# THE PROSECUTION OF YOUTH AS ADULTS IN CALIFORNIA: A 2015 UPDATE

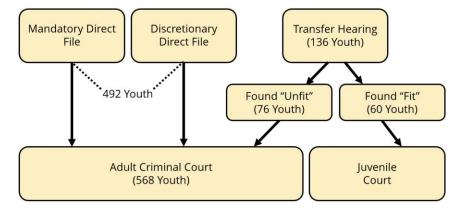
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#### Introduction

California's juvenile justice system was designed to address the unique needs of youth by prioritizing rehabilitation and education over punishment. However, over the past few decades, California laws have created new pathways into criminal court that bypass the juvenile justice system and subject young people to an adult system of justice. Initially, only a juvenile court judge had the authority to transfer youth to criminal court (AB 3121, 1976). In 2000, Proposition 21 granted prosecutors discretion to file charges against youth as young as 14 years old directly in adult criminal court in a process known as "direct file" (LAO, 2000). Only 13 other states and the District of Columbia

Figure 1: Pathways into adult criminal court in 2015



Source: DOJ, 2016b.

allow prosecutors the authority to direct file charges against youth (OJJDP, 2011). Since 2003 (when data first became available), more than 10,000 youth in California have been prosecuted as adults; 70 percent of whom were direct filed.

Figure 1 details the pathways into the criminal justice system in 2015. In a transfer hearing, a judge is required by statute to review a youth's environment, experiences with trauma, ability to rehabilitate, and role in the alleged offense, in a

process that generally takes about six months to render a decision. However, when youth are direct filed, prosecutors have limited information and typically only 48 hours to decide whether or not to charge a youth in adult court. Because of short timeframes and limited guidance, prosecutors often fail to consider a youth's life circumstances or potential for rehabilitation when making consequential charging decisions. Moreover, prosecutors are the opposing party in court proceedings against youth, creating an automatic conflict of interest in the use of direct file.

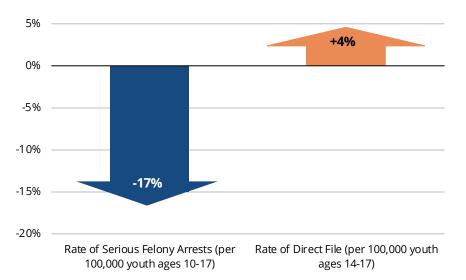
Prosecuting youth in adult criminal court undermines the mission of California's juvenile justice system and produces serious, long-term, negative consequences for young people and their communities. Youth subjected to the adult system face more severe sentences and experience significant life disruptions, including psycho-emotional trauma stemming from high-stakes criminal prosecution, making them more likely to recidivate (CDC, 2007; Redding, 2010). Moreover, the burden of direct file, and its harmful, lifelong impacts, falls most heavily on youth of color.

Earlier this year, the W. Haywood Burns Institute, the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, and the National Center for Youth Law published a report examining the use of direct file in California between 2003 and 2014, titled "The Prosecution of Youth as Adults" (Ridolfi, Washburn, & Guzman, 2016). The report found that California prosecutors were increasingly reliant on direct file, despite plummeting youth crime. Further, it found that the practice of direct file was being used at much higher rates against youth of color, with wide disparities across California's 58 counties. The report concluded that the race and location of a young person – rather than the severity of the alleged offense – determined his or her likelihood of adult prosecution.

## 2015 Update and Prospects for Reform

This report offers a one-year update to the previous study by comparing 2014 direct file statistics for each California county to those for 2015. Between 2014 and 2015, the state's per capita rate of direct file increased by 4 percent, even as the arrest rates for serious juvenile offenses¹ fell by 17 percent (Figure 2). Data from 2015 also demonstrate that direct file continues to be used unevenly across counties, with stark racial and ethnic disparities in its application (See Figure 4 and 5).

Figure 2: Change in the rates of serious juvenile felony arrest and direct file, 2014 to 2015



## **Takeaway**

The statewide rate of direct file increased from 2014 to 2015 despite a decline in the rate of serious juvenile felony arrests.

