

Homeless in Utah: What happened to Rio Grande crime after Operation Rio Grande?

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SALT LAKE CITY — Shortly after dawn on a warm August morning, a chaotic scene broke out in Salt Lake's Rio Grande district. Scores of authorities from multiple jurisdictions flooded the area in what was described by Utah's lieutenant governor as a "very targeted and very surgical" approach to crime. It was called Operation Rio Grande.

The large police presence within the blocks of the city's homeless shelter [on Aug. 14, 2017](#), was just the beginning of a long-term plan that Lt. Gov. Spencer Cox said was designed to reestablish public safety and order, help treat those dealing with mental health problems or drug addiction and give those within Utah's homeless community the tools to possibly rejoin the workforce.

So why did the state feel the need to take such a dramatic approach? KSL.com took to data to find out. We obtained Salt Lake City police data from January 2007 through December 2018 to see how crime has shifted over time, and how it changed after August 2017.

How we define Rio Grande

KSL.com follows the Salt Lake City Police Department's March 2017 definition for Rio Grande: North Temple to 900 South, and from 300 East to I-15. As of 2019, police trimmed the southern portion of their perimeter to 700 South and eastern portion to State Street.

Salt Lake City Police Chief Mike Brown said he did not know why the boundary changed. For consistency, we kept our data perimeters static.

