The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) implemented the Arrest-Related Deaths (ARD) program in 2003 as part of the Deaths in Custody Reporting Program to fulfill the data collection requirement of the Death in Custody Reporting Act of 2000. The ARD program captures the number of persons who died during the process of arrest or while in the custody of state or local law enforcement officials nationwide. This includes deaths due to police use of lethal force or justifiable homicides, suicides, accidental deaths, and deaths from intoxication and medical conditions that occurred during interaction with state or local law enforcement.

In 2014, BJS suspended the ARD program because of challenges that resulted in a significant underestimate of the number of annual arrest-related deaths. That year, BJS undertook a study to examine the impact of these challenges and to identify ways to improve program coverage, such as relying on multiple methods to identify arrest-related deaths.
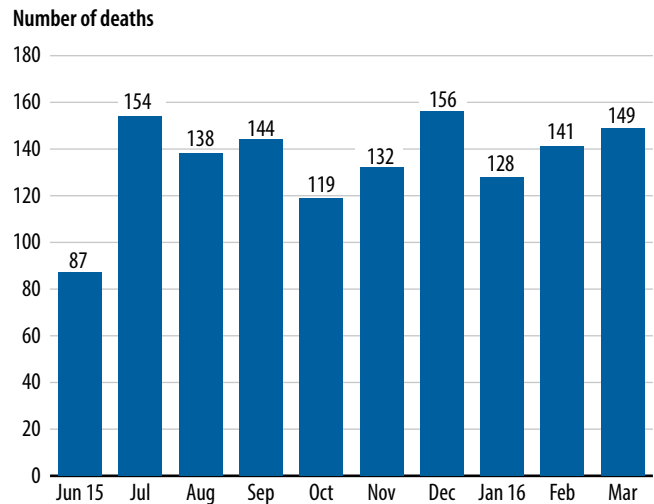
About the redesign

Launched in 2015, the redesigned ARD program has two phases to its data collection methodology to maximize completeness. In the first phase, BJS reviews open information sources, including news outlets and official agency documents, to identify potential arrest-related deaths. In the second phase, BJS surveys law enforcement agencies and medical examiner/coroners' (ME/C) offices to confirm all arrest-related deaths occurring in their jurisdiction and collect additional information about those deaths.

This hybrid approach addresses two primary obstacles to compiling accurate and reliable information from media sources. First, articles are reduced, coded, and classified through an automated process, which lowers the cost and amount of time needed to review the large amount of information available from open sources. Second, the agency survey collects and verifies information from official sources about the decedent and circumstances surrounding the death, which supplements and verifies the accuracy of data from open sources.

Preliminary findings

Between June 1, 2015, and March 31, 2016, media reviews identified 1,348 potential arrest-related deaths. During this period, the number of deaths consistently ranged from 87 to 156 arrest-related deaths per month, with an average of 135 deaths per month. To confirm and collect

Potential arrest-related deaths identified through open source review, June 2015–March 2016

Number of deaths

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Arrest-Related Deaths Program Redesign Study, 2015–16

more information about the 379 deaths identified through open sources from June to August 2015, BJS conducted a survey of law enforcement agencies and ME/C offices.

The survey findings identified 425 arrest-related deaths during this 3-month period—12% more than the number of deaths identified through the open source review. Extrapolated to a full calendar year, an estimated 1,900 arrest-related deaths occurred in 2015. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of the deaths that occurred from June to August 2015 were homicides, about a fifth (18%) were suicides, and a tenth (11%) were accidents.

Future of the ARD program

BJS will continue to use a hybrid approach to identify and collect information about arrest-related deaths occurring in the custody of state and local law enforcement agencies through the redesigned ARD program. BJS is also planning to implement a survey of arrest-related deaths occurring during the process of arrest or in the custody of a federal law enforcement agency. Additionally, BJS continues to coordinate with the FBI as it develops a Use of Force data collection as part of the Uniform Crime Reporting program.