

CALIFORNIA'S CRIME RATE FALLS TO A RECORD LOW IN 2020; COUNTIES WITH HIGH INCARCERATION RATES HAVE MORE CRIME AND WORSE TRENDS



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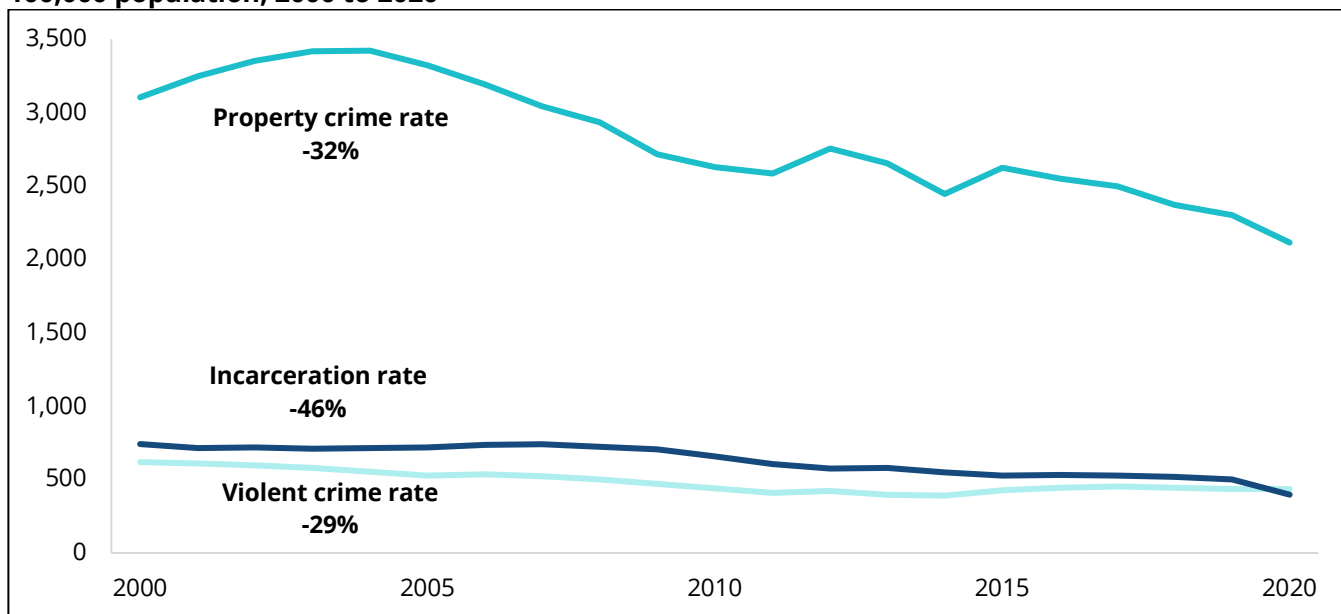
Fact Sheet

In the weeks leading up to the recall election of California Governor Gavin Newsom, crime has become a hot-button issue (David Binder Research, 2021; Gutierrez, 2021). Unfortunately, rather than rationally analyzing crime, the press and some candidates and interest groups publicize anecdote-based claims featured in headlines such as, “California is seeing a crime surge,” or “San Francisco’s shoplifting surge” (Fuller, 2021; Walters, 2020). While some press outlets have helped to correct such deceptive stories, fact checking typically comes after the damage is done (e.g., Neilson, 2021). The real trends in California crime contain reasons for both calm and concern (DOJ, 2021).

- **California’s overall crime rate fell 6 percent in 2020, reaching its lowest level ever recorded.**

Of the eight Part I felonies¹ in the FBI’s index of crime, four increased from 2019 to 2020 and four declined (Table 1). Overall, the Part I crime index has fallen steadily over the last 20 years (including a 6 percent decline in 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic), with all eight index offenses showing declines during that period. The state’s index crime rate in 2020 was the lowest ever recorded since the index was created in 1969.

Figure 1. California incarceration (jail and prison), violent offense, and property offense rates per 100,000 population, 2000 to 2020



Sources: CDCR (2021); DOF (2021); DOJ (2021). Note: the violent crime rate includes the pre-2014 definition of rape to allow for comparison across years.

