

# Understanding National Crime Data

A Comparison of Data from the FBI and the National Crime Victimization Survey

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## Introduction

In the months leading up to the 2022 midterm elections, crime emerged as a major political issue.<sup>1</sup> The narrative that the United States is in a historic violent crime wave has landed with some voters and reflects how media coverage of crime shapes public perception and people's sense of safety.<sup>2</sup> When crime trends in the United States are used to fashion political messaging, they can impact not only electoral politics but also government policy and the allocation of public resources. It also serves to distract from other policy priorities that truly produce community safety, including safe and affordable housing, good jobs, health care, and education.

The most frequently cited national crime data comes from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), though it is not the only government data source. As many researchers and journalists have cautioned, the FBI's police-reported crime data is troubled by inaccuracies and incomplete coverage.<sup>3</sup> This brief explains why the FBI data is an inconclusive measure of crime in the United States and presents analysis of an additional, less-discussed source of crime data: the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). Considering both data sources together, along with data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), helps clarify what we know about crime and violence in the United States and what remains inconclusive. It also highlights the gulf between people's experiences of crime and police responses to it.

## How do crime stats get made?

There are two primary government sources of data on national crime rates in the United States:

- The FBI, using the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program; and
- The U.S. Department of Justice's (DOJ's) Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), through the National Crime Victimization Survey.

These two measures of crime are both estimates, because neither has complete coverage of every event. This means that in a single year, they can trend in different ways. Recently, estimates from the NCVS showed declines in the level of non-fatal crime since 2019, whereas the FBI's crime estimates showed

increases in specific kinds of violent crime, especially aggravated assault. The Bureau of Justice Statistics argues these two measures are “complementary” and that they work together to provide a comprehensive picture of crime.<sup>4</sup> In recent years, however, the differences appear to be contradictory more than complementary.

The processes used to collect and compute these national statistics are very different, which helps to explain these divergences. It also has consequences for how reliable and accurate the data is and for how much these statistics actually tell us about crime.

## FBI data is increasingly incomplete and cannot easily be compared year-to-year

To produce national estimates of crime trends, the FBI relies on thousands of law enforcement agencies submitting data, which is often incomplete. It is difficult to evaluate these estimates for accuracy due to a lack of detailed transparency in the FBI’s methods.

The number of agencies submitting complete data has decreased over recent years. When asked by researchers at the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera), the FBI’s press office stated that in 2018, 80 percent of the reporting agencies submitted complete crime data for all 12 months, but in 2020, only 65 percent of agencies did.<sup>5</sup> A closer look at the FBI’s source data shows the problem may even be worse: Limiting the analysis to local police departments that the FBI identifies as having resident populations associated with them—ignoring those without any associated populations—shows that in 2018, only 57 percent of the 16,815 relevant local agencies reported complete data for the entire year.<sup>6</sup> In 2020, only 52 percent of the 16,885 agencies submitted complete data.<sup>7</sup>

In 2021, the FBI transitioned from a monthly summary reporting system to a detailed incident database system (known as the National Incident-Based Reporting System, or NIBRS). Due to this transition—at least in part—data submitted by law enforcement agencies has been even more incomplete, requiring the FBI to make more statistical assumptions and place greater reliance on estimation. In 2021, only 37 percent of the 16,903 agencies with associated populations reported complete data for the entire year.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the estimation methods used by the FBI did not account for pandemic-related reporting problems.

Without high-quality, complete data, the FBI is left to extrapolate information using a variety of opaque methods to generate its reports.

## FBI crime data collection activities

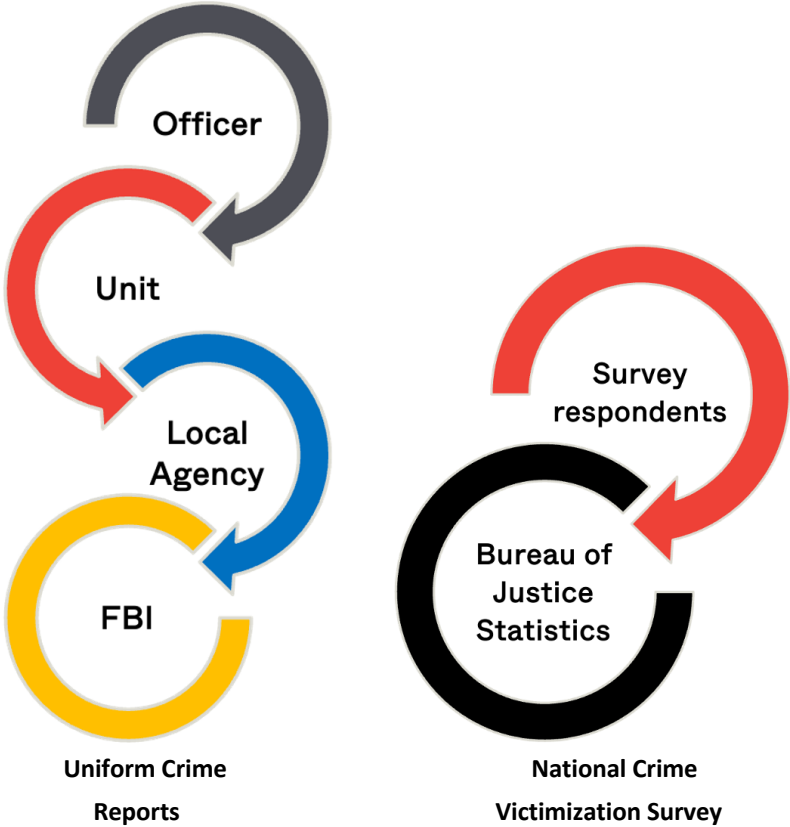
The FBI has used the UCR program to collect and report crime statistics for nearly a century, pulling data from thousands of local, county, state, tribal, and federal law enforcement agencies across the country.<sup>9</sup>

