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Data and the State

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Price of Punishment: Exploring Crime Data in NYC, DC, and LA

Literature Review:

Policing, incarceration, and its disparate effects on communities has been controversial in the United States, with a history tracing back to the 18th century. Existing literature examines the complicated past of policing and its impacts on marginalized communities over time.

America's first centralized community police departments appeared in the mid-1800s, with New York City in 1845, Washington DC in 1861, and Los Angeles in 1869.¹ However, the roots of policing trace back the 1700s, when "Slave Patrols" were established in the Carolinas, forming the first unofficial police force in America to thwart slave uprisings and escapes.² When slavery was later abolished with the 13th Amendment in 1865, these slave patrols developed into "militia-style groups" tasked with enforcing the Black Codes: laws limiting the freedoms of former slaves.³ Although the 14th Amendment formally outlawed these codes in 1868, newly-formed local police departments continued to enforce racially discriminatory laws, including the Jim Crow laws legalizing segregation. These police departments were trusted by municipalities to "exert excessive brutality" on African-American offenders", embedding racial prejudice in urban police departments from their inception.⁴ Issues of racial justice are still rampant in policing. Discriminatory practices such as the "stop and frisk" policy, allowing officers to stop and search individuals they deem suspicious without warrants, encourage racial profiling⁵. As a consequence, even though African Americans make up only 13 percent of the total US population, 50% of all prisoners are Black.⁶

Police departments in the 19th and 20th centuries were also notoriously corrupt, often protecting the interests of the elite instead of the public. August Vollmer, chief of the police department of Berkeley, California in 1909 and the father of modern American policing, described his work as a "war against the enemies of society", where his enemies were composed of "mobsters, bootleggers, socialist agitators, strikers, union organizers, immigrants, and Black people".⁷ This

¹ "The History of American Police Brutality." National Trial Lawyers, thenationaltriallawyers.org/article/the-history-of-american-police-brutality/, pg. 1

² "The Origins of Modern Day Policing." NAACP, 3 Dec. 2021, naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/origins-modern-day-policing, pg. 1

³ Ibid, pg. 2

⁴ Ibid, pg. 2

⁵ Bhattar, Kala. "The History of Policing in the US and Its Impact on Americans Today." UAB Institute for Human Rights Blog, 30 Nov. 2021, sites.uab.edu/humanrights/2021/12/08/the-history-of-policing-in-the-us-and-its-impact-on-americans-today/, pg. 4

⁶ Parenti, Christian. Lockdown America Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis. Verso, 2020, pg. xii

⁷ Lepore, Jill. "The Invention of the Police." The New Yorker, 13 July 2020, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/07/20/the-invention-of-the-police, pg. 10

pattern of policing as a tool of social control rather than public safety still persists. Throughout North America, those that are most likely to be imprisoned are the poor and people of color: society's most oppressed groups, thus widening the gap between the elite and the historic "enemies" of society.⁸

The prison-industrial complex is the modern extension of these historical systems of oppression, a term describing the overlapping interests of government and corporations which promote higher levels of incarceration than necessary. This began through a loophole in the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery except as a form of punishment, giving the government an incentive for imprisonment.⁹ The continuing presence of the prison-industrial complex can be seen through the "War on Drugs", a government campaign that began during Nixon's presidency. While designed to target major distributors and "drug king-pins", low-level offenders - often people of color - with hardly any involvement in the drug trade are being imprisoned for 15-30 years, with drug offenders currently making up 61% of the federal prison system.¹⁰ This influx of prisoners has allowed for the modern-day exploitation of unpaid labor, through systems such as UNICOR, the California prison industry authority, which continues to sell captive labor to the highest bidding private company even today.¹¹

Los Angeles

In the past few years, LA has made large changes to policing, each affecting arrest and incarceration patterns in different ways. One major shift was the 2015 rollout of mandatory body cameras for all LAPD officers. Survey data from LAPD officers shows mixed feelings about the effectiveness of body-worn cameras (BWCs)¹². Notably, over 48% of officers thought BWCs would make them less likely to stop or arrest people, and about 40% believed they'd be more likely to follow department procedures when wearing them. Most officers did not think the public should have access to footage. Their responses suggest that while BWCs were meant to boost accountability, many officers were skeptical of their impact.

