

Research Brief

California Youth Crime Plunges to All-Time Low

By  
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Introduction

New figures for 2011 released by the California Department of Justice’s Criminal Justice Statistics Center (CJSC, 2012) show arrests of youths under age 18 fell by 20% from 2010 to 2011, reaching their lowest level since statewide statistics were first compiled in 1954. While there are many theories regarding reasons for crime trends, none have been sufficient to explain the significant decreases in California’s youth crime over the past 60 years. This publication explores the most recent data in the context of these historic trends, and examines possible explanations for the youth crime decline.

California’s youth crime decline in detail

All categories of crime fell substantially among youths in 2011. Felony arrests were down 17%, both violent and property felonies were down 16%, misdemeanor and status offenses were down 21%, and homicide was down 26% (see table 1). These data demonstrate today’s young people are less likely to be involved with the criminal justice system than any generation in at least the last 60 years.

Table 1. Arrests per 100,000 California youths age 10-17 by offense category and decade, 1955-2011.

Decade	All	Felonies	Violent	Homicide	Rape	Property	Drugs	Misdemeanor/ Status
1950s	8,741.4	1,557.3	179.4	3.8	17.8	1,321.0	n/a	7,184.1
1960s	10,859.7	2,146.8	215.1	5.7	14.3	1,579.9	988.7	8,712.9
1970s	10,898.5	3,475.7	472.9	9.8	19.3	2,094.4	1,050.6	7,422.7
1980s	7,759.4	2,608.7	449.5	12.3	18.4	1,648.2	678.2	5,150.7
1990s	7,155.3	2,395.8	585.3	13.8	14.0	1,297.0	558.5	4,759.4
2000s	5,293.5	1,455.1	383.4	4.6	6.6	612.9	523.3	3,838.4
2010	4,357.4	1,219.6	309.5	4.2	4.5	459.8	546.1	3,137.9
2011	3,483.1	1,010.8	259.9	3.1	4.0	388.2	288.7	2,472.3
<b>Change in arrest rate, 2011 versus:</b>								
1950s	-60%	-35%	45%	-17%	-77%	-71%	n/a	-66%
1970s	-68%	-71%	-45%	-68%	-79%	-81%	-73%	-67%
1990s	-51%	-58%	-56%	-77%	-71%	-70%	-48%	-48%
2010	-20%	-17%	-16%	-26%	-10%	-16%	-47%	-21%

Source: CJSC, 2012, 2012a, 2011; Department of Finance, 2012.

The trend was led by a 47% decrease in drug offense arrests from 2010. The largest contributor to this decrease was a drop of 9,000 in youths’ low-level marijuana possession arrests under a new state law reducing that offense from a misdemeanor to an infraction (see table 2). However, other drug offenses showed considerable decreases as well.

**Table 2. Youth drug offense arrests, 2011 versus 2010.**

<u>Drug offense</u>	<u>2010</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>Change</u>
Marijuana possession	14,991	5,831	-61%
Other drug possession	2,106	1,770	-16%
Marijuana felonies	2,206	1,952	-12%
Narcotics felonies	1,363	1,174	-14%
Other drug felonies	2,628	1,671	-36%

Source: CJSC, 2012, 2012a, 2011.

In the 1950s, youth arrests equivalent to 8.7% of California’s total youth population were recorded; today, that figure is 3.4%. Youth crime declines have been more substantial since the 1970s. Total arrests, felonies, rape, homicide, property crime, and misdemeanor/status offense rates now stand at the lowest levels ever reliably tabulated. Only robbery and assault rates are higher today than 60 years ago, though still lower today than at any time since 1967.

