



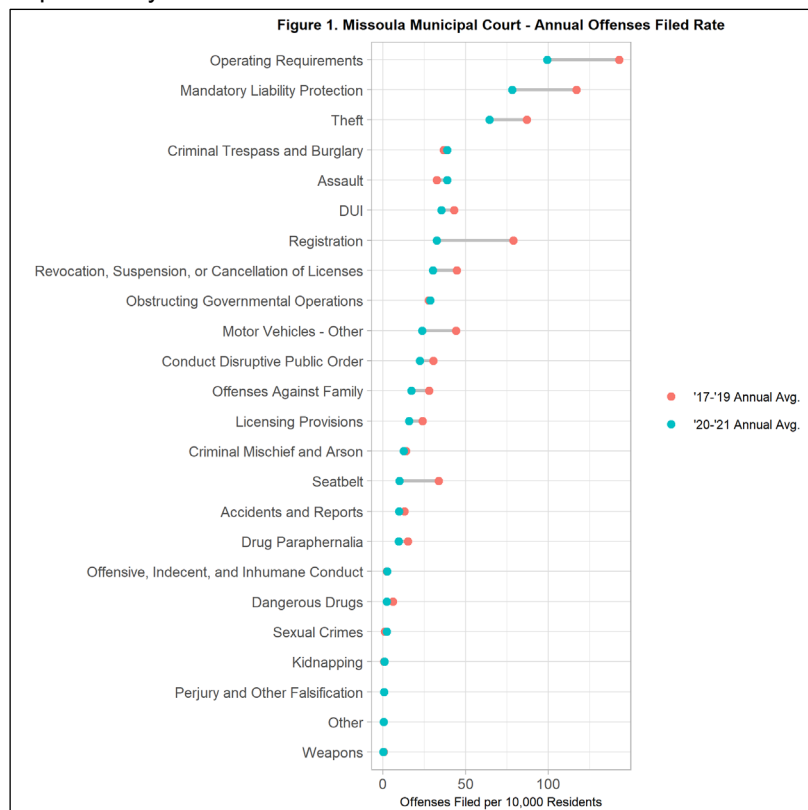
## Movement in County Crime Trends

### SECTION I. INTRODUCTION

This report provides an overview of recent crime trends in Missoula County and other similarly sized jurisdictions in the state of Montana. Reported statistics examine changes in crime volume between the 2017-2019 period and the 2020-2021 period, acknowledging that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic had dramatic and dynamic societal and economic impacts that extended to the criminal legal system. While this report provides an overview of changes in crime volume, this report does not provide an inference as to the drivers behind observed changes. Data for this report were extracted and analyzed from the State of Montana Fourth Judicial District Court (Missoula County), Missoula County Justice Court, Missoula Municipal Court, the United States Census Bureau, the Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), and the Montana Board of Crime Control (MBCC).

### SECTION II. OVERVIEW OF CRIME IN MISSOULA COUNTY

Across the three courts that serve Missoula County, Municipal and Justice Court have both seen dramatic reductions in criminal case filing volume over the last five years.<sup>1</sup> Only District Court, with 678 criminal cases filed in 2020 and 639 criminal cases filed in 2021, saw no significant change in criminal case filings compared to previous years.



