

Arrests in California

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Given the limitations of the available data for 2020, this fact sheet provides preliminary 2020 trends and focuses on data from 2019, prior to the pandemic.

➤ **The pandemic likely led to significant changes in arrests.**

While the full impact of COVID-19 on arrests is currently unknown, many local law enforcement departments have directed officers to avoid arrests and bookings for lower-level offenses to reduce the number of people entering county jails and to limit officers' and citizens' potential exposure. This, in conjunction with **changes in crime rates**, suggests there have likely been fewer arrests and shifts in the crimes for which people are arrested. Statewide data on jail bookings support this notion, as the number of weekly bookings dropped from about 17,000 in February 2020 to roughly 12,000 in September 2020.

➤ **California's overall arrest rate was historically low in 2019, before the pandemic.**

Arrest rates—measured as the number of arrests per 100,000 residents—have dropped dramatically over the past few decades. The overall arrest rate peaked at 6,757 arrests per 100,000 residents in 1989 and then fell precipitously throughout the 1990s. It has declined steadily since 2006, reaching a historic low of 2,642 in 2019. The decline is driven by **fewer arrests for misdemeanor offenses and of juveniles and young adults**. According to the **FBI's Uniform Crime Report**, the nationwide arrest rate is 3,024 per 100,000 residents, with California ranking 36th highest among states.

➤ **Violent offenses are the largest category of felony arrests.**

More than 293,500 felony arrests were made in 2019. More than a third were for violent offenses (37.1%), while 23.3% were for property crimes and 9.3% were for drug offenses. Weapons-related arrests made up 7.1% of felony arrests in 2019.

➤ **Drug offenses are the largest category of misdemeanor arrests.**

A quarter of about 758,000 misdemeanor arrests in 2019 were for drug offenses (25.5%). Traffic offenses and battery/assault made up 17.4% and 10.7% of all misdemeanor arrests, respectively. Alcohol-related offenses accounted for 8% of misdemeanor arrests, and offenses related to burglary, petty theft, or misuse of checks accounted for 5.8%.

➤ **Racial disparities in arrest rates have become less extreme but are still significant.**

The rise and fall of arrest rates over the past several decades have been especially marked among African Americans. In 1980, the adult arrest rate for African Americans was 15,273 per 100,000 residents, compared to 8,524 among Latinos and 5,225 among whites. Since the early 1990s, arrest rates have declined most dramatically among communities of color. In 2019, the African American arrest rate was 7,104, the Latino arrest rate was 2,881, and the white arrest rate was 2,534.

➤ **Men are arrested at a substantially higher rate than women, but the gap is narrowing.**

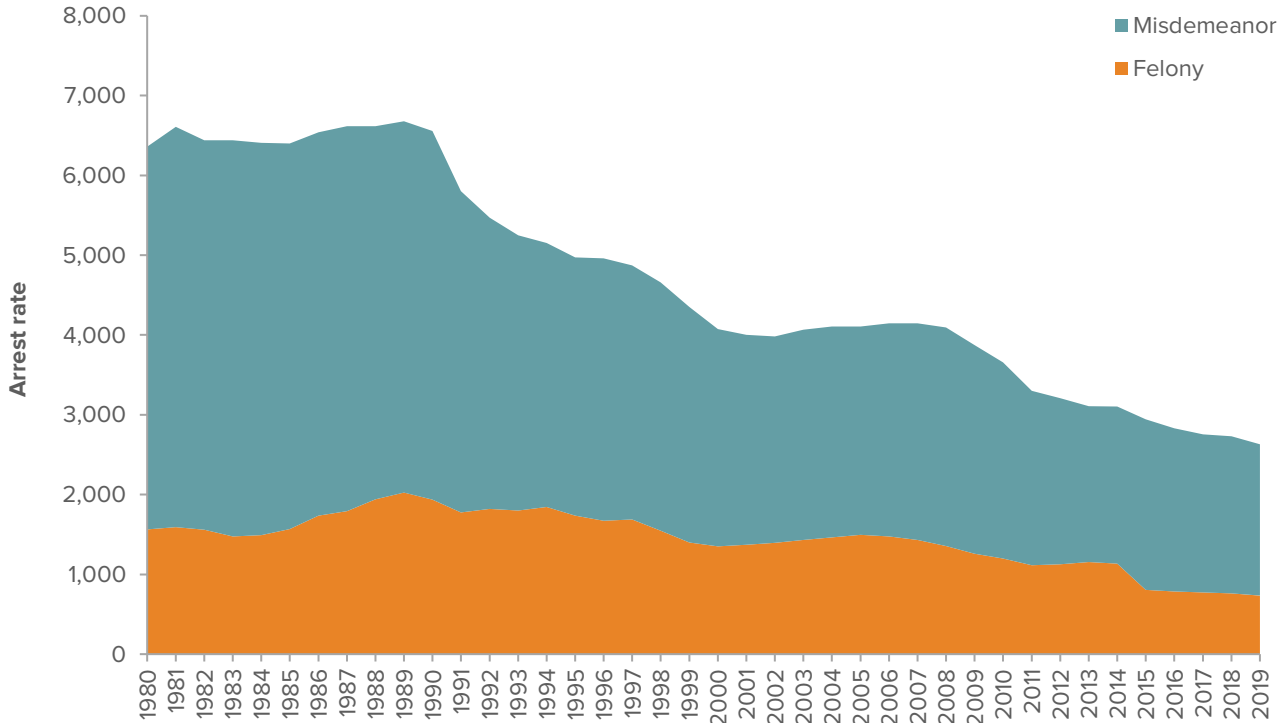
The male arrest rate was 4,059—more than three times the female arrest rate of 1,241. This gender gap has narrowed notably over the past few decades. In 1980, the male arrest rate was more than six times the female rate (11,258 and 1,850, respectively). Since then, the female share of arrests has grown from 14.5% to 23.6%.

