

REFUTING FEAR: IMMIGRATION, YOUTH, AND CALIFORNIA'S STUNNING DECLINES IN CRIME AND VIOLENCE



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Introduction

As California's population moved from two-thirds white¹ in 1980 to over 60 percent people of color today (Table 1), the state has seen dramatic reductions in crime in each category. Additionally, indicators of social health and safety—such as violence, violent death and school dropouts—have decreased significantly, and California has weathered the national opioid epidemic better than elsewhere in the country. As of 2015, the state's total violent and property crime rate was 52 percent lower than in 1970, 61 percent lower than in 1980, and 54 percent lower than in 1990, much larger declines than the nation overall experienced during the same periods (DOJ, 2017; FBI 2017). Since 1980, two demographic events have occurred alongside California's decrease in crime that are important to explore:

- Racial and ethnic diversity driven by foreign immigration has increased sharply;
- Among young people (California's most diverse population), crime and violence trends have diverged sharply from those of older populations, led by a 72 percent decrease in youth violent crime rates and a 92 percent drop in homicide arrests of urban youth from 1980 to 2015.

Table 1. Racial composition by age in California and the United States

	Percent of population that is white			
	1980	1998	2017	2044
California, age <25	60%	38%	28%	23%
California, all ages	67%	50%	38%	29%
United States, age <25	75%	64%	52%	41%
United States, all ages	80%	72%	62%	50%

Source: DRU, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017. Note: 1998 is the year of California's population had no demographic majority, and 2044 is the year the U.S. Census estimates the United States will become an all-minority nation.

These trends have caught experts, officials, and interest groups by surprise. In the 1990s, leading criminologists predicted growing populations of youth of color would result in a “blood bath of teenaged violence” incited by “juvenile super-predators” (Dilulio, Jr., 1995; Newsweek, 1995). Similarly, in 2017, President Donald Trump is blaming people of color—specifically immigrants from Muslim-majority countries and Mexico—for causing increased crime, drug-related death, and “American carnage” (Johnson, 2015; Lee, 2015; Trump, 2017). The President has also stated that “sanctuary cities” in particular “breed crime,” and that California is therefore “out of control” (Lee, 2017; Memoli, 2017). However, California's crime trends in the all-minority population era have proven to be more positive than the nation overall. This is especially apparent in California's largest cities, many of which have established local policies, or must adhere to state policy, limiting cooperation with federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

¹ In this report, “white” refers to persons of European descent who are not ethnically Hispanic or Latino. This simplification is made to allow for comparisons across racial and ethnic classifications.

California's racial and ethnic transition, 1980-2015

California became an all-minority state with no demographic majority in 1998; the rest of the country is predicted to follow suit by the 2040s (DRU, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). The racial and ethnic composition of California's population has changed swiftly and sharply. The white population has decreased by almost 30 percentage points since 1980 (from 67 percent to 39 percent) and, as of 2015, more than six in 10 residents are people of color (DRU, 2017).

California's 15 largest cities², which comprise approximately 30 percent of the state's population, have even greater demographic diversity; over 70 percent of their total population is of color (CDC, 2017). The major factors driving California's racial and ethnic transition are: (a) immigration to California from Latin American and Asian countries; (b) white populations emigrating from California; (c) births (71 percent of births in 2015 were to parents of color or of mixed race); and (d) deaths—white populations comprised 63 percent of California's deaths in 2015 (CDC, 2017; DRU, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).

In terms of net migration (immigration minus emigration), 3.4 million people have immigrated to California from foreign countries since 1995 while two million U.S.-born residents, mostly white, have emigrated from the state (DRU, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). In addition, an estimated 2.6 million undocumented immigrants, mostly Latino, are currently residing in California (PPIC, 2017).

