



STOP LYING ABOUT JUSTICE REFORM IN CALIFORNIA

New crime data refutes false narratives that are misinforming Californians as a crucial election approaches

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Research Brief

Introduction

Media reports, politicians, and law enforcement lobbies¹ are manufacturing a false picture of crime as Californians prepare to vote. Backers of anti-justice reform policies are falsely blaming liberal reforms and prosecutors for a non-existent “crime wave.” The anti-reform campaign is also exploiting public anger that retail thieves are “getting away with crime,” while the media fails to hold law enforcement and conservative jurisdictions accountable for their own failed practices.

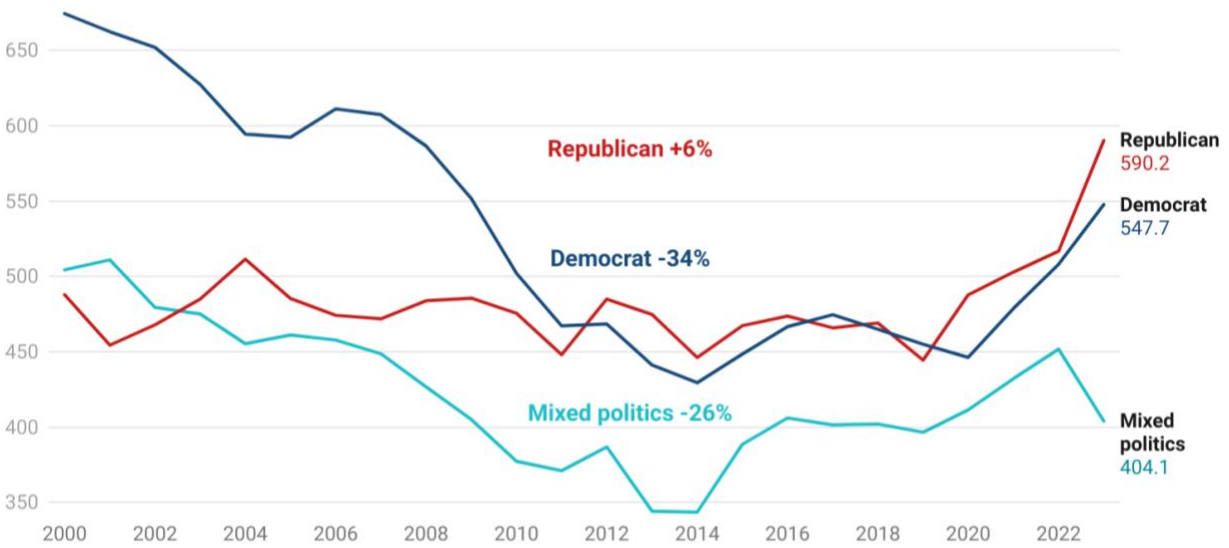
California’s criminal justice statistics (BSCC 2024; CDCR 2024; DOJ 2024) clearly show:

- 1) California’s 23 **Republican-voting counties* consistently suffer worse trends in murder, violent crime, gun violence, and drug abuse** than the 25 Democratic-voting counties or the 10 counties with mixed-voting patterns.
- 2) **California’s conservative inland and rural counties suffer the state’s worst homicide trends.**
- 3) All counties show **similar property crime trends and rates.**
- 4) **California’s liberal counties² have gotten tougher on crime, especially in the post-2010 reform era**, incarcerating a greater share of people arrested – even though conservative counties have long incarcerated a greater share of their overall populations.
- 5) The real reason the public has the impression that retail thieves are “getting away with crime” is not reforms, but because **law enforcement in all jurisdictions, regardless of politics, are making arrests in far fewer crimes today than 30 years ago.** Law enforcement’s plunging “crime clearance rate” will be detailed in an upcoming report.

¹ For a few examples of many, see Jones & Gallagher (2024); Kasparian (2024); Lambert (2023).

² See Method.

