

BULLETIN

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Crime Statistics

Interpreting What the Data Do—and Do Not—Measure

Crime rates are an increasingly prominent topic in American public discourse. News headlines, political debates, and social media frequently raise questions about whether crime is increasing or decreasing and what those trends mean for public safety. Yet despite sustained attention on this issue, perceptions of crime often differ from the data-driven statistics. For example, according to recent FBI statistics, reported violent crime has decreased nationally in recent years¹, yet public opinion surveys continue to find that many Americans believe crime is increasing nationally.² While there are many possible explanations for this disconnect—ranging from differences in personal experience, the visibility of high-profile crimes, and the way crime is covered in traditional and social media—it also raises a more fundamental question: what do crime statistics *actually* measure? And, more importantly, what are they able to tell us about crime?

Crime rates are often treated as straightforward indicators of public safety, but they are the product of a series of decisions about how crime is defined, reported, recorded, and analyzed that ultimately influence public policy, law enforcement strategies, resource allocation, and public perception. Understanding what crime measures capture well and their limitations are therefore essential to informed interpretation of what the numbers really mean.

This bulletin examines four questions that contribute toward a broader understanding of crime data. It begins by exploring how crime becomes a statistic - from legal definitions and measurements to the reporting decisions that determine what enters official records. It then

examines how those statistics are used to guide policing strategies before considering how news and social media shape public perceptions of crime rates. Together, these sections underscore that understanding crime rates requires a consideration of not only how crime is measured, but also how those measurements are used and interpreted.

WHAT ARE CRIME STATISTICS?

Crime statistics are often presented as objective indicators of public safety. News reports, public officials, and researchers routinely reference changes in crime rates to describe whether communities are becoming more or less safe. These figures are not simply counts of crimes committed, but the product of a series of decisions about what behaviors are considered crimes, which incidents are reported to law enforcement, how those incidents are classified, and how crime data are ultimately collected and analyzed.³

How Crime is Defined

Before crime can be measured, societies must first decide what constitutes and should be counted as a crime. Actions and activities become crimes only when they are prohibited through political and legal processes that are shaped by cultural values, moral beliefs, economic interests, and existing power structures.⁴ Thus, as societies change, so, too, can their definitions surrounding criminal behavior.

The distinction between *mala in se* and *mala prohibita* offenses illustrates this point. *Mala in se* offenses—including murder, rape, and assault—are generally viewed as inherently



harmful and are criminalized across most societies. In contrast, *mala prohibita* offenses are prohibited because society has decided to impose a standard that makes an action or activity illegal, not because they are universally considered immoral. For the latter type of offenses, differing moral views result in greater variation across jurisdictions. For example, countries establish different minimum drinking ages, and states differ on whether drivers may legally turn right at a red light. Consequently, crime data reflect not only behavior, but also the legal frameworks used to define crime.

How Enforcement Shapes Crime Statistics

Even when jurisdictions define crimes similarly, enforcement priorities can produce very different crime statistics as law enforcement agencies devote varying levels of attention and resources to detecting and recording particular offenses. For example, during the expansion of the War on Drugs policing in the 1980s and 1990s, drug-related arrests increased dramatically from approximately 581,000 per year in 1980 to more than 1.58 million by 2000.⁵ Although Black and White Americans have consistently reported comparable rates of drug use, Black Americans have historically been arrested for drug offenses at disproportionately higher rates,⁶ illustrating how enforcement practices can influence the racial composition of official crime records and statistics.

How Crime is Measured

The processes of defining and enforcing the law ultimately determine what becomes part of the official record. Researchers rely on multiple sources of information to measure crime, each providing a different perspective on crime and public safety. Two of the most widely used national measures include (1) the FBI's National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS)—under the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program—that compiles crimes submitted by law enforcement agencies, and (2) the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), which reports crime based upon survey data drawn from a nationally representative sample of Americans regardless of whether those incidents were reported to police.

Because these systems measure crime in different ways they do not always produce identical results. Instead of viewing one source as

“correct” and the other as “incorrect,” criminologists generally consider them complementary measures that together provide a more complete picture of crime than either could alone.⁷

Recent data illustrate this point. Between 2022 and 2023, official police statistics showed reported rape and sexual assault declined from 0.45 to 0.40 incidents per 1,000 persons, while the NCVS estimated that victimization increased from 0.40 to 0.78 incidents per 1,000 persons during the same period.⁸ These figures appear contradictory at first glance, but together they suggest that fewer incidents may have been reported to and recorded by law enforcement than the number that actually occurred. This highlights an important reality: the official crime data that often make headlines—like NIBRS—measure reported and recorded crime, but not necessarily all crime that occurs. An equally important question, then, is why some crimes never become part of the official record in the first place.