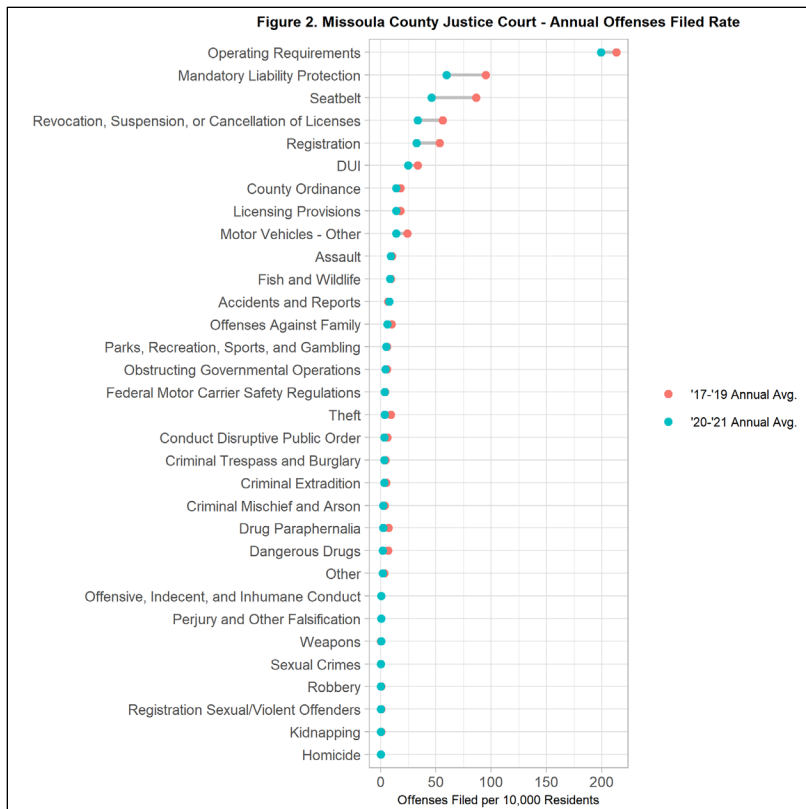
Municipal Court hears all misdemeanor-level criminal and traffic cases for which the alleged crime was committed within the limits of the City of Missoula. Examining the rate of offenses filed per 10,000 residents (the offense filed rate) in Municipal Court between the 2017-2019 and 2020-2021 periods, large reductions were observed for offenses primarily related to the operation of motor vehicles, though misdemeanor theft offenses also saw a notable reduction (see Figure 1). Notably, the offense filed rate was down or generally unchanged in every category of crime in the 2020-2021 period compared to the previous three-year annual average except for misdemeanor assaultive offenses and offenses related to misdemeanor criminal trespass and burglary.

Similar trends were observed in Missoula County Justice Court, which

<sup>1</sup> Filing volume statistics only include those cases in which the filed offense(s) were alleged to have occurred in the same calendar year in which the case was filed.



Figure 2. Missoula County Justice Court - Annual Offenses Filed Rate



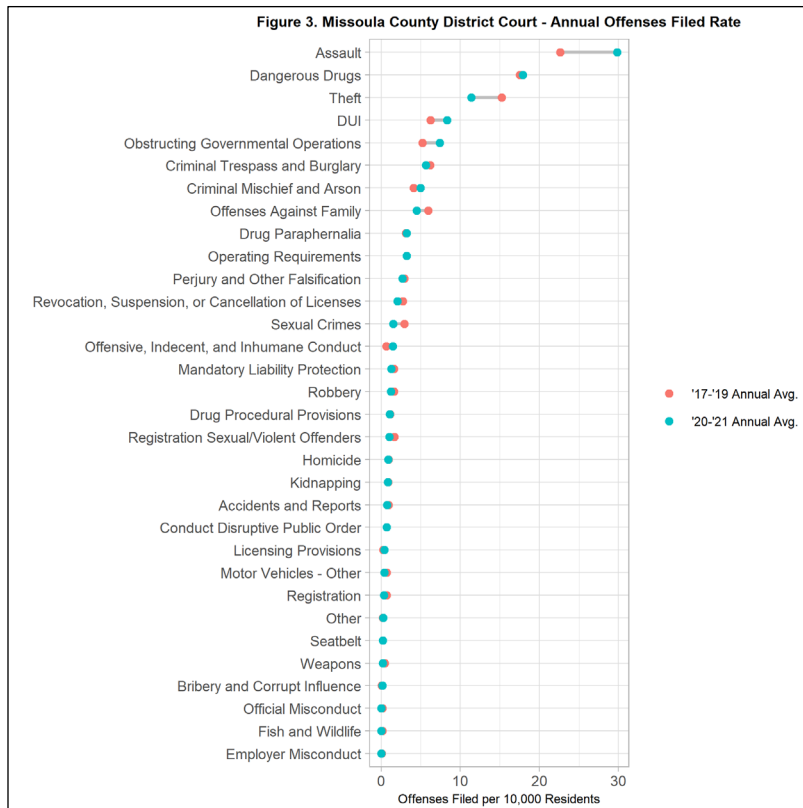
hears all criminal and traffic cases for alleged crimes that occurred within Missoula County but outside the Missoula city limits. Like Municipal Court, Justice Court also witnessed the offense filed rate fall or remain unchanged in essentially every category of crime, largely driven by reductions in offenses related to the operation of motor vehicles (see Figure 2). Unlike Municipal Court, Justice Court did not observe an increase in assaultive offenses between the 2017-2019 and 2020-2021 periods.

