

RACIAL DISPARITIES PERSIST AMID LARGE DRUG ARREST DECLINES IN SAN FRANCISCO



Mike Males, Ph.D., Senior Research Fellow
Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice

February 2018

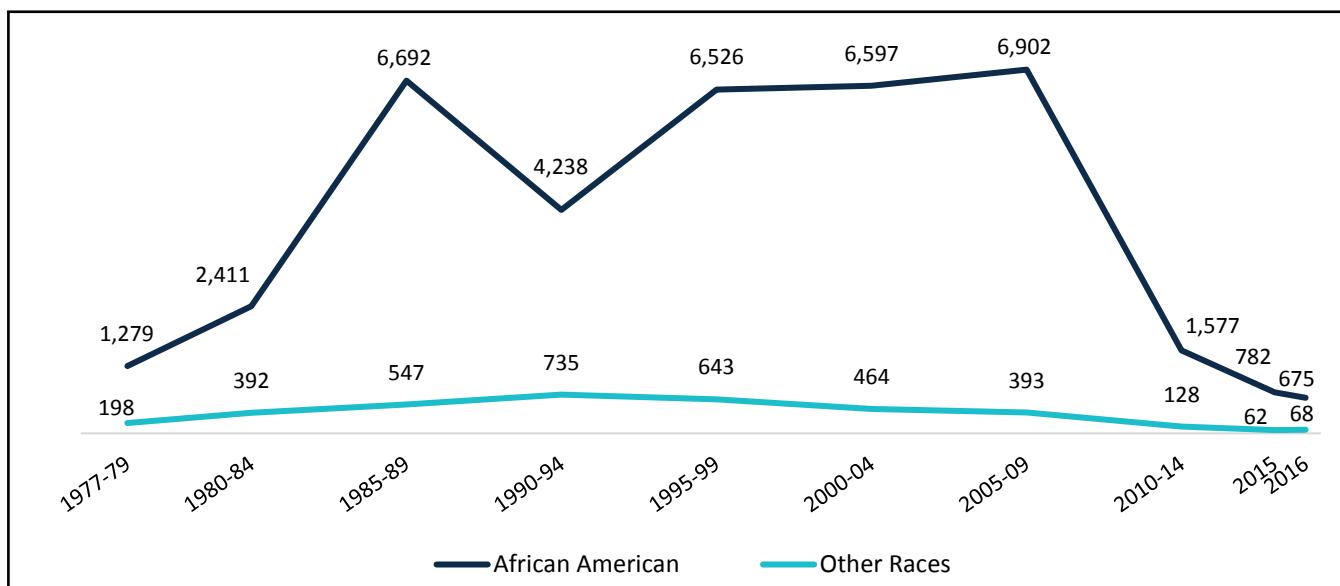
Fact Sheet

Amid drastic changes in San Francisco’s drug enforcement and statewide drug policy reforms, disproportionate arrests among African American residents continue. This fact sheet excerpts key findings from a recent study by CJCJ’s Senior Research Fellow, Mike Males, and San Jose State University Human Rights Institute Professor, William Armaline. The study, *San Francisco’s Drug Arrests Drop 90% through 2016; Disproportionate Arrests of African Americans Persist*, details drug arrest patterns by race since the 1980s and provides comprehensive insight on the city’s fluctuating trends. Some figures differ slightly from those in the original report due to updated information from the Department of Justice and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention through 2016.

- **Even as San Francisco’s population grew by 150,000, the city’s drug arrests plummeted by 92 percent since 1988-89, the peak years for drug arrests.**

Despite population growth in San Francisco, drug arrests declined sharply through 2015 and 2016. The decline has been especially steep during the last seven years as statewide criminal justice reforms reclassified several drug offenses from felonies to misdemeanors and marijuana was decriminalized, then legalized. Drug law reforms, policing changes, and other, unknown factors have reduced drug felony arrest rates drastically in San Francisco (down 92% for African Americans and 85% for other races from their 2008 peak compared to 2016).

Figure 1. San Francisco felony drug arrests by race, per 100,000 population, annual averages, 1977-2016



Sources: DOJ (2017); DRU (2017).