- **Homicide rates rose 31 percent in 2020 but remain below levels seen from 1968 through 2008.**

California, then, is not experiencing an overall “crime surge.” The state did, however, suffer a 31 percent increase in both homicide deaths and reported homicides in 2020 compared to 2019. However, rates remain well below

¹ The eight Part 1 felonies include four violent offenses (aggravated assault, homicide, rape, and robbery) and four property offenses (arson, burglary, larceny-theft, and motor vehicle theft).

levels for the entire 40-year period from 1968 through 2008, during the state’s “tough-on-crime” era. Homicide, though a rare crime, profoundly affects communities’ sense of safety.

Table 1. Trends and rates of Part I offenses in California per 100,000 population, 2000, 2010, 2019, 2020

Year	Homicide	Rape	Robbery	Assault	Burglary	Vehicle theft	Larceny	Arson	Total index
2000	6.1	*	177.2	407.0	653.7	532.5	1,916.3	42.4	3,763.9
2010	4.8	*	155.5	256.2	612.0	408.1	1,606.7	21.0	3,086.5
2019	4.2	34.7	130.9	263.5	381.3	353.9	1,566.5	20.8	2,758.1
2020	5.5	33.8	112.3	285.4	365.4	422.4	1,326.6	29.6	2,581.0
Change, rate in 2020 vs. rate in:									
2000	-9%	*	-37%	-30%	-44%	-21%	-31%	-30%	-31%
2010	+14%	*	-28%	+11%	-40%	+4%	-17%	+40%	-16%
2019	+31%	-8%	-14%	+8%	-4%	+19%	-15%	+43%	-6%

Source: DOF (2021); DOJ (2021). *Definition of rape expanded in 2014, distorting comparison with previous years. “Total index” rates include the pre-2014 definition of rape to allow for comparison across years.

• **Low-incarceration counties have half as many homicides per capita as high-incarceration counties.**

An examination of jail (BSCC, 2021), prison (CDCR, 2021), and crime data shows that counties with the lowest rates of incarceration also have lower rates of homicide and shoplifting—two offenses that have garnered the most media attention. This counters an assumption by recall proponents, too often echoed uncritically in the press, that counties with progressive district attorneys have pursued policies they label “lenient” and “no-consequence” that are responsible for more crime (see Arango, 2021; Levenson, 2021; Stringini, 2021; Wallace-Wells, 2021).

Table 2 compares California’s 29 counties with the highest jail and prison incarceration rates in 2020 with its 29 counties with the lowest rates. The differences are substantial: the high-incarceration counties lock up 1.75 times more people per capita than low-incarceration counties, and their decrease in incarceration from 2019 to 2020 was much slower than for the low-incarceration group.

Table 2. Rates of incarceration (jail and prison), homicide, and shoplifting, per 100,000 population, plus changes in counties with highest vs. lowest incarceration rates, 2020 vs. 2019

Rate per 100,000 population	Incarceration rate		Homicide rate			Shoplifting rate		
	2019	2020	2019	2020	2020 vs. 2019	2019	2020	2020 vs. 2019
High incarceration	597.1	481.4	5.3	7.1	+35%	235.4	162.6	-31%
Low incarceration	362.0	274.5	2.9	3.5	+21%	216.8	159.3	-26%

Sources: BSCC (2021); CDCR (2021); DOF (2021); DOJ (2021).

Contrary to claims by recall advocates and repeated in many press accounts, the low-incarceration counties actually have half as many homicides per capita as high-incarceration counties (3.5 vs. 7.1 homicides per 100,000 population), and their increase in homicide from 2019 to 2020 was less than for high-incarceration counties. Similarly, rates of shoplifting—another crime sensationalized in the press even as it was declining—are slightly lower in low-incarceration counties (159.3 vs. 162.6 shoplifting offenses per 100,000 population), though high-incarceration counties had a larger decrease in 2020. In San Francisco, where substantial media attention has been trained on shoplifting, the tourism industry is about three times larger per capita than the state average, affording more opportunities for criminal activity (Visit California, 2021). Yet, the county’s shoplifting rate in 2020 (169.5 per 100,000 population, a 35 percent decline from 2019’s rate of 260.9) was only slightly above the state average (227.1 in 2019; 161.1 in 2020).