The first step in the data collection process happens when a law enforcement officer takes an incident report (also known as a police report) following an alleged criminal event. Next, based on local agency rules and state law, these incident reports are processed by the officer, the officer’s unit, or local agency into the agency’s database. The local agency then summarizes the reports in the database in a standard monthly report, according to FBI counting and crime classification rules.<sup>10</sup> (See Figure 1.) Finally, these

monthly reports are checked for data completeness and plausibility by the FBI and turned into national crime statistics.

Figure 1

**How crime becomes a statistic in the FBI’s Uniform Crime Report and the National Crime Victimization Survey**



As noted, not every agency consistently reports crime data and some report nothing at all. Consequently, in an attempt to fill gaps in available data, the FBI estimates national and state totals, using monthly or annual information that is available on hand for the same or similar agency.<sup>11</sup>

Error and distortion can creep into the data at each step in the process.

Law enforcement officers have substantial discretion in their decision about whether to record a police report and how to interpret what type of alleged crime occurred.<sup>12</sup> If a responding officer chooses not to fill out a police report, the alleged crime will not make it into crime statistics and, further, no arrest or

prosecution will be made. If the officer does choose to write up the report, particular officers and/or units might be incentivized to downgrade a case to a lower charge or to upgrade it to a more severe one in ways that help their units meet controversial police management quotas—like requirements to make a certain number of arrests.<sup>13</sup> Since incident reports take time to write up, incentives may also relate to an individual officer’s workplace or schedule concerns, or relatively standard practices related to overtime pay or time off.<sup>14</sup> Bail and charging practices in each jurisdiction can also influence decisions about charging a case following arrest: for example, an officer might write up a report with charges that would prevent or dissuade a judicial officer from releasing a person on recognizance at initial arraignment.<sup>15</sup>

The local agency might have other concerns that factor into how its members approach reporting crime statistics—such as demonstrating the effectiveness of law enforcement in meeting quantitative crime control goals or demonstrating the need for further funding from local authorities.<sup>16</sup> The FBI, in its turn, has a unit dedicated to auditing crime statistics and reviewing classification. The details of these

reviews—which are conducted once every three years—are not published. However, FBI reports acquired by Vera through public records request suggest that the unit often finds substantial errors in its reviews of each state.<sup>17</sup> Once identified, the FBI does not automatically update the published UCR data to adjust for these errors.<sup>18</sup> Without greater transparency in its methods, it is impossible to determine the extent to which data released by the FBI is truly reliable or accurate.

In sum, the data used in the FBI's crime statistics can serve many disparate interests during the reporting process. Though they are not labeled as such, the FBI crime statistics can be considered measures of law enforcement agency activity and decision-making.<sup>19</sup> Turning our attention to the other source of government data on crime—the NCVS—highlights another major issue: many experiences of crime are never reported to the police and are therefore not counted in the FBI's statistics. Indeed, this is true for nearly half of serious violent crimes.<sup>20</sup> As a result, FBI crime statistics are not reliable measures of people's experiences of safety or harm.<sup>21</sup>

## NCVS crime data

The Bureau of Justice Statistics has collected and published the National Crime Victimization Survey since the 1970s.<sup>22</sup> BJS serves as the federal statistical agency for the Department of Justice. NCVS is a large scale, in-person survey using a nationally representative sample of people ages 12 and up. Administration of the survey includes regular follow-ups, including by phone, over the study period.<sup>23</sup> It takes BJS about 10 months from the end of the year to process and publish NCVS crime statistics.

The survey data is collected directly from people who have experienced crimes, making it a better measure of trends than data produced by the FBI. The NCVS

- includes incidents police never learn about,
- includes incidents police learn about but do not document, and
- has far fewer data collection and processing steps that might introduce error than the FBI process.

