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How youth development programs can save America's Outcasts

California has a lengthy history of imprisoning juveniles for extreme periods of time, essentially throwing their lives away for mistakes they made before they turned 18. While California has fortunately done away with charging 15-year-olds as adults, youth juvenile incarceration is still very much alive and must be addressed. Most youth who enter the system live in areas that stimulate criminal activity and have little recourse for those who want to escape it. Many of those youth are brought into the criminal fold from peer pressure or groups of friends and feel that there is no other option. This is where youth development programs can help. According to the Office of Justice Programs, youth development enables adolescents to develop positive behaviors and provides the foundation for these children to avoid a life of crime and violence.¹ Humans are a product of their environment, and if every child were to have role models or be cared for, which is what many youth development programs provide, there would be fewer juvenile criminals. Therefore, my research will delve into the correlation between youth development programs and incarceration, asking the question: What is the relationship between youth development programs and youth incarceration and arrest rates? In this paper, I define youth development programs as those which target an age audience of 14-25 and can incorporate any program, such as professional development or educational classes. In the forthcoming paper, I will analyze 17 California counties and compare the number of youth development programs each county has to their youth incarceration rates. I will also examine a few major California

¹ 4 ways to provide opportunities for children and youth. Accessed May 21, 2023. <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh176/files/action/sec4.htm>.

cities' fiscal spending on youth development programs over time and demonstrate its effect on youth arrests and incarceration.

Context and Significance

Incarcerating youth at an early age can lead to dire consequences for both the individual and the state. For one, being imprisoned at an early age in anyone's life will most certainly damage a person's physical and mental health, likely hinder any educational or professional success, and they are then forced to go back and participate in the same behavior that got them incarcerated in the first place. Nearly 20,000 juveniles in California were arrested in 2019.² The following year, in addition to those that were arrested, over 2,000 youth were held in California juvenile detention centers, and an additional 5,000 youth aged 18-25 were incarcerated in 2022.³ That is over 27,000 individuals whose lives are forever altered by poor decisions they made in the first quarter of their life. Research has shown that a human brain is not fully developed until a person is at least 25.⁴ It is for this reason that many youth development programs run until the age of 25. Although science and these programs acknowledge this biological fact, government policy has not, and as a consequence, these youth's livelihoods are taken away from them. Furthermore, these policies significantly affect minority communities, as they make up a large portion of youth incarceration disproportionate to their population. As illustrated by Figure 1, African Americans make up 6% of the total youth population, yet they comprise 20% of total youth arrests in California. Furthermore, once arrested, African Americans and Latinos have a

² "Juvenile Justice in California 2021". California Department of Justice. Accessed June 14, 2023
https://data-openjustice.doj.ca.gov/sites/default/files/2022-08/Juvenile%20Justice%20In%20CA%202021_0.pdf

³ "The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation." The 2023-24 Budget: The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, February 16, 2023.

https://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/4686#Division_of_Juvenile_Justice_Closure_; "California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation Office Research." Public.tableau.com. Accessed May 21, 2023.

<https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/cdcr.or/viz/OffenderDataPoints/SummaryInCustodyandParole>.

⁴ "The Teen Brain: 7 Things to Know." National Institute of Mental Health. Accessed May 21, 2023.

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-teen-brain-7-things-to-know#:~:text=Although%20the%20brain%20stops%20growing,the%20last%20parts%20to%20mature.>

much higher chance of being sentenced to a juvenile detention center or prison. Compared to their White counterparts, Black youth are 31 times more likely to be incarcerated in California, with Latino youth almost five times more likely.⁵

