

RIVERSIDE LIVES LOST

A REPORT OF IN-CUSTODY DEATHS IN RIVERSIDE
COUNTY BETWEEN 2012-2024

RIVERSIDE COUNTY

REPORT STATEMENT

"WHAT DO YOU EXPECT WHEN YOU GO TO JAIL? WELL, THE EXPECTATIONS WHEN GOING TO JAIL SHOULDN'T BE THAT YOU DIE."

— Lisa Matus, mother of Richard Matus, Jr. who passed away on August 11th, 2022

Riverside County is California's fourth-largest county, with a population of 2.53 million residents. The county has experienced rapid population growth over the past two decades, driven primarily by rising housing costs in other regions and an increase in logistics-related jobs. However, this growth has outpaced the development of essential resources and support systems that residents need for their well-being. As a result, local institutions have increasingly relied on incarceration to address social issues such as homelessness, substance use, and mental health crises.

The reliance on incarceration and policing to resolve social issues created a system capable of jailing around 5,000 people a day. A system that is rife with problems, including an alarming rate of in-custody deaths.

This report examines the devastating toll that these deaths have had on communities in the county, highlighting a crisis that can no longer be ignored.

We hope that the data and analysis in this report will help Riverside County work toward a new vision of justice, grounded in collective care rather than retribution. A vision focused on investing in community-based alternatives, expanding care-first programs, and instituting robust oversight. This change will require courageous leadership, deep partnership with impacted communities, and an unwavering commitment to the inherent worth of every human life. Together, we can build a county that centers healing, care, and the well-being of its residents over handcuffs and cages.

We acknowledge that the death of an individual in law enforcement custody has far-reaching consequences, extending beyond the immediate moment, cell, station, or jail. Such a death profoundly affects everyone who knew and cared for that person. We recognize that the full extent of harm caused by mass incarceration cannot be captured or expressed by data alone.



