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New Insights into California Arrests

Trends, Disparities, and County Differences



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Technical appendices to this report are available on the PPIC website.

Crime, policing, and community relations are the subject of heated debate in California and nationwide. Decisions made by local law enforcement are often at the heart of the controversy. Though California’s criminal laws are determined by the state’s legislature and voters, local agencies and officers have broad discretion over enforcement, especially when it comes to lower-level offenses.

To inform the broader conversation about policing and community relations, this report describes trends in arrests—the very first step in the criminal justice process—in California between 1980 and 2016. We find:

- **The arrest rate in California has dropped 58 percent since a peak in 1989.** The arrest rate reached a low of 3,428 per 100,000 residents in 2016. About three-fourths of this decline is due to sharp drops in misdemeanor arrests, especially for traffic and alcohol-related offenses. Felony arrest rates for property and drug offenses also fell substantially. Arrest rates declined across racial/ethnic, age, and gender groups.
- **Arrested individuals tend to be nonwhite, younger, and male.** In 2016, 41 percent of all arrests were of Latinos, 36 percent were of whites, and 16 percent were of African Americans. Individuals ages 18–39 accounted for two-thirds of arrests, and men accounted for three-quarters. African Americans were highly overrepresented: African Americans made up 6 percent of the state’s population but 16 percent of arrests in 2016, while Latinos represented 39 percent of the population and 41 percent of arrests.
- **Racial disparities have narrowed over time.** But the disparity between African Americans and whites remains substantial. In 2016, the arrest rate among African Americans was three times that of whites, compared to 3.6 times as large in the early ‘90s. The arrest rate among Latinos was 1.1 times higher than the white arrest rate in 2016, compared to 1.8 times as large in the early ‘90s.
- **Overall declines in arrests are driven primarily by plummeting arrest rates for juveniles and young adults.** From 1980 to 2016, the arrest rate among those 17 or younger dropped by 84 percent, while the arrest rate among those ages 18–24 declined by 63 percent.
- **Women now account for nearly a quarter of all arrests.** This is up from 14 percent in the early 1980s. Arrest rates for violent offenses have increased among women between 1980 and 2016: felony violent arrest rates declined 37 percent for men but increased 62 percent for women, while misdemeanor assault and battery arrest rates declined 25 percent for men but increased 67 percent for women.

- **Counties with the lowest arrest rates tend to be large and urban, while counties with the highest arrest rates tend to be smaller and rural.** There is notable county variation in the demographics of those arrested. However, nearly all counties see a large disparity between African Americans and whites: of the 49 counties examined, the African American arrest rate is at least double the white arrest rate in 45 counties, at least three times greater in 33 counties, at least four times greater in 21 counties, and at least five times greater in 13 counties.

Future PPIC research will explore possible contributing factors to these trends and regional differences—which may be affected by crime rates, demographics, poverty, fiscal conditions, jail capacity, law enforcement staffing and policing, and criminal justice reforms. In addition, we will examine local law enforcement discretion regarding the decision to cite and release individuals following arrest or to book them into jail. As the state continues its efforts to monitor police interactions with the public, this research provides a critical, fact-based foundation to frame constructive and solutions-oriented discussions regarding local law enforcement decisions and their implications for equity and public safety.

Introduction

Charged with protecting public safety and upholding the law, local law enforcement agencies have considerable discretion when making arrests, especially for lower-level offenses. While some arrests are made following an investigation that results in a warrant issued by a judge, most arrests are made on the scene by an officer who responds to a call or witnesses the offense, and has probable cause to believe that the suspect committed the offense.¹

Arrests can kick-start a consequential series of events. The decision to make an arrest may carry immediate safety risks to the officer and the suspect. As has been highlighted in media in recent years, the degree of force used when executing an arrest can spark tensions and deteriorate relationships between law enforcement and communities. Arrests also require the use of public resources—such as the officer’s time and county jail space, since most arrests lead to the officer booking the suspect into jail. Depending on how the arrest is executed, the length of detention, and other factors, the impact may extend beyond the suspect and have collateral effects on family members, friends, and employers in the community.

As the very first step in the criminal justice process, arrests likely contribute to the stark disparities in criminal justice experiences of people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Research finds racial disparities throughout the nation’s criminal justice system—including in sentencing, incarceration, and probation and parole—and gaps are especially glaring when comparing the experiences of African Americans and whites.² In 2015, the state passed legislation (the Racial and Identity Profiling Act) requiring that local law enforcement agencies collect data on all initial interactions that police officers have with the public, an important step to better understanding disparities in law enforcement.³

The issue of how statewide criminal laws are enforced at the local level is a crucial aspect of the criminal justice landscape. But little is known about who is being arrested and what they are arrested for. In addition, the state does not closely monitor how arrests have changed over time and how they differ across jurisdictions. These basic facts are necessary to frame constructive discussions and ultimately develop effective solutions.

This research is the first to offer a statewide examination of long-term arrest trends for a large and diverse state like California. To do so, we use unique data on arrests in California between 1980 and 2016. This report presents a broad overview, including findings about arrests for different kinds of offenses, the demographic composition of those arrested, and how these patterns have changed over time. We also examine differences in arrests across counties. Our [online interactive tool](#) allows for deeper exploration of demographic disparities and trends in arrests across California counties, while the [technical appendices](#) to this report provide a comprehensive analysis of the arrest data.

¹ A warrant issued by a judge occurs when an arrest cannot be made at the time the crime was committed. A suspect can be arrested for a felony without a warrant if the officer has probable cause that the offense was committed. A suspect can be arrested for a misdemeanor without a warrant if the offense was witnessed by the officer, in public, an instance of domestic violence, or the arrest was made by a citizen.

² There is robust research evidence showing these disparities (Bonczar, Kaeble, and Maruschak 2015; Bonczar 2003; Raphael and Stoll 2013; Rehavi and Starr 2014; Grattet et al. 2016; Mustard 2001).

³ This legislation required law enforcement agencies to begin collecting data on all initial police interactions with the public—known as “stops”—in 2018, including reason, location, gender, age, and race/ethnicity. However, these data will not be available for a statewide analysis for a number of years.

About the Arrest Data

This report uses offense-level data from the Monthly Arrest and Citation Register (MACR). These data consist of arrest and citation data reported monthly by law enforcement agencies to the California Department of Justice's (CA DOJ) Criminal Justice Statistics Center. For each arrest in California between 1980 and 2016, the MACR data contain information on law enforcement agency and jurisdiction, arrest offense, disposition (e.g., whether charges were filed by the district attorney), arrest date, and whether the arrest led to a booking or the suspect was cited and released. The data also include the suspect's age, gender, and race/ethnicity. This allows us to calculate the annual number of arrests by offense level (felony or misdemeanor) and offense type (e.g., property, violent, or drug) at the state and county level. We use these calculations to generate statistics on the rate of arrests per 100,000 residents and the share of arrests by offense level for each offense type and by age group, gender, and race/ethnicity. This report focuses on the arrests themselves, while future PPIC research will examine trends in the decision to book or cite and release a suspect after an arrest has taken place.