Unlike the FBI, the researchers who produce the NCVS data publish a transparent, fully documented methodology, which is made available to the public along with the source data sets.

## Data from the NCVS and the FBI show very different crime trends

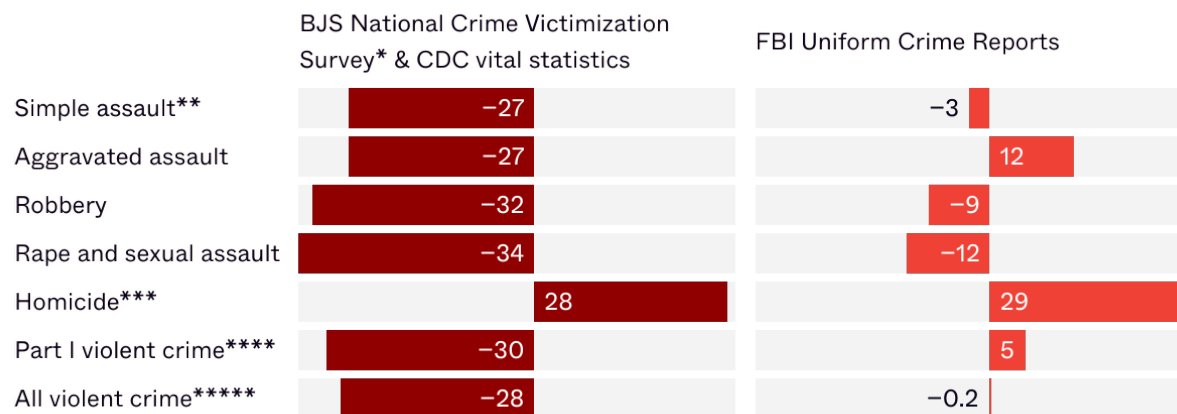
NCVS data for 2019 and 2020 shows declines in non-fatal violent victimization across the board, indicating that fewer people are experiencing violence—even as public concern about violence, guns, and crime remains high.<sup>24</sup> However, data collected by the FBI tells a different story.

Figure 2 compares NCVS and UCR trends in violence, by type of crime, for 2019 to 2020. For robbery, as well as rape and sexual assault, both NCVS and UCR national estimates show declines, although NCVS data shows steeper declines. However, for trends in aggravated assault, the FBI data shows a 12 percent *increase* compared to a 27 percent *decrease* from NCVS data. (For both NCVS and FBI data, aggravated

assaults include committed as well as attempted offenses and involve serious injury or a weapon, but are not robberies or sexual assault.)

Figure 2

### Percentage change in crime by type, 2019–2020



\* Crime victimization data measured by event year, rather than collection year.

\*\* FBI simple assault estimate from Vera Institute of Justice 70 percent sample.

\*\*\* CDC homicide data from National Vital Statistics System; FBI murder and non-negligent manslaughter.

\*\*\*\* Part I violent crime is an aggregate grouping defined as aggravated assault, robbery, rape and sexual assault, and homicide.

\*\*\*\*\* All violent crime is an aggregate grouping defined as Part I violent crime and simple assault.

Because NCVS data is collected directly from crime survivors and does not measure murder, for a complete comparison of trendlines on serious violence, it is necessary to include homicides via an additional data source. Vera uses data from the CDC’s National Center for Health Statistics.<sup>25</sup> CDC and FBI data both show a large increase in homicide, 28 percent for CDC and 29 percent for the FBI. (The difference between the two is due to missing data in the FBI estimates.<sup>26</sup>)

Looking at Part I violent crime—which includes aggravated assault, robbery, rape and sexual assault, and homicide—we see striking divergence across sources: NCVS data is down 30 percent, and UCR data is up 5 percent.

As noted, the FBI does not report crime trends for non-serious violence, also known as simple assault. However, many agencies report non-serious violent crime numbers through the UCR as part of their data submissions. Vera was able to estimate this crime trend based on the sum of data reported by agencies covering 70 percent of the population.<sup>27</sup> Doing so reveals that both data sources—the FBI and NCVS—show declines in violent crime overall, although the UCR decline is less than 1 percent, and the NCVS decline is 28 percent.

The overall picture that emerges is an increase in homicides accompanied by a decline in other forms of non-lethal violence. Despite these changes, homicides continue to make up a small fraction of overall crimes.

