

THE PLUMMETING ARREST RATES OF CALIFORNIA'S CHILDREN

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Research Report

Introduction

A dramatic development with profound implications for California's criminal justice system has gained momentum over the last three decades: an enormous decline in arrests among the youngest Californians. Over the last 30 years, the arrest rate of children under age 12 in California has dropped by 93 percent. This trend has significant long-term consequences, as those who are arrested at early ages are more likely to develop chronic offending patterns and to have repeated contacts with courts, correctional programs, and prisons (see Orange County Probation Department, 1999).

A seminal study of life course offending found that "childhood delinquency is linked to adult crime, alcohol abuse, general deviance," and a host of troubles later in life (Sampson & Laub, 1990, p. 609). Further, while most people with repeat arrests and incarceration were first arrested in adulthood, those arrested in childhood and early adolescence had much higher odds of future justice-involvement (DeLisi, 2006; Miller & Lyman, 2001). The traditional identification of crime at young ages, both with contemporaneous crime rates and later offending as adults, is so powerful that it remains the main index used to forecast criminal justice system and prison needs for decades (California Department of Finance, 2015). The striking drop in arrests among children in California presents an opportunity to explore greatly reduced reliance upon the criminal justice, jail, and prison systems in the future. While this report focuses on the youngest justice-involved youth — those under age 12 — large declines in arrests have also occurred among youth of older ages.

Several lines of evidence suggest the significant drop in arrest rates indicates a drop in criminal behavior among children, rather than a change in law enforcement policy. First, this massive drop in child arrests did not occur in isolation, but accompanied large decreases in other youth problems. Favorable trends in school graduation, college enrollment, violent death, self-destructive behaviors, and low-weight births (see CJCJ, 2014 and CJCJ, 2015) suggest broader social and generational factors are working to reduce crime among those of younger ages.

There also appear to be no policy or record-keeping changes that would explain such a significant drop in arrests among the youngest ages. Barring evidence pointing to statewide change in policy or statistics-gathering that somehow affected only young ages and nearly all jurisdictions, offenses, and demographics equally, the decline in child and youth arrests is assumed to reflect a real drop in child and youth crime.

Table 1. California arrests rates of children under age 10 (1980-2013)

	1980	1990	2000	2013	Change
All offenses	518.7	355.1	161.0	21.9	-95%
Felony arrests	160.2	104.0	54.5	7.8	-95%
Violent crimes	16.5	15.9	13.6	2.3	-86%
Property crimes	135.1	77.7	31.3	2.9	-98%
Misdemeanors	324.0	234.4	95.5	12.1	-96%
Status offenses	34.4	16.7	11.0	2.0	-94%
Female, total	142.2	81.7	42.2	6.7	-95%
Male, total	879.1	613.8	274.2	36.4	-96%
Black	1,119.9	1,098.7	554.2	106.6	-90%
Latino	353.3	261.6	122.7	13.6	-96%
White	537.4	328.9	160.5	24.3	-95%
Asian/other	220.1	229.5	69.5	15.7	-93%
33 large counties	519.7	349.5	157.3	20.1	-96%
25 small counties	488.1	511.8	282.8	82.6	-86%
Total arrests	3,648	3,119	1,782	219	-3,429

Note: Rates are per 100,000 population. "Large counties" are those with populations of 100,00 people or more.
Sources: CJSC (2014; 2014a), DRU (2014).

