

# SUMMONS IN THE CITY

## AN ANALYTICAL REPORT

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## **A. Introduction**

Policing is a fraught issue in the United States. Most people of color fundamentally distrust law enforcement, mainly because police brutality is a prevalent problem and has been for centuries. From internal corruption to quotas for arrests and summons to race targeting, law enforcement departments in the United States have had their fair share of troubles, and the NYPD is no different.

At the same time, over the past decade in NYC, there have been several murders of police officers at the hands of civilians and vice versa, leading to an incredibly tense environment that finally reached its peak in 2015 with a string of police protests. With such a troubled history, there are naturally changes in how the law is enforced, upon whom it is enforced, and which laws are enforced.

In the following report, we will be examining exactly that: how often is the law enforced per year, on whom is it enforced, and what laws are enforced most often.

## **B. The Dataset**

This data comes from the official NYC OpenData website, compiled from the Office of Management Analysis and Planning. It encompasses all criminal summons issued from 2006 to end of calendar year 2019, with each row in the dataset comprising one criminal summons.

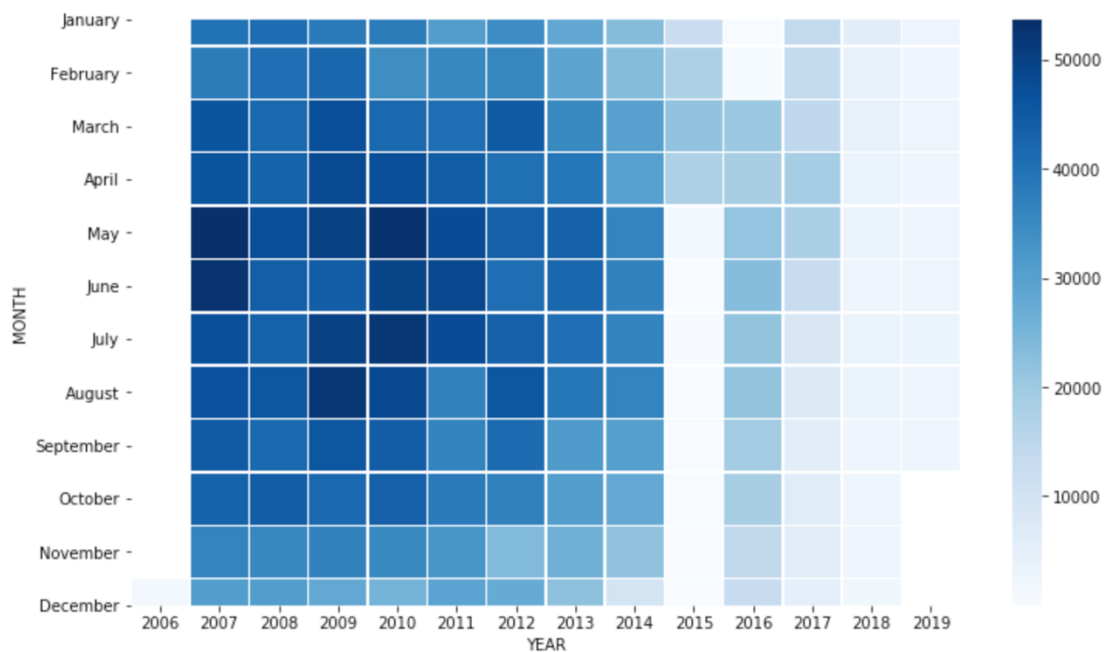
The original dataset has 5,262,307 rows and 16 features, including a key, the date that the summons was issued, a categorical description of the offense, the relevant NYS penal law and local law section number, a description of the law dictionary from which the cited violation came, the summons type, the age, sex, and race of the suspect (three separate columns), the jurisdiction code (what department of the NYPD was responsible

for issuing the summons), the borough, the precinct where the violation was issued, a set of x and y coordinates (two separate columns), and a latitude and longitude (also two separate columns).

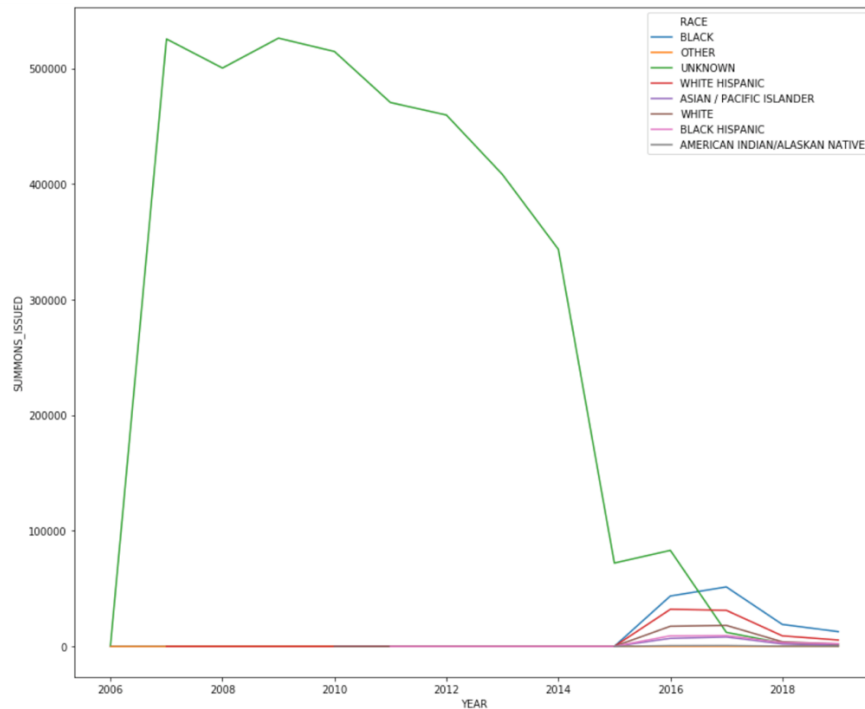
Because there is incredible nuance to gender identity and certain summons that would not be adequately covered with the dataset, there will not be a focus on gender in the demographics of this analysis.