Overall, high-incarceration counties have considerably higher rates of violent crime (513.7 per 100,000 population in 2020 vs. 340.6 in low-incarceration counties), slightly lower rates of property offenses (2,108.5 vs. 2,121.9), higher rates of Part I felonies overall (2,622.2 vs. 2,462.5), and worse trends in 2020 (Part I offense rates down 6 percent from 2019 to 2020, compared to down 8 percent in low-incarceration counties).

- **High-incarceration counties impose a \$3.2 billion burden on state taxpayers.**

Many local factors such as poverty, visitor volume, and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic influence homicide and crime rates, as shown in the greatly varying rates by county (Appendix). One important factor—the extent to which local law enforcement agencies prioritize incarceration—appears not to reduce crime rates. However, these practices are placing a considerable burden on local and state budgets. At an average annual cost of \$100,000 per person in prison (Governor’s Budget, 2021), state taxpayers spend \$3.2 billion more every year for high-incarceration counties’ reliance on prisons than if these counties were to adopt the imprisonment rates of low-incarceration counties.

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Appendix. Rates of incarceration (jail and prison), homicide, and Part I offenses per 100,000 population by county, 2019 and 2020

County	Incarceration rate			Homicide rate			All Part I offenses rate		
	2019	2020	Change	2019	2020	Change	2019	2020	Change
Alameda	354.4	292.0	-18%	5.8	8.6	49%	4,581.6	4,063.6	-11%
Alpine	178.1	0.0	-100%	0.0	0.0	NA	4,007.1	2,959.6	-26%
Amador	652.1	516.3	-21%	2.7	5.3	101%	2,067.6	1,964.0	-5%
Butte	696.4	559.2	-20%	3.3	5.8	78%	2,958.1	2,623.5	-11%
Calaveras	403.1	295.8	-27%	2.3	0.0	-100%	2,213.8	2,086.4	-6%
Colusa	612.4	453.0	-26%	0.0	4.5	NA	1,837.2	1,775.8	-3%
Contra Costa	258.6	203.6	-21%	4.7	3.8	-19%	2,849.6	2,397.6	-16%
Del Norte	922.6	742.8	-19%	7.4	7.4	0%	3,355.8	3,074.3	-8%
El Dorado	413.6	343.7	-17%	2.6	0.0	-100%	1,526.3	1,527.5	0%
Fresno	690.2	517.5	-25%	5.4	9.2	70%	2,742.6	2,976.3	9%
Glenn	629.5	464.3	-26%	6.9	6.8	-1%	2,122.3	2,026.6	-5%
Humboldt	626.2	439.3	-30%	4.5	6.8	51%	3,401.6	3,085.0	-9%
Imperial	421.8	236.1	-44%	3.7	3.7	0%	2,151.2	2,108.6	-2%
Inyo	449.5	428.7	-5%	5.4	5.4	0%	2,637.7	2,431.0	-8%
Kern	654.8	552.9	-16%	9.2	12.7	38%	3,866.2	3,735.7	-3%
Kings	1,112.5	915.1	-18%	2.6	7.1	173%	2,099.4	2,121.6	1%
Lake	859.9	611.6	-29%	7.8	1.6	-80%	2,457.9	2,378.8	-3%
Lassen	890.5	446.8	-50%	0.0	0.0	NA	2,392.0	1,953.4	-18%
Los Angeles	560.7	450.3	-20%	5.0	6.7	34%	2,748.1	2,634.6	-4%
Madera	750.9	555.4	-26%	1.9	5.7	198%	2,234.2	1,706.6	-24%
Marin	203.9	143.3	-30%	0.4	0.4	1%	2,283.4	2,276.8	0%
Mariposa	605.3	444.4	-27%	0.0	0.0	NA	1,462.8	1,468.1	0%
Mendocino	721.7	324.6	-55%	3.4	6.9	101%	1,805.4	2,037.9	13%
Merced	552.6	456.2	-17%	4.3	8.4	98%	2,989.4	2,672.8	-11%
Modoc	750.7	647.8	-14%	0.0	10.6	NA	1,152.5	1,221.3	6%
Mono	338.6	230.5	-32%	0.0	14.9	NA	1,869.7	1,509.6	-19%
Monterey	561.3	487.2	-13%	3.4	3.2	-6%	2,067.7	2,086.6	1%
Napa	393.9	323.0	-18%	0.7	0.7	1%	2,084.0	2,051.0	-2%
Nevada	322.1	266.8	-17%	3.1	5.1	67%	1,461.0	1,289.0	-12%
Orange	349.3	266.3	-24%	1.8	1.8	4%	2,065.1	2,143.8	4%
Placer	343.6	271.7	-21%	1.8	1.8	-1%	1,706.7	1,630.1	-4%
Plumas	617.9	389.1	-37%	5.4	5.5	1%	2,395.7	2,482.7	4%
Riverside	545.1	438.1	-20%	4.9	6.3	29%	2,697.1	2,450.9	-9%
Sacramento	654.5	541.6	-17%	5.0	6.4	27%	2,775.7	2,569.1	-7%
San Benito	398.1	278.7	-30%	1.6	4.8	196%	997.6	1,173.8	18%
San Bernardino	589.3	480.6	-18%	6.8	8.3	23%	2,740.4	2,396.0	-13%
San Diego	424.7	318.6	-25%	2.6	3.4	32%	1,991.1	1,819.4	-9%
San Francisco	217.9	145.4	-33%	4.5	5.4	22%	6,253.8	4,925.6	-21%
San Joaquin	536.1	462.7	-14%	6.5	10.8	66%	3,562.9	3,005.1	-16%
San Luis Obispo	432.1	344.4	-20%	1.8	2.5	41%	2,073.4	1,964.9	-5%
San Mateo	277.3	197.3	-29%	1.3	2.1	60%	2,333.6	2,239.4	-4%
Santa Barbara	457.7	358.7	-22%	3.8	1.8	-53%	1,954.6	2,359.9	21%
Santa Clara	370.2	275.2	-26%	2.3	2.7	18%	2,752.1	2,539.5	-8%
Santa Cruz	340.6	277.0	-19%	2.2	4.4	102%	2,980.0	2,638.2	-11%
Shasta	947.5	755.2	-20%	3.4	6.8	100%	1,709.3	2,480.1	45%
Sierra	255.8	160.4	-37%	0.0	0.0	NA	1,023.3	673.7	-34%