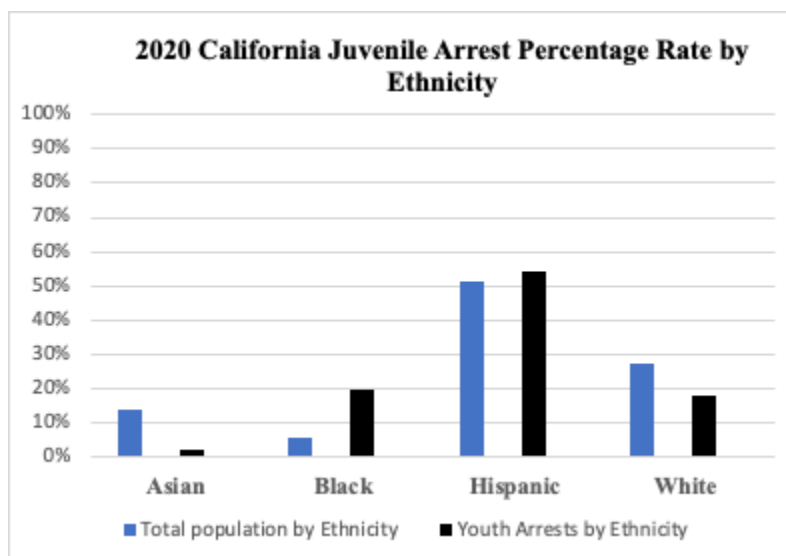


Figure 1: Total Juvenile Arrest Percentage by Ethnicity
Data Source: California and U.S Department of Justice

Undiagnosed or untreated mental issues should also be a cause for concern when holding an adolescent in youth detention centers or prisons. An estimated 60 percent of those in U.S. youth detention centers have behavioral, cognitive, or emotional problems.⁶ Even worse, many youths who suffer from mental illness cannot receive treatment because of a lack of funding and resources. In fact, a study found that only 15 percent of youths with physiological disorders are treated properly.⁷ Allowing such gross negligence to occur will be not only hurtful to the juvenile

⁵ Hall, Emma. “‘A Change in Narrative’: Ethnic Studies Program Helps Incarcerated Youth Navigate Identity.” CalMatters, February 10, 2022. <https://calmatters.org/education/higher-education/college-beat-higher-education/2022/02/ethnic-studies-youth-prison-san-francisco-state/>.

⁶ Information about mental illness and the brain - NIH curriculum ... Accessed May 22, 2023. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK20369/>.

⁷ The intersection between Mental Health and the Juvenile Justice System. Accessed May 22, 2023. https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/model-programs-guide/literature-reviews/intsection_between_mental_health_and_the_juvenile_justice_system.pdf.

offender but society itself. How are these juveniles expected to become functioning members of society if the problems that got them incarcerated in the first place are never addressed? Having youth go through a traumatic experience such as detention or arrest while ignoring their mental health needs will make them more unstable. Then, without proper treatment, they are pushed back into the real world, leading to more crime and confusion.

The limited services and facilities for those incarcerated come at an extreme cost to the United States. Thirty-three states spend over \$100,000 or more annually to incarcerate young people; California spends triple that amount at a whopping \$300,000 to incarcerate each youth annually.⁸ This is money that could be better well spent investing in programs that prevent these youth from being incarcerated in the first place. This issue pertains to more than just California but the country as a whole. There are thousands of children and young adults whose lives are being ruined for foolish decisions they made when their own brains are not fully matured. With the proper resources and guidance, California and America can save these lives and secure a better future for everyone.

Background

Over recent years, California has experienced a dramatic decrease in youth incarceration. This is in part due to the many criticisms and research projects that highlighted the adverse outcomes of the status quo, which inspired new reforms to how the government deals with troubled youth. Gone are the days of punitive punishment that only benefited the owners of for-profit prisons. Before California Governor Gavin Newsom ordered the shutdown of four state youth prisons in 2020, these institutions reflected more of a profit-hire racket and not an institution designed to correct the behaviors of troubled youth. When these service systems

⁸ “Sticker Shock 2020: The Cost of Youth Incarceration.” Justice Policy Institute, April 4, 2022. <https://justicepolicy.org/research/policy-brief-2020-sticker-shock-the-cost-of-youth-incarceration/>.