### C. Visualization & Narrative

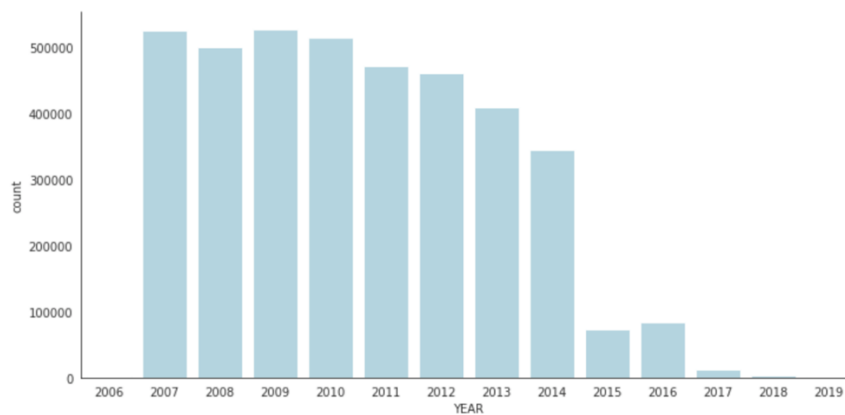
Prior to 2015, the NYPD tended to issue tens of thousands of criminal summons a month, with more summons being issued in the summer months than winter months. Around the end of 2014, however, there was a staggering drop in the amount of criminal summons issued, which continued until about March 2016.



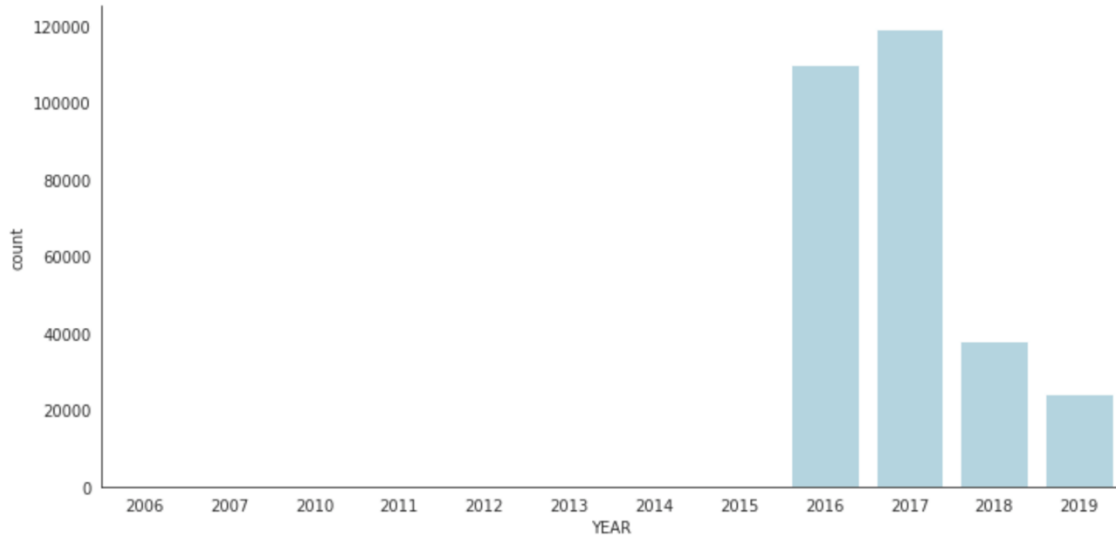
What makes this most interesting is the following, in which race was mostly undocumented (listed as unknown in the dataset) until precisely that point in time—late 2014.



