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## **Data Collaborative for Justice Releases New Report Documenting Declines in Misdemeanor Enforcement but Persistent Racial Disparities Across the Country**

*A new report from DCJ's Research Network on Misdemeanor Justice indicates that, for years, police enforcement of misdemeanor arrests have had a disproportionate impact on people of color*

**New York** – Today, as policymakers across the U.S. continue to rethink law enforcement practices in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and a national reckoning over a criminal legal system marred by racial injustice, the [Data Collaborative for Justice](#) at John Jay College's (DCJ) [Research Network on Misdemeanor Justice](#) (Research Network), with support from Arnold Ventures, released a [new report](#), "Misdemeanor Enforcement Trends Across the United States," which examines low-level enforcement in seven different jurisdictions across the U.S. over the past decade. **The report identifies three notable trends across all jurisdictions:**

- **Significant increases and then a general decline in misdemeanor enforcement in the past 10 years;**
- **Black people, younger people and males were consistently arrested for misdemeanors at the highest rates of any group; and**
- **The focus of police enforcement changed over time – discretionary, drug-related charges became a smaller proportion of enforcement and charges involving a victim or complainant became a larger share of misdemeanor enforcement.**

"Misdemeanors represent the vast majority of enforcement interactions between police and communities, but are grossly under-researched." **said Preeti Chauhan, director of the Data Collaborative for Justice.** "Unless we examine trends in misdemeanor enforcement, the impact of this enforcement on police-community relations, and their impact on communities of color in particular, we will not be able to fix a criminal legal system that many believe is failing to properly serve communities. The Research Network aims to address this by providing data and research to inform a national discourse on misdemeanors, including about the role they play in reinforcing racial disparities that pervade our nation's institutions, especially the criminal legal system."

### **Key findings in the report include:**

**Misdemeanor Arrest Rates:** The misdemeanor arrest rates in all Research Network jurisdictions decreased in recent years. These declines often followed a period of significant increases in misdemeanor enforcement.

**Misdemeanor Arrests by Race:** Black people were arrested at the highest rates of any racial/ ethnic group for all jurisdictions across the entire study period. Racial disparities between Black people and

White people existed in all jurisdictions, and these disparities persisted despite the recent overall declines in arrest rates. However, the magnitude of the disparities varied by jurisdiction and over time – ranging from approximately three to seven arrests of Black people for every arrest of a White person.

**Misdemeanor Arrests by Age:** Arrest rates were highest for younger age groups (i.e., 18-20 year-olds and 21-24-year-olds) at the beginning of the study period. At the same time, arrest rates were generally much lower for the oldest age group (i.e., 35-65 year olds). Over time, arrest rates for the younger age groups fell the most, sometimes to rates lower than middle-adults (i.e., 25-34 year-olds).

**Misdemeanor Arrests by Sex:** Males were arrested at higher rates than females in all jurisdictions across the study period. Although the arrest rates for males fell more than for females, this gender gap in arrest rates persisted over the study period.

**Misdemeanor Arrests by Charge:** Within the context of fluctuating misdemeanor arrests, the composition of misdemeanor charges changed over time across most sites. Cross-jurisdiction trends indicate a move away from more discretionary, drug-related charges and an increase in the share of charges where there is an identifiable complainant or victim (“person-related” offenses).

This [new report](#) is the culmination of nearly five years of research by DCJ’s Research Network, which seeks to gather insights into how police interact with communities around misdemeanors through researcher-practitioner partnerships. The report analyzes cross-jurisdictional trends in lower-level enforcement in seven regions across the U.S. that make up the Research Network, including **Durham, NC; Los Angeles, CA; Louisville, KY; New York City, NY; Prince George’s County, MD; Seattle, WA; and St. Louis, MO.**

Historically, little effort had been made to gather data on misdemeanors even though they represent the vast majority – 75% to 80 % – of all criminal cases each year nationwide. Misdemeanors can also result in significant jail time and a permanent criminal record — both of which have a ripple effect on individuals’ lives and their communities.

“Ultimately, understanding trends in misdemeanor enforcement is vital for a number of reasons,” **states the report.** “First, it can help communities and policymakers determine whether the types of misdemeanor crimes that police are enforcing are a priority for those communities and/or whether other resources are needed to address persistent social problems (e.g., related to substance misuse). Second, it can help communities assess whether disparities in enforcement by race, age, gender, or neighborhood require reforms to ensure that the criminal legal process is not reinforcing or exacerbating inequities in society. Finally, with information about local trends in misdemeanor enforcement, the public, government leaders, and advocates are better positioned to weigh community safety concerns against the potential harms of misdemeanor arrests.”