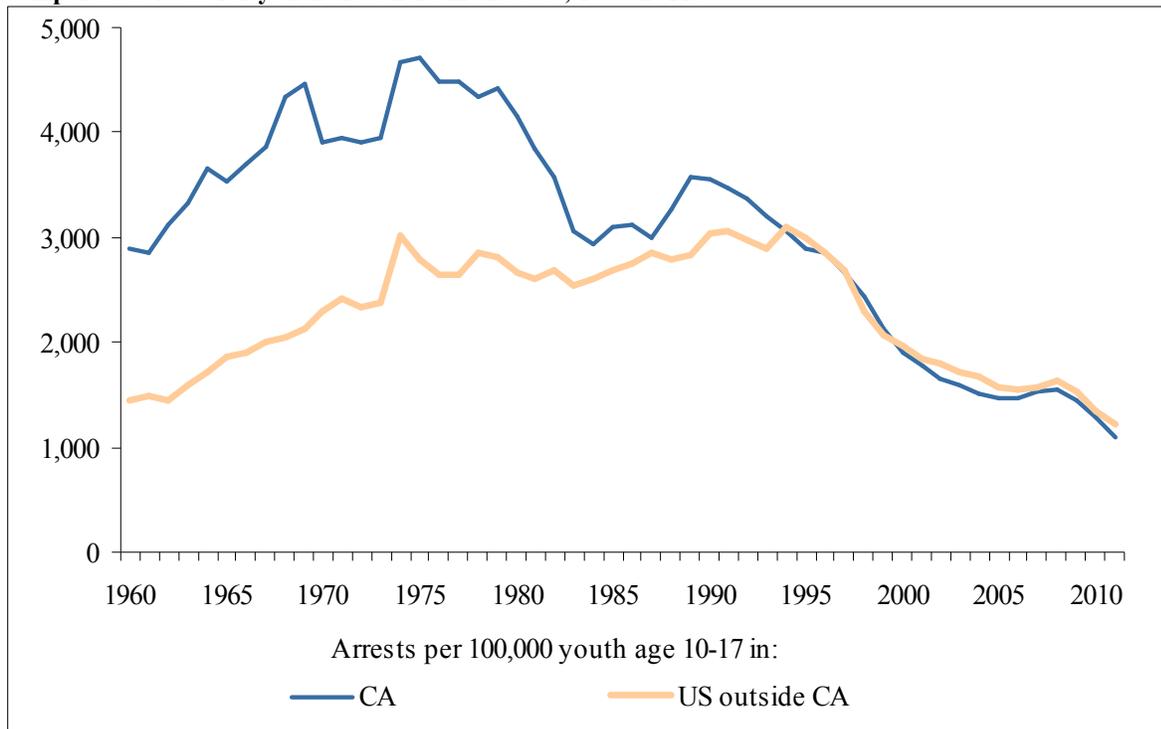
However, these numbers may understate the youth crime decline. Many youth offenses may have been hidden in the past, due to historic data collection limitations. An average of 90,000 arrests per year in the 1950s, were reported as “delinquent tendencies,” a broad category that included various violent, property, drug, and status offenses. In contrast, only 22,000 juvenile arrests were classified as status offenses in 2011; all other arrests were reported as specific criminal offenses.<sup>1</sup>

Even given the less detailed reporting available before 1975, when youth offense reporting became more specific in terms of crime, race, gender, and age of arrestee and other details, it is clear that today’s youth are much less involved in the criminal justice system than their counterparts of the past 60 years. The data demonstrate this is true from the most trivial offenses (such as status or low-level theft) to the most serious (murder and rape).

*California versus the rest of the nation.* California’s rates of serious youth crime and incarceration have fallen faster over the last 40 years than the nation’s rates, though national statistics are less complete (see figure 1). Prior to the 1990s, California’s youth were considerably more likely to be arrested than youth elsewhere in the country; now the rates are comparable. The drop in youth offending parallels a larger 50% decline in the numbers of crimes reported to law enforcement in California over the last 20 years.

<sup>1</sup> Status offenses include curfew violations, truancy, incorrigibility, etc., and apply only to youth.

**Figure 1. California youth arrest rates for Part I (serious violent and property crimes) compared to rates for youth elsewhere in the U.S., 1960-2011.**



Sources: CJSC, 2012, 2012a, 2011; Department of Finance, 2012; FBI, 2012; Census Bureau, 2012.

*Changes by race and gender.* Figures 2a and 2b, which use violent crime as an example, show that for both sexes and all races separately, California youth arrest rates are at their lowest level recorded since these breakdowns became available in 1975. Earlier statistics are less complete, but a 1960 report shows higher rates of homicide arrests for both male and female youth in California that year than in 2011.

Compared to the 1975-79 period, the annual average rates for murder, violent crime, and all felonies have fallen sharply among youth, including large drops for both sexes and all races (see table 3). The lesser decline in female youth violence arrest rates is largely due to several law changes in the 1979-88 period directing police agencies to establish written domestic violence policies and mandating arrests in more domestic violence cases.<sup>2</sup> While the large increases for domestic assault and related offenses overwhelmingly involved male offenders, the new laws affected female arrests disproportionately because a higher proportion of female assault arrests are for domestic, not public, violence.