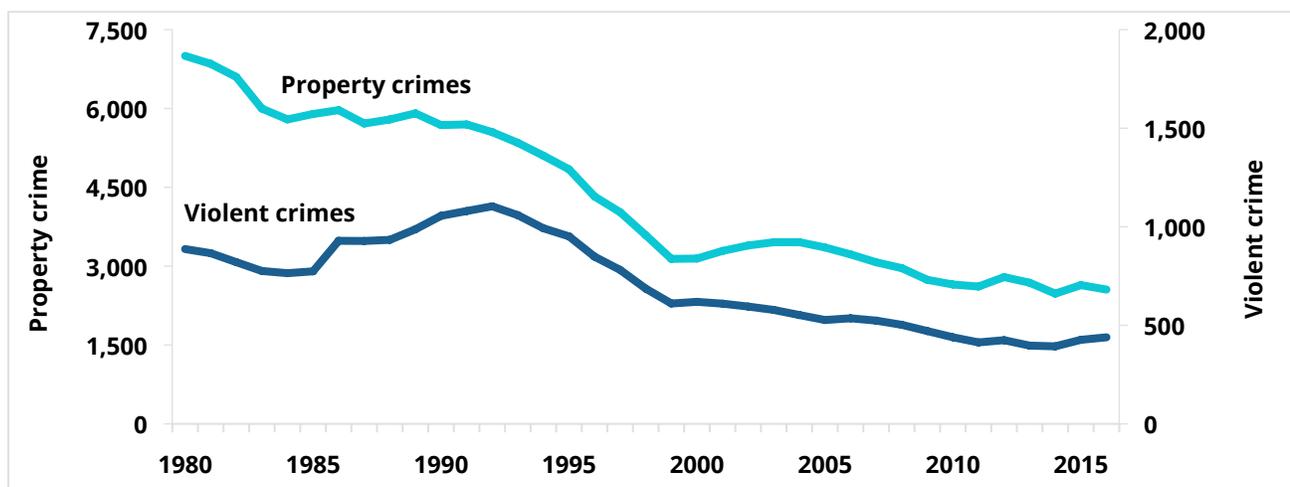
In terms of natural population change (births minus deaths) in 2015, the white population had 22,429 more deaths than births, while populations of color had 254,971 more births than deaths (CDC, 2017). This pattern is due to the fact that, on average, California's white population is older (the median age of white Californians is 45.7, 9.5 years older than the state's average). Today, Californians ages 60 and older are the only majority-white age group in the state (DRU, 2017).

California's changes in crime and violence

Crime

From 1980 to 2015, California's violent crime rate fell by 52 percent, including a 67 percent drop in homicides, while property offense rates fell by 62 percent (Figure 1). In the decades following 1980, California's crime decline has been larger than the rate of decline in the rest of the U.S. (Figure 2).

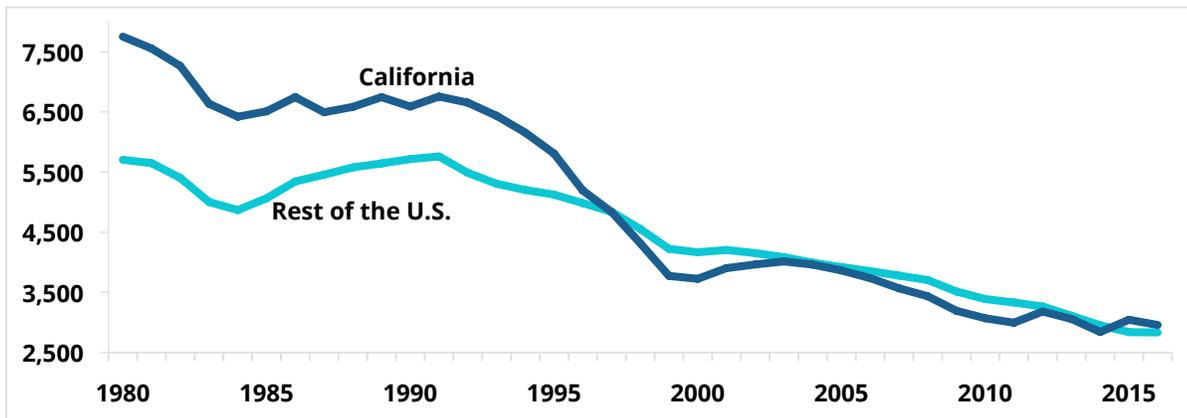
Figure 1. Reported Part I offenses in California per 100,000 population, 1980-2015



Source: DOJ, 2017; DRU, 2017.

