

The Continued Criminalization of Black Youth: California Juvenile Arrest Rates, 2000–2024

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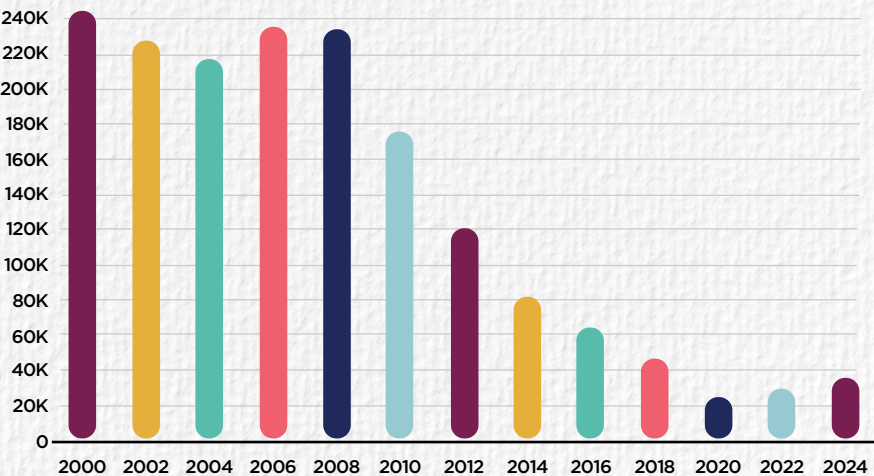
For decades, many communities across the United States have responded to social problems created by poverty, disinvestment, and early childhood trauma through punitive approaches that include increased surveillance, aggressive policing, and incarcerating young people. These strategies can have profound, long-term negative effects on education, employment, and health outcomes (Barnert et al. 2018; Raphael and Stoll 2009), as well as increase the odds of future entanglements with the criminal justice system (Mendel 2023). In practice, the criminalization of young people has disproportionately harmed Black youth, reflecting broader patterns of racial inequity and highlighting the urgent need for alternative approaches that prioritize opportunity, support, and prevention over punishment.

Policymakers in California made significant progress in reducing juvenile arrests over recent decades. Arrests of people under the age of 18 in the state plunged from a high of nearly 237,000 arrests in 2007 to 19,355 in 2021—a 92 percent drop (fig. 1). These figures demonstrate that substantial reductions in youth arrests are achievable. Moreover, research suggests that substantial declines in youth incarceration do not result in upticks in crime (Mendel 2023).

After falling significantly in the 2010s, youth arrests are on the rise again

Figure 1.

Total arrests of individuals under 18 years old in California, 2000–2024



Source: California Department of Justice Open Justice Data Portal • Created with Datawrapper