Note that not all arrests may be recorded in MACR. For example, an officer who does not have probable cause to make an arrest can refer the case to the district attorney's (DA) office for review. If the DA decides that sufficient evidence exists, the DA can request the court issue either an arrest warrant or a summons requiring the suspect to appear in court. If the arrest takes place at the court it may not be reported to CA DOJ and consequently may not be included in the MACR data. The data may also not include in-prison arrests of inmates. Finally, there are instances when law enforcement agencies do not complete reporting, and given that the records have been mostly paper submissions, manually entered into a database by the CA DOJ, reporting errors undoubtedly exist. Nonetheless, the MACR data capture the vast majority of arrests in California, and the research team has made every effort to identify and, when possible, correct errors.

What Could Cause Changes in Arrests?

Arrests may be affected by numerous factors—including crime rates, demographics, economic and fiscal conditions, jail capacity, law enforcement staffing and discretion, as well as criminal justice policies and reforms—that may vary across jurisdictions in the state. Though this report does not examine specific factors that may have affected arrests, here we present a brief description of policy changes and crime trends during the time period under consideration.

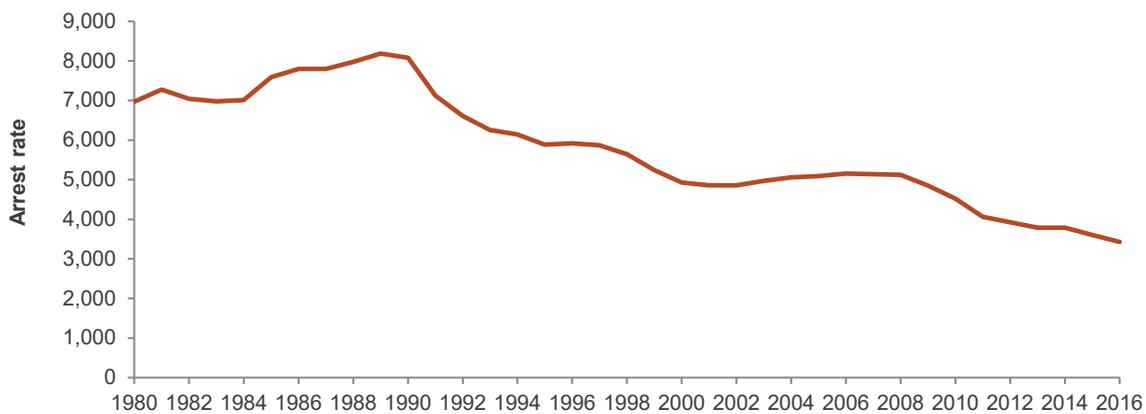
The last several decades have witnessed wide-scale changes in state and federal criminal justice laws—which can affect local criminal justice agencies' capacities, as well as law enforcement's ability and discretion to make an arrest. The 1980s saw the war on drugs and other “tough on crime” policies, such as increased mandatory minimum sentences and longer sentences for those who have a prior conviction. In the 1990s, “three strikes” was signed into law in California, and federal legislation provided significant funding for law enforcement, prison construction, and crime prevention. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the state has also passed a number of reforms overhauling its juvenile justice system. More recently, California has implemented reforms to lessen the overall reliance on incarceration—including public safety realignment (AB 109), a revision to “three strikes”

(Proposition 36), and the reclassification of some drug and property offenses from felonies or potential felonies to misdemeanors (Proposition 47), to name a few.

There were 1.35 million arrests made in California in 2016.⁴ While this is a staggering number, arrests have declined dramatically, from a peak of more than 2 million a few decades ago. When we account for California’s growing population by looking at the arrest rate—the number of arrests per 100,000 residents—we see the total arrest rate peaked in 1989 (8,188 arrests per 100,000 residents) and has since fallen steadily, with the exception of slight increases from 2002 to 2008 (Figure 1). In 2016, the arrest rate reached a historic low (3,428), down 58 percent from 1989. Broadly, this trend aligns with falling crime rates over the past few decades, though there have been fluctuations year to year (Figure 2).

FIGURE 1

Arrest rates in California have dropped dramatically in the past few decades



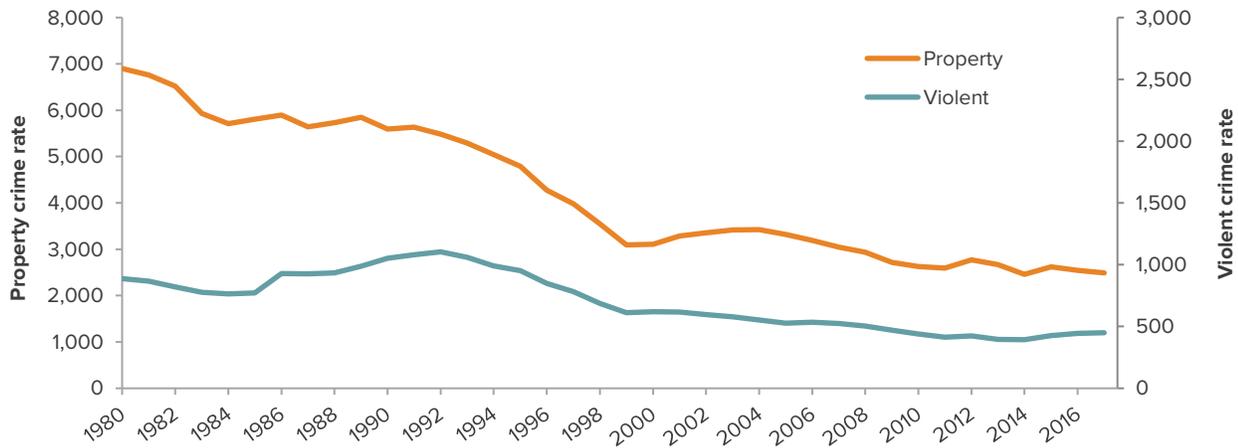
SOURCE: Author calculation based on California Department of Justice’s Monthly Arrest and Citation Register and California Department of Finance Population Data, 1980–2016.

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

⁴ This number is greater than the number of arrests reported in the California Department of Justice’s *Crime in California* publications. The latter excludes arrests for offenses that are not mandatory to report. These include federal offenses, outside warrants (i.e., arrests made with a warrant), probation/parole violations, “civil drunk in public” (i.e., drunk and disorderly conduct), and misdemeanor “miscellaneous traffic” offenses.

FIGURE 2

California's violent and property crime rates have declined since 1980



SOURCE: Author calculation based on Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reports 1980–2002 and the California Department of Justice's Criminal Justice Statistics Center, California Crimes and Clearances Files, 2003–2017.

NOTES: Violent crime rate (per 100,000 residents) includes homicide, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault; property crime rate (per 100,000 residents) includes burglary, motor vehicle theft, and larceny theft (including non-felonious larceny theft).

