

# More Law Enforcement Spending Accompanies Worse, Not Improved Crime-solving



***Rising law enforcement inefficiency—not reforms—is the key issue affecting Californians' safety.***

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Research Brief

## Introduction

Reform critics often misreport crime as soaring when, in fact, it has plummeted to record lows. The real issue contributing to Californians' growing concern about retail theft and "smash and grab" incidents is not policy reform but the fact that **California's police and sheriff departments are spending significantly more money and solving far fewer crimes than they did decades ago.** Despite unprecedented funding levels, clearance rates (the share of crimes police solve by making an arrest) have dropped by 41%—from 22.3% in 1990 to just 13.7% in 2023. Law enforcement groups argue that fewer officers on the street are to blame (Sheeler, 2024), but this explanation overlooks a larger issue.

**Figure 1. Arrests per officer and total law enforcement staff in California: a 70% decline, 1990-2023**

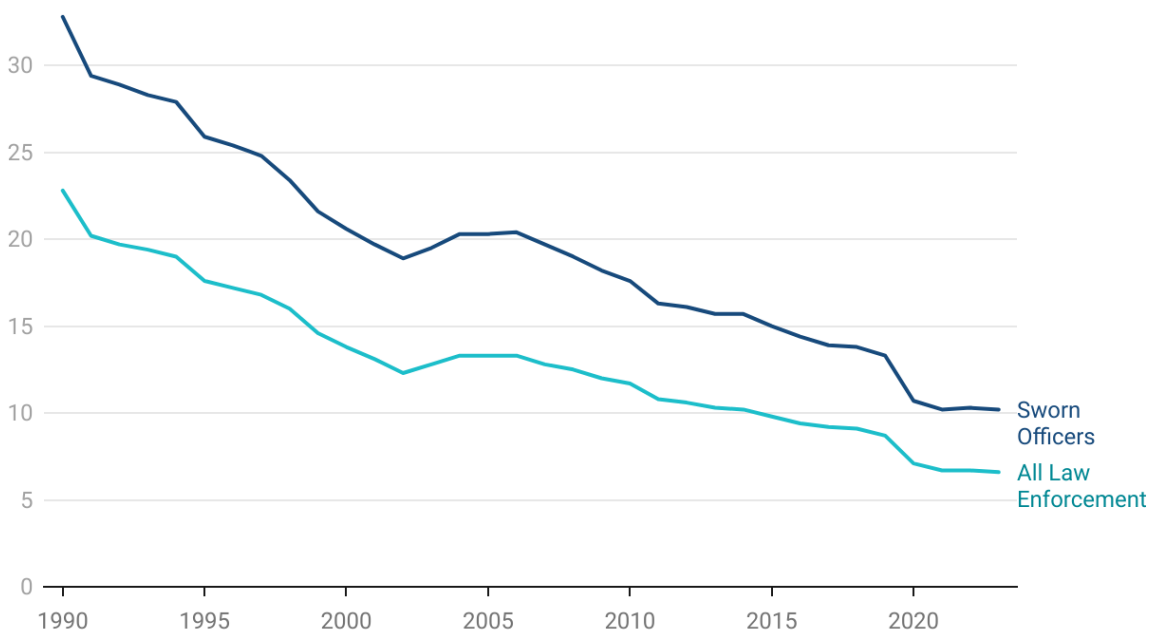


Chart: Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice • Source: Source: Controller 2024; DOJ 2024 • Created with Datawrapper

### • Police have far fewer crimes to investigate today.

Reported violent and property crimes in California have dropped by 45%, from nearly 2 million cases in 1990 to just over 1 million in 2023.<sup>1</sup> Police and sheriff's agencies now have 2.3 times more sworn officers, 2.4 times more total