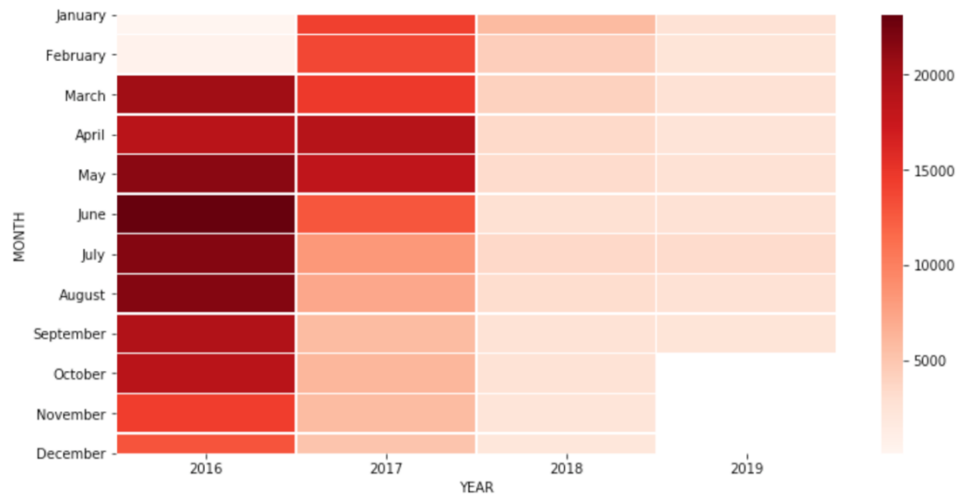
Because the amount of records that labeled race as “unknown” were so massive and then dropped so drastically beginning in 2012, I split the datasets and created two versions of the same graph. The graph below consists of only records where race is labeled as “unknown,” and begins with a y-axis that goes up to 500,000 records.



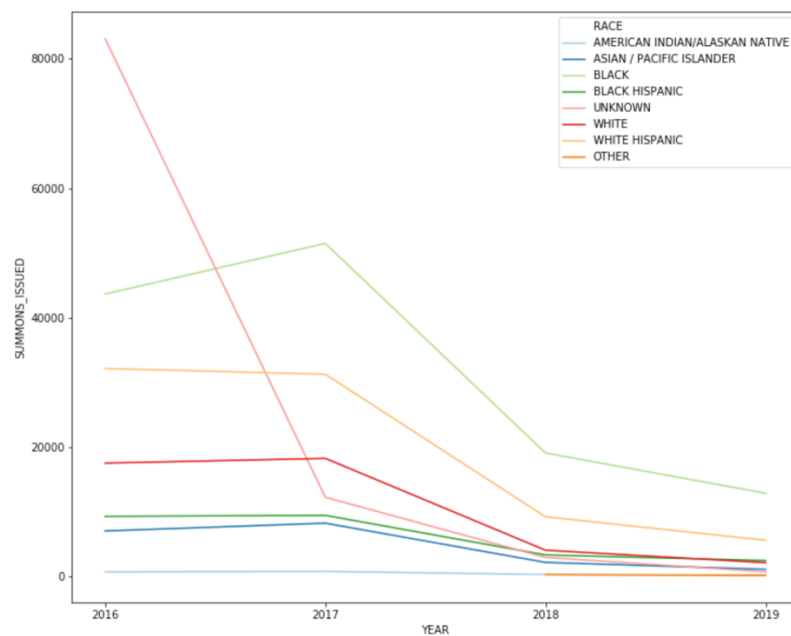
Our axes have shifted in this second iteration of records where race is actually categorized—as opposed to our upper limit of 500,000 in the previous graph, this one has an upper limit of 120,000. It’s a very stark drop, as we determined earlier, but more importantly, the slight jump from 2016 to 2017 indicates that there were heightened efforts to correctly classify race within the NYPD. The sheer drop afterwards can be explained with other policy changes, but that will be interrogated further in the context section of this analytical report.



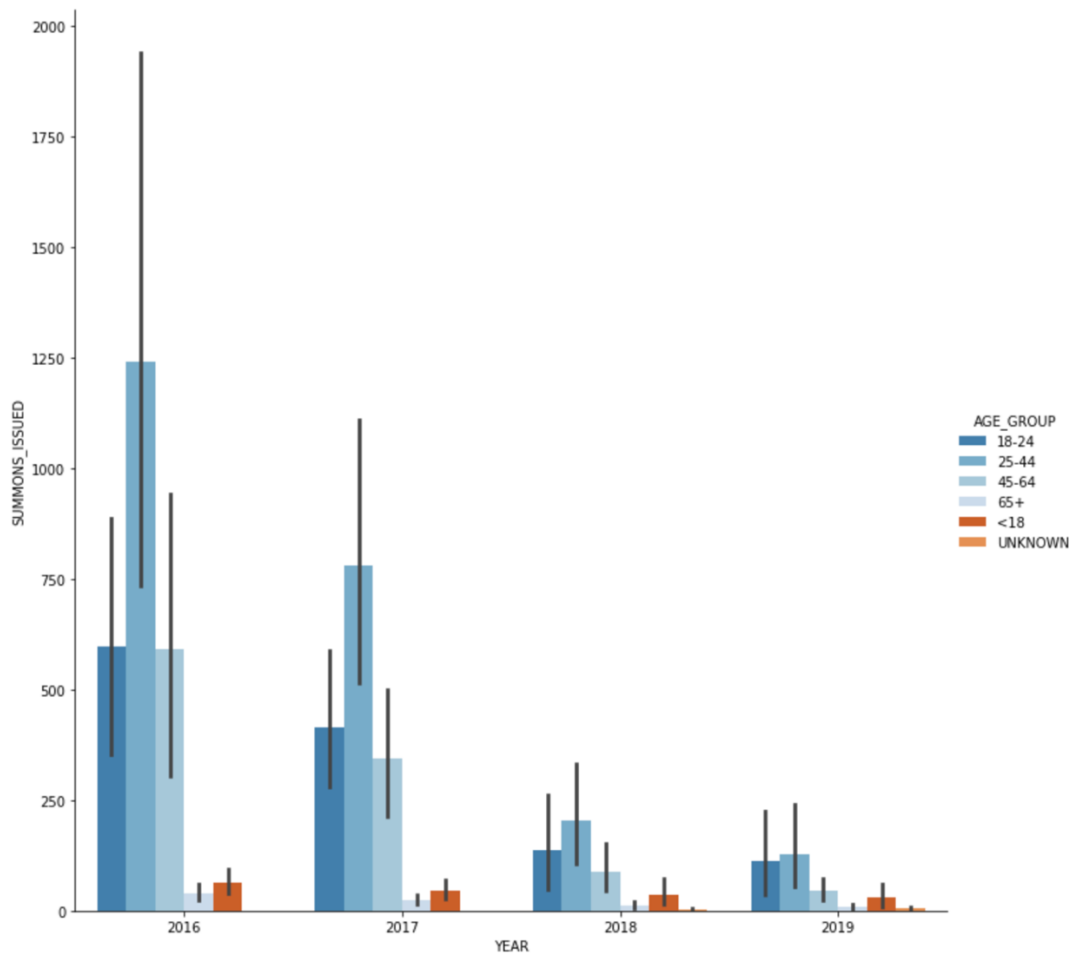
For a narrower focus, I reduced the overarching heat map to only include 2016-2019, the years in which summons issuances were substantially reduced. It is somewhat subtle, but more summons tend to be issued in the summer months every year. Overall, however, the amount has gone down immensely, with the NYPD reporting only about 2500 summons issued per month in 2019.