WHY DO CRIMES GO UNREPORTED?

Research has long recognized the existence of the “dark figure of crime” - offenses that occur but are never reported to police or captured in official crime statistics.⁹ Victimization surveys help illuminate some of these crimes, but even they depend on individuals' willingness to disclose these incidents. Researchers have identified many reasons victims choose not to report crime. Some fear retaliation or believe the incident is too minor to warrant police involvement. Others worry they will not be believed or that reporting will expose them to additional harm. These decisions are often shaped by broader experiences with public institutions, and particularly law enforcement.

Trust in Law Enforcement

One of the strongest predictors of crime reporting is trust in the criminal justice system, with individuals who believe law enforcement will respond fairly and effectively being generally more likely to report victimization than those who expect discrimination, inaction, or mistreatment.¹⁰ Research suggests that perceptions of police legitimacy are shaped by everyday interactions with law enforcement. Studies have extensively documented racial disparities in traffic stops, surveillance, and other routine police en-

counters,¹¹ with one study finding that many Black men report recognizing the important role police play in promoting public safety, while also describing frequent experiences of disrespect and harassment during police encounters.¹² For some communities, these concerns have deeper historical roots in the origins of American policing—including its role in enforcing slavery and later systems of racial control—which continue to influence relationships between law enforcement and marginalized communities today.¹³ Such experiences can erode confidence that reporting crime will lead to fair treatment or meaningful assistance, reducing victims' willingness to report crimes to law enforcement.

Fear of Harm and Institutional Betrayal

For some victims, the decision not to report extends beyond trust in law enforcement to concerns about retaliation, privacy, or how they will be treated after coming forward. Research with transgender individuals found that many victims of hate crimes chose not to report their experiences because previous interactions with law enforcement involved verbal harassment or repeated misgendering, leading them to believe reporting would expose them to additional victimization.¹⁴ Similarly, although sexual orientation was the second most common motivation for bias-related incident reports to the FBI between 2021 and 2022¹⁵, LGBTQ+ individuals who perceived law enforcement as ineffective or unsupportive were significantly less likely to report hate crimes.¹⁶

Certain researchers describe these experiences as institutional betrayal – situations in which institutions fail to protect individuals who seek their assistance or dismiss their experiences after victimization.¹⁷ When victims anticipate that reporting will result in disbelief or additional harm they may choose not to do so, leaving these offenses omitted from official crime records.

Immigration Status and Reporting

Immigration status can also create barriers to reporting crime, with many police officers recognizing that immigrants report crime at lower rates than non-immigrants.¹⁸ Research has found that reporting of violent crime declines as the proportion of noncitizens within a community increases.¹⁹ This is not because communi-

ties with a higher share of noncitizens are more accepting of crime, but because many immigrants have concerns about interacting with law enforcement born of experiencing corrupt or abusive policing in their country of origin, which shapes their perceptions of American law enforcement.²⁰ Regardless of the underlying reasons, lower reporting means that crimes experienced within immigrant communities may be less likely to appear in official crime statistics.

Information and Community Awareness

Reporting also depends on access to reliable information. Research on “news deserts” suggests that residents of communities with limited access to credible local journalism often expend substantial emotional, infrastructural, and cognitive effort simply to remain informed about events in their communities.²¹ Without trusted local information sources, residents may be less informed about crime and public safety issues and available reporting processes, and less able to hold public institutions accountable.²² In this way, declining local journalism may influence not only public understanding of crime, but also whether crime becomes part of the official record.

HOW CRIME STATISTICS SHAPE POLICING

The previous sections explored the many factors that shape official crime data, from how crime is defined to why some offenses never become part of the official record. Once these data are collected, however, they become more than a record of past events: they also influence future policing decisions, and subsequently, the crime statistics produced tomorrow.

Using Crime Statistics in Data-Driven Policing

For decades, law enforcement agencies have relied on crime data to guide policing strategies. One of the most influential developments was CompStat, introduced by the New York City Police Department during the 1990s under Police Commissioner William Bratton. CompStat combined detailed crime reporting with geographic mapping to help police identify crime “hot spots,” monitor emerging trends, and allocate personnel more strategically.²³ According to an interview conducted by the U.S. De-

partment of Justice, Bratton described CompStat as an effort to use timely crime information to improve accountability and deploy resources where they were believed to be most needed.²⁴

Today, many police departments use forms of data-driven or predictive policing. Rather than relying solely on officers' observations or community complaints, these systems analyze historical crime data to estimate where particular crimes may be more likely to occur or where additional police resources may be warranted.²⁵ In theory, this allows agencies to respond proactively rather than reactively, helping departments allocate limited personnel and resources more efficiently.²⁶

While research provides important insights into the development and implications of data-driven policing, practitioners are responsible for applying these tools in the field. To complement the research discussed above, the Presley Center Research Interns interviewed former Riverside Chief of Police Sergio Diaz about the evolution of data-driven policing, the role of crime statistics in policing decisions, and the importance of transparency and integrity in crime reporting.

