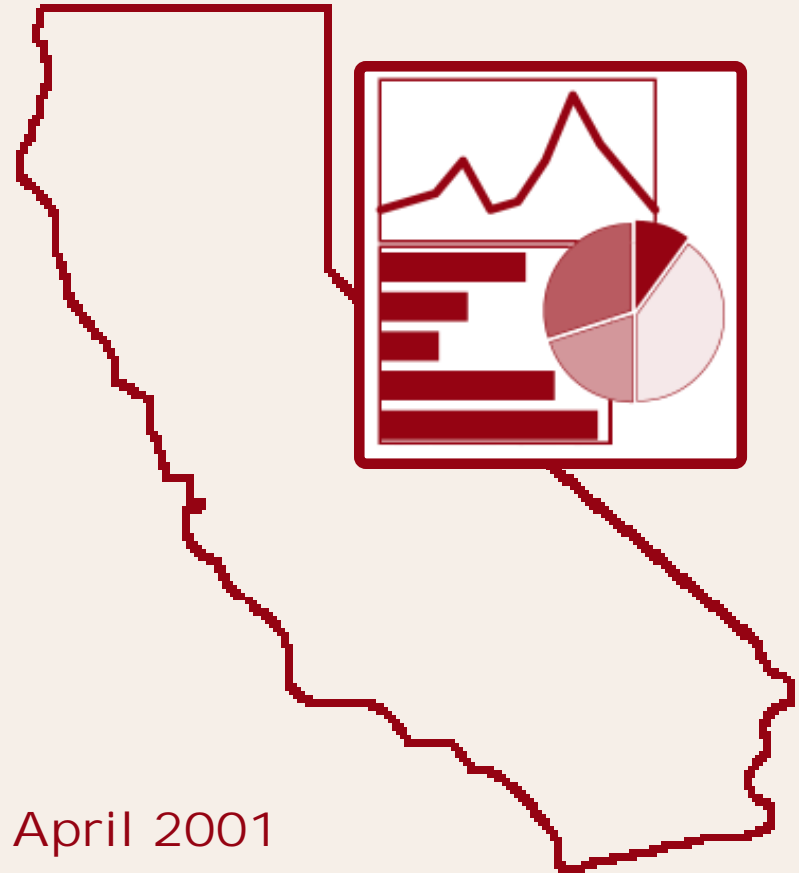


# CRIME IN CALIFORNIA



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April 2001

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Division of Criminal Justice Information Services  
Bureau of Criminal Information and Analysis  
**CRIMINAL JUSTICE STATISTICS CENTER**



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## Introduction

In an effort to add perspective to the ongoing discussion of crime in California, we have prepared this report to answer several key questions, including:

- How much crime is there in California?
- What are the short-term and long-term trends in crime?
- How does crime vary within California, and among the states?
- Who are the victims and perpetrators of crime?
- How does California's criminal justice system deal with crime?
- What are the costs of crime?
- What are the policy implications for decision-makers?

Although this report is not designed to present comprehensive answers to all of these questions, it does provide basic information on these issues. It does this through a “quick reference” style that relies heavily on charts to present the information.

This report was originally published in 1994 by the State of California Legislative Analyst's Office. It is with the permission and assistance of the Legislative Analyst's Office that the report has been updated and reprinted.

***The State of Crime in California.*** California began maintaining official crime rates in 1952 and long-term trends showed the rate rising before reaching peak levels in 1980. National surveys conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice in which persons are asked whether they have been the victim of a crime (whether reported to the police or not) confirmed this trend nationwide. However, the California crime rate declined from 1992 through 1999, and violent crimes in the state experienced decreases from 1993 through 1999. Nationally, crime rates declined from 1994 through 1999.

## What Is Crime?

In its simplest definition, “crime” is any specific act prohibited by law for which society has provided a formally sanctioned punishment. This also can include the failure of a person to perform an act specifically required by law.

**Types of Offenses.** Crimes are classified by the seriousness of the offenses as follows:

- A **felony** is the most serious offense, for which the offender may be sentenced to state prison. Felonies generally include violent crimes, sex offenses, and many types of drug and property violations.
- A **misdemeanor** is a less serious offense for which the offender may be sentenced to probation, county jail, a fine, or some combination of the three. Misdemeanors generally include crimes such as assault and battery, petty theft, and public drunkenness.
- An **infraction** is the least serious offense and generally is punishable by a fine. Many motor vehicle violations are considered infractions.

California law permits law enforcement and prosecutors to charge many types of crimes as either a felony or misdemeanor (known as a “wobbler”), or as either a misdemeanor or an infraction. Most of the resources of the criminal justice system are devoted to dealing with felonies.

**Categories of Crimes.** In general, felonies, misdemeanors, and infractions are classified in one of three broad categories: violent, property, and drug-related. Violent crime refers to events such as homicide, rape, and assault that result in an injury to a person. Robbery is also considered a violent crime because it involves the use or threat of force against a person.

Property crime refers to events such as burglary and motor vehicle theft. Such crimes are often referred to as “household crimes.”

Drug-related crimes, such as possession or sale of illegal narcotics, are generally in a separate category altogether. This is because such offenses do not fall under the definition of either violent or property offenses.

