

STOP LYING ABOUT CALIFORNIA

Reforms Did Not Bring More Crime. Rates Are Near Record Lows.

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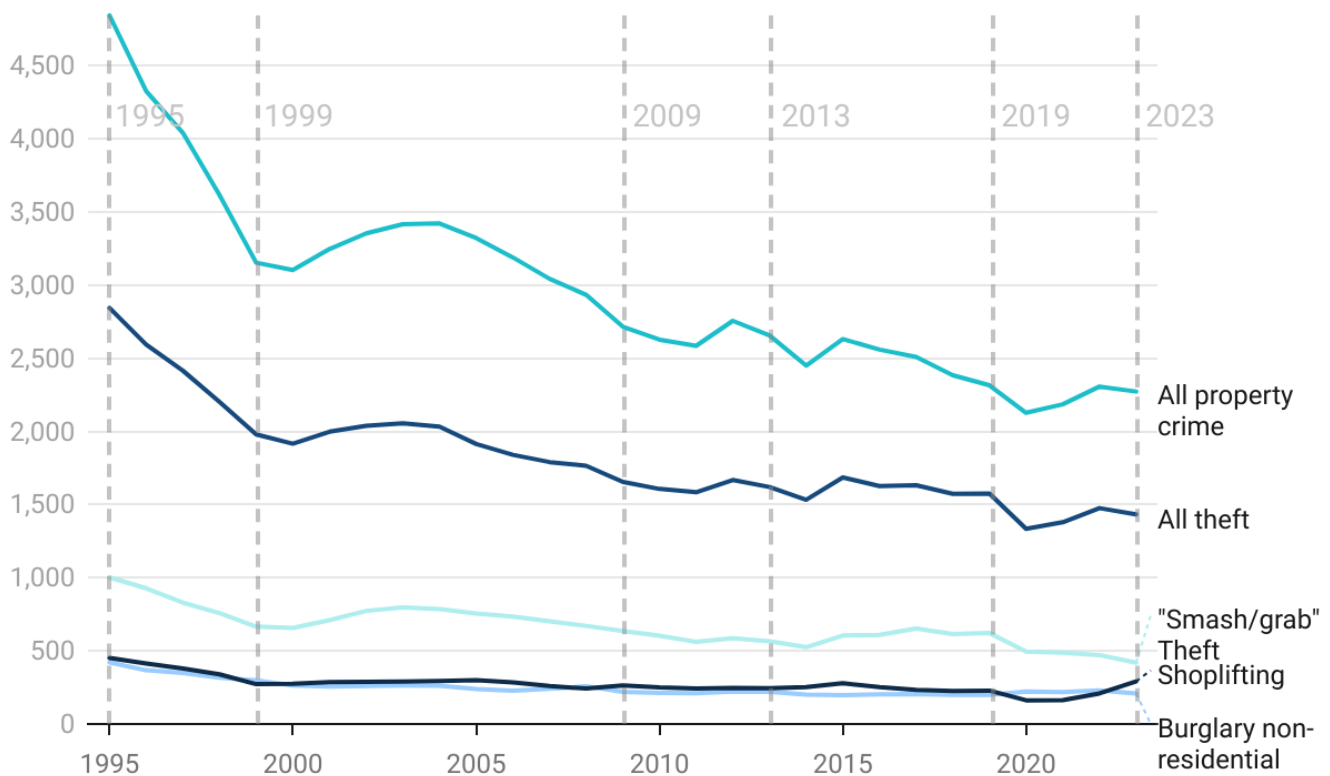


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Research Brief

Both right- and left-wing sources are peddling a false narrative that California is awash in unheard-of crime and drug abuse, worse than anywhere else, and liberal reforms and prosecutors are at fault. These blatant distortions, perpetuated by *Fox News* (Perino, 2024), the Heritage Foundation (Colton, 2023; Males, 2023), Riverside County Sheriff Chad Bianco (Miller, 2024), *The Young Turks* (Kasparian, 2024) and many others, recite inflammatory anecdotes, quips, and selective, deliberately misleading “statistics” from anti-reform entities. This report is the first of a series that challenges these deceptions by presenting comprehensive data from standard sources.