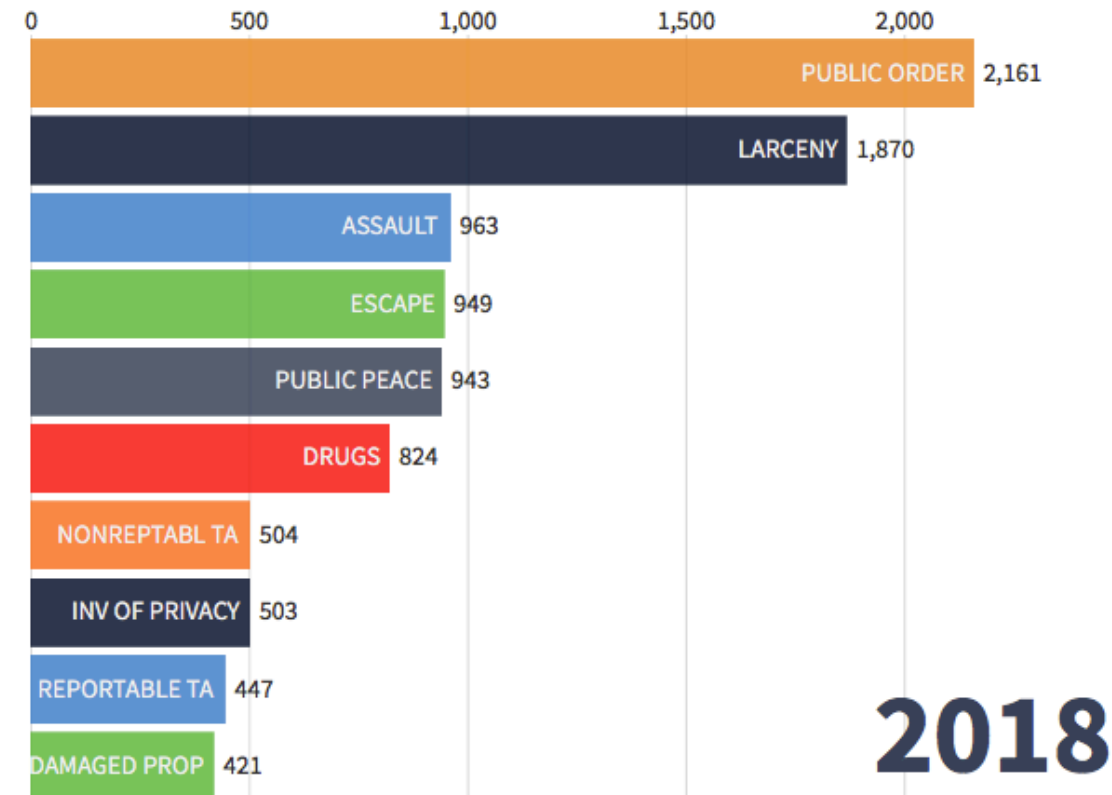
How we defined crime

We split crime into two categories: Part I and Part II, as defined by FBI's "[Uniform Crime Reporting](#)." Part I crimes are major crimes like homicide, robbery or aggravated assault. Part II crimes are smaller, like public order, intoxication or forgery.

Our data shows total police reports filed for each crime in the Rio Grande area, but not calls. While calls do siphon police resources, not all calls turn into crime reports. Salt Lake police have handled Part I crime investigations since the multiagency effort began in August 2017, and the department's data includes all crime in the Rio Grande area where an arrest or citation occurred.

Salt Lake City Police Department Cases (2007-18)

A Top 10 look at all the SLCPD cases for each year in the Rio Grande District of Salt Lake City, Utah.



Source: • The data was made publicly available by the Salt Lake City Police Department and cleaned by the SLCPD KSL.com team to isolate the Rio Grande District area. 

