

# Study links growth of Airbnb listings in Boston to 911 calls

The short-term rental giant disputes the findings, which suggest spread of listings has led to increase in reports of violent crimes in city neighborhoods.

By **Angela Yang** Globe Correspondent, Updated July 23, 2021, 8:51 a.m.



A new study by Northeastern University researchers found crime rates rise after Airbnb listings proliferate in a neighborhood. BLOOMBERG

Airbnb has ingrained itself into travel culture in recent years. But a [new study](#) from Northeastern University links the growth of units listed on the short-term rental app in

## Boston to 911 calls reporting violent crimes.

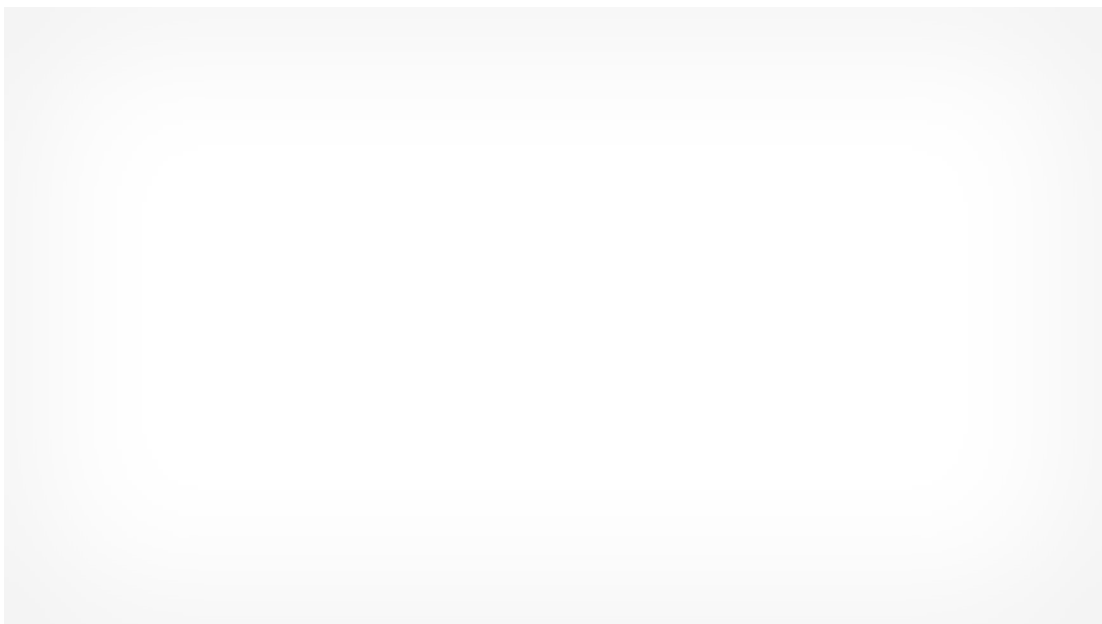
The study, published last week, highlights how the proliferation of short-term rentals in some Boston neighborhoods is leading — over time — to a breakdown in trust and community bonds, said co-authors Dan O’Brien and Babak Heydari. That, in turn, makes people more likely to call the police on suspicious behavior.

“When you think about Airbnbs, which are literally the most transient population you can imagine, it’s people moving in and out every few days,” said O’Brien, who teaches public policy and criminal justice at Northeastern. “That household itself is just a nonplayer in the social fabric of the neighborhood, and you’ve essentially created a hole there.”

The effect grows stronger over time. 911 call rates don’t change much immediately, the researchers found, but they begin increasing after a year, and more the year after that. This suggests a gradual erosion of the small interactions that build and maintain community bonds.

Lately, scrutiny has grown over safety concerns tied to Airbnb.

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Last month, a Wellesley woman [filed a lawsuit against](#) the company after allegedly

being attacked at a rental in Barcelona. The same month, Bloomberg reported Airbnb

spends about \$50 million per year in payouts to victims of crimes that occur during their stays.

The researchers said they undertook the study because while the question of Airbnb's link to crime had been posed in writings, no one had "done their due diligence" to test the data.

Meanwhile, Tom Nolan, visiting associate professor of sociology at Emmanuel College and former Boston police officer, said their reliance on 911 call data to measure crime is flawed.

"911 call data doesn't mean anything other than what a caller reports that he or she views as what is going on," Nolan said. "In most cases, what the caller reports is not in fact what has occurred, if anything has occurred."

Airbnb disputed the findings as well, issuing [a lengthy rebuttal](#) that blasts the study for "flawed methodology" and saying it fails to show a link between the presence of Airbnbs to any increase in crime. The company also questioned whether a narrow study of Boston could be extrapolated to other cities.

"The result is a paper with inaccurate conclusions not supported by the evidence," Airbnb wrote.

But to some in Boston, the findings ring true.

Ford Cavallari, chair of Boston's Alliance of Downtown Civic Organizations, said the proliferation of Airbnbs in residential buildings compromises security because these rental operators don't have the same resources a hotel would. He started hearing from worried neighbors years ago, when he was president of the North End/Waterfront Residents Association.

“I would have seniors in our meetings come up to me and say, ‘I’m really concerned, and I’m scared because there are all these strangers in the neighborhood walking with these rolly bags,’” said Cavallari, who advocated for the city’s [stricter rules governing short-term rentals](#).

Criminologist Janese Free, an associate sociology professor at Emmanuel, said it’s possible such sentiments contribute to more 911 calls, especially ones made out of implicit bias. But, she said, linking the increase to Airbnb might misdirect public attention.

“It’s taking the focus off of the more macro-level issues that cause crime: social inequality, joblessness, residential segregation,” Free said. “And it’s putting it on something that I feel like is a flash in the pan.”

O’Brien said that looking into the correlation in Boston was a first step toward understanding whether a link exists nationwide but that other researchers should test their findings in other cities.

“This is how science works,” he said. “We’d like to see people . . . test it more in additional locales in nuanced ways.”

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