Every Three Seconds

Unlocking Police Data on Arrests

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Overview

More than 10 million arrests are made each year in the United States. Although arrest is an important tool in some situations, its overuse can have many detrimental effects. These include, but are not limited to, mass incarceration, diminished public health and economic prosperity, racial inequities, and unwieldy levels of bureaucratic work for officers. The widespread use of arrests also damages already fractured trust between police and many of the communities they serve. Given these impacts, arrests should be monitored carefully and applied sparingly. Alternatives to arrest need to be explored and implemented. However, this space has seen little innovation to date, largely because the data needed to drive and inform change is inaccessible.

To help unlock this important knowledge, the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) developed Arrest Trends. This tool provides answers to fundamental questions about American policing by organizing publicly available datasets into one easy-to-use data platform where users can access, customize, and analyze decades of policing data that previously had been disparately located and difficult to interpret. Users can explore trends in arrests, arrest demographics, clearance rates, victimizations, and data reported at both the local and national levels to understand how these vary by time, location, and offense type. *Arrest Trends* aims to empower diverse stakeholders such as community advocates, police practitioners, and policymakers to explore and better understand police enforcement.

The most important aspects of *Arrest Trends* are the actionable findings that can be quickly generated and visualized. These findings will create an understanding of, and drive needed improvements to, police enforcement in America. Initial analyses of *Arrest Trends*' data paint a striking picture, showing that despite recent reductions, the use of arrest is still staggeringly high. The tool reveals that, although arrest volumes have dropped by more than 25 percent since 2006, an arrest is made every three seconds. Fewer than 5 percent of these are for serious violent crimes. Instead, the bulk of police work is in response to incidents that are not criminal in nature and the majority of arrests involve non-serious offenses like "drug abuse violations"—arrests for which increased more than 170 percent between 1980 and 2016—disorderly conduct, and a nondescript low-level offense category known as "all other non-traffic offenses." Collectively, these offenses make up more than 80 percent of all arrests. Further, these heavily arrested non-serious offenses disproportionately impact people of color. The data shows that arrests are applied with geographic disparity as well, concentrating most prominently in metropolitan—and particularly suburban—areas.

The enforcement of overwhelmingly low-level offenses may challenge police-community relationships—which are often already frayed—impairing police effectiveness and public safety as a whole. When people do not trust the police, they may be less likely to report crimes or assist in investigations. Indeed, *Arrest Trends* shows us that fewer than 40 percent of victims report their experiences to the police, and fewer than 25 percent of offenses known to the police are then cleared (meaning that they are solved by arrest).

Collectively, the data presented in *Arrest Trends*, and the findings in this report, challenge the notion that America's reliance on enforcement is a necessary component to achieving oft-stated public safety goals—or indeed, a means of achieving justice or equity. The launch of *Arrest Trends* marks Vera's most recent effort to reduce the criminal justice system's footprint—by unlocking key policing data and, in doing so, elevating the narrative of overreliance on arrests and the need for viable alternatives. In this report, readers will find information about the need for greater access to policing data, an overview of the *Arrest Trends* tool as well as several initial findings gleaned from it, and future directions for this work.

The Issue

The use of arrests can have a multitude of detrimental individual, community, and agency level effects. (See Table 1.) These disproportionately impact racial and ethnic minorities in ways that exacerbate existing structural disadvantages, lack of economic opportunity, and material insecurity. Although arrests are a necessary part of the justice system, police officers have discretion to take alternative, less invasive courses of action (such as applying de-escalation techniques or referring

people to supportive services), which in many circumstances may be more appropriate for or beneficial to the individual person, community, officer, and agency.   Yet few formal alternatives to arrest currently exist.

Table 1:
Detrimental effects of arrests

Individual level	Community level	Police agency/officer level
Financial challenges associated with underemployment, reduced wage growth, and legal and incarceration expenses	Fractured police-community relations	Traditional policing practices are expensive
Difficulty obtaining and retaining housing	Perceptions of unsafety and police distrust	Limited resources available for community and proactive policing purposes
Diminished physical and mental well-being	Minimal collaboration on public safety goals with police departments	Risks of physical harm to officers
Legal risks, such as detainment, loss of child custody, and deportation	Civil unrest in response to perceived unfairness of arrest practices	Poor officer morale, which can result in overuse of sick days and recruitment challenges
	Risk of harm to innocent bystanders	

Researchers, practitioners, and advocates alike need information on the dynamics of policing to better understand how the overreliance on arrests drives mass incarceration and deepens other social inequities. But unless one knows how to navigate the multitude of public datasets available, there is no easy way to find and interpret data on the basic components of American policing—such as how often people are arrested, who police are arresting and why, or whether community members collaborate with and report crimes to the police.

