May 2021

Arrest Trends: Suburban Police Are Driving the Use of Arrests

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Introduction

In 2020, the United States faced a historic reckoning with the role of the police. Millions of people in cities, towns, and suburbs across the country rose up to demand fundamental change in the wake of George Floyd's murder at the hands of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin.[1] Fueled by a need to confront the ongoing overpolicing of marginalized communities, data on where and why people are being arrested is essential to elevate and act on these calls. Data is an important component in the critical examination of police practices, It can be used to understand systemic racism and racial injustice and identify places and situations where intervention is urgently needed.

Data from Vera's *Arrest Trends* tool reveals precipitous declines in arrest rates since the mid-1990s nationwide. This is a promising finding as the public expresses growing support for changing the scope of American policing.[2] But arrest rates remain extremely high, and people of color are still disproportionately targeted. Moreover, the decline in arrest rates has not equally benefited all communities, racial groups, and age groups, casting a false picture of nationwide progress. Indeed, progress has been concentrated in the country's principal cities. Suburban cities, in contrast, have seen substantially less progress and worsening racial disparities.

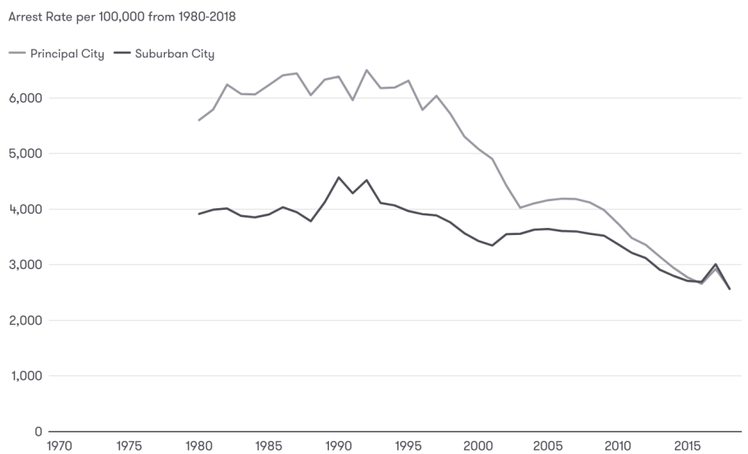
This analysis examines major differences between the arrest rates in principal and suburban cities in more detail to understand these trends.[3] It draws on the data presented in Vera's *Arrest Trends*—a tool that collates and visualizes arrest, victimization, and demographic data. The tool allows communities to understand their local police departments' enforcement practices, including arrest rates and racial disparities.

Takeaways:

- Over the past 20 years, the United States has seen a 20 percent decrease in overall arrest rates, lower rates of racial disparities in arrests, and lower youth arrest rates.
- However, these promising changes have all been concentrated in principal cities, which have seen a 49 percent drop in arrest rates since 2000. Arrest rates in suburban cities (that is, cities with a population below 50,000 located within a larger metropolitan area) have not seen the same changes, only decreasing by around 16 percent during the same time period.
- In 2016, for the first time in U.S. history, arrest rates in suburban cities were higher than those in principal cities (see Figure 1). Further analysis below reveals this was largely due to massive drops in arrest rates for property crimes and less serious ("Part II") crimes in principal cities.[4]
- Nationally, Black people are arrested at more than twice the rate of white people. In principal cities, racial disparities in arrests persist but have dropped by more than 50 percent. This progress has not occurred elsewhere; racial disparities in arrests have *increased* in suburban cities.
- In 2018, for the first time in the history of the FBI's data program, more people aged 40 to 59 years were arrested than people aged 18 to 24 years. Arrest rates for young adults have dropped more steeply in principal cities than in suburban cities.

Figure 1

Arrest Rates by Community Type



Part I vs. Part II Crimes

Law enforcement agencies report arrests to the FBI in two main categories: Part I and Part II crimes. Part I crimes include a set of major felonies, such as homicide and auto theft. Many, but not all, Part I crimes include violence. Part II crimes are less serious. This broad category contains a few offenses that involve violence (such as unarmed assault) but predominantly consists of property offenses (e.g., embezzlement and receipt of stolen property) and public order offenses (e.g., disorderly conduct and curfew violation).

