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**Title**

Trends in Misdemeanor Arrests in Los Angeles: 2001 - 2017

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# Trends in Misdemeanor Arrests in Los Angeles: 2001 - 2017

**Michael Lens, Michael A. Stoll, Yiwen Kuai • 2019**

## Highlights

» Overall, misdemeanor arrest rates dropped over the 16-year period, with rates falling dramatically for juveniles, while other demographic groups, like black females, saw increases.

» Mirroring a declining arrest rate, the City Attorney's caseloads dropped by 60 percent at their peak year in 2008.

» At the beginning of the 2000s, 16- to 17-year-olds had the highest misdemeanor arrest rates by age group, and by 2017 they were the age group with the lowest arrest rates.

» Racial disparities persist in arrests. The rate for African Americans was 4.5 times higher than their white counterparts in 2017.

» Many of the arrest trends in Los Angeles are mirrored in other parts of California, including Alameda, San Diego, and San Francisco counties.

This brief examines an understudied occurence in the criminal justice system with wide-ranging implications: misdemeanor arrests and convictions.

While misdemeanor offenses inherently create less harm to life, body, and property than their felony counterparts, misdemeanors tend to be far more common and thus occupy much of the time and energy of police and prosecutorial agencies.

By examining population-adjusted trends over time, we present findings on arrest rates by population, charge type and disposition.

*Trends in Misdemeanor Arrests in Los Angeles* is a report published by UCLA as part of its participation in the Research Network on Misdemeanor Justice, a project of the Data

Collaborative for Justice at John Jay College. The Research Network is a coalition of seven researcher-practitioner partnerships across the country that publish data on lower-level enforcement in order to inform policy, operations and reforms. The Research Network is funded through a general grant from Arnold Ventures. The opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not those of the Data Collaborative for Justice or Arnold Ventures.

### Data

We use data from four sources for our analyses: the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), the Office of Los Angeles City Attorney, the Public Policy Institute of California, and the U.S. Census. The LAPD data include information on all felony and misdemeanor arrests in the City of Los Angeles from 2001 to 2017. The data from the City Attorney afford information on misdemeanor cases referred by the LAPD for prosecution, including demographic information and sentencing outcomes.

Rates of felony and misdemeanor arrests in Los Angeles



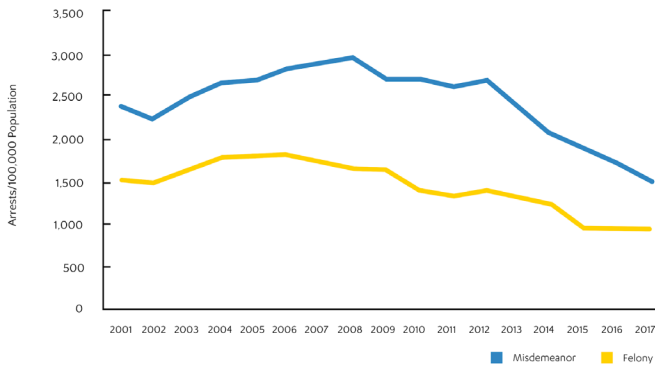**Figure 2.**
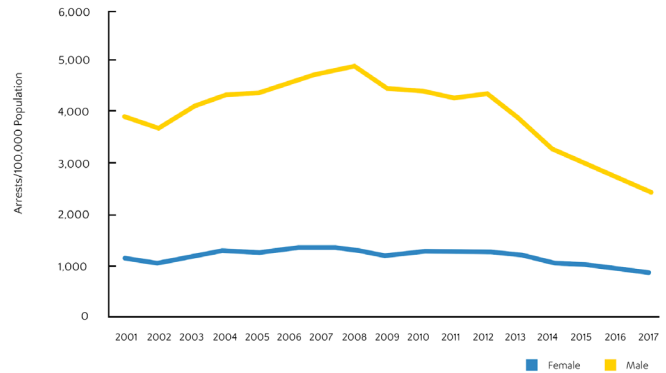
Misdemeanor arrest rates by gender in Los Angeles