Although police agencies and the federal government invest significant time and resources into collecting policing data, the data is not easily accessible, centrally located, or available in a user-friendly format.   Files are often large and require a great deal of cleaning, restructuring, merging, statistical knowledge, and computing power to analyze. In addition, there is no simple way to compare data across locations, see information from agencies that only share partial data, or calculate arrest rates among specific demographic groups. For data-savvy researchers, this is technically possible, but time intensive.

For other stakeholders, such as police chiefs, advocates, the media, and community members—who may want to learn about how arrests affect their communities or how the implementation of a

particular policy changed arrest trends over time—this is a much harder task. As a result, it can be difficult to lift the veil off policing practices for both community members and police practitioners alike. The result is that those who do not have the time or technical expertise to go through reams of data often only have access to high-level information—such as overall crime rates—to make decisions.

At a time when confidence in the police is low—particularly within communities of color—and in the wake of high profile incidents of police violence, increased transparency and access to information about police practices is more important than ever.   Moreover, access to good data is necessary in order to build an evidence-base for practices that are intended to make communities safer—including those that serve as an off-ramp from the justice system (and thus incarceration), as well as those that strengthen and improve trust between police and the communities they serve.

Launching Arrest Trends

Vera developed _Arrest Trends_ to unlock important policing data. This tool helps to answer fundamental questions about American policing by organizing publicly available datasets into one easy-to-use platform. Users can explore multiple related and customizable visualizations that allow for a deeper understanding of police enforcement in local jurisdictions and across the country. _Arrest Trends_ focuses on the following critical areas.

- **Arrests:** How many arrests are made annually, and for what?
- **Demographics:** How do arrest trends vary across demographic groups?
- **Clearance rates:** How successful are the police at solving reported crimes?
- **Victimizations:** How common are victimizations and how often are they reported to the police?
- **Data reported:** What gaps exist in policing data?

Through _Arrest Trends_, users can easily access and analyze decades of policing data that previously has been disparately located and difficult to interpret. This tool builds on the development and successes of Vera's _Incarceration Trends_ tool, which collates and visualizes publicly-available jail and prison incarceration data to explore and compare county and state incarceration by location and time. _Arrest Trends_ will allow a broad group of stakeholders to access data related to policing at both a national and localized level, allowing users to better understand how police currently operate and helping to set the roadmap for reform.

What Arrest Trends does and who it helps

Arrest Trends allows users to:

- explore multiple up-to-date indicators of enforcement in one comprehensive tool;
- profile the use of arrests in individual agencies, counties, states, regions, and the United States as a whole;
- understand how arrest trends vary over time, place, offense type, and arrestee demographics;
- learn about gaps in policing data, when and where they exist, and how they affect information accuracy and transparency; and
- identify situations (such as locations or non-serious offense types) in which enforcement is particularly heavy with limited public safety need.

By making data accessible to all, Vera hopes *Arrest Trends* will generate dialogue about the role of policing. Importantly, the tool can be used to highlight the extent to which local decisions about arrests create disparity and may act as a primary driver of mass incarceration. For example:

- police chiefs can use *Arrest Trends* to understand how various policing strategies and new approaches (such as decriminalizing select low-level offenses, implementing de-escalation strategies) might impact their communities;
- policymakers can access information that is critical to decisions about the potential impact of decriminalizing certain behaviors (such as vagrancy);
- criminologists and researchers working in related social policy disciplines can incorporate measures of enforcement into their analyses more easily; and
- media outlets, educators, and advocates can use the tool to inform the public about the extent and disparate impacts of arrests locally and across the country and how this has changed over time.

What data is featured in Arrest Trends?