perform the original intent of their creation and support young people by focusing on their needs rather than forwarding the system's agenda, interventions have the highest success rate.⁹ Newsom accepts this theory, at least partly, as the Governor ended the use of private prisons and privately-run immigration detention facilities in 2020. Under the new law, California would have phased out the use of for-profit private prisons by 2028. However, this victory was short-lived, as the federal courts held that this law was unconstitutional.¹⁰ Whether California can ban private prisons or not, much more work must be done to steer youth to a better future. It is commendable that California has started to see the errors in its ways of punitive punishment, but that only tackles half of the problem with youth incarceration. One must not wait to implement reform after these youth enter the system; there should be programs for these at-risk individuals before incarceration. In doing so, one can prevent these youths from seeing the inside of a jail cell altogether.

Before delving into the data, it is important first to understand who these programs are meant to serve. In order to proactively prevent behavior that would lead to incarceration, we must first identify the factors that put certain youth at risk for delinquency, as well as factors that discourage youth from becoming delinquent. So what are the risk factors?

Children and youth who do not feel like they fit into society and do not see themselves as contributing members of their community, family, or school are likely to become rebellious and engage in socially unacceptable behaviors.¹¹ These behaviors can sometimes lead to gang involvement or violence. Issues stemming from family life, such as abusive or negligent parents,

⁹ Benjamin, M. P. (1995). *Effective collaboration as the key to understanding and reducing youth violence: A mental health perspective*. Washington, DC: National Technical Assistance Center for Children's Mental Health, Center for Child Health and Mental Health Policy.

¹⁰ Pazanowski, Bernie. "California Ban on Private Prisons in State Held Unconstitutional." *Bloomberg Law*, September 26, 2022. <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/us-law-week/california-ban-on-private-prisons-in-state-held-unconstitutional>.

¹¹ Chapter 4 -- Risk Factors for Youth Violence - Youth Violence - NCBI. Accessed May 22, 2023. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK44293/>.

are also good indicators of youth more susceptible to delinquent or illegal behavior.¹² However, removing these children or youth away from the situation entirely and separating them from their parents may do more harm than good. Research shows that taking kids from parents and placing them as wards of state will lead to more crime.¹³ Ultimately, I will use this information to highlight the importance of youth development programs in mitigating these bad outcomes for youth and instead providing them with better opportunities.

Researchers and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention agree that positive approaches that emphasize youths to connect with the community and engage in healthy opportunities lead to better social and mental development and, thus, a much greater likelihood of success.¹⁴ This involves long-term, continuous, comprehensive programs that, for example, include adults as tutors and mentors. Councilmember Rick Jennings of District 7, Sacramento, is a proponent of this idea through his work with the Center for Fathers and Families.¹⁵ The Councilmember is the CEO, and through his leadership, the program has mentored countless individuals to create successful and fulfilling lives. Through professional programs such as resume building, computer programs, and education programs like tutoring sessions and homework assistance, youth can feel empowered and inspired to pursue education and work hard for their career goals, which would not have been possible if not given the right guidance. The Councilmember's success story is just one of many programs throughout California and should inspire other individuals and state legislators to take action and reform. Ultimately, there need to

¹² The role of adverse childhood experiences (aces) and ... - sage journals. Accessed May 22, 2023.
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1541204020927075?journalCode=yvja>

¹³ Family Life and Delinquency and Crime Office of Justice Programs. Accessed May 22, 2023.
<https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/140517NCJRS.pdf>

¹⁴ Positive youth development literature review Accessed May 22, 2023.
https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/model-programs-guide/literature-reviews/positive_youth_development.pdf

¹⁵ "Welcome to the Center for Fathers and Families." Center for Fathers and Families. Accessed June 14, 2023.
<https://www.cffsacramento.org/>

be more programs, such as the Center for Families and Fathers, that are more readily available for troubled youth to have a real effect on youth outcomes. This leads me to my hypotheses and answers for my original research question.

