

CALIFORNIA'S REPUBLICAN COUNTIES HAVE WORSE CRIME TRENDS AND HIGHER VIOLENT CRIME RATES THAN DEMOCRATIC COUNTIES



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Fact Sheet

Introduction

California, like the rest of the country, suffered a major increase in homicide in 2020. This disturbing development has prompted calls by Republicans and some Democrats to roll back criminal justice reforms and reinstate tougher arrest and imprisonment policies (see Cassidy, 2021; Korte, 2021). These “get-tough” campaigns ignore a number of important realities, led by the fact that areas with high rates of arrest, prosecution, and incarceration appear to be suffering more, not less, crime.

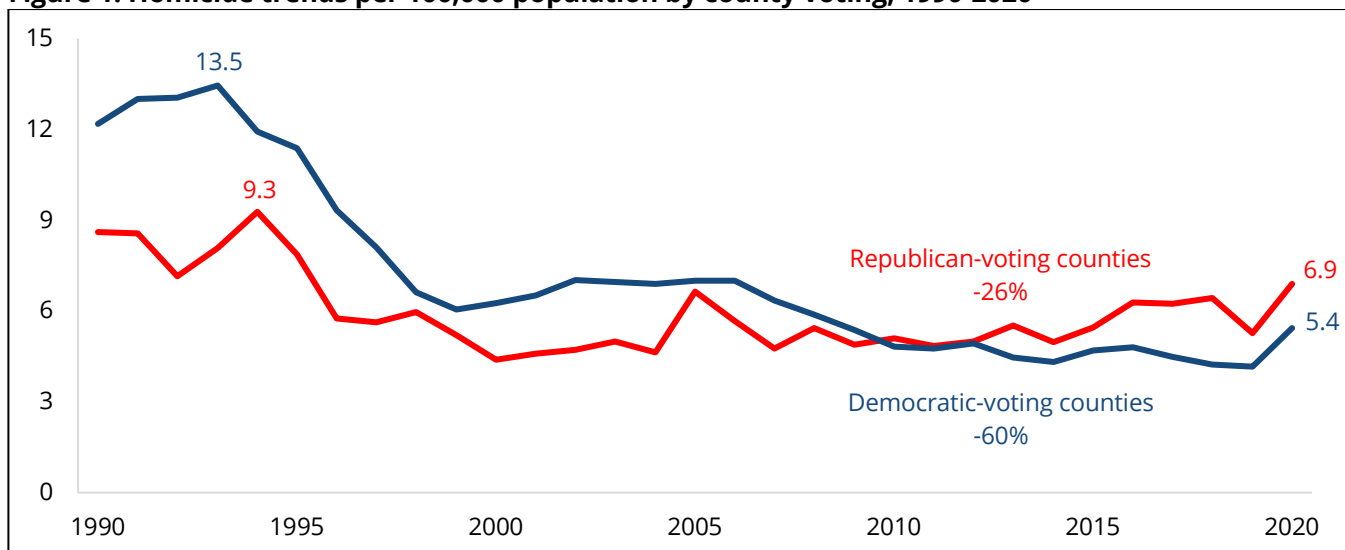
- **Despite a substantial one-year increase in homicide, overall crime is at historic lows.**

Even after 2020’s homicide increase is included, California has experienced massive reductions in crime, especially homicide, over the last 25 to 30 years. From 1990 through 2020, the state’s homicide rate fell by 53 percent, violent crime was down 58 percent, and property crime fell 62 percent (DOF, 2021; DOJ, 2021). Crime rate declines persisted as California implemented major criminal justice reforms during the 2010s, including Proposition 47, which reduced lower-level drug and property offenses from felonies to misdemeanors, and Proposition 64, which legalized marijuana (Prop 47, 2014; Prop 64, 2016). Recent criminal justice reforms have reduced the number of adults in jail and prison by 40,000, and juvenile detention and confinement numbers have fallen from over 20,000 to under 4,000 since the mid-1990s (BSCC, 2021; CDCR, 2020; see also CJCJ, 2019). In 2020, property crime and violent crime, including homicide, stood at or near their lowest levels in more than half a century (DOJ, 2020).

- **Republican-voting counties arrest and imprison people at higher rates than Democratic-voting counties.**

Around two dozen California counties largely have resisted reforms and maintain high incarceration and arrest rates, particularly for drug and other nonviolent offenses. The clearest difference between areas that have cut crime substantially and those suffering the worst crime trends and rates is not geographic nor demographic, but how they vote – Republican versus Democratic (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Homicide trends per 100,000 population by county voting, 1990-2020



Sources: DOF (2021); DOJ (2021); SOS (2020). Note: Percent change compares 2020 with respective 1990s peak year.