- **Felony drug arrest rates were 10 times higher for African Americans in San Francisco than residents of other races in 2016.**

Racial disparities in 2016 have narrowed from the peak year, 2008, when African Americans in San Francisco were 19.2 times more likely than San Franciscans of other races, and 4.5 times more likely than African Americans elsewhere in California, to be arrested for a drug felony. In 2016, African Americans in San Francisco experienced

felony drug arrest rates 10 times higher than San Franciscans of other races, and 2.4 times higher than African Americans elsewhere in California.

- **Misdemeanor drug arrests fell by 85 percent in San Francisco from 2008-2009 to 2015-2016.**

While some of the decline in felony arrests can be attributed to the reclassification of many felony drug offenses as misdemeanors due to recent reforms, misdemeanor drug arrests also fell by 85 percent in San Francisco from 2008-09 to 2015-16, both two-year periods.

Table 1. Drug arrests in San Francisco by crime classification, 1988-89 vs. 2008-09 vs. 2015-16

	Felonies	Misdemeanors	Total
1988-89 (peak years for drug arrests)	22,500	6,700	29,200
2008-09 (peak years for racial disparities)	14,500	4,800	19,300
2015-16 (most recent years)	1,718	696	2,414

Sources: DOJ (2017); CDC (2018).

- **Steep declines in juvenile drug arrests have accompanied continuing reductions in youth crime, drug overdose deaths, and violence.**

Arrest rates of youth in San Francisco for drug felonies have declined by 94 percent in recent years, including a decline of 98 percent among African American youth. Notably, only one African American female youth was arrested in San Francisco for a drug felony in 2016 after years of deeply disproportionate drug arrest rates (CJCJ, 2015). Additionally, marijuana arrests among teenagers have declined by 80 percent since 2010. Declines in juvenile drug arrests have accompanied large, continuing declines in juvenile crime, violent deaths, traffic deaths, school dropout, teen pregnancy, and related problems among youth through 2016 (CDC, 2018).

- **Racial patterns in drug arrests still do not match racial patterns in drug use.**

Of the 839 people who died from using illicit drugs in San Francisco during the five-year, 2012-2016 period, 57 percent were non-Latino white residents, 25 percent were African American, 10 percent were Latino, and 8 percent were Asian. In contrast, 42 percent of the city’s 5,691 drug felony arrests during this period were African Americans (other races are not detailed by San Francisco police).

While San Francisco’s major declines in drug arrests show improvement, steep racial disparities in drug arrests must be addressed by law enforcement and policy leaders in order to better serve the city’s diverse communities. By investigating racial disparities and uniting local policies with fair practices, San Francisco can invest in the safety and health of its residents.

References

Armaline, W., & Males, M. (2017). San Francisco’s Drug Arrests Drop 90% through 2016; Disproportionate Arrests of African Americans Persist. *Cannabis Equity Report*, 61-82. At: http://sf-hrc.org/sites/default/files/11.19.2017_Cannabis_Equity_Report.pdf

California Department of Justice (DOJ) (2017). California Criminal Justice Profile, San Francisco County, and Statewide (annual, 1980-2009). *Criminal Justice Statistics Center*. At: <https://oag.ca.gov/cjsc/pubs> Open Justice, Arrests. At: <https://openjustice.doj.ca.gov/crime-statistics/arrests>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2018). WONDER. Underlying Cause of Death File. At: <https://wonder.cdc.gov/ucd-icd10.html>

Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice (CJCJ). (2015). San Francisco's Disproportionate Arrest of African American Women Persists. At:
http://www.cjcj.org/uploads/cjcj/documents/disproportionate_arrests_in_san_francisco.pdf

Demographic Research Unit (DRU). (2017). Population Projections. California Department of Finance. At:
<http://www.dof.ca.gov/research/demographic/reports/projections/>

Please note: Jurisdictions submit their data to the official statewide or national 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.

Contact: For more information about this topic or to schedule an interview, please contact CJCJ Communications at (415) 400-5214 or cjcjmedia@cjcj.org.