Arrest Trends collates information from eight major data series, so that users can easily explore police enforcement trends in one comprehensive location:

- Uniform Crime Report (UCR) Arrests by Age, Sex, and Race;
- UCR: County-Level Detailed Arrest and Offense Data;
- Arrests Data Analysis Tool National Estimates;
- U.S. Census Populations with Bridged Race Categories;
- UCR Offenses Known and Clearances by Arrest;
- National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) Victimization Analysis Tool;
- Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Offenses Known to Law Enforcement;   and
- Law Enforcement Agency Identifiers Crosswalk.

Vera has produced a separate technical report, *Arrest Trends: Data Sources and Methodology*, which

readers can access for more information about these data sources and how they were analyzed and integrated into this tool.   In general, however, *Arrest Trends* uses these data series to populate interactive visualizations of the following five policing indicators: (1) arrests; (2) arrest demographics; (3) clearance rates; (4) victimizations; and (5) reported data (in other words, gaps in data reported by police agencies to the FBI).   Users can explore these indicators to better understand the extent, disparity, effectiveness, and transparency of American policing enforcement practices.

Emerging Findings

Early use of *Arrest Trends* has already uncovered important trends regarding:

- drivers of arrests;
- disparities in arrests;
- effectiveness of arrests; and
- gaps in arrest data.

These emerging trends are described below and can be explored further online through *Arrest Trends*.

Drivers of arrests

Arrest Trends can be used to examine the number of, and reasons for, arrests made. The results are stark. Initial analysis shows that, **across the United States, an arrest occurs every three seconds.** Although this figure may sound strikingly high, today's estimated total arrest volume—approximately 10.5 million arrests annually—has dropped to historic lows not otherwise seen since the early 1980s.
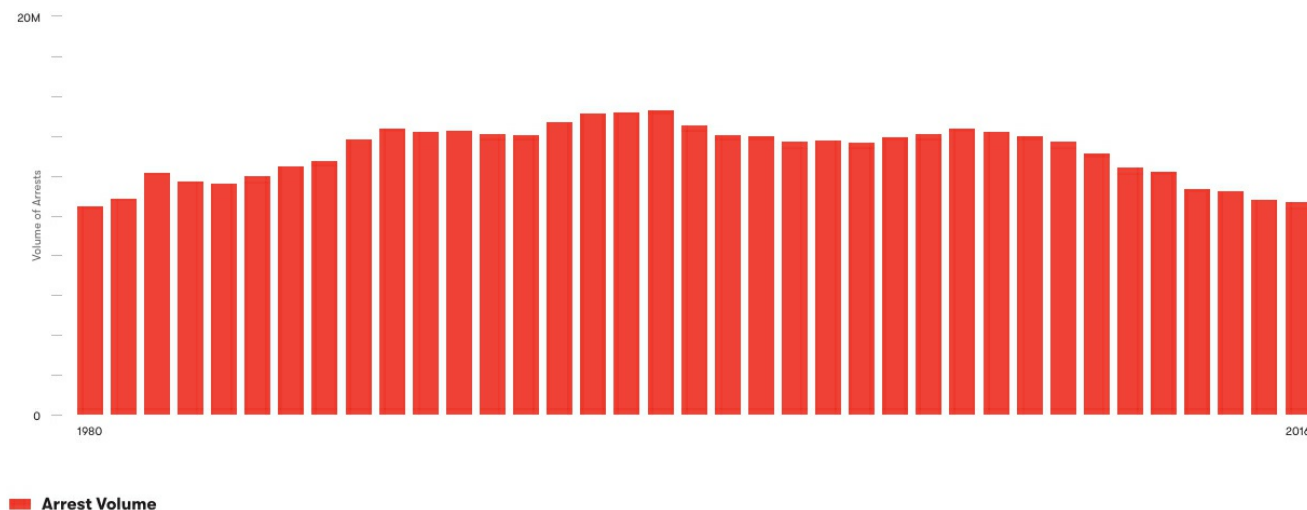
Figure 1. 1980–2016 estimated arrest volume

This recent decline in arrests occurred primarily over the past 10 years, with **arrest volumes dropping by more than 25 percent between 2006 and 2016**.   The timing of this decline in arrest trends parallels widespread changes in policing policies, such as the decriminalization of certain offenses (such as "runaways" and "vagrancy"), changing practices around pedestrian and vehicle stops, and the growing recognition that America incarcerates too many people.