Republican and Democratic counties are very different. California’s 23 Republican-voting counties in the 2020 presidential election tend to be more exurban and rural, with populations dominated by White residents and conservative politics (SOS, 2020). The 35 Democratic-voting counties are dominated by large cities and inner suburbs, racially diverse populations, and more liberal policies.

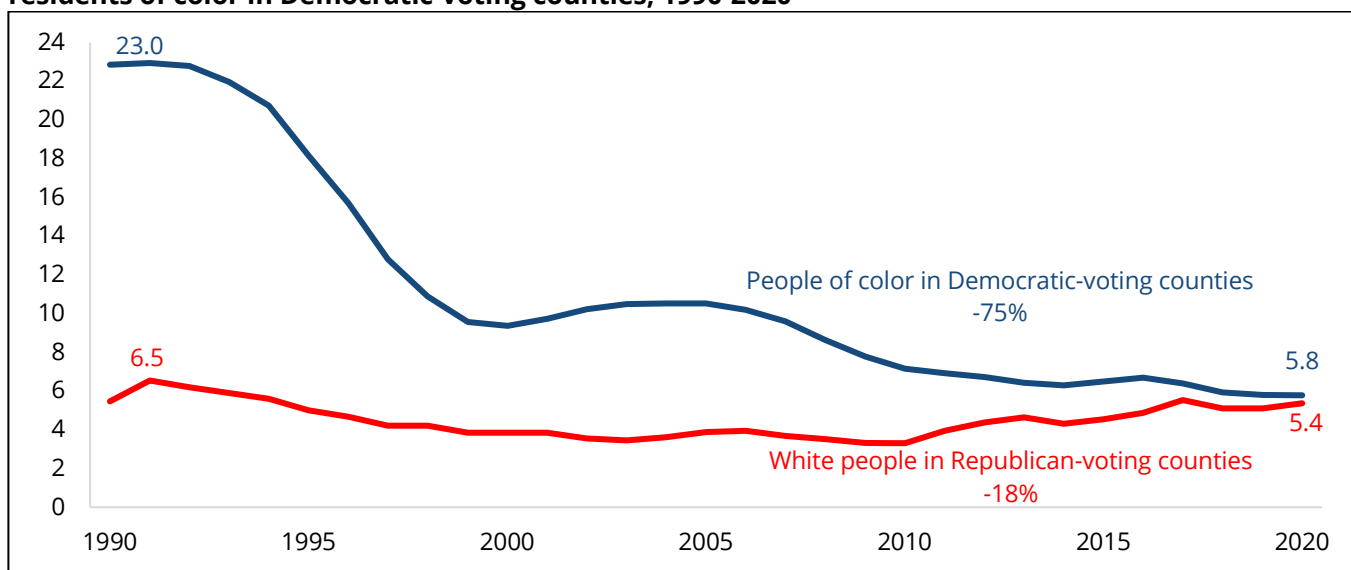
For decades, state and local Republican leaders (often joined by Democrats) have demanded a “get-tough” approach to crime that generated more arrests, more imprisonments, and longer prison sentences. In fact, despite recent legislative reforms issued from Sacramento, criminal justice remains largely a local endeavor. Some jurisdictions continue to pursue hardline policies, producing large disparities in criminal justice outcomes. Politics is a pivotal factor in sentencing outcomes, as shown by the fact that 12 of the 13 highest-incarceration counties vote Republican, while 16 of the 18 lowest-incarceration counties vote Democratic (BSCC, 2021; CDCR, 2020). With 8.5 percent of California’s youth population, Republican-voting counties account for 14.1 percent of the state’s imprisonments in youth facilities. On average, a person is 58 percent more likely to be arrested (including 62 percent more likely for a nonviolent offense) and 41 percent more likely to be incarcerated in a Republican-voting county than in a Democratic-voting county (BSCC, 2021; CDCR, 2020; DOJ, 2021). For example, Republican-voting Tulare County arrests people for drugs at five times the rate of Democratic-voting San Mateo County. Republican-voting Shasta County arrests people overall at triple the rate of Democratic-voting San Francisco.