## FBI data is vulnerable to small changes in crime classification

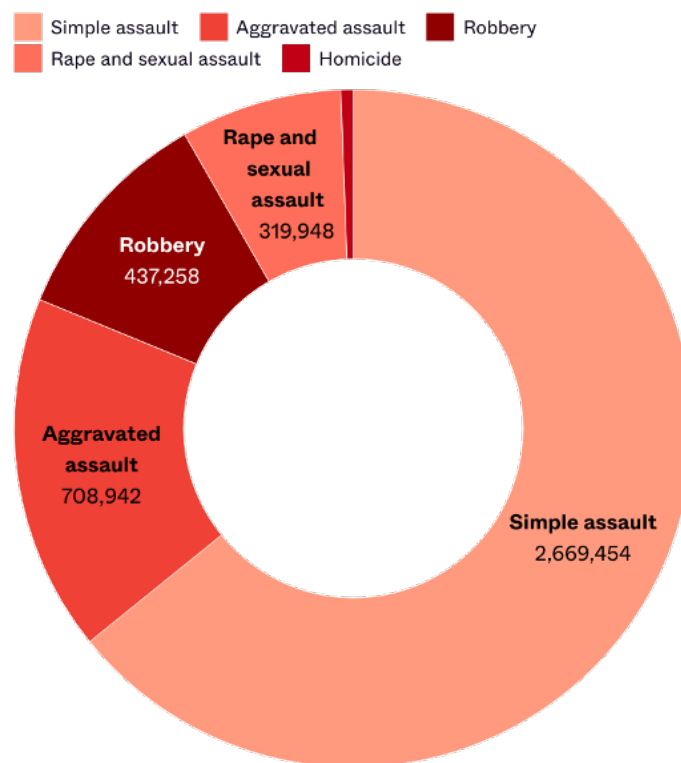
The discrepancy between the FBI and NCVS data regarding the details and degree of changes in violent crime requires an explanation. An answer can be found through a careful examination of how police classify and report assaults. The increases in aggravated assaults reported by the FBI might have been, at least in part, a result of changes to crime classification by police agencies, particularly changes to incidents that might otherwise have been classified as simple assault.

The NCVS data shows that the most frequent kind of violence is a “simple” assault—one that does not involve serious injury, a weapon, or robbery and is not a sexual assault—for example, a fist fight. In contrast, even accounting for recent increases, very serious violence like murder occurs infrequently (see Figure 3). In 2020, nearly two out of three violent encounters were simple assaults.<sup>28</sup>

In contrast, the FBI only reports national estimates for assaults that involve serious injuries or weapons. Not only does this provide an incomplete picture, it also means that any shifts in how law enforcement agencies categorize violent crimes, up or down, can substantially influence crime trends. When more assaults are counted as simple assaults, the level of violent crime appears to decline; when more assaults are counted as aggravated assaults, the level of violent crime appears to go up. For example, FBI data rules require every assault involving a gun to be counted as an aggravated assault—regardless of whether the gun was fired, brandished, or displayed.<sup>29</sup> Police departments, however, retain discretion in reporting some of these incidents as simple assault, effectively excluding

Figure 3

### NCVS estimates of violent crime, 2020



Note: Homicide data taken from the CDC, all other data from the NCVS. NCVS data is measured by event year, rather than collection year. Part I violent crime reported in FBI national estimates does not include simple assault.

them from violent crime estimates. A high-profile instance of this comes from California, where a *Los Angeles Times* investigation that audited crime statistics discovered the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) had misclassified violent crimes, including some gun crimes, as minor offenses, skewing crime stats for years.<sup>30</sup> After the ensuing scandal and oversight investigations, there was an increase of aggravated assaults reported by the LAPD the following year. This increase appeared to be the result—at least in part—of this change in classification practices.<sup>31</sup>

As a hypothetical example, if the United States had the exact same number of violent crimes in two years, but changed assault classification practices a little—counting three percent of simple assaults as aggravated assaults—the change would have a substantial impact on crime rates under the standard FBI reporting approach.<sup>32</sup> Aggravated assaults would appear to have increased 10.5 percent and Part I violent crime overall would appear to have increased 6.8 percent, even as total violent incidents remained the same.

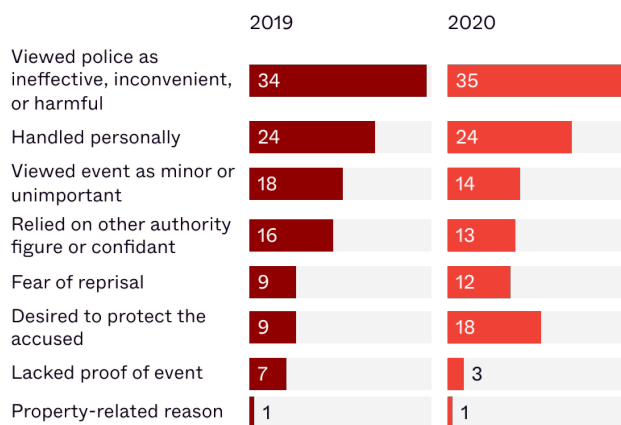
### NCVS data counts crimes that are not reported to the police and are therefore missing from the FBI data

The NCVS data reveals how incidents of crime and violence frequently escape police scrutiny, in large part because survivors do not contact or involve law enforcement. In recent years, roughly half of serious violent crimes are not reported to or known about by law enforcement.<sup>33</sup> The most frequently cited reason people gave the NCVS for not reporting their victimization to the police is that they believe that police are ineffective or biased.<sup>34</sup> Another common reason is that the harmed person decided to handle things personally, which is true in about one in four cases. (See Figure 4.)

