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How Much Does California Spend on Law Enforcement, the Criminal Legal System, and Incarceration?

Recent acts of police brutality against Black Americans and greater public outcry over the continued abuse and deaths of people across Black communities have amplified calls for defunding, abolishing, and reimagining local policing. This also comes with growing awareness that police violence has disproportionately fatal consequences for Black men and women, and Black transgender women in particular. The calls to action involve significantly transforming the mission and structure of local law enforcement, divesting from local law enforcement in its current forms, and reinvesting the freed-up funding into community-building capacities that would also seek to end racial profiling and police brutality against Black people and other people of color.

What's more, over-policing of communities of color along with harsh state sentencing laws and local district attorneys' power to inequitably and unjustly pursue criminal charges continue to drive California's over-reliance on incarceration as well as the disparate treatment of people of color in the justice system. This leaves Black, Latinx, undocumented Californians, and many other families of color beholden to an overly harsh and unfair criminal justice system that has spanned generations and leaves these families unable to provide or build economic security for their households.

As calls for restructuring and reforming local policing and reducing incarceration intensify, what is at stake in terms of state and local spending in California? Data from the Department of Finance and the State Controller's Office show that:

- **California's 482 cities and 58 counties spent more than \$20 billion from all revenue sources on city police and county sheriff's departments as recently as 2017-18 (the most recent statewide data available).** Cities spend nearly three times more on police than on housing and community development. Counties spend more of their general revenue on sheriff's departments than on social services by a substantial margin.
- **The financial outlay goes beyond local law enforcement. The state of California and its cities and counties spend roughly \$50 billion annually on local law enforcement, the criminal legal system, and incarceration in state prisons and county jails.** In comparison, this spending is about three times what California spends from its General Fund on higher education (community colleges, CSU, and UC) and is roughly equivalent to state General Fund support for K-12 education.

The negative effects of prioritizing spending on systems of punishment and incarceration fall disproportionately on Black Californians and other people of color. For instance, Black and

Latinx Californians are incarcerated at much higher rates than other Californians and are [overrepresented in state prisons](#).

Budgets are about values. As state and local leaders craft their budgets for the upcoming fiscal year, they also can address recent and longstanding patterns of police brutality against Black people and other people of color. This should include asking whether spending approximately \$50 billion per year on law enforcement, the criminal legal system, and incarceration accurately reflects our state's values.