**Figure 3.**

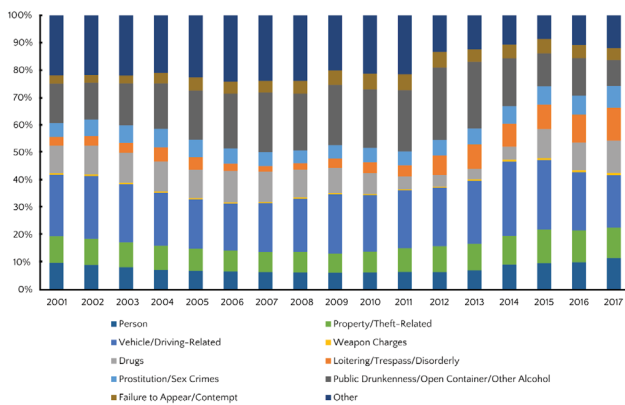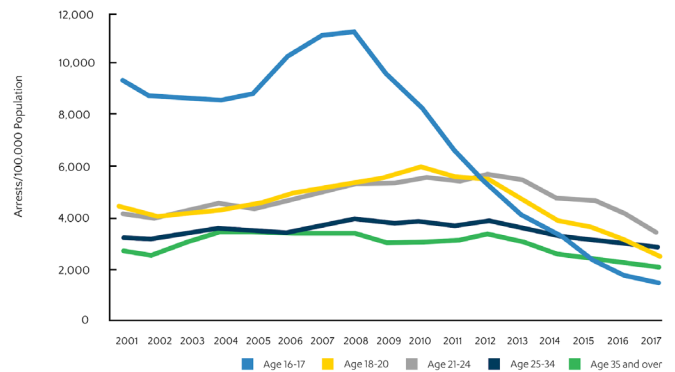Percentages of misdemeanor arrests by category in Los Angeles



**Figure 4.**

Misdemeanor arrest rates by age group in Los Angeles



## Key Findings

### Overall Trends

In 2017, both the misdemeanor and felony arrest rates were essentially half what they were at their peaks in 2008 and 2006, respectively. The misdemeanor arrest rate peaked at 3,008 arrests per 100,000 in 2008 — rising from 2,421 in 2001. This rate then declined to 1,540 arrests in 2017 (Figure 1).

### Trends by Gender

Both the female and male misdemeanor arrest rate decreased, but not evenly. While the ratio of the male to female misdemeanor arrest rate was near 4 to 1 in 2001, that ratio is now much closer to 3 to 1 by 2017  (Figure 2).

### Trends by Charge Type

Overall, all types of misdemeanor arrests declined between 2001 and 2017, except for loitering/trespass/disorderly conduct, prostitution, and weapon charges. Vehicle-related, alcohol, person, property and drug charges made up between 63 to 70 percent of misdemeanor arrests in any year (Figure 3).

### Trends by Age

At the beginning of the 2000s, 16- to 17-year-olds had the highest misdemeanor arrest rates by age group, and by 2017 they were the age group with the lowest arrest rates. We attribute the majority of this decline to a virtual cessation of arrests for curfew/truancy violations, a charge that dropped by 96 percent over the time period (Figure 4).

**Figure 5.**

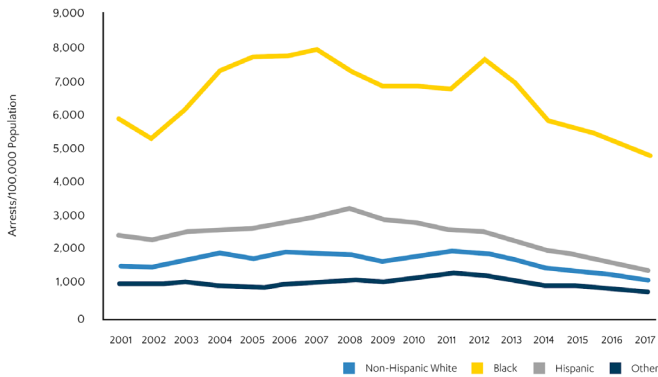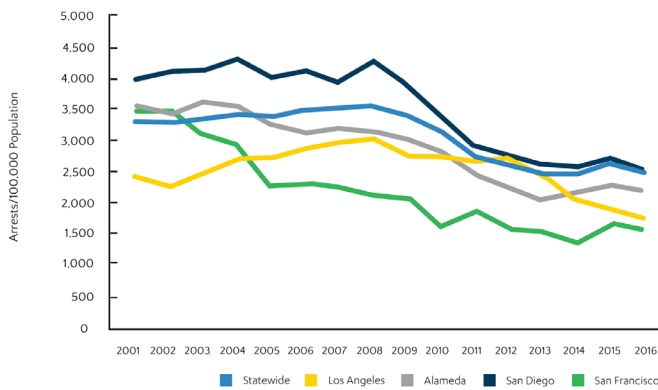Misdemeanor arrest rates by race/ethnicity in Los Angeles