Notably, of people harmed by serious violence who were interviewed as part of the NCVS in 2020, 18 percent said that one of the reasons they had not reported the crime to the police was because they wanted to protect the responsible party. This is the largest percentage of respondents to cite this underlying reason in the last decade.<sup>35</sup> Conversely, in the same year, only 3 percent of the people who survived serious violent crimes said that they reported the crime to police because they wanted the responsible party to be punished.<sup>36</sup> Some of the other reasons people shared for not reporting to police are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

#### Reasons given by survivors of serious violence for not involving the police



Note: Serious violence includes rape and sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault. Survey respondents can name multiple categories. Responses are subsequently grouped into similar categories.

Source: Vera analysis of National Crime Victimization Survey data for 2019 and 2020.

Relationships with, and expectations of, the police are therefore instrumental in people's decision to report a crime.<sup>37</sup> In years when we see stark or growing differences between FBI and NCVS data, looking to this item of the survey can provide important context.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Law enforcement-reported crime data—whether from local or state agencies or from the FBI—offers an incomplete view of violence trends. Instead, it measures law enforcement response to certain types of crime, and its creation involves discretion, judgement, interpretation, and estimation. Even when it comes to the most serious kinds of crime like homicide, the FBI data relies on estimates and is less accurate than annual data compiled by coroners and health departments through the national vital statistics program. Vera recommends the following:

- Policy makers, politicians, and the media should show greater caution regarding the use of FBI crime data as an exact reflection of crime trends and as a tool for understanding safety.
- The DOJ should be more transparent with the public about the results of the FBI's UCR quality assurance audits of local agencies' crime reporting activities. The DOJ should regularly publish the audits and update official crime estimates when the results of audits indicate substantial error and the need to discard inaccurate data. The department should proactively share any such updates of estimates with stakeholders.
- The FBI should increase transparency about the estimation methods it uses, acknowledging limitations in the precision of these numbers. The level of detail in methodologies published by the FBI should allow independent replication and assessment of their reported crime trends, especially with more complex estimations involved in NIBRS-based estimates.
- Federal agencies should design and implement ways to monitor crime and violence that center community needs. These measures should acknowledge that crime data is not a complete proxy for safety. Appropriate federal statistical agencies, and not law enforcement agencies, should organize these measures.
- In the absence of better data, journalists and editors should provide better coverage and framing of police-reported crime data. They should make greater use of NCVS data when writing about annual crime and violence trends and point out the limitations of FBI and other law enforcement data.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Annie Linskey and Colby Itkowitz, “GOP Strategy Elevates Clashes over Crime, Race in Midterm Battlegrounds,” *Washington Post*, September 25, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/09/25/crime-immigration-race-republicans-democrats/>.

<sup>2</sup> Surveys conducted in October 2022 by Pew Research Center and Gallup both indicated high levels of concern about crime and gun control, although focus on gun policy had weakened since June 2022. Gallup has not included crime among the set of possible midterm issues over at least the last two decades, indicating crime’s recent reemergence as a partisan political issue. See: Pew Research Center, “Midterm Voting Intentions Are Divided, Economic Gloom Persists,” *Pew Research Center*, October 20, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/10/20/the-midterm-elections-and-views-of-biden/#h-top-midterm-issues-the-economy-future-of-democracy>; Lydia Saad, “Economy Is Top Election Issue; Abortion and Crime Next,” *Gallup*, October 31, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/404243/economy-top-election-issue-abortion-crime-next.aspx>. According to the Gallup poll, 57 percent of conservatives saw crime as extremely important to their vote; however, only 31 percent of moderates and 26 percent of liberals thought crime was very important. See Gallup News Service, “Gallup Poll Social Series: Crime: Final Topline,” October 3-20, 2022, 11 <https://news.gallup.com/file/poll/404324/221101IssueImportance.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> See Laura Bennett, *A Journalist’s Guide to the FBI’s 2021 Crime Statistics*, The Center for Just Journalism, 2022, 15, <https://justjournalism.org/media/download/cjj-fbi-crime-stats-2022.pdf>. For a detailed presentation of problems with police reported crime data in 2021, see Weihua Li, Andrew Rodriguez Calderón, and David Eads, “See If Police in Your State Reported Crime Data to the FBI,” *The Marshall Project*, August 15, 2022, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2022/08/15/see-if-police-in-your-state-reported-crime-data-to-the-fbi>. See also Richard Rosenfeld, “Transfer the Uniform Crime Reporting Program from the FBI to the Bureau of Justice Statistics” *Criminology and Public Policy* 6 (2007): 825-34, and Benjamin P. Comer, Cody Jorgensen, and David Carter, “Reported Crime Frequencies: A Statistical Comparison of State Crime Reports and the UCR,” *American Journal of Criminal Justice* (2021), 1–25, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12103-021-09623-y>.