Source: DOJ, 2016a; DOJ, 2016b; Puzzanchera, 2016.

The increasing use of direct file, despite decreases in youth arrests and persistent racial disparities, illustrates the need for changes in the law. The 2016 California ballot will include Proposition 57, which would end prosecutors' ability to direct file charges against youth in adult criminal court (Prop 57, 2016). Ending this practice would return sole authority to juvenile court judges, allowing them to decide whether to transfer youth to adult court.

Though Proposition 57 seeks to shift power back into the hands of neutral judges, some prosecutors appear open to the reform. In fact, Patrick McGrath, the district attorney in Yuba County, a county with one of the highest rate of direct file, does not oppose the change in law. "The absolute reality is that we, as prosecutors, have an immense amount of power in California," said McGrath, "In some respects, I think almost everybody would agree that the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Data are not available on the number of offenses that qualify for adult court prosecution in each county, each year. Therefore, "serious juvenile felony arrests" serve as a proxy for direct file eligible offenses and include offense categories defined by the California Department of Justice (DOJ), such as homicide, forcible rape, robbery, assault, kidnapping, narcotics, dangerous drugs, lewd or lascivious acts, unlawful sexual intercourse, other sex law violations, and arson.

extent of power that we have over charging and case disposition probably really exceeds the amount of power that a judge has." To remedy this, McGrath is confident that most district attorneys in the state would readily return to the system in place prior to the adoption of direct file in 2000. "If we want to take direct-filing authority away from me, I have no problem with that" (Lantigua-Williams, 2016).

Judges are better equipped to make these decisions. This is due, in part, to the clear set of laws that exist to govern the judicial transfer process. Current California law recognizes the serious implications of sending a youth to the adult system and requires judges to first consider the circumstances of the case, including a youth's background. In addition to repealing direct file, Proposition 57 will make the judicial transfer process fairer by presuming youth should remain in juvenile court unless proven otherwise.

By returning to a system where judges, not prosecutors, make key decisions about youth in the justice system, California can promote rehabilitation while reducing the high cost of overly punitive youth incarceration as well as recidivism, thereby improving public safety.

## **Geographic Disparities**

There is substantial county variation in the use of direct file by district attorneys. Its uneven application across California's 58 counties contributes to a system of justice-by-geography in which youth face vastly different odds of adult court prosecution depending on their location. For example, in 2015, San Mateo and Riverside counties reported fairly similar rates of serious juvenile felony arrest (151.3 and 132.3 per 100,000 youth ages 10-17, respectively), yet Riverside County direct filed charges against 47 young people, while San Mateo direct filed no youth.

Direct file cases tend to be concentrated in a small number of counties. In 2015, just six counties – Orange, Riverside, Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Joaquin, and Tulare – comprised more than 50 percent of the state's 492 cases, while 20 counties refrained from direct file altogether.