Another area of crime which has gained much attention is that of “Hate Crimes”. Hate crimes are not separate, distinct crimes. Rather, they are offenses motivated by the victim’s race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, physical or mental disability, or gender. The “Hate Crimes Statistics Act”, passed in 1990, required the U.S. Attorney General to collect bias-motivated crime information, with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) publishing its first report in 1992. California began collecting data in 1994 and first published its findings in 1995.

***Society’s Definition of Crime Can Change.*** Although many offenses, such as homicide, robbery, and burglary, have been considered crimes for centuries, changes in the values and moral attitudes of society result in some conduct being criminalized while other conduct is decriminalized. For example, in recent years California has chosen to criminalize more severely drunken driving, while lessening criminal penalties for the possession of small amounts of marijuana.

Also, society’s attitudes towards the amount of punishment that should be dealt out for particular crimes changes over time. For instance, the state has enacted many laws that increase punishment for felonies and limit the discretion of state and local criminal justice officials in dealing with offenders.

## How Much Crime Is There in California?

Although this is a simple question, the answer to it is often confusing because of the bewildering volume of crime statistics. For this reason, it is important to first understand how crimes are counted. Crime is counted in two different ways. One is based on official reports to law enforcement agencies, and is reflected in the national Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) data and the California Crime Index (CCI) data. Crime is also counted based on surveys of individuals to determine if they have been victims of crime, even though the crime may not have been reported to the police. These data are obtained from national victimization surveys.

***Crimes as Counted by Law Enforcement Reports.*** For more than 60 years, the FBI has collected criminal statistics from throughout the nation under the UCR Program. Under this program, law enforcement agencies in California report information on crimes to the state Department of Justice (DOJ), which forwards the data to the FBI. In order to eliminate differences among various states’ statutory definitions of crimes, the UCR reports data only on selected crimes, which are chosen because of their seriousness, frequency, and the likelihood of being reported to law enforcement. The UCR crimes are homicide, rape, robbery, assault, burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson.

The DOJ annually reports on California crime using the CCI. The state’s data are similar, but not identical, to the national data. The state’s data exclude larceny-theft and arson in order to maintain the long-term consistency in the CCI trend.

***Crime as Counted by Victimization Surveys.*** The U.S. Department of Justice annually surveys households and organizations regarding

whether they have been victims of crimes. These studies, known as victimization surveys, are conducted nationally, not on a state-by-state basis, using scientific survey techniques.

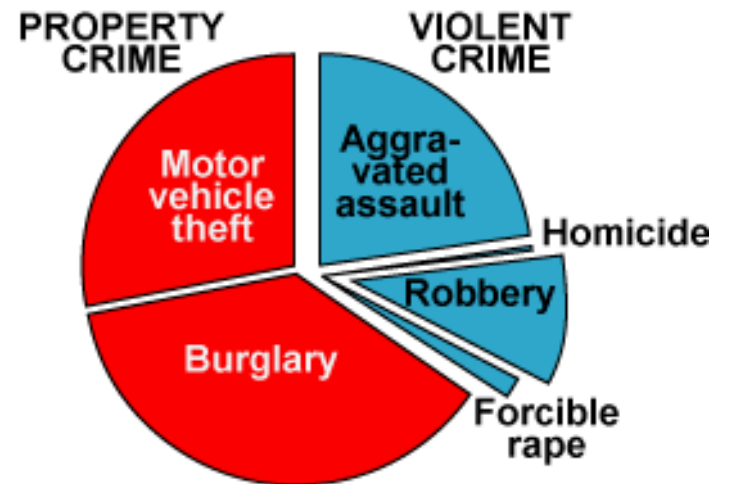
**Crime “Rates.”** Crime data are often presented in terms of “rates.” A rate is defined as the number of occurrences of a criminal event within a given population. For example, the overall crime rate in California (according to the CCI) for 1999 was 1,763.3, which means that there were about 1,763 reported crimes per 100,000 Californians in 1999.

**Crime is Underreported.** Crime statistics from law enforcement agencies don’t tell the entire story for two reasons. Victimization surveys generally show that there is a significant amount of crime committed each year that is not counted in official statistics because it is not reported to law enforcement authorities. However, the proportion of crimes reported to law enforcement agencies has increased steadily since the victimization surveys began in the early 1970s. Improvements in technology and methodology led to a redesign of the survey in 1992, and victims are now reporting more types of crime incidents to survey interviewers.

Some crimes are more likely to be reported than others. For example, crimes involving personal injury or large economic loss are more apt to be reported. Violent crimes that are attempted, but not completed, and property crimes involving small amounts of money are much less likely to be reported. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, in 1999, about 64 percent of all crimes went unreported to police. This figure includes about 56 percent of all violent victimizations and 66 percent of all property crimes.

Another reason for underreporting of crime is that sometimes several crimes are committed by an offender at the same time, but only one (usually the most severe) is counted in the data. For example, if an offender robbed a store, assaulted a clerk, and killed the owner, only the homicide would be reported.

## Most Crime Is Property Crime 1999



- There were 1,763 reported crimes per 100,000 Californians in 1999.
- Property crime (burglary and motor vehicle theft) accounted for about 65 percent of crimes reported in California in 1999, and violent crime (homicide, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) accounted for about 35 percent.
- Although the proportion of violent crimes decreased slightly in 1999 from 1998, the general relationship of violent to property crimes (roughly 30 percent to 70 percent) has remained stable in recent years.

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