2018

• A Flourish data visualisation

Crime frequency

What does crime in the Rio Grande area look like? Data shows the most common offenses in this area between 2007 through 2018 were larceny, violation of public order, possession of drugs, escape from authority, violation of public peace, assault, invasion of privacy and liquor offenses.

A growing drug problem

Drugs were a problem in the Rio Grande district in 2007, but data from Salt Lake police shows the problem escalated a decade later. Americans were just starting to realize the full impact of the opioid crisis after 2010, and that played a role in the Rio Grande drug spike, Brown said.

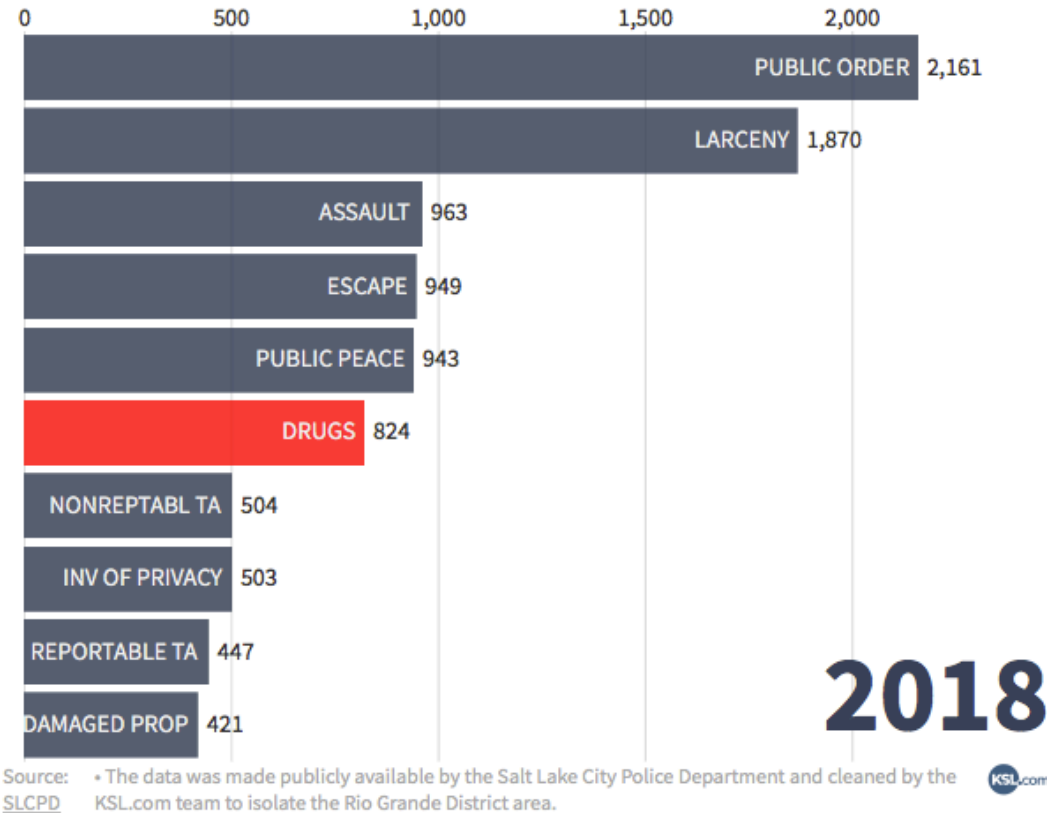
Opioid addiction ruined lives. People from all over the state came to Salt Lake City because that's where addiction treatment clinics or homeless resources were. As Brown put it, "All roads of addiction led to Salt Lake City."

