

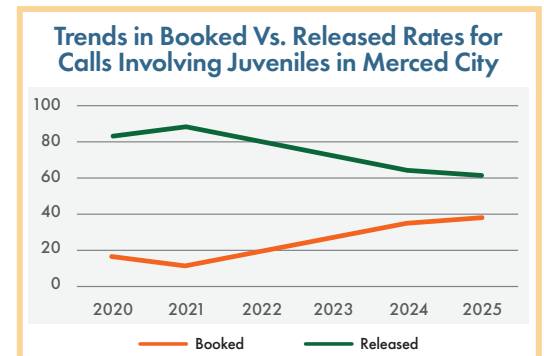
Navegando Oportunidades, Apoyando Hogares Saludables Hope (NOAHS Hope)

Cultiva Central Valley @ United Way of Merced County Empowering Latino Families

THE CHALLENGE

Law enforcement involvement in youth behavioral incidents in Merced remains high. Encounters rooted in mental health challenges, trauma, or adolescent behavioral issues are often addressed through policing rather than behavioral health interventions, increasing the likelihood that youth enter the criminal justice system. In some cases, these encounters escalate and result in serious harm.

While youth arrests declined between 2020 and 2025, the percentage of encounters between the Merced Police Department and youth that resulted in booking into the criminal justice system more than doubled — increasing from 16.5% in 2020 to 38.3% in 2025. Additionally, the percentage of arrested youth subsequently referred for an involuntary 5150 psychiatric hold also more than doubled, rising from 10.5% in 2020 to 26% in 2025. These trends suggest that youth encounters with law enforcement are increasingly leading to criminal justice involvement and psychiatric holds, even when behavioral health services may be more appropriate.¹



Source: City of Merced Police Department

WHY IT MATTERS

As long as access to mental health services remains tied to law enforcement systems, many Latino, immigrant and farmworker families in the Central Valley may be reluctant to seek support. Through grassroots leadership and culturally responsive solutions, Cultiva Central Valley, in partnership with United Way of Merced County, aims to disrupt systems that perpetuate classism, racism, trauma and isolation within Latino, immigrant and farmworker communities.

THE SOLUTION

This policy effort seeks a decision by the Merced City Council to require all Merced Police Department officers and dispatchers to complete a 40-hour Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training program, funded through revenues generated by Measure Y, the city's 2018 Commercial Cannabis Business Tax.

The initiative also aims to strengthen diversion to behavioral health services and shift police response practices toward verbal de-escalation and connection to supportive services.

Desired Outcomes:

- Increased likelihood that responding officers are trained in CIT
- Increase referrals to behavioral health services
- Reduced use of involuntary psychiatric holds
- Fewer juveniles entering the criminal justice system
- Reduced in recidivism



1. Source: City of Merced Police Department data (2020–2025), analyzed by UC Merced.