Figure 1. Property offenses reported per 100,000 population, California, 1995-2023.



Note: “Smash/grab theft” is from breaking into vehicles. The following years represent key moments in criminal justice policy over the last three decades: 1995, the most recent baseline crime levels during the pre-reform period, when arrest and incarceration rates were high; 1999, the last year before the pioneering measure, Proposition 36, reforming drug-misdemeanor sentences; 2009, the last year before the criminal justice reforms associated with drug decriminalization and Realignment’s prison population reductions began taking effect; 2013, the last full year before Proposition 47, which reformed non-violent drug and property offenses; 2019, the last year before the COVID pandemic and large-scale shutdowns strongly affected crime policies and trends; and 2023, the most recent crime data available and one of the first full years following the post-pandemic reopening.

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

- **California’s Part I property crime rates declined during a period of transformative reform.**

Statistics released this month by the California Department of Justice, clearly show that property crime rates now stand near record lows following a period of major criminal justice reform that includes Public Safety Realignment

(2011), Proposition 47 (2014), and Proposition 57 (2016). Figure 1 shows 29 years of the latest California Department of Justice data (DOJ, 2024) for five relevant offenses as reported by more than 98% of the state's law enforcement agencies. The data show that property crime rates have fallen by 53% since 1995 (DOJ, 2024). Part I property crime, which mostly consists of felonies, declined by 13% from 2009 through 2023, the criminal justice reform period.¹ After a brief uptick in 2015, the types of crime most affected by Prop 47's reforms² generally fell through 2019, a period when Prop 47's effects should be most visible. After 2019, COVID disruptions have interfered with crime trends, as have changes in policing strategies and priorities.

- **2023 crime statistics are muddled by recent political, social, and administrative changes.**

Several factors complicate recent data reporting and may have inflated 2023's already-low property crime statistics. These include the end of COVID-19 restrictions, which had temporarily suppressed most types of crime; a change in how police agencies report data to the FBI, which may have boosted rates for certain low-level offenses; evidence that some police agencies over-reported statistics (Echeverria, 2024); and an effort by retailers and law enforcement interest groups to portray California as a hot-bed of retail theft, which may have affected reporting for certain property offenses such as shoplifting.

The first major complication, the COVID pandemic and related public restrictions accompanied reductions in crime (other than homicide and assault) in 2020 and 2021, followed by a rebound as the state reopened in 2022 and 2023. The second, also important, is law enforcement's gradual phase-in of the FBI's (2024) new National Incident-Based crime reporting standard (NIBRS), which allows agencies to report multiple arrests or offenses within a single incident (such as a theft that occurred during an assault), thus boosting numbers for lesser crimes such as property and drug offenses. California agencies have been slowly phasing in the NIBRS, which increased crime and arrest numbers for 2021, 2022, and 2023.

Further, there is evidence of changing reporting and police priorities for certain offenses that receive a lot of publicity and political attention, such as retail thefts, which are categorized as shoplifting or commercial burglary.³ The large increases in reported shoplifting (but not non-residential burglary) occurring after 2020 may be due, in part, to police and retailers' more organized attention to this offense, particularly in urban areas. This period has coincided with sharply increased press coverage of shoplifting incidents, a spate of store closures,⁴ and fierce debate over the fate of Proposition 47 (CRA, 2023; see also Little Hoover Commission, 2024).