As Figure 2 shows, arrest rates for Part I (that is, more serious) offenses have dropped substantially since the early 1990s, particularly in the country's principal cities. Suburban Part I arrest rates have fallen much less sharply, with the result being that arrest rates in the two types of cities have now almost converged. A similar pattern is seen in arrest rates for Part II offenses (Figure 3). Principal city Part II arrest rates fell below those of suburban cities in 2016 and have remained slightly lower since. Because Part II arrests are far more common than Part I arrests, overall arrest rates in suburban cities are higher than those in principal cities for the first time since the implementation of the Uniform Crime Reporting system.

Figure 2

Arrest Rates for Part I Offenses

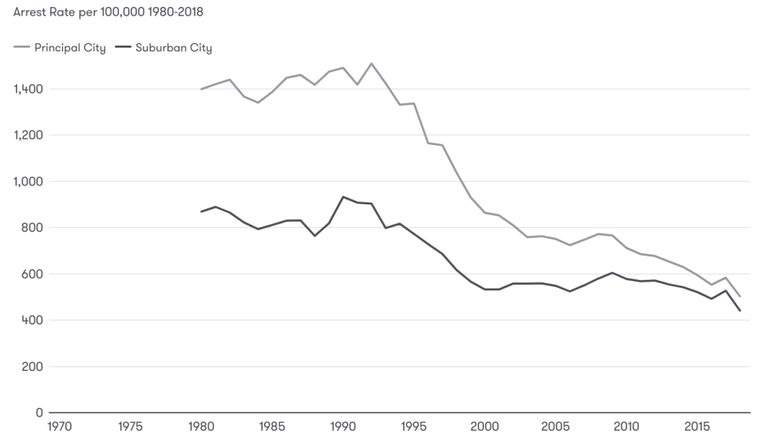
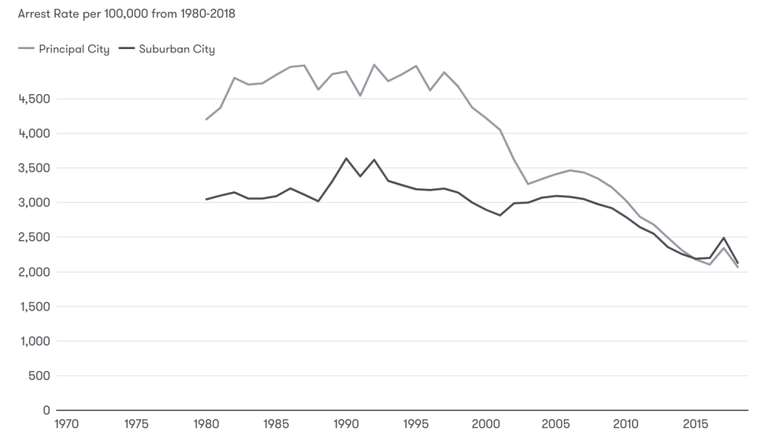


Figure 3

Arrest Rates for Part II Offenses

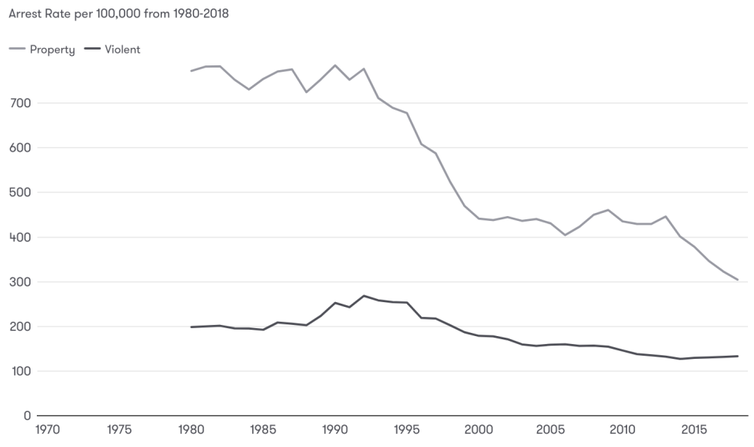


Violent vs. Property Crimes

Another way of looking at the data is to compare arrest rates for violent crimes with arrest rates for property crimes (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Arrest Rate by Offense Type