- **Homicide rates are 28 percent higher in Republican-voting counties than in Democratic-voting counties.**

Have the hardline approaches pursued by Republicans actually reduced crime? Just the opposite, as Figures 1-5 show. Consider the most serious offense, homicide. In the early 1990s, the state’s 35 counties that voted Democratic in 2020, which contain major cities like Los Angeles and Oakland with diverse populations and active gangs, had homicide rates nearly double those of the 23 more rural, mostly White counties that voted Republican (CDC, 2020; CDPH, 2020). Today, after mammoth homicide declines in the state’s urban areas and increases in Republican areas during the 2010s, Republican counties have homicide rates 28 percent higher than do Democratic counties (Figure 1).

- **White people in Republican areas have homicide rates on par with people of color in Democratic ones.**

Figure 2. Homicide deaths per 100,000 population, White residents in Republican-voting counties vs. residents of color in Democratic-voting counties, 1990-2020

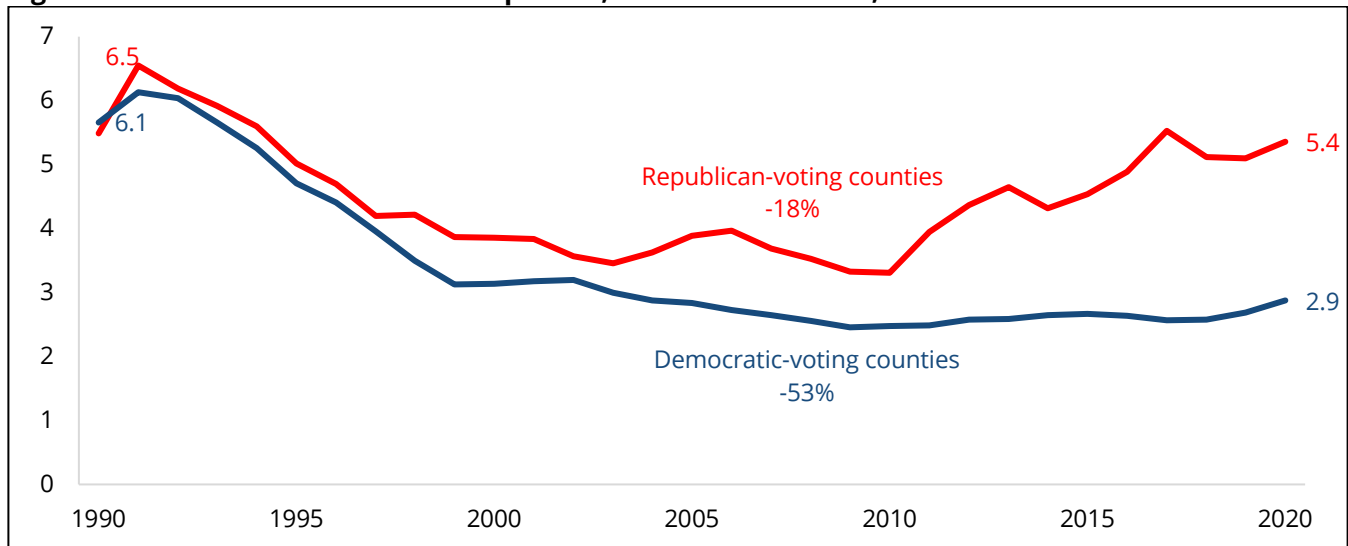


Sources: CDC (2020); DOF (2021); SOS (2020). Note: Percent change compares 2020 with respective 1990s peak year. The trendline uses a three-year rolling average to smooth year-to-year variations in the data.

Do these trends result from more immigration and increased populations of color in rural counties? No. White residents in Republican counties appear to be driving the disparity. FBI tabulations (2020) show that the overwhelming majority of homicides are perpetrated by people who are the same race as the victim. Moreover,

White homicide arrest trends in Republican counties, as reported by the California Department of Justice, closely parallel White homicide death rates as reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) and the California Department of Public Health (2020). Homicide death rates were similar among White residents in Republican and Democratic areas in the 1990s (Figure 3). Since then, homicide death rates among White residents have fallen nearly three times faster in Democratic counties, so that by 2020, White homicide rates were nearly twice as high in Republican counties than in Democratic ones. Homicide death rates for White residents in Republican counties now match those of residents of color in Democratic counties (Figure 2; Table 1). This finding challenges the perception that communities of color and urban areas are epicenters of California’s recent homicide spike.

