



# Bureau of Justice Statistics Executive Summary

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# Felony Defendants in Large Urban Counties, 1994

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As a part of its State Court Processing Statistics program, the Bureau of Justice Statistics tracked a sample of felony cases filed during May 1994 in the Nation's 75 largest counties. Compared to a similar study of cases filed in May 1992, the 1994 study found a slightly higher proportion of drug defendants, while the proportion of property defendants was down slightly.

Defendants in 1992 and 1994 were similar in terms of demographic characteristics, criminal history, and

pretrial misconduct rates. Court processing of cases was also similar in terms of pretrial detention rates, adjudication outcome, and sentencing.

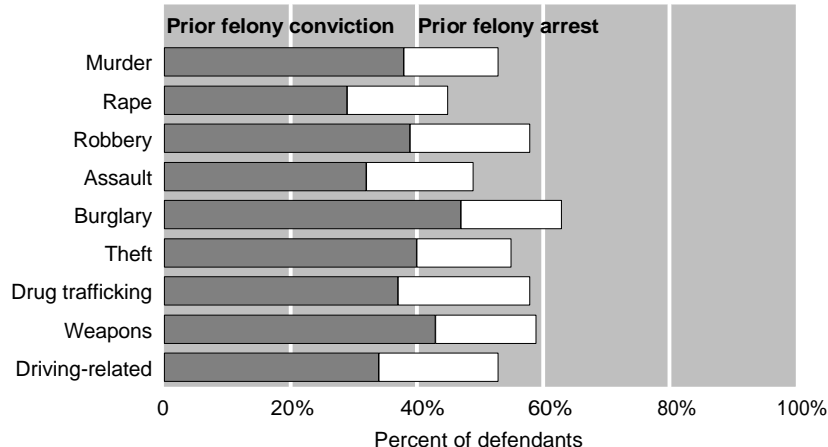
## Arrest charges

An estimated 53,099 felony cases were filed in the State courts of the Nation's 75 largest counties during May 1994. A fourth of the defendants in these cases were charged with a violent offense, usually assault (12%) or robbery (8%). A small percentage of defendants were charged with murder (1%) or rape (1%).

About 2 in 3 defendants were charged with either a drug (35%) or property (31%) offense. Two-fifths of drug defendants, 15% of defendants overall, were charged with drug trafficking. A majority of property defendants were charged with theft (11% of all defendants) or burglary (9%). Nine percent of all defendants were charged with a public-order offense. Often these charges were weapons-related (4% of all defendants) or driving-related (2%).

**Felony arrest and conviction record of felony defendants in the 75 largest counties, 1994**

Most serious current arrest charge



## Demographic characteristics

Eighty-five percent of defendants were male, with the largest percentages among those charged with rape (97%), a weapons offense (95%), robbery (93%) or a driving-related offense (93%). Women accounted for about a fourth of the defendants charged with a property offense other than burglary.

Blacks comprised nearly three-fourths of the defendants charged with robbery or a weapons offense. Whites accounted for about three-fourths of those charged with a driving-related felony.

A majority (57%) of defendants were under age 30. Twenty-one percent were under age 21, including about two-fifths of murder (42%) and robbery (38%) defendants. Five percent of defendants were under age 18, including 16% of murder defendants and 15% of robbery defendants.

## Criminal history

At the time of arrest, about 3 in 8 defendants had an active criminal justice status such as probation (17%), release pending disposition of a prior case (15%), or parole (8%). Robbery defendants (49%) were the most likely to have a criminal justice status, and rape defendants (17%) the least likely.

About two-thirds of all defendants had been arrested previously, with 39% having at least five prior

arrest charges. Fifty-six percent of defendants had a felony arrest record, including 63% of burglary defendants.