Consistent with Part I arrest rates, violent crime arrest rates remain highest in principal cities and lower in suburban cities, although the gap has narrowed (see Figure 5). Consistent with Part II arrest trends, principal city arrest rates for property crimes dropped so significantly that they fell lower than property crime arrest rates in suburban cities for the first time in 2016 (see Figure 6).

Figure 5

Arrest Rate for Violent Offenses

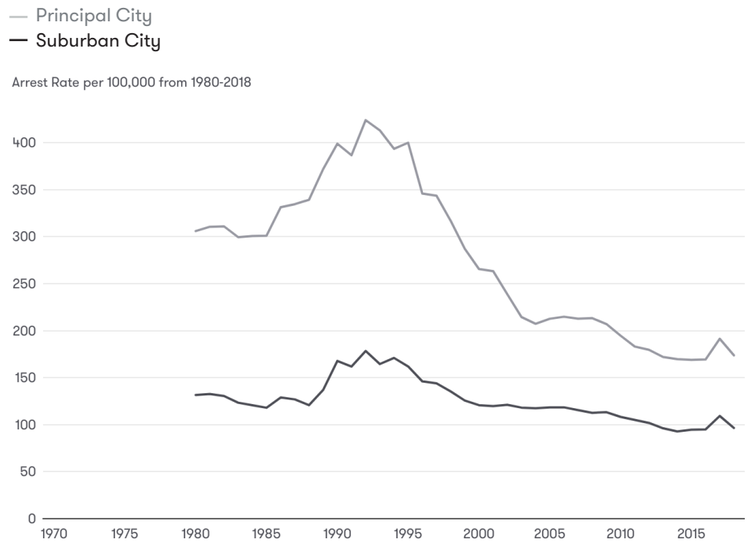
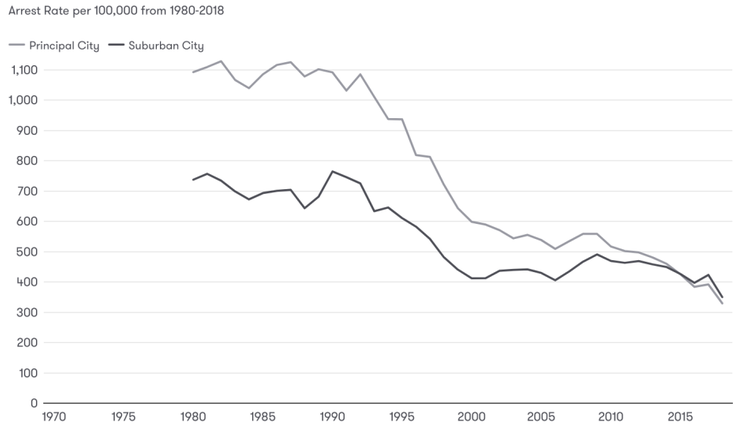


Figure 6

Arrest Rate for Property Offenses



This suggests that police in principal cities have made headway in decreasing their responses to lower-level offenses—instances where officers have much more discretion in how they act.[5] Suburban police, however, appear not to have changed how they operate to the same extent.