Richard Matus, Jr. (1993-2022) with his two children at the beach

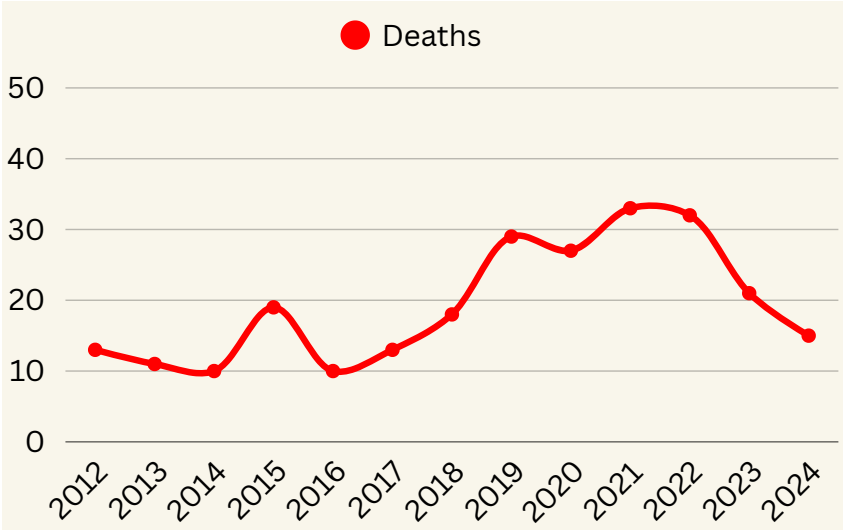
PREVIOUS WORK IN RIVERSIDE COUNTY

BRIEF HISTORY OF LOCAL JUSTICE WORK

- **DECEMBER 28, 1998:** On the evening of Dec. 28, Riverside Police Department officers shot Tyisha Miller 23 times while she was lying in her vehicle. She was killed instantly. Tyisha's death sparked the rise of local movements for law enforcement accountability in the region.
- **MARCH 2020:** California began to implement shutdowns to reduce the spread of COVID-19. As a result, Riverside advocates sent a letter to Riverside Sheriff Bianco, urging the release of medically vulnerable people from the jails. Protests began in Riverside and San Bernardino, demanding that people be released.
- **APRIL 2020:** Prison Law Office filed an emergency motion to protect people detained in Riverside County in response to Sheriff Bianco's failure to release people from custody.
- **SEPTEMBER 2021:** ACLU SoCal, Starting Over Inc., and Riverside All of Us or None sent a letter to the Attorney General of California, urging an investigation into the Riverside Sheriff's Department. The letter highlighted the high number of officer-involved shootings.
- **APRIL 28, 2022:** Death of Alicia Upton - the first person to die in a Riverside County Jail Facility in 2022. Alicia's death marked the beginning of the deadliest year in Riverside County Jail Facilities in 15 years.
- **SEPTEMBER 2022:** First rally held outside of the Robert Presley Detention Center in Downtown Riverside with families of those who died in Riverside County jails.
- **FEBRUARY 7, 2023:** Advocates sent a letter to the Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC) urging increased oversight of the Sheriff's Department, with a focus on custody issues, including deaths.
- **FEBRUARY 23, 2023:** California Attorney General Bonta announced a pattern or practice investigation into the Riverside Sheriff's Department.
- **OCTOBER 31, 2023:** Rally and launch of the Riverside Sheriff Accountability Coalition (RSAC). Also on this date, RSAC delivered a letter signed by over 30 organizations to the Riverside County Board of Supervisors, urging the establishment of Sheriff oversight, funding of alternatives to incarceration, and separation of the Coroner from the Sheriff's Department.
- **NOVEMBER 2023:** Riverside County Board of Supervisors agreed to conduct a study on whether Riverside County should separate the Coroner's Office from the Sheriff's Department.
- **MARCH 12, 2024:** Sheriff-Coroner separation report was published. The Riverside County Board of Supervisors did not recommend separating the Riverside County Coroner from the Sheriff's Department. The Board agreed to contract out autopsies where conflicts of interest may be implied and to create a family liaison within the Sheriff's Department to address in-custody deaths.
- **OCTOBER 1, 2024:** Release of Inland Region In-Custody Deaths Report.
- **JULY 29, 2025:** Riverside County Board of Supervisors failed to adopt a motion to create an ad-hoc commission that would have studied how to implement civilian oversight over the Riverside Sheriff's Department.

RIVERSIDE TOTAL DEATHS

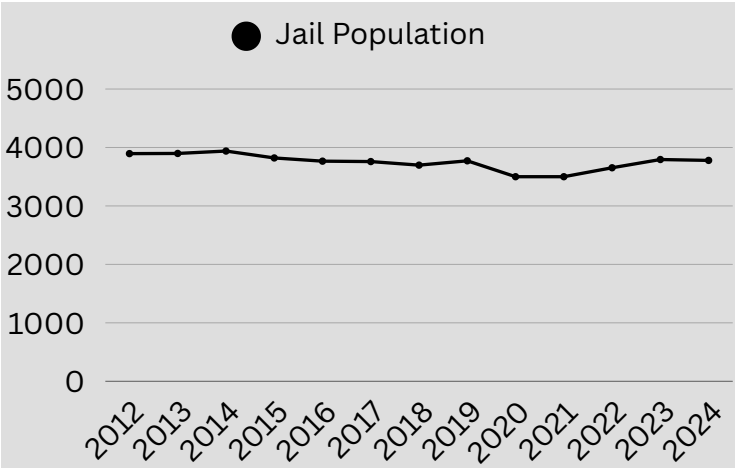
OVER TIME



Although the average jail population has remained relatively consistent since 2012, the number of deaths has increased quite drastically in the past few years (up to 182% in 2021 from 2012). There has been a decrease in recent years which is still a 19% increase from 2012 numbers.

