



Crime in California during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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INTRODUCTION

As the COVID-19 pandemic struck the US in early 2020 and led to social dislocations, financial and health stresses, and alterations in our daily routines, crime rates in California and across the country also changed, sometimes in unpredictable ways. Throughout the nation, there have been widely cited [media reports](#) of increases in [homicide rates](#), aggravated assaults, and [gun-related violence](#). Additionally, there have been [reports](#) of sizable increases in auto theft across the country. At the same time, many law enforcement agencies reported declines in the types of offenses that tend to increase with the volume of social interactions, such as robbery and larceny theft.

In this brief, we use Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) data published by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), California Department of Justice (DOJ) data, and US Census data to assess the degree to which crime in 2020 changed relative to crime in 2019 in California. We also compare crime trends in California to trends in other states. This policy brief expands on [testimony](#) provided to the California Committee on the Revision of the Penal Code, and includes 437 municipalities, whereas the testimony only included municipalities with over 100,000 people.

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

- Recent crime rates in California remain much lower than historical averages during the 1980s and 90s.
- Between 2019 and 2020, property crime declined by 8% in California, while violent crime increased slightly by 0.8%. Overall, other states have experienced larger increases in violent crime and similar decreases in property crime
- California's overall violent crime rate masks diverging trends among specific crime types: homicides increased by 31% and aggravated assaults increased by 9%, while robberies decreased by 14% and rapes decreased by 8%. These trends match those in other states.
- California experienced a 15% decrease in larceny (personal property theft) and a 20% increase in motor vehicle theft. Both trends are larger in magnitude than those in other states.
- Within California, the largest changes in crime rates occurred in cities with high baseline rates in 2019.

Between 2019 and 2020, violent crime increased and property crime decreased in California and across the country

Violent crime increased in 2020 in both California and all other states as compared to 2019 (Table 1). The overall violent crime rate (the sum of homicide, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) increased by 0.8% in California and 3.8%

in other states between 2019 and 2020. The overall property crime rate (the sum of burglary, larceny, and motor vehicle theft) declined by 7.7% in California and 7.9% in other states between 2019 and 2020. We observe larger increases in violent crime and smaller decreases in property crime outside California relative to within California.

TABLE 1. Crime rates per 100,000 in California and the rest of the United States for 2019 and 2020