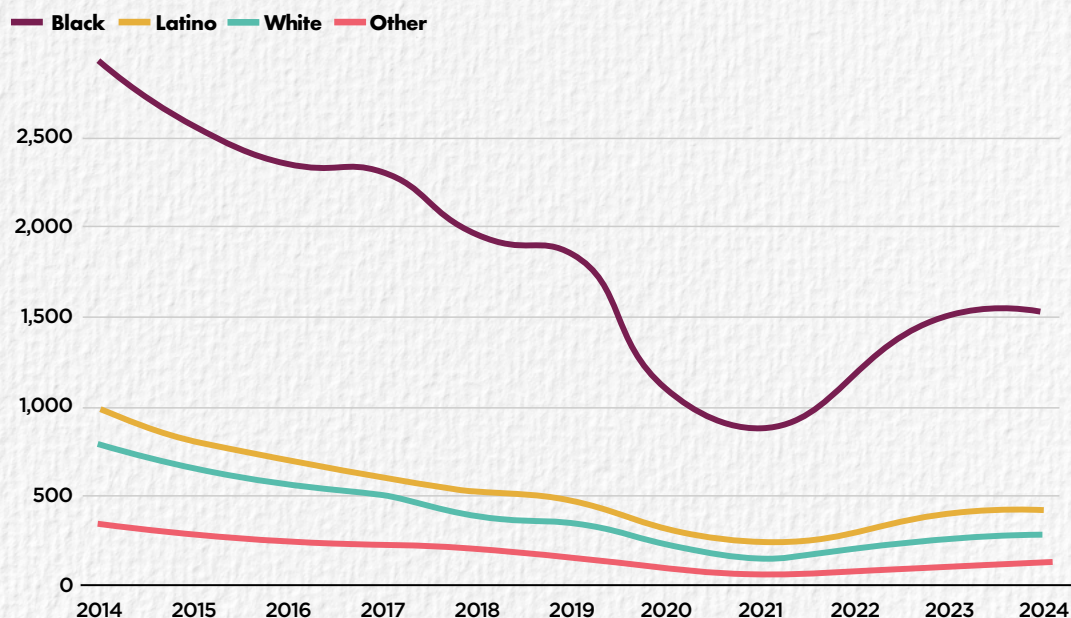
However, despite this noteworthy decrease, California still arrests thousands of young people each year. Even more troubling, arrests of minors under the age of 18 have risen since their pandemic-era low in 2021. The state made nearly 33,000 juvenile arrests in 2024, up 70 percent from 19,355 in 2021. Each of these arrests has the potential to disrupt education, strain families, and undermine young people's future and well-being. This concerning uptick underscores the urgent need for California policymakers to recommit to earlier approaches that keep children and adolescents out of the formal justice system.

California's arrest rates also reflect historic racial inequalities and the ongoing, disproportionate targeting and policing of Black youth nationally (Alexander 2012; Hinton and Cook 2021). Black young people make up only 5 percent of California's population under the age of 18, but their arrest rates have climbed significantly. From the pandemic-era low of 859 in 2021, the Black youth arrest rate (per 100,000 young people) increased by 78 percent to 1,527 in 2024 (fig.2). Moreover, the Black youth arrest rate was over five times the white youth arrest rate, up from three times as high in 2010. This widening gap shows that racial disparities in arrest rates have grown even while overall arrests have declined. Nationally, these disparities are found at every stage of the youth justice system: white youth are more likely to be diverted from formal processing, while Black youth are more likely to be detained and incarcerated (Rovner 2025). These alarming inequalities point to the need to address racial profiling and the uneven consequences of being arrested, as well as to expand opportunities for Black youth more broadly.

Black youth under the age of 18 face the highest arrest rates and sharpest post-pandemic growth

Juvenile arrest rates per 100,000 young people by race in California, 2014-2024

Figure 2.



Source: California Department of Justice Open Justice Data Portal and the American Community Survey

While Black youth face the highest arrest rates (relative to their share of the population), most youth arrests in California are of Latinos, who compose 52 percent of the state's population under age 18. In 2024, 18,500 out of 33,000 total arrests, or roughly 56 percent, were of Latino youth. Moreover, from 2021 to 2024, the Latino youth arrest rate rose 86 percent, from 223 to 416. Latino youth are also arrested at one-and-a-half times the rate of white youth. Meanwhile, white youth experienced the largest declines in arrests and the smallest increases following their pandemic-era lows.

Amid these disparities, there are glimmers of hope. California has demonstrated that significant reductions in youth criminalization are both possible and compatible with public safety. The recent rise in arrests, coupled with the stark racial disparities they reveal, should serve as a warning rather than dismissed as inevitable. Moving forward, policymakers must renew their commitment to reduce unnecessary law enforcement contact, eliminate racially-biased practices, and prioritize interventions that foster healthy youth development. Shifting investments away from police and jails and toward education, housing, and youth employment programs can help ensure that all young people reach their potential while also making communities safer in the long run (Beck 2025).



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Ángel Mendiola Ross received their PhD in sociology from the University of California, Berkeley, and is a Provostial Fellow in the Department of Sociology at Stanford University. Born and raised in Southern California's Inland Empire, their research examines racial-spatial inequality and geographies of punishment across urban and suburban communities.



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