Despite this decline, arrests are clearly still a massive enterprise, affecting many. To better understand their purpose, we can begin by investigating the types of offenses that most prominently drive arrest volumes. The data shows that non-serious, **low-level offenses such as "drug abuse violations" and "disorderly conduct" make up over 80 percent of arrests, while serious (Part I) violent offenses account for fewer than five percent of arrests**.

Especially notable are drug arrests, which increased by 171 percent between 1980 and 2016, and—despite recent, smaller declines—now account for more than 1.5 million arrests annually—the vast majority of which are made for drug possession generally, and marijuana possession most often.

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Volume of Arrests
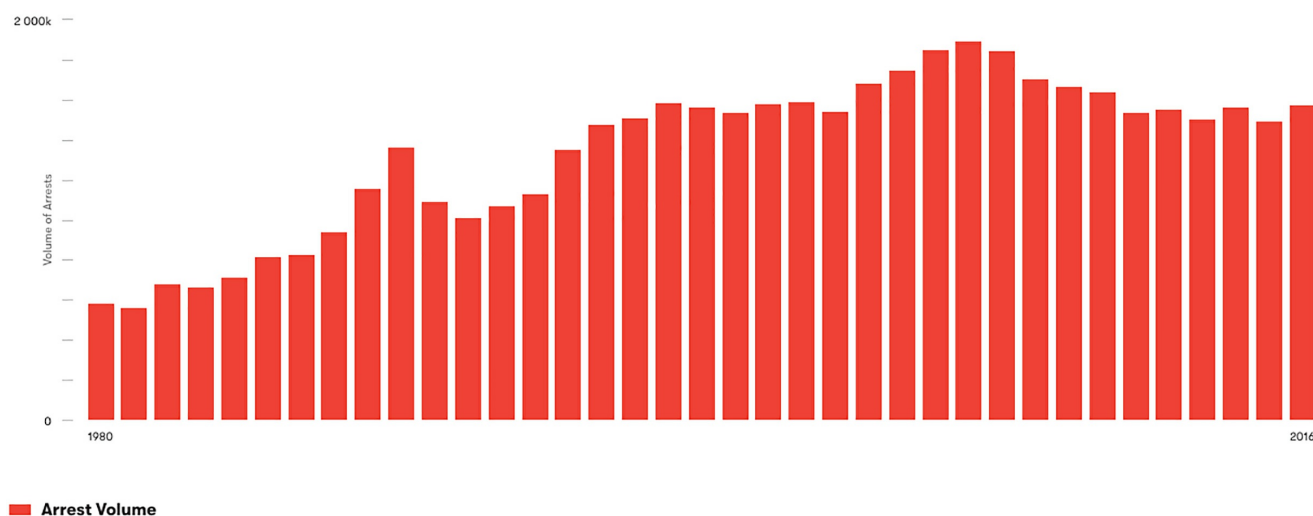
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1980

2016

■ Arrest Volume

Figure 3. 1980–2016 estimated drug arrest volume

This stark increase in drug arrests suggests that despite evidence that public health-based solutions are more effective, policing practices in response to drugs remain largely punitive in nature.   In light of the rising opioid epidemic—and the abundance of research suggesting that justice system involvement exacerbates rather than solves substance use disorders—it is imperative that the nation begins to question the reliance on arrests as a response to this public health problem, among others.

Unfortunately, Vera's analysis reveals that by far the most common arrest category includes a group of low-level offenses labeled by the FBI as **"other non-traffic offenses," which accounts for more than 30 percent of all arrests**.

"Other non-traffic offenses" are classified by the FBI as non-serious, low-level offenses, but little else is known about these arrests, making it impossible to understand their utility and effect in maintaining public safety.   So, although we know that arrests overall are widespread and frequent, we don't know the specific nature of the largest category of arrests. Going forward, nationally we must interrogate and further understand frequently occurring arrest practices in much greater detail.

What is clear, however, is that approximately 10.5 million arrests per year is a staggeringly high number, given the detrimental effects arrests have on individuals, communities, police officers, and police agencies. Because the vast majority of arrests are made in response to low-level, non-violent offenses, it is imperative to examine the purpose and necessity of arrests—as well as viable alternatives—in order to scale back these and other forms of punitive enforcement.