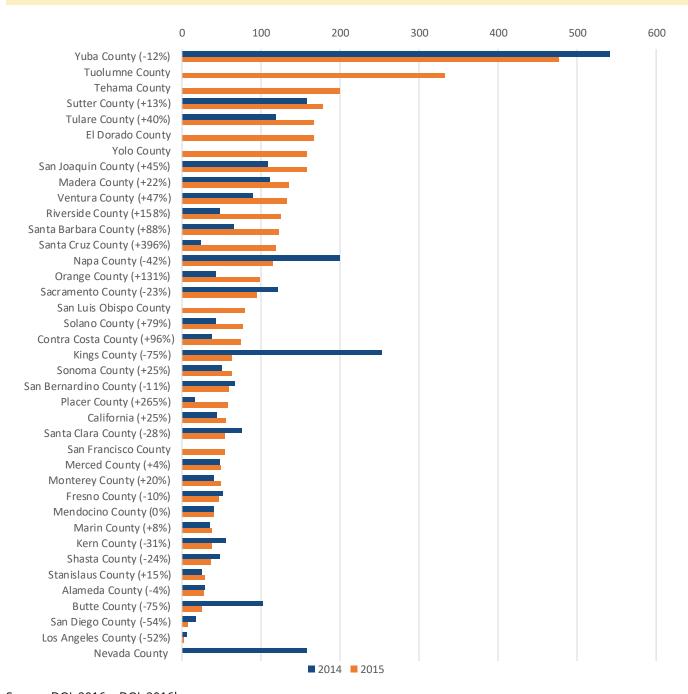
Figure 3 illustrates this variation by comparing direct file numbers across counties for 2014 and 2015 (DOJ, 2016a; DOJ, 2016b). To allow for a more direct comparison, the figure presents each county's rate of direct file per 1,000 serious juvenile felony arrests. As shown in the figure, the statewide rate of direct file per 1,000 serous juvenile felony arrests increased 25 percent between 2014 and 2015, from 44.8 to 55.9. This statewide rate increase is attributable to rising levels of direct file as well as declines in the number of serious juvenile felony arrests (Figure 2). During this period, several counties reported notably large increases or decreases in their rates of direct file. From 2014 to 2015, 24 of California's 58 counties reported rising rates of direct file per 1,000 serious felony arrests, and seven counties direct filed charges against youth in 2015 after reporting no cases in 2014.

For example, Santa Clara County, which had one of the highest rates of direct file in 2014, decreased its reliance on the practice in 2015 by reducing its rate from 75.8 youth direct filed per 1,000 serious juvenile felony arrests in 2014 to 54.9 in 2015. Likewise, Napa County reported a steep decline in its rate of direct file: in 2014, Napa County reported the third highest rate of direct file in California, with 200 youth direct filed per 1,000 serious juvenile felony arrests, but fell to 15<sup>th</sup> in the state in 2015, with a rate of 115.4. By contrast, Orange County increased its rate of direct file by more than 130 percent in 2015, from 42.9 to 98.9 youth per 1,000 serious juvenile felony arrests, while the Santa Cruz County rate increased nearly fivefold, from 24.2 to 119.4.

Figure 3: County rates of direct file per 1,000 serious juvenile felony arrests, 2014 and 2015

## **Takeaway**

Direct file rates increased in 24 counties from 2014 to 2015, and continued to vary widely by county.



Source: DOJ, 2016a; DOJ, 2016b.

Note: Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Colusa, Del Norte, Glenn, Humboldt, Imperial, Inyo, Lake, Lassen, Mariposa, Modoc, Mono, Plumas, San Benito, San Mateo, Sierra, and Siskiyou counties are excluded from Figure 3 because they reported no direct file cases in 2014 or 2015. Trinity County is excluded because its 2015 rate is an outlier that, when compared to other counties, detracts from notable rate changes. Trinity County reported one serious felony arrest in 2015 and one direct file case, which resulted in a direct file rate of 1,000 per 1,000 serious felony arrests.

## **Disparities by Race and Ethnicity**

In 2015, prosecutors were far more likely to direct file charges against youth of color than White youth. While Black and Latino youth constitute less than 60 percent of California's population ages 14-17, they were nearly 90 percent of the youth subjected to direct file prosecutions (DOJ, 2016b; Puzzanchera, 2016).

Since 2003, the gap between rates of direct file for White youth and those for Latino and Black youth has widened. After accounting for differences in population, Latino youth were 2.4 times more likely than White youth to be direct filed in 2003 but were 3.4 times more likely in 2015. Black youth were 4.5 times more likely than White youth to be direct filed in 2003, and 10.8 times more likely in 2015. The growth in this racial and ethnic disparity gap is shown in Figure 4.

Even when adjusting for the disproportionate rates at which youth of color are arrested for serious felonies, Black and Latino youth are still more likely to be direct filed than their White counterparts. In 2015, Black youth were nearly twice as likely and Latino youth were more than twice as likely as White youth to be direct filed for serious felony arrests (DOJ, 2016a; DOJ 2016b). Appendix A lists the rates of direct file by race and ethnicity per 100,000 population and Appendix B presents these rates per 1,000 serious juvenile felony arrests.