Another policy was Prop 47, passed in 2014 as part of a push to de-crowd California's prison system, downgrading certain crimes from felonies to misdemeanors. It also allowed some people

⁸ Ogden, Stormy. "The Prison-Industrial Complex in Indigenous California." *Global Lockdown: Race, Gender, and the Prison-Industrial Complex*, Routledge, New York City, New York, 2005, pp. 57–66.

⁹ Bhattar, pg. 3

¹⁰ Smith, Kemba. "Modern Day Slavery: Inside the Prison-Industrial Complex." *Global Lockdown: Race, Gender, and the Prison-Industrial Complex*, Routledge, New York City, New York, 2005, pp. 105–108.

¹¹ Ogden, pg. 64

¹² Uchida, Craig D. Testing and Evaluating Body Worn Video Technology in the Los Angeles Police Department, California, 2012–2018. Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 28 Apr. 2021, <https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR37467.v1>.

already serving time to get their sentences reduced.¹³ We used a difference in differences approach to see if the policy actually had a long-term impact on incarceration trends in LA.

From 2011 to 2019, the LAPD ran Operation LASER, a predictive policing program aimed at reducing gun and gang violence. A 2012 study found it led to a 22.6% monthly drop in homicides and fewer violent crimes in targeted areas.¹⁴ The program was criticized for targeting communities of color and relying on surveillance and it was shut down in 2019.

Based on these policy changes, we decided to focus our project on the impact of Prop 47 in LA because its effects are more easily measurable through arrest and incarceration data. It also stood out to us because so many prisoner rights groups and advocates pushed for its passage as a way to reduce incarceration. By analyzing trends before and after the policy, we wanted to see if their efforts actually led to desired outcomes.

New York City

NYC, with its population of over eight million residents, has become important in the evaluation of modern policing strategies. A variety of order maintenance and policing tactics have been implemented over time in response to the city's public safety needs. While certain strategies have demonstrated promise in fostering improved police-community relations and reductions in crime and arrest rates, others have been criticized for their limited effectiveness in crime reduction and potential to cause harm.

Meta-analyses of disorder policing programs reveal that community problem-oriented policing has led to significant reductions in crime. On the other hand, aggressive programs that embrace “zero tolerance” regimes tend to generate unintended harms, such as racial disparities in police interactions, punishment of young people of color, abusive/unlawful encounters, etc.¹⁵ These “zero-tolerance tactics” are often equated with Broken Windows policing, or quality-of-life policing: the idea that unaddressed disorder encourages more disorder, from that follows crime, and then violence. This type of policing results in greater rates of misdemeanor arrests, following the idea that low-level disorder/petty crime should be addressed before they grow into more serious crime, ultimately leading to fewer felony arrests. Many critique this form of policing in arguing that it targets certain communities and demographics, worsening racial disparities.¹⁶

¹³ Sosa, Paola. “What Is Proposition 47? And What Could Change about It?” Los Angeles Times, 12 Aug. 2024, <https://latimes.com/california/story/2024-08-12/what-is-california-proposition-47-how-proposition-36-could-change-crime-sentencing-drugs-theft>

¹⁴ Uchida, pg. 9

¹⁵ Braga, Anthony A, et al. “Disorder Policing to Reduce Crime: An Updated Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis.” *Criminology & Public Policy*, vol. 23, no. 3, 1 May 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12667>.

¹⁶ Bratton, William. “Broken Windows and Quality-of-Life Policing in New York City.” The New York City Police Department, 2015.

Programs such as Operation Impact, which deployed extra NYPD officers to high crime areas designated as “impact zones” and encouraged investigative stops, have shown to achieve a small but significant reduction in total crime (largely specific to robbery and burglary) from 2004 to 2012. However, the mechanism behind these reductions remains unclear, and stops with actual probable cause were only a small fraction of the total number of stops, suggesting excessive stops with little crime suppression benefits. The program may have been more effective if it had focused on stops with a direct relation to observable criminal activity.¹⁷

Among the many consequences of policing are the effects on mental health, as evidence from psychological research points to. Particularly for disproportionately targeted men in highly surveilled neighborhoods, frequent exposure to stop-and-frisk and use-of-force tactics correlates with greater levels of psychological distress, including feelings of nervousness, worthlessness, and mental fatigue. Living under conditions of aggressive surveillance and the threat of policing can be an important risk factor for men’s mental health,¹⁸ further marginalizing vulnerable communities.