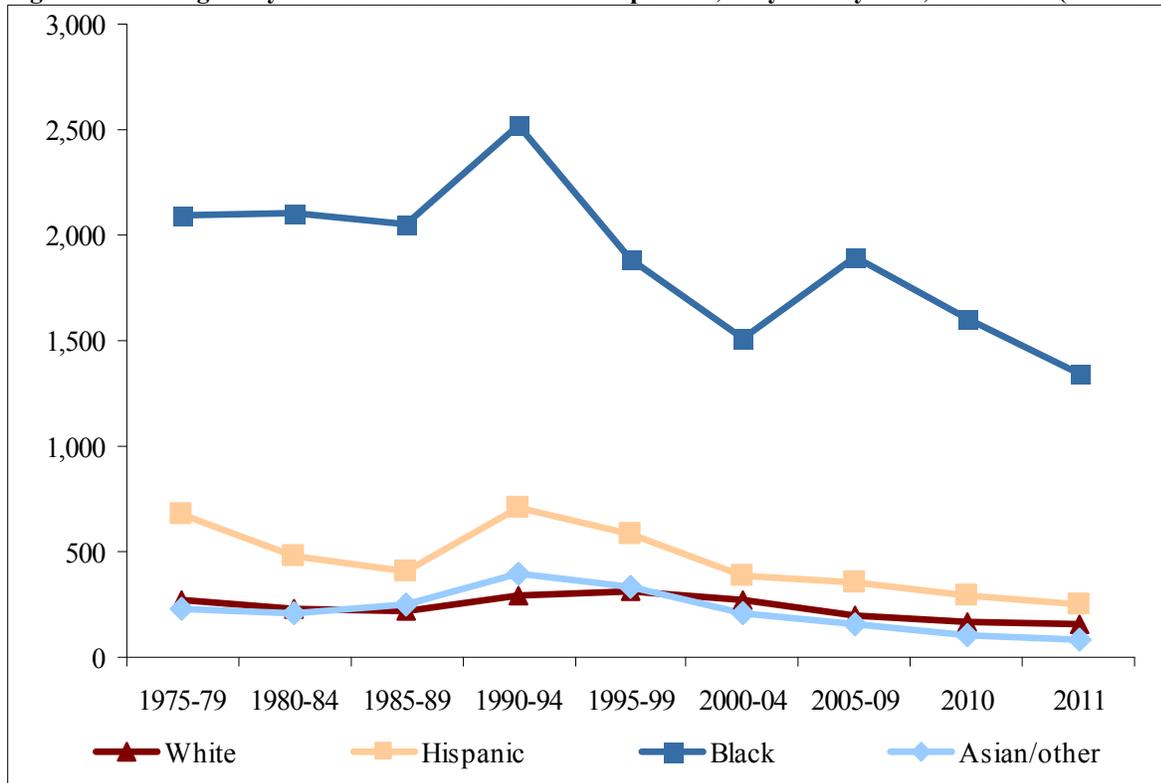
**Table 3. Change in arrest rates by gender, race/ethnicity, 2011 vs. 1970s.**

	<u>All felonies</u>	<u>Violent crime</u>	<u>Homicide</u>
All youth	-71%	-51%	-71%
Male	-73%	-55%	-71%
Female	-51%	-19%	-83%
White	-74%	-43%	-72%
Latino	-68%	-63%	-85%
African American	-56%	-36%	-57%
Asian	-74%	-65%	-47%

Source: CJSC, 2012, 2012a, 2011; Department of Finance, 2012.