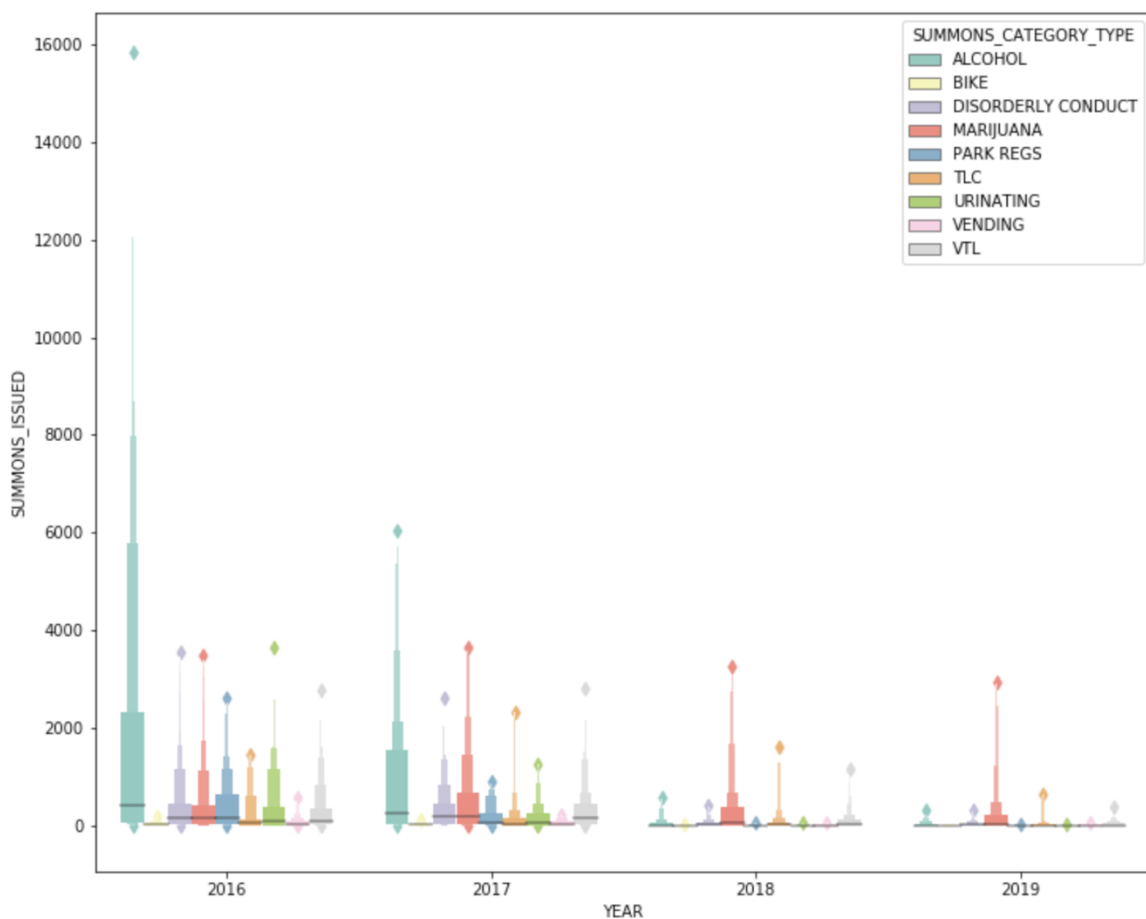
Similar to the second chart in this report, this visualization is a race breakdown that shows how the “unknown” documentation all but disappeared after 2016, where 60,000 fewer summons are listed as “unknown” race. Overall, more summons were issued to black people, with the second-most category being people classified as “white Hispanic.”