Neighborhood policing was a strategy implemented between 2015 and 2018 that aimed to encourage more communication between police and community members. It was associated with reductions in misdemeanor and proactive arrests; however, it did not significantly affect racial disparities in arrests or impact overall crime. The policy was linked to a temporary increase in complaints against police, potentially due to more community engagement and thus willingness of residents to report misconduct.¹⁹

Washington, D.C.

Washington, D.C.’s policing landscape has undergone several major reforms with mixed impacts on arrest patterns. In 2015, DC passed the Firearms and Controlled Substances Legalization Act, decriminalizing the possession of up to one ounce of marijuana and reclassifying it as a civil infraction. This legislative shift led to an immediate drop of over 60% in marijuana-related arrests, significantly reshaping the city’s drug enforcement profile.²⁰ Around the same time, the District implemented pretrial services reforms that expanded risk-based releases and diverted low-level offenders from jail, reducing the average daily jail population by more than 25%.²¹

¹⁷ MacDonald, John, et al. “The Effects of Local Police Surges on Crime and Arrests in New York City.” *PLOS ONE*, vol. 11, no. 6, 16 June 2016, p. e0157223, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0157223>.

¹⁸ Sewell, Abigail A., et al. “Living under Surveillance: Gender, Psychological Distress, and Stop-Question-And-Frisk Policing in New York City.” *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 159, June 2016, pp. 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.04.024>.

¹⁹ Beck, Brenden, et al. “Effects of New York City’s Neighborhood Policing Policy.” *Police Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 4, 15 Feb. 2022, p. 109861112110469, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10986111211046991>.

²⁰ Council of the District of Columbia. Comprehensive Policing and Justice Reform Amendment Act of 2020. Council of the District of Columbia, <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Legislation/B23-0774>.

²¹ DC Police Reform Commission. Decentering Police to Improve Public Safety. Council of the District of Columbia, 2021, <https://dccouncil.gov/police-reform-commission-full-report/>.

However, some critics noted a resurgence in failure-to-appear warrant sweeps in 2016–17, which disproportionately affected Black residents and reversed parts of that progress.²²

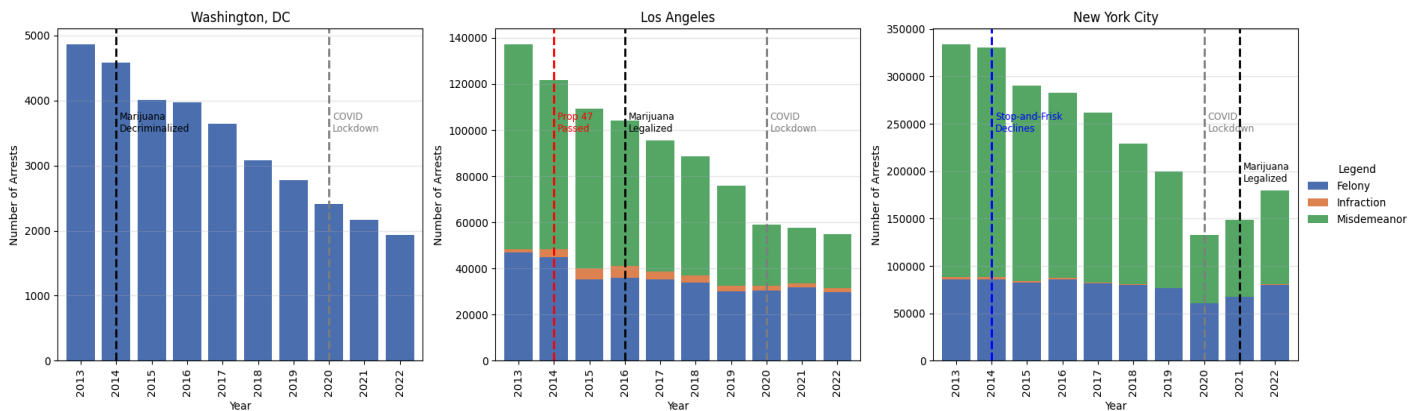
Meanwhile, MPD also intensified its focus on violent-crime hot spots in neighborhoods east of the river especially Wards 7 and 8 through initiatives like the Robbery Suppression Initiative and ATLAS task force. These programs applied data-driven strategies and undercover operations to reduce assaults and weapons charges, but they raised civil liberties concerns due to their disproportionate For our analysis, we use the 2015 marijuana decriminalization as a focal point. Employing a difference-in-differences approach, we compare monthly drug-related arrest rates per capita in D.C. against those in New York City and Los Angeles across a three-year window before and after February 2015. This allows us to isolate the direct effects of decriminalization from broader patterns, including seasonal surges and pretrial policy changes while also assessing whether any policing reductions were equitably distributed by ward and demographic group.

²² Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs. Racial Disparities in Arrests in the District of Columbia, 2009–2019. July 2019, https://www.washlaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/2019_07_31_racial_disparities_in_arrests_in_dc_report.pdf.

City Analysis:

Comparing Cities Over Time

Adult Arrests by Charge Type (2013–2022), with Key Policy Events



From 2013–2022, adult arrests declined in NYC, DC, and LA. NYC saw the steepest drop in count, with arrests significantly falling from 2013 to 2022.

Across cities, the first decline occurred in 2015, but the reasons vary by location. In NYC, the decline may be linked to the reduction of stop-and-frisk, as arrests dropped from over 350,000 in 2014 to around 300,000 in 2015 with a reduction in misdemeanors. The reduction of stop-and-frisk may have also improved mental health considering that “living in a neighborhood with aggressive policing may affect one's mental health ... for men who are the primary targets of police stops,” and men report higher levels of general psychological distress and experience more intense feelings of nervousness, exhaustion, and worthlessness.²³ In LA, the 2014 passage of Proposition 47 contributed to a sharp drop in felony arrests. It is important to note that its reduction in prison populations and spending have resulted in \$800 million saved, which have been redirected to support treatment and diversion programs.²⁴ Similarly, in DC, the decline may be explained by the decriminalization of marijuana. Arrests for possession dropped from 2,488 in 2012 to 22 in 2015–2020, yet racial disparities in enforcement still persist, as police are far more likely to arrest Black individuals than white individuals for marijuana-related offenses.²⁵

²³ Sewell, Abigail A., et al. “Living under Surveillance: Gender, Psychological Distress, and Stop-Question-And-Frisk Policing in New York City.” *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 159, June 2016, pp. 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.04.024>.

²⁴ Lofstrom, Magnus, et al. “Crime After Proposition 47 and the Pandemic.” Public Policy Institute of California, Sept. 2024, www.ppic.org/publication/crime-after-proposition-47-and-the-pandemic/#:~:text=Under%20Prop%2047%2C%20prison%20and,reclassified%20from%20felonies%20to%20misdemeanors.

²⁵ Schwartzman, Paul, and John D. Harden. “D.C. Legalized Marijuana, but One Thing Didn’t Change: Almost Everyone Arrested on Pot Charges Is Black.” *The Washington Post*, 15 Sept. 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/local/legal-issues/dc-marijuana-arrest-legal/2020/09/15/65c20348-d01b-11ea-9038-af089b63ac21_story.html.

The consequences of marijuana legalization in NYC are not straightforward. While legalization may have aimed to reduce arrests, both misdemeanor and felony arrests actually increased afterward. This may have been due to poor implementation as with only 140 licensed dispensaries statewide, many continued to buy marijuana through illegal markets.²⁶ Similar to LA, NYS planned to give 40% of sales tax revenue to reinvestment grants for communities with historically high arrest rates.²⁷ Individuals from these areas also receive priority, financial assistance, and support in obtaining legal licenses.²⁸ However, the impact may be limited due to few legal dispensaries. Still, these efforts aim to rebuild trust between law enforcement and communities, considering that heavy enforcement of low-level offenses have strained police-community relationships, weakening public safety and police effectiveness. When people lack trust in law enforcement, they are less likely to report crimes or cooperate with investigations. Fewer than 40 percent of victims report crimes to the police, and less than 25 percent of reported offenses are ultimately cleared through arrest.²⁹

Arrests declined during COVID-19 citywide. This decline was driven by self-isolation and shifts in police priorities, as law enforcement agencies focused less on low-level offenses to limit contact with the public to reduce its spread.³⁰ While DC and LA maintained lower arrest levels after the pandemic, NYC saw a gradual increase in the two years that followed. The analysis does not account for population changes, which could provide additional context.