Shift in Arrest Rates by Age and Race

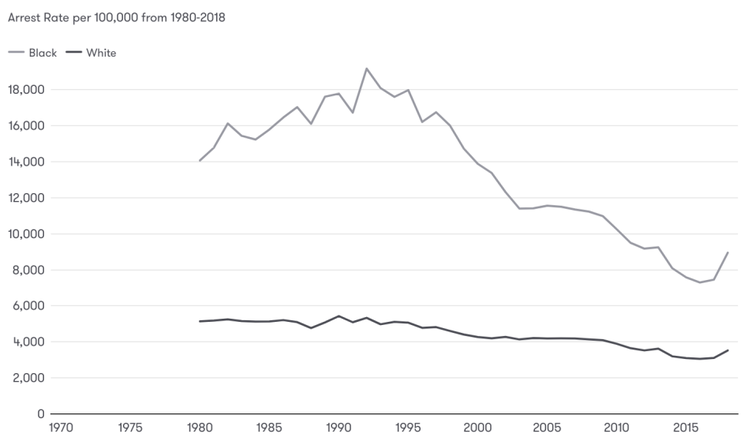
There is a long, well-documented history of racism in how the police make arrests, with Black people in particular suffering the effects of overpolicing.[6] The heavy impact of policing on the lives of young people has also long been noted.[7] It is therefore important to examine how people of different races and ages are represented in arrest trends across communities. Data from *Arrest Trends* clearly shows that progressive national trends do not fully capture how the criminal legal system impacts people of color and youth.

Race

Since 2000, the overall arrest rate has plummeted by more than 20 percent, and the arrest rate of Black people has dropped by an even greater 36 percent—slowly reducing racial disparities in arrests at the national level (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

Arrest Rate for All Offenses by Race



However, racial disparities remain: Black people are still arrested at a rate 2.54 times that of white people. Furthermore, arrests of Black people by the police have increased in suburban cities, unlike the decreases seen in principal cities.

Figure 8

Number of Black People Arrested

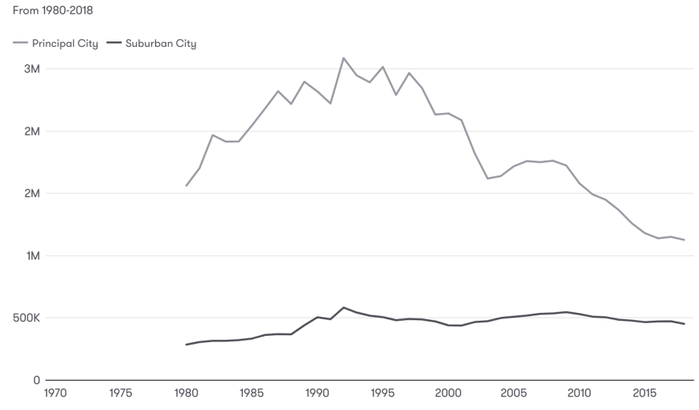
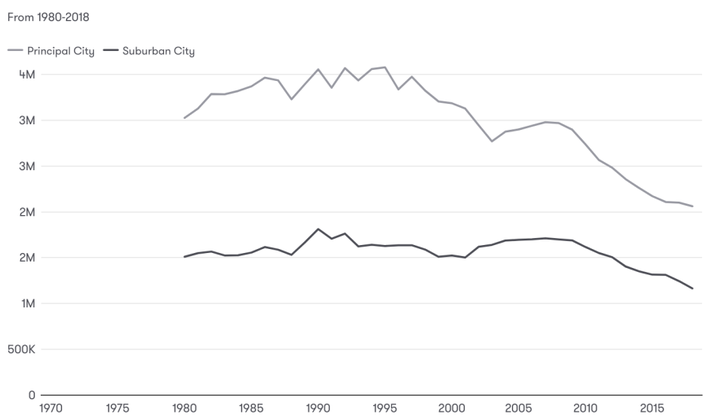