Findings

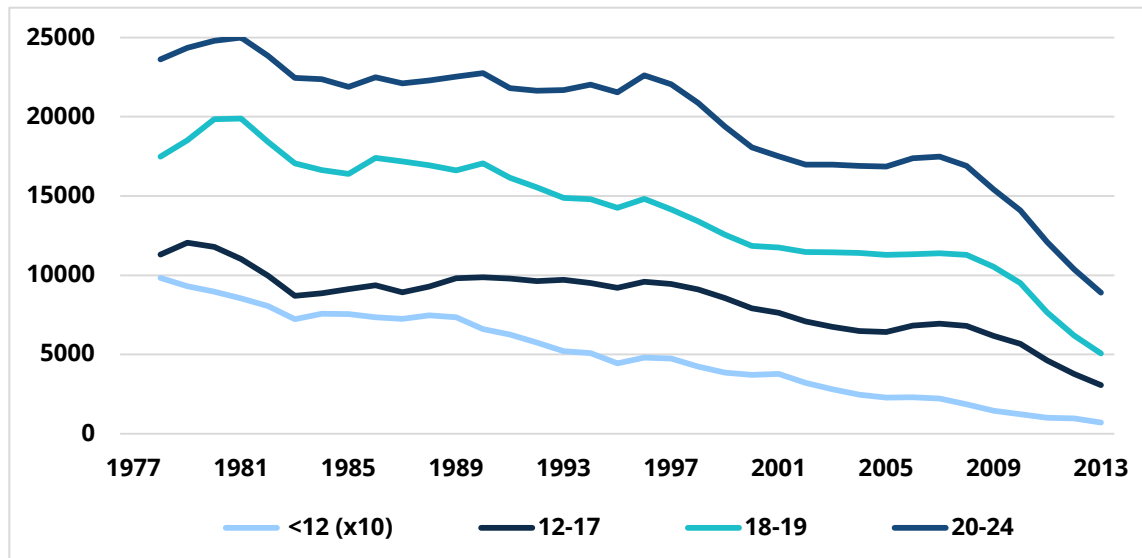
Quantifying the drop in childhood crime

Nearly 14,000 children under age 12, including 4,400 under age 10, were arrested in 1978, the first year detailed records were kept. By 2013, in a pre-teen population 40 percent larger, those numbers had fallen to 1,394 and 219, respectively (CJSC, 2014, 2014a; DRU, 2014). For the most serious offenses, eight children under age 12 were arrested for murder and 46 were arrested for rape in the five-year 1978-82 period; in 2009-13, there was one child arrest for murder and three for rape (CJSC, 2014).

Forty-seven of California's 58 counties showed remarkable declines since 1980; nine smaller counties had zero arrests of pre-teen children across all three and a half decades, and only two smaller counties — with between zero to four arrests per year — showed increases (see Appendix).

For example, from 1980 to 2013 (the period for which county figures are available), the number of arrests of children under age 10 in Los Angeles County dropped from 485 to 17; in Fresno County, from 132 to four; in Alameda County, from 321 to six; and in Lassen County, from six to none (see Appendix). The plunge in arrest rates for younger ages applied to both sexes, all races, all offenses, from petty misdemeanors to serious felonies, and occurred in all of California's major jurisdictions.

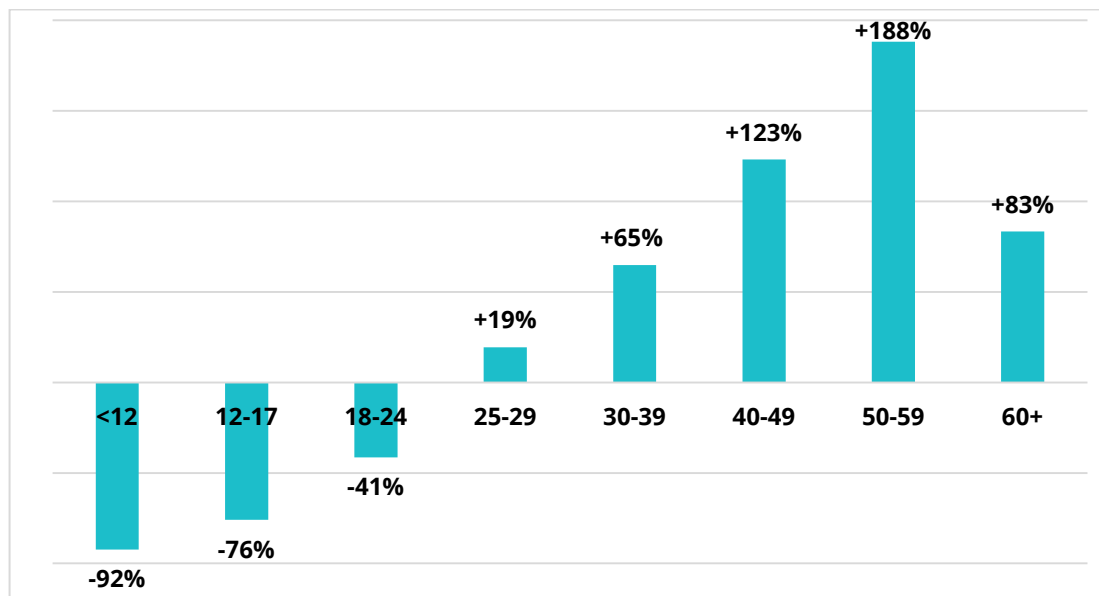
Figure 1. Change in total arrest rates by age (1978-2013)



Note: Rates are per 100,000 population. Data for children ages 7-11 used to calculate arrests rates for children under 12. Rates for ages <12 are multiplied by 10 to facilitate comparison to arrest rates of other age groups. Sources: CJS (2014); DRU (2014).

