

Understanding California’s Youth Arrest Trends

Technical Assistance Brief

December 2025

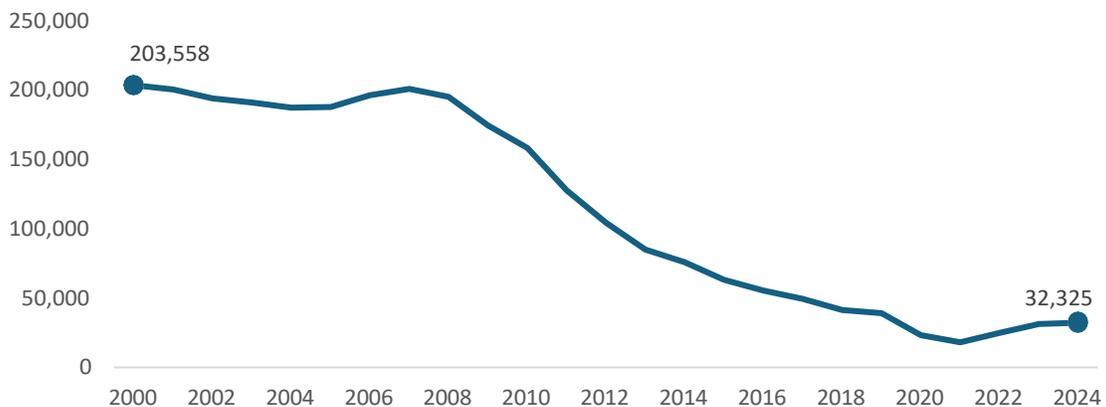
This brief provides an overview of youth arrest trends for misdemeanor and felony offenses in California, drawing primarily from the California Department of Justice’s *OpenJustice Portal: Arrests Dataset* (DOJ, 2025) to show that the number of arrests among youth in California remains near all-time lows.

Two Decades of Progress

Youth Arrests are Down

Over the past two decades, California has seen a dramatic and sustained decline in juvenile arrests. Since 2000, youth arrests have fallen by 84%, from 203,558 arrests in 2000 to 32,325 in 2024, reaching historic lows even before the pandemic. By 2019, youth arrests in California had dropped to an all-time low and when COVID-19 struck, that decline became even more pronounced as schools closed, community members stayed home, and there were reductions in social interactions, police stops, and formal law enforcement (Premkumar et al., 2023). As a result, from 2019 to 2021, California experienced a once-in-a-generation decline in youth arrests, falling another 54% during this period (DOJ, 2025).

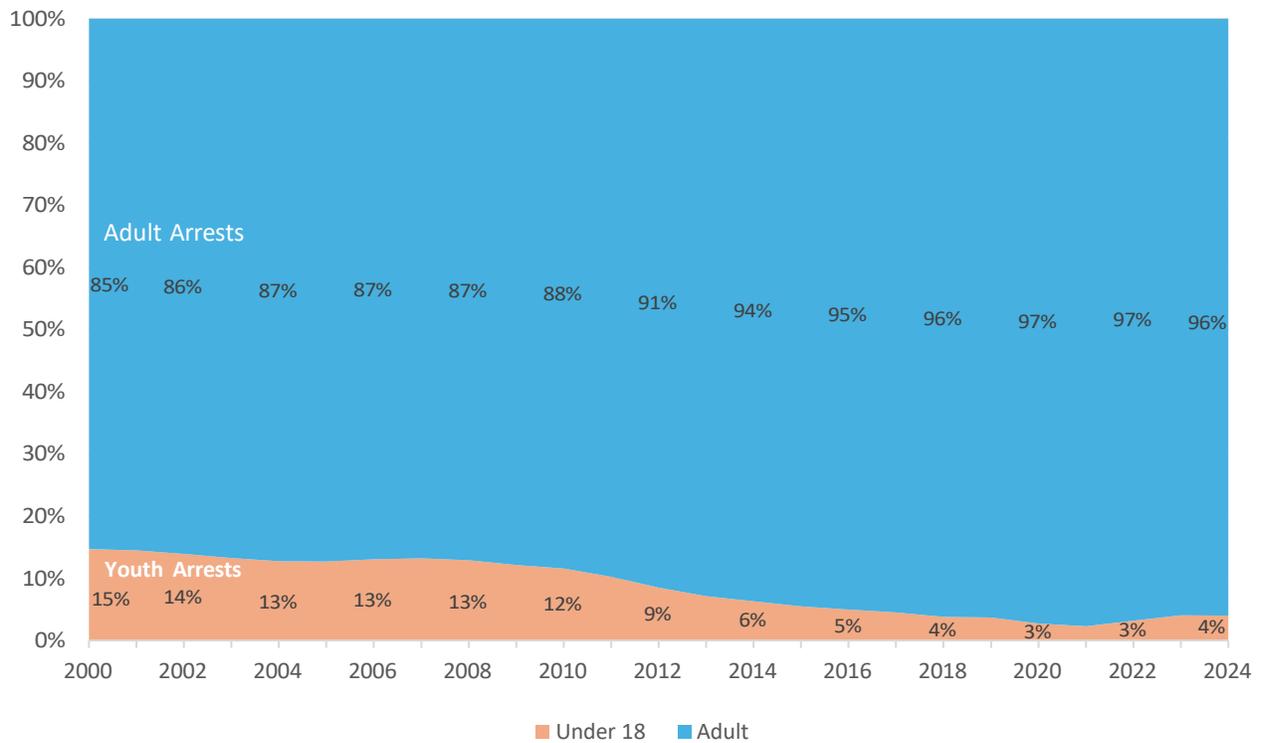
Figure 1. Total Youth Arrests in California, 2000-2024 (DOJ, 2025)



