

# CALIFORNIA LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES ARE SPENDING MORE BUT SOLVING FEWER CRIMES



## Executive Summary

California spent \$27 billion on police in 2021 – more than ever before and an increase of more than 250 percent since 1985, after accounting for inflation. This record spending corresponded with the lowest clearance rates ever reported in the state. In 2022, police cleared just 13 percent of all reported offenses, down from 20 percent in 1985.

This report is based on the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice’s analysis of data from the California Department of Justice and the Office of the State Controller. It shows how spending on and clearance rates for law enforcement have changed in the state since 1985, and how those trends have developed in each of California’s counties and its 361 largest jurisdictions since 2003. The report only addresses law enforcement spending, not spending on prisons, jails, or courts.

The key finding of this report is that police are consuming more public resources than ever before but solving fewer crimes. Law enforcement agencies solve fewer than one in seven serious offenses. Clearance rates for homicide, rape, aggravated assault, burglary, vehicle theft, and larceny are all down substantially over a long period.

Spending on law enforcement has far outstripped population growth. Real spending per capita went from \$399 in 1985 to \$651 in 2022, an increase of more than 60 percent.<sup>1</sup> Changes in some localities have been even more extreme. Residents of San Mateo County pay \$266 more per capita for policing than they did in 2003, and residents of Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, Orange, Santa Cruz, San Bernardino, Solano, Fresno, Santa Barbara, Contra Costa, and Tulare counties all pay more than \$100 more per person.

Crime clearance rates vary by county and city. Among counties with populations greater than 500,000, clearance rates ranged from highs of 20 percent and 21 percent in Sonoma and San Bernardino counties to lows of 6 and 7 percent in San Francisco and Alameda counties. Despite jurisdictional variability, the trend is clear: Clearance rates fell in 20 out of the 22 largest counties in the state.

Billions of dollars in additional spending for police has corresponded with decreasing effectiveness, as measured by the ability to solve crimes.

As California considers new investments in public safety, policymakers should compare each dollar spent based on return on investment. While more than \$25 billion in police spending have corresponded with reduced efficacy, other, much smaller programs punch above their weight. Proposition 47 programs, for instance, have received over \$800 million in savings from reduced prison incarceration since 2017 but made essential contributions to public safety. Over the same time period, police have received more than \$150 billion – roughly 200 times more funding. Proposition 47 programs have served more than 75,000 people, reduced homelessness by 64 percent, reduced unemployment by 32 percent, and observed recidivism rates far lower than the state average.

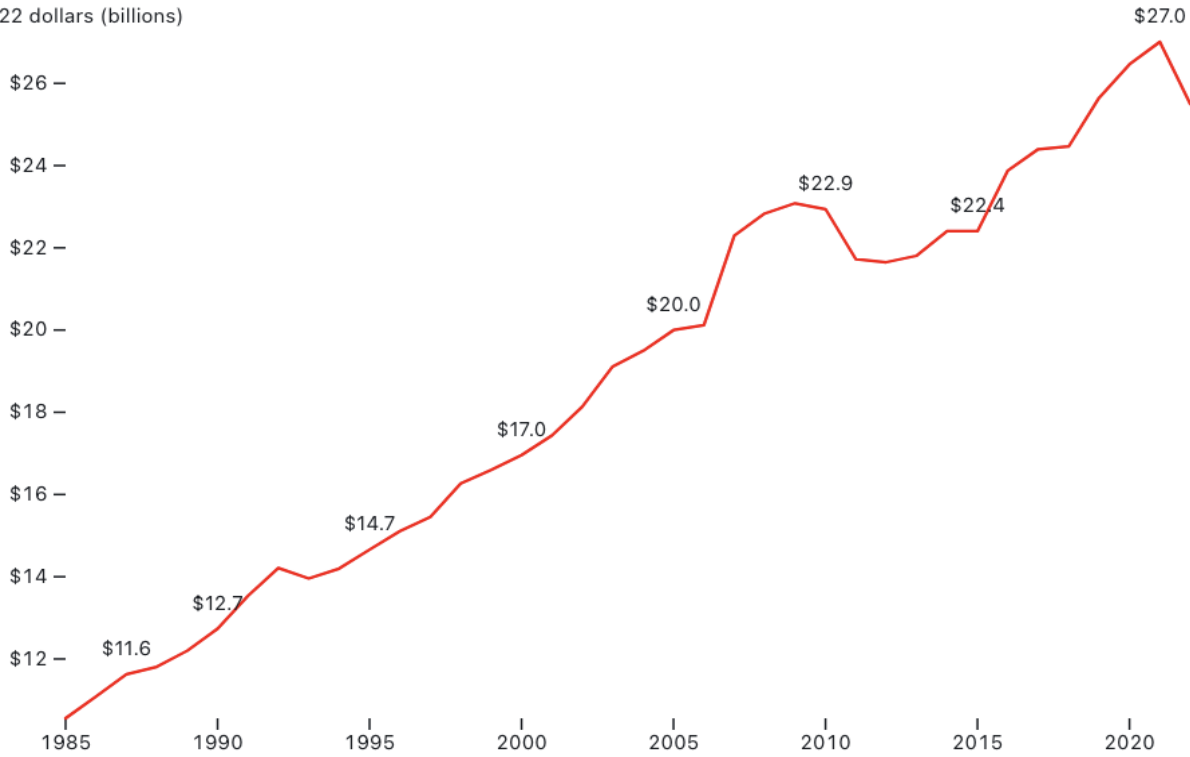
This report contributes to a vital debate about how California communities can achieve real safety. Other researchers have shown that police are ill-equipped to address social problems such as homelessness, drug use, and mental health issues. Using 38 years of data from jurisdictions across the state of California, this report adds a crucial fact to our understanding of policing: Additional funding for police has not resulted in more effective law enforcement, and crime and harm prevention programs, like those funded by Proposition 47, and other strategies that scale up the drivers of safety, are better investments that truly prevent crime and harm before they occur.

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<sup>1</sup> All cost figures are in constant 2022 dollars adjusted for inflation using the California Consumer Price Index.

## California Spending on Police, 1985-2022, Real 2022 Dollars

↑ 2022 dollars (billions)



## Statewide per capita spending on police vs clearance rates, 1985-2022 (real 2022 dollars)

Select a Category of Offenses

All Offenses

↑ spending per capita

