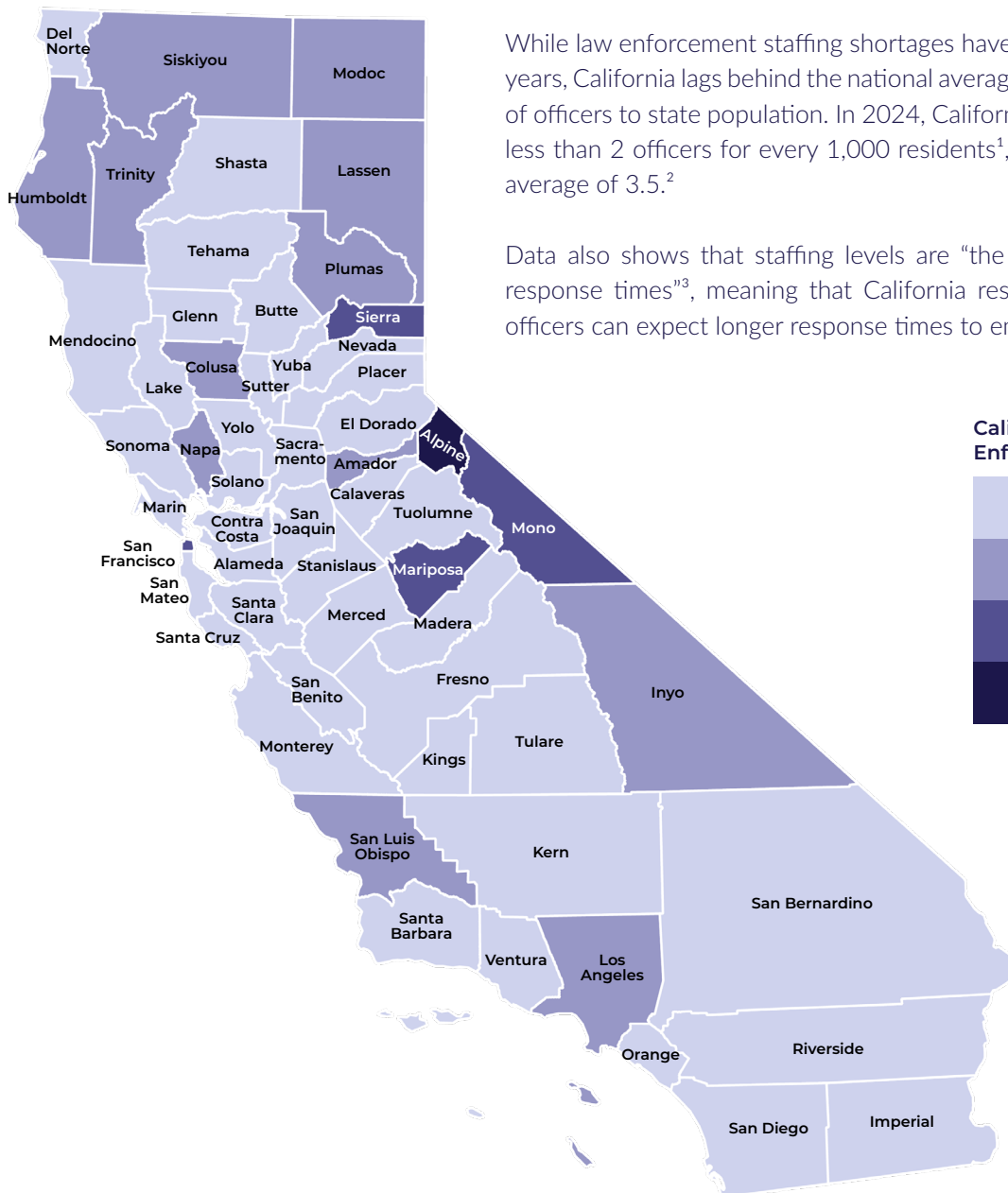


Every Second Counts: Law Enforcement Staffing Shortages Are Slowing Police Response Times in California



While law enforcement staffing shortages have improved slightly in recent years, California lags behind the national average when it comes to the ratio of officers to state population. In 2024, California counties on average had less than 2 officers for every 1,000 residents¹, nearly half the nationwide average of 3.5.²

Data also shows that staffing levels are “the strongest predictor of call response times”³, meaning that California residents in areas with fewer officers can expect longer response times to emergency calls.

California Sworn Law Enforcement Officers Per 1,000

Less than 2
2 to 3
3 to 4
More than 5

Only 2 of California’s 58 counties exceed the national average of 3.5 officers per 1,000 residents.