Theory and Hypotheses

In this paper, I will review two hypotheses regarding youth development programs and arrest rates. First, I hypothesize that the more youth development programs provided, the greater decline in youth arrests and incarceration. I contend that youth development programs lead youth on a better path by providing opportunities to learn and grow, and crime would thus be less likely to happen. However, having a wide variety of youth development programs may be insufficient to curb undesirable youth behavior and incarceration. These programs must also have resources to effectively reach kids and show them opportunities to change. Therefore, I also hypothesize that the more money spent on existing programs, the lower the incarceration and arrest rates will be. My research will involve two independent variables, one for each hypothesis. My first independent variable is the total number of youth development programs per county. It is meant to help determine the relationship between the number of programs a county has to its arrest rate. The second independent variable that will be used in this research is each city's annual fiscal spending on youth development programs. Similar to the independent variables, there will also be two dependent variables measured for this research. The first dependent variable will consist of the youth arrests by county and will be measured alongside the first independent variable. The other dependent variable is the total California youth arrests data and will be measured with the second independent variable. I believe that positive reinforcement and opportunities for youth will significantly decrease youth incarceration rates, and California public policy should reflect that when looking at the yearly budget.

There are, however, other possible explanations or factors that can change youth arrest rates. A list of possible confounding variables that may affect youth arrest rates include but are not limited to median income, gang activity, and education level. Not accounting for these variables could skew the research results and should be noted and acknowledged before any findings are discussed.

Research Design and Data

In order to test my hypothesis, I first created a point-in-time dataset. I collected data from 17 California counties' in 2020 and obtained the total number of youth development programs each county had. I then divided the total number of youth development programs each county had by its respective youth population. In doing so, I could measure each county's youth development programs in proportion to their youth population. Thus, my independent variable for this research was the number of youth development programs for every 1,000th youth in the county. The data for the independent variable was gathered from the databases of Cause IQ and the U.S. Census for California. Ideally, more youth development data would be available at the county level, but I found that the less populated counties had no resources to incorporate my research into.

The dependent variable was measured by obtaining the youth arrest rates from each county in 2020 and then proportioning each incarceration rate to its total youth population. From this, I could gather my dependent variable: measuring each county's youth arrest rate for every 1,000 youths in each respective county. This data was provided from the Kidsdata database, which is powered by the Population Reference Bureau.

The analysis for this data in this research project was completed by comparing the results for each county's total number of youth development programs to its youth incarceration rate for

every 1,000 youth. Using a scatter plot graph, I then reviewed the data and calculated the correlation between the two variables. A scatter plot will provide the best insight into the potential correlation between the independent and dependent variables since each data point will be easily visible and comparable. Creating a line of best fit and calculating the correlation coefficient will also be useful as a visual aid as one can see which direction the data points lead to.

In order to better understand if increasing youth development programs is an effective approach to reducing youth incarceration, I separately accounted for a control variable, a county's median income. In theory, one would assume that the more money a family possesses, the lower the chance their children will be subject to situations that promote criminal activity. Therefore, I also took similar-income counties and compared each county's youth development programs and subsequent arrest rates to determine if income played a role in youth arrest and incarceration.

While conducting this research, there were some concerns about the validity of the independent variable and its effectiveness in predicting youth incarceration rates. There are a variety of youth development programs. Though its diversity in activities and education can be extremely beneficial to a youth's upbringing and overall reach, it also makes it harder to accurately measure the effect programs have on youth arrests. Although it would be ideal to individually measure each youth development program, as one could then use the data of the most popular programs across counties in California to compare with youth arrests, no such information is available to the public. Counties in California have not disclosed the specific youth development programs it possesses, nor does it share data on these programs' reach within

the community. This could be further developed and expanded in the future, but it is not possible now.

