISRAEL: ARABS (2023)	43.88
3	Latvia	7.08	3	Latvia	40.10
4	United States	5.40	4	United States	26.30
	ISRAEL: ARABS (2019)	4.90	5	Estonia	26.30
5	Estonia	4.45		ISRAEL: ARABS (2019)	20.30
6	Chile	4.36	6	Chile	18.90
7	Slovakia	2.17	7	Slovakia	11.40
8	Türkiye	1.97	8	Portugal	9.33
9	Poland	1.60	9	Türkiye	8.62
10	ISRAEL (2019)	1.56	10	Poland	8.49
11	Portugal	1.56	11	Hungary	8.31
12	Canada	1.51	12	Finland	8.18
13	Finland	1.49	13	Canada	7.75
14	Hungary	1.49	14	Greece	7.71
15	Belgium	1.43	15	ISRAEL (2019)	7.70
16	South Korea	1.40	16	Belgium	7.69
17	Australia	1.31	17	South Korea	7.07
18	New Zealand	1.28	18	Sweden	6.08
19	Greece	1.26	19	Australia	6.05
20	Sweden	1.17	20	New Zealand	6.04
21	Czechia	0.99	21	Slovenia	5.75
22	Slovenia	0.92	22	Czechia	5.66
	ISRAEL: JEWS/OTHERS (2023)	0.85	23	Italy	5.11
23	Netherlands	0.84	24	France	4.61
24	France	0.81		ISRAEL: JEWS/OTHERS (2023)	4.58
25	Italy	0.81	25	Spain	4.51
26	Austria	0.79	26	Netherlands	4.47
27	Denmark	0.75	27	Germany	4.23
28	Germany	0.73	28	Austria	4.21
29	Spain	0.73	29	Denmark	3.84
	ISRAEL: JEWS/OTHERS (2019)	0.67	30	Japan	3.74
30	Switzerland	0.62		ISRAEL: JEWS/OTHERS (2019)	3.50
31	Norway	0.61	31	Switzerland	3.32
32	Japan	0.56	32	Norway	3.01
33	United Kingdom	0.51	33	United Kingdom	2.60

Source: Weinreb et al., Taub Center | Data: Our World in Data

The near future

Israeli Arabs are subject to a completely different risk of homicide than their non-Arab, mostly Jewish, compatriots. More worrying yet, the homicide rates of Jews and Arabs headed in very different directions between 2017–2022, and the nascent reversal in these trends seen in 2022 has evaporated. As a result, whereas the homicide rate for Israel's mostly Jewish non-Arab population fell to levels seen in some of the least violent high-income countries, the homicide rate for Israel's Arab population has moved squarely into the Americas' zone. It has not yet reached Mexican or Colombian levels, but it has left the Chilean, Argentine, and the US rate in the dust.

The data also show that while population growth, especially among younger adults, accounts for a portion of the rising number of homicides in the Arab population, a much larger part of the increase stems from a secular rise in the underlying homicide rates: *a 2.8-fold increase between 2018 and 2023*.

Over the next several years, the rate of increase of Israeli Arabs aged 20–34 will slow sharply, while those of Israeli Jews will increase. Again, this is related to distinct irregularities in the age structure of Israel's Arab and Jewish population, discussed in [prior research](#). Homicide rates among Jews have been very low over the last few years but it is not clear why they should remain so. Indeed, the relatively rapid rise in Jews' homicide rate in 2023 may be a sign that this increase is starting to happen. That would make sense sociologically. Cultures of violence spread and become self-perpetuating. The more such violence roots itself in the Jewish population, the more the combination of population growth and rising rates of violence will lead to much sharper increases in homicide rates within the Jewish population. This is exactly what happened in the Arab population over the last six years.

We therefore reiterate our call from our more expansive study on rising violence in Israel, especially, but not only, in Israel's Arab communities. Israel's police and security authorities need to be aware of underlying demographic forces and fluctuations, but also to the limits of those forces. Over and above the effects of demographic change, a longstanding literature in the social sciences shows that violence grows during periods of cultural, normative, and economic instability. So, whereas Israel's growing population presents a quite different set of challenges than those arising in most of Israel's high-income

counterparts — the latter are confronting shrinking populations of youth — it shares some of the instability: the transition to service economies that place a premium on higher education; the weakening of traditional authority structures; high levels of income inequality (though inequality fell as the smaller cohorts of the 2010s were entering the labor market). But beyond population growth, there is a wider set of socioeconomic, cultural, and political challenges that are feeding into these sharp rises in violence and homicide.

Why does the Taub Center care about this? Because ongoing violence in the medium to long term will directly affect economic opportunities in these communities as investors look elsewhere, the most able people leave, and those remaining spend more of their time behind barriers or in the protective embrace of their core networks and neighborhoods. Each of these has negative consequences for ongoing socioeconomic development, in particular in areas of health, education, and welfare, that are the focus of our research activity.

We return, therefore, to our prior call on Israeli policy makers. The time has come to confront the problem of violence in the Arab population. The longer we delay returning this particular genie to its bottle, the more difficult it will be.

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