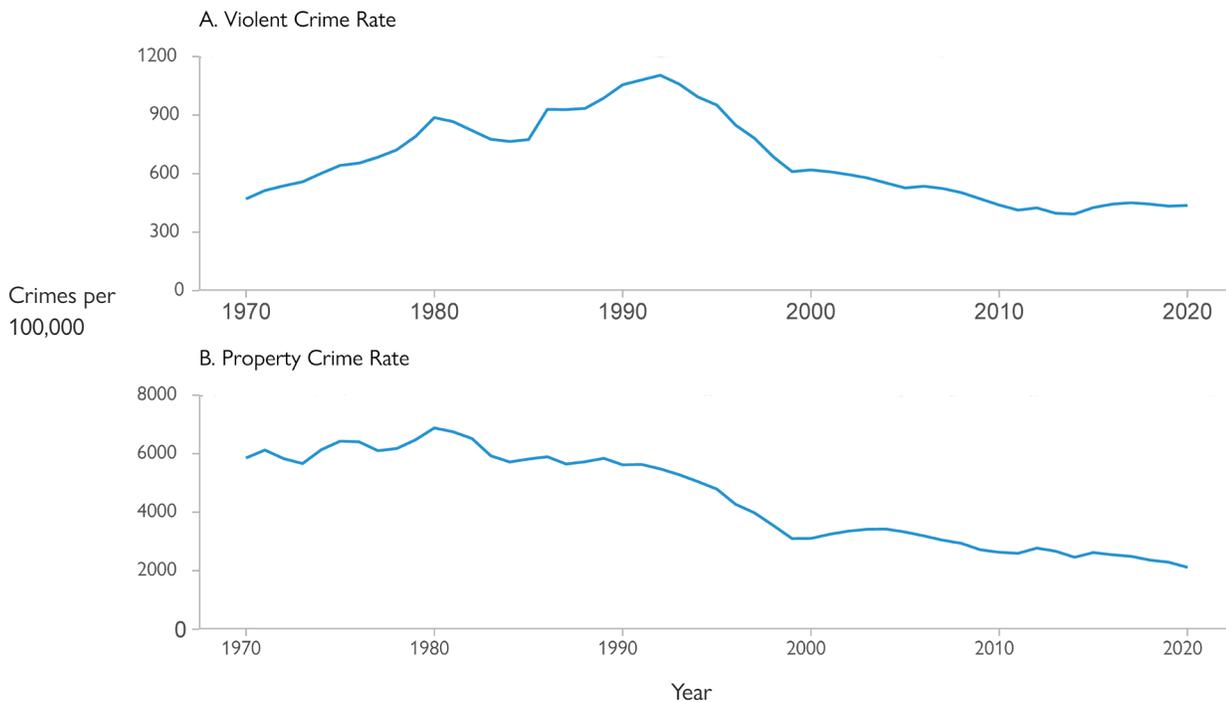
	CALIFORNIA			REST OF THE US		
	2019	2020	PERCENT CHANGE	2019	2020	PERCENT CHANGE
Violent	433.5	437.0	0.8%	357.4	370.9	3.8%
Homicide	4.2	5.5	31.0%	5.1	6.3	23.5%
Rape	36.8	33.8	-8.1%	43.4	36.9	-15.0%
Robbery	130.3	112.3	-13.8%	74.8	67.8	-9.4%
Aggravated Assault	262.2	285.4	8.8%	248.5	275.3	10.8%
Property	2,290.3	2,114.4	-7.7%	2,084.9	1,919.9	-7.9%
Burglary	379.4	365.4	-3.7%	335.1	304.6	-9.1%
Larceny	1,558.8	1,326.6	-14.9%	1,548.2	1,395.0	-9.9%
Motor vehicle theft	352.2	422.4	20.0%	201.6	218.5	8.4%

Source: Crime in California, 2020, California Department of Justice, 2019 Crime in the United States, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and 2020 Census data

Despite these changes, crime rates in California remain at historic lows. Crime rates in California and throughout the United States have dropped dramatically over the past three decades (Figure 1). In 2020, California's violent crime rate was 40% of the state's peak rate recorded in 1992. Similarly, the 2020 property crime rate for California was 30% of the

peak rate from 1980. California's 2019 homicide rate of 4.2 incidents per 100,000 marked the lowest recorded rate since 1966. The 2020 rate of 5.5 incidents per 100,000 is roughly equivalent to the rate last experienced in 2009. Since 2014, California's homicide rate has also been below the national average.

FIGURE 1: Historical crime rates in California, 1970–2020



Source: [Crime in California, 2020, California Department of Justice](#)

Homicides and aggravated assault increased in California and across the country in 2020

In California and other states, the increase in the cumulative violent crime rate can be attributed to increases in the homicide rate and aggravated assault rate (Table 1). In California, the homicide rate increased by 31% and the aggravated assault rate increased by 8.8%. In all other states, the homicide rate increased by 23.5% and the aggravated assault rate increased by 10.8%. Despite the slightly larger percentage increase, the absolute change in the homicide rate in California (an increase of 1.3 per 100,000) is similar to the change observed in other states (an increase of 1.2 per 100,000). In addition, the California homicide rate in 2020 (5.5 incidents per 100,000) is still lower than the homicide rate for all other states (6.3 per 100,000). In California, rape declined by 8.1%, while for other states, the decline was 15%. Robberies declined by 13.8% in California, while in other states robbery only declined by 9.4%.