Youth Comprise a Small and Shrinking Proportion of All Arrests

Youth arrests are not only down in absolute terms, they also represent a shrinking share of total arrests in California. In 2000, youth made up approximately 15% of all arrests statewide. In 2024, that figure is just 4% (DOJ, 2025). Notably, this is significantly lower than the proportion of the population in California who are youth (22%), as well as lower than the proportion of the population who are ages 14 to 17 (5%), who comprise the majority of juvenile arrests (California Department of Finance, n.d.).

Figure 2: Youth Arrests as a Percent of Total Arrests in California 2000-2024 (DOJ, 2025)



A Modest Rebound from an Unprecedented Low

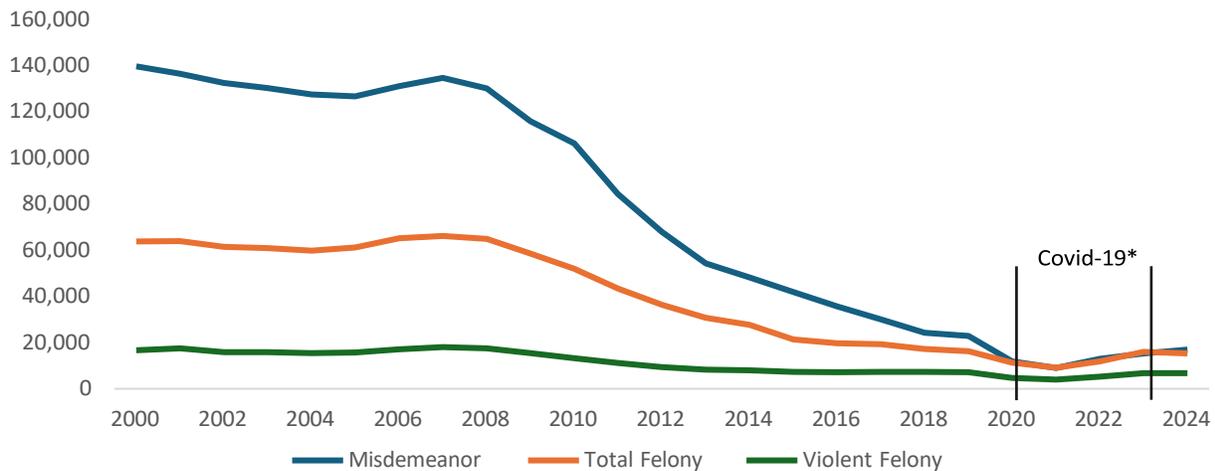
California’s experience mirrors national trends. Across the United States, youth crime indicators including arrests, delinquency cases, and detention admissions all fell sharply for more than two decades after peaking in the mid-1990s, with youth arrests declining by 71% from 2000 to 2021. The pandemic created an even steeper but temporary dip in youth crime indicators, including arrests, followed by small rebounds. Both nationally and in California, these rebounds reflect a return toward the historically low pre-pandemic arrest levels, not a return to the arrest levels of the 1990s and 2000s (OJJDP, 2001, 2021).

It is within this context that recent increases in youth arrests should be understood. Notably, between 2023 and 2024, total juvenile arrests in California rose by just under 3%, and were still below 2019 levels, the last full year prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2024, youth arrests remain approximately 17% below pre-pandemic levels (2019) and far below the peak of the mid 1990’s and early-2000s (DOJ, 2025).

Felony and Misdemeanor Arrests Remain Below Pre-Pandemic Levels

From 2000 through 2019, youth misdemeanor and felony arrests, including violent felony arrests, declined sharply in California. Youth misdemeanor arrests declined more than felony arrests during this period, from 139,669 misdemeanor arrests in 2000 to 22,836 in 2019 (representing an 84% decrease), compared to 63,889 felony arrests in 2000 and 16,288 in 2019 (representing a 75% decrease) (DOJ, 2025).