Disparities in arrests

Arrest Trends can also be used to identify agencies and locales that have been particularly successful in reducing their reliance on arrests—or, conversely, those in particular need of alternative strategies to reduce their reliance on arrests. Vera hopes that future phases of this work will highlight lessons from agencies that have reduced their reliance on arrests and build partnerships with agencies that are eager to implement alternatives.

One important insight from *Arrest Trends*' data is that metropolitan areas account for the vast majority of arrests. More specifically, **metropolitan areas account for 78 percent of all arrests**, while nonmetropolitan areas account for only 21 percent, and another 1 percent occur in areas without a specified municipality type.   Arrest rates mimic these same patterns: **metropolitan areas have higher average arrest rates—4,229 arrests per 100,000 residents**—than nonmetropolitan areas—3,552 arrests per 100,000 residents.

Further analysis shows that **suburban cities have the highest average arrest rates** (4,604 per 100,000), followed by cities outside of metropolitan areas (4,090 per 100,000), principal metropolitan cities (3,332 per 100,000), metropolitan counties (3,027 per 100,000), and nonmetropolitan counties (2,322 per 100,000).   To date, there has been limited criminological research on suburban arrest trends, making this finding particularly worthy of further exploration. This is especially true given that a number of high-profile police enforcement-related events in recent years that resulted in deaths —of black people in particular—have occurred in suburbs such as Ferguson, Missouri; Falcon Heights, Minnesota; and Balch Springs, Texas.

Publicly available data—made more accessible through *Arrest Trends*—further suggests that arrests are disproportionately applied across racial, age, and gender groups, and that these trends are particularly prominent for non-serious offenses. The estimated volume of arrests of black people across the country rose by 23 percent between 1980 and 2014, and **black people now make up 12 percent of the U.S. population, but an estimated 28 percent of all arrests**.

Unpacking this further, *Arrest Trends* shows that in 2014, **black people were an estimated 2.39 times more likely to be arrested for "drug abuse violations" than white people**—even though research suggests that black people and white people use drugs at similar rates.   This trend may have been spurred by a combination of concentrated policing efforts in disadvantaged communities, racially targeted pedestrian and vehicle stop practices, and racial trends in using drugs outside in public view rather than indoors and in private spaces.

Arrests of women similarly increased between 1980 and 2014—here by 83 percent—while arrests of men decreased 7 percent over the same timeframe.   **In 1980, women accounted for an estimated 16**

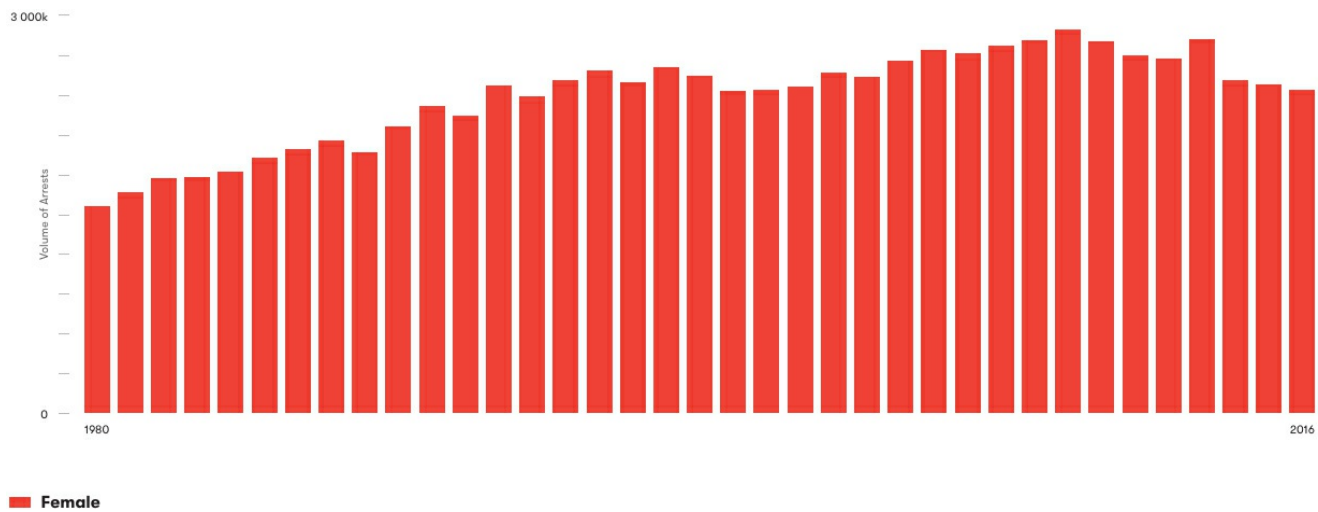**percent of all arrests, but in 2014 they accounted for 27 percent**.