State officials met many who had developed prescription pill addictions, were cut off by doctors and had turned to street drugs, Cox, who is a key player in the Operation Rio Grande project, said.

Then, in October 2015, Utah changed the criminal code. The state downgraded drug possession from a third-degree felony, (second-degree in some cases close to a church), to a class-A misdemeanor, Brown explained.

Salt Lake City Police Department Drug Cases (2007-18)

A look at the amount of drug cases for each year in the Rio Grande District of Salt Lake City, Utah.

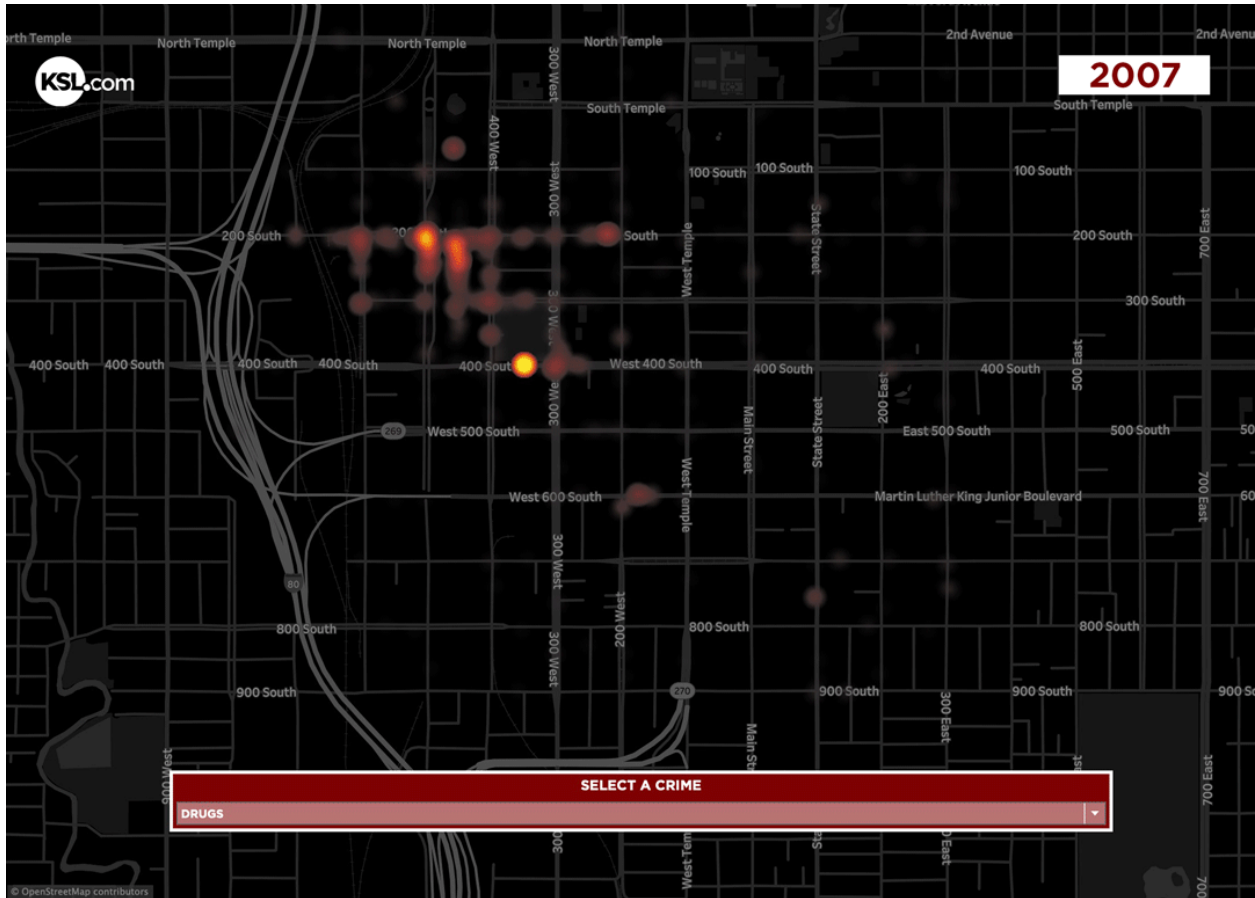