Figure 4: Disparity gap in rate of direct file per 100,000 youth ages 14-17

20	03	2015					
White 1	İ	Ť	White 1				
Latino 2.4	İİİ	İİİİ	Latino 3.4				
Black 4.5			Black 10.8				

# **Takeaway**

Latino youth were 3.4 times more likely to be direct filed than White youth, and Black youth were 10.8 times more likely to be direct filed than White youth in 2015.

Source: DOJ, 2016b; DOJ, 2016c; Puzzanchera, 2016.

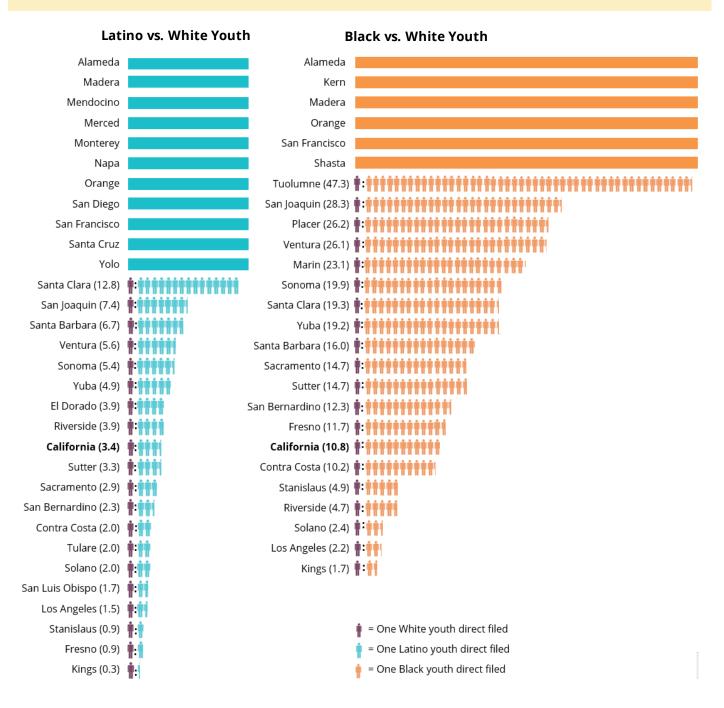
Racial and ethnic disparities in the application of direct file can be even more pronounced at the county level. For example, in San Joaquin County in 2015, Latino youth were direct filed at 7.4 times the rate per capita of White youth, and Black youth were approximately 28.3 times more likely to be subjected to direct file than White youth.

Figure 5 depicts the differing likelihood of direct file across counties for Black and Latino youth. While a disparity gap of 1.0 signifies an equally likely chance of being direct filed, a gap of greater than one indicates that direct file is disparately impacting youth of color. As shown in the figure, 25 counties direct filed charges against Black youth at higher rates per capita than White youth in 2015, while 27 counties direct filed charges against Latino youth at higher rates than White youth.

Figure 5: Disparity gap by county in the rate of direct file per 100,000 youth ages 14-17, 2015

# **Takeaway**

Many counties direct filed charges against Latino youth and Black youth at far higher rates, per capita, than White youth. Thirteen counties direct filed Black or Latino youth, but no White youth.



Source: DOJ, 2016b; Puzzanchera, 2016.

Note: In some counties, the disparity gap between White youth and youth of color could not be computed because no White youth were direct filed in 2015. Those counties are represented with solid bars.

## **Conclusion**

In 2015, direct file remained a form of justice-by-geography. The race and location of youth – rather than the seriousness of the offense – impacted the likelihood they were direct filed in adult criminal court and subjected to the adult system. The practice of direct file, and its stark racial and ethnic disparities, highlights the need for more appropriate, effective, and humane treatment of youth accused of committing serious offenses.

The increasing use of direct file to prosecute youth as adults, despite historic declines in youth crime and enduring racial disparities, illustrates the need for changes in the law. Proposition 57 would end prosecutors' ability to direct file charges against youth in adult criminal court and would give judges the sole authority to decide whether or not to transfer youth to adult court (Prop 57, 2016).