Figure 9

Number of White People Arrested



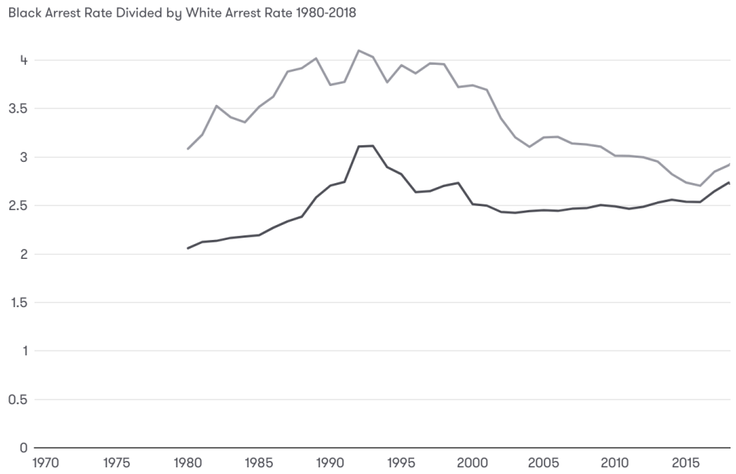
Although racial disparities remain highest in principal cities, the number of arrests of both Black and white people in such cities dropped substantially—by more than 35 percent each—since 2000. However, in suburban areas during the same period, the number of arrests of Black people increased by 2.6 percent (Figure 8), while arrests of white people dropped by nearly 24 percent (Figure 9). As a result, racial disparities in suburban city arrests have widened.

What arrest types are driving these changes?

Figure 10

Part II Arrest Rate Disparities

— Principal City
— Suburban City



It appears the worsening racial inequity in arrests in suburban cities is being driven by disproportionate arrests of Black people for less serious Part II offenses. Since 2000 (and despite a troubling uptick since 2016), principal cities have seen a 24 percent decrease in arrest disparities between Black and white people for Part II crimes. Yet, during the same timeframe, suburban cities have seen a 12 percent *increase* in racial disparities in arrests for those offenses (see Figure 10).

Despite these improvements in principal cities, more progress must be made by police departments. Although trending in the right direction, arrest rate disparities in principal cities remain higher overall than in suburban cities.

However, principal cities have not only made progress in lowering arrest rates but also in reducing racial disparities. Unfortunately, the opposite has occurred in suburban cities, where differences between police treatment of Black people and white people continue to worsen.

Age

At the same time as arrest rates have generally trended downward, the age of the people being arrested has shifted upward. Twenty-five- to 39-year-olds recently surpassed 40 percent of those being arrested—the highest proportion for this age group since 1993. This occurred while the proportion of the total population in this age group declined by about 5 percent.[8]

Meanwhile, people aged 24 years and under have accounted for a decreasing proportion of arrests. In fact, 2018 was the first year in the history of the Uniform Crime Reporting program that a greater percentage of those arrested were 40 to 59 years old than 18 to 24 years old. Only 21.6 percent of arrests in 2018 were of people aged 18 to 24 years (Figure 12), the lowest proportion to date. These changes cannot be entirely accounted for by demographic changes in the general population (see Figure 11).

Despite accounting for a shrinking proportion of arrests, young people are still vastly overrepresented. In 2018, 21.5 percent of arrests were of 18- to 24-year-olds, despite that age group making up only 7.8 percent of the population.[9] This was the highest disparity for any age group.

Arrest rates of young people for Part II crimes have decreased more steeply in principal cities than in suburban cities. It was once the case that the arrest rate of 18- to 24-year-olds for Part II crimes was higher in principal cities than in suburban cities; now, the opposite is true.