Year	Number of Deaths	Average Daily Population	Rate of Death
2012	13	3895	3.34
2013	11	3839	2.82
2014	10	3939	2.54
2015	19	3821	4.97
2016	10	3766	2.66
2017	13	3759	3.46
2018	18	3698	4.87
2019	29	3772	7.69
2020	27	3500	7.71
2021	33	3500	9.43
2022	32	3653	8.76
2023	21	3794	5.54
2024	15	3779	3.97
Avg.	19	3752	5

Between 2012-2024 an **average of 19 lives** were lost each year.



We calculated percent change in the death rate by comparing the rate of death in 2012 to the rates of death in 2021 and 2024, respectively. To calculate the rate of death for each year, we used the total number of deaths reported to the California Department of Justice, divided by the annual average daily population in the jail as reported by the BSCC, and then multiplying that by 1,000. This is how the State Auditor’s Office calculated the rate of death in their 2022 audit of the San Diego County Sheriff’s Department.

RIVERSIDE TOTAL DEATHS

AT WHAT CUSTODIAL STAGE ARE DEATHS OCCURRING

Custody Status	Count
Process of Arrest	120
Awaiting Booking	3
Booked - No Charges Filed	8
Booked - Awaiting Trial	87
In Transit	2
Sentenced	17
Other	14
Total Deaths in Custody	251

93%
OF DEATHS
OCCURED BEFORE
THE INCARCERATED
PERSON WAS
SENTENCED.

We calculated the percentage of people who died before their case was resolved by adding all Custody Status categories provided by the Department of Justice’s individual-level data, apart from “Sentenced,” and dividing that number by the total number of deaths in the period (234/251).

However, the categories of “Other” and “In Transit” are vague, and it is unclear whether individuals in these categories had also been sentenced. If we were to exclude the "Other" and "In Transit" categories from the calculation, the percentage of deaths that occurred before the incarcerated person's case was resolved would decrease slightly from 93% to 87% (218/251).

Notably, of the 14 deaths where custody status was categorized as “Other,” six individuals had “died in the scene of the crime/arrest scene” listed as their location of death. While their exact custodial status remains unclear, the available information suggests that it is unlikely that these six individuals had been convicted given where their death occurred.

HOW DOES RIVERSIDE COMPARE?

COUNTIES WITH THE MOST IN-CUSTODY DEATHS 2012-2024

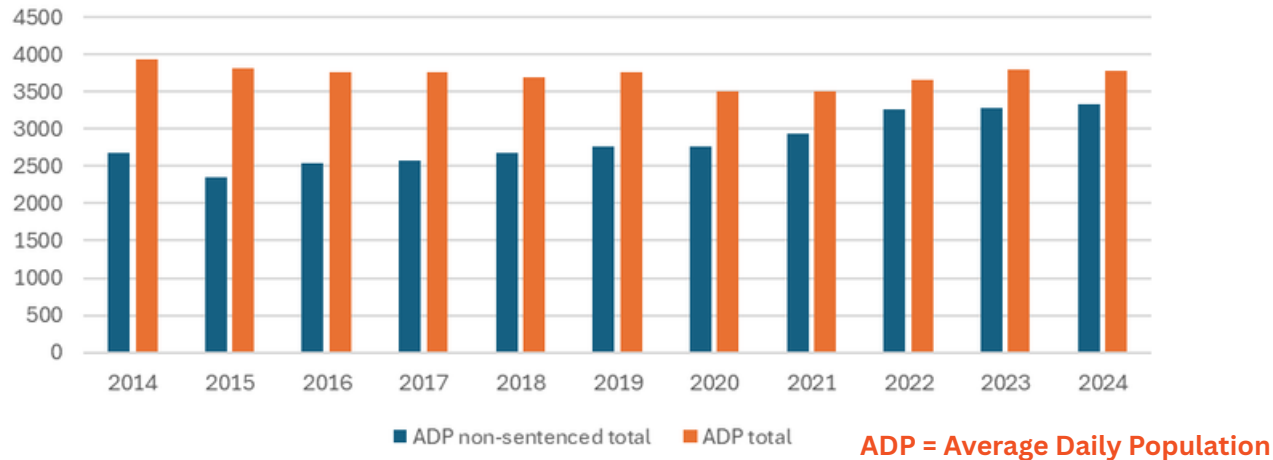
Of all 58 counties, Riverside is **3rd in total deaths in-custody** between 2012-2024.