County	Incarceration rate			Homicide rate			All Part I offenses rate		
	2019	2020	Change	2019	2020	Change	2019	2020	Change
Siskiyou	754.5	580.0	-23%	13.6	4.6	-67%	1,856.8	2,027.8	9%
Solano	376.8	300.3	-20%	4.8	9.1	90%	3,471.7	2,962.1	-15%
Sonoma	372.1	266.5	-28%	1.8	2.0	12%	1,772.7	1,755.9	-1%
Stanislaus	530.5	429.4	-19%	4.5	5.9	32%	3,100.3	2,458.1	-21%
Sutter	552.5	388.5	-30%	3.9	4.9	27%	2,689.5	2,704.6	1%
Tehama	908.5	668.0	-26%	4.6	10.7	133%	2,883.5	2,514.3	-13%
Trinity	994.5	752.4	-24%	15.0	15.0	1%	2,228.2	2,106.7	-5%
Tulare	770.9	648.7	-16%	4.2	6.0	44%	2,578.2	2,308.5	-10%
Tuolumne	856.2	615.1	-28%	3.8	1.9	-50%	2,414.5	2,313.1	-4%
Ventura	386.9	315.1	-19%	2.8	2.4	-16%	1,713.3	1,755.2	2%
Yolo	441.7	309.0	-30%	2.7	2.7	0%	3,298.7	3,178.4	-4%
Yuba	1,000.5	684.0	-32%	9.0	2.5	-72%	2,779.9	2,838.6	2%
Total	492.9	389.8	-21%	4.2	5.5	31%	2,737.3	2,551.5	-7%

Sources: BSCC (2021); CDCR (2021); DOF (2021); DOJ (2021).

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