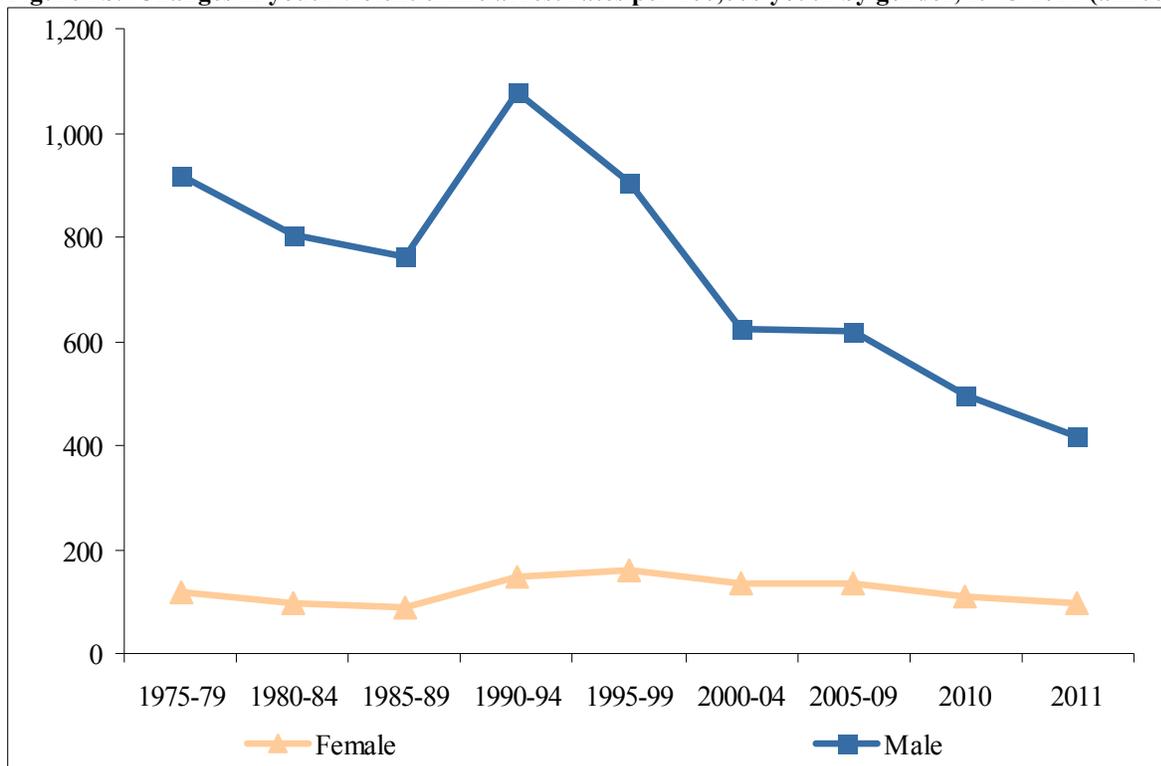
<sup>2</sup> See Senate Bill (SB) 1472 (1984), Assembly Bill (AB) 546 (1979), and SB 1058 (1985).

**Figure 2a. Changes in youth violent crime arrest rates per 100,000 youth by race, 1975-2011 (annual avg.)**



Sources: CJSC, 2012, 2012a, 2011; Department of Finance, 2012.

**Figure 2b. Changes in youth violent crime arrest rates per 100,000 youth by gender, 1975-2011 (annual avg.)**



Sources: CJSC, 2012; Department of Finance, 2012; FBI, 2012; Census Bureau, 2012.

## Why has California's youth crime fallen so dramatically?

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The declines in youth arrests from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, and from 1990 through 2011 remain difficult to explain by conventional theory. *The question is whether youth crime actually fell, only appears to have fallen, or fell because of factors unrelated to changes in behavior. These factors are examined below.*

### ***1. Factors that are insufficient to explain California's youth crime decline***

*Structural explanations.* Structural changes, such as changes in statistics gathering, police tactics, and laws, affect arrest totals independently of actual changes in offending. If law enforcement agencies are arresting more or fewer people per actual offense, crime statistics can change without actual changes in offending.

However, more complete statistical reporting and more efficient law enforcement procedures over the last six decades should have increased, not decreased, arrests. California's decline in youth crime is not influenced by incomplete reporting. In 2011, the CJSC confirmed, all 58 counties reported arrest totals, and numbers are comparable to those of previous years. Nor do changes in laws and policing sufficiently explain the youth crime decrease.

There have been two structural changes relating to reclassification of marijuana, discussed in the next section, that influenced youth arrest numbers. However, these marijuana reforms were offset by the expanded definitions of other offenses, including domestic violence under a series of legislative reforms beginning in the 1980s (discussed earlier) that led to many thousands more arrests of offenders in cases that were formerly policed much less vigorously or not at all. Similarly, the definition of rape has expanded to include same-sex, marital, and cases involving victim intoxication.<sup>3</sup> Other offense definitions were similarly broadened during the 1980s and 1990s. Taken as a whole, structural factors do not explain the large decline in youth crime.