Riverside County also has the **highest rate of in-custody deaths in the state at 5.21 deaths per 1,000 people** in the jail. This rate includes those that die in Sheriff custody but outside of the jail walls.

RIVERSIDE JAIL POPULATION

Riverside Non-Sentenced Numbers per Total Jail Pop.



The graph above presents the average of the non-sentenced daily population (ADP) and compares it with the total average daily population (ADP).

The Riverside County jail system has an average daily population of 3,725 people. Data obtained from the BSCC shows 76% of those detained in Riverside County are non-sentenced, meaning most are legally presumed innocent. Notably, the non-sentenced population has grown steadily since 2014, reaching an all-time high of 89% in 2022. This upward trend means that more people are being held in jail before their court cases are resolved. The increase also followed the deadliest year for in-custody deaths for Riverside, with 33 reported deaths in 2021. Many of these occurred during the process of arrest.

This dataset has real limitations. It only provides surface-level information on sentenced and non-sentenced populations for misdemeanors and felonies.

LOST WHILE AWAITING HIS DAY IN COURT



On February 5th, 2023, Cristian Miguel Viramontes was found unresponsive in his cell at the Robert Presley Detention Center in Riverside, California. His family has since filed a wrongful death lawsuit against the Riverside Sheriff's Department.

CRISTIAN WAS A WONDERFUL SON, BROTHER, DADDY, UNCLE, COUSIN, GRANDSON, NEPHEW, AND FRIEND WHO IN HIS OWN WAY TOUCHED THE LIVES OF THOSE AROUND HIM.

— Noemi Bravo, Cristian's mother.