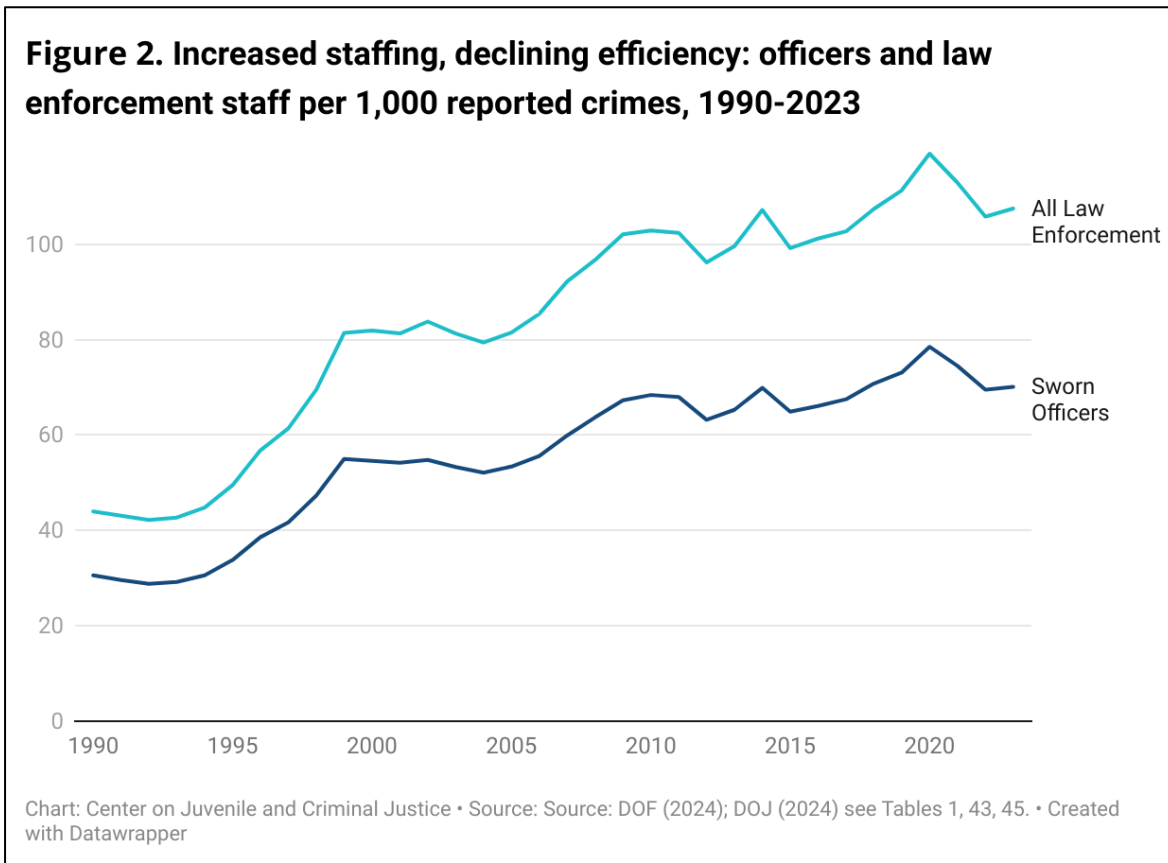
<sup>1</sup> In 1990, 1,972,835 Part I violent and property "index" offenses (named because they are chosen to simulate crime as a whole) were reported to law enforcement agencies; in 2005, 1,374,984; in 2023, 1,088,679.

personnel, and 3.6 times more funding to investigate each reported crime than in 1990—yet efficiency continues to plummet.

- **The average police officer/sheriff’s deputy now makes far fewer arrests per year.**

In 1990, each sworn officer made an average of 32.8 arrests per year, or 22.8 arrests per total law enforcement staff member (see Figure 1). In 2023, these figures fell significantly—each sworn officer averaged just 10.2 arrests annually (a 69% decline), with 6.6 arrests per staff member (a 71% decline).

Why do law enforcement agencies require substantially more officers and support staff to handle fewer crimes than 30 years ago? Law enforcement officers should be solving more crimes, not fewer. Crime has dropped significantly. Agencies benefit from expanded civilian staffing. There has also been a 408% increase in funding relative to arrests. **The substantial increase in law enforcement’s per capita spending should have strengthened their capacity to solve crimes, not weakened it.**



- **Law enforcement’s declining effectiveness is the problem, not their lack of resources.**

While the number of sworn officers and deputies per capita has decreased slightly and the total number of law enforcement personnel has increased by just 0.7%, per capita department spending has surged by 46% since 1990.<sup>2</sup> The stark 41% drop in crime clearances over this period (CJCJ, 2024) should not result from this slight decrease in sworn officers per capita or increased overall staffing and funding. Moreover, the number of sworn officers and law enforcement staff has grown substantially when compared to reported crimes. Since 1990, total law enforcement staff per 1,000 reported crimes has risen 144% and sworn officers per 1,000 crimes grew 129% (Figure 2).

<sup>2</sup> Spending on law enforcement rose from \$13.2 billion (\$444 per capita) in 1990 to \$26.5 billion in 2022 (\$677 per capita, a 46% increase in constant 2023 dollars adjusted for inflation and population growth).

- **Justice reforms are wrongly blamed for law enforcement failures.**

If viral videos of retail thefts and sensational claims have led the public and lawmakers to believe that individuals are "getting away with crime," the fault does not lie with soft-on-crime policies or lenient prosecutors. Incarcerations per arrest are higher today than in the "tough on crime" 1990s, even accounting for temporary COVID-related reductions (CJCJ 2024).