In 2016, a much larger proportion of people aged 25-44 were being issued summons, but now that there are fewer summons overall, the proportional difference between the 18-24 group as opposed to the 25-44 age group has significantly decreased, which means that overwhelmingly, police have stopped issuing as many summons to the 25-44 group, while ratio-wise, the amount issued to people aged 18-24 has grown over time. Much more interestingly, though, we can see a very small increase in the unknown age classification from 2016 to 2019.



Over a period of four years, most summons issuances in the top ten summons categories severely decreased; the single area in which it increased or stayed in relatively the same position was summons for marijuana use and possession. Additionally, TLC offenses also went up in 2016, following certain policy implementations. In the next few parts of this section, we'll take a look at demographic data for a select number of these summons categories.

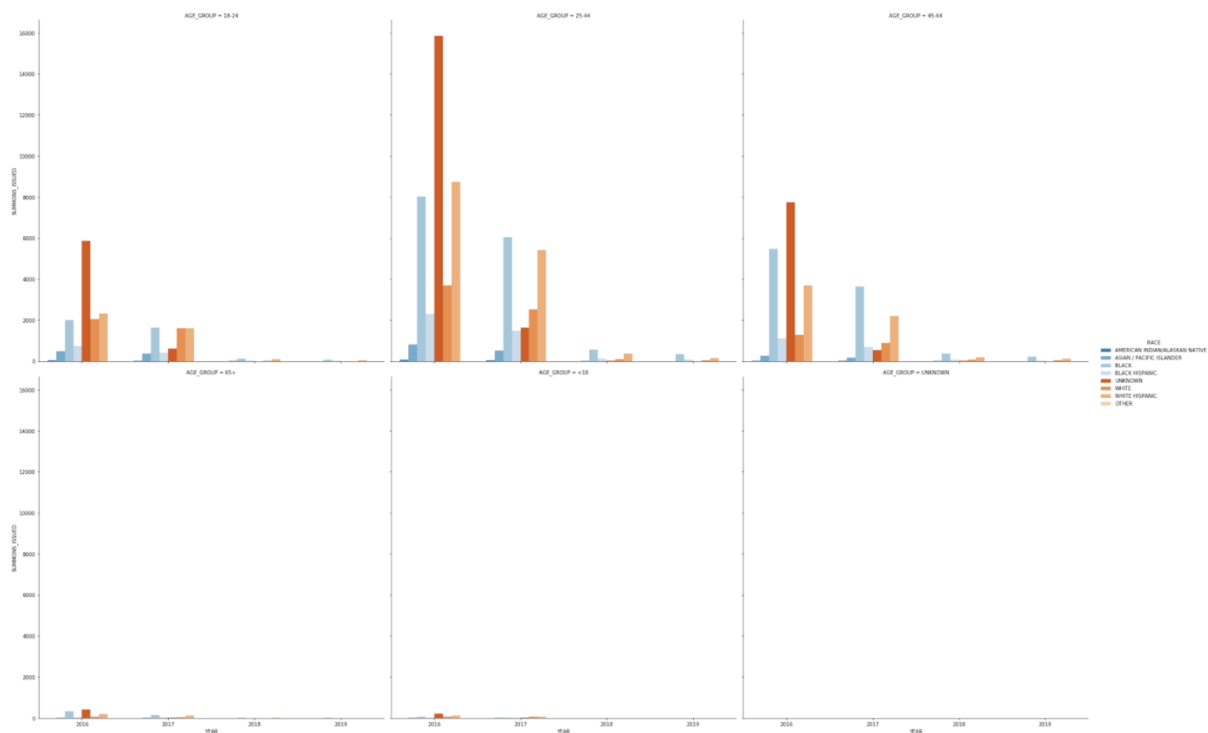


As something of a minor overview, the next three visualizations contain a breakdown in two categorical dimensions (age and race), split over three of the top 10 summons category offenses: alcohol, marijuana, and disorderly conduct. I chose these