What Are People Arrested For?

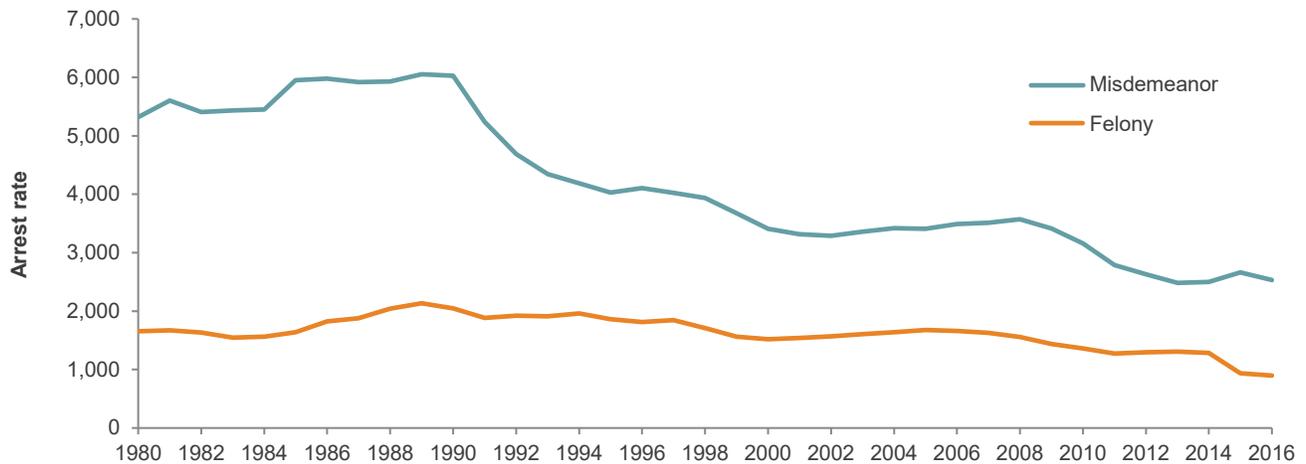
When we examine the kinds of offenses that people were arrested for in 2016, we find:

- Among felony arrests, 32 percent were for violent offenses (e.g., robbery and assault), 21 percent were for property offenses (e.g., auto theft and burglary), and 11 percent were for drug offenses (generally involving controlled substances with high potential for abuse). Other felony arrests included arrests executed with a warrant issued by the court (8%), arrests related to prohibited weapons (6%), and arrests for parole and probation violations (5%). See [Figure A3 in the technical appendices](#).
- Among misdemeanor arrests, 25 percent were for traffic offenses (e.g., driving under the influence), 18 percent were for drug offenses (mostly non-marijuana offenses), and 18 percent were for failure to appear in court or arrests executed with a warrant. About 8 percent of misdemeanor arrests were for assault and battery, and about 7 percent were for property offenses (e.g., petty theft). See [Figure A5 in the technical appendices](#).

Roughly three-fourths of the overall drop in arrest rates is driven by declines in misdemeanor arrests—which consistently make up the majority of all arrests. From 1989 to 2016, both the felony and misdemeanor arrest rates decreased by close to 60 percent. The felony arrest rate declined from 2,135 per 100,000 residents to 897, while the misdemeanor arrest rate dropped from 6,053 to 2,530 (Figure 3). Notably, the share of misdemeanor arrests increased after Proposition 47's reclassification of some drug and property offenses as misdemeanors—jumping from 66 percent of all arrests in 2014 to 74 percent in 2015.

FIGURE 3

Misdemeanor and felony arrest rates are both 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.

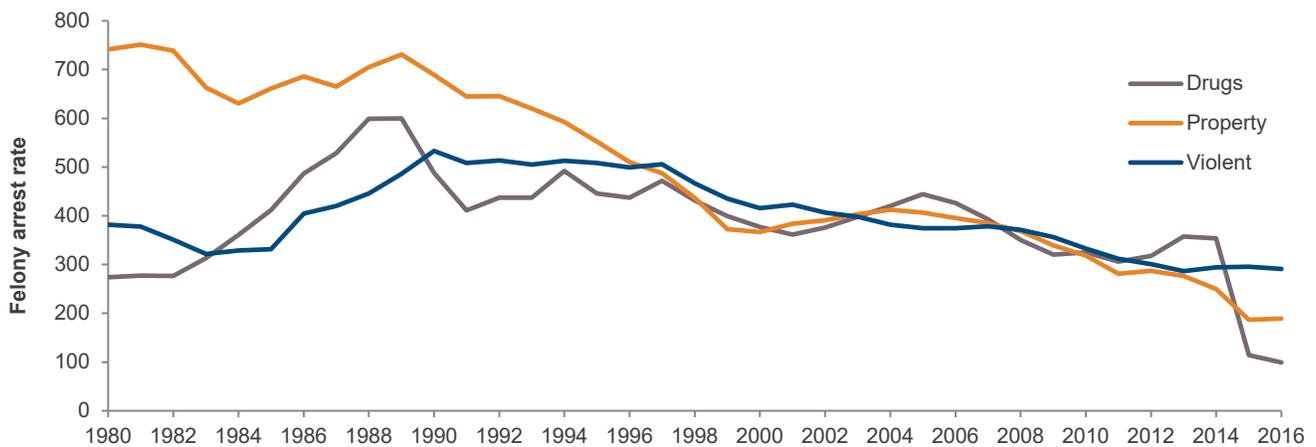
NOTE: Arrest rates are the number of arrests per 100,000 residents.

Changes in Felony Arrests

The overall decline in felony arrests can largely be attributed to substantial drops in arrests for property and drug offenses. The arrest rate for felony property offenses has plummeted, falling from 731 arrests per 100,000 residents in 1989 to 189 in 2016 (Figure 4). The felony drug arrest rate dropped from 600 arrests per 100,000 residents to 99 in 2016, with a particularly sharp decline following Proposition 47. The arrest rate for violent felonies has also been declining steadily since 1990. See [Figure A2 in the technical appendices](#) for details about other felony offense types.

FIGURE 4

The felony property arrest rate has been on a consistent downward trend since 1989



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 felony arrests per 100,000 residents. For arrest rates of other felony offense types, see [Figure A2 in the technical appendices](#).

The composition of felony arrests has changed markedly, with property and drug arrests now making up much smaller shares of all felony arrests. In 1980, 45 percent of felony arrests were for property offenses, compared to 21 percent in 2016 (see [Figure A3 in the technical appendices](#)). The share of felony arrests for drug offenses has fluctuated over time but fell by more than half after Proposition 47, going from 28 percent in 2014 to 11 percent in 2016. As the shares of property and drug arrests have declined, the percentage of felony arrests for violent offenses has risen—despite the steady decline in the violent arrest rate. Violent offenses made up less than a fourth of felony arrests in 1980 but almost a third of felony arrests in 2016.