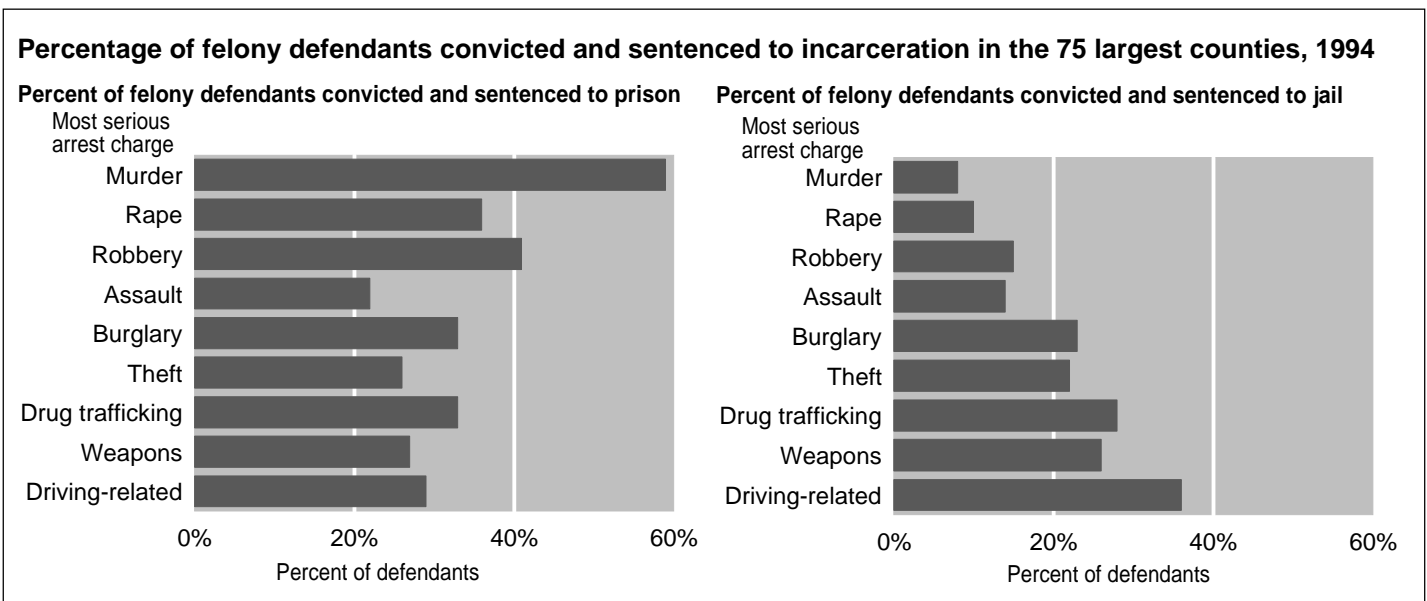
An estimated 38% of defendants had at least one prior conviction for a felony, including nearly half of burglary defendants. Thirteen percent of all defendants had a prior conviction for a violent felony, including a fifth of murder and robbery defendants.

## Pretrial release and detention

An estimated 38% of all defendants were detained until the court disposed of their case, including 7% who were denied bail. A majority of defendants charged with murder (79%), robbery (57%), or burglary (53%) were detained. Forty-three percent of murder defendants were denied bail.

Fifty-six percent of the defendants with an active criminal justice status were detained until case disposition, compared to 30% of those without such a status. Defendants on parole (76%) were the most likely to be detained, followed by those on probation (57%).

Released defendants were most likely to be released on personal recognizance, which accounted for 41% of all releases. The next most common type of pretrial release was surety bond (25%),



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followed by conditional release (11%) and deposit bond (9%).

About a third of released defendants committed one or more types of pretrial misconduct that resulted in the revocation of their release. Twenty-four percent failed to appear in court as scheduled, and 15% were rearrested for a new offense.

### **Adjudication**

About a fourth of all defendants had their case adjudicated within 1 month of arrest, and about half within 3 months. At the end of the 1-year study period, 87% of all cases had been adjudicated.

Nearly three-fourths of the cases adjudicated within 1 year resulted in a conviction. Conviction rates were highest for defendants charged with a driving-related offense (86%) or drug trafficking (81%) and lowest for defendants charged with assault (53%).

Sixty-one percent of all defendants were convicted of a felony, and 11% of a misdemeanor. Felony conviction rates were highest for defendants originally charged with drug trafficking (73%), a driving-related offense (70%), murder (67%), burglary (67%), or a weapons offense (67%). Assault defendants (41%) had the lowest felony conviction rate.

Ninety-two percent of convictions occurring during the 1-year study period were obtained through a guilty plea. About 5 in 6 guilty pleas were to a felony. Murder defendants (32%) were the most likely to have their case adjudicated by trial. About 4 in 5 trials resulted in a guilty verdict, including 7 in 8 murder trials.

### **Sentencing**

A majority (62%) of convicted defendants were sentenced within 1 day of adjudication. About two-thirds of all sentences were either to a State prison (32%) or a local jail (34%). Two-thirds of all jail sentences included a probation term. Nearly all convicted defendants who did not receive an incarceration sentence were placed on probation.

Thirty-six percent of the defendants convicted of a felony were sentenced to prison, including all of those convicted of murder. A large majority of the defendants convicted of robbery (70%) or rape (69%) also received prison sentences.

A majority of those with multiple prior felony convictions were sentenced to prison following a felony conviction in the current case, as were about half of those with a single prior felony conviction. About a fourth of those without prior felony convictions received a prison term.

The mean prison sentence for defendants convicted of a violent felony was about 9 years, and the median was 6 years. Defendants convicted of murder (20 years) or rape (10 years) had the longest median prison sentences. About a fifth of convicted murderers received a life sentence.

The median prison sentence for defendants convicted of a nonviolent felony was 3 years, ranging from 4 years for those convicted of drug trafficking to 1½ years for those convicted of a driving-related offense.