California experienced a larger decrease in larceny and a larger increase in motor vehicle theft relative to other states

In California and in other states, drops in property crime rates are driven by declines in burglary, but more notably, by large

decreases in larceny theft (Table 1). In California, larceny declined by 14.9%, while for other states, the decline was only 9.9%. The one property crime where California experienced an increase is motor vehicle theft. Between 2019 and 2020, motor vehicle theft increased by 20%, compared with an increase in other states of only 8.4%.

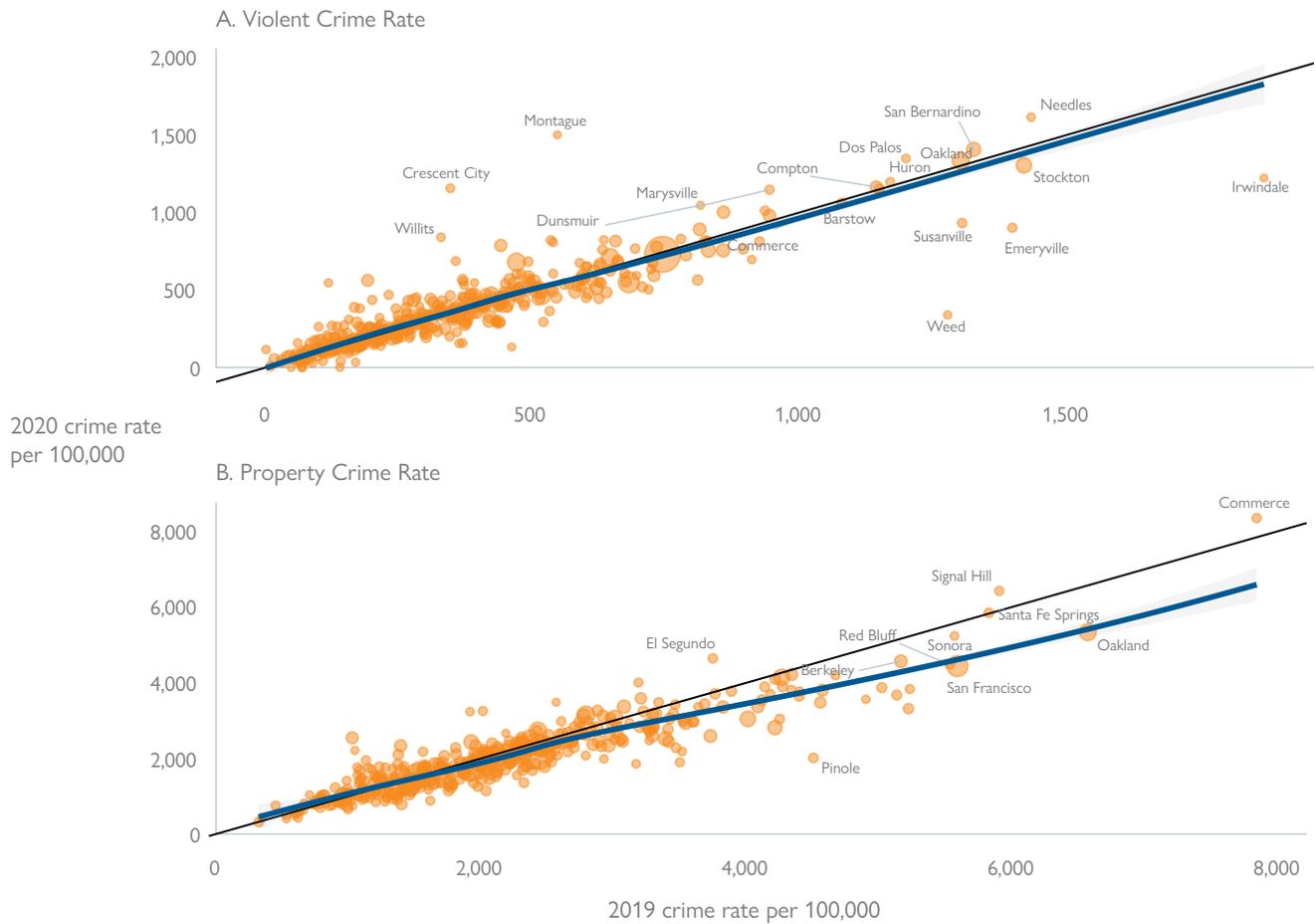
Within California, the largest changes in crime occurred in cities with high baseline crime rates