Figure 3. White homicide death rates per 100,000 White residents, 1990-2020

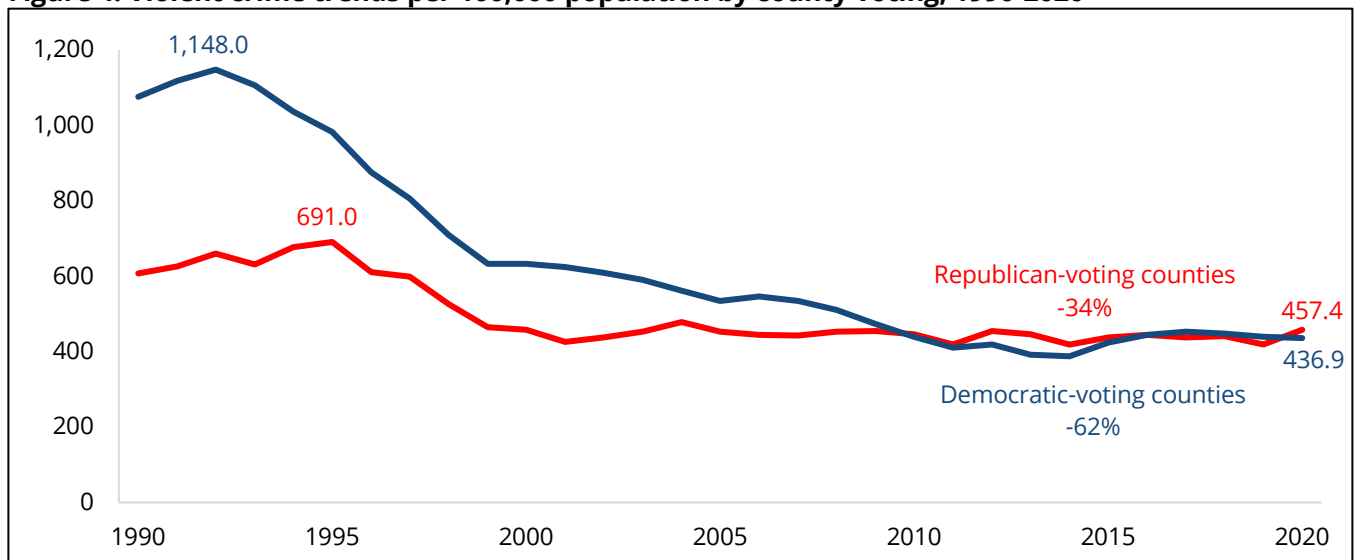


Sources: CDC (2020); DOJ (2021); SOS (2020). Note: Percent change compares 2020 with respective 1990s peak year.

- **Violent and property crime rates have declined most rapidly in Democratic-voting counties.**

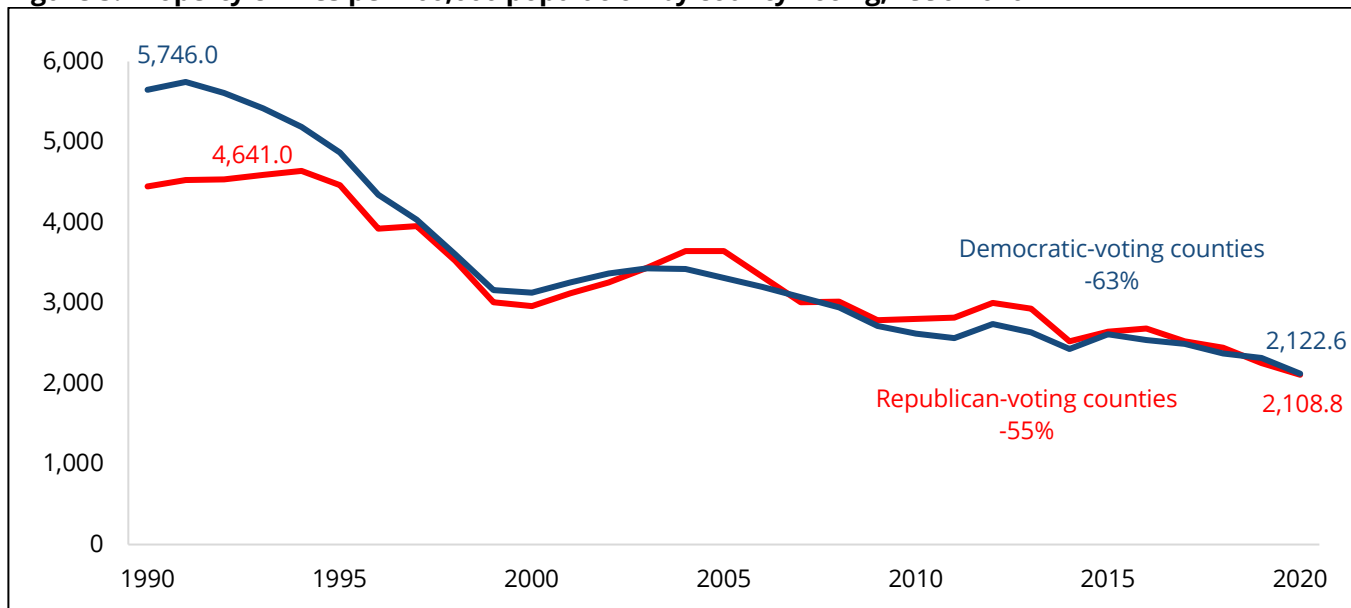
Similar politically related divergences show up for violent and property crime. In 1990, Democratic areas had violent crime levels 77 percent higher than Republican areas. Today, Democratic counties actually are safer than Republican areas from violent crime (Figure 4). Property offenses, once substantially higher in Democratic areas, have followed identical trends since 1997 and now are virtually the same in Democratic and Republican areas (Figure 5).