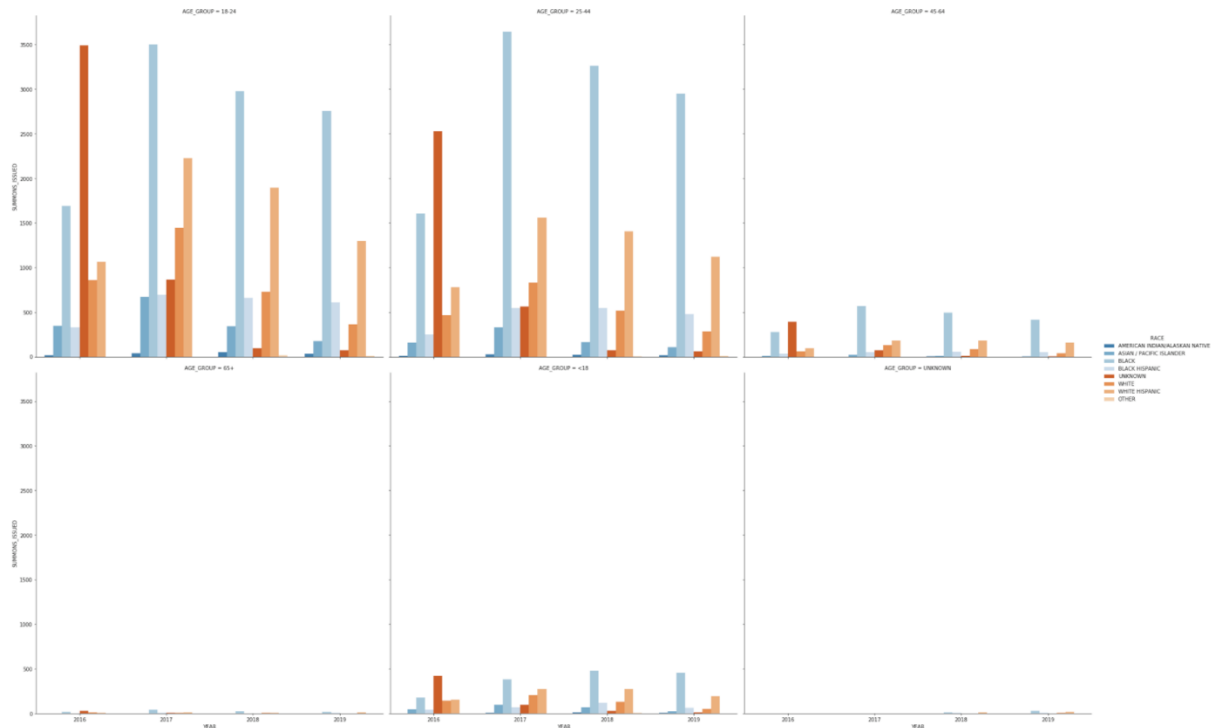
three to analyze because these have the most interesting implications, particularly the summons issued for marijuana possession/use.

The first in this small trio of graphs regards summons issued for consuming or possessing alcohol in a location other than a block party, feast, or other location with a valid liquor license. As with our general graphs, the “unknown” race is prevalent in 2016, decreasing dramatically in 2017. The number of records here spans 0 to 16,000. In each race category, there is a reduction of about 50% or higher on a yearly basis.



The second graph in the series regards possession/use of marijuana. Recalling the earlier distribution graph, summons issued for marijuana use/possession have remained largely the same throughout the last four years, but a key insight lies in the bottom middle graph: when the NYPD started really cataloguing the race of individuals to whom they issued summons, they are revealed to only really be issuing summons in the under 18 age

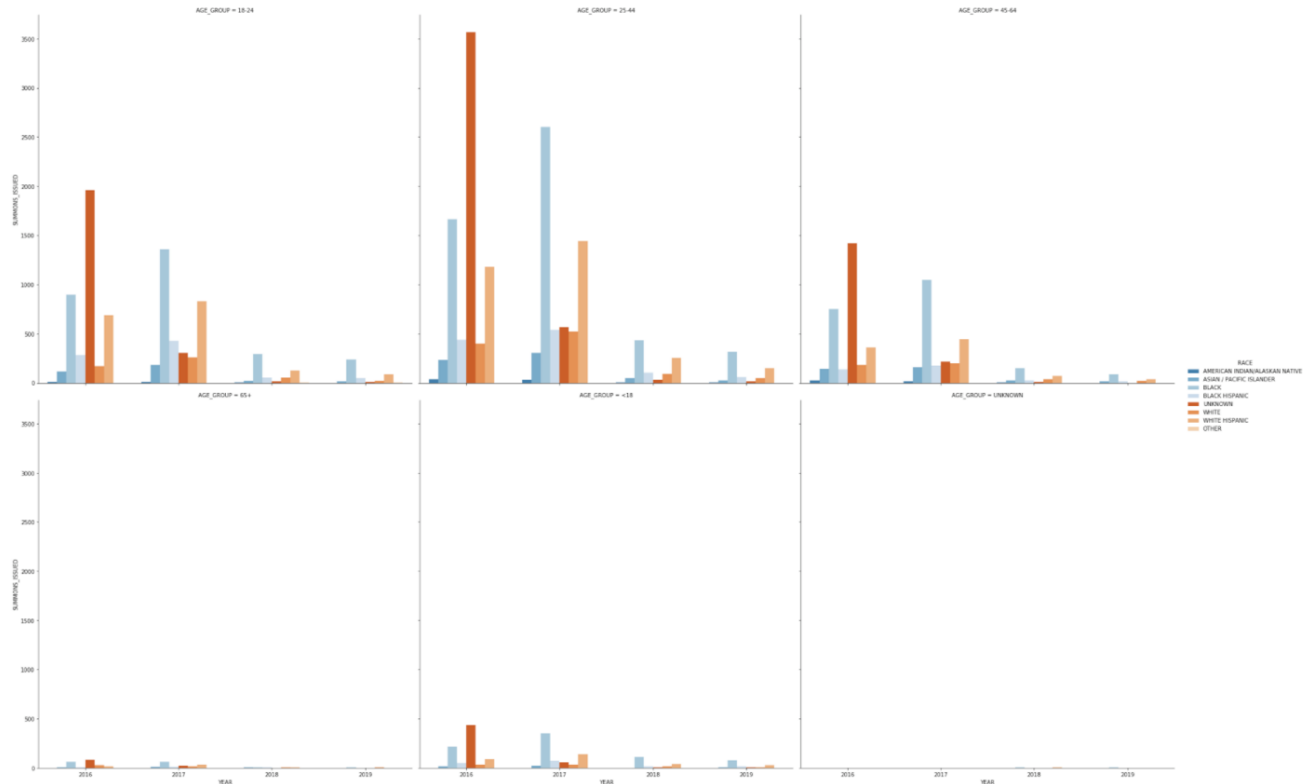
group to black people under 18. The number of records issued to people of other races has decreased over time, but about 300 criminal summons are still issued to black minors every year.



