

Younger Americans much more likely to be arrested than previous generations

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Americans under the age of 26 are much more likely to be arrested than Americans born in previous decades, with the increase in arrest rates occurring most rapidly among white Americans and women, according to a new RAND Corporation study.

The rising rate of arrests and convictions is associated with lower probabilities of being married, fewer weeks worked, lower hourly wages and lower family incomes during Americans' adulthood, according to the

study.

The findings, published by the journal *Crime & Delinquency*, are based on the nation's longest-running [household survey](#) that has followed families over generations to gather information about their work histories and earnings.

"Increased enforcement is likely a critical driver of this trend," said James P. Smith, author of the study and Distinguished Chair in Labor Markets and Demographic Studies at RAND, a nonprofit research organization. "The evidence suggests that the growing criminalization of American youth is increasingly affecting all races and genders."

The study found rapidly rising rates of arrests, multiple arrests and convictions over time for all ethnic and [gender groups](#). The [arrest](#) rate for [white men](#) has increased almost three-fold in recent decades and the relative increase in arrests, multiple arrests and convictions among women were even larger.

"As more Americans are arrested and convicted during their younger years, we see an association with a variety of negative trends later in life, including lower chances of being married and less economic success," Smith said.

The findings come from a survey of participants in the national Panel Study of Income Dynamics, which has gathered information for 50 years about 5,000 American families and 35,000 individuals living in those families. The survey is representative of 95 percent of the American population, excluding career criminals, and is conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan.

While the survey is focused primarily on tracking work history and economic outcomes, the 2014 survey included supplemental questions

created by Smith about participants' family history, including whether participants ever had been arrested or convicted of a crime by age 26.

Across all age groups, the most dramatic finding from the study were the differences in arrest rates across birth groups. People between ages 26 and 35 were 3.6 times more likely to have been arrested as compared to those who were at least 66 years old. About one-third of the men between the age of 26 and 35 had been arrested during their youth, 2.6 times the rate of those 66 and older.

Women experienced an even more rapid relative increase in arrests. Among those aged 66 and older, arrests before age 26 occurred among only one in 100 participants. But among those aged 26 to 35, about one in every seven women had been arrested at least once by age 26.

Black men who participated in the survey were more likely to have been arrested during their youth than white men (33 percent for blacks compared with 23 percent for whites), but the probability of being arrested was converging over time between the races.

Education levels were strongly associated with the risk of having been arrested among all ethnic and gender groups. Among men aged 26 to 35 with less than a [high school education](#), 60 percent of the men reported having been arrested by age 26. That compares with about 23 percent of male college graduates in the same age group, with little difference between racial groups.

"These findings show that education is strongly associated with differences in arrest rates between racial groups, especially for men in younger age groups," Smith said.

Arrests for all types of crime increased over time, with robbery and theft being among the most numerous. Drug arrests became much more

common over time, even though drug arrests remained less common relative to many other offences.

Smith found that being arrested for a crime was associated with a 3.5 percentage point drop in the likelihood of being married, with multiple arrests further lowering the likelihood of marriage.

People arrested only once during childhood had about \$6,000 less in annual earning as adults, with the earnings even lower (about \$13,000 less) if someone had multiple arrests during childhood. People with violence or drug arrests averaged about \$11,000 less in annual earnings.

"It is imperative that we better document the relative role played by criminal activity and enforcement because the trends have long-term consequences both for individuals and our society," Smith said.

The unedited study was made available online in July 2018 prior to the final article's publication in the March 2019 print issue of the journal *Crime & Delinquency*.

More information: James P. Smith, The Long-Term Economic Impact of Criminalization in American Childhoods, *Crime & Delinquency* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0011128718787514](https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128718787514)

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