Figure 4. Violent crime trends per 100,000 population by county voting, 1990-2020



Sources: DOJ (2021); DOJ (2021); SOS (2020). Note: Percent change compares 2020 with respective 1990s peak year.

Figure 5. Property crimes per 100,000 population by county voting, 1990-2020



Sources: DOF (2021); DOJ (2021); SOS (2020). Note: Percent change compares 2020 with respective 1990s peak year.

- **Arrest rates have declined most slowly among White residents in Republican-voting counties.**

Arrest patterns confirm the trends in reported crime. In the 1990s, Californians of color had substantially higher arrest rates in both Democratic and Republican counties than White residents of Republican counties, who in turn had higher rates than White residents of Democratic counties. That pattern also applied to specific offenses: homicide, violent crimes, and drug offenses (Table 1).

Three key years are compared in Table 1: 1990, 2010 (the year before major statewide criminal justice reforms began), and 2020. They show the convergence of arrest rates among people of different races over time. While White residents of Republican counties showed much lower arrest rates for all, homicide, violent, property, and drug offenses than residents of color in Democratic areas in 1990, these differences had largely evaporated by 2010. By 2020, White residents of Republican counties had only slightly lower violent crime arrest rates, and higher violent death rates and property, drug offense, and total arrest rates, than residents of color in Democratic counties. For drug offenses, White residents in Republican counties now have the highest arrest rates of any group.

While people of color in Republican counties are arrested at the highest rates, racial arrest gaps have narrowed considerably in recent decades. However, Republican counties lag behind Democratic counties in reducing crime and arrest rates involving both White people and people of color.

These patterns are surprising for a number of reasons. Law enforcement statistics show White residents, rural areas, and older ages are generally known for lower arrest rates than residents of color, urban areas, and younger ages. Yet, over the last 30 years, these once hard-and-fast rules within the criminal justice system have disappeared. People of color in and around cities now have as low or lower arrest rates than White people in exurban and rural areas. This stunningly refutes rumors in right-wing media and political discourse that nonwhite immigration is bringing more crime and drugs to rural areas (CJCJ, 2017).