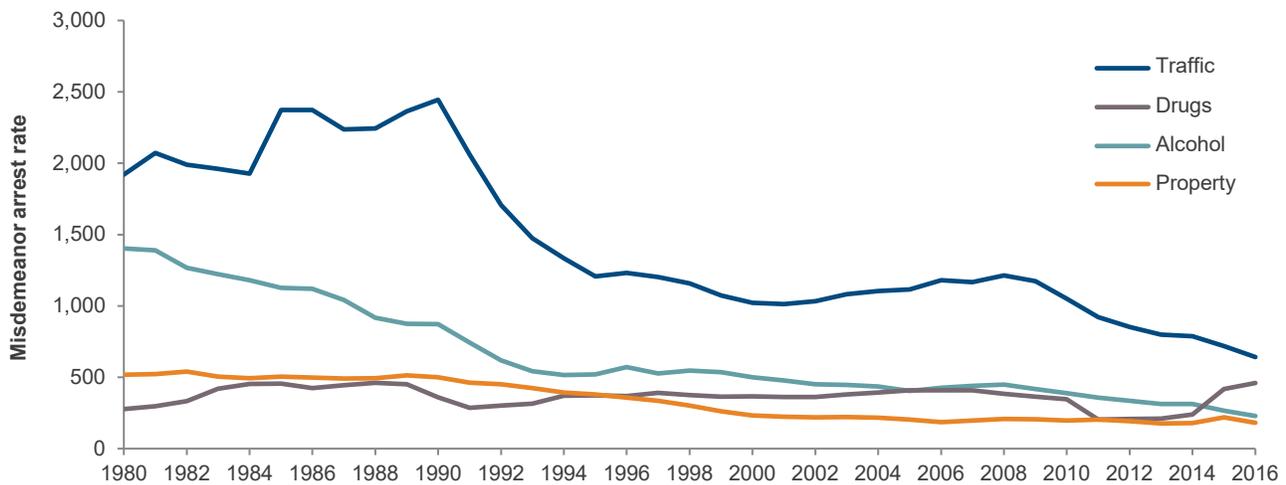
Changes in Misdemeanor Arrests

The substantial decline in misdemeanor arrests has been driven primarily by lower arrest rates for traffic offenses and alcohol-related offenses (e.g., drunk and disorderly conduct). The arrest rate for traffic offenses fell dramatically from its peak in 1990 (2,444 per 100,000 residents) to its lowest level in 2016 (642). The arrest rate for alcohol-related offenses has been on a long-term downward trend since 1980, dropping from 1,403 arrests per 100,000 residents to 229 (Figure 5). See [Figure A4 in the technical appendices](#) for details about other misdemeanor offense types.

Not surprisingly, the arrest rate for misdemeanor drug offenses increased notably after Proposition 47, almost doubling from 239 to 460 per 100,000 residents between 2014 and 2016. However, the arrest rate for misdemeanor property offenses barely changed, going from 179 to 182 over the same time period.

FIGURE 5

California saw significant drops in misdemeanor arrest rates for traffic and alcohol-related offenses



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. For arrest rates of other misdemeanor offense types, see [Figure A4 in the technical appendices](#).

The composition of misdemeanor offenses has also changed considerably over time. In 1980, traffic and alcohol-related offenses accounted for almost two-thirds of all misdemeanor arrests, compared to a little more than one-third in 2016 (see [Figure A5 in the technical appendices](#)). As the percentages of traffic and alcohol-related arrests have dropped, the share of arrests for those who fail to appear in court or who were arrested with a warrant has

grown, from 6 percent in 1980 to 18 percent in 2016. The share of assault and battery arrests has risen as well (from 4% to 8%). And between 2014 and 2016, following Proposition 47, the share of misdemeanor arrests for drug offenses went from 10 percent to 18 percent.

Who Is Being Arrested?

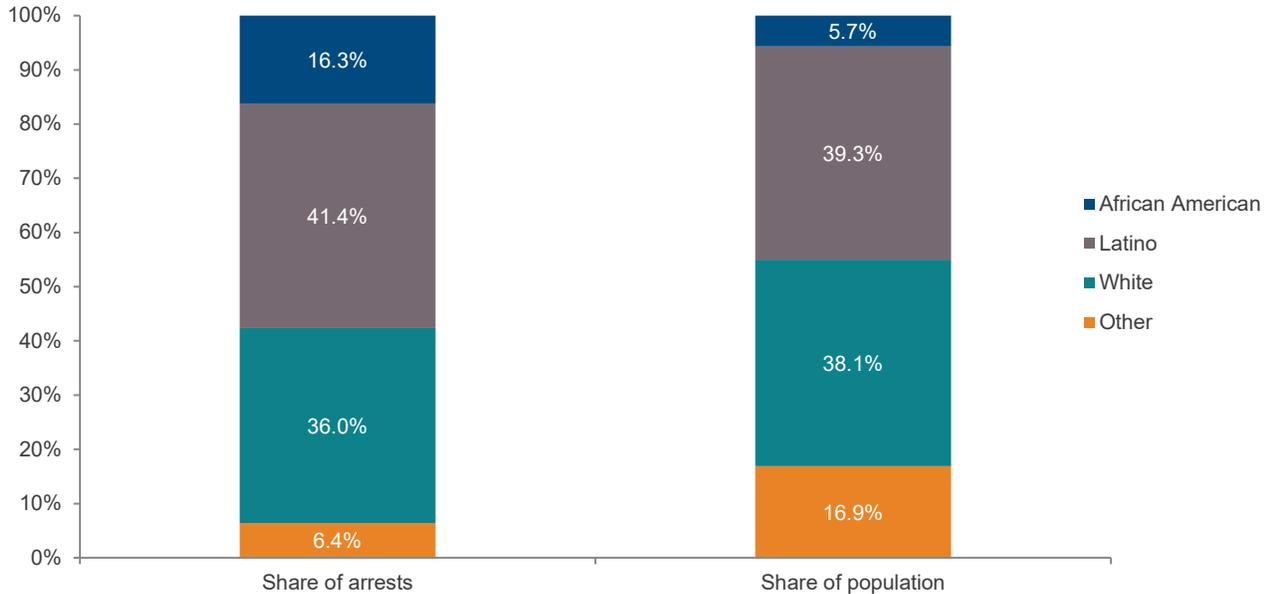
Below we examine the race/ethnicity, age, and gender of individuals arrested in California. Overall, arrested individuals tend to be nonwhite, younger, and male. However, racial, age, and gender disparities in arrests have narrowed over time.