Figure 11

Population Proportion by Age Group

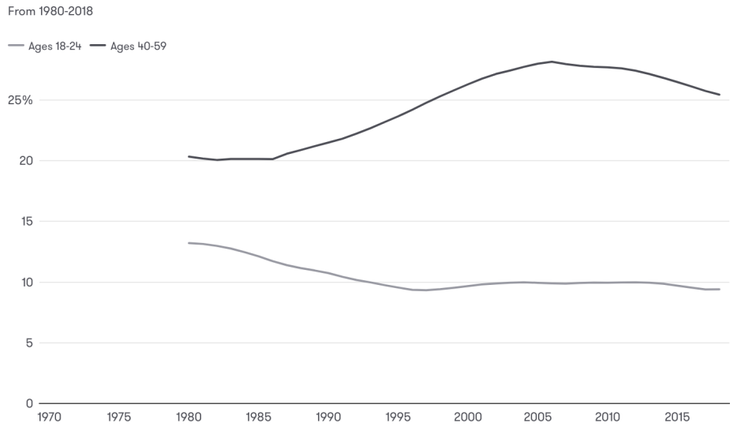
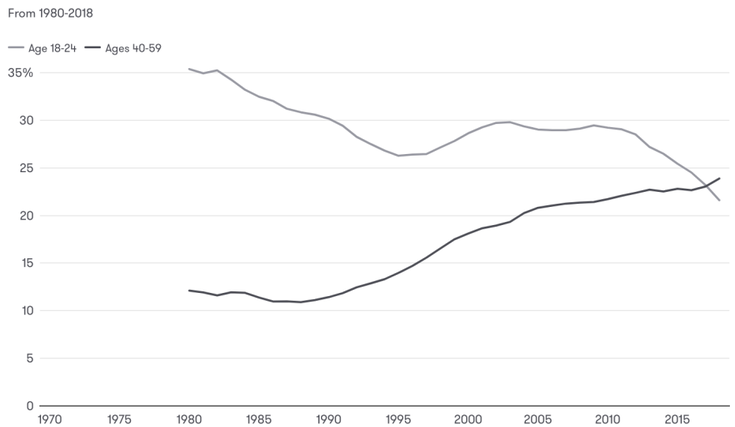


Figure 12

Arrest Breakdown by Age Group



Conclusion

Principal city aggregate arrest rates fell below those in suburban cities for the first time in 2016. Examining this shift by crime type reveals that dramatic decreases in principal city arrest rates are driven by reduced rates of arrest for relatively minor Part II and property crimes.

But deep disparities remain. Black people are still arrested at more than twice the rate of white people. Although principal cities have reduced racial disparities in arrests by more than 50 percent, disparities persist even there, and the disproportionate rate of arrests of Black people has increased in suburban cities.

Examining arrest trends by age shows a historic shift in 2018, as more arrests were made of people aged 40 to 59 years than people aged 18 to 24 years. Again, this shift was driven by especially steep declines in arrest rates of young adults in principal cities compared to suburban cities.

These patterns raise important questions about why suburban cities have not seen the same improvements as principal cities. Further research, and greater transparency and accountability in police practices, is required to extend improved outcomes to all communities. Data analysis that critically examines police enforcement among different demographic groups is foundational to understanding and documenting where disparities exist, serving as a benchmark from which to monitor progress. The results of Vera's analysis corroborate the sobering finding that the number of people in major cities who are killed by police has declined, even as police killings in suburban cities have increased.[10] Even when interactions with the police do not escalate to such tragic levels of violence, arrests can have devastating impacts on people's lives.[11] People of color continue to bear the brunt of that harm. Concerted efforts to reduce punitive enforcement and eliminate persistent disparities are critical in the pursuit of greater justice.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank our colleagues Daniela Gilbert and Leah Pope, whose valuable contributions helped shape this analysis. We are also grateful to Léon Digard, Jim Parsons, and Cindy Reed for their review and comments and to Ishan Desai-Geller for editorial support. Thank you to Sara Duell for design.

This report was made possible with the support of Vera's Capital Campaign, the Microsoft Corporation and the Microsoft Cities Team, and the Charles Koch Foundation.

The Vera Institute of Justice is powered by hundreds of advocates, researchers, and activists working to transform the criminal legal and immigration systems until they're fair for all. Founded in 1961 to advocate for alternatives to money bail in New York City, Vera is now a national organization that partners with impacted communities and government leaders for change. We develop just, antiracist solutions so that money doesn't determine freedom; fewer people are in jails, prisons, and immigration detention; and everyone is treated with dignity. Vera's headquarters is in Brooklyn, New York, with offices in Washington, DC, New Orleans, and Los Angeles.