Table 1. Deaths and arrests per 100,000 population by race and politics

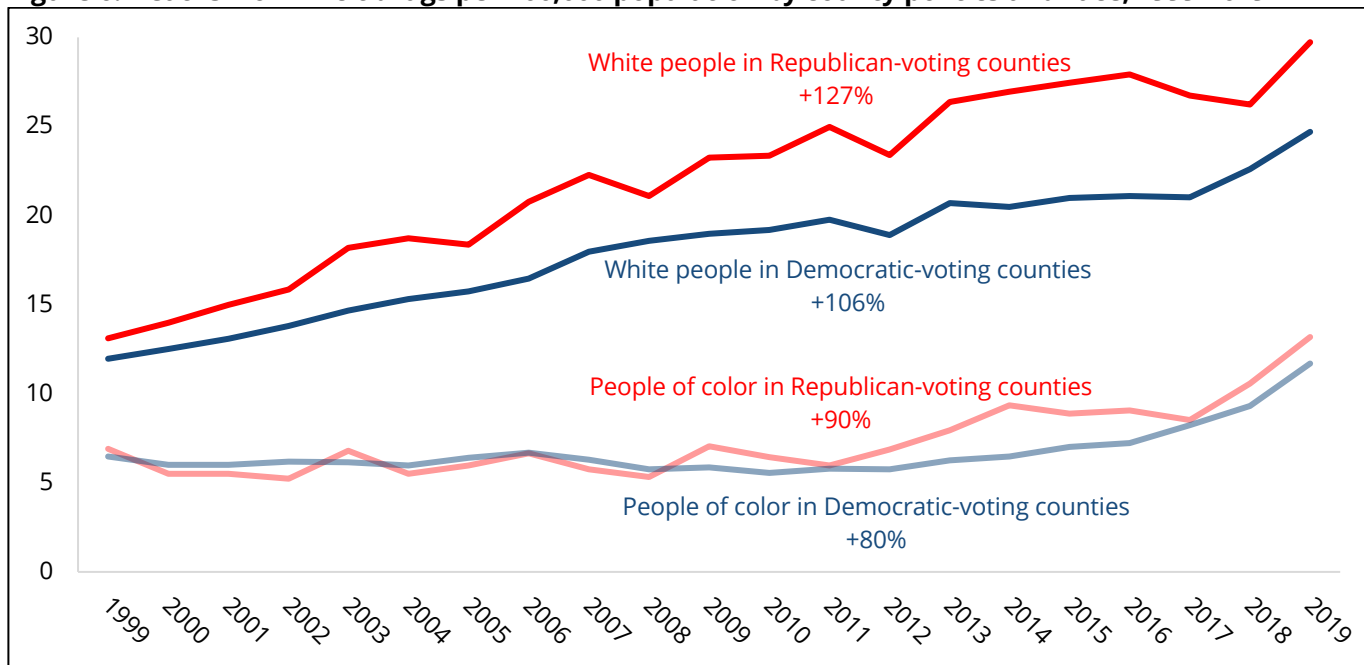
	White residents in Republican-voting counties	Residents of color in Republican-voting counties	White residents in Democratic-voting counties	Residents of color in Democratic-voting counties
Violent deaths (homicides, suicides, accidents)				
1990	78.0	72.5	63.7	61.4
2010	81.3	39.8	70.2	29.4
2019*	99.2	53.4	84.7	39.6
Change	+27%	-26%	+33%	-35%
Violent offenses				
1990	361.6	820.5	245.4	837.3
2010	336.1	448.3	206.0	369.6
2020	284.6	382.2	171.2	301.4
Change	-21%	-53%	-30%	-64%
Property offenses				
1990	533.3	888.7	424.9	1,053.7
2010	356.9	416.2	257.8	354.8
2020	196.8	203.1	123.8	177.5
Change	-63%	-77%	-71%	-83%
Drug offenses				
1990	304.3	488.4	286.5	768.2
2010	359.0	366.0	299.2	337.6
2020	106.5	102.2	59.3	63.1
Change	-65%	-79%	-79%	-92%
All offenses				
1990	6,348.3	11,802.1	4,703.3	8,924.9
2010	4,522.8	5,127.1	3,185.3	3,957.3
2020	3,163.9	3,328.2	1,796.3	2,216.2
Change	-50%	-72%	-62%	-75%

Sources: CDC (2020); CDPH (2020); DOF (2021); DOJ (2021). *2019 is the latest year available for detailed death statistics.

• **Drug and alcohol deaths soar among White Californians – especially in Republican areas.**