Benefits and Challenges

Supporters argue that data-driven policing can improve public safety by allowing agencies to identify crime patterns more quickly, direct officers to areas experiencing higher levels of reported crime, and make more efficient use of limited resources.²⁷ Particularly for departments facing staffing shortages or budget constraints, these systems offer an evidence-informed approach to prioritizing patrols and investigations.

At the same time, predictive policing systems are only as reliable as the data on which they are built. As discussed throughout this bulletin, crime measures do not capture all crime equally. They reflect the processes through which crime is identified, recorded, and measured, all of which can influence the patterns found within the data. When predictive systems rely primarily on historical police records, they may unintentionally reinforce those existing patterns rather than simply identify where crime is most prevalent.²⁸ This can be particularly problematic if historical policing practices disproportionately focused on particular neighborhoods or populations and the predictive models trained on those data continue directing police attention toward the same communities.²⁹ In this way,



A Practitioner Perspective on Data-Driven Policing with Mr. Sergio Diaz

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How did the adoption of CompStat influence the development of data-driven policing in the United States?

In my opinion, the most significant aspect of the adoption of CompStat-type analyses of crime by U.S. police departments has to do with the mind-shift of police personnel themselves. Starting with the adoption of CompStat in New York City in the 1990s, American police leaders became increasingly convinced that "policing matters." Traditionally, police officials had largely taken the position that crime was impervious to police efforts. The prevailing wisdom was that crime was the result of social influences that largely did not include whatever it was that the police did. ... The New York Police Department's early experience confirmed that when police collected and analyzed detailed crime data, and most importantly when those crime

data were shared with officers on the street, perpetrators could be identified and prosecuted, resulting in real reductions in crime. Most importantly, contrary to the expectations of some, crime was not simply displaced. Throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century, significant reductions in crime were realized throughout the city and in jurisdictions that adopted CompStat-style programs.

What role do crime classification and data quality play in ensuring that crime statistics accurately reflect what's happening in a community?

In the US, the FBI, through the process of Uniform Crime Reports, collects crime data from thousands of police agencies. These reports traditionally focus on eight distinct crime categories: four violent crime categories (Murder, Rape, Robbery and Aggravated Assault) and four property crimes (Burglary, Larceny-theft, Motor Vehicle Theft, and Arson).

In the property crime categories, there is significant room for interpretation as to where a specific crime should be placed. For example, car thefts, car burglaries, and shoplifts are all larcenies, so there could be some differences in how a data entry employee might code a particular crime. In my opinion, this is principally a quality-control and audit issue. I am familiar with one particular instance where [a Los Angeles Police Department] official mused about changing the categorization of unreturned rental cars. These cases had been captured as motor vehicle thefts. Motor Vehicle Thefts (or GTAs) get a lot of attention from the public and are generally considered as very reliable statistics. The official (who was also a lawyer) noted that these rental car cases were, strictly speaking, embezzlements, and should be removed from the GTA stats and added to the larceny numbers. I don't know if this change was enacted. The change was fundamentally dishonest in that much more attention was placed by the public and the media on year-over-year changes in the GTA numbers compared to the undifferentiated larceny statistics.

I have not seen any other issue close to this. However, the bigger point is that as data analysis becomes more and more crucial and as the general public pays more attention to the issue, a strong audit component is necessary, as is management commitment to transparency and integrity. If the chief is committed to playing it straight, his or her subordinates will know and will act accordingly.

What do you think the future of data-driven policing is?

Of course, there will continue to be improvements in the analysis of information. I don't know to what degree AI will be a factor, but if I had to guess, I would expect that there will be attempts to rely on that technology before it is mature enough to be relied upon for matters of guilt and innocence. The exuberance for AI in our society and the profit motive will be dangerous incentives to incorporate AI in the criminal justice system before it is truly ready for that role.



the technology itself is not necessarily biased; rather, it may reproduce biases already present within the underlying data.