Race/Ethnicity

There are pronounced racial disparities in arrests in California. In 2016, African Americans made up 6 percent of the population but 16 percent of arrests (Figure 6). Latinos were slightly overrepresented in arrests as well, representing 39 percent of the population but 41 percent of arrests. Meanwhile, whites were slightly underrepresented and the “other” racial/ethnic group—which includes Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans—was markedly underrepresented in arrests compared to their shares of the population.⁵

FIGURE 6

African Americans are highly overrepresented in arrests, relative to their share of the population



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

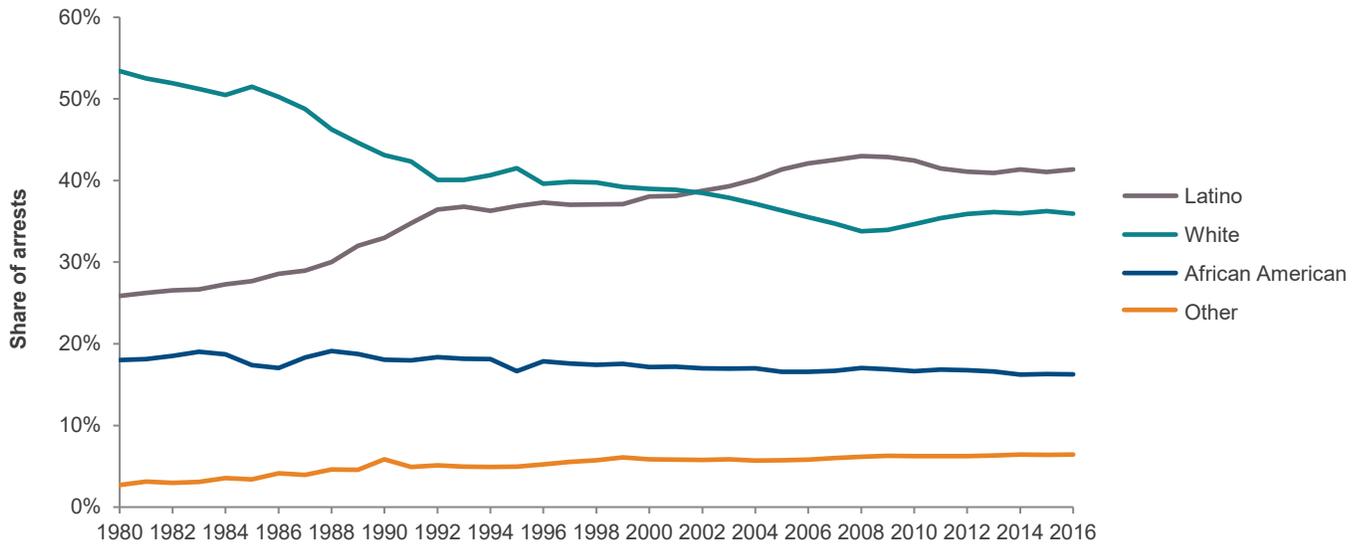
NOTE: “Other” includes Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans.

⁵ We observe a small number of arrests of individuals in these race/ethnic groups for some offenses. Hence, to ensure no personally identifiable information is released, we combined these groups into an “other” category. The [technical appendices](#) include a more detailed discussion of findings pertaining to this group.

The racial/ethnic composition of those arrested has shifted alongside changes in California’s population. From 1980 to 2016, the share of Latinos in the state’s population more than doubled, from 19 percent to 39 percent, while the share of Latinos among all arrests grew from 26 percent to 41 percent. Since 2002, Latinos have been the most commonly arrested racial/ethnic group in California (Figure 7).

FIGURE 7

As California’s population has changed, Latinos now make up a growing share of all arrests



SOURCE: California Department of Justice’s Monthly Arrest and Citation Register, 1980–2016.

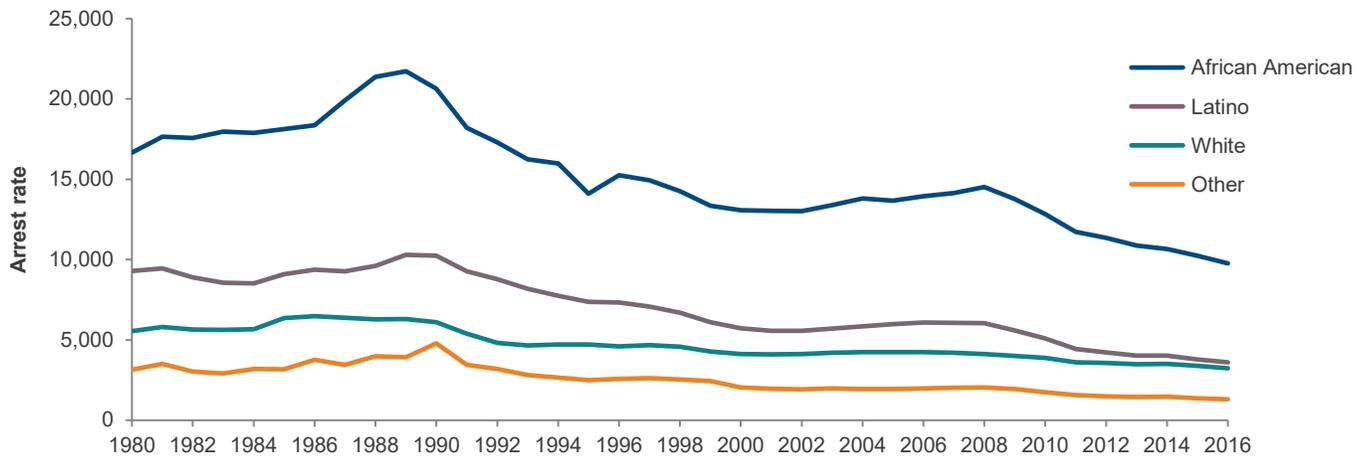
NOTE: Figure shows the race/ethnic group shares of all annual arrests. “Other” includes Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans.

All racial/ethnic groups have seen declines in their arrest rates since 1980. We see the largest declines among African Americans, with about 12,000 fewer arrests per 100,000 African American residents in 2016 compared to a peak in 1989 (Figure 8). In comparison, the arrest rate among Latinos dropped by about 6,700 arrests per 100,000 Latino residents and the arrest rate among whites decreased by about 3,100 arrests per 100,000 white residents from their respective peaks. As a group, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans have consistently had the lowest arrest rates of all racial/ethnic groups and saw a decline of about 3,500 arrests per 100,000 residents since a peak in 1990.

Racial disparities in arrests have narrowed over time. The racial disparities in arrest rates peaked in 1992, when the African American arrest rate was 3.6 times greater than the white arrest rate, and the Latino arrest rate was 1.8 times greater than the white arrest rate. These gaps are now smaller. In 2016, the African American arrest rate of 9,765 was about three times greater than the white arrest rate of 3,235, and the Latino arrest rate of 3,606 was 1.1 times higher than the white arrest rate.

FIGURE 8

There is pronounced racial disparity in arrests in California, but the gaps are growing smaller



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 of the relevant demographic group.