**Figure 6.**

Percentages of misdemeanor arrests by category (African American females 18-20 years old)



**Figure 7.**

Misdemeanor arrest rates in Los Angeles, selected counties, and statewide
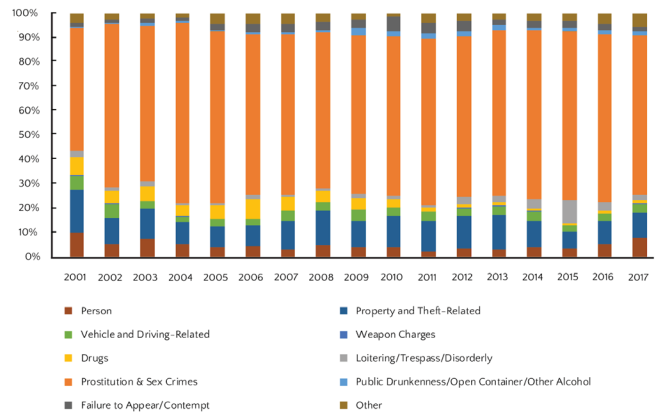


## Trends by Race/Ethnicity

Racial disparities persist in arrests. The arrest rate for African Americans was nearly 4.5 times higher than the white arrest rate in 2017. And the arrest rate for Hispanics was about 4 times higher than the white arrest rate in the same year (Figure 5).

## A Closer Look at Black Females

Black 18- to 20-year-old females have higher misdemeanor arrest rates than black males in this age group. In 2001, black females accounted for 8 percent of misdemeanor arrests of all 18- to 20-year-olds, male or female. In 2017, they accounted for 14 percent of misdemeanor arrests among the age group. Arrests for prostitution drove the majority of the increase (Figure 6).

## Trends Across the State

Overall, Los Angeles had similar trends in misdemeanor arrests compared to other counties in California and the state as a whole. In Los Angeles, African Americans had the highest arrest rates across the state and selected counties. The arrest rates for black residents declined 10 percent in Los Angeles and 15 percent statewide between 2001 and 2016. Hispanic arrest rates saw the biggest decline between 2001 and 2016. In Los Angeles, the arrest rate for Hispanics dropped 35 percent while the statewide rate dropped 31 percent during this period (Figure 7).[1]

## Conclusions

The report on misdemeanor arrests in Los Angeles over the 2001–2017 period presents several important findings. First, arrests and prosecution caseloads generally declined substantially during this time period (the misdemeanor arrest rate in 2017 was roughly half the peak year of 2008). Moreover, with few caveats, this trend in declining misdemeanor arrests follows generally that for Los Angeles County, other counties in California, such as San Francisco, as well as that for the state as a whole.

Misdemeanor arrest rates changed by key demographic characteristics over this period. They fell much more slowly for women than men, though men are still arrested at much higher rates than women. Juvenile arrest rates have fallen dramatically over this period mostly as a consequence of the near disappearance of arrests for curfew and truancy infractions. Unlike other demographic groups whose arrest rates largely declined over this period, black female arrest rates increased for some age groups, and prostitution arrests are the most frequent type for younger black females.

For more in-depth analysis of trends in misdemeanor arrests and enforcement in Los Angeles, please see the full report available at https://datacollaborativeforjustice.org/partner/ucla/.

## About the Author

**Michael Lens** is the associate faculty director of the Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies and an associate professor of urban planning and public policy at UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs.

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## References

1.   The Public Policy Institute of California has trend data across the state from 1980 to 2016. We use this data to compare local arrest trends to three other counties: Alameda, San Diego, and San Francisco. Lastly, the data from the 2000 and 2010 census form a basis for weighted estimates of the city's population and composition between 2011 and 2017.