Crime rates [1]

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by Dennis F. Daniels, 2006; Revised October 2022.

The frequency of major crimes in North Carolina-including murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, and larceny-generally has increased with the size of the state's population. Statistics of violent crimes over four centuries, particularly murder and rape, are difficult to track. One of the earliest surviving records of a person charged with murder in North Carolina dates from October 1685, when a young enslaved person named Exeter pleaded guilty of killing his enslaver, Richard Bentley. For his crime, Exeter was "Hanged by the Neck till he be dead." Petty arguments, personal insults, or simply intoxication often caused people to fight and sometimes kill others. However, a person who was tried for murder during the early nineteenth century was often acquitted; between 1811 and 1815, 64 courts tried 89 people but convicted only 26 of them.

Many instances of rape have gone unreported, and the private nature of the crime has made convictions problematic. In the colonial era, English law defined rape as a felony, as it has remained throughout history. A survey of North Carolina records from 1663 to 1776 showed that only 9 cases of rape were brought to trial, and of the 7 known outcomes, none ended in a conviction. A document of 1728 states that although a bill of indictment was presented by a grand jury "against David Oliver for ravishing Elizabeth Hassell," Oliver was "discharg'd by proclamation" and spared even the court costs. The paucity of statistics for rape also applies to antebellum North Carolina. The state prison's annual report for 1871-72 listed 8 prisoners incarcerated for rape and 6 confined for attempted rape. In 1899-1900 the prison took in 5 persons convicted of assault with intent to rape, 16 of attempted rape, and 8 of actual rape. In 1950-52-50 years later-prison authorities listed only 18 prisoners incarcerated for rape.

The Reconstruction era [2], plagued by economic woes, heated racial discord, and political unrest, was a particularly violent time in North Carolina. After the 1868 killing of a black man in Warren County [3], Governor William W. Holden [4] declared: "The habit which some of our people have of taking their guns, to be used against colored people, for offences or supposed offences which inflame their passions must be put down." The state prison's annual report for 1871-72 indicates that it held 39 prisoners confined for murder, manslaughter, or felonious slaying; but of the 150 individuals who entered that year, only 7 had been convicted of killing another person.

Violent crime continued to rise in twentieth-century North Carolina. In 1899-1900 the state prison took in 5 offenders for felonious slaying, 24 for manslaughter, 37 for first-degree murder, and 8 for second-degree murder. Between 1909 and 1928, 395 people were charged with first-degree murder, and by 1951 North Carolina ranked seventh in the United States for non-negligent manslaughter, with 110 deaths. In 1965 the Charlotte metropolitan area recorded the highest per capita murder rate in the nation, with 58 murders, or 15.9 killings per 100,000 people. In 1973 the state counted 630 murders-a monthly average of 53, or approximately 1 murder every 14 hours. About 25 percent of these killings were by a family member.

In the second half of the twentieth century, as the crime of rape began to receive more attention through various legislative and social initiatives, statistics began to give a more accurate picture of the incidence of rape in North Carolina. In 1966, 523 cases were reported; in 1967, 551; and in 1973, 805. By the 1990s the number of reported rapes or attempted rapes had skyrocketed.

By 2000, with a population of about 8 million, North Carolina ranked ninth in the total number of crimes reported in the United States, with 4,919.3 crimes per 100,000 people, and eighteenth in the number of violent crimes, with 497.6 per 100,000 people. The state actually led the nation in burglaries, with 1,216 per 100,000 people. North Carolina's national rankings in other major categories included tenth in murder (7 per 100,000 people), twelfth in robbery (156.5 per 100,000 people), thirteenth in larceny (2,891.8 per 100,000 people), twenty-second in aggravated assault (307 per 100,000 people), and thirty-fourth in rape (27.1 per 100,000 people).

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