²⁶ Lehman, Charles Fain. "The Real Problem with Legal Weed." The New York Times , 3 July 2024, www.nytimes.com/2024/07/03/magazine/marijuana-legalization-new-york.html.

²⁷ Southall, Ashley. "How 1.2 Million Marijuana Arrests Will Shape New York's Legal Market." New York Times, 24 Nov. 2023, www.nytimes.com/2023/11/24/nyregion/marijuana-legal-arrests-ny-race.html.

²⁸ Ibid.

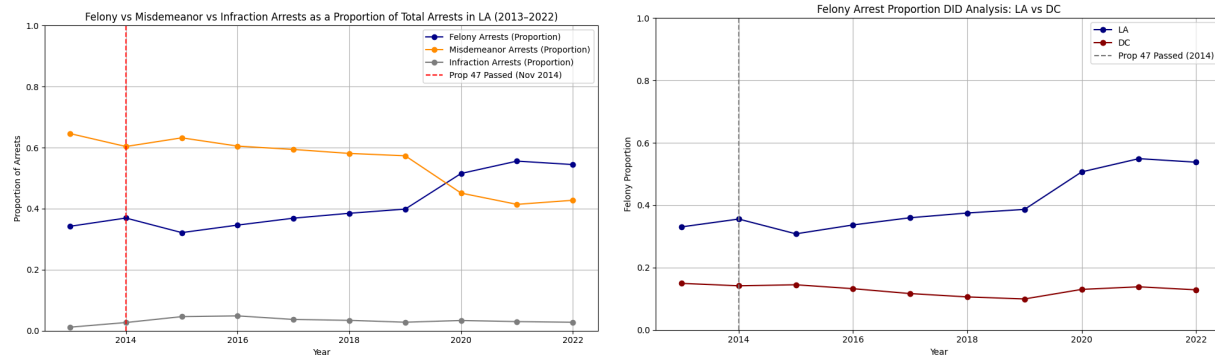
²⁹ "Every Three Seconds." Vera Institute of Justice, www.vera.org/publications/arrest-trends-every-three-seconds-landing/arrest-trends-every-three-seconds/overview. Accessed 14 May 2025.

³⁰ Clark, Dan. "Why Arrests Plummeted During New York's COVID-19 Peak." City & State NY, City & State New York, 6 July 2021, www.cityandstateny.com/policy/2020/05/why-arrests-plummeted-during-new-yorks-covid-19-peak/175981/.

LA Prop 47

Prop 47 was a California law passed in 2014 that reclassified certain non-violent drug and property crimes from felonies to misdemeanors. The goal was to reduce incarceration rates and shift focus toward rehabilitation.

In my graphs, I'm looking at the proportion of felony, misdemeanor, and infraction arrests before and after Prop 47 passed using DID analysis. I wanted to see if there was a noticeable shift, like fewer felonies and more misdemeanors over time.



The goal of prop 47 was to reduce felony charges by reclassifying crimes, but the data tells a different story. Immediately after, the proportion of felony arrests seem to drop. But over time, misdemeanor arrests actually trend downward, while felony arrests rise. Although the policy had good intentions, the impact is not clear.