District Court, which hears all felony-level criminal cases in Missoula County, observed more variation in the offense filed rate across crime types. It is important to note that while District Court hears felony-level cases, not all offenses filed into District Court are in fact felonies, as it is common for defendants seen in District Court to be charged with both felony and

misdemeanor-level offenses in a single case. Between the 2017-2019 and 2020-2021 periods, District Court observed notable increases in the offense filed rate for assaultive offenses, DUIs, and obstructing governmental operations (largely composed of resisting arrest charges) (see Figure 3). The offense filed rates for all other crime types either fell or remain largely unchanged from the previous three-year average.

Examining the assaultive offense category further in District Court, the sizeable jump in the offense filed rate for these crime types appears primarily driven by increases in assault with a weapon, criminal endangerment, assault on a peace or judicial officer, and intimidation. The offense filed rate for strangulations also increased significantly in the 2020-2021 period, though some caution should be exercised when assessing the

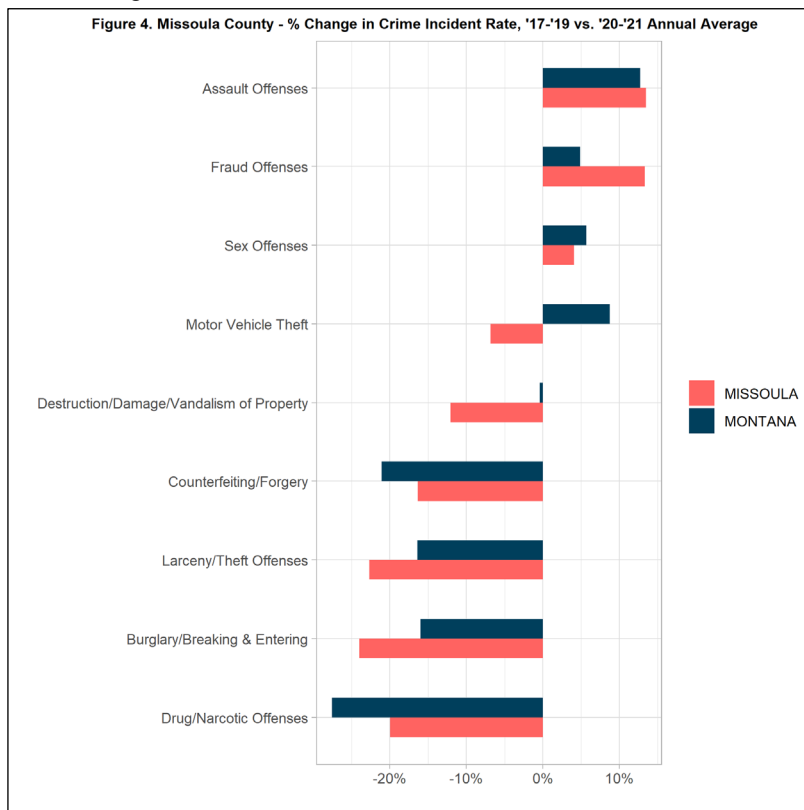
Figure 3. Missoula County District Court - Annual Offenses Filed Rate





magnitude of the increase. The Montana Code Annotated did not include a specific statute for strangulation until 2018 and what are now categorized as strangulations would previously be filed under some other statute, typically aggravated assault, if filed at all. As a result, the offense filed rate for 2017-2019 is likely under-reported. Notably, the offense filed rate for partner or family member assault, which is typically one of, if not the, most commonly filed persons crime in Missoula County, largely remained unchanged between the two periods of interest.

Taken together, court data suggest an elevated level of assaultive offenses in the 2020-2021 period, with indication that the most notable increases are concentrated at the felony-level. While a few other crime types have seen more modest increases over the same period, the offense filed rate in most crime categories is down or unchanged.



Generally, these data are consistent with data reported by law enforcement. National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS) data reported to the BJS by law enforcement agencies within Missoula County indicates a sizeable jump in the incident rate for assaultive offenses (13.5%) that exceeds the increase observed in the state rate. Increases were also observed for incidents involving fraud and sex offenses, though the increase in the county rate (4.1%) of sex offenses was below the increase in the state rate (5.7%). The increase in sex offense incidents in Missoula County may be correlated with the small increase in the offense filed rate for misdemeanor sex offenses observed in Municipal Court. The 13.3% increase in the incident rate of fraud offenses with no observed increase in the offense filed rate for associated offenses in Missoula County courts requires further