When we examine felony arrests, we find:

- Though all racial/ethnic groups saw declines in arrests for felony drug and property offenses, the declines were especially large among African Americans. For example, felony property arrests plummeted by about 2,000 arrests per 100,000 African American residents, compared to about 700 arrests per 100,000 Latino residents, and 360 arrests per 100,000 white residents, between 1980 and 2016.
- The decline in felony arrests accounts for 48 percent of the overall decline in arrests among African Americans—this is especially notable since most arrests are for misdemeanors. In contrast, the decline in felony arrests accounts for 25 percent of the overall drop in arrests among Latinos and 19 percent among whites.
- As the share of African Americans in California’s population declined slightly, the share arrested for felonies decreased substantially. For example, the share of African Americans arrested for felony drug offenses dropped nearly in half between 1990 and 2016, from 31 percent of all felony drug arrests to 16 percent. The share of African Americans arrested for felony violent offenses also fell, from 34 percent in 1980 to 22 percent in 2016.

When we examine misdemeanor arrests, we find:

- Latinos and African Americans saw the largest declines in arrest rates for traffic and alcohol-related offenses. For example, the largest decrease is among Latinos, where the misdemeanor traffic arrest rate dropped by 2,410 (from a peak of 3,232 in 1990 to 822 in 2016). The drop was almost as large among African Americans (from a peak of 3,568 in 1983 to 1,345 in 2016) and smaller among whites (from a peak of 2,318 in 1985 to 488 in 2016). The decreases in misdemeanor alcohol arrests were also substantial, dropping by 2,045 arrests per 100,000 residents for Latinos, 1,698 for African Americans, and 870 among whites from their respective peaks to 2016.
- Following Proposition 47, the misdemeanor drug arrest rates roughly doubled for all racial/ethnic groups. Between 2014 and 2016, the rate went from 426 to 886 among African Americans, from 279 to 548 among whites, and from 240 to 452 among Latinos.
- The share of Latinos arrested for misdemeanor traffic offenses has grown considerably. In 1980, 27 percent of misdemeanor traffic arrests were of Latinos, compared to about 50 percent in 2016—much higher than their current share of the population (39%). Meanwhile, the share of African Americans arrested for

misdemeanor drug offenses dropped almost in half (from 21% to 11%), though African Americans are still overrepresented among these and other misdemeanor arrests.

Age

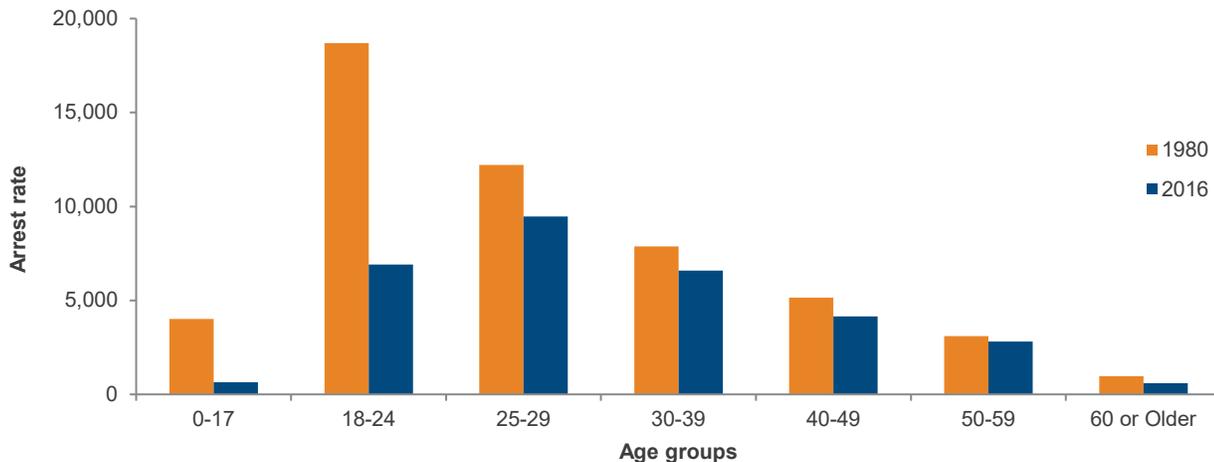
Younger adults are more likely than juveniles (ages 17 and younger) and adults 40 and older to be arrested. In 2016, two-thirds of arrests were of individuals between the ages of 18 and 39, though these age groups made up less than a third of the population.

Most of the overall decline in arrest rates can be attributed to a precipitous drop in arrests of young suspects, including juveniles and those between the ages of 18 and 24. The 1990s saw a number of state and national juvenile justice reforms, which may have contributed to these trends.⁶ In 2016, juveniles represented 24 percent of the population but only 5 percent of arrests. While California’s population has aged over the past few decades—and younger residents now represent smaller shares of the population than they did in 1980—the large declines in the number of annual arrests among younger residents are significantly greater than the corresponding changes in the population overall (see [Table B2 in the technical appendices](#)). Meanwhile, older adults make up a growing share of all arrests. For example, those ages 40 and older made up 14 percent of all arrests in 1980, compared to 30 percent in 2016.

Arrest rates in California are still highest among young adults, but differences across adult age groups have decreased (Figure 9). While the arrest rate decreased between 1980 and 2016 for all age groups, the largest drop is among juveniles and 18-to-24-year-olds. Arrest rates declined by about 11,800 arrests per 100,000 residents between the ages of 18 and 24 (63%, from 18,692 to 6,914) and by 3,400 arrests per 100,000 juvenile residents (84%, from 4,011 to 648).

FIGURE 9

Arrest rates have dropped the most for the state’s younger population



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 of the relevant demographic group.

⁶ These include the US Congress passing amendments in 1994 to the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974, where states must determine whether disproportionate minority confinement exists, and if so, identify causes and implement actions to remedy disparity. In the mid-1990s, California began shifting responsibility for juvenile offenders to the counties, and a 2007 reform permitted counties to commit only the most serious offenders to state facilities (Tafoya and Hayes 2014).

