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INTERVIEWER: Crime is one of the campaign issues in this fall's election. It's likely to increase in attention given a report that came out late Friday. That's when the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension released a summary of crime numbers statewide for 2021. Violent crime is up statewide by 21%. That's not only in the Twin Cities where crime was up by nearly 24%, but violent crime-- homicides, rape, assault-- is also up in greater Minnesota by 16%.

The report prompted some GOP hopefuls to blame DFL incumbents for their so-called soft on crime policies. But that's not quite accurate. To give us more insight and some perspective, I'm talking with Thomas Abt. He's a senior fellow at the Council on Criminal Justice in New York. Thomas Abt, welcome to the program.

THOMAS ABT: Good to be with you.

INTERVIEWER: So as I mentioned, in Minnesota, violent crime, according to our BCA, is up substantially-- double digits-- by more than 20%. I know you've been tracking crime numbers in communities across the country. What did you see happen in 2021?

THOMAS ABT: Sure. I think the numbers that we see in the Minnesota report largely track the numbers that we've seen across the country. In 2021, there was a 5% increase in homicide in most cities overall. That's a 5% increase over 2020, which was a historic year, unfortunately, for homicide where there was a 29% increase from the previous year. Aggravated and gun assault rates were also up slightly-- 4% and 8% respectively. But property crime actually fell in 2021 across most cities in the United States.

INTERVIEWER: I'm wondering about the homicide rates and the aggravated assaults being so high. Why do you think that is?

THOMAS ABT: Well, it's very hard to understand crime trends as they're happening. And even looking backwards, it can be difficult. But experts generally agree on three major likely causes. The first, of course, is the pandemic itself, which placed the individuals who are at the highest risk for gun violence under enormous strain.

But the pandemic also put the institutions that are responsible for engaging those individuals-- cops, courts, corrections, community-based organizations, and others-- it placed all of those institutions under tremendous strain as well. So that's the first reason.

The second reason is the unrest following the murder of George Floyd as your listeners well know in Minneapolis. There was a nationwide significant spike in violence in 2020 immediately after that event. And rates have increased ever since.

And then, finally, guns. There was a very large surge in legally-purchased guns beginning at the beginning of the pandemic. And unfortunately, of those legally-purchased guns, a larger share than normal have been actually getting into the wrong hands and finding their way to crime scenes.

INTERVIEWER: I'm wondering, who do we know is committing the crime?

THOMAS ABT: Well, in relation to gun violence, we know that it is typically perpetrated by a small number of at-risk individuals-- usually young men without a lot of opportunity or much hope. And it's important for your listeners to understand that this gun violence is much more concentrated than you might think.

It's not concentrated generically among large classes of people or in whole neighborhoods. It's concentrated in microlocations-- often known as hotspots-- a particular nightclub or a particular liquor store or something like that. And it's concentrated among very small networks of young men who are often involved in sort of back and forth retaliatory violence against one another.

INTERVIEWER: Gang related?

THOMAS ABT: Well, it can be gang related. But the term gang means so many things to different people. So it could be gang related. It could be crew, set, click-- whatever you want to call it. Gang sometimes implies that this violence is more organized than it actually is. But it is groups of young men acting against one another.

INTERVIEWER: I remember talking to a local criminologist a few years ago. We were talking about violence at that time had also spiked, had gone up. And he had said that it's cyclical. It depends-- when you look at the young folks coming up, it's not always high. It's like a roller coaster. It goes up and down and up and down. Is that right?

THOMAS ABT: Well, I think that it certainly varies year to year. But I don't know if it's a concrete cycle. I don't think we can predict with certainty when violence is going to go up or down.

We did see a significant surge, however, in the aftermath of the death of Michael Brown in Missouri. And so that may have been connected to the social unrest following the murder there or the killing there-- excuse me-- similar to what happened in 2020.

INTERVIEWER: I know that this is going to be upsetting for a number of people. But when it comes to the number of rapes, that has increased 7% in Minnesota statewide-- as much as 30% in one county. What are you seeing across the country when it comes to sexual assault?

THOMAS ABT: Sexual assault was not covered by our report. And the reason it was not covered is because the data city to city in terms of reporting is very spotty. And there's not always a very consistent methodology by how those sexual assaults are counted. And so one thing I would say is, that a very disturbing increase. But you need to look closely at the reporting practices of your particular jurisdictions.

INTERVIEWER: When you look at crime stats across the country-- and of course, people can use these figures, especially when it comes to the politics of crime-- what's the big takeaway for you as you examine these?

THOMAS ABT: I think one thing to note is that violent crime, particularly gun violence, has been up everywhere. It's been up in red states, in blue states, in red cities, in blue cities. And there's really not one political party that's associated with this rise in violence.

And I also think it's important as we examine what to do about this to sort of avoid some of the easy answers. I think that we see sort of a false choice that's being presented to people in the public. That this is either all about getting tough and adding more police and those things, or it's all about social justice and reducing mass incarceration.

And I think it's important for people to know that we need a balanced set of responses. We need to continue to reform our criminal justice system while paying close attention to violent crime and that we can do both at the same time.

INTERVIEWER: All right. Thomas Abt, I appreciate your time. Thank you so very much.

THOMAS ABT: Pleasure to be with you.

INTERVIEWER: Thomas Abt is a senior fellow at the Council on criminal justice located in New York.

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