The large, steady decline in arrest rates of children under age 12 beginning around 1980 was initially followed by slower declines in arrest rates among teenagers and young adults from the early 1980s through the mid-1990s and large declines thereafter (Figure 1). The steep declines in arrest rates among all young ages from the late 1990s to the present (detailed in Appendix) offer encouragement that these trends will continue.

Figure 2. Change in California's per-capita felony arrest rates by age (1978-2013)



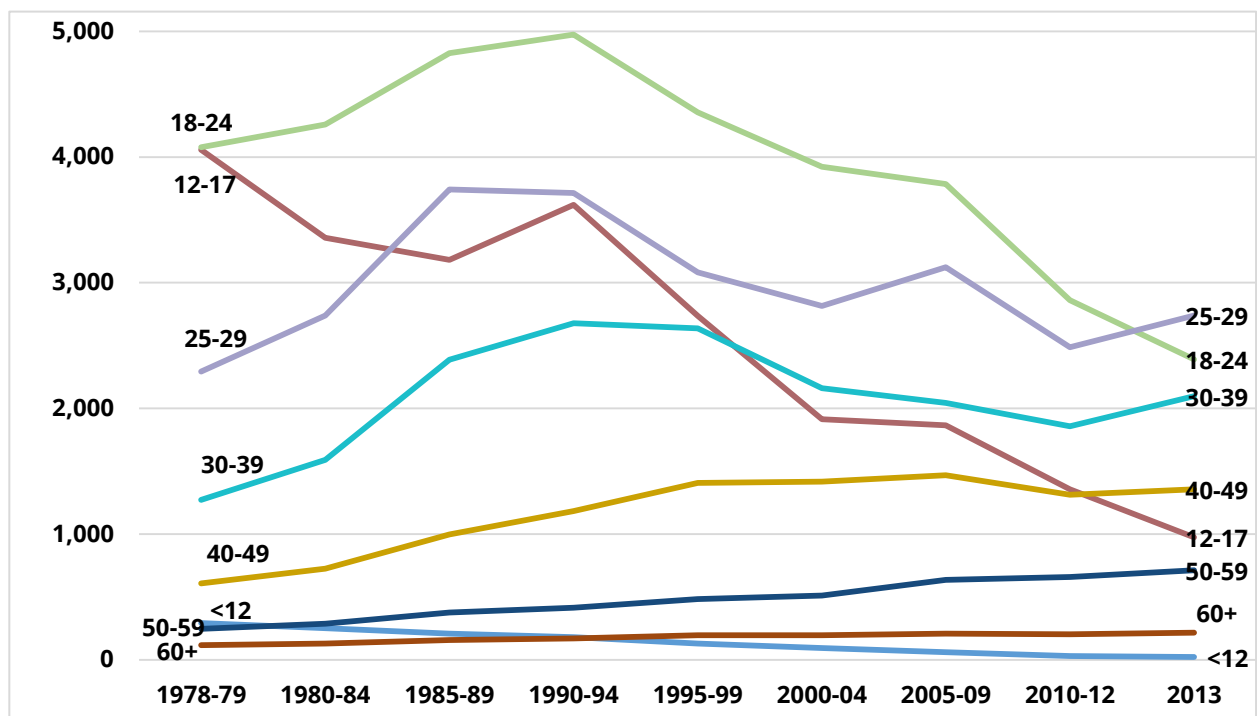
Note: Rates are per 100,000 population. Sources: CJS (2014); DRU (2015).

California's large age division in arrest rate trends

Figure 2 summarizes the decline in child arrests with the changes among older age groups over the last 35 years for which statistics are available. The division is striking; persons under age 25 experienced large declines in felony arrests, while those ages 25-29 saw a modest increase, and those ages 30 and older saw large increases.

Figure 3 provides more detail concerning the components of the age split seen in California's arrest rates. In the late 1970s, California's felony arrest pattern fit the standard "age-crime curve," with ages 12-17 and 18-24 showing by far the highest arrest rates, followed by older age groups, whose felony arrest rates declined uniformly with age (ages <12, which uses as its population base ages 7-11, showed rates comparable to adults around 50). However, after a volatile 35-year period, the age-crime curve is completely disrupted by 2013. Ages 25-29 now have the highest felony arrest rate, followed by ages 18-24, 30-39, 40-49, and 12-17, respectively.