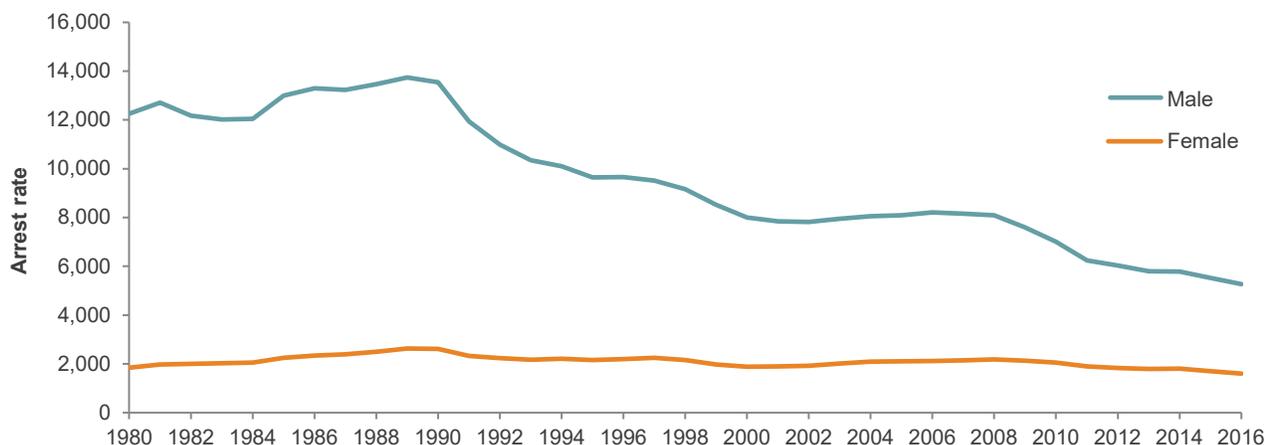
Gender

Men are much more likely to be arrested than women, but this gap has narrowed somewhat over time. Women accounted for nearly a quarter of all arrests in 2016, up from 13 percent in 1980, whereas the share of male arrests has declined from 87 percent to 77 percent over the same time period (see [Figure B10 in the technical appendices](#)).

In 1980, the male arrest rate was more than seven times higher than the female arrest rate (12,705 versus 1,840). By 2016, the male arrest rate was 3.3 times higher than the female rate (5,270 versus 1,603), a ratio that has held steady since 2010 (Figure 10). The male arrest rate declined by about 8,500 arrests per 100,000 male residents (62%) between a peak in 1989 and 2016, while the female arrest rate decreased by about 1,000 arrests per 100,000 female residents (39%) during that time.

FIGURE 10

Male arrest rates are substantially higher than female arrest rates, but the gap is decreasing



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 of the relevant demographic group.

When we examine specific offense types, we find:

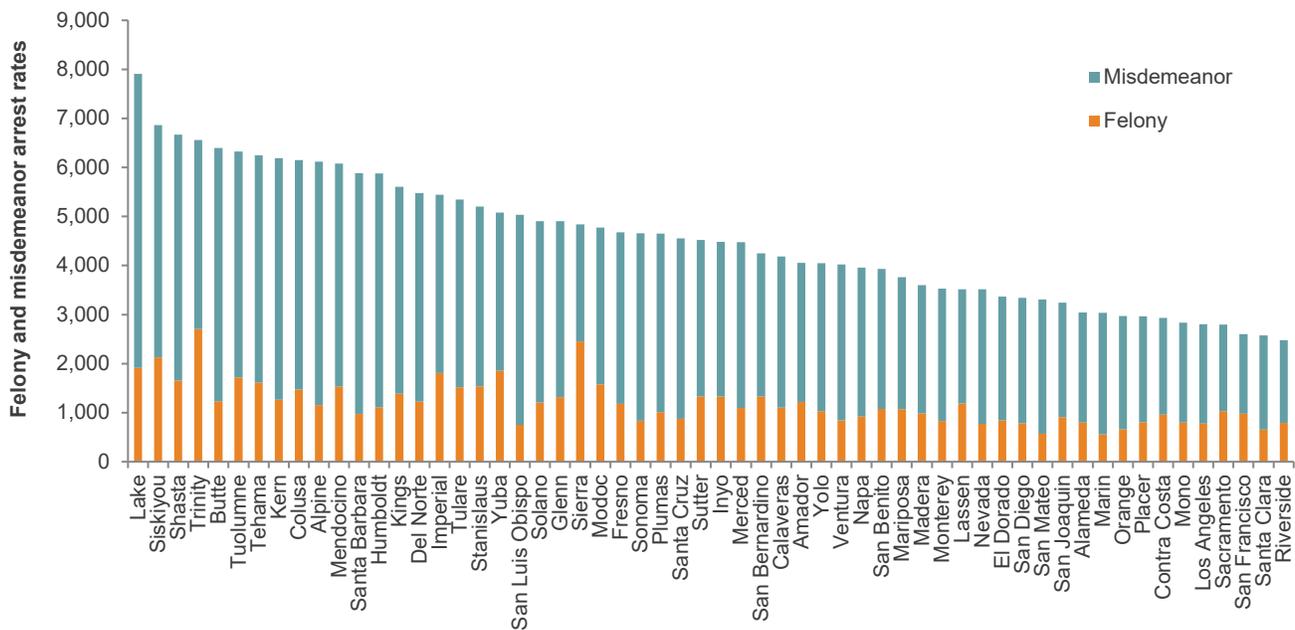
- The offenses men and women are arrested for tend to be somewhat different. In 2016, women made up a slightly higher share of all misdemeanor arrests (25%) than felony arrests (20%), while the reverse is true for men (80% of felony arrests, 75% of misdemeanor arrests). Furthermore, women accounted for 32 percent of all arrests for property crimes, compared to 23 percent of violent offenses and 22 percent of drug offenses.
- While arrest rates for violent felonies and misdemeanors have declined for men over the past few decades, they have increased for women. Felony violent arrest rates declined 34 percent for men but increased 62 percent for women. Similarly, misdemeanor assault and battery arrest rates declined 25 percent for men and increased 67 percent for women (see [Tables B3 and B4 in the technical appendices](#)). However, arrest rates for violent offenses continue to be substantially higher for men.
- For other more-common offenses—including felony property arrests and misdemeanor traffic and alcohol-related arrests—arrest rates declined more for men than they did for women. For example, felony property arrest rates declined 78 percent for men and 50 percent for women from 1980 to 2016.

How Do Arrests Differ across Counties?

Arrest rates vary substantially across counties (Figure 11). The five counties with the highest arrest rates—including both felonies and misdemeanors—are all rural and less populous: Lake (7,906 annual arrests per 100,000 county residents), Siskiyou (6,862), Shasta (6,672), Trinity (6,559), and Butte (6,394). The lowest total arrest rates are mostly found in large counties: Riverside (2,479), San Francisco (2,576), Santa Clara (2,603), Sacramento (2,797), and Los Angeles (2,800). As mentioned earlier, many factors are likely to contribute to these differences, including crime rates, demographics, poverty, fiscal conditions, jail capacity, law enforcement staffing and policing, and criminal justice reforms.

FIGURE 11

Most of California’s lowest arrest rates are in the larger counties



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 county residents.

When we examine county differences for felony and misdemeanor arrests, we find:

- Differences in the felony arrest rates for drug and violent offenses are the primary contributors to differences across counties in overall felony arrest rates. Differences in arrest rates of those who have violated probation or parole also contribute notably to county differences. The counties with the highest felony arrest rates are Trinity (with 2,705 felony arrests per 100,000 residents), Sierra (2,451), Siskiyou (2,127), Lake (1,913), and Yuba (1,853). The counties with the lowest felony arrest rates are Marin (556), San Mateo (573), Santa Clara (655), Orange County (659), and San Luis Obispo (752).
- Differences in the misdemeanor arrest rates for traffic offenses, failure to appear in court or arrests executed with a warrant, and drug offenses are the primary drivers of differences across counties in overall misdemeanor arrest rates. The counties with the highest misdemeanor arrest rates are Lake (5,993), Butte (5,159), Shasta (5,016), Alpine (4,965), and Kern (4,928). The lowest misdemeanor arrest rates are in San Francisco (1,622), Riverside (1,690), Sacramento (1,765), Santa Clara (1,921), and Contra Costa (1,927).