Abolishing direct file through Proposition 57 would enhance justice and safety for all Californians. Youth sentenced in the juvenile justice system are entitled to education and rehabilitative services that they are not entitled to in the adult system. Upon release, youth retained in the juvenile system are less likely to recidivate and are able to build stronger connections and benefit from economic opportunities (CDC, 2007; Redding, 2010). By returning to a system of judicial discretion, California would reduce the high cost of unnecessary and harmful long-term incarceration of youth, while improving public safety and expanding opportunities for youth to engage in school, work, family, and community.

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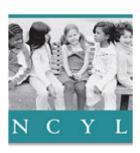
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		tal	White		rages 14	Black				
	Direct Files (DF)	ect DF rate Direct DF rate Direct DF rate   Xr		X more likely than White	Direct Files (DF)	DF rate per capita	X more likely than White			
California	492	23.9	51	8.4	124	90.1	10.8	299	28.8	3.4
Alameda County	10	13.6	0	0	7	72.3	NA	3	13.1	NA
Alpine County	0	0	0	0	0	0	NA	0	0	NA
Amador County	0	0	0	0	0	0	NA	0	0	NA
Butte County	1	9.6	1	15.1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Calaveras County	0	0	0	0	0	0	NA	0	0	NA
Colusa County	0	0	0	0	0	0	NA	0	0	NA
Contra Costa County	17	27.5	3	12.4	9	125.6	10.2	5	25.3	2.0
Del Norte County	0	0	0	0	0	0	NA	0	0	NA
El Dorado County	4	39.8	2	27.2	0	0	0	2	108.7	4.0
Fresno County Glenn County	13	21.7	2	15.2	6	177.4	11.7	5	13.6	0.9
Humboldt County	0	0	0	0	0	0	NA NA	0	0	NA NA
Imperial County	0	0	0	0	0	0	NA NA	0	0	NA NA
Inyo County	0	0	0	0	0	0	NA NA	0	0	NA NA
Kern County	8	14.5	0	0	8	251.7	NA NA	0	0	NA NA
Kings County	6	68.7	3	139.2	1	230.9	1.7	2	35.2	0.3
Lake County	0	0	0	0	0	0	NA NA	0	0	NA
Lassen County	0	0	0	0	0	0	NA	0	0	NA
Los Angeles County	7	1.3	1	1.0	1	2.2	2.2	5	1.6	1.5
Madera County	5	52.9	0	0	1	448.4	NA	4	61.0	NA
Marin County	2	16.4	1	11.9	1	275.5	23.1	0	0	0
Mariposa County	0	0	0	0	0	0	NA	0	0	NA
Mendocino County	1	23.5	0	0	0	0	NA	1	62.5	NA
Merced County	6	33.5	0	0	0	0	NA	6	49.3	NA
Modoc County	0	0	0	0	0	0	NA	0	0	NA
Mono County	0	0	0	0	0	0	NA	0	0	NA
Monterey County	5	21.4	0	0	0	0	NA	5	29.7	NA
Napa County	3	40.9	0	0	0	0	NA	2	57.3	NA
Nevada County	0	0	0	0	0	0	NA NA	0	0	NA NA
Orange County Placer County	45 3	26.7 14.3	1	0 6.8	1	30.4 179.5	NA 26.2	41 0	54.4	NA 0
Plumas County	0	0	0	0.8	0	0	NA	0	0	NA NA
Riverside County	47	32.4	4	10.3	5	48.7	4.7	35	40.4	3.9
Sacramento County	37	46.1	4	13.0	21	190.8	14.7	9	37.7	2.9
San Benito County	0	0	0	0	0	0	NA	0	0	NA
San Bernardino County	52	39.6	4	14.0	21	171.4	12.3	27	32.8	2.3
San Diego County	5	3.2	0	0	0	0	NA	3	4.2	NA
San Francisco County	5	22.5	0	0	1	52.9	NA	3	61.2	NA
San Joaquin County	50	108.4	2	16.9	19	479.6	28.3	29	125.9	7.4
San Luis Obispo County	2	17.2	1	14.7	0	0	NA	1	24.3	1.7
San Mateo County	0	0	0	0	0	0	NA	0	0	NA
Santa Barbara County	15	69.7	1	14.7	1	234.7	16.0	13	98.8	6.7
Santa Clara County	20	21.5	1	3.8	2	73.8	19.3	16	48.8	12.8
Santa Cruz County	8	65.3	0	0	0	0	NA NA	8	139.8	NA
Shasta County	1	11.1	0	0	1	383.1	NA NA	0	0	NA NA
Sierra County Siskiyou County	0	0	0	0	0	0	NA NA	0	0	NA NA
Solano County	14	61.3	3	0	4	102.1	NA 2.4	7	96.2	NA 2.0
Sonoma County	6	25.2	1	43.1 8.0	1	159.7	19.9	4	86.2 43.0	5.4
Stanislaus County	6	18.2	2	18.0	1	87.1	4.9	3	16.4	0.9
Sutter County	5	86.4	1	41.5	1	609.8	14.7	3	135.5	3.3
Tehama County	3	86.6	3	145.4	0	0	0	0	0	0
Trinity County	1	200.4	1	258.4	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tulare County	24	77.1	3	45.6	0	0	0	21	91.6	2.0
<b>Tuolumne County</b>	3	136.6	1	58.8	1	2777.8	47.3	0	0	0
Ventura County	22	46.6	2	11.0	3	285.4	26.1	15	61.6	5.6
Yolo County	9	87.4	0	0	0	0	NA	9	201.0	NA
Yuba County	21	498.0	3	152.0	6	2912.6	19.2	12	751.9	4.9