A Flourish data visualisation

"Honestly that's where it should be," he said. "We shouldn't be trying to arrest individuals that are addicted and thinking that's going to cure them."

However, it also meant offenders would get ticketed, their drugs confiscated and they'd return to the street where they'd find drugs again. Officers reported to Brown that they'd cite the same offenders over and over.

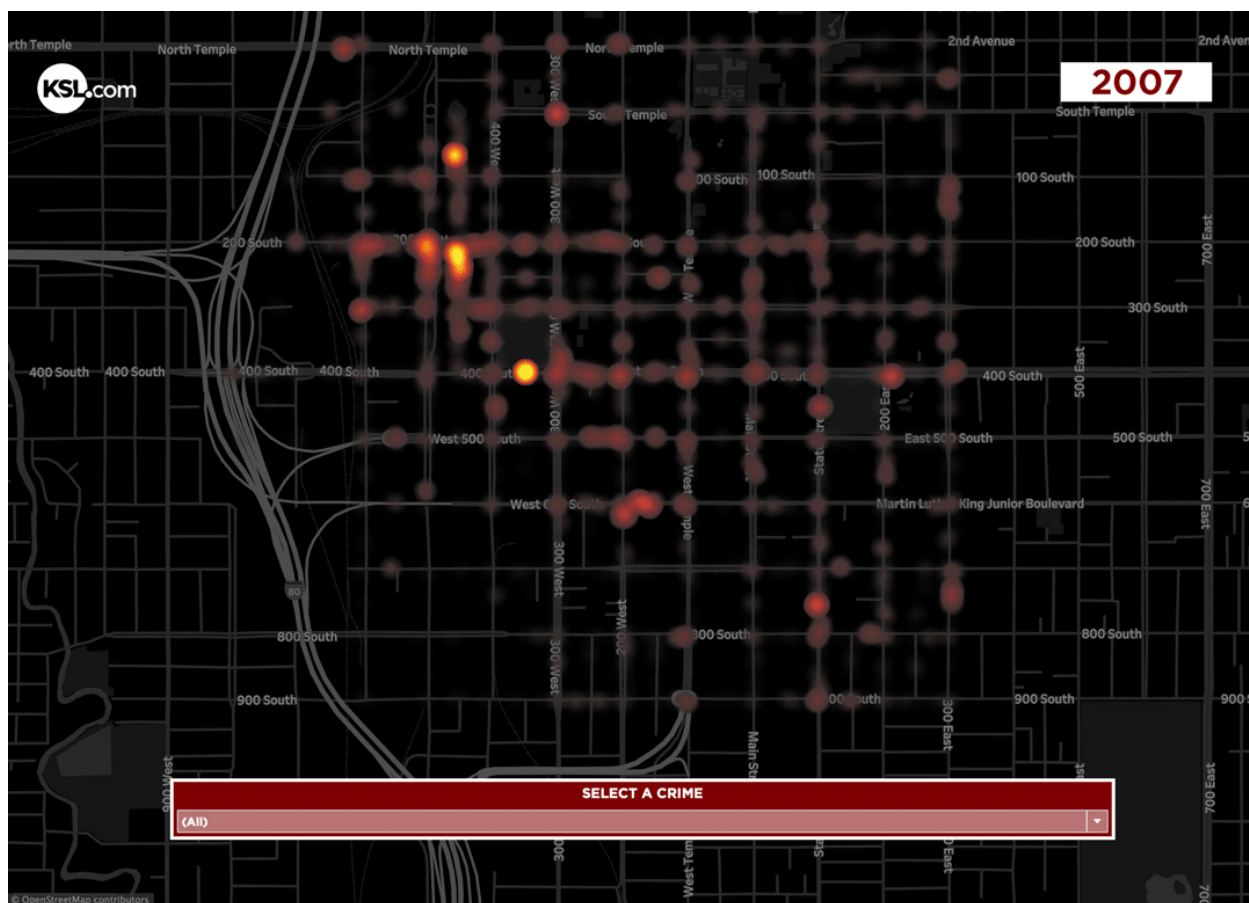
We created a heat map from the data to see where these crimes were happening. Drug crimes started to center around the homeless shelter on Rio Grande Street during this time.