I further developed my research to test my second hypothesis, which argues that an increase in youth development funding for existing programs would lead to a decrease in youth incarceration. The independent variables were measured as the three major California cities' youth development budgets from 2018 to 2021. These three cities were Sacramento, Los Angeles, and Oakland, and I gathered each city's budgets from their annual fiscal spending reports. I then compared these datasets with the dependent variable, which was the arrest rates for California youth in the same period. A limited number of California cities could only be involved in this research because of the vagueness some of these cities detailed when outlining their yearling spending. There was no clear indication from other cities not previously mentioned in how their money was being diverted into youth development programs and therefore were left out of the study. Consequently, the lack of more city data in this small n-study could potentially interfere or conflict with the trend in the three previously mentioned annual fiscal spending on youth development programs and the subsequent effect on incarceration too. I obtained all data on the overall number of California youth arrests, ages 14-25, from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting System (UCR). I then converted this data into a time series analysis to compare the California city's youth development budgets with California youth arrests from 2018-2021.

The analysis for this data in this research project was completed by first totaling the sum of youth development funding cities in the study spent and the youth arrest rate over the four years separately. This particular study required two variables on the y-axis of the graph because the data was comparing the counties youth development budgets and total California youth

arrests over a span of four years. After gathering the appropriate data, the correlation coefficient between the two variables was calculated to better understand the relationship between youth development program funding and youth arrest rates.

Findings

Initially, through my first research method, I found a significant positive relationship between a county's number of youth development programs and youth incarceration rates. The more youth development programs a county has, the higher its incarceration rate will be, the opposite of my original hypothesis argument. However, I found that this data was skewed as San Francisco County was an extreme outlier in the data. Despite the large number of youth development programs the county possessed, the incarceration rate was nearly twice that of any other county, arresting 5.3 youth individuals for every 1,000. Once I removed San Francisco from the data set, I found a weak negative correlation between the number of youth development programs and youth incarceration rates. Therefore, San Francisco County had skewed the data so much that it created a positive relationship instead of the weak negative one, which was present once removed. The relationship was demonstrated through the correlation coefficient. Figure 2, which included the San Francisco dataset, had $r=.531$, implying a moderate to strong positive relationship between the two variables. When San Francisco County was removed from the dataset, $r= -.222$, and a weak negative relationship between the two variables became apparent. While the reasons for why San Francisco is a huge anomaly in this dataset will not be answered in this paper, it is clear that it is an extreme data point that is unlike the other California counties measured. It, therefore, would be more suitable to adopt Figure 2 as a source for the relationship between youth development programs and youth arrest rates.

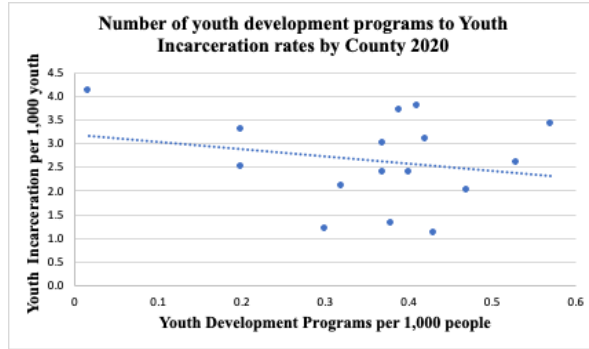
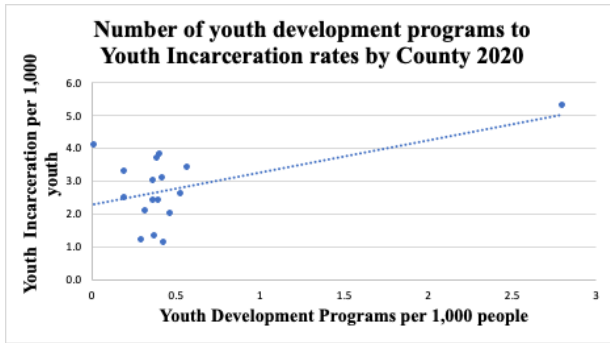