- **These downward trends are continuing into 2024, with declines in nearly every crime category.**

Opponents of reform, such as *Fox News* and *The Young Turks*, highlight cities and crimes that show increases, but the latest crime trends for 48 California cities⁵ show the opposite: continued large declines. The data show crime declines across almost every major crime category, including an 11% decline in theft and a 17% drop in burglary, in the first three months of 2024 compared to the first three months of 2023 (see Table 1). FBI quarterly crime tabulations, while not a complete picture of crime even for cities, have proven predictive of statewide trends in the past. Across the eight types of crime and 48 cities reporting them (384 total categories), crime rose in 124, fell in 232, and stayed the same in 28—nearly twice as many crime declines as increases. Yet *Fox*, *The Young Turks*, and other outlets picked only the few cities and crimes showing the worst increases while ignoring the much larger number of cases where the opposite trends prevailed.

¹ Part of this decline is due to raising the old, 1982 felony threshold from \$400 to \$950, in 2010, a correction for inflation, which previously had boosted former misdemeanors to felonies.

² Larceny/theft and its subcategories, shoplifting, non-residential burglary, and thefts from vehicles often referred to as “smash and grab,” all of which include both felony and misdemeanor offenses.

³ These offenses are not always customer or outsider crimes; a major retail research agency found that just 37% of retail theft is due to shoplifting, while 54% is due to employee theft and “process and control failures” (theft during storage or transfer, vendor theft, and clerical error), and 9% is attributed to unknown causes (CapitalOne Research, 2024).

⁴ These closures appear due mainly to retail over-saturation in certain areas. See, for example, a CNN analysis of urban Target closures (Matthews & Wilson, 2023).

⁵ Data are for January-March 2024. The 48 cities have a total population 10.4 million.

Table 1. Part I (index) offenses per 100,000 population, large California cities, Q1 2024 v Q1 2023.

Jan-Mar	All Part I	Violent	Property	Murder	Rape	Robbery	Assault	Burglary	Theft	MV theft	Arson
2023	2752.80	453.70	2299.10	4.40	35.00	110.00	304.30	377.00	1489.80	432.40	17.40
2024	2522.80	446.30	2076.40	3.30	28.60	111.00	303.40	313.90	1322.80	439.70	15.90
Percent Change	-8%	-2%	-10%	-24%	-18%	1%	0%	-17%	-11%	2%	-9%

Note: Crime has seasonal variations, so comparing the first quarters of 2024 and 2023 as is done here yields the best comparison.

Table: Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice • Source: Source: FBI 2024 • Created with Datawrapper

Crime statistics will always vary by offense, jurisdiction, and time frame. However, opponents of reform are falsifying crime issues to depict a nonexistent surge. In fact, California appears to be enjoying a period of historically low property crime. This has occurred amid transformative justice reform, reopening after COVID-19, and adopting a new statistics system.

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Appendix. Offenses reported to law enforcement, first quarter 2024 and 2023, 48 reporting cities