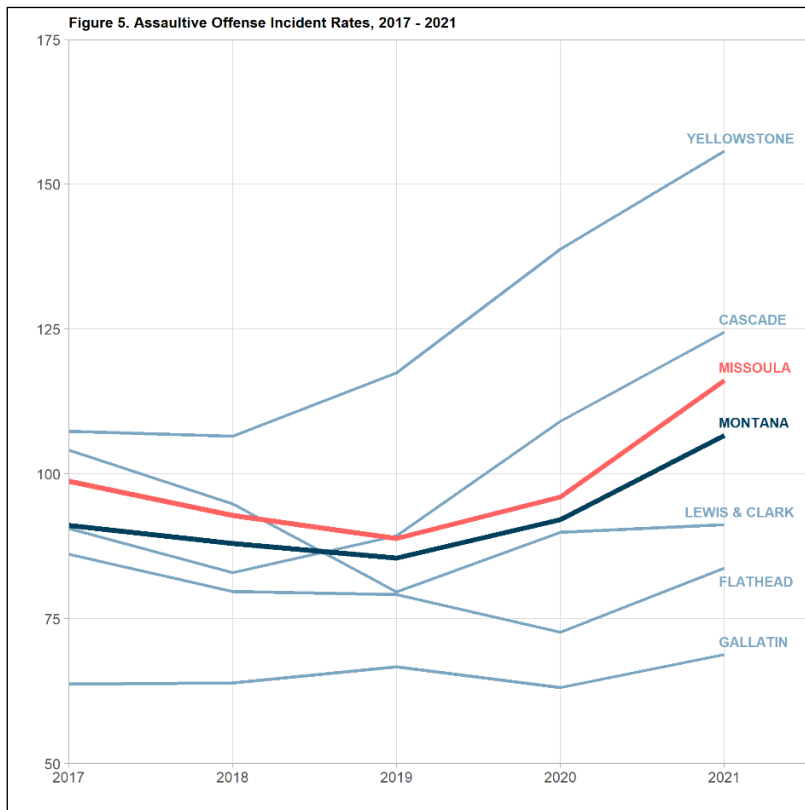
investigation. Notably, the reported incident rates for property offenses in Missoula County witnessed large reductions in the 2020-2021 period compared to the previous three-year average and largely exceed reductions observed at the state level. Incident rates involving drug offenses in Missoula County also saw a sizeable reduction (19.9%), though to a lesser extent than at the state level (27.6%).

### SECTION III. COMPARISON TO OTHER COUNTIES

In 2021, overall incident rates reported by participating law enforcement agencies to the BJS reached their lowest point in the last five years in four of Montana's six largest counties, with the exceptions being Yellowstone County (713.7 incidents per 10,000 residents) and Cascade County (669.3 incidents per 10,000 residents). However, Missoula County's overall incident rate (504.9), while reduced, sat notably higher than its other peer counties and the state of Montana (430.5). The lowest incident rates in 2021 were observed in Gallatin County (280.7), Flathead County (312.6), and Lewis & Clark County (395.7).



Figure 5. Assaultive Offense Incident Rates, 2017 - 2021



Movements in incident rates for assaultive offenses has also been varied. While Lewis & Clark County, Flathead County, and Gallatin County have witnessed comparatively muted movements in assaultive incident rates, sharp increases beginning in 2018 or 2019 have been noted for Yellowstone County, Cascade County, Missoula County, and the state of Montana in the aggregate (see Figure 5).

While NIBRS provides minimal detail as to the nature of these offenses, in 2021, Missoula observed levels of aggravated assault (33.5 incidents per 10,000 residents) and simple assault (74.7 incidents per 10,000 residents) that exceed the state rate (30.1 and 66.5, respectively), with levels of intimidation (13.1) on par with the state rate.

Although incident rates for drug offenses are generally at their lowest levels since 2017, the prevalence of

substance use and its potential nexus to other types of crime is a common topic amongst criminal legal system agencies. Like trends in other crime categories, Yellowstone County and Cascade County observed the highest incident rates for drug offenses in 2021 relative to other large counties, followed by Missoula County and the state of Montana. Lewis & Clark County, Flathead County, and Gallatin County, by comparison, all had significantly lower incident rates for these types of crimes in 2021 relative to their peers. Importantly, however, several counties experienced their most significant year-to-year drop in drug-incident rates between 2020 and 2021, which is likely due, at least in part, to the legalization of recreational marijuana beginning in 2021.

