

Juveniles Lead Adults in Declining Rate of Drug Crime

by Jeffrey A. Butts

JohnJayREC — The Research and Evaluation Center at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York

Changes in per capita arrest rates for drug-related offenses vary considerably by the age of arrestees. Between 1980 and 2015 (the most recent national data available), juvenile drug arrests fell more consistently than drug arrests involving adults.

Based on statistics compiled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and disseminated by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) within the U.S. Department of Justice, the national decline in arrests for drug offenses since the 1990s was more prolonged among juveniles than it was among adults age 18 and older.

During the early 1990s, the arrest rate for older juveniles (ages 15-17) increased sharply. Arrests of 15-17 year-olds grew from just under 700 to more than 1,500 arrests per 100,000 between 1991 and 1997. The arrest rate then plummeted, reaching a low of 660 arrests per 100,000 in 2015— the lowest rate observed since the 1980s. Since the peak year of 1997, drug arrest rates declined sharply both among older juveniles ages 15-17 (-57%) as well as among younger juveniles ages 10-14 (-62%).

The pattern of change in adult drug arrests was quite different. Adult arrests always outnumber juvenile arrests. In 2015, the national estimate for all juvenile drug arrests was just under 100,000. In the same year, there were more than 1.4 Million drug arrests involving adults age 18 and older. When arrest rates are calculated for specific age groups, however, it is clear that drug arrests for juveniles dropped more than drug arrests for adults in the past 20 years.

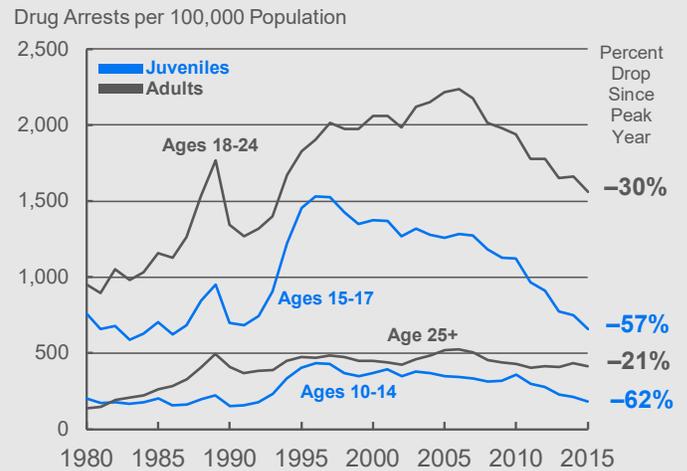
In fact, juvenile arrests began to fall nearly a decade before adult drug arrests had peaked. The drug arrest rate for juveniles reached its highest point in 1997 and then declined through 2015. Adult drug arrest rates continued to grow well into the 2000s before beginning to fall. Drug arrest rates for young adults ages 18-24 did not peak until 2006.

All age groups experienced falling drug arrest rates after 2006, but arrest rates for adults have not yet declined as much as arrest rates for juveniles. By 2015, juvenile arrest rates for drug law violations had dropped far enough to be similar to the levels of the 1980s. Juvenile arrest rates declined more than adult rates in all categories of drug offenses, both possession and sales.

DATA SOURCE:

National arrest estimates for 1980-2012 are from by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) as published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). Estimates for 2013-2015 were calculated by John Jay College using BJS methods. Juvenile rates calculated by BJS represent number of arrests per 100,000 population ages 0-17, but this analysis uses age 10 as the lower limit for calculating juvenile arrest rates.

Juvenile Drug Arrests Declined Earlier and Dropped Longer than Adult Drug Arrests



Drug Arrest Rates by Age and Offense Type

	2015 National Arrest Rate	Percent Change Since Peak
All Drug Offenses		
Juveniles: Ages 10-14	181	-62%
Juveniles: Ages 15-17	660	-57%
Adults: Ages 18-24	1,563	-30%
Adults: Ages 25 and Older	416	-21%
Possession Offenses		
Juveniles: Ages 10-14	156	-56%
Juveniles: Ages 15-17	567	-54%
Adults: Ages 18-24	1,299	-30%
Adults: Ages 25 and Older	335	-22%
Sales & Manufacturing Offenses		
Juveniles: Ages 10-14	25	-70%
Juveniles: Ages 15-17	93	-73%
Adults: Ages 18-24	264	-46%
Adults: Ages 25 and Older	82	-30%