California	Offenses reported, Jan-Mar 2024				Offenses reported, Jan-Mar 2023				Rate change, 2024 v 2023			
City	All Part I	Violent	Murder	Property	All Part I	Violent	Murder	Property	All Part I	Violent	Murder	Property
Anaheim	2,396	551	3	1,845	2,903	538	3	2,365	-17%	2%	0%	-22%
Antioch	866	106	4	760	895	135	1	760	-3%	-21%	300%	0%
Bakersfield	3,671	887	8	2,784	4,086	628	14	3,458	-10%	41%	-43%	-19%
Burbank	877	79	0	798	856	82	0	774	2%	-4%	0%	3%
Carlsbad	498	59	0	439	533	49	0	484	-7%	20%	0%	-9%
Chico	498	126	0	372	585	150	1	435	-15%	-16%	-100%	-14%
Chula Vista	1,095	259	0	836	1,136	233	1	903	-4%	11%	-100%	-7%
Clovis	604	76	0	528	603	66	1	537	0%	15%	-100%	-2%
Concord	662	88	0	574	1,005	176	1	829	-34%	-50%	-100%	-31%
Corona	748	93	0	655	953	82	1	871	-22%	13%	-100%	-25%
El Cajon	507	92	0	415	507	109	0	398	0%	-16%	0%	4%
Elk Grove	517	69	0	448	532	66	1	466	-3%	5%	-100%	-4%
Escondido	651	150	0	501	674	116	0	558	-3%	29%	0%	-10%
Fairfield	633	144	1	489	880	189	1	691	-28%	-24%	0%	-29%
Fontana	802	145	1	657	824	140	3	684	-3%	4%	-67%	-4%
Fremont	1,419	118	2	1,301	1,724	121	1	1,603	-18%	-2%	100%	-19%
Fresno	5,052	723	5	4,329	5,059	1,085	4	3,974	0%	-33%	25%	9%
Fullerton	766	135	0	631	1,148	172	0	976	-33%	-22%	0%	-35%
Glendale	1,131	109	1	1,022	1,176	100	0	1,076	-4%	9%	100%	-5%
Hayward	1,792	238	2	1,554	1,674	245	2	1,429	7%	-3%	0%	9%
Inglewood	1,134	162	1	972	1,064	160	2	904	7%	1%	-50%	8%
Irvine	984	76	0	908	1,453	83	1	1,370	-32%	-8%	-100%	-34%
Long Beach	4,408	709	2	3,699	3,647	543	5	3,104	21%	31%	-60%	19%
Menifee	276	52	0	224	394	41	1	353	-30%	27%	-100%	-37%
Modesto	1,597	327	1	1,270	1,417	335	3	1,082	13%	-2%	-67%	17%
Murrieta	280	39	0	241	367	47	0	320	-24%	-17%	0%	-25%
Oceanside	821	168	0	653	917	169	1	748	-10%	-1%	-100%	-13%
Orange	604	70	1	534	850	68	0	782	-29%	3%	100%	-32%
Oxnard	1,105	292	3	813	1,196	293	1	903	-8%	0%	200%	-10%
Pasadena	1,038	170	2	868	1,025	161	0	864	1%	6%	200%	0%
Pomona	1,161	236	3	925	1,188	211	5	977	-2%	12%	-40%	-5%
Richmond	802	198	1	604	1,019	242	1	777	-21%	-18%	0%	-22%
Riverside	2,517	375	3	2,142	3,152	387	2	2,765	-20%	-3%	50%	-23%
Roseville	616	91	1	525	675	114	0	561	-9%	-20%	100%	-6%
Sacramento	4,282	878	10	3,404	4,562	977	9	3,585	-6%	-10%	11%	-5%
Salinas	754	164	1	590	728	179	0	549	4%	-8%	100%	7%
San Diego	7,281	1,310	11	5,971	7,522	1,241	14	6,281	-3%	6%	-21%	-5%
Santa Clara	797	65	2	732	1,160	70	0	1,090	-31%	-7%	200%	-33%
Santa Maria	509	122	0	387	880	159	1	721	-42%	-23%	-100%	-46%
Santa Rosa	677	142	0	535	885	145	3	740	-24%	-2%	-100%	-28%
Simi Valley	279	32	0	247	344	40	0	304	-19%	-20%	0%	-19%
Stockton	3,073	885	10	2,188	3,295	781	18	2,514	-7%	13%	-44%	-13%
Torrance	995	89	0	906	950	83	0	867	5%	7%	0%	4%
Vacaville	463	75	0	388	635	83	0	552	-27%	-10%	0%	-30%
Vallejo	1,461	243	5	1,218	1,349	225	5	1,124	8%	8%	0%	8%
Ventura	615	106	0	509	675	101	1	574	-9%	5%	-100%	-11%
Visalia	871	138	2	733	991	152	5	839	-12%	-9%	-60%	-13%
West Covina	450	45	0	405	686	93	0	593	-34%	-52%	0%	-32%
All 48 cities	65,035	11,506	86	53,529	70,779	11,665	113	59,114	-8%	-2%	-24%	-10%

Table: Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice • Source: FBI, 2024 • Created with Datawrapper

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