Figure 1. Violent crimes increased in conservative counties, decreased in liberal ones, 2000-2023. Rates shown are per 100,000 population in each area.



Numbers are rates per 100,000 population. For counties by politics, see endnote.*
 Chart: Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice • Source: DOJ 2024; DOF 2024. • Created with Datawrapper

- **Democratic-voting counties show the largest declines in violent crime.**

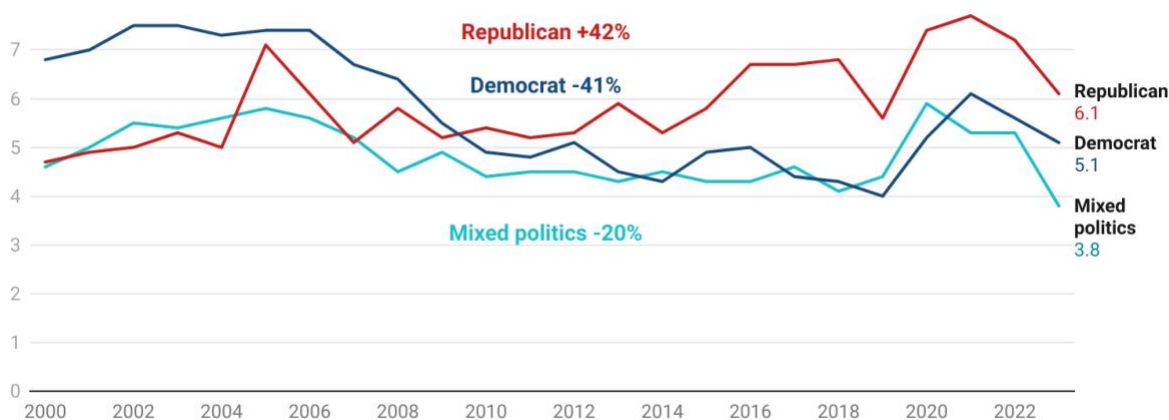
Figures 1-3 show that crime is not soaring in California, though with some complications. The record low rates during the COVID-19 shutdown in 2020 have been followed by a return to pre-2010 rates for violent crime, and trends in mixed-politics counties differ from those in Republican and Democratic counties. These trends are not caused by reform measures that took effect seven to 10 years earlier, nor are liberal DAs to blame. In fact, the state’s most liberal counties consistently show the largest declines in crime and the lowest levels of nearly every crime, especially violence. These liberal counties include the supposedly crime, gang, drug, and violence ridden cities of Oakland, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Meanwhile, crime has increased in California’s conservative-voting, generally rural areas.

- **Conservative inland and rural counties suffer the worst homicide trends.**

California’s county homicide trends are the most shocking when separated into Republican-, Democratic- and mixed-politics-voting. Previously, California’s urban areas suffered highly publicized crises of gun violence, especially in the 1990s, including sporadic outbreaks in cities such as Oakland amid overall urban murder declines. However, California’s worst homicide trends and rates are now in conservative inland and rural counties, especially heavily Republican Kern County.