How did crime rates change between 2019 and 2020 among cities in California? In Figure 2, we plot 2020 crime rates against 2019 crime rates for 437 California cities with municipal police departments reporting crime data for 2019 and 2020. We have excluded nine cities with populations below 1,000 and removed outliers from Figures 2B, 3, and 4. The notes for each figure specify which outlier cities were removed. Cities above the 45 degree line experienced increases in crime, while those below experienced decreases. Cities that had higher baseline crime rates in 2019 are further to the right.

On average, violent crime was stable between 2019 and 2020. In [Figure 2A](#), California cities are evenly and tightly scattered around the line marking the points where 2020 crime rates equal 2019 crime rates (the black diagonal line). In other words, while we see small increases and small decreases in violent crime rates, the overall pattern suggests that violent crime rates in 2020 are fairly similar to what we observe for these cities in 2019. Moreover, the fitted average line (thick blue) closely follows the black line (denoting all points where the 2019 rate equals the 2020 rate).

Property crime rates fell in most cities, with the largest declines among cities with high baseline property crime rates in 2019 ([Figure 2.B](#)). For cities with 2019 property crime rates between 500 and 2,500 incidents per 100,000, the 2020 crime rates were on average similar to 2019 crime rates (as seen by the overlapping blue and black lines in that range). On the other hand, cities with 2019 property crime rates greater than 2,500 incidents per 100,000 tend to lie below the black line (as does the fitted average), indicating a decline in property crime in 2020.