A Statewide Issue: Case Studies

Across the state, Californians who call for help are hit especially hard by staffing shortages.

SACRAMENTO COUNTY



The number of active Sacramento Police Department officers is expected to drop to below 600 next year, less than half of the officers needed to serve the population of Sacramento.⁴

“We have 639 officers right now. In a normal city with our population, you would think we’d be right around 1,050 police officers...If you have a burglary and you call in, and then there’s six or seven other people that have called in person-to-person crimes, you’re going to wait quite a while before we get to your burglary,” said Dustin Smith, President of the Sacramento Police Officers Association.

SANTA CLARA COUNTY



The San Jose Police Department has consistently fallen short of its target response times for emergency calls due to staffing shortages. In 2021–2022, officers took an average of 7.3 minutes to respond to Priority 1 calls — incidents involving an immediate threat to life or significant risk of property damage — more than a full minute longer than the department’s goal. For Priority 2 calls, which involve urgent but less critical situations, the average response time was nearly 24 minutes, more than twice the target of 11 minutes.⁵

“When San Jose was meeting its goal of 11 minutes for priority two calls, it was back when there were 1,400 officers. So, you see a direct decline year after year in these reports because staffing has just kept going down,” said Tom Saggau, a spokesperson for the San Jose Police Officers Association.

LOS ANGELES COUNTY



As the Long Beach Police Department struggles to fill 155 vacancies, officers are taking more than 20 minutes longer to respond to the highest priority calls than they did in 2021.⁶

“My last employee just quit because she didn’t feel safe,” said Make Collectives owner Kathleen Engel said inside her shop in Long Beach.

SAN DIEGO COUNTY



Despite significant staffing shortages, the San Diego Police Department continues to meet its 7-minute goal for the most serious emergencies⁷ – those involving immediate threats to human life. But for other serious crimes, which still include cases such as missing children, child abuse, domestic violence, and even bomb threats, the average response time exceeds 36 minutes, more than twice the 14-minute target.⁸

“It’s incredibly difficult for large-city officers and throughout the nation, particularly here in San Diego, we are seeing we are understaffed and really overworked,” said Jared Wilson, President of the San Diego Police Officers Association.

The Challenge at Hand: Core Issues Behind Staffing Shortages

Shortages create a vicious cycle for departments, causing strain on the existing workforce and making it more difficult to hire new officers. A 2024 national survey found that 70% of participating agencies say that recruitment is more difficult now than it was five years ago. The survey showed, on average, agencies are staffed at only 91% of their approved positions, meaning approximately 10% of roles remain unfilled.⁹

On average, agencies are staffed at only 91% of their approved positions, meaning 10% of roles remain unfilled.

In California, while law enforcement gained a small number of new officers and staff in 2023, **the profession overall has still lost over 3,300 sworn officers and 400 civilian staff since 2020.**¹⁰

But recruitment is only one step in the process. Qualified peace officers must be hired, trained, and retained for a physically and emotionally taxing job that requires many to retire or leave the profession early. When agencies are unable to recruit and keep qualified candidates, response times suffer. 65% of participating agencies said that they were forced to reduce or eliminate specialized units or services due to staffing shortages.¹¹

Fewer officers mean less law enforcement availability to respond to calls, forcing departments to prioritize only the most urgent cases, leaving less urgent, but still devastating crimes, like vandalism or burglary, with extensive wait times.

California faces the following roadblocks to maintaining appropriate staffing levels:

- **Negative Views of Law Enforcement:** Prevalent anti-law enforcement rhetoric has made it increasingly difficult to recruit, hire, train, and retain the right officers for the job. Applications have decreased significantly, and anti-police sentiment has placed officers at greater risk – in 2021, intentional killings of law enforcement officers reached a 20-year high.
- **Higher Attrition Rates & Early Departures:** The demanding nature of being a peace officer today coupled with the emotional and physical toll of the job has led to a significant increase in early retirements and voluntary exits from the profession.
- **Lengthy Recruitment Processes:** As experienced officers retire at staggering rates, departments must replace them quickly with new recruits. This presents a challenge for the approximate 45% of departments who have a hiring process that lasts between four months to year.¹²

"I'm down 100 (deputies), so everybody is down... No one wants to be a cop."