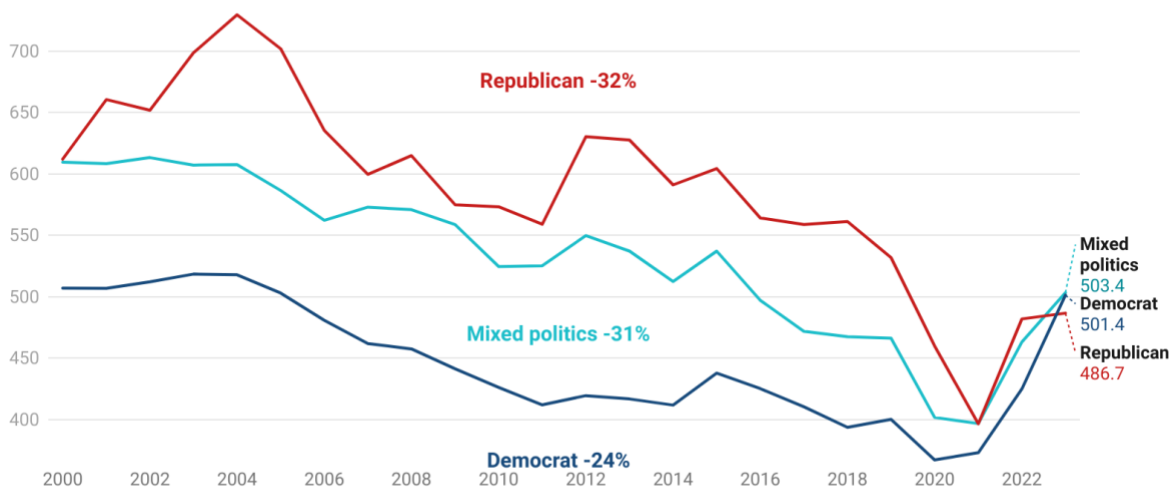
- **Since 2000, homicide rates have increased an average of 42% in conservative counties compared to an average decline of 41% in liberal counties.**

Figure 2. Homicides increase in conservative counties, decrease in liberal ones. Rates shown are per 100,000 population.



Numbers are rates per 100,000 population. For counties by politics, see endnote.*
 Chart: Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice • Source: DOJ 2024; DOF 2024. • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 3. Shoplifting/non-residential burglaries decreased faster in conservative counties than in liberal ones, but remain at similar levels, 2000-2023. Rates shown in per 100,000 population.



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 Chart: Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice • Source: DOJ 2024; DOF 2024. • Created with Datawrapper

- **Retail theft offense rates and trends remain strikingly similar across all sets of counties, regardless of politics.**

Only one type of crime shows slightly more favorable trends in conservative areas: shoplifting and non-residential (mainly commercial) burglary. However, media and viral-video sensationalizing have thoroughly misrepresented this offense.

California’s Republican counties had the highest shoplifting/burglary rates in the pre-2020 era and now have rates comparable to those in other counties. The similar rates of shoplifting/burglary

offenses seem counterintuitive, since Democratic areas have large cities with high-density retail districts. Figure 3 shows that contrary to viral anecdotes, shoplifting/burglary plummeted in all three county types after California began adopting major reforms from 2011 through 2019. All county categories then experienced shoplifting increases as California re-opened from COVID-19 restrictions. This post-COVID-19 shoplifting increase, which occurred long after the state largest criminal justice reforms took effect, was somewhat more pronounced in Democratic areas. Still, 2023 rates remain similar across all three county sets.

- **Republican areas incarcerate a greater share of their overall populations, but Democratic counties incarcerate a greater share of people arrested.**

California’s conservative and liberal areas operate under the same state laws, but counties implement these policies in starkly different ways. While county incarceration rates have similarly declined regardless of local politics, conservative counties traditionally have incarcerated 60-70% more of their populations than have liberal areas (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Incarceration rates (adult and youth imprisonments plus jailings) are much higher in conservative than in liberal areas, though trends are similar, 2000-2023.