Figure 6. 1980–2016 reported volume of women arrested

Arrests of juveniles age 17 and younger decreased by more than 50 percent from 1980 to 2014. In 1980, juveniles accounted for an estimated 20 percent of all arrests, but by 2014 this proportion dropped to 9 percent.

This decrease in arrests of young people paralleled several political and cultural shifts in how young people are viewed and treated in the U.S. criminal justice system. Several juvenile-specific offenses were largely decriminalized (such as running away and curfew violations), local non-punitive programs were implemented in response to low-level offenses, developing neurological research showed that young people are evolving decision makers and very capable of change, and the Supreme Court overturned life without parole sentences for juveniles.   These types of advances may have helped propel the decrease in arrests of young people. An important opportunity now exists to explore the application of alternatives to arrest that have been effective with young people to adults as well.

Effectiveness of arrests

The data presented in *Arrest Trends* shows that, although the estimated volume of victimizations based on reports to national surveyors has dropped by more than 50 percent in the past 20 years, **nearly 18**

million serious victimizations still occur annually across the country, and the majority of these (more than 60 percent) are not reported to the police.
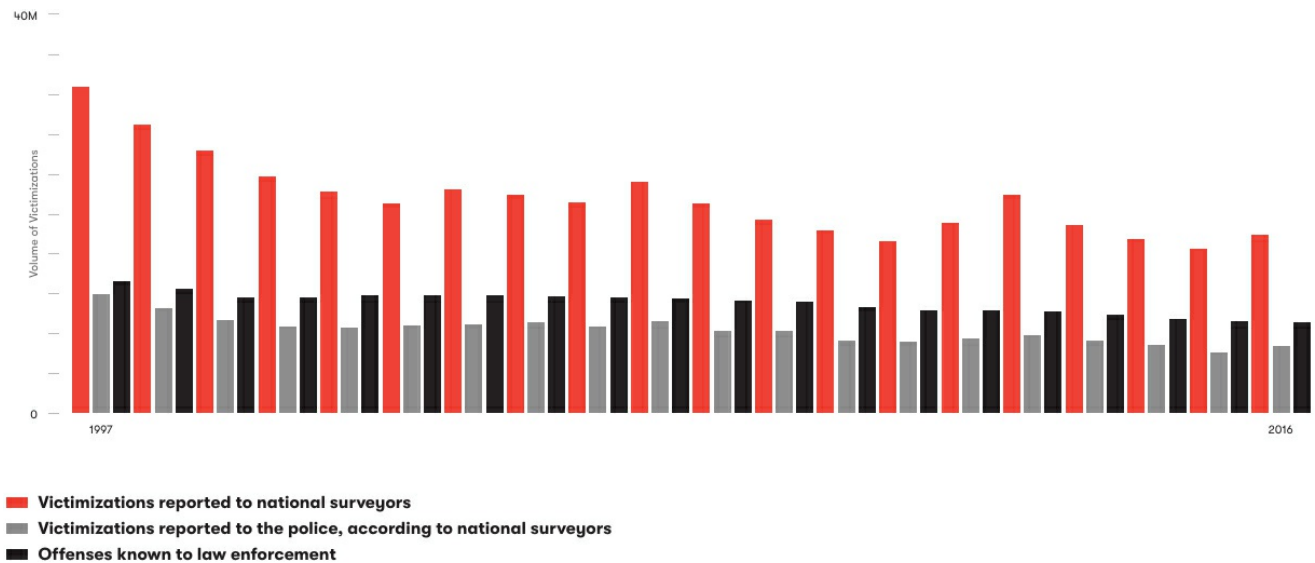

Figure 8. 1997–2016 total victimizations and victimizations reported to the police

Of those offenses known to law enforcement, **just 25 percent are cleared by arrests** (meaning that they are solved by the police).

