

Are Younger Generations Committing Less Crime?

Highlights

- ▶ The violent felony arrest rate for young adults (ages 18–22) in California has dropped by more than 50 percent over the last 25 years.
- ▶ For those born in 1993 and later, criminal offending, as measured by violent offenses, is 20 to 25 percent lower than in previous generations.
- ▶ The number of offenses each individual is arrested for in a year has increased by about 5 percent, a notable deviation from decades-long levels that is not limited to the most recent generation.

Our findings represent a shift in longstanding trends and identify a factor driving the overall decline in crime over the last decades in California—despite a recent uptick in violent crime, the rate is [less than half of its peak](#) in the early 1990s. Building on studies that find less criminal offending among more recent generations in [New York State](#) and [Chicago](#), we examine whether younger generations in California are less criminally active than past generations, with a focus on violent offenses, or if drops in offending have affected all age groups. Drawing from unique, individual-level data on arrests in California between 1980 and 2020, we focus on arrests for violent felonies as our measure of criminal offending. Some common violent felonies include domestic violence, aggravated assault, and robbery.

Criminal offending declined among those born in the mid-1990s

The violent felony arrest rate for young adults (ages 18–22) dropped by more than 50 percent over the last 25 years, from 1,712 per 100,000 residents in 1994 to 840 in 2019. After representing about 25 percent of violent felony arrests among adults for decades, young adults now account for 16 percent of these arrests.

To investigate whether this steep drop was driven by lower offending among more recent generations, we account for two other critical factors that can affect crime trends. First, age is one of the strongest predictors of criminal behavior, which generally increases in adolescence, peaks in the late teens or early 20s, and then continually decreases. Second, broader social and economic conditions (known as period effects) can influence crime; for example, the early 1990s saw a widespread surge in violent crime across age groups in California and the nation.

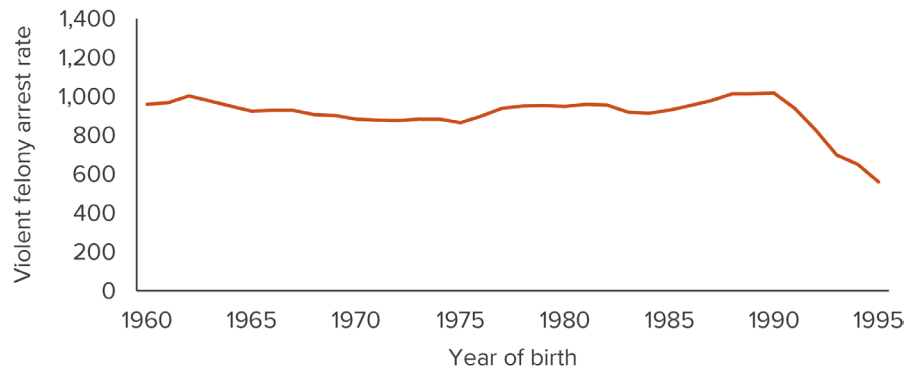
After adjusting for changes in the age distribution of the population and period effects, we find that violent felony arrest rates stayed relatively constant for individuals born between 1960 and the early 1990s, and then dropped notably. For the most recent generation, those born in 1993 and later, the criminal offending rate is 20 to 25 percent lower than for previous generations.

Frequency of offending has ticked up

The decline in criminal behavior is driven by fewer individuals arrested for violent felonies. However, when we examine the number of violent felony arrests in a year *per arrested individual*, we see an increase of about 5 percent over roughly the last decade. That is, while the violent felony arrest rate has declined

among younger generations, the frequency of offending has been gradually increasing. Importantly, this holds true across age groups and generations. The magnitude of the increase is arguably modest, but the deviation from decades-long patterns is noteworthy and deserves further attention.

After staying relatively constant for decades, criminal offending rates started to drop among individuals born in the early 1990s



Source: Authors' calculations using data from California Department of Justice, Automated Criminal History System, 1980–2020.
Note: Figure shows the violent felony arrest rate (annual number of violent felony arrests per 100,000 residents) for adults 18–52, by birth year, adjusted for age compositional changes across birth years and period effects (which account for broader non-age-specific or birth-year-specific changes in crime).

Other teen behaviors have also changed

Our study does not aim to identify causal factors, but we note that younger generations have also experienced reductions in several measures of risky behavior, like alcohol consumption, drug use, and teenage pregnancy. These shifts coincide with changes in how teens spend their time, including more time on the computer, less time socializing in person, and greater school enrollment and educational attainment. While far from conclusive, many of these changes seem to have started for individuals born in the early 1990s and may be associated with fewer opportunities and less temptation to commit crime. Future work to determine specific contributing factors and whether the changes are persistent and apply to other types of crimes would have great value and policy relevance.

Policy implications

Even without knowing the root causes, several policy implications follow from our findings.

- ▶ The decrease in crime among younger generations suggests the possibility of lower future capacity needs for the criminal justice system. If these changes persist, it is possible that law enforcement may need to make fewer arrests, criminal courts may handle fewer cases, and jails and prisons may need less space for a smaller population.
- ▶ Given the increased frequency of offending, criminal justice agencies may need new and/or alternative approaches to reduce crime among a plausibly more challenging-to-treat offender population. With realignment and the recent closure of the state's Division of Juvenile Justice, rehabilitation programming increasingly falls on county probation departments. Close monitoring and evidence-based research will be necessary to determine effective approaches.
- ▶ Risk assessment tools—which are widely used to predict individuals' likelihood of reoffending—should be adjusted to account for declines in criminal behavior among younger generations to reduce inaccurate predictions.

Supported with funding from Arnold Ventures.

Adapted by Vicki Hsieh from [Are Younger Generations Committing Less Crime?](#) by Magnus Lofstrom, Brandon Martin, and Deepak Premkumar.