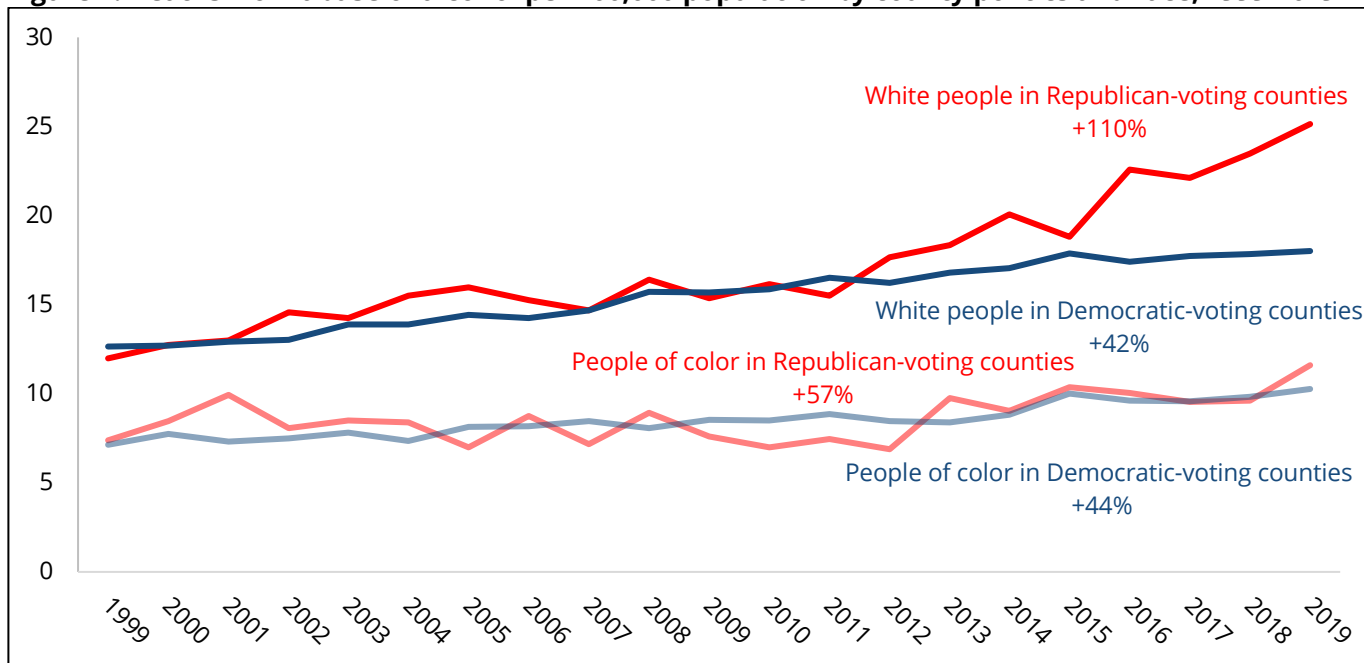
What underlying trends might help explain the troubles in California’s Republican-voting counties? Figures 6 and 7 show that rates of fatalities from illicit drugs and alcohol abuse have risen rapidly among White residents in California, trends that are especially acute in Republican-voting counties (data are available from 1999 through 2019; see CDC, 2020). California Department of Justice (2020) arrest, California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2020) imprisonment, and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) mortality trends show that alcohol and illicit drug use, especially among older populations, is linked to increasing arrest and incarceration. As with crime, rising rates of illicit drug use cannot be blamed on immigration or people of color. In fact, people of color have considerably lower rates for these problems than do White people, though all populations show increasing death rates. Alcohol and drug use deaths have been more pronounced among White people than people of color, and more serious in Republican-voting counties than in Democratic-voting counties.

Figure 6. Deaths from illicit drugs per 100,000 population by county politics and race, 1999-2019



Source: CDC (2020); SOS (2020). Note: Percent change compares 2019 to 1999.

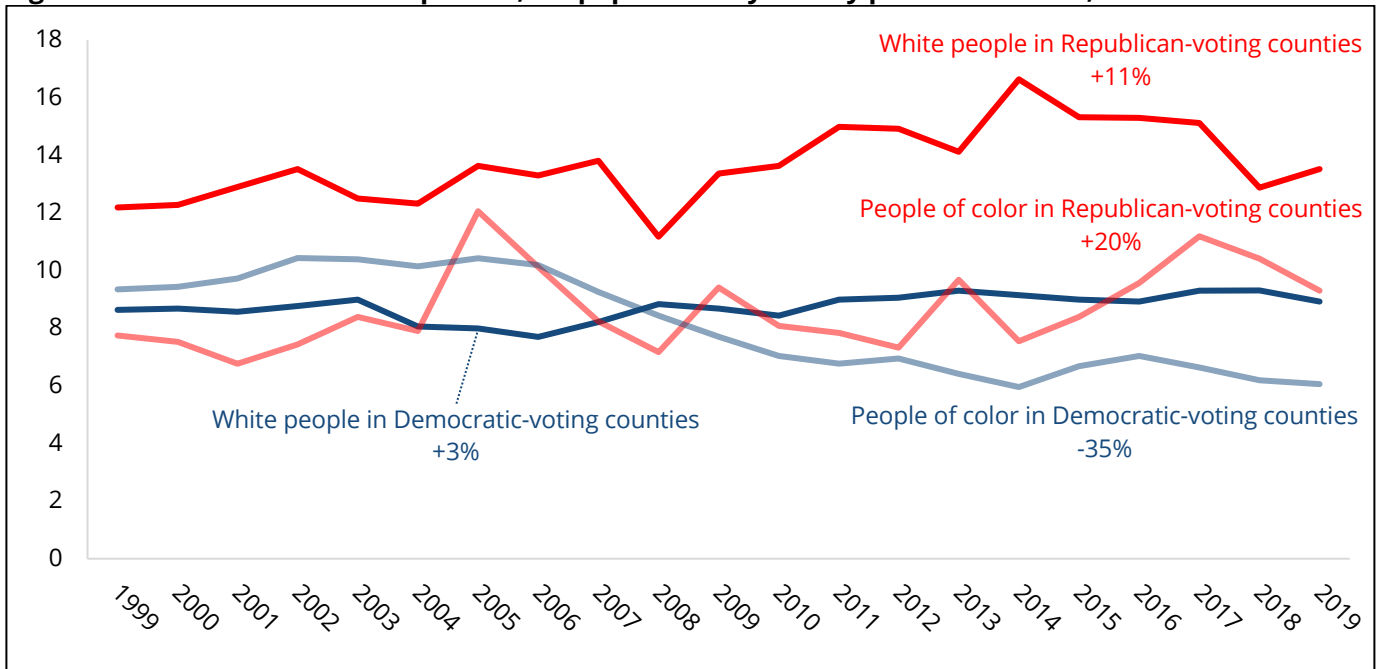
Figure 7. Deaths from abuse of alcohol per 100,000 population by county politics and race, 1999-2019