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Endnotes

1. For example, see Larry Buchanan, Quoctrung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel, "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History," *New York Times*, July 3, 2020, https://perma.cc/5GZE-P8JU; Sam Levin, "Movement to defund police gains 'unprecedented' support across US," *The Guardian*, June 4, 2020, https://perma.cc/EVC5-ECVV; and Karina Zaiets, Janie Haseman, and Veronica Bravo, "We looked at protester demands from across the nation and compared them with recent police reforms," *USA Today*, July 24, 2020, https://perma.cc/6UKF-XKQS.

2. Dawn Milam and Sean McElwee, "Poll: Voters Support Broad Reforms to Scope of Police Work and Accountability After Chauvin Verdict," *The Appeal*, April 28, 2021, https://perma.cc/S4SG-59RJ.

3. This examination of arrests uses the five community types used in the FBI Uniform Crime Reporting Program, which are in turn based on Office of Management and Budget and U.S. Census Bureau definitions. The five community types are:

   - Principal cities: cities with a population of 50,000+ located within a larger metropolitan area;
   - Suburban cities: cities with a population below 50,000 located within a larger metropolitan area;
   - Cities outside metropolitan areas: cities with a population below 50,000 that are not located within a larger metropolitan area;
   - Metropolitan counties: unincorporated (non-city) areas located within a metropolitan area; and
   - Nonmetropolitan counties: unincorporated rural places outside of any metropolitan area.

   In this report, Vera focuses on arrest trends in principal and suburban cities. These are the locations of recent incidents—such as the police killings of George Floyd and Daunte Wright—that have fueled the current movement for change and shone spotlights on policing approaches in these communities. However, trends in rural places, especially cities outside metropolitan areas and nonmetropolitan counties, also merit attention.

4. Crimes are usually classified under one of two schemas: violent crimes versus property crimes, or Part I versus Part II crimes. The Part I versus Part II distinction uses categories created by the FBI that generally track the violent/property crime dichotomy, with some exceptions. The eight Part I crimes are criminal homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, motor vehicle theft, larceny-theft, and arson. The Part II crimes include other assaults, gambling, family offenses, driving while intoxicated, liquor law violations, public drunkenness, disorderly conduct, vagrancy, curfew violations, loitering, suspicion, runaways, and a category for "all other offenses." Federal Bureau of investigations, *Uniform Crime Reporting Handbook* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2004), 8, https://perma.cc/QWS9-WCJP.

5. George L. Kelling, *"Broken Windows" and Police Discretion* (Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, 1999), https://perma.cc/F6YE-338A.

6. Elizabeth Hinton, LeShae Henderson, and Cindy Reed, *An Unjust Burden: The Disparate Treatment of Black Americans in the Criminal Justice System* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2018), https://perma.cc/542M-5SH8.

7. See, for example, Aaron Gottlieb and Robert Wilson, "The Effect of Direct and Vicarious Police Contact on the Educational Achievement of Urban Teens," *Children and Youth Services Review* 103 (2019), 190-199.

8. National Center for Health Statistics, "U.S. Census Populations with Bridged Race Categories," https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/bridged_race.htm.

9. Ibid.

10. Samuel Sinyangwe, "Police Are Killing Fewer People in Big Cities, but More in Suburban and Rural America," FiveThirtyEight, June 1, 2020, https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/police-are-killing-fewer-people-in-big-cities-but-more-in-suburban-and-rural-america/.

11. For example, see Christopher Uggen, Mike Vuolo, Sarah Lageson et al., "The edge of stigma: An experimental audit of the effects of low-level criminal records on employment," *Criminology: An Interdisciplinary* Journal 52, no. 4 (2014), 627–654, https://perma.cc/WE6J-SPSN; and Naomi F. Sugie and Kristin Turney, "Beyond Incarceration: Criminal Justice Contact and Mental Health," *American Sociological Review* 82, no. 4 (2017), 719–743, https://perma.cc/3JX4-Q7ND.

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