Figure 2: Dataset includes San Francisco
Data Source: U.S. Census: California, Cause IQ, and KidsData

Figure 3: Dataset without San Francisco
Data Source: U.S. Census: California, Cause IQ, and KidsData

The second finding found that the control variable, median income, is not a big factor in determining youth incarceration rates. Figure 4 and 5 help illustrate the differences between the two variables and hints that incarceration is generally spread throughout California regardless of income. These figures only include data from the 17 California counties which had available youth development program data in order to establish consistency. Figure 4 maps out the number of arrests a county has for every 1,000 youth in its population, while Figure 5 details each county's median income. These two figures did, however, provide an insight into an interesting pattern. While the figures demonstrated that a high median income did not translate to a lower incarceration rate for a county, there did seem to be a correlation between poorer median-income counties having a higher youth incarceration rate on average. Therefore, while this may show more money may not solve the incarceration problem, less money might exacerbate the problem for those involved, and are thus more likely to commit offenses. Cases such as San Francisco, which has the highest median income and the highest crime, demonstrate that median income may not be the best factor. However, these findings did lead to considering other variables that might have a bigger impact on youth arrest rates. Income disparity between the rich and poor in a county may be a better indicator or variable to measure with youth incarceration.

2020 County Arrest Rate for every 1,000 youth

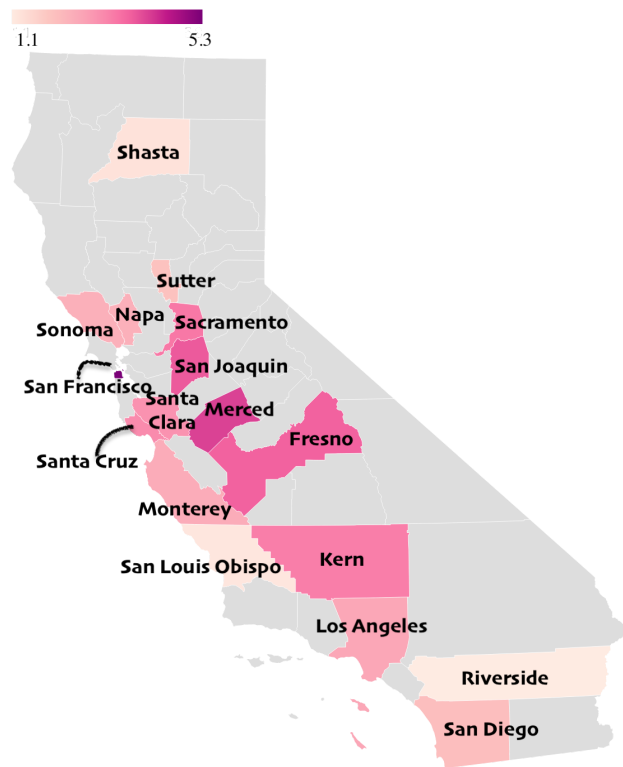


Figure 4
Data Source: KidsData

2020 Median Individual Annual Income by County
Measured in thousands of dollars



Figure 5
Data Source: California Franchise Tax Board

The last research method tested the presence of a relationship between rising youth development funding within counties to a decreasing youth arrest rate. It proved to be the most fruitful finding in supporting my second hypothesis, but it comes with its limitations. While the data yielded encouraging results, the dataset was small and hence may be biased. The cities in the Figure 6 dataset are Oakland, Sacramento, and Los Angeles. These three cities support a pattern that suggests youth development funding is rising in most cities simultaneously as youth arrest rates are falling dramatically. After collecting the sum of the total youth development budget and arrest data, the correlation coefficient was calculated between the two variables and produced a strong relationship of $r = -.941$. This, of course, is an extremely high correlation between the two variables and supports the notion that youth cities should increase funding for

youth development programs. Although the correlation is extremely high and most certainly supports my second hypothesis, this pattern should be developed further before any concrete assertions about these two variables' relationship can be made. In all likelihood, this strong correlation would not be so prominent if more city budgets for youth development programs were made available. Additionally, other factors such as government policy changes, gang activity, or education level should be addressed before claiming the effectiveness of youth development programs alone in countering youth arrests or incarceration. Therefore, I exercise caution when I share these findings, but the results of this paper should expose the public to the potential incredible benefits youth development programs can impart to society and encourage further research to be done in this field.