*Demographic explanations.* Demographic change can affect overall crime rates without changing behaviors. California's youth population has grown rapidly by 3 million since 1950, and by 1 million since 1990. California's youth population also has transitioned from 80% non-Latino white in the 1950s to 73% nonwhite<sup>4</sup> today (Department of Finance, 2012). While modern authorities do not attribute criminality to any particular race or ethnicity, it is clear that California arrest rates are historically higher for Latino and African American populations than for non-Latino whites. Given these trends, the state's large demographic changes over the last 60 years should have predicted somewhat higher, not lower, youth arrest rates.

*"Get tough" policy explanations.* According to conservative "get tough" proponents, stronger policing, longer sentences, and more use of incarceration should translate into lower crime rates due both to the removal of offenders from society and the deterrent effect on potential offenders.

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<sup>3</sup> See California Penal Code 261(a)(2), amended by Stats.1979, c.994, p.3384, § 1; PC 262, added by Stats.1979, c.994, p.3384, § 2; PC 261(a)(3)), amended by Stats.1993-94, 1st Ex.Sess., c. 40 (AB 85).

<sup>4</sup> Includes Latino, Asian, African American, Native, and other or mixed-race/ethnicity.

In fact, California has done the opposite. Youth today are not more intensively policed. Arrests for youth-targeted status offenses such as curfews, truancy, incorrigibility, and running away have fallen to record lows. Arrests for curfew violations, in particular, have fallen from over 20,000 per year in the late 1990s to 8,441 in 2011. In 2011, arrests of youths for the largest single drug category, marijuana, fell by 9,000 to a level not seen since before the 1980s implementation of the “war on drugs.”

Further, significantly fewer youths are confined in state or local juvenile facilities today than in the past. In 1960, 227 of every 100,000 youths age 10-17 were held in California Youth Authority<sup>5</sup> detention, a proportion that fluctuated but reached a peak of 263 per 100,000 in 1995. As of September 2012, that figure has been reduced to 21 per 100,000—a decline of 92% over the last 17 years. Nor are more youth held in local juvenile halls, camps, and other confinements. In the mid-1990s, approximately 11,000 youths were in local juvenile detention facilities on any given day. As of December 2011, that number had fallen to under 7,500.

Combining state and local detention facilities, around 20,000 youth were confined in the mid-1990s, compared to around 8,500 now—a decline in overall youth confinement of 43% even as the youth population grew by over half a million. There are around 12,000 fewer youths in detention today than 15-20 years ago, a decline of 60% in number and 65% in population-adjusted rate. Yet, contrary to theory, youth crime declined during the period more rapidly than ever before.

*Family and community explanations.* Theories relating to the crime generating (or deterrent) nature of personal associations, family influences, and community norms also seem inadequate to explain the large reduction in youth crime.

California’s middle-aged population—those in their 40s and 50s, the age generally parenting teenagers—has experienced large increases in drug abuse and criminal arrest over the period. From 1995 to 2010, felony arrests of Californians ages 40-59 increased from 70,000 to 103,000. Today’s young people experience a parent generation that suffers considerably more drug abuse, arrest, and imprisonment than past generations did.

Given more crime among parent-aged adults in families and communities, an increase in youth crime would be predicted. However, during this same period, youth felony arrests decreased from 85,000 to 43,000. Note that 15 years ago, youths accounted for more than twice as many serious crimes as middle-agers age 40-59; today, fewer than half as many. This may represent one of the largest and most rapid shifts in the age structure of crime ever documented.

*Cultural explanations.* California’s youth crime decline also challenges theories based on cultural factors such as media influences. Trends toward more wide-open, pervasive, interactive, and explicit media (television, music, movies, magazines, games, the Internet), especially since 1990, have accompanied large declines in crime reported to police, youth and young adult violence and arrests, and self-reported criminal victimization.

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<sup>5</sup> The 2005 reorganization of the California Youth Authority and Adult Correctional Agencies into the CDCR created the Division of Juvenile Facilities (DJF). The DJF is commonly referred to as the Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ).

In particular, the number of California youths arrested for rape—an offense thought to be particularly influenced by cultural factors—has fallen from a peak of 600 per year in the 1970s to a low of 173 in 2011. Other sex offenses such as sexual assault and lewd conduct also show large declines even as the youth population grew rapidly.

## ***2. Factors that may contribute to California's youth crime decline***

*Marijuana law reforms.* Effective in 1976, SB 95 downgraded low-level possession (less than one ounce) of marijuana from a felony to a misdemeanor, and effective on January 1, 2011, SB 1449 reduced most simple marijuana possessions to an infraction involving a mere citation rather than criminal arrest. The 1976 reform simply transferred a few thousand marijuana arrests from felonies to misdemeanors, affecting these categories but not overall or drug arrest totals. The 2011 reform did reduce youth marijuana possession arrests by 61% in one year, from nearly 15,000 in 2010 to 5,800 in 2011, reducing overall drug and total arrests in tandem.