² Cities with populations of 250,000 or more in 2015: Anaheim, Bakersfield, Chula Vista, Fresno, Irvine, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, Riverside, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco, San Jose, Santa Ana, and Stockton (DRU, 2017).

Figure 2. Reported Part I violent and property offenses per 100,000 population, 1980-2015

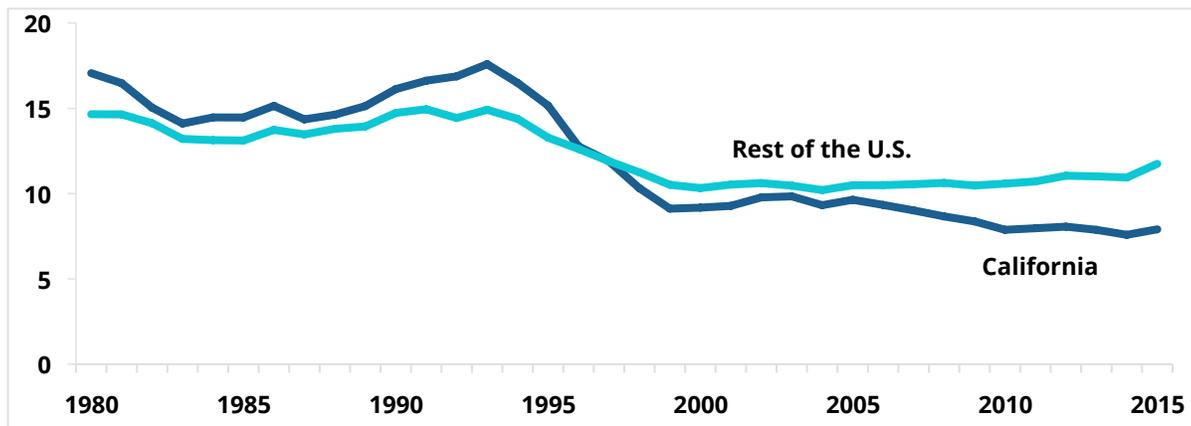


Source: DRU, 2017; FBI, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017.

Gun fatalities

The United States has become safer from guns in recent decades, but the decline has been uneven (Males, 2017). From 1980 to 2015, gun fatality rates fell 54 percent in California compared to 20 percent in the other 49 states combined (Figure 3). California's once severely high death rate from firearms dropped to a considerably lower than average level in 2015 compared to the rest of the country.