FIGURE 2: Comparison of 2019 and 2020 crime rates for 437 California cities

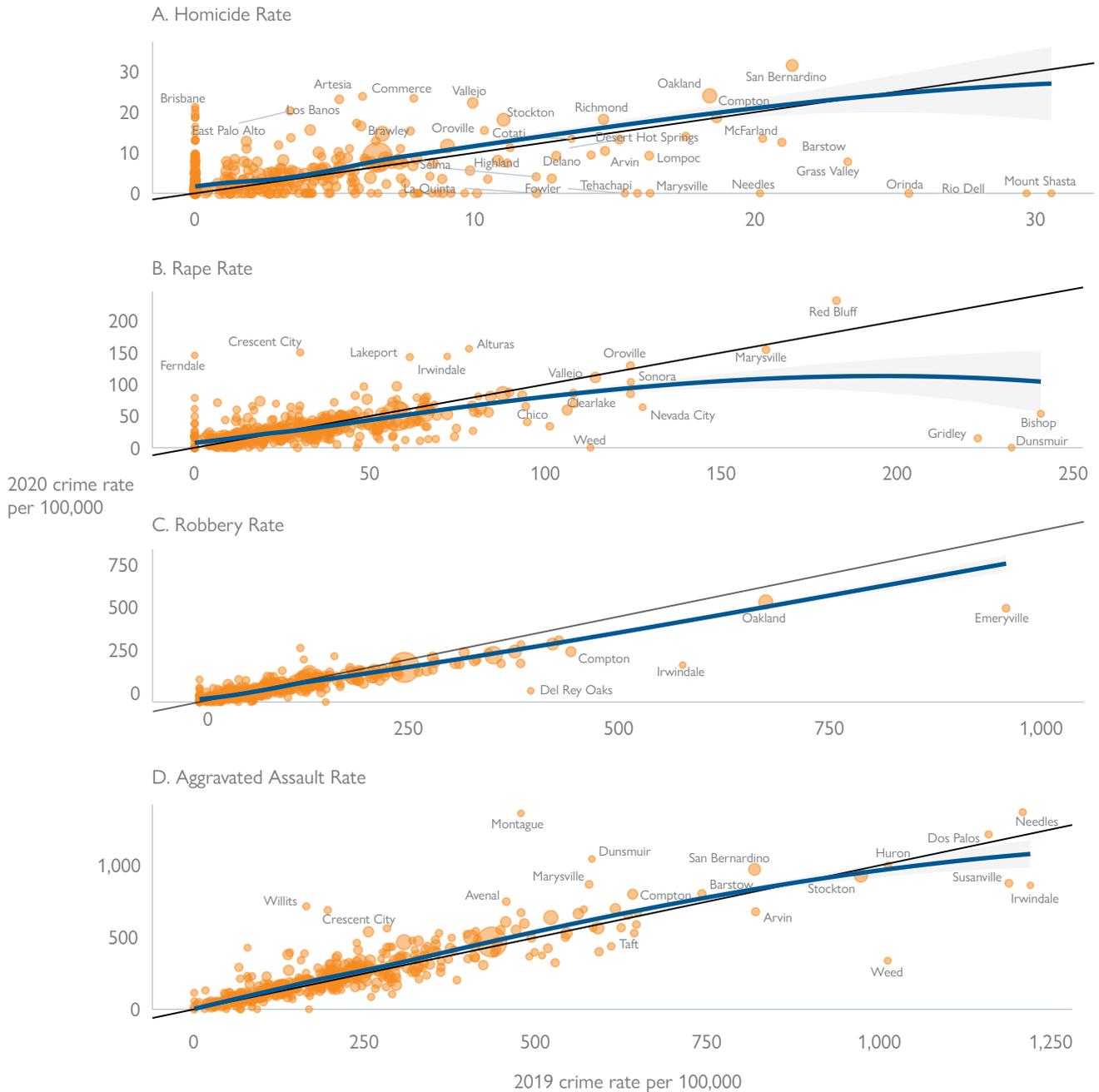


Notes. Each orange dot represents one California city. The larger dots represent a larger population for that city. The thick blue line fits a trend to the collection of data points, and takes into account the population size of the cities. A blue line above the black line indicates an overall increase in crime in 2020, a blue line below the black line indicates an overall decrease in crime in 2020, and a blue line similar to the black line indicates no change in crime in 2020. The graph omits nine cities with populations below 1,000. The cities of Emeryville and Irwindale were removed from Figure 2B, as both were clear outliers. Both cities had relatively high property crime rates in 2019 and experienced large declines in 2020. Source: [Crimes and Clearances data, California Department of Justice](#).

Overall trends in violent crime mask diverging trends in specific types of violent offenses (Figure 3). First, while the state's overall homicide rate increased, there is high variation in city-specific trends, with several cities seeing large declines, but several others seeing marked increases, especially among cities with higher baseline homicide rates in 2019. Second, while incidents of rape per 100,000 are down on average

statewide, there was substantial variation in city-level trends, though most cities with higher baseline rates in 2019 saw large decreases. Third, we observe fairly consistent declines in robbery across California cities, most notably in cities with the higher baseline rates in 2019. Finally, for aggravated assault we see cities evenly distributed around the horizontal line marking the points where 2019 crime rates equal 2020 crime rates.