Appendix B: 2015 Direct Files Rates (per 1,000 Serious Juvenile Felony Arrests)

		Total			White			Black			Latino				
	Serious	Direct	DF Rate	Serious	Direct	DF Rate	Serious	Direct	DF Rate	X more	Serious	Direct	DF Rate	X more	
	Felony	Files	per	Felony	Files	per	Felony	Files	per	likely	Felony	Files	per	likely	
	Arrests	(DF)	arrest	Arrests	(DF)	arrest	Arrests	(DF)	arrest	than	Arrests	(DF)	arrest	than	
- II.										White				White	
California	8,806	492	55.9	1,617	<b>51</b>	<b>31.5</b> 0	2,435	<b>124</b>	50.9	1.6	4,319	299	69.2	2.2	
Alameda County	356 0	10 0	28.1 NA	34 0	0	0	206 0	0	34.0 0	NA NA	91 0	3	33.0 0	NA NA	
Alpine County  Amador County	3	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	NA NA	2	0	0	NA NA	
Butte County	39	1	25.6	25	1	40	5	0	0	0	9	0	0	0	
Calaveras County	11	0	0	7	0	0	0	0	0	NA	4	0	0	NA	
Colusa County	6	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	NA	3	0	0	NA	
Contra Costa County	229	17	74.2	43	3	69.8	112	9	80.4	1.2	57	5	87.7	1.3	
Del Norte County	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	NA	0	0	0	NA	
El Dorado County	24	4	166.7	18	2	111.1	2	0	0	0	4	2	500	4.5	
Fresno County	276	13	47.1	23	2	87.0	70	6	85.7	1.0	175	5	28.6	0.3	
Glenn County	8	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	NA	3	0	0	NA	
Humboldt County	20	0	0	17	0	0	1	0	0	NA	1	0	0	NA	
Imperial County	34	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	NA	31	0	0	NA	
Inyo County	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	NA	0	0	0	NA	
Kern County	210	8	38.1	44	0	0	65	8	123.1	NA	97	0	0	NA	
Kings County	94	6	63.8	25	3	120	14	1	71.4	0.6	53	2	37.7	0.3	
Lake County	16	0	0	9	0	0	1	0	0	NA	3	0	0	NA	
Lassen County	7	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	NA	1	0	0	NA .	
Los Angeles County	2214	7	3.2	177	1	5.6	788	1	1.3	0.2	1192	5	4.2	0.7	
Madera County	37	5	135.1	9	0	0	5	1	200	NA 2.0	23	4	173.9	NA	
Marin County	52	2	38.5	23 0	1	43.5 0	8	1	125.0	2.9	19	0	0	0	
Mariposa County	0 25	0	NA 40	12	0	0	3	0	0	NA NA	0 6	0	0 166.7	NA NA	
Mendocino County  Merced County	121	6	49.6	19	0	0	10	0	0	NA NA	89	6	67.4	NA NA	
Modoc County	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	NA NA	0	0	0	NA NA	