Source: CDC (2020); SOS (2020). Note: Percent change compares 2019 to 1999.

Finally, deaths from firearms are also more prevalent among White people in Republican-voting counties, mainly due to firearm suicides (Figure 8). This finding negates the widely held belief that communities of color in urban areas experience the most gun deaths. In fact, people of color in California’s Democratic-voting counties have the lowest firearm death rate in the state and have shown a substantial decline in deaths over the past 20 years (-35%). During this time, gun death rates increased among all other demographic groups.

Figure 8. Deaths from firearms per 100,000 population by county politics and race, 1999-2019



Source: CDC (2020); SOS (2020). Note: Percent change compares 2019 to 1999.

Conclusion

California’s 23 Republican-voting counties stand out as uniquely troubled on many fronts. Their per-capita adjusted gross incomes (totaling \$25,800 in 2018) are far below those of Democratic-voting counties (\$42,200), and their state and local tax contributions (\$430 per capita) also substantially lag those of Democratic counties (\$762) (IRS, 2021) (Table 2). Republican counties exceed Democratic-voting counties in homicide and other violent death, reported crime, criminal arrest, drug and alcohol death, gun death, and incarceration rates. All this despite the traditional advantages of Whiteness and exurban-rural locales in boosting incomes and mitigating arrests. In fact, White people in Republican counties now have higher criminal arrest rates than people of color in Democratic counties. Republican counties’ low tax contributions and greatly excessive state imprisonment rates for both adults and youth generate extra costs that must be paid by all state taxpayers.

Table 2. Population, economic and taxation comparison, Republican vs. Democratic counties

California, 2018 income, taxes	Republican-voting counties (23)	Democratic-voting counties (35)
Population (2020)	3,075,304	36,573,634
Total tax returns	1,246,920	16,927,870
Total adjusted gross income	\$79,457,032,000	\$1,542,230,838,000
State/local taxes paid	\$1,323,180,000	\$27,873,377,000
Total taxes paid	\$10,718,718,000	\$265,456,155,000
Charitable contributions	\$997,708,000	\$30,534,955,000
Adjusted gross income/capita	\$25,837	\$42,168
State/local taxes/capita	\$430	\$762
Total taxes/capita	\$3,485	\$7,258
Charitable contributions/capita	\$324	\$835

Sources: DOF (2020); IRS (2021); SOS (2020).

Further, the gaps between urban/suburban-Democratic and exurban/rural-Republican California are widening, contributing to extremist politics and intractable divisions. Thirty years ago, the state’s cities

experienced the worst economic hardships and highest rates of violent crime. Today, it is its exurbs, small towns, and rural areas. It is important to note that the issues challenging different races and locales may stem from very different drivers. For many Republican-voting White people, resentments and fears toward perceived loss of racial status is a key factor in their rising radicalization. That is, the economic, crime, drug use, violent death (often termed “deaths of despair”), and incarceration woes increasingly afflicting White people in conservative areas appear related to internal reactions against “America's growing racial diversity and a perceived loss of U.S. global dominance” and “an effort to maintain their perceived social dominance” (Annenberg School, 2018; Case & Deaton, 2020). In contrast, poverty and violence affecting people of color are largely driven by externally imposed systemic racism. Just as state policy makers directed special interventions to stem urban problems in the 1990s, innovative measures may be necessary to address the social harms, high costs, and taxation deficits being imposed on all of California by Republican-voting counties.

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