FIGURE 3: Comparison of 2019 and 2020 violent crime rates for 437 California Cities

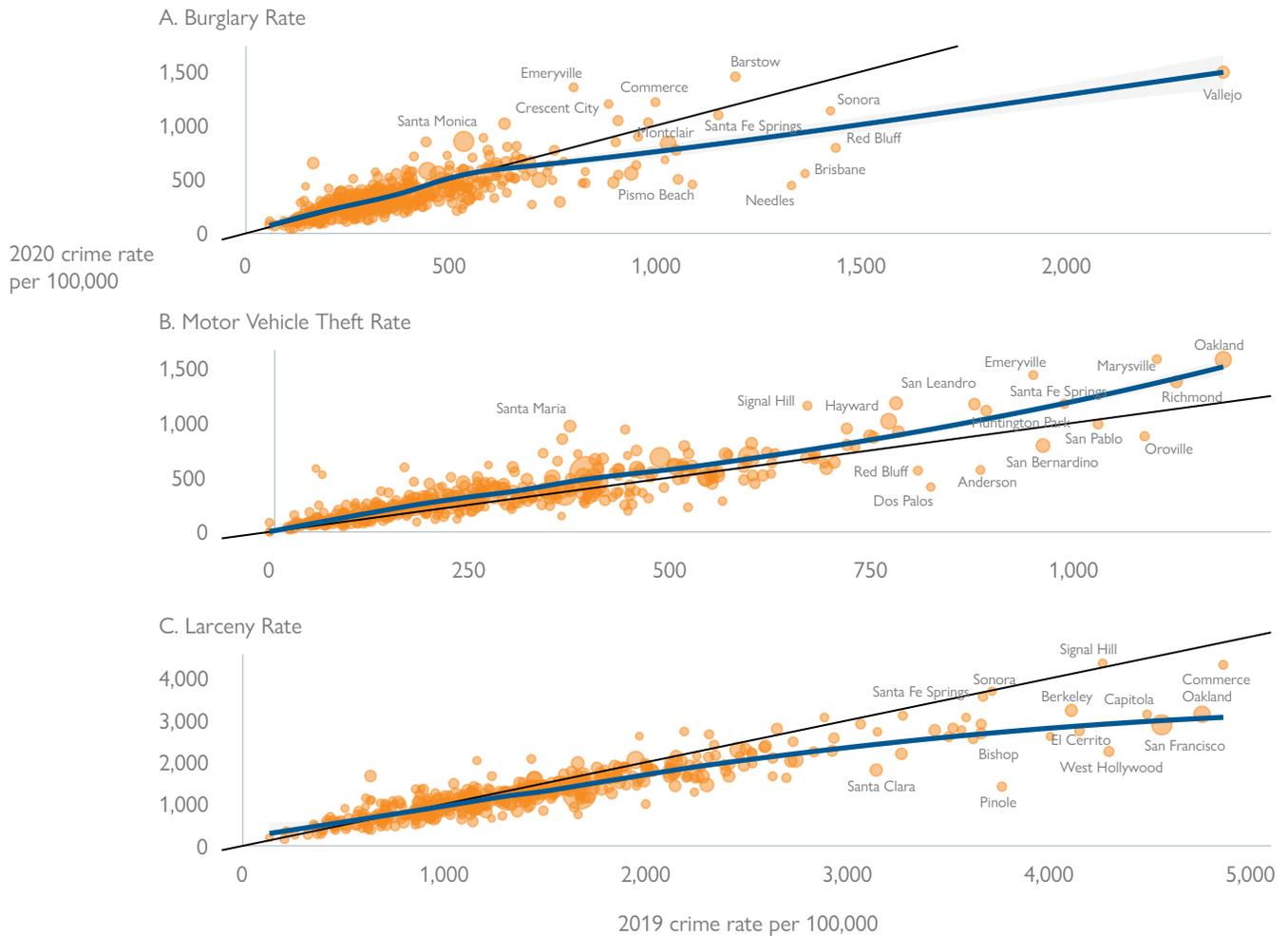


Notes. Each of the four graphs omit nine cities with populations below 1,000. Source: Crimes and Clearances data, California Department of Justice

The overall decrease in property crime also masks some differing trends in specific types of property crime: increases in motor vehicle theft are offset by large decreases in burglary and larceny (Figure 4). For burglary and larceny, the data suggest stability (or even slight increases) in crime rates for

cities with relatively low rates for these offenses in 2019, and large declines for most cities with high levels of these offenses in 2019. Bay Area cities, including Richmond, Oakland, and Hayward, saw the largest increases in motor vehicle theft.