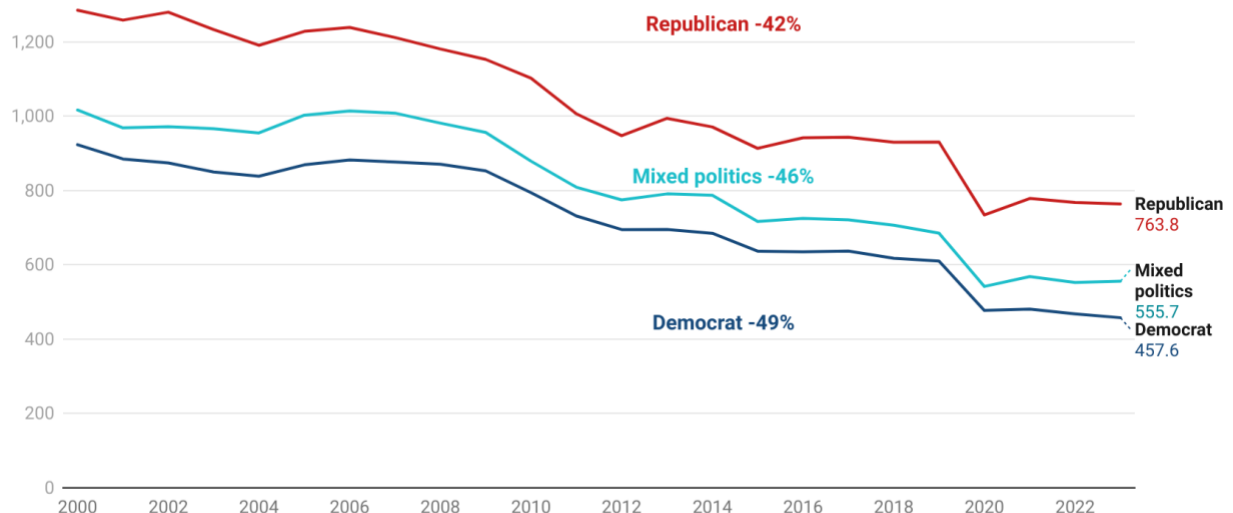


Chart: Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice • Source: BSCC (2024); CDCR (2024); DOJ (2024); DOF (2024). • Created with Datawrapper

However, this is not because liberal areas’ prosecutors and judges are “soft on crime,” or that reforms since 2010 have made it harder to “hold criminals accountable” (as measured by an individual’s chance of incarceration). Just the opposite. Once arrested, the odds of being convicted and incarcerated are nearly equal regardless of whether the arrested person is convicted in a conservative, liberal, or mixed-politics jurisdiction (Figure 5).

Not only are liberal-county prosecutors and courts just as “tough on crime” today as conservative-county ones, but both got tougher during the reform era. From 2010 through 2023, an arrested person’s odds of being incarcerated increased by 20% in liberal areas, 16% in conservative areas, and 11% in mixed politics counties. In short, liberal-county DAs incarcerated

arrested persons more often than conservative-county ones. The next section explains how these trends have developed.

Figure 5. Incarceration rates increased more in liberal than conservative areas during the post-2010 reform era and are similar regardless of county politics. Rates are per 1,000 arrests.