➤ **Smaller, rural counties tend to have higher arrest rates than larger, urban counties.**

Alpine (6,738), Del Norte (6,003), Tuolumne (5,597), and Lake (5,546) had the highest arrest rates in the state, more than triple those of the counties with the lowest rates: San Francisco (1,756), Riverside (1,796), and Santa Clara (1,852). Many factors, including crime rates, economic and demographic differences, and law enforcement policies, could be driving this variation.



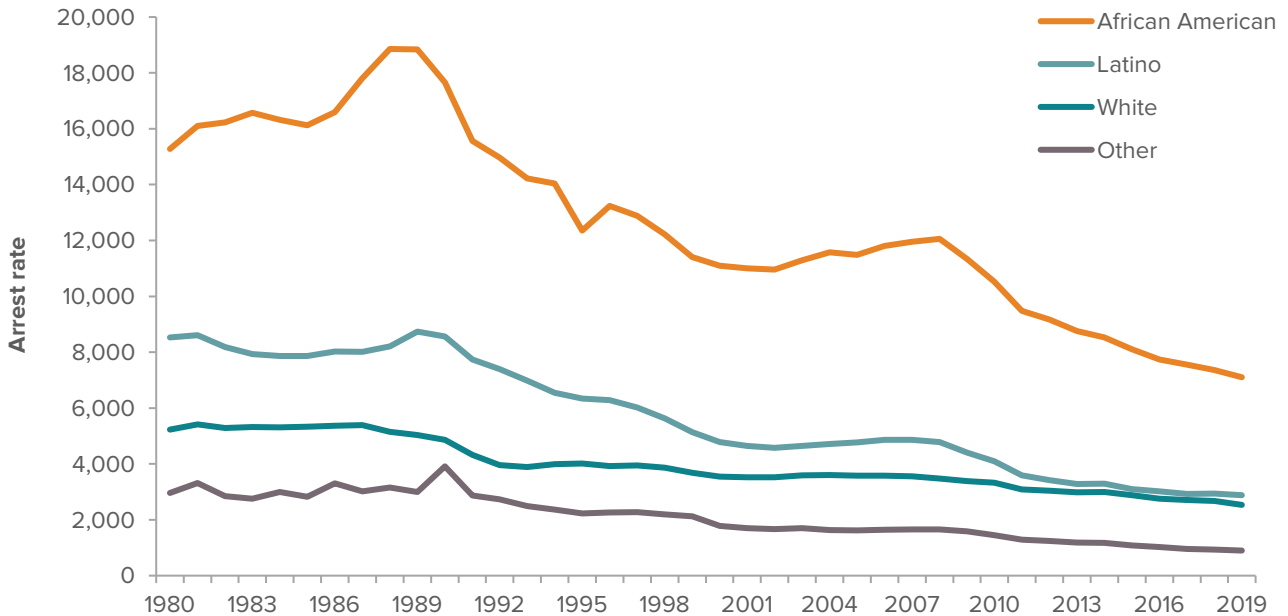
Arrest rates have declined steadily since the early 1990s and were at historic lows in 2019



Source: Authors' calculation based on California Department of Justice's [Open Justice Arrests dataset](#) and [California Department of Finance Population Data, 1980–2019](#).

Note: Arrest rates are the number of arrests per 100,000 residents, not age-adjusted.

Racial disparities in arrests were less extreme but still pronounced in 2019



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Note: Arrest rates are the number of arrests per 100,000 residents, not age-adjusted.

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