Figure 3. Youth Arrests 2000 - 2024, by Severity (DOJ, 2025)



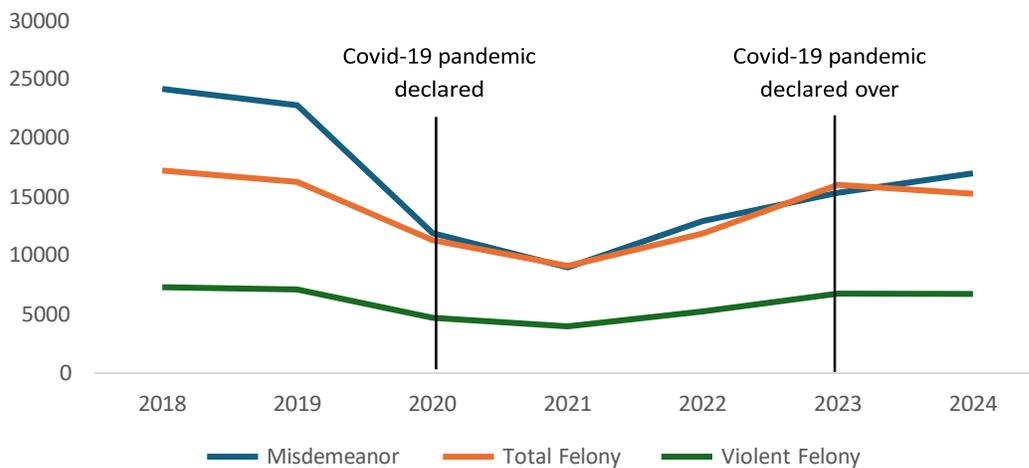
*The World Health Organization officially declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic in March 2020 and declared an end to the public health emergency in May 2023.

Most recently, between 2023 and 2024, youth misdemeanor arrests rose 10.8%, while youth felony arrests declined by 4.7% and youth violent felony arrests also fell slightly. These shifts reflect both youth behavioral factors and juvenile justice procedures returning to how they were practiced prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. As noted above, the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in fewer social

interactions among youth, fewer public interactions with police, and reductions in arrest practices, especially for lower-level misdemeanor offenses (Premkumar et al., 2023). With normal law enforcement operations resumed, misdemeanor arrests have rebounded proportionally among youth. This is less a sign of rising youth crime and reflects a return to pre-pandemic law enforcement patterns.

Compared to 2019, youth misdemeanor arrests are more than 25% lower in 2024, while youth felony arrests are 6% lower, and youth violent felony arrests are nearly 5% lower over this period (DOJ, 2025).

Figure 4. Youth Arrests 2018 - 2024, by Severity (DOJ, 2025)



While youth arrests are down, and arrests for serious violent offenses among youth remain rare, there are understandable concerns about youth violence, particularly lethal violence in a time where news of gun homicide is ubiquitous and frequent. In California, referrals to probation for homicide arrests have increased from 222 in 2019 (the last full year prior to the pandemic) to 315 in 2024 (JCPSS, 2012, 2024). However, it is notable that the gun homicide rate in 2022¹ for youth below the age of 25 in California was 45% below the rate recorded for the rest of the U.S. In addition, California’s gun homicide rate for youth under 25 was nearly 50% lower in 2022 than it was in 2006. In contrast, the rest of the U.S. experienced a 37% increase in youth gun homicide rates over the same period (DOJ, 2023).

¹ 2022 is the last year for which there is publicly available data on youth homicide arrests

While Youth Arrests Remain Near All-Time Lows, Racial Disparities Have Increased

While youth arrests decreased substantially in California from 2000 through 2024, racial disparities increased during this period. In the year 2000, Black youth were approximately 2.5 times as likely as White youth to be arrested relative to their population sizes (age 14 – 17), and Hispanic youth were approximately 1.1 times as likely as White youth to be arrested. By 2024, Black youth were approximately 5.7 times as likely as White youth to be arrested, and Hispanic youth were approximately 1.5 times as likely as White youth to be arrested relative to their population sizes (DOJ, 2025) (California Department of Finance, n.d.).

These disparities in arrests cannot be explained by racial and ethnic differences in how often youth break the law. Surveys asking youth about their lawbreaking behavior, known as self-report data, find only modest differences in offending rates by race or ethnicity for most offense categories (Cauffman et al, 2023; Gase et al, 2016; National Research Council, 2013). Also, research finds that neighborhood characteristics influence how police officers exercise discretion “in ways that make youth of color more vulnerable to stops and arrests” (Bishop & Lieber, 2012).

Sustained Progress Guided by Research

California’s youth arrest rates show a consistent downward trend spanning more than a decade, and arrests levels remain near historic lows, even with recent fluctuations tied to the social disruptions of the pandemic. This coincides with an increased reliance on the adolescent brain science and developmental research that informs prevention and education programs aimed at reducing juvenile justice system contact among youth, as well as implementation of positive youth development approaches for youth who do enter the juvenile justice system. Building on this model is key to ensuring continued improvement for young people and public safety across California.

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