RIVERSIDE DEMOGRAPHICS

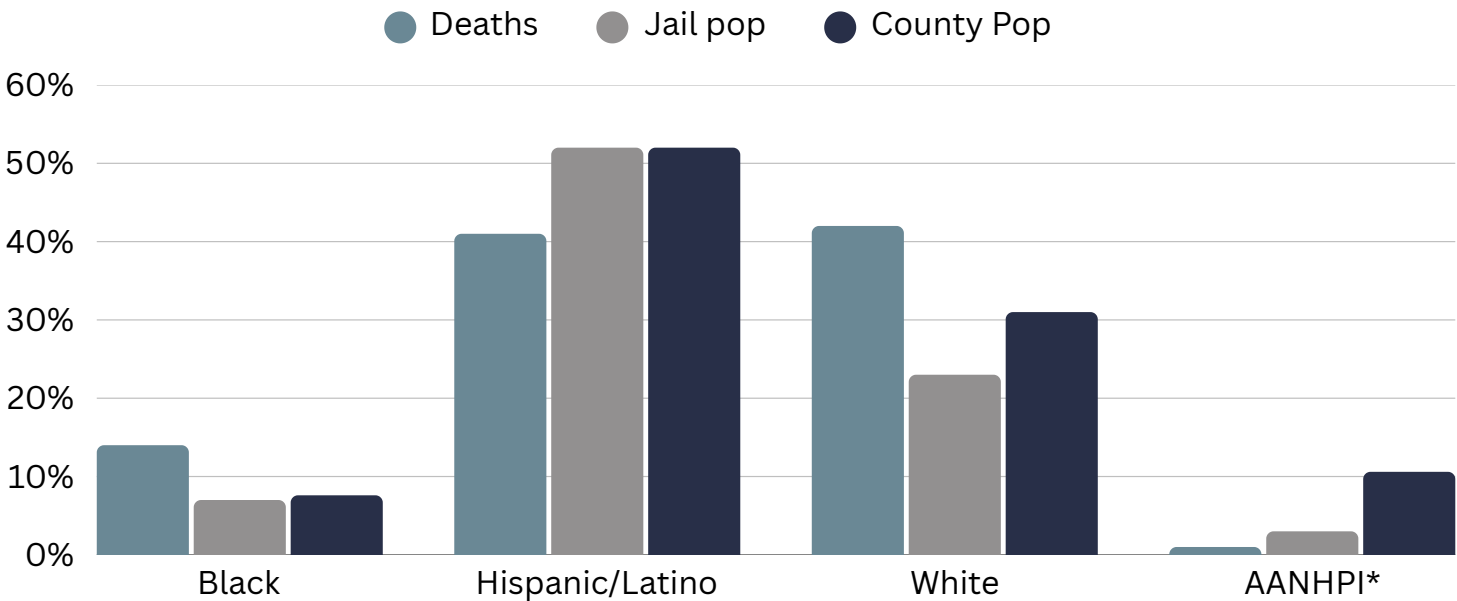
AGE

24 and under	18 people
25-34	66 people
35-44	73 people
45-54	41 people
55+	53 people

The youngest person who died while in-custody was **18** and the oldest was **83**.

RACE/ ETHNICITY

Total In-Custody Deaths vs. Population Averages



Though only **8%** of Riverside residents identify as Black (an estimated 158,667 in 2023), **14%** of those that die in the Riverside Sheriff’s Department’s custody (36 of 251) **are Black**.

The data displayed does not accurately reflect people who identify with multiple races/ethnicities, and [studies show](#) that [Latine people are routinely misidentified ethnically and racially](#), likely skewing the results and any conclusions we might draw. Additionally, three of the decedents were racially classified as “other.” The racial classification data for those reported as “other” were not included in the chart.

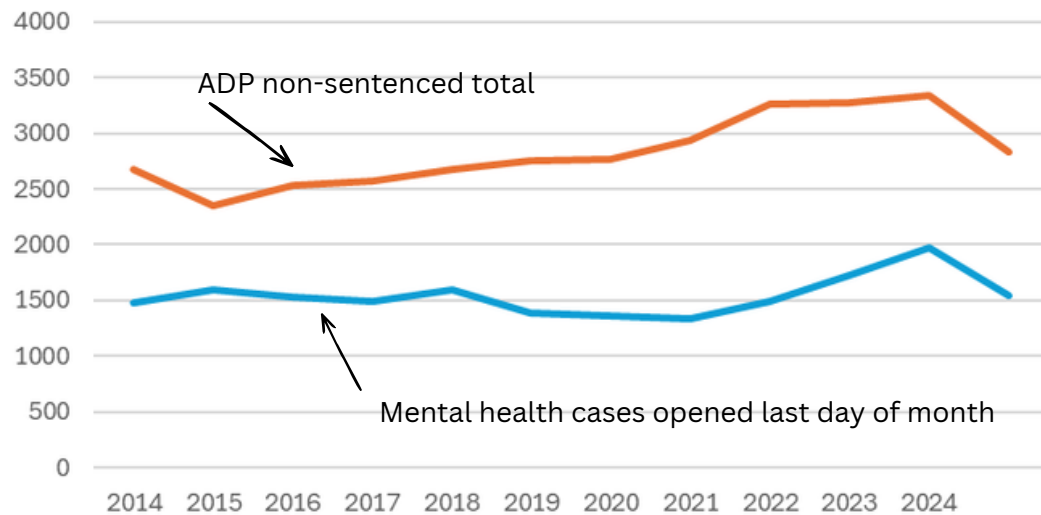
* AANHPI stands for Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islanders

MENTAL HEALTH IN RIVERSIDE

MENTAL HEALTH INSIDE RIVERSIDE JAILS

Since 2014, the Riverside Sheriff's Department has operated under a consent decree due to its failure to provide adequate medical and mental health care inside the county jails.