Mono County	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	NA	0	0	0	NA NA	
Monterey County	102	5	49.0	12	0	0	10	0	0	NA	79	5	63.3	NA	
Napa County	26	3	115.4	8	0	0	2	0	0	NA	14	2	142.9	NA	
Nevada County	24	0	0	17	0	0	3	0	0	NA	3	0	0	NA	
Orange County	455	45	98.9	80	0	0	18	1	55.6	NA	312	41	131.4	NA	
Placer County	51	3	58.8	29	1	34.5	4	1	250	7.3	17	0	0	0	
Plumas County	3	0	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	NA	0	0	0	NA	
Riverside County	376	47	125.0	75	4	53.3	92	5	54.3	1.0	193	35	181.3	3.4	
Sacramento County	391	37	94.6	75	4	53.3	209	21	100.5	1.9	87	9	103.4	1.9	
San Benito County	31	0	0	9	0	0	1	0	0	NA	21	0	0	NA	
San Bernardino County	865	52	60.1	168	4	23.8	295	21	71.2	3.0	378	27	71.4	3.0	
San Diego County	623	5	8.0	140	0	0	129	0	0	NA	309	3	9.7	NA	
San Francisco County	92	5	54.3	12	0	0	57	1	17.5	NA C.C	0	3	0	NA 7.2	
San Joaquin County San Luis Obispo County	317 25	50 2	157.7 80	67 15	2	29.9 66.7	96 1	19 0	197.9 0	6.6 0	134 9	29 1	216.4 111.1	7.3 1.7	
San Mateo County	107	0	0	20	0	00.7	13	0	0	NA NA	55	0	0	NA	
Santa Barbara County	122	15	123.0	25	1	40	7	1	142.9	3.6	85	13	152.9	3.8	
Santa Clara County	364	20	54.9	59	1	16.9	31	2	64.5	3.8	233	16	68.7	4.1	
Santa Cruz County	67	8	119.4	17	0	0	3	0	0	NA	45	8	177.8	NA	
Shasta County	27	1	37.0	20	0	0	4	1	250	NA	1	0	0	NA	
Sierra County	0	0	NA	0	0	0	0	0	0	NA	0	0	0	NA	
Siskiyou County	5	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	NA	0	0	0	NA	
Solano County	181	14	77.3	44	3	68.2	75	4	53.3	0.8	53	7	132.1	1.9	
Sonoma County	95	6	63.2	32	1	31.3	11	1	90.9	2.9	44	4	90.9	2.9	
Stanislaus County	206	6	29.1	46	2	43.5	36	1	27.8	0.6	114	3	26.3	0.6	
Sutter County	28	5	178.6	10	1	100	6	1	166.7	1.7	12	3	250	2.5	
Tehama County	15	3	200	12	3	250	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	
Trinity County	1	1	1000	1	1	1000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Tulare County	144	24	166.7	32	3	93.8	9	0	0	0	101	21	207.9	2.2	
Tuolumne County	9	3	333.3	7	1	142.9	1	1	1000	7.0	1	0	0	0	
Ventura County	166	22	132.5	39	2	51.3	12	3	250	4.9	111	15	135.1	2.6	
Yolo County	57	9	157.9	15	0	120.4	8	0	0	NA 4.6	33	9	272.7	NA 0.2	
Yuba County	44	21	477.3	23	3	130.4	10	6	600	4.6	10	12	1200	9.2	