“It was an open-air drug market. I walked down there with the police and saw people openly using and dealing in front of the cops. Nobody cared,” Cox said.

Other crime

Overall crime as reported by Salt Lake police has fluctuated over the past decade. Much like drug crimes, it started to shift toward Rio Grande in 2014 and 2015. Those living or working in the area flooded police with calls, according to Cox.



"We looked at the data and there had been an infiltration on the drug side by at least two drug cartels and that our homeless friends were being preyed upon and were being used as mules, drug traffickers and dealers, as well," Cox said. "All of this led to a point. There were a couple of homicides within — if I remember — in a two-week period. There were just a feeling that enough was enough."

Crime after Operation Rio Grande

Cox said state officials especially wanted to crack down on Part I crime and, in 2018, Salt Lake police reported a massive decline from the 5-year average of those crimes in the area. Overall crime (Part I and II) dropped to a decade low in 2018, too.

"It was a tremendous decrease," Salt Lake City Police Deputy Chief Josh Scharman said.

The heat map shows that crime in the area began to spread out again in 2018, and was no longer centralized around Rio Grande Street.

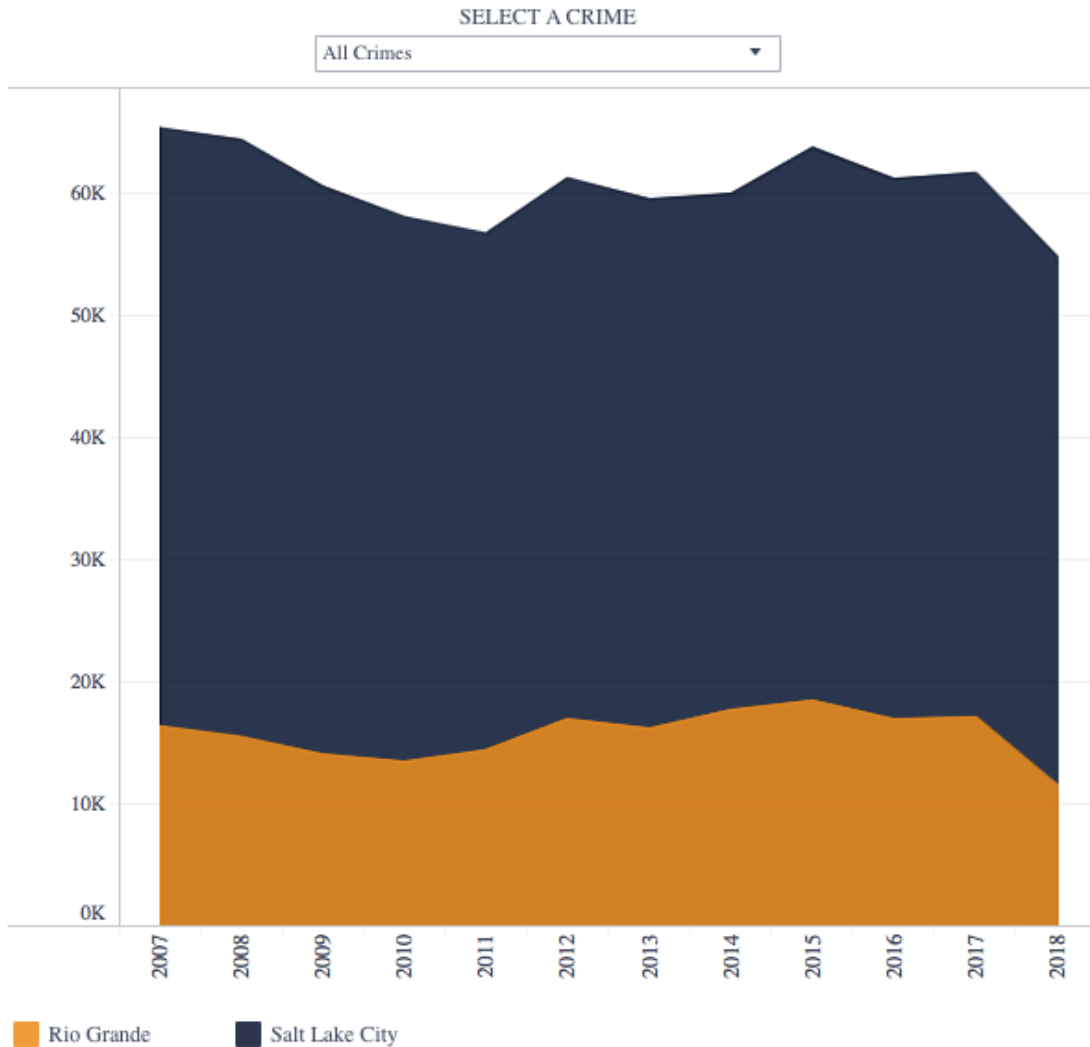
In summer 2017, police reinstated drug possession arrests. Brown said that allowed them to get offenders into drug or mental health programs.

It is worth noting that not everyone has been on board with Operation Rio Grande. Some organizations, such as the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah, have voiced concerns that the increased police presence was criminalizing homelessness. [The ACLU blasted the project](#) as a "hurried and heavy-handed response conceived with little appreciation for its long-term consequences."

State officials, on the other hand, have been pleased with results so far because it has "changed the culture around homelessness," Cox said.

"It hasn't been perfect," he added, but he also said he felt police had a better handle on crime in the area than before the operation began.

Salt Lake City Police Department Cases (Year-by-Year)



The chart is made from publicly-available case data from the Salt Lake City Police Department. The data was filtered to highlight the Rio Grande District (N. Temple to 900 So. and 300 E. to I-15).

What happens next?

The multiagency effort was slated to end this June as the state splits its homeless resources into various areas across the county and [closes the downtown Rio Grande shelter](#). Salt Lake police believe that may be around September now.

Officials believe the crime won't return to what it was in the past once the multiagency effort ends. There are plans to have increased police backup near new shelters in the valley that the state may play a smaller role in.

"If we end up creating three Rio Grandes like they were in 2016 and 2017, then we will have failed greatly," Cox said. "No one wants to see us go back. We're 100 percent committed to doing whatever it takes to ensure the safety of our public and the safety of our homeless friends."