Figure 3. Felony arrest rates, annual average (1978-2013)



Note: Rates are per 100,000 population. Sources: CJSC (2014); DRU (2015).

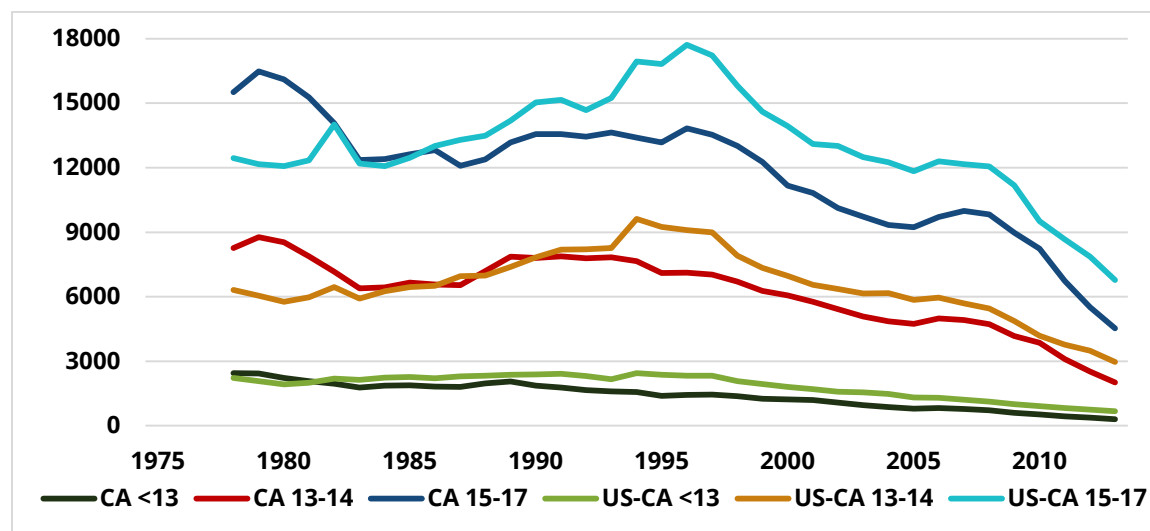
The trajectories of ages <12 and 12-17 are of particular interest. While ages <12 (7-11) showed higher arrest rates than ages 50 and older in 1978, they now have the lowest felony arrest rate of any age group. Even more striking, ages 12-17 had the highest felony arrest rates in the 1970s but fell below age 18-24 in 1979, below age 25-29 in the mid-1980s, below age 30-39 in the late 1990s, below age 40-49 around 2010, and (if current trends persist) may fall below age 50-59 by the end of this decade.

As Figure 3 shows, ages <12 showed a steady decline in felony arrest rates throughout the study period, as did ages 12-17 with a delayed effect (a secondary, lower peak in the early 1990s). Ages 18-24 and 25-29 had plateaus in arrest rates in the early 1990s, as did age 30-39 in the late 1990s, and age 40-49 in the mid-2000s. There also is a “period effect” (a trend that affects all or most ages during the same time period) in the late 1980s and early 1990s among all ages under 40, and another one affecting ages 25 and older in the early 2010s. This suggests that the post-1970s decline in arrest rates among very young ages was followed by declines in arrest among older teens, then young adults, then middle-aged adults in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. If this pattern holds, ages 50-59 and 60+ may soon show peaks followed by declines in arrests in the late 2010s and the 2020s as the under-12 cohort, whose arrest rate decline began in the 1980s, ages into their middle aged and senior years.

California is leading a national trend

California is unique in the degree of its reduction in youth arrest rates, but similar trends are occurring elsewhere in the country. Because California and the FBI report crimes and arrests in different ways, all offenses (felony, misdemeanor, and status) are used to compare California trends with those of the rest of the country (CJSC, 2014; FBI, 2014). From the earliest year available, the rate of arrest for ages <13 (Figure 4, bottom series) fell by 87 percent in California and 70 percent elsewhere in the U.S.; of ages 13-14 (middle series), by 76 percent in California and 53 percent in the rest of the country; and of ages 15-17 (top series), by 71 percent in California and 46 percent in other states. The reasons for the discrepancies, as for the trends themselves, are not known.