Disorderly conduct is an incredibly nebulous and frustratingly vague offense. It is necessary to provide the legal text for the following, in order to create context for the following graph and to put into perspective how enforcement of this offense is arbitrary at best and negligent at worst.

A person is guilty of disorderly conduct when, with intent to cause public inconvenience, annoyance or alarm, or recklessly creating a risk thereof: 1. He engages in fighting or in violent, tumultuous or threatening behavior; or 2. He makes unreasonable noise; or 3. In a public place, he uses abusive or obscene language, or makes an obscene gesture; or 4. Without lawful authority, he disturbs any lawful assembly or meeting of persons; or 5. He obstructs vehicular or pedestrian traffic; or 6. He congregates with other persons in a public place and refuses to comply with a lawful order of the police to disperse; or 7. He creates a hazardous or physically offensive condition by any act which serves no legitimate purpose. Disorderly conduct is a violation.

With that in mind, we can move on to the following subplot chart about summons issued for disorderly conduct. For reference, the y-axis goes up to 3,500 records.

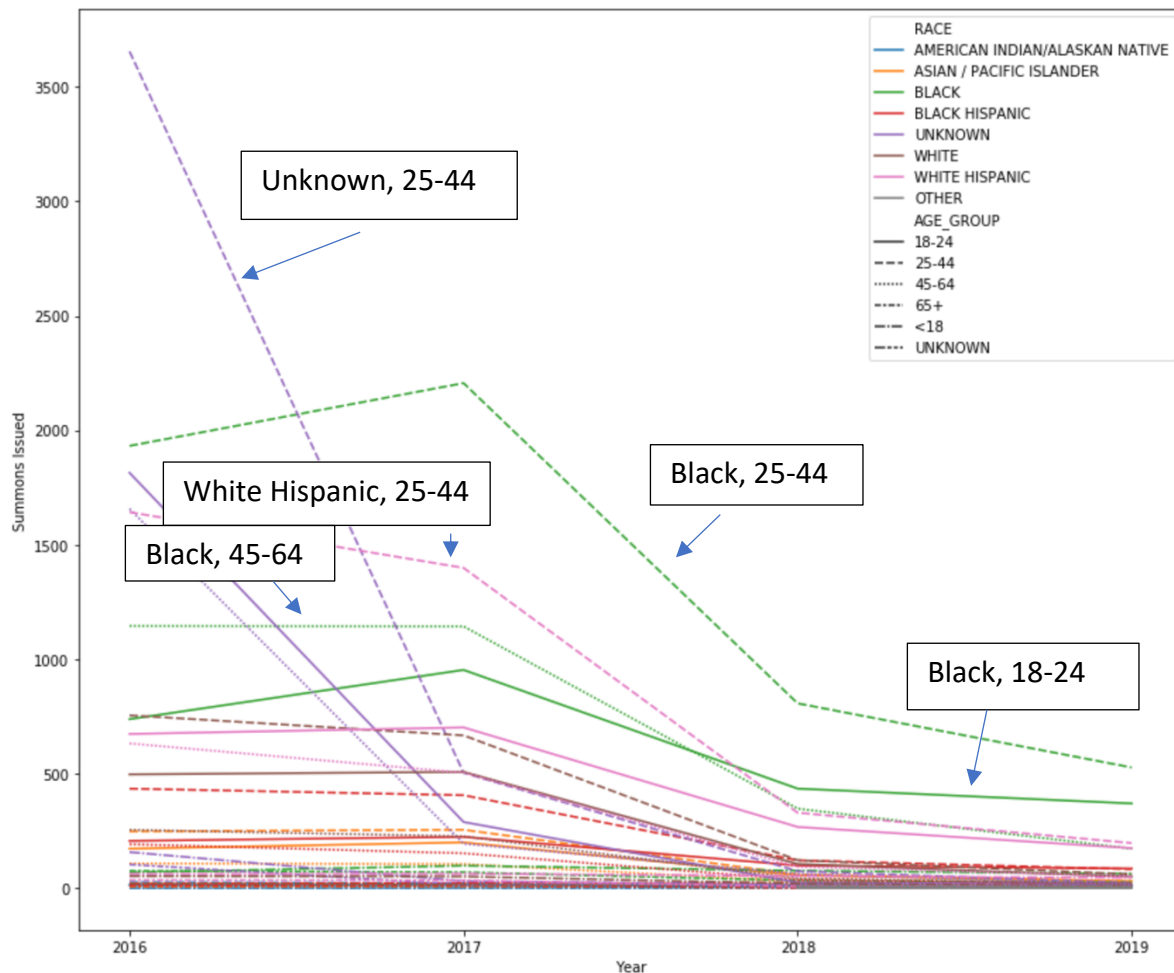


Over the last four years, enforcement of this arbitrary law has gone down to near-nothing. At the same time, black and white Hispanic people are still getting overwhelmingly targeted by the officers issuing these summonses.

