Arrests in California
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- **California’s overall arrest rate is historically low.**
  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 8,188 arrests per 100,000 residents in 1989 and then fell precipitously throughout the 1990s. It has been declining steadily since 2008, reaching a historic low of 3,428 in 2016.

- **Misdemeanor arrests account for most of the overall decline.**
  Both felony and misdemeanor arrest rates have declined since the early 1990s, but the decrease in misdemeanor arrests is the main contributor to the overall drop. The felony arrest rate declined from 2,135 in 1989 to 897 in 2016, while the misdemeanor arrest rate dropped from 6,053 to 2,530 over the same period.

- **The most common felony arrests in California are for violent offenses.**
  Almost 353,000 felony arrests were made in 2016. About a third were for violent offenses (32.4%), while 21.1% were for property crimes and 11.1% were for drug offenses. Warrants (issued by the court because an arrest could not be made at the time the crime was committed) result in 7.5% of felony arrests, weapons-related arrests make up 6.1%, and violations of the terms of parole or probation account for 4.7%. The remaining 17.2% of felony arrests are for other offenses that are too varied to categorize.

- **The most common misdemeanor arrests are for traffic offenses.**
  A quarter of about 995,000 misdemeanor arrests in 2016 were for traffic offenses (25.4%). Drug offenses and arrests authorized by misdemeanor warrants—including those issued for failing to appear for a non-traffic court date (“FTA/misdemeanor warrant”)—make up 18.2% and 17.6% of all misdemeanor arrests, respectively. Alcohol-related offenses account for 9%, battery/assault offenses make up 8.1%, and property offenses account for 7.2% of misdemeanor arrests.

- **Racial disparities in arrests 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 16,653 per 100,000 residents, compared to 9,294 among Latinos and 5,553 among whites. While arrest rates grew for all three groups in the 1980s, the African American arrest rate in the late ’80s was roughly four times higher than the rate among whites. Since the early 1990s, arrest rates have declined most dramatically among African Americans. In 2016, the African American arrest rate was 9,765, the Latino arrest rate was 3,606, and the white arrest rate was 3,235.

- **Men are arrested at substantially higher rates than women, but the gap is narrowing.**
  The male arrest rate is 5,270 per 100,000 residents—more than three times higher than the female arrest rate of 1,603. This gender gap has narrowed notably over the past few decades. In 1980, the male arrest rate was more than six times the rate for women (12,253 and 1,841, respectively). Since then, the female share of arrests has grown from 13.4% to 23.5%.

- **Young adults are arrested at high rates.**
  Adults aged 25–29 have the highest arrest rate (9,462), followed by 18-to-24-year-olds (6,914) and 30-to-39-year-olds (6,595). The lowest arrest rates are those for juveniles (648) and adults age 60 or older (592).

For deeper exploration of demographic disparities and trends in arrests across California counties, visit our online interactive tool.
Arrest rates have been declining steadily since the early 1990s and are now at historic lows

Source: Author calculation based on California Department of Justice’s Monthly Arrest and Citation Register and California Department of Finance Population Data, 1980–2016.

Note: Arrest rates are the number of arrests per 100,000 residents.

Racial disparities in arrests are less extreme but are still pronounced

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