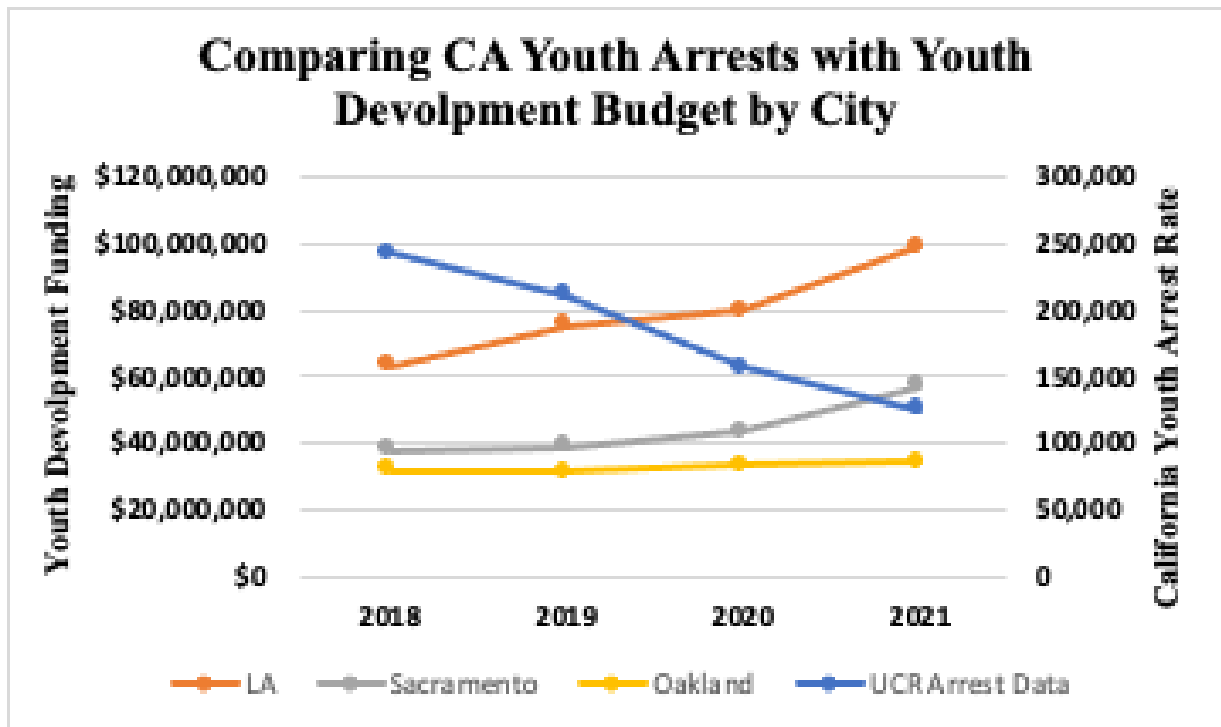


Figure 6

Data Source: Oakland, Sacramento, and Los Angeles FY budget 2018-2021, and The Uniform Crime Reporting Program (FBI).