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Rachel E. Morgan and Alexandra Thompson, *The Nation’s Two Crime Measures, 2011–2020* (Washington, D.C: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022), 1, <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/ntcm1120.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> FBI, Media Request to Jacob Kang-Brown, senior research associate, Vera Institute of Justice, February 17, 2022. Vera analyzed the number of agencies submitting complete and incomplete data using the Return A Master File for 2020 and 2018 but was unable to replicate the numbers reported by the FBI press office. In the 2020 file, there were just over 24,400 unique reporting agencies in the file, and about 10,200 reported for 12 months of the year. In 2018, there were closer to 24,300 agencies and 10,700 reporting for the entire year. Because a large number of these agencies are not local law enforcement, Vera then narrowed the analysis to agencies with an associated population. The indicator is Card\_1\_Type for each month of data, which shows whether the agency reported data for the month. In this way, Vera determined which agencies had reported 12 months of data. See pages 9–12 of Return A data.

<sup>6</sup> Agencies with no associated population include railroad police, interagency task forces, national parks, state and federal agencies, as well as school districts and universities. Vera analyzed FBI’s Return A Master File for 2018, available from the FBI’s crime data explorer. To calculate whether an agency had reported for the complete year, Vera examined the 12 different Card\_1\_Type fields, one for each month of data. Although the fields do not identify the month, the presence or absence of data indicates reporting and can be used to determine completeness for the year. See FBI, “Return-A, 1960--Current, Fixed-Length, Unpacked” (FBI), 9–12.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Vera’s analysis of FBI’s Return A Master File for 2021.

<sup>9</sup> FBI, *About the UCR Program* (Washington, DC: FBI, 2018), 3, <https://perma.cc/AK4S-6JQS>. The UCR program includes both NIBRS as well as the recently discontinued Summary Reporting System. See FBI, *National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS)*, <https://www.fbi.gov/how-we-can-help-you/need-an-fbi-service-or-more-information/ucr/nibrs>.

<sup>10</sup> A state agency may collate and collect these monthly reports from law enforcement agencies in the state before sending the data to the FBI. Although there are no federal laws that require that local agencies participate in the FBI UCR, many states have requirements that their local agencies participate.

<sup>11</sup> Congressional Research Service, “How Crime in the United States Is Measured: Imputation,” [https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL34309.html#\\_Toc202681827](https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL34309.html#_Toc202681827).

<sup>12</sup> See for example, Rémi Boivin and Gilbert Cordeau, “Measuring the Impact of Police Discretion on Official Crime Statistics: A Research Note,” *Police Quarterly*, 14(2): 2011 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/109861111404179>.

<sup>13</sup> See for example Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Service* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation 2010). See discussion of quotas, especially at the NYPD, in Ram Subramanian, Jackie Fielding, Lauren-Brooke Eisen, et al., *Revenue Over Public Safety: How Perverse Financial Incentives Warp the Criminal Justice System* (New York: Brennan Center for Justice, 2022), 25–29, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/revenue-over-public-safety>.

<sup>14</sup> See for example Peter Moskos, “The Better Part of Valor: Court-Overtime Pay as the Main Determinant for Discretionary Police Arrests,” *Law Enforcement Executive Forum* 8, no. 3 (2008), 77–94, <https://iletsbeiforumjournal.com/images/Issues/FreeIssues/ILEEF%202008-8.3.pdf>. See also Aaron Chalfin and Felipe Goncalves, “Collars for Dollars: Arrests and Police overtime,” *Social Science Research Network (SSRN)* 3712794 (2020), [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3712794](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3712794).

<sup>15</sup> For example, see discussion of charging practices in Nicole Gonzalez Van Cleve, *Crook County: Racism and Injustice in America’s Largest Criminal Court* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Ethan Corey, “FBI Crime Data Is Out: Here’s What You Need to Know,” *The Appeal*, October 5, 2022, <https://theappeal.org/fbi-crime-data-2021/>

<sup>17</sup> FBI audits from 2019 to 2021 showed that 11 of the 20 states reviewed had classification errors substantial enough to require a findings letter from the FBI—a formal indication of failure to comply with federal policy. The average state’s classification error rate was 10 percent.

<sup>18</sup> FBI, “Data Quality Guidelines,” archived July 5, 2022, <https://perma.cc/99R3-AGGT>.

<sup>19</sup> See discussion in Richard Rosenfeld, “Explaining the Divergence between UCR and NCVS Aggravated Assault Trends,” in *Understanding Crime Statistics: Revisiting the Divergence of the NCVS and UCR*, James P. Lynch and Lynn A. Addington, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 251–68.