*Socioeconomic explanations.* Given the close connection between poverty level and arrest rates, the improvement in the economic well being among the state's youth might have contributed to their crime decline over the last 15-20 years. Overall, California youths' economic standing has changed little since 1990, though youth today are poorer than those of 40-50 years ago. In 1970, 12.5% of California's children and adolescents under age 18 grew up in families with incomes below federal poverty guidelines; in 1990, 18%; in 2000, 19%, and in 2010, 18% (United States Census Bureau, 2012; KidsCount, 2012).

However, the highest violence rates by far involve youth living in communities where poverty is concentrated. Over the last decade, the percentage of youths residing in communities where 30% or more of the residents are impoverished fell by 9% in California even as it increased by 29% in other states (KidsCount, 2012).

Recent economic improvements—or, more importantly, the kinds of positive changes in high-poverty communities that accompany improvements in youths' economic well-being—might well be associated with reductions in youths' crime and violence. Still, recent economic gains would not explain why youth crime rates today are much lower than in 1970.

Given these trends—a much larger, more racially diverse youth population subjected to decreased policing (especially for marijuana) and greatly decreased incarceration, more troubled adult influences, high poverty levels, and more explicit popular culture—normally would lead authorities across the spectrum to predict high and increasing rates of youth crime. Indeed, such predictions of a coming youth crime wave have repeatedly been made over the last two decades (for a typical example, see Fox & Piquero, 2003), and repeatedly proven wrong. Only the marijuana law change and recent improvements in young people's economic standing, both of which are fairly modest, would appear to offer partial explanations for the dramatic drop in youth arrests.

## Conclusion

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California's youth crime trends continue to demonstrate the need for wholesale revision in theories and policies regarding crime. First, they show that contrary to conventional notions, more youth and increasing racial and ethnic diversity do not lead to more crime. In fact, the state's largest, most diverse youth population has the lowest level of both major and minor offenses ever reliably tabulated.

Second, they show that deincarceration of youth does not generate more crime. The simultaneous declines in youth crime and youth incarceration have been followed by similarly large decreases in the numbers of youths supervised by parole and probation departments. The number of youths on state parole has fallen by 92% over the last two decades, from 6,100 in 1993 to 500 as of August 2012. This number will fall to zero by July 2014, when AB 1628 (2010) policies transferring responsibility for state youth parolees to county probation departments are fully implemented. Local probation statistics are harder to determine, but numbers have fallen from around 2,650 youth in 2005 to 1,900 in 2010.

Third, and similarly, crime trends show that police emphasis on targeting young people is not necessary to reduce crime; in fact, levels of curfew and other status offenses have also fallen to record lows. While studies generally disconfirm that "get-tough" policies are effective in reducing crime, they clearly are not factors in the recent youth crime drop.

Finally, the decrease in annual youth arrests of more than 100,000 from the mid-1990s to 2011 has sharply reduced costs for all phases of California's criminal justice system, releasing resources for other priorities. These savings include 12,000 fewer youth incarcerations, at least 5,000 fewer youths supervised by parole or probation departments, and unknown but unquestionably large reductions in the total numbers of youth being processed by law enforcement, court, treatment, and other pre- and post-adjudication agencies on any given day. Even if only incarcerations are considered under conservative cost estimates (\$100,000 per incarcerated youth per year), the youth crime decline has brought annual savings of at least \$1 billion; when all phases of the system are considered, savings to public agencies would total significantly more.

The only two factors definitively associated with (or, at least, positively accompanying) the dramatic decline in youth arrests are the relaxing of marijuana possession laws and the improvement in economic well-being among young people in the state's poorest neighborhoods. Cost savings resulting from the decrease in youth crime could be reinvested into enhanced education and employment opportunities for California's young people to build on these trends. Even though today's young people are subjected to a variety of conditions that, theoretically at least, would predict more crime than among youth of 20 to 60 years ago, they are engaging in less offending for reasons evidently tied to their own characteristics and times.

For now, the trends seem best described as "generational." Clearly, more—and more realistic—research and policy attention is needed to investigate this remarkable trend, beginning with rethinking the often emotional and increasingly unfounded rhetoric now used to characterize young people, violence, and crime.

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