Research and Policy Implications

The results of these studies identified a relationship between the number of youth development programs and youth development program funding with youth arrest rates. The number of youth development programs a county has was found to have a weak relationship with youth arrest rates, but a city's overall youth development funding proved to be a much more important factor. These new findings are promising and should therefore stimulate more interest in youth development programs both in policymaking and research. It is to be seen how strong of a relationship these programs have with arrest rates, but it is nevertheless an encouraging start. It should signal for cities to look into ways to increase their total number of youth development programs and, more importantly, allocate more overall funds into existing youth development programs. This might face pushback from policymakers and constituents alike, but cities can get creative with how they obtain the money for these programs. The constituents of Sacramento, for example, recently passed Measure L last year to further expand youth development programs and provide reach and provide them with more money. This measure is paid for by allocating 40% of the total funds generated from marijuana business operations taxes.¹⁶ According to the City of Sacramento, Measure L's purpose is to support positive youth development and youth violence prevention programs for children and youth less than 25 years old.¹⁷ This measure encompasses many beneficial youth initiatives such as mental health counseling, substance abuse treatment, and extracurricular activities. Through this Measure, Sacramento found a way to increase overall funds for programs without taking it out of an already established organization that could limit

¹⁶ “City of Sacramento Impartial Analysis of Measure L.” Sacramento County. Accessed June 14, 2023. <https://elections.saccounty.net/ElectionInformation/Documents/2022-November-General/MEASURE-L-EN-N2022.pdf>.

¹⁷ “Voter Registration and Elections.” Election Information. Accessed May 21, 2023. <https://elections.saccounty.net/ElectionInformation/Pages/default.aspx>.

the city's ability to respond to other issues. While it is much too early to tell if there have been any significant changes in the youth incarceration or arrest rate in Sacramento after this measure was implemented, it is something other cities should be paying attention to and potentially implementing similar policies themselves in the future.

If these findings are supported by additional research and analysis, cities may also want to take an active role in youth development programs to ensure they run smoothly. Therefore, these cities could create youth development departments that consist of community leaders, program organizers, as well as youth themselves, and could serve as the central point within the city to go over policies and systemize funding for youth programs.

Conclusion

While these findings are encouraging, there is still much more research to be done before claiming the link between youth development programs and youth arrest to be definite. Before cities and policymakers can adopt policies that stimulate youth development programs, there needs to be an increased focus on research on the effectiveness of youth development programs. There are a number of ways in which future research for youth development programs can expand. Researchers can start by first isolating all possible variables to understand which ones have a direct and biggest impact on youth arrest rates. Variables that have the potential to have a big impact on youth incarceration include median income, gang activity, and education level. There could also be a variety of factors that are capable of influence. Therefore, the more variables that are isolated and examined the better. If one were to isolate these variables, it would provide a more comprehensive view of youth development programs' real effect on youth arrest and incarceration. After isolating the variables, further research could begin by identifying a specific common youth program in each county or at least in numerous counties across

California. According to Cause Iq, there are 2,959 youth development programs in California, employing over 9,131 people.¹⁸ If one were to find a prevalent program in multiple cities, they could use it as a case study. In doing so, one could discover whether there is a correlation between the cities' arrest rate of those who have this specific program and those cities that do not. Before this is to happen, however, further research must first engage in a comprehensive audit of youth development programs across the state and develop a system in which one can measure the effectiveness of a youth development program in decreasing youth arrest rates. If there were a system or scale in which youth development programs are graded for effectiveness, then researchers could then implement the programs that have a high grading in their research to see whether there is a correlation between the cities' arrest rate of those who have this specific program and those who do not. This study could expand to include multiple youth development programs at once by grouping the high-graded programs to cities that contain all of the valued programs as to those that do not. Although this paper's findings were inconclusive and additional research needs to be done, these original findings provide a good trend and roadmap for future research that can expand upon what has already been discovered. Youth development programs can change youth's lives for the better at a fraction of the cost it would take to incarcerate them. It is time for policymakers and cities across California to value youth development programs and potentially save the futures of thousands of youths. With more programs and resources, youth development programs can mold better citizens and, therefore, a better California.

¹⁸ "California Youth Development Programs." Youth development programs in California | Cause IQ. Accessed May 21, 2023. https://www.causeiq.com/directory/youth-development-programs-list/california-state/#search_section.

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