Figure 3. Deaths from firearms per 100,000 population, 1980-2015

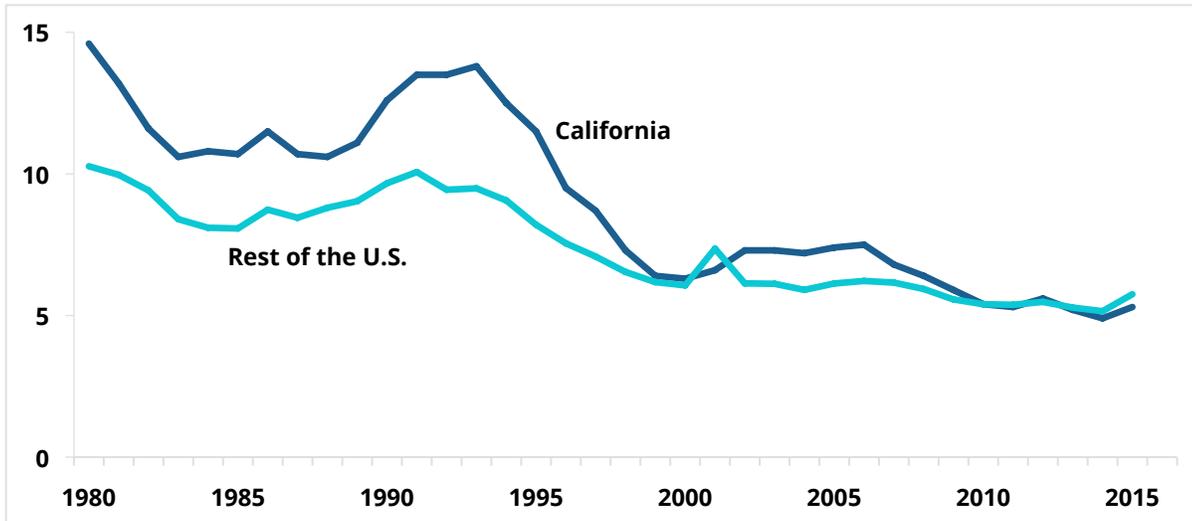


Sources: CDC, 2017; DRU, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017.

Homicide and urban violence

Through the early 1990s, Californians suffered substantially higher rates of homicide than the nation as a whole (Figure 4). Since peaking in the early 1990s, homicide rates fell by 63 percent through 2015 in California, and by 48 percent in rest of the country. In 2015, California's homicide level was about 8 percent below the rest of the country, among the lowest rate ever reliably recorded in the state.

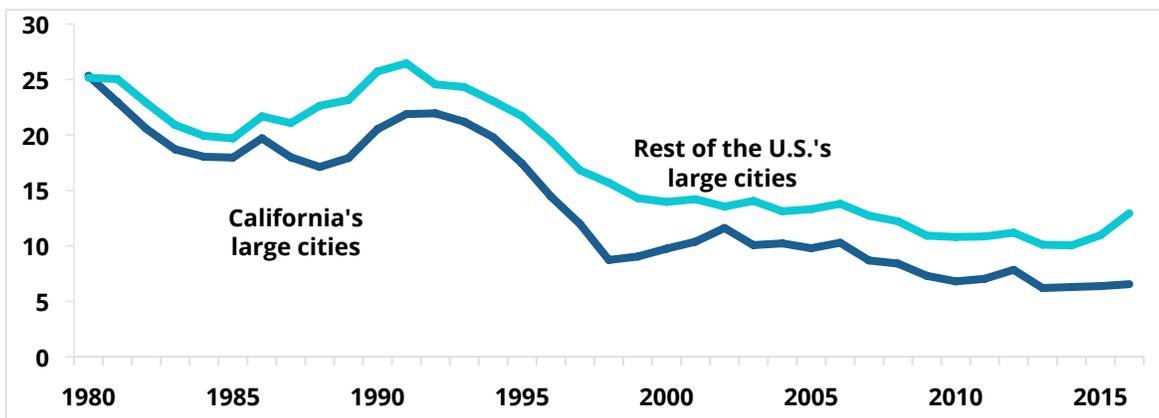
Figure 4. Homicides per 100,000 population, 1980-2015



Sources: CDC, 2017; DRU, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017. Note: The national homicide spike in 2001 resulted from the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, which also increased California's rate.

In particular, California has shown declining homicide levels in large cities with populations of 250,000 or more (Figure 5). In 1980 and earlier, California's cities had homicide levels similar to the rate for large cities nationally. Since then, homicide rates declined by 74 percent in California's large cities compared to 49 percent in the nation's large cities (as of the first half of 2016); nearly all declines occurred after the early 1990s. By the first half of 2016, the homicide rate in California's large cities was just half the rate for other U.S. cities with comparable populations (FBI, 2017).

Figure 5. Homicides per 100,000 population in cities > 250,000 population, 1980- June 2016

