

# UNRAVELING THE POWERS OF SHERIFFS

**In California, Sheriffs are elected and have enormous powers.  
It's time to rein them in.**

## **Jailer, Police, Immigration Enforcement, & So Much More...**

Sheriffs are responsible for the incarceration of 82,440<sup>1</sup> Californians in County jails. Sheriffs are also the primary police force for numerous cities and in unincorporated areas, covering much of the state.

### **On top of this, California law gives Sheriffs a wide range of additional powers:**

Sheriffs' broad-ranging powers also enable them to entangle local government in immigration enforcement. Several Central Valley sheriffs have stated that they will work with immigration authorities to help deport community members.

In 2020 alone, Orange County Sheriff-Coroner Don Barnes transferred over 200 people to ICE custody.



- ✓ **Eviction enforcement**
- ✓ **Car towing & impound**
- ✓ **Traffic control**
- ✓ **Tax collection**
- ✓ **Courthouse security**
- ✓ **Transportation of incarcerated people**
- ✓ **Process service**
- ✓ **Administering estates**
- ✓ **Coroner's duties**

## **Sheriffs Control Billions of Taxpayer Funds**

**Across the state, Sheriffs control a significant share of county budgets and on top of this, receive millions in state grants.**



**Los Angeles County Sheriff: \$3.6 billion**  
**San Diego County Sheriff: \$1 billion**  
Riverside County Sheriff: \$372.2 million  
Orange County Sheriff: \$269.9 million  
Kern County Sheriff: \$242 million  
Alameda County Sheriff: \$185.7 million

Each year, Sheriffs extract hundreds of millions of dollars from California families through jail fees and commissary markups. Some have used these ill-gotten profits as personal slush funds, like the Sacramento County Sheriff, who used this money to pay for a staff trip to a Tahoe resort.

**ACLU**  
**CALIFORNIA**  
**ACTION**

**Turn to page 2 to read the stories  
and find out how to join the  
movement to check the sheriff.**

<sup>1</sup>The avg daily population for county jails statewide – from <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2019/09/18/state-jail-bookings/>

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## Broad and Unchecked Power Leads to Abuse

Currently, under California law, county Boards of Supervisors have few meaningful mechanisms to hold Sheriffs accountable – and they are often hesitant to use the tools they have. And while the law gives the Attorney General’s office the ability to directly supervise Sheriffs, it has rarely exercised this power.

**The result:** with their many powers and limited checks on them, Sheriffs have huge leeway to carry out their own personal vendettas and political agendas, creating conflicts of interest and threatening the wellbeing of the public.



Los Angeles County Sheriff Alex Villanueva has repeatedly violated the law and obstructed civilian oversight, defying lawful subpoenas. He even created a “secret police unit” to pursue investigations with the purpose of intimidating and harassing oversight officials.



Kern County Sheriff Donny Youngblood has overseen one of the country’s deadliest law enforcement departments for years. He was caught on tape telling the Sheriff deputies’ union that it is “better financially” for them to kill people than to wound them.



Riverside Sheriff Chad Bianco admitted to being a member of the violent extremist Oath Keepers organization. He has used CARES