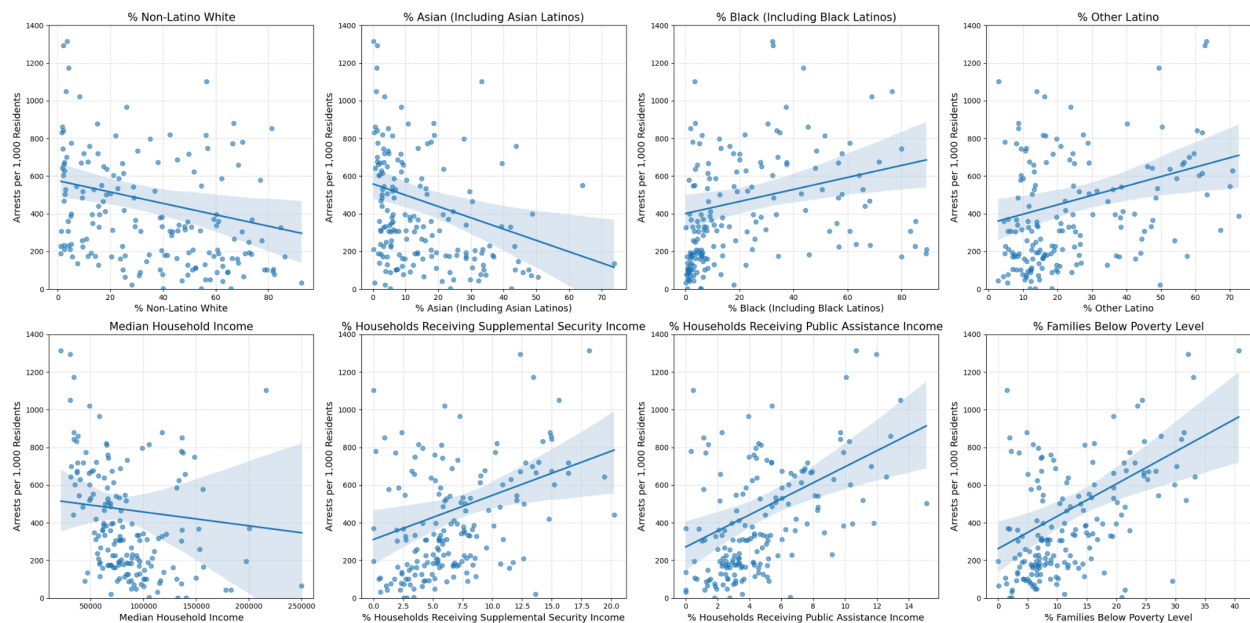
Difference-in-Difference Analysis on the right compares the arrest proportions of LA with DC to examine if felonies are actually being affected by the policy.

After looking at the data, it's clear that felonies in LA have increased slightly since Prop 47 passed, while felonies in DC without a similar policy have decreased. Overall, Prop 47 hasn't worked as expected in reducing felonies within LA, and may actually be doing the opposite.

NYC Low-Level Arrests

Broken Windows policing has been widely criticized for disproportionately targeting minority and low-income communities, leading to excessive police presence and racial profiling. We can compare low-level arrest rates for NYC to different socioeconomic variables and demographic rates. While broken policing was most active in the 1990s-2000s, this analysis across the years 2006 to 2022 provides valuable information regarding which communities have been most charged for lower-level crimes.

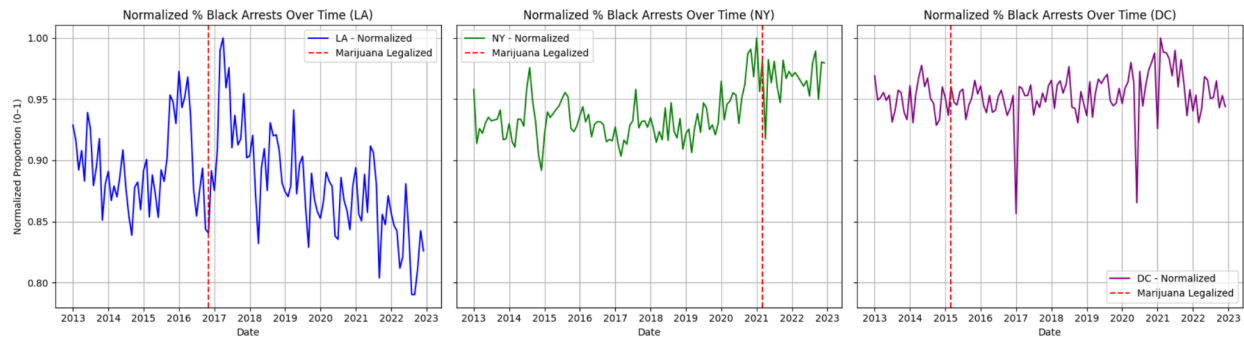
NYC Low-Level Arrests vs. Race and Socioeconomic Variables (2006–2022)



