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Carl Bialik examines the way numbers are used, and abused.

How Many American Men Will Be Arrested in Their Lifetimes?

By Carl Bialik

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My print column this week examines a surprising statistic: Over their lifetimes, American men have a 52% chance of being arrested. Though the estimate originated in 1965 crime data, which were incomplete, subsequent inquiries have come up with consistent findings.

All the studies encountered a problem with American crime numbers: They're based on reports from local law-enforcement agencies that may have widely different measurement and reporting standards. The Federal Bureau of Investigation strives to collate these in its Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), but as David Burnham, former spokesman for the commission that released the 52% figure and co-director of Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, said, "There's a warning up front that says, don't use them" for rankings, because of variation between localities.

Arrest records are particularly incomplete, because most crime reporting focuses on crime reports, convictions and incarceration. "This is a problem in a country with 19,000-plus law-enforcement agencies that have the power to arrest and not all of them record those arrests in an easily searchable way," said Joel Garner, chief of the law enforcement unit for the Department of Justice's bureau of justice statistics.

Robert Friedmann, professor of criminal justice at Georgia State University, has attempted to compile incident reports for his Improving Crime Data project. "We have collected incident reports from dozens of agencies and literally no two look alike," he said.

Then, of course, there are gaps that arise from unreported crimes. "UCR reporting is a voluntary activity and does not accurately reflect crime rates since it can only list crimes reported to law enforcement agencies," said Cornell University statistician Martin T. Wells.

"The quality of the data across agencies varies dramatically," said Alan Lizotte, interim dean of the school of criminal justice at the University at Albany. "There's no easy, straightforward way to do this, at all," he said of estimating the proportion of Americans who have been arrested.

Still, the 52% figure doesn't appear too far off base, which may surprise people who don't know anyone who's been arrested (or don't know they know anyone who's been arrested). Part of the reason is that it's a lifetime risk, and a lifetime is generally a very long time. Mark Rank co-wrote a recent paper finding that half of American children will be on food stamps between the ages of one and 20. "Some colleagues were quite surprised," Rank told me. "However, the data presented in this paper are quite consistent with other work we've done where we've looked at the long-term risk for adults experiencing poverty or having to use a social safety net program. One of the reasons why these numbers are so high is that we are looking across long stretches of time (which is quite unusual in social-science research). As a result, individuals and families are much more likely to be at risk of particular economic hardships and risks occurring." The same could be said for arrest rates.

Further reading: The arrest stat was mentioned in a Wall Street Journal article last week. I've written previously about murder stats, recidivism and local crime stats. And fellow numbers guy Charles Forelle assessed whether crime rises during recessions.