“This new analysis from DCJ’s Research Network documents critical information about how jurisdictions across the U.S. handle low-level offenses – data that has not been prioritized for far too long, at the

expense of communities nationwide,” said **Jeremy Travis, Executive Vice President of Criminal Justice at Arnold Ventures**. “The Research Network found encouraging trends indicating that enforcement of misdemeanors is trending downward in many places across the country. But at the same time, data revealing persistent racial disparities demonstrates just how far our criminal justice system has to go to truly deliver justice.”

The [full report](#) as well as a related [data tool](#) are available on the [Data Collaborative for Justice’s website](#).

**Quotes from partners and practitioners in each jurisdiction are also available below.**

*Seattle, WA*

“As the Seattle Police Department continues to work to respond to the public safety needs of our community, the data produced through the Research Network has allowed us to think critically about how our officers are interacting with communities and what changes we can make to ensure trust and safety for all Seattle residents,” said **Chief Adrian Diaz, Seattle Police Department**. “Research and data are essential to informing how we make decisions about enforcement in our city.”

“Cities have limited capacity to evaluate their own operations, which makes the work of the Research Network on Misdemeanor Justice a true asset,” said **Seattle City Attorney Pete Holmes**. “At a time when misinformed partisan talking points and political narratives fuel debate, it’s truly refreshing to have a team dedicated to uncovering truths rooted in data and evidence.”

*Durham, NC*

“As the police chief of the city Durham, NC, I am committed to our community’s safety and our community’s trust in its police department,” said **Durham Chief of Police Cerelyn “C.J.” Davis**. “Working with outside researchers through the Research Network has helped us better understand and address the concerns of our community to prevent racial disparities in policing. This work has made us ever more committed to engaging with the people of Durham to bring about a safe, trusting, and healthy community.”

*New York, NY*

“The state Division of Criminal Justice Services is committed to providing data to our local criminal justice partners to inform policy and help illustrate and understand the impact of their practices,” said **Michael C. Green, executive deputy commissioner of the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services**. “Data also are critical to helping the state support evidence-based work. The Research Network’s rigorous research, data analysis, and collaboration with stakeholders in New York State and other jurisdictions will further advance the public’s understanding of how the criminal legal system is functioning in their communities.”

“This research is critical to efforts to demystify the inner workings of the criminal justice system and its racial disparity findings are a call to action for decision makers within the system,” **said Chief Administrative Judge Lawrence K. Marks, New York State Unified Court System.** “The Office of Court Administration has had a long-standing relationship with DCJ and the Research Network for exactly this purpose -- we are committed to learning more and sharing more about how the court system serves our communities.”

*St. Louis*

"The Saint Louis Metropolitan Police Department is happy to partner with researchers examining local justice system practices and our own operations to better understand how we can most effectively serve our community," **said the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department.** “Our fundamental duty is to safeguard lives, which commonly steers our focus toward violent crime. While determined to deliver law enforcement services in a just and equitable manner, we are committed to transparency, building trust within the community, and maintaining peace through service, integrity, leadership, and fair treatment to all."

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*[The Data Collaborative for Justice \(DCJ\)](http://www.datacollaborativeforjustice.org) leads critical research about frequent interactions between community members and the criminal legal system and aims to ensure that communities, and the governments that serve them, have the necessary information to develop and implement evidence-based policies, practices, and programs. DCJ’s work has informed policy reforms, facilitated partnerships between researchers and government agencies across the country, spurred new scholarly research on lower-level enforcement, and been cited extensively in the press. More information about the Data Collaborative for Justice’s work is available at: [www.datacollaborativeforjustice.org](http://www.datacollaborativeforjustice.org).*

*[The Research Network on Misdemeanor Justice \(Research Network\)](#) was launched in 2016 by the Data Collaborative for Justice to study lower-level enforcement actions, which represent the most common interactions between communities and the criminal legal system. The Research Network seeks to inform criminal justice system operations and policy at the local and state levels. It also seeks to support a national discourse, informed by data, on the role of lower-level enforcement in public safety, trust in the criminal legal system, racial justice, and efficient use of finite taxpayer dollars. The Research Network is comprised of researcher-practitioner partnerships in seven jurisdictions committed to producing data, research, and scholarly work on lower-level enforcement trends. The Research Network partner sites are: Durham, NC; Los Angeles, CA; Louisville, KY; New York City, NY; Prince George’s County, MD; Seattle, WA; and St. Louis, MO.*