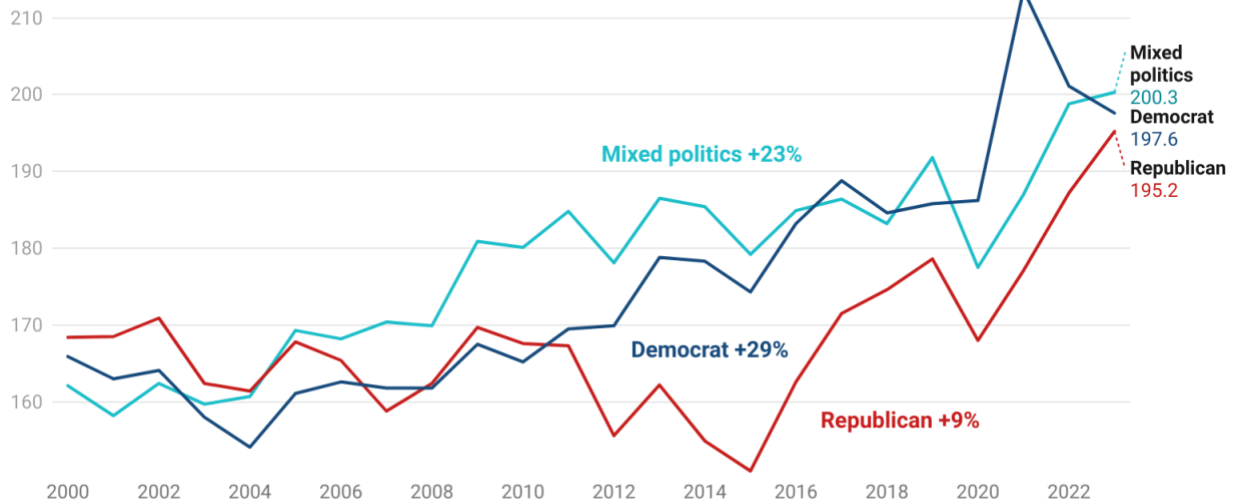


Chart: Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice • Source: BSCC (2024); CDCR (2024); DOJ (2024); DOF (2024). • Created with Datawrapper

- **Prison and jail populations have decreased because of falling crime and low police clearance rates that present DAs with far fewer arrested persons to prosecute.**

What, then, explains why property crimes, violent crimes, and incarcerations all have fallen even as incarcerations per arrest have risen substantially? How can conservative areas be incarcerating more people per capita while liberal areas send a higher proportion of arrested persons to jail or prison? The reason is that police are clearing (solving) far fewer crimes reported to them today than in the past, which will be explained in greater detail in a following report.

Conclusion

California's criminal justice data consistently contradicts the prevailing false narratives about crime and progressive reforms. Criminal justice reforms have not increased crime in California. Law enforcement can still hold arrested persons responsible for crime. Compared to liberal areas, conservative counties have higher crime, violence (especially homicide), and related trends despite incarcerating a greater share of their populations. Vital statistics on deaths from homicides, guns, and drug/alcohol overdoses reinforce these conservative-area failures. Californians are safer from crime, drugs, violence, and other ills when fewer people are incarcerated and with criminal justice reforms in place.

Method

Murder, homicide, shoplifting, and other crime statistics are from the California Department of Justice's Open Justice tabulations (DOJ, 2024). Imprisonments are provided by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR, 2024). Jailing statistics are compiled by the Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC, 2024). Rates are calculated per 100,000 population for each year and set of counties, sorted by politics, * for 2000 (before 2010's justice reform era) through 2023. Trends are calculated by using regression equations that incorporate all years' values into a trendline, not by using beginning and ending years, which typically are "cherry-picked" by interests to produce the desired result and thus are not credible.

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Please note: Jurisdictions submit their data to the official state or nationwide databases maintained by appointed governmental bodies. While every effort is made to review data for accuracy and to correct information upon revision, CJCJ cannot be responsible for data reporting errors made at the county, state, or national level.

Contact: For more information about this topic or to schedule an interview, please contact CJCJ Communications at (415) 621-5661 x. 103 or cjcjmedia@cjca.org.

* Republican counties are the 23 that voted Republican in the presidential election of 2020 and Republican in the 2022 gubernatorial election: Amador, Calaveras, Colusa, Del Norte, El Dorado, Glenn, Kern, Kings, Lassen, Madera, Mariposa, Modoc, Placer, Plumas, Shasta, Sierra, Siskiyou, Sutter, Tehama, Trinity, Tulare, Tuolumne, and Yuba (population 2.9 million total). Mixed-politics counties are the 10 that voted Democratic in the presidential election of 2020 but Republican in the gubernatorial race in 2022: Butte, Fresno, Inyo, Lake, Merced, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Joaquin, Stanislaus (population 10.9 million total). Democratic counties are the remaining 25 that voted Democratic in 2020 and in the 2022 governor's race: Alameda, Alpine, Contra Costa, Humboldt, Imperial, Los Angeles, Marin, Mendocino, Mono, Monterey, Napa, Nevada, Sacramento, San Benito, San Diego, San Francisco, San Luis Obispo, San Mateo, Santa Barbara, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Solano, Sonoma, Ventura, and Yolo (population 25.4 million total). See California Secretary of State (2024).