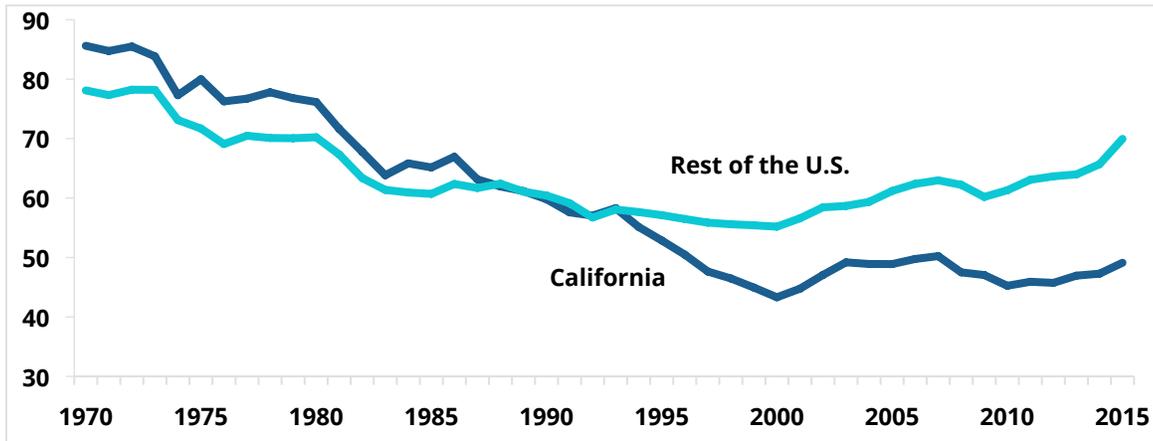


Sources: CDC, 2017; DRU, 2017; FBI, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017.

All violent deaths

Prior to the early 1990s, California had a much higher rate of violent death (homicides, suicides, and accidents, including drug overdoses) than the rest of the country. However, since 1990, the state has experienced less fatal violence than the U.S. overall; by 2015, California's violent death rate was 30 percent below that of the rest of the nation (Figure 6). The state's greatly improved safety record is attributable to its larger than average decline in gun fatalities and lesser increase in drug overdose deaths (Rudd, et al., 2016).

Figure 6. All violent deaths per 100,000 population, 1980-2015



Sources: CDC, 2017; DRU, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017.

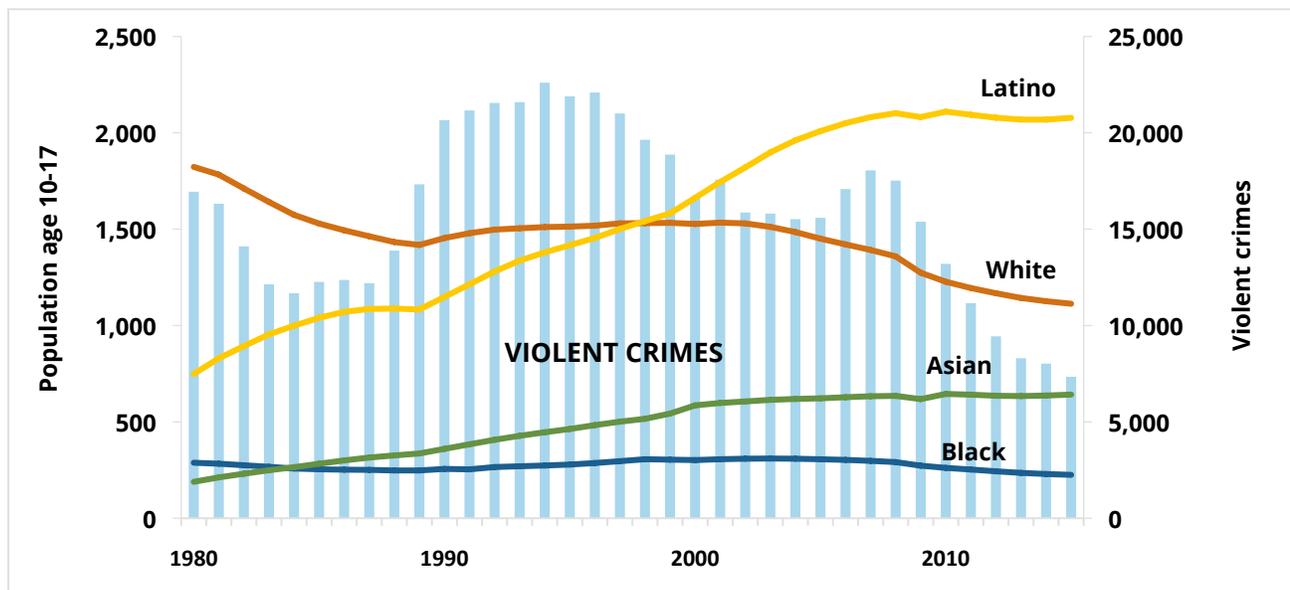
Young Californians show the largest declines in serious crime and violence, especially homicide

California's younger generations in particular have been shaped by rapid demographic change driven by immigration. In 1980, 60 percent of Californians under age 25 were white; in 2015, 71 percent were young people of color (Figure 7).