The findings of these plots are consistent with our research. Specifically, there is a positive correlation between low-level arrest rates and the percentage of Black and Latino residents across ZIP codes, suggesting that individuals from these groups are disproportionately subjected to such arrests. On the other hand, the percentage of White residents is negatively correlated with arrest rates, indicating fewer arrests in predominantly White areas. Greater arrests in lower-income communities is highlighted by its negative correlation with median household income. Positive correlations with the percentages of households receiving Supplemental Security and Public Assistance Income further emphasize the heightened arrests in economically disadvantaged areas. Taken collectively, these patterns support the critique that low-level arrests seem to disproportionately target marginalized populations and communities facing socioeconomic hardship. While broken policing may appear ideal in theory, it often shows a more complex story in practice.

Legalization of Marijuana and Effects on Policing

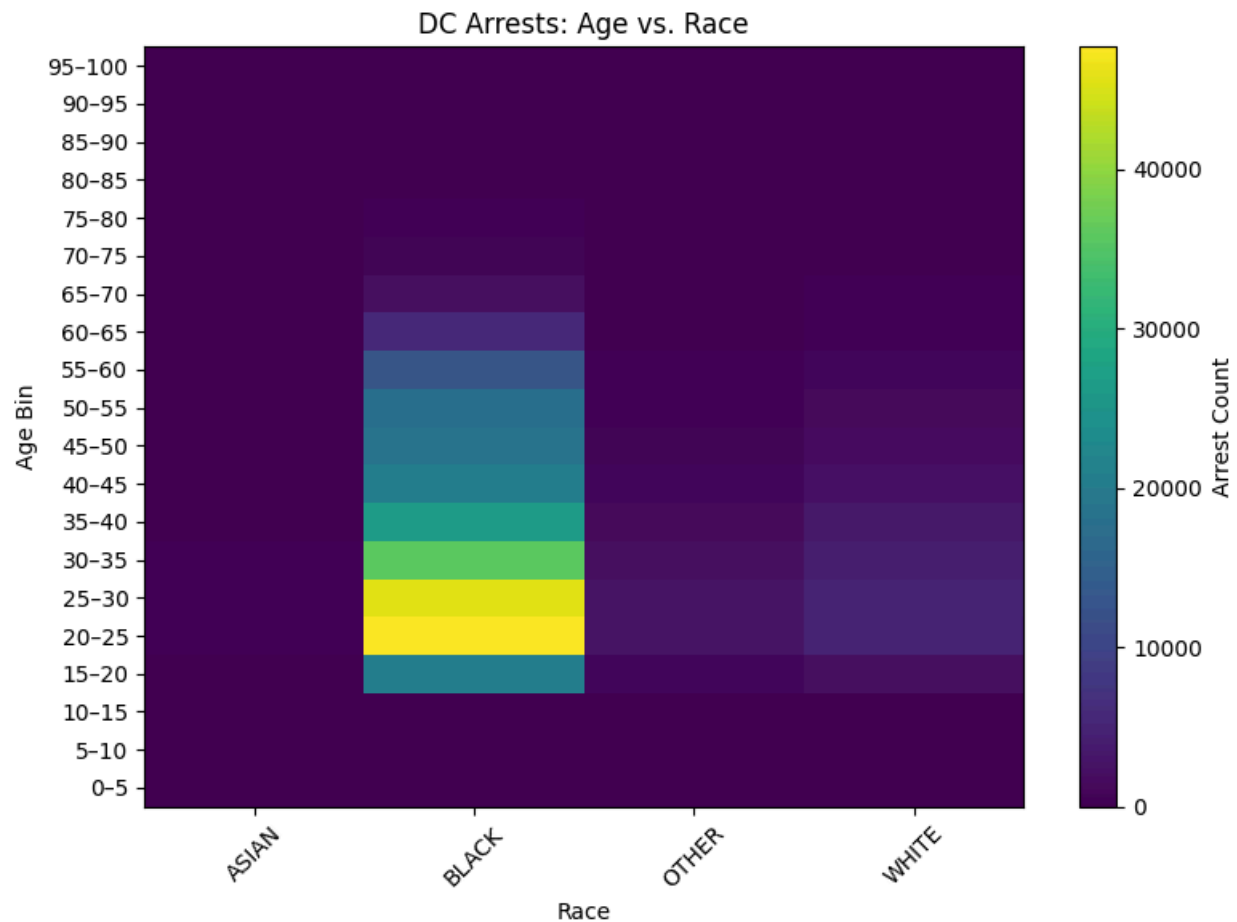
Drug use has long been overpoliced in America - with people of color and Black people especially serving as targets of this overregulation. However, all three cities recently legalized the recreational use of marijuana. Washington DC was the first in February 2015, then LA in November 2016, and NYC in March 2021. We wanted to investigate the effects of the legalization of marijuana on the proportion of Black arrests in each city.