Recognizing these concerns, researchers have begun exploring ways to reduce bias while maintaining predictive accuracy. For example, an evaluation of the predictive policing system ResourceRouter found that removing demographic information from the model substantially reduced the potential for bias while maintaining comparable predictive performance.³⁰ Although these findings are encouraging, the authors note that additional research is needed to determine whether similar approaches are effective across other predictive policing systems.

Data-Driven Policing Reinforces the Feedback Loop

Data-driven policing illustrates one of the central themes of this bulletin: crime statistics are not simply historical records but also become input for future decision making. Crime reports generate the data used to identify crime patterns, those patterns influence where law enforcement concentrates its efforts, and those enforcement decisions help determine which crimes are most likely to be recorded in the future. In this way, crime statistics both reflect and shape the criminal justice system. Recognizing this feedback loop does not make crime rate information unreliable; rather, it highlights the importance of interpreting them within the broader social and institutional context in which they are produced.

HOW MEDIA SHAPES PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF CRIME RATES

Throughout this bulletin, we have examined how crime data are produced and how they are used by law enforcement to inform policing strategies. For most Americans, however, these data are encountered not through FBI reports, victimization surveys, or academic research, but through news stories, social media posts, political debates, and conversations with others. Because most people do not experience serious crime firsthand, they rely on these sources to understand crime and public safety.³¹ As a result, public perceptions of crime are shaped not only by crime itself, but also by the ways and the party who is discussing it.

When Crime Becomes News

Although thousands of crimes occur every day, news organizations tend to prioritize incidents that are unusual, violent, emotionally compelling, or otherwise likely to attract public interest,³² resulting in disproportionate coverage of murders, kidnappings, mass shootings, and other high-profile crimes despite their relative rarity.³³ This pattern can shape public perceptions of crime through the availability heuristic—the tendency to judge how common an event is based upon how easily examples come to mind³⁴—leading people to conclude that violent crime is increasing even when official statistics suggest otherwise.³⁵

How Media and Experience Shape Perception of Crime Rates

Social media has accelerated this process by allowing crime stories to spread almost instantly. Because these platforms reward attention, posts that provoke fear, outrage, or surprise are often shared more widely than routine or contextual information.³⁶ As a result, even a relatively small number of highly publicized crimes can receive disproportionate attention, creating the impression that crime is more widespread than official statistics indicate.³⁷

People also interpret crime records through the lens of their own experiences and beliefs. Individuals tend to prefer news sources that align with their existing views,³⁸ while media portrayals emphasizing graffiti, vandalism, or neighborhood disorder can reinforce the perception that crime is increasing even when reported crime rates remain relatively low.³⁹ Repeated exposure to these messages has been associated with greater fear of victimization, avoidance of certain neighborhoods, and reduced trust among neighbors,⁴⁰ which may ultimately weaken residents' willingness to look out for one another, a practice frequently associated with lower crime rates.⁴¹

Crime data are only a small part of how people understand crime rates. Even if crime rates were measured perfectly and captured every instance of criminal activity, the public would still interpret those statistics through the lens of news coverage, social media, personal experience, and their own cognitive biases. Understanding crime therefore requires a consideration of not only how crime is measured but also

how those measurements are communicated and interpreted.

PUTTING CRIME STATISTICS IN CONTEXT

As this bulletin has detailed, crime measures are the product of numerous legal, institutional, and social processes that influence both how crime is measured and how those measurements are understood. Interpreting crime data therefore requires considering not only the numbers themselves, but also how they were produced and what they are designed to measure.

Several principles can help place crime statistics in context to facilitate greater comprehension:

Consider the source. Official police statistics, victimization surveys, arrest records, and other data sources each measure different aspects of crime and should be understood as complementary rather than competing sources of information.

Recognize what may be missing. Official crime data reflect crimes that are reported to and recorded by law enforcement. Reporting rates vary across offense types and communities, meaning some crimes are less likely to appear in official data compared to others.

Look beyond individual incidents. Highly publicized crimes and short-term fluctuations often receive disproportionate attention, while longer-term trends generally provide a more reliable picture of changes in crime over time.

Evaluate how information is presented. News coverage and social media frequently showcase unusual or highly visible incidents. Considering whether information reflects a single event or is part of a broader pattern can provide a better assessment of reported crime trends.

Consult multiple sources of evidence. Comparing official crime measures with victimization surveys and other credible sources often provides a more complete un-

derstanding of crime than relying on any single measure.

Taken together, these principles underscore an important point: crime statistics are not merely numbers to be accepted or rejected, but evidence to be interpreted. Understanding both the strengths and limitations of crime data allows for more informed discussions about crime, public safety, and the policies designed to address crime.



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