Finally, here is a breakdown of summons by both race and age group. The most relevant lines have been annotated for ease of interaction.

The most interesting thing about this graph is the shift from 2018 to 2019 in terms of proportional summons issuances for black people who are 25-44 as opposed to those who are 18-24. It is definitely reflective of the earlier age graph, but it's so much easier to see how the gap between the two has shrunk from 2017-2019. Overwhelmingly, officers

are still targeting black people aged 18-24 when deciding to whom summons should be issued.



#### D. Summary Insights

Though the NYPD has not stopped targeting young black people when deciding whom should be issued a criminal summons, they have overall stopped issuing as many criminal summons as they were issuing five years ago. It used to be the case that they were issuing over 500,000 criminal summons per year, but in the last five or so years, documentation has gotten both more precise and less numerous. Most of the top 10 summons types issued have also decreased, but criminal summons issued for possession or use of

marijuana have actually remained somewhat stable over the last four years. Finally, it remains the case that more summons are issued during the summertime, while fewer are issued during the winter months; despite the overall number of summons decreasing, the proportion of summons issued throughout the year has remained somewhat the same.

## **E. Connections to Existing Knowledge**

In 2015, the NYPD began protesting what they saw as “anti-police sentiment” from the De Blasio administration.<sup>1</sup> The events leading to this protest were the murders of several police officers<sup>2</sup>, as well as the cessation of Stop and Frisk. In 2016, the Administration agreed to decriminalize<sup>3</sup> low-level offenses<sup>4</sup>, and the policy was enacted in 2017, leading to the deep drop in summons over time. Because this data refers only to criminal summons, it is entirely likely that the summons have been moved to a different category—civil summons.

There is also documented evidence that officers are being directed to target black and Hispanic people. Consider this article from the New York Times<sup>5</sup>, published on December 6, 2019, in which a police commander instructed officers to “write more black and Hispanic people.” According to that same article, these reports describe the time period of 2011-2015, and since then, that commander has been promoted to a position of inspector. With the insights from this report, it’s more than likely that commanders all over the city are quietly issuing similar instructions.

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<sup>1</sup> Badger, Emily. “The NYPD Slowdown Can Only Turn out Badly for the Police.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 7 Jan. 2015, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/01/07/the-nypd-slowdown-can-only-turn-out-badly-for-the-police/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/01/07/the-nypd-slowdown-can-only-turn-out-badly-for-the-police/).

<sup>2</sup> Murphy, Jarrett. “Timeline: The Saga of Bill De Blasio and the NYPD.” *City Limits*, 17 Oct. 2017, [citylimits.org/2017/10/16/timeline-the-saga-of-bill-de-blasio-and-the-nypd/](http://citylimits.org/2017/10/16/timeline-the-saga-of-bill-de-blasio-and-the-nypd/).

<sup>3</sup> Bredderman, Will. “De Blasio Administration Agrees to Decriminalization of Low-Level Offenses.” *Observer*, Observer, 25 Jan. 2016, [observer.com/2016/01/de-blasio-administration-agrees-to-decriminalization-of-low-level-offenses/](http://observer.com/2016/01/de-blasio-administration-agrees-to-decriminalization-of-low-level-offenses/).

<sup>4</sup> Eure, Philip K. “NYPD Quality of Life Report.” *QUALITY-OF-LIFE ENFORCEMENT*, The City of New York Department of Investigation, 22 June 2016, [www1.nyc.gov/assets/doi/reports/pdf/2016/2016-06-22-Pr18oignypd\\_qualityoflife\\_report.pdf](http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doi/reports/pdf/2016/2016-06-22-Pr18oignypd_qualityoflife_report.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Goldstein, Joseph, and Ashley Southall. “I Got Tired of Hunting Black and Hispanic People’.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 6 Dec. 2019, [www.nytimes.com/2019/12/06/nyregion/nyc-police-subway-racial-profiling.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/06/nyregion/nyc-police-subway-racial-profiling.html).

Perhaps most telling is the shift from using paper documentation to using smartphones within the NYPD. Prior to 2015, all precincts in the NYPD used a memo book to log arrests and summons. Starting that year, officers began to be issued smartphones, which have an app for logging what used to be logged in the memo book. According to the article “Why the N.Y.P.D. Dropped One of Its Oldest Crime-Fighting Tools,” the data uploaded to these databases has been collected from the officers’ memo books, and now “[t]he standardized format will allow the department to collect “clean data,”...instead of sifting through handwritten entries in log books that varied widely depending on an individual officer’s note-taking preference.”<sup>6</sup> This absolutely explains why suddenly there were fewer arrests and summons, as well as why race has been documented so much more precisely since 2015. Moreover, according to a former police detective quoted in the same article, “[officers] used to leave blank pages so they could go back and add observations just to get a judge to give them a search warrant on someone.”

All of these things taken together explain the staggering decrease in summons issues over the past few years, and perhaps with more policy implementation and investigative journalism, the issue of certain races being targeted will decrease as well.

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<sup>6</sup> Kilgannon, Corey. “Why the N.Y.P.D. Dropped One of Its Oldest Crime-Fighting Tools.” The New York Times, The New York Times, 5 Feb. 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/02/05/nyregion/nypd-memo-book.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/05/nyregion/nypd-memo-book.html).



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