While historically low, California’s violent crime rate saw an uptick in 2015.

California’s violent crime rate increased by 8.4% in 2015 to 426 per 100,000 residents. From 1960 to 1980, the state’s violent crime rate increased from 236 to 888 violent crimes per 100,000 residents—a staggering 276% rise. After declining in the early 1980s, the rate rose to a peak of 1,104 in 1992. Since then, violent crime has declined substantially, and even with recent upticks in 2012 and 2015, it remains comparable to levels seen in the late 1960s. In the most recent national data (from 2014), California’s violent crime rate of 396 per 100,000 residents was higher than the national rate of 366 and ranked 18th among all states. In 2015, 59% of reported violent crimes in California were aggravated assaults, 32% were robberies, 8% were rapes, and 1% were homicides. This breakdown is similar to that of 2014, though a change in the FBI definition of rape contributed to a higher share of reported rapes in 2015 (from 6% in 2014).

Property crime rates also rose in 2015.

The 2015 property crime rate of 2,620 per 100,000 residents is up 6.6% from the 50-year low of 2,459 in 2014. Like violent crime, property crime increased dramatically between 1960 and 1980—from 3,140 per 100,000 residents in 1961 to a 50-year peak of 6,900 in 1980. But the property crime rate fell in the 1980s and 1990s, and by 2011 it was down almost 63%. In the most recent national data (from 2014), California’s property crime rate of 2,441 per 100,000 residents was below the national rate of 2,596 and ranked 30th among all states. Of all reported property crimes in California in 2015, 64% were larceny thefts, 19% were burglaries, and 17% were auto thefts.

Crime rates vary dramatically by region and category.

The lowest rates of both violent and property crime in 2015 were in the Sierra region (including the small rural counties from Alpine to Inyo) and on the South Coast (which includes Ventura, Orange, and San Diego Counties). Property crime rates in these two regions stood at 1,798 and 2,085 per 100,000 residents, respectively; violent crime rates were 348 and 283. The state’s highest rates of property and violent crime were in the relatively poor San Joaquin Valley, at 3,245 and 574 per 100,000 residents. The crime category that varies the most widely across regions is robbery: in 2015, the robbery rate in the San Francisco Bay Area (179 per 100,000 residents) was almost six times higher than the rate in the Sierras (32). By contrast, larceny theft rates vary the least across the state: the highest rate in 2015 was 2,090 incidents per 100,000 residents in the San Francisco Bay Area, and the lowest rate, again in the Sierras, was 1,030. The highest auto theft rates were in the San Francisco Bay Area (557) and San Joaquin Valley (532), while the lowest rates were on the South Coast (280) and in the Sierras (176).

Violent crime increased in a majority of counties.

A total of 40 of the state’s 58 counties—including 13 of the 15 largest—saw increases in their violent crime rates in 2015. In 21 counties, the violent crime rate increased by more than 10%, while seven counties saw increases of more than 20%. Of the state’s 15 largest counties, only Alameda and San Francisco saw decreases in their violent crime rate (7.6% and 1.4%, respectively). Throughout the state, declines of more than 10% were seen in only five counties (Del Norte, El Dorado, Glenn, Mono, and Sierra). Most of these larger declines occurred in small counties, which are susceptible to substantial swings in crime rates due to small populations and rare instances of violent crime.

Property crime also increased in a majority of counties.

A total of 41 of the state’s 58 counties—including 13 of the 15 largest—saw increases in their property crime rates in 2015. Fewer counties saw significant increases in the property crime rate than in the violent crime rate. In 13 counties, the property crime rate increased by more than 10%, and three counties saw increases of more than 20%. Four counties (Calaveras, Inyo, Modoc, and Monterey) saw declines of more than 10% in their property crime rate, and only two counties saw declines of more than 20% (Inyo and Modoc).
California’s violent and property crime rates are still at historic lows


Note: Violent crime includes homicide, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault; property crime includes burglary, motor vehicle theft, and larceny theft (including non-felonious larceny theft).

Almost all large counties saw crime rates increase in 2015

Source: Author calculation based on the California Department of Justice’s Criminal Justice Statistics Center, California Crimes and Clearances Files, 2014–2015.

Notes: Chart shows California’s 15 largest counties, sorted by population size. Violent crime includes homicide, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault; property crime includes burglary, motor vehicle theft, and larceny theft (including non-felonious larceny theft).

Sources: Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Uniform Crime Report, California Department of Justice’s Criminal Justice Statistics Center, California Crimes and Clearances Files, and California Department of Finance’s Demographic Research Unit, County Population Estimates.

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