Major risks

From 1980 to 2015, a number of serious problems, including violent deaths and arrests for criminal offenses, declined sharply among California's young people. Among youth and young adults ages 10-24, rates of arrest have plummeted across multiple offense categories, including violent crime (down 47 percent), property crime (down 84 percent), total crime (down 57 percent), and homicide (down 76 percent)(DOJ, 2017). Additionally, rates of total gun fatalities among young people ages 10-24 decreased 58 percent, and homicides victimizing youth dropped 61 percent (CDC, 2017). In 2015, just 7 percent of fatal drug overdoses and 21 percent of gun fatalities in California involved victims ages 10-24 (CDC, 2017). The largest declines in all of these categories were among youth ages 10-17. Moreover, from 1980 to 2015, this population increased by over one million and became more racially diverse, increasing from 60 percent to 73 percent of color (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Violent crime rates and population by race/ethnicity among youth ages 10-17, 1980-2015



Source: DOJ, 2017; DRU, 2017.

California’s declines in several major negative trends, including justice-system involvement among youth, are also more significant than those nationally. Prior to 1980, in major risk categories such as arrest, violent death, gun fatality, and drug overdose, California youth experienced rates above (and usually substantially above) the national rate. However, by 2015, nearly all major risk factors for youth in California had fallen to near or below their respective national rates. For example, in 1980, California’s youth arrest rate for violent offenses was about twice the rate of the U.S.; in 2015, the rate had fallen to just 1.17 times the national rate, an absolute decline of 69 percent and a net decline (relative to the rest of the country) of 42 percent (FBI, 2017).

As a result of these decreasing crime and violence trends, admissions of Californians under age 25 to state prisons, jails, and juvenile facilities fell from over 18,000 per year in 1990 to under 8,000 in 2015 (BSCC, 2017; CDCR, 2016; 2017; DJJ, 2017). As of December 2015, more than 7,000 beds in local juvenile facilities were empty (BSCC, 2017).

Since 1999³, California’s large cities (populations of 250,000 or more) have experienced particularly significant declines in homicides with youth victims (CDC, 2017). In California’s large cities, rates of gun homicides with youth or young adult victims ages 15-24 fell 33 percent, compared to an 8 percent decline nationally (CDC, 2017). Lesser declines in youth homicide victimization rates occurred in smaller cities, suburbs, and rural areas (down 15 percent statewide), compared to an eight percent increase in these areas nationally. Compared to national rates in 2015, California youth were less likely to be the victim of a homicide in large cities (where three-fourths of the youth population are young people of color). However, California youth were somewhat more likely to be killed in less populated areas (where 60 percent of youth are of color) compared to national rates (CDC, 2017; DRU, 2017).