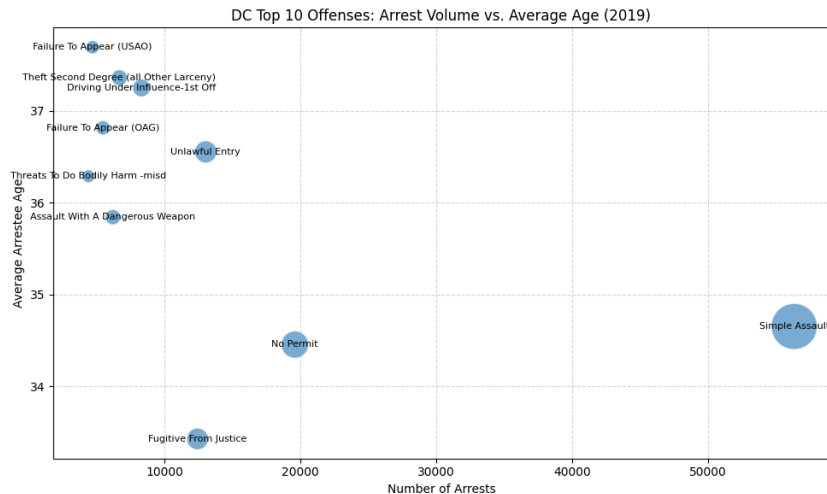
We expected the proportion of Black arrests to decrease following the legalization of marijuana, which can be seen through a large downward spike in the NYC graph, but this trend did not hold in LA or DC. In fact, in LA, we saw a substantial immediate increase following the marijuana's legalization, but this city also shows the largest decrease in Black arrests in the long term.

Uneven Enforcement in DC, 2019: Offense Volume, Age Profiles & Racial Disparities

This visual summarizes DC’s 2019 arrests. The heatmap shows arrest counts by race and five-year age groups, revealing a heavy focus on young Black adults. Below, a bubble chart maps the top ten charges by total arrests and average arrestee age, highlighting dominant offenses and age patterns.



The heatmap plots race against five-year age bins, with color showing arrest counts. Arrests peak for Black individuals aged 20–30, exceeding 40,000, then decline with age. White arrestees peak in the mid-20s at much lower volumes, while “Other” races show modest activity in their 20s–30s. Arrests of Asian individuals remain minimal. Overall, the chart highlights a sharp concentration of arrests among young Black adults.



In the bubble chart of DC’s top ten 2019 arrest offenses, position shows arrest count, average arrestee age, and bubble size reflects volume. Simple assault dominates with ~55,000 arrests and an average age of 35. “No Permit” and DUI follow, skewing older (~37). Mid-sized bubbles like unlawful entry and theft cluster around age 35, while smaller ones (threats, weapons, FTA) stay under 8,000 arrests. Fugitive-from-justice involves the youngest group (~34). Overall, enforcement centered on simple assault, traffic, and property crimes, each tied to different age ranges.

Conclusions and Limitations:

Citywide, adult arrests declined from 2013 to 2022, but the causes and consequences varied. Reforms like marijuana legalization and Prop 47 aimed to reduce incarceration and racial disparities, yet their effects were often uneven. In some cases, arrests dropped but disparities remained. In others, poor implementation has limited impact. Our analysis shows that low-income and predominantly Black and Latino communities continue to face higher arrest rates, especially for low-level offenses.

Even though we followed best practices with the data, there still may be limitations. Cities may report crime differently, and this can change over time. For example, an action treated as a crime in one city may not be in another. It is also important to remember that an arrest does not always mean a crime happened, but rather that the police believed one did. Finally, since our data was compiled by an outside institute, there may be some mistakes in how it was collected or organized.

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