<sup>20</sup> Alexandra Thompson and Susannah N. Tapp, *Criminal Victimization in 2021* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022), 5, <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv21.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> See discussion in “Explaining the Divergence Between UCR and NCVS Aggravated Assault Trends,” 2007, 251–68.

<sup>22</sup> Callie M. Rennison and Michael Rand, “Introduction to the National Crime Victimization Survey,” in *Understanding Crime Statistics: Revisiting the Divergence of the NCVS and UCR*, James P. Lynch and Lynn A. Addington, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 17–54.

<sup>23</sup> In recent years, the survey has included a sample of about 240,000 people per year. BJS uses sampling weights as well as nonresponse weighting to create population-level estimates. See BJS, *NCVS: Documentation*, [https://bjs.ojp.gov/data-collection/ncvs?utm\\_content=default&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=govdelivery#documentation-0](https://bjs.ojp.gov/data-collection/ncvs?utm_content=default&utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery#documentation-0)

<sup>24</sup> Megan Brennan, “Worry About Crime in U.S. at Highest Level Since 2016,” *Gallup*, April 7, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/391610/worry-crime-highest-level-2016.aspx>.

<sup>25</sup> For more information on the CDC’s vital statistics system, see National Vital Statistics System, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/index.htm>. This system tracks mortality based on death certificates and shows both an underlying cause of death as well as additional causes, and for injuries, injury mechanism, and injury intent. This data is used to support a wide range of research that informs public policy and health care practice.

<sup>26</sup> The CDC tends to have more accurate numbers on homicide. See Wendy Regoeczi and Duren Banks, *The Nation’s Two Measures of Homicide* (Washington, DC: BJS, 2014), 3–4 (“The NVSS consistently shows a higher number and rate of homicides in the United States compared to the [FBI], likely due to the differences in coverage and scope and the voluntary versus mandatory nature of the data collection. . . . The NVSS will produce more accurate homicide trends at the national level.”), <https://perma.cc/GPE6-YY9F>.

<sup>27</sup> Vera researchers chose a sample of agencies from the FBI’s published Return A Master Files to study trends for 2020. Agencies in the sample are the most reliably reporting police departments in the United States: each agency reported data monthly to the FBI for every year from 2015 to 2020. Together, the 6,699 agencies cover 70 percent of the population. Vera researchers processed this data for 2020 and the

five years prior (2015 to 2019), and then compared annual totals. In 2020, this sample included 71 percent of the FBI's national estimates of Part I serious violent crime. When that category is broken down into its component parts, the sample has 73.6 percent of murders, 69.1 percent of rapes, 77 percent of robberies, and 69.6 percent of aggravated assaults. The sample produced percentages that were similar to the FBI's national estimates in terms of year-over-year change. Increases in Vera's sample agencies' reported rates of murder and aggravated assault were higher, and the decreases in reported rape were steeper. Robbery was down in both samples, but Vera's sample showed a smaller decrease than the FBI's national estimates. In the sample agencies, Part I violent crime increased by 6.5 percent, but it was up by 5 percent in FBI national estimates. All violence, including simple assaults, decreased by 0.2 percent in the sample agencies. Thus, this sample is roughly consistent with overall trends, indicating that the simple assault trend estimate reported here should be indicative of national changes.

<sup>28</sup> See Thompson and Tapp, 2022, 2. (An estimated 2,988,770 simple assaults out of an estimated 4,558,150 total violent events is 65.6 percent.) See also FBI Return A file, 2020. (Source data file shows that there were 2,418,259 simple assaults reported out of 3,588,179 reported Part I violent crimes or simple assaults, dividing to 67.4 percent.)

<sup>29</sup> For UCR reporting guidelines, see FBI Uniform Crime Reporting Program, *Uniform Crime Reporting Handbook* (Washington, DC: FBI, 2004), 26–27, <https://perma.cc/3GC4-7QZD> (“Other Assaults—Simple, Not Aggravated (4e) includes all assaults which do not involve the use of a firearm, knife, cutting instrument, or other dangerous weapon and in which the victim did not sustain serious or aggravated injuries”).

<sup>30</sup> After the *Los Angeles Times* investigations in 2014, the LAPD began ensuring that all cases that involved brandishing a firearm were counted as serious crimes such as aggravated assault or robbery, in keeping with the FBI's UCR crime classification guidelines. See Ben Poston, Joel Rubin, and Anthony Pesce, “LAPD Underreported Serious Assaults, Skewing Crime Stats for 8 Years,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 15, 2015, <https://www.latimes.com/local/cityhall/la-me-crime-stats-20151015-story.html>. For UCR reporting guidelines, see generally FBI Uniform Crime Reporting Program, *Uniform Crime Reporting Handbook*, 2004.