Figure 4. California child and youth arrest rates vs. those in the rest of the U.S. (1978-2013)



Note: Rates are per 100,000 population, ages 8-12, 13-14, and 15-17. FBI figures combine ages 10-12, so age <13 is used in this chart. National arrest totals are estimated for each year by prorating arrests from non-reporting jurisdictions, usually 10 to 30 percent of all jurisdictions, from arrest numbers from reporting jurisdictions. Sources: CJSC (2014); FBI (2014).

Predicting California's future trends

The decline in youth arrests may help forecast crime declines among older ages. While crime forecasting remains a hazardous (though necessary) exercise and correlation of trends does not prove common causation, the consistency of arrest trends over several decades yields some grounds for preliminary estimates. Based on arrest declines that have already occurred among children under age 12 — and barring a sudden break with patterns established over the last few decades — the decline in arrests should continue among ages under 25 at least through the mid-2020s and perhaps longer. There are also positive associations between arrest trends for ages under 12 and ages 25-29 and 30-39 in the same cohorts that will require more years of data and more extensive analysis to quantify.

Conclusion

The fact that the large decline in arrest rates of Californian pre-teens over the last three decades was present across all offenses (homicide, rape, shoplifting, and truancy alike), sex, race/ethnicity, and jurisdiction (with only one city as a partial exception) strongly indicates that it reflects sharply reduced criminal behavior among the state's youngest individuals and is not an artifact of changes in policing or statistics gathering in certain times or jurisdictions. That is, the decline reflects a generational trend among children, youth, and young adults themselves rather than any policy or combination of policies. If the large decrease in child arrests is an artifact of large, heretofore unmentioned changes in policies or policing, we would expect to see it concentrated in jurisdictions that substantially changed their policing and other practices toward young ages, and to affect lesser crimes such as misdemeanors and status offenses more than felonies. However, if jurisdictions can point to proactive policies that substantially reduced arrests among younger ages by design, then policy change would also have to be considered.

Whether the reductions in arrests among ages 10-24 will continue to accumulate in the future, as suggested by the continued reductions in arrests among ages 8-9 through 2013, is a crucial question for juvenile and criminal justice analysis and planning. Why did these trends occur? Will they continue? How can they be reinforced?

Analyzing and answering these questions require a seismic shift in criminal justice thinking. The current disconnect between the massive decline in childhood and adolescent arrests, crime discussion, and crime policy is understandable. For instance, few in 1980 would have predicted that as the young population became increasingly non-white over the three decades to come, child arrest rates would plummet by 93 percent, adolescent arrest rates would fall by 76 percent, and arrest rates among teens age 12-17 would fall to the level of 50-year-olds. The general image is that youth crime has increased and become more serious at younger ages (i.e., Martinez, 2014; Barnhart, 2008). However, various arrest and victimization indexes agree that the opposite is the case: crime and violence have plummeted the most among the youngest ages. (It should also be noted that arrest numbers for most offenses substantially overstate youth crime. The more recent FBI (2014) clearance statistics show that compared to adults, youth accounted for 33 percent less crime than their arrests volume indicates.) Criminal justice authorities increasingly characterize teenagers as developmentally, biologically, and sociologically crime-

prone (i.e., Steinberg, 2007; Fox & Piquero, 2003). These images and characterizations stubbornly persist even though the plunge in youth crime and rise in older-age crime renders them dubious.

The most logical approach to analyzing the forces underlying such a large, generalized young-age phenomenon is not to look for narrow, targeted, or local developments and policies (except those in Stockton, where criminal arrest appears to be a major component of grade-school disciplinary strategy, see supplemental report “Stockton, San Bernardino School District Officers Have Arrested Over 90,000 Youths”). Therefore, the most plausible factors consist of broad social currents, primarily cohort effects but also temporary period effects, which affected younger generations more than older ones. Definitively specifying these trends is a much larger research undertaking than this paper can accomplish.

Recommendations

The unexpected and unexamined plunge in child arrests suggests at least four reasons for caution in implementing new or expanded juvenile justice initiatives. First, the number of youth entering the justice system are likely to be much lower than those assumed from traditional crime forecasting models, and overinvestment in unnecessarily large facilities is a serious possibility. Second, the criminal justice system needs to adjust to managing a growing population of older incarcerated people, who require more innovative and community-based drug and alcohol treatment. Third, racial disparities remain and need to be addressed. Even after a 90 percent decline in their arrest rate since 1980, African American children remain substantially more likely to be arrested than children of other races. Finally, authorities and policy makers need to understand much more about why the large decline in childhood crime occurred before designing future system responses. It is time for a new science in juvenile justice administration and planning, and the trends suggest we have a lot to learn.