This data signals a persistent problem affecting police and communities alike: when crime is not reported to the police—as it often is not—it limits the police's ability to solve and prevent crime and affects the overall safety of communities. While people have various reasons for not reporting a crime to the police, they may be discouraged from doing so by fractured police-community relationships and feelings of mistrust—issues that can be exacerbated by an over-emphasis on the enforcement of low-level offenses.

Gaps in arrest data

Not all police agencies report their data to the FBI's UCR program, though they may opt to publish their data elsewhere. Data goes unreported by agencies for a variety of reasons—including lack of technology or resources, incompatible offense definitions, and concerns around open policing data. Further, some agencies report only partial data. As *Arrest Trends* shows, of the 22,645 police agencies

on record in 2016, **32 percent reported none of their arrest data to the FBI, 9 percent reported some of their data, and 59 percent reported all of their data**.

Unlike most existing tools, *Arrest Trends* allows users to explore all relevant arrest data reported through the UCR regardless of whether that data is complete. In other words, community members can still find their agency's arrest and clearance rate data in *Arrest Trends*—along with an indicator of where data gaps exist (instances where agencies did not report data to the FBI)—even if the agency only reported partial data. (If an agency reported no data—rather than partial data—however, users will not be able to view these trends.) To account for missing or partial data, the FBI produces estimates at the county, state, regional, and national level; users can explore this data through *Arrest Trends*, in addition to the reported data.

Underreporting clearly impacts the accuracy and availability of policing data across the country, inhibiting the public's ability to paint a complete picture of enforcement. *Arrest Trends* allows community members to understand how transparent their agencies are about their practices. Further research is needed to understand why agencies are not reporting data to the FBI, and whether that data is available elsewhere. Still, by making data available to a wide range of audiences, including policymakers, researchers, and members of the general public, *Arrest Trends* provides a new tool for understanding how policing operates across the country and a mechanism for constituents to better understand local and national policing practices.

What's next

The nation's current approach to public safety overly applies arrests without a full accounting of the social and financial costs associated with this widespread practice. The launch of Arrest Trends marks Vera's most recent effort to reduce the criminal justice system's footprint, this time by unlocking key policing data and thus elevating the narrative of overreliance on arrests and the need for viable alternatives. Vera anticipates that the outcomes of Arrest Trends' launch will include:

- surfacing national arrest trends that were previously not well known;
- highlighting communities that are making positive changes to their enforcement practices;
- enabling peer learning across communities and various stakeholders; and
- increasing access to and transparency of policing data.

In future phases of Arrest Trend's development, Vera intends to expand upon the tool by:

- developing a "create your own report" function, whereby users can explore specific research questions and access comprehensive arrest information on an agency or location of their choice;

- enabling Arrest Trends visuals to be embedded into other mediums, including social media platforms;

- expanding map functionality to also show data at a local agency level and other important geographic areas (such as congressional districts);

- incorporating census data at the agency level to present arrest disparities across demographic and socioeconomic groups at a more localized level;

- including crime data to explore and better understand the relationship between, and impacts of, crime and arrests;

- integrating Law Enforcement Management and Statistics (LEMAS) data to inform how agency size, priorities, training, infrastructure, management, and other characteristics impact arrests;

- building out the capacity to compare agencies based on additional factors such as proximity, population demographics, and more; and

- allowing users to develop and save tailored queries and personal profiles.

Vera will prioritize the development of these features based on user experiences and the field's most pressing needs.

Vera also plans to publish subsequent reports that dive into additional significant and nuanced findings from Arrest Trends, such as which agencies most contribute to high arrest volumes, which have shown marked improvements and why, and where the greatest demographic disparities exist. Perhaps most importantly, this tool will help identify agencies with which to collaborate in developing and testing alternative-to-arrest policies and practices. To transform the nation's policing practices, we must first understand them. Arrest Trends seeks to unlock this important information and make it accessible for all people who are involved with and care about the American criminal justice system.