<sup>31</sup> See Ben Poston and Joel Rubin, “LAPD Misclassified Nearly 1,200 Violent Crimes as Minor Offenses,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 9, 2014, <https://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-crimestats-lapd-20140810-story.html>. Using a relatively conservative method and looking at data from 2012 and 2013, the *Times* estimated that if the LAPD recorded aggravated assaults correctly, they would have been reported at 14 percent higher, and violent crime overall would have been reported to be 7 percent higher. See also Ben Poston, “Violent Crime Rose 14.3% in L.A.; Officials Vow Action,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 2015, <https://www.latimes.com/local/crime/la-me-0113-lapd-crime-stats-20150113-story.html>. The article noted that “[LAPD Chief Beck] attributed the increase of serious assaults to three factors: improvements in how LAPD classified assault crimes, a spike in domestic violence cases, and alcohol-fueled street attacks.”

<sup>32</sup> This example is designed using 2019 FBI national crime data, reported in the FBI Return A file. In 2019, 2,558,717 simple assaults were reported, and 1,133,219 Part I violent crimes, for a total number of 3,691,936 violent crimes. If 3 percent of the 2.5 million simple assaults were not counted as simple assaults and instead counted as aggravated assaults, aggravated assaults would increase by 76,761, or 10.5 percent.

<sup>33</sup> See Thompson and Tapp, 2022, 5.

<sup>34</sup> To determine the reasons why survivors of serious violence do not involve police, Vera researchers analyzed NCVS concatenated datafiles for 1992 to 2020. See BJS, “National Crime Victimization Survey, Concatenated File, [United States], 1992–2020 (ICPSR 38136)” database (Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, ver. Date October 18, 2021), <https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/NACJD/studies/38136>.

One section of the NCVS asks an open-ended question, “What was the reason this incident was not reported to the police? (Can you tell me a little more?) Any other reason?” There is also a structured probe to go along with this initial question, “Was the reason because you dealt with it another way, it wasn't important enough to you, insurance wouldn't cover it, police couldn't do anything, police wouldn't help, or was there some other reason?”

NCVS staff code respondents' answers into 19 categories: 1) Reported to another official (guard, apartment manager, school official, etc.); 2) Private or personal matter or took care of it myself or informally; told offender's parents; 3) Minor or unsuccessful crime, small or no loss, recovered property; 4) Child offender(s), “kid stuff”; 5) Not clear was a crime or that harm was intended; 6) No insurance, loss

less than deductible, etc.; 7) Didn't find out until too late; 8) Could not recover or identify property; 9) Could not find or identify offender, lack of proof; 10) Police wouldn't think it was important enough, wouldn't want to be bothered or get involved; 11) Police would be inefficient, ineffective (they'd arrive late or not at all, wouldn't do a good job, etc.); 12) Police would be biased, would harass/insult respondent, cause respondent trouble, etc.; 13) Offender was police officer; 14) Did not want to get offender in trouble with the law; 15) Was advised not to report to police; 16) Afraid of reprisal by offenders or others; 17) Did not want to or could not take time—too inconvenient; 18) Other; 19) Respondent not present or doesn't know why it wasn't reported. See Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Codebook: National Crime Victimization Survey, Concatenated File, [United States], 1992-2020* (Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 2021), 581–589, <https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/NACJD/studies/38136/datadocumentation#>.

Vera researchers consolidated respondents' reasons into eight thematic categories:

*Viewed police as ineffective, inconvenient, or harmful* is a combination of categories 10, 11, 12, 13, and 17. *Handled personally* is category 2.

*Viewed event as minor or unimportant* combines 3 and 5.

*Relied on other authority figure or confidant* combines 1 and 15.

*Fear of reprisal* is category 16.

*Desired to protect the accused* combines 4 and 14.

*Lacked proof of incident* is category 9.

*Property-related reason* combines categories 6, 7, and 8.

<sup>35</sup> Vera analysis of NCVS concatenated data file, 1992–2020.

<sup>36</sup> From the open-ended question in the NCVS that asks, “Besides the fact that it was a crime, did YOU have any other reason for reporting this incident to the police? Any other reason?” that is followed by a structured probe, “Did you report it to get help with this incident, to recover your loss, to stop or punish the offender, to let police know about it, or was there some other reason?” The specific response in the data set used for this statistic is “To punish offender.” Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Codebook: National Crime Victimization Survey 1992-2020*, 2021, 591, 593–594.

<sup>37</sup> For a working paper on this theme using 911 calls from 2020, see Desmond Ang, Panka Bencsik, Jesse Bruhn, and Ellora Derenoncourt, “Police Violence Reduces Civilian Cooperation and Engagement with Law Enforcement,” HKS Working Paper No. RWP21-022, 2021, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3920493](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3920493).

## For more information

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