Police departments consume more resources than ever while solving fewer crimes. This is a crisis of resource misallocation and operational inefficiency. Officers might also be protesting reforms through intentional work slowdowns. This unprecedented inefficiency is enough to erode public confidence in law enforcement's ability to protect communities.

The steep decline in police performance, despite rising costs, demands serious scrutiny. Local jurisdictions should refocus police efforts on core law enforcement duties rather than diverting them to non-criminal tasks.

- **Increased police department funding is associated with worse crime-solving and more crime.**

Our 20-year analysis of California's 51 major cities shows that increased law enforcement budgets and personnel correlate with significantly worse crime clearance rates and higher crime incidence (see Appendix).<sup>3</sup> This trend has occurred both before the justice reform era (2003-2009) and during recent reform years (2010-2022), indicating that reforms have had little to no impact on these outcomes.<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion

For decades, law enforcement lobbyists argued that additional funding and officers would improve community safety and solve more crimes. Yet the data tell a different story: increased spending, officers, and staffing have coincided with fewer crimes solved and higher crime rates. This alarming trend long preceded the reform era and has continued throughout, proving that reforms are not responsible.

These failed investments have exposed a deep-seated inefficiency crisis in law enforcement that demands urgent attention and accountability. Local governments and policymakers must rethink public safety policies, redirect resources toward proven solutions, and hold police agencies accountable for their performance. Now is the time to reassess law enforcement investments and demand results—not excuses.

## References

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<sup>3</sup> Data sources include comprehensive reports from all 51 major California cities of 100,000 population or more that reported police budgets, staffing levels, and crime trends for all years over the 2003-2022 period. Budgets were adjusted for inflation and population changes to ensure comparability. Crime clearance rates refer to the percentage of reported crimes solved by law enforcement, while crime incidence rates refer to the number of reported crimes per capita.

<sup>4</sup> The analysis distinguishes between the pre-reform (2003-2009) and reform (2010-2022) periods, based on the timeline of California's significant criminal justice reforms.

Sheeler, A. (2024). California cops get billions in funding, yet solve just 13% of crimes, new report says. *Sacramento Bee*, 14 February 2024. At: <https://www.sacbee.com/news/politics-government/capitol-alert/article285430262.html>.

**Appendix: The paradox of police spending: Higher budgets and staffing are associated with fewer crimes solved and rising crime incidence.**

All 51 cities						
Part I clearance rate	Part I Per capita police					
	Crime rate	Spending	Officers	Other staff	Year	City size
2003-2009 (pre-reform)	-.464**	-.233**	-.163**	-.191**	0.028	-0.065
2010-2022 (post-reform)	-.399**	-.219**	-.107**	-.091*	-.347**	-.086*
2003-2022	-.332**	-.224**	-.078*	-.066*	-.329**	-.081**
Part I crime rate	Part I Per capita police					
	Clearance rate	Spending	Officers	Other staff	Year	City size
2003-2009 (pre-reform)	-.464**	.280**	.330**	.372**	-.167**	0.052
2010-2022 (post-reform)	-.399**	.311**	.374**	.383**	-.115**	0.062
2003-2022	-.332**	.275**	.385**	.414**	-.284**	0.051

\*\*p < 0.01, 2-tailed; \*p < 0.05, 2-tailed (significance).

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

**Interpretation of correlation data**

The table above presents correlation coefficients between various law enforcement metrics (such as clearance rates, crime rates, spending, and staffing) for California’s 51 major cities across two time periods: pre-reform (2003-2009) and post-reform (2010-2022).

- Clearance Rates: In both time periods, there is a **negative correlation between crime rates and clearance rates**, meaning that as crime rates increased, clearance rates declined. **Increased police spending and**

**staffing did not correlate with improved clearance rates.** In fact, both spending and officer/staff numbers were negatively associated with clearance rates, suggesting that more resources have not led to more effective crime-solving.

- **Crime Rates:** Across both periods, higher per capita police spending and staffing levels were **positively correlated with crime rates**, meaning that departments that spent more on law enforcement had higher crime rates.
- **Overall Trends (2003-2022):** Over the entire period (2003-2022), the data show a **consistent negative correlation between increased resources and police efficiency** (as measured by clearance rates), highlighting an inefficiency in resource allocation within law enforcement.

The correlation between increased spending and higher crime rates reinforces the need for a critical re-evaluation of how law enforcement resources are allocated and utilized.

These correlations suggest that simply increasing police budgets and personnel does not lead to more effective crime-solving or safer communities. The data point to a deeper issue within California's law enforcement agencies—where additional resources have not translated into better public safety outcomes. These findings call for a reassessment of law enforcement strategies and resource allocation to address systemic inefficiencies.

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](mailto:cjcjmedia@cjca.org).