According to the BSCC's Jail Profile Survey, **approximately 41% of all people detained in Riverside jails have an open mental health case.**



This means that upon booking, these individuals received an assessment that identified them as needing mental health care while in custody. Existing analyses from the Public Policy Institute of California use “mental health cases opened on the last day of the month” to represent a point-in-time estimate of opened mental health cases in county jails. We utilized the same methodology to present the data above.



Michael Vasquez, died in-custody on May 26, 2022, after staff failed to provide him with medically necessary care. He was just 20 years old. At the time of Michael Vasquez's death, he had been incarcerated for only six days.

MY SON LAID THERE FOR OVER 2 HOURS BEFORE SOMEONE CAME TO HIS AID [...] THEY WERE TOO LATE TO SAVE MY SON. WHY OH WHY? WHY OH WHY DIDN'T SOMEONE SAVE MY SON.”

— Kathy Nigro, mother of Michael Vasquez

Michael's family has since filed a wrongful death lawsuit against the Riverside Sheriff's Department for wrongful death. His death report lists the cause of death as an “accidental fentanyl overdose.”

MENTAL HEALTH IN RIVERSIDE

MENTAL HEALTH AND JAILS DON'T MIX

Even a few days in jail can be especially devastating for people with serious mental health and medical needs, as they are cut off from their medications, support systems, and regular healthcare providers.

Jails are not appropriate settings for those with mental health needs. Many of the defining features of incarceration, such as disconnection from family and loss of autonomy, are linked to negative mental health outcomes. Poor conditions in prisons and jails, including overcrowding, violence, enforced solitude, lack of privacy, cause significant suffering, trauma, and mental health deterioration (Quandt & Jones, 2021).

Several studies have evaluated the available resources and accessibility of treatment for incarcerated persons, finding that care is often inconsistent or entirely absent. When mental health treatment is provided, it is often paired with unnecessary medication adjustments that lead to withdrawal or decompensation. And, despite the need for immediate crisis interventions, clinical staff often do not fully assess or care for the psychiatric needs of incarcerated people (Jacobs & Giordano, 2018).

Untreated mental illness only contributes to the cycle of incarceration. People living with serious mental illness are three times more likely to face multiple arrests (25% vs. 9%) and three times more likely to report serious psychological distress, such as symptoms of depression and anxiety, than people with no arrests in the past year (30% vs. 11%) (Jones & Sawyer, 2019).

The lawsuit *Grey v. Riverside* exemplifies the county's failure to meet the needs of incarcerated people with mental illness. Filed by the Prison Law Office, this lawsuit mandated systemic changes to medical and mental health care in Riverside County's jails. However, despite the case's 10-year lifespan, the courts have yet to find satisfactory conditions regarding mental health services in its custodial settings.

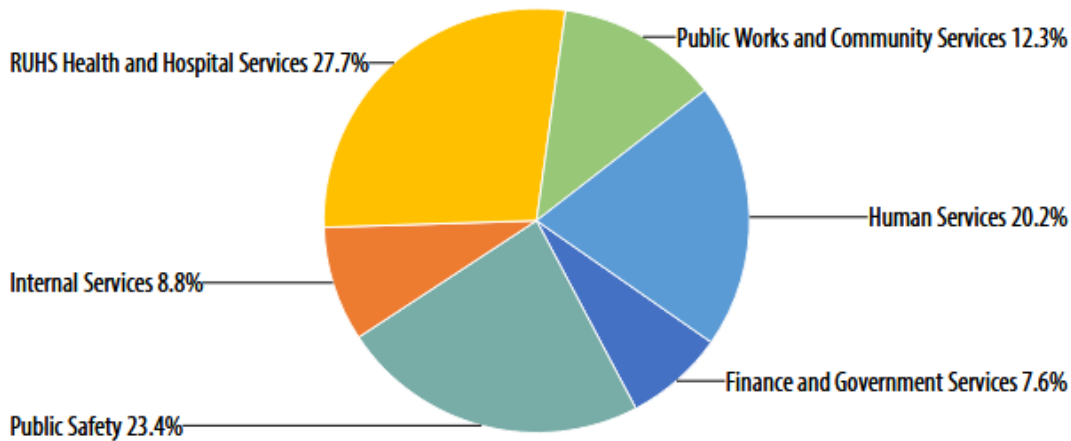
Given the high incarceration rate of people with mental health needs, inadequate treatment, and the relationship between untreated mental illness and incarceration, Riverside County must implement more community-based treatment and diversion programs to better support people living with mental health illnesses.