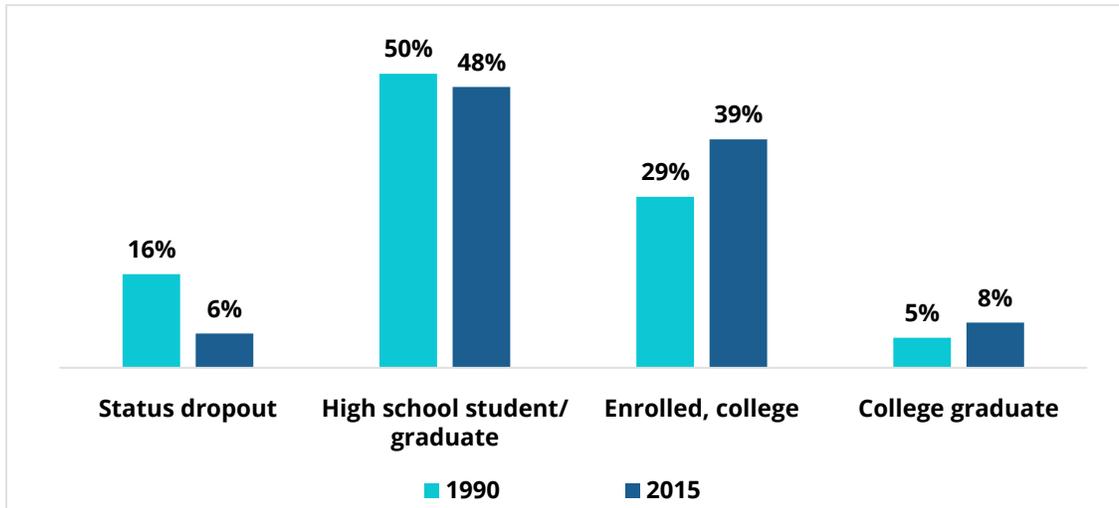
School dropout

Another parallel trend worth examining is educational attainment, which strongly correlates with arrest and other risk behaviors such as homicide victimization (see, for example, Debaun, et al., 2013; CJCJ, 2015). Since 1990, rates of status dropout (not a high school graduate and not enrolled in school) among Californians ages 16-24 have declined substantially, and college enrollment and graduation rates have risen (Figure 8). In 2015, 94 percent of California’s 16-24-year-olds were either enrolled in high school or college, or had obtained a diploma or degree; fewer than 6 percent were status dropouts (U.S. Census Bureau, 1994; 2017). Since 1990, the state’s school dropout

³ The first year the national Center for Disease Control began publishing standardized local data.

rate (down 63 percent) has fallen substantially faster than the national average (down 46 percent), and its college enrollment and graduation rate (up 36 percent) has risen at twice the pace of the rest of the country (up 17 percent)(Figure 8). Whether greater educational attainment is the chief cause of reductions in crime and violence, or simply another positive trend among young people, requires further investigation.

Figure 8. Educational attainment, Californians ages 16-24, 2015 vs. 1990



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1994; 2017.

Conclusion

California’s positive trends and lower levels of crime accompany its transition to an all-minority state. This correlation contradicts claims that increasing immigration will negatively impact society, that “sanctuary cities” such as those in California’s “breed crime,” or that California is “out of control”(Lee, 2017; Memoli, 2017; Trump, 2017). California, once a state with unusually high rates of drug overdose, gun violence, and crime, has demonstrated substantial gains in health and safety as its demographic composition has become more diverse.

The shifts have been most dramatic for California’s young people, among whom immigrant-driven demographic changes in recent decades have contributed to a more diverse population (DRU, 2017). A number of studies suggest recent immigrants commit less crime than residents (see, for example, Ghandnoosh, et al., 2017). While the large declines in crime and violence among young Californians have benefitted all races and ethnicities, the ethnic groups composing the highest proportions of recent immigration showed the largest declines. For example, from 1980 to 2015, homicide arrest rates of youth fell by 93 percent among Asian populations, 91 percent among Latino populations, 80 percent among black populations, and 77 percent among white populations (DOJ, 2017; DRU, 2017).

That these sustained declines in crime, violence, and school dropout rates have been concentrated in the groups most impacted by immigration—Californians compared to those in other states, urban residents more than rural ones, younger age groups more than older age groups, and Asian and Latino populations more than populations with a lower proportion of recent immigrants—suggests that immigration may be contributing, in part, to reduced risk. While causal factors remain multifarious and unstudied, there appears to be a complex interaction in which younger and more diverse age groups are less involved with crime, violence, and drugs than the state’s older residents.

Despite these gains, California faces stark threats being proposed by President Trump, his administration, and Congress using fear and “alternative facts” to exploit myths of “victimization by criminal aliens present in the United States” (Jaffe, 2017; Kopan, 2017). Analysis does not support these fears. Far from being “out of control,” California is experiencing record declines in crime led by young people in large cities, who in turn are those most influenced by immigration and racial diversity. The state’s experience shows that racial transition can accompany greater public safety and well-being, a reality that should impact the national discussion over immigration.

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