Methods

Arrest data are available from the Criminal Justice Statistics Center (CJSC, 2014, 2014a), and California Department of Justice, for ages <10, 10-17, and 18-19 statewide and by county, jurisdiction, year, offense, race, and sex for 1980-2013. The California Department of Justice statewide data are also available for the additional ages, 10-11, 12-14, and 15-17 for 1978-2013. Populations used to calculate rates are from the Demographic Research Unit (2014), California Department of Finance.

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Please note: Each year, every county submits their data to the official statewide databases maintained by appointed governmental bodies. While every effort is made to review data for accuracy and to correct information upon revision, CJCJ cannot be responsible for data reporting errors made at the county, state, or national level.

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Appendix

Table 1. Arrests and changes in arrest rates of ages <10 by county (1980-2013)

Counties (ranked by arrest change)	Change in arrest rate per 100,000 population ages 8-9, 2013 vs. 1980	Change in arrest counts			
		1980s	1990s	2000s	2013
Sonoma	-100%	46	40	15	0
Imperial	-100%	25	12	6	0
Santa Cruz	-100%	23	13	0	0
Kings	-100%	21	26	38	0
San Luis Obispo	-100%	13	5	5	0
Napa	-100%	10	0	0	0
El Dorado	-100%	9	15	5	0
Madera	-100%	8	7	5	0
Nevada	-100%	6	0	0	0
Lassen	-100%	6	0	0	0
San Benito	-100%	4	0	0	0
Trinity	-100%	4	0	0	0
Yolo	-100%	3	19	8	0
Tuolumne	-100%	2	0	0	0
Sutter	-100%	1	0	0	0
Siskiyou	-100%	1	0	0	0
Inyo	-100%	1	0	0	0
Solano	-99%	103	70	32	1
Fresno	-98%	132	220	158	4
Riverside	-98%	157	68	52	5
Stanislaus	-98%	198	207	95	5
Alameda	-98%	321	266	61	6
Sacramento	-98%	79	72	46	2
Monterey	-98%	62	19	20	1
Shasta	-98%	41	48	31	1
San Francisco	-98%	39	52	5	1
Ventura	-97%	33	36	24	1
San Diego	-97%	326	223	117	10
Kern	-97%	135	253	128	10
Santa Clara	-97%	267	148	88	9
Contra Costa	-97%	161	93	38	6
San Mateo	-97%	73	69	35	3
Santa Barbara	-96%	70	65	32	3
Los Angeles	-96%	485	342	155	17
Orange	-96%	194	110	44	8
San Bernardino	-96%	266	237	177	18
Merced	-95%	74	69	38	5
Marin	-95%	50	19	13	2
Mendocino	-94%	18	0	0	1
Placer	-94%	5	12	13	1
Humboldt	-89%	38	0	0	4
Tulare	-81%	37	68	43	15

Counties (ranked by arrest change)	Change in arrest rate per 100,000 population ages 8-9, 2013 vs. 1980	Change in arrest counts			
		1980s	1990s	2000s	2013
Yuba	-76%	12	0	0	4
Butte	-74%	5	9	32	2
Glenn	-60%	2	0	0	1
San Joaquin	-44%	74	51	130	59
Tehama	-20%	5	0	0	6
Colusa	na	0	0	0	0
Amador	na	0	0	0	0
Del Norte	na	0	0	0	0
Plumas	na	0	0	0	0
Mono	na	0	0	0	0
Mariposa	na	0	0	0	0
Modoc	na	0	0	0	0
Sierra	na	0	0	0	0
Alpine	na	0	0	0	0
Calaveras	+23%	2	0	0	4
Lake	+ ~	0	0	0	3

Note: County arrest figures are available for 1980-2013. Sources: CJSC (2014); DRU (2014).

Table 2. Change in total arrest rates by age group (1980-2013)

Age group	Change in Total Arrests	Change in Felony Arrests
<10	-96%	-96%
10-11	-91%	-89%
12-14	-77%	-81%
15-17	-73%	-74%
18-19	-74%	-61%
20-24	-62%	-39%

Sources: CJSC (2014); DRU (2014).