RIVERSIDE BUDGET

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2025 BUDGET SPENDING BREAKDOWN

Graph obtained from Riverside County's 2025 Adopted Budget Document

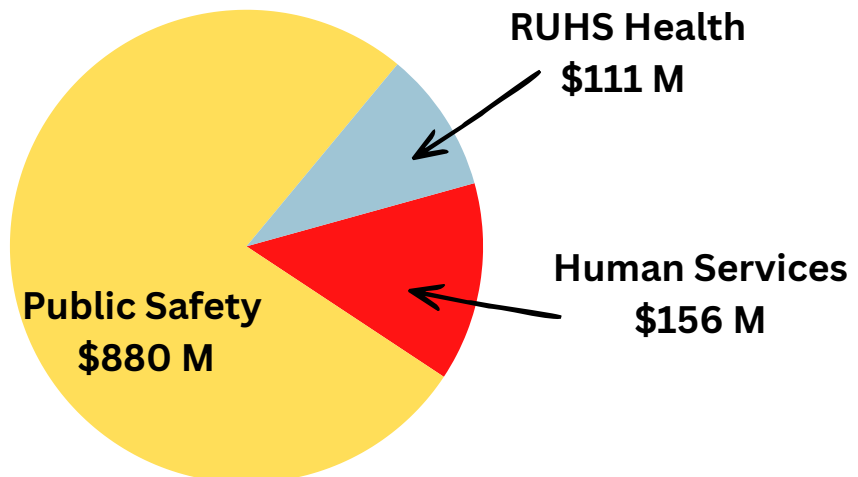


23%

of the 2025 county budget went towards the criminal legal system, the equivalent of **\$2.2 Billion.**

From 2014-2024 the Sheriff's Department's lawsuit settlement payouts were **nearly \$100 million.**

These settlements are paid from citizens' taxes, not the Sheriff's Department's budget.



Out of the discretionary budget total of \$1.3 billion, about 63% of it went to public safety. That is more spending than...

...Education, Mental Health, Public Health, and Substance Use Services combined.

RIVERSIDE COUNTY

ABOUT THE DATA

Data concerning in-custody deaths, as defined by the Federal Death in Custody Reporting Act (DCRA of 2000 and 2013) and California PC 10008, was received from the California Department of Justice via a Public Records Act Request. Additionally, the BSCC provided data on the average daily population, including mental health data.

Death in Custody Defined: "In-custody death" means the death of a person who is detained, under arrest, or is in the process of being arrested, is en route to be incarcerated, or is incarcerated at a municipal or county jail, state prison, state-run boot camp prison, boot camp prison that is contracted out by the state, any state or local contract facility, or other local or state correctional facility, including any juvenile facility. "In-custody death" also includes deaths that occur in medical facilities while in law-enforcement custody.

Due to concerns about the impact of realignment on the dataset, we removed the 2011 data from the updated report. Additionally, the updated report now includes California Department of Justice data from 2024. Many limitations to the data still exist, including, but not limited to, problematic grouping of race and gender, and inconsistencies in categories across facilities and stations.

Contact Shayla Wilson for additional information justice2jobsadvocacy@gmail.com

GET INVOLVED

**Join the fight for
Riverside County
Sheriff Oversight**

**SIGN UP TO JOIN
OUR MAILING
LIST!**



Follow and support our impacted families in their fight for justice:



@matus_brothers
@justice_for_minor
@justiceforernieserrano



rivcosheriffacctcoalition@gmail.com



[@rivcosheriffaccountability](https://www.instagram.com/rivcosheriffaccountability)

RIVERSIDE COUNTY

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