Given that most arrests are for misdemeanor offenses, it is not surprising that county patterns for total arrest rates often align with those of misdemeanor arrest rates. See [Table C1 in the technical appendices](#).

Race/Ethnicity, Age, and Gender across Counties

Racial disparities in arrest rates are prevalent in the vast majority of California counties.⁷ Only two of the smallest counties examined, Lassen and Del Norte, had arrest rates for African Americans that were lower than those of whites. The African American arrest rate was at least double the white arrest rate in 45 of the 49 counties examined, at least three times greater in 33 counties, at least four times greater in 21 counties, and at least five times greater in 13 counties. We see substantial disparities in both small, rural counties (e.g., Glenn and Nevada, where the African American arrest rate is about 6.7 times greater than the white arrest rate) and large urban counties (e.g., San Mateo and San Francisco, which have African American arrest rates that are nine times and nearly eight times greater, respectively, than the white arrest rates). In comparison, the Latino arrest rate was higher than the white arrest rate in 23 out of the 49 counties examined—meaning there are numerous counties where the Latino arrest rate was similar to or less than the white arrest rate. In three counties (San Mateo, Marin, and Santa Clara), the Latino arrest rate was at least twice that of whites (see [Table C3 in the technical appendices](#)).

In addition, there are notable racial/ethnic disparities across counties as well. Counties with the highest African American arrest rates have rates that are about 3.3 times greater than in counties with the lowest African American arrest rates (26,000 versus 7,900 arrests per 100,000 African American residents). The highest arrest rates among African Americans are in small rural counties (e.g., Tehama, Glenn, and Shasta), while the lowest African American arrest rates are found in both small rural counties (e.g., Lassen, Del Norte, and Tuolumne) and large urban counties (Riverside and Los Angeles). Comparing counties with the highest and lowest arrest rates for other racial/ethnic groups, counties with the highest Latino arrest rates have rates that are about 2.2 times greater than counties with the lowest Latino arrest rates, and counties with the highest white arrest rates have rates that are about 2.8 times greater than counties with the lowest white arrest rates.⁸

In all counties, individuals ages 25–29 and those ages 30–39 have the highest felony and misdemeanor arrest rates. Accordingly, arrests of people in these age groups largely drive differences in overall arrest rates across counties. For example, several counties with the highest arrest rates of 25-to-29-year-olds (e.g., Trinity, Siskiyou, Lake, and Shasta) are among the counties with the highest overall arrest rates for all age groups. Similarly, several counties with the lowest arrest rates of 25-to-29-year-olds (e.g., San Francisco, Riverside, Santa Clara, and Los Angeles) have some of the lowest overall arrest rates in the state.

The highest shares of female arrests tend to be in small rural counties. The 15 counties with the highest share of women among arrests (between 27% and 32%) are in small rural counties, with shares close to a third in Tuolumne, Plumas, and Modoc.⁹ However, the reverse does not hold true: we see small and large counties among those with the lowest share of women: Los Angeles (22%), Madera (20%), San Francisco (19%), Alpine (17%), and Mono (17%). We also find that the counties with the highest female arrest rates tend to be the same small rural counties with the state's highest arrest rates, with female arrest rates between 3,644 and 4,210 arrests per 100,000 female residents in Tuolumne, Lake, Siskiyou, Shasta, and Butte. These counties have female arrest rates that are roughly four times as large as those in the counties with the lowest female arrest rates: Los Angeles, Riverside, Santa Clara, Mono, and San Francisco (see [Tables D2 and D5 in the technical appendices](#)).

⁷ It is important to note that in counties with a small population, arrest statistics can be heavily skewed by unusual events or the actions of a few individuals. Caution is warranted when the analysis is broken down by demographic groups, especially where the minority population is a small share of the overall population. For that reason, we limit our county analysis of racial/ethnic differences to the 49 counties with an overall population of at least 25,000.

⁸ Counties with the highest and lowest African American and Latino arrest rates refer to the top and bottom deciles. See [Table C3 in the technical appendices](#).

⁹ It should be noted that the pattern that the highest female shares of arrests tend to be in small rural counties holds for both felony arrests and misdemeanors.

Conclusion

While much of the penal code is determined by the state legislature, the state does not closely monitor how arrest decisions based on these laws are implemented across jurisdictions—or how local enforcement decisions may affect demographic groups differently. As the first statewide examination of arrests in California, this report identifies major trends over time and the disparities that exist across demographic groups and counties.

The past four decades have witnessed tremendous change in the criminal justice landscape in California, and arrest rates in the state fell precipitously. Declines in misdemeanor arrests—especially for traffic and alcohol-related offenses—were the key driver, but felony arrest rates for property and drug offenses dropped considerably as well. The offenses for which suspects are arrested have also changed. For example, violent offenses now make up a third of all felony arrests—even though the arrest rate for violent felonies has been declining.

The demographics of who is arrested in California has shifted as well. The drop in arrests is almost entirely due to lower arrest rates among juveniles and adults ages 18–24, which have fallen 84 percent and 63 percent, respectively, since 1980. In addition, we find the share of women arrested has grown steadily—from one in eight of all arrests in 1980 to almost one in four in 2016. Increases in arrest rates for violent offenses among women are contributing to this trend.

There are stark racial disparities in arrests. Though these gaps have narrowed over time, the disparity between African Americans and whites remains substantial. African Americans were three times more likely than whites to be arrested in California in 2016, compared with 3.6 times more likely in the early 1990s. In comparison, Latinos were 1.1 times more likely than whites to be arrested in 2016, compared with 1.8 times more likely in the early '90s.

Finally, arrests vary substantially across California counties—with urban counties tending to have lower arrest rates and rural counties tending to have higher arrest rates. Counties with the highest rates arrest almost 5,400 more suspects per 100,000 residents each year than counties with the lowest arrest rates. These differences are largely driven by misdemeanor arrests for drug and traffic offenses, as well as arrests executed with a warrant. Notably, nearly all counties have a large disparity in arrests between African Americans and whites. Forty-five of the 49 counties examined have an African American arrest rate that is at least double that of whites, while 13 counties have an African American arrest rate that is at least five times that of whites.

As the state and local jurisdictions continue their data collection efforts on initial police interactions, these trends shed valuable light on the changing context of arrests throughout the state. Future PPIC research will examine possible contributing factors and further explore trends and county differences in arrests, as well as law enforcement discretion in booking suspects into jail. By bringing data-driven information into the broader conversation about policing and community relations, we hope to spur productive discussions and ultimately evidence-based approaches to law enforcement that will promote equity and maintain public safety.

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