– Sacramento County Sheriff Jim Cooper¹³

"Ask 150 high school kids who wants to be a police officer – you won't get one that will raise their hand." – Sam Blonder, CEO of Epic Recruiting¹⁴



Looking Ahead: The Benefits of Hiring More Officers

California faces a web of compounding obstacles as it grapples with a public safety crisis marked by increased crime and unprecedented officer staffing shortages. In an attempt to mitigate these impacts, in 2024, the state resorted to deploying the California Highway Patrol (CHP)¹⁷ to bolster officer levels on the ground in especially hard-hit areas — even though the CHP is also understaffed.¹⁸ But this shortsighted solution simply removes officers from one understaffed area to provide short-term relief to another.

“Law enforcement officials keep our families, neighborhoods, and communities safe. While our departments are stepping up to combat crime, gun violence, the opioid epidemic, and natural disasters, they should not have to worry about not having the resources they need to recruit, vet, and hire the officers they need on the beat”. – Congressman Salud Carbajal (D-Santa)¹⁹

This moment exemplifies the urgency for increased resources to recruit, train, and retain officers. Even small changes can make a big impact:

Crime Reduction

Each additional officer results in 1.3 fewer violent crimes and 4.2 fewer property crimes per year.¹⁵

Economic Impact

There is a significant crime-reduction benefit of hiring even one additional officer — in Los Angeles, one officer yields an expected benefit of \$480,000.¹⁶

Police departments must be fully funded so they can prevent, not just respond to, crime. It's time to provide the necessary funding and resources to ensure departments can maintain adequate staffing levels to increase public safety in our neighborhoods, respond to and address the disturbing wave of rising crime, increase hours spent on training, and provide officers with the support they need.

In addition to sufficient funding, the public safety profession needs public support from federal, state, and local elected officials. The negative public narrative around law enforcement over the last several years has only compounded existing recruitment challenges. We urge elected officials to actively promote law enforcement careers as secure, middle-class opportunities with strong benefits. Our leaders have a responsibility to help us protect the communities we collectively serve, and supporting our profession is a simple, cost-effective way to boost recruitment. That's how we'll build a safer California, together.

¹ California DOJ: <https://openjustice.doj.ca.gov/exploration/crime-statistics/criminal-justice-personnel> & U.S. Census: <https://data.census.gov/>

² FBI Crime Data Explorer: "Ratio of Law Enforcement Employees to Population: United States": <https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/le/pe>

³ Scott M. Mourtgos, Ian T. Adams, & Justin Nix, "Staffing levels are the most important factor influencing police response times," *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, 2024, 18, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paae002>

⁴ KCRA 3, "Sacramento Police Department comes to grips with an alarming staffing shortage," <https://www.kcra.com/article/sacramento-police-department-staffing-shortage/64973532>

⁵ San Jose Spotlight, "San Jose police are getting slower at responding to calls", <https://sanjosepotlight.com/san-jose-police-are-getting-slower-at-responding-to-calls/>

⁶ Long Beach Post, "Long Beach police are taking longer to respond to calls due to vacancies, data shows", <https://lbpost.com/news/long-beach-police-are-taking-longer-to-respond-to-calls-due-to-vacancies-data-shows/>

⁷ San Diego Police Department Communications Division, "Dispatch Priority System", https://sehat.datasd.org/police_calls_for_service/pd_cfs_priority_defs_datasd.pdf

⁸ NBC San Diego, "San Diego Police Officer Staffing Impacting Emergency Response Times", <https://www.nbcсандiego.com/news/investigations/san-diego-police-officer-staffing-impacting-emergency-response-times/3193036/>

⁹ IACP (2024): https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/IACP_Recruitment_Report_Survey.pdf

¹⁰ PPIC (2025): <https://www.ppic.org/publication/law-enforcement-staffing-in-california/>

¹¹ IACP (2024): https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/IACP_Recruitment_Report_Survey.pdf

¹² IACP (2024): https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/IACP_Recruitment_Report_Survey.pdf (estimate based on graph on page 6)

¹³ ABC 10: <https://www.abc10.com/article/news/local/california/law-enforcement-staffing-shortages/103-877b8734-df6d-42e8-bd7f-f871b12b319b>

¹⁴ CalMatters: <https://calmatters.org/justice/2022/12/police-officer-shortage/>

¹⁵ PPIC: <https://www.ppic.org/publication/law-enforcement-staffing-in-california/>

¹⁶ RAND: https://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP279.html

¹⁷ Office of Governor Newsom: <https://www.gov.ca.gov/2024/02/06/chp-surge-east-bay/>

¹⁸ KRON: <https://www.kron4.com/news/bay-area/chp-struggling-with-statewide-staffing-shortages/>

¹⁹ <https://carbajal.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=1950>