Examining drug seizure rates by drug type reported by the Montana Board of Crime Control, annual seizure rates per every 10,000 residents for marijuana/hashish are down significantly across the state of Montana and the state's six largest counties in the 2020-2021 period compared to the previous three year average (see

Figure 6. Nominal Change in Annual Average Drug Seizure Rates, '17-'19 vs. '20-'21

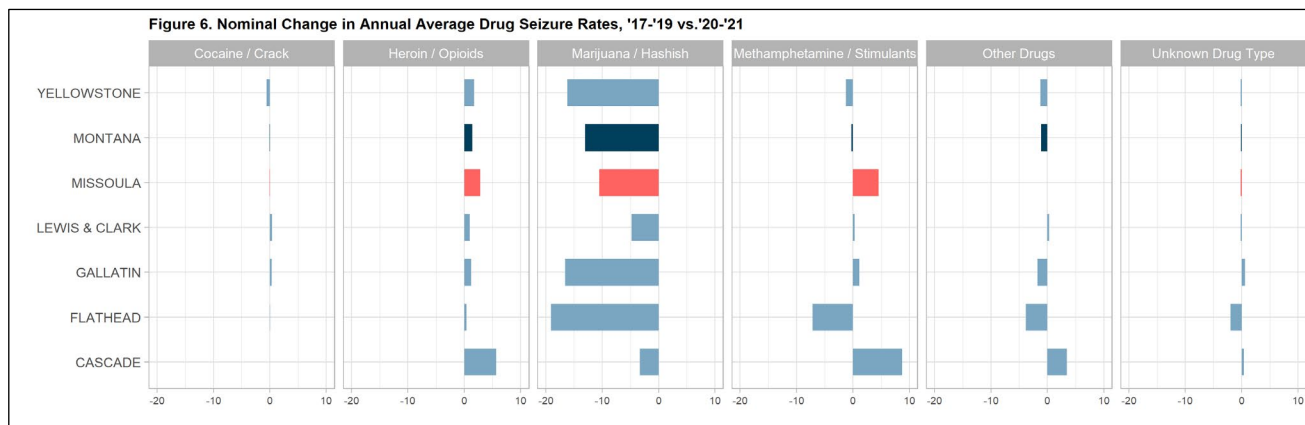




Figure 6). However, slight increases in seizure rates for heroin/opioids were observed across the state in the 2020-2021 period. On average, Missoula County saw 2.8 more heroin/opioid seizures per year per every 10,000 residents in the 2020-2021 period compared to the previous three years. This increase in the seizure rate for heroin/opioids was second only to Cascade County (5.7 more seizures per year per every 10,000 residents). Additionally, while movements in the seizure rate for methamphetamine/stimulants were varied across counties, Missoula County saw an average increase in the annual seizure rate of 4.5 more seizures per year per every 10,000 residents involving these drugs. Again, Missoula County was second only to Cascade County (8.8 more seizures per year per every 10,000 residents) in the observed increase in the seizure rate of methamphetamine/stimulants.

Notably, there is a moderate positive correlation (0.44) observed when looking at the correlation between county drug seizure rates for all non-marijuana/hashish drug types and incident rates involving assaultive offenses. When looking at the same correlation between seizure rates for just methamphetamine/stimulants and incident rates involving assaultive offenses, the strength of the correlation increases further (0.52). While caution should be exercised, these results indicate a potential relationship between drug prevalence (as indicated by drug seizures) and incidents of violent crime that warrants further investigation.

## SECTION IV. CONCLUSION

Based on available court and law enforcement data, crime rates have generally trended downward or remained steady for most types of crime in Missoula County over the last five years. However, crime rates observed in the county still exceed those observed in several other similarly sized jurisdictions and in the state of Montana in 2021. Of particular concern is the significant growth of incidents involving assaultive offenses, particularly assault with a weapon, criminal endangerment, assault on a peace or judicial officer, intimidation, and strangulation over the last few years. Additionally, although incidents involving overall drug offenses have trended downward, drug seizure data suggests that the prevalence of certain more dangerous drugs, namely methamphetamine/stimulants and heroin/opioids, are on the rise.

It is difficult to assess the extent to which changes in the prevalence of substance use and distribution have contributed to the increase in violent offenses with available data and further work with local, state, and federal criminal legal system agencies is needed to understand this dynamic. Additionally, it is still unknown what impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had and may continue to have on crime rates. Continued monitoring and study is necessary to further evaluate these questions and to determine whether the observed movements discussed in this report will persist in the years to come.