FIGURE 4: Comparison of 2019 and 2020 property crime rates for 437 California Cities



Notes. Each of the three graphs omit nine cities with populations below 1,000. In addition, the following outlier cities are removed from specific visualizations; Irwindale from the burglary graph, Emeryville and Irwindale from the larceny graph, and Irwindale and Commerce from the motor vehicle theft graph. Source: [Crimes and Clearances data, California Department of Justice](#)

CONCLUSION

To summarize, overall violent crime rates in California increased slightly between 2019 and 2020 while property crime declined substantially. California experienced similar trends in both violent and property crime as compared to all other states. Behind these aggregates, however, are important changes: homicide, aggravated assault, and motor vehicle theft increased, while rape, robbery, burglary, and

larceny theft decreased. The observed increases in homicide and aggravated assault in California generally reflect national trends, while the observed increase in motor vehicle theft and decrease in larceny are notably larger in California compared to all other states. Though any increase in crime is concerning, crime rates have declined in California over the last three decades and continue to remain at historically low levels.

METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

The FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) data includes data from over 18,000 law enforcement agencies who participate voluntarily and submit their crime data either through a state UCR program or directly to the FBI's UCR Program. The goal is to provide reliable crime statistics to researchers, media, and the public. The California Department of Justice (DOJ) data presents an overview of the criminal justice system in California through crime data provided by reporting California law enforcement agencies. All data used in this brief is publicly available.

Table 1 was created with [UCR data](#), [California DOJ data](#), and [Census data](#). The UCR data used includes crime data for the entire United States in 2019 and the percent change in crime rates from 2019 to 2020 for the entire United States, while the [California DOJ data](#) used includes crime data specifically for California in 2019 and 2020. The Census data was used for the US population in 2020. Figure 1 was created with California DOJ data of annual crime rates, while Figures 2, 3, and 4 were created through the use of [Crimes and Clearances California DOJ data](#) (reported as part of the UCR program) and Census data, specifically the 2019 population numbers for California cities. From California DOJ data, we obtained annual crime totals from each reporting law enforcement agency. The DOJ data was filtered to only include municipal crime data, excluding any other reporting law enforcement data (e.g. California Highway Patrol, Sheriff's offices, or BART police), as we were focusing on calculating crime rates by geographic region. Some municipal data is not included in the UCR data, as some municipalities without their own municipal police department may contract with the county sheriff or other police authority. Hence, we are unable to isolate or disaggregate the crimes of certain cities and include those cities in our data. Additionally, some law enforcement agencies could have elected to not report crime data for either, or both, 2019 and 2020. We merged the

filtered data with city-level population data from the 2019 US Census. Twenty-four cities in the Census data did not have corresponding crime data available for the aforementioned reasons, leaving us with a total of 437 municipalities for analysis. We used this data in order to compute the crime rates used in Figures 2, 3, and 4. The total population in the 437 cities amounts to 32.2 million people, representing approximately 80% of the population of California.

We remove nine cities with a population less than 1,000 from the figures. The cities removed are Bradbury, Dorris, Tulelake, Etna, Industry, Isleton, Vernon, Sand City, and Fort Jones. For these cities, small increases or decreases in the number of crimes often result in very large changes in the crime rate. Including these small cities in the graphs changes the scale of the visualizations, making it difficult to observe trends among the majority of cities. Additionally, as explained in the figure notes, we removed a few cities (never more than three) from the property crime figures (figure 2B and figure 4). These cities were clear and visible outliers in the property crime plots, with generally high 2019 property crime rates and large declines in 2020.

For a fuller description of how crime has changed within California since the pandemic, please reference [our Crime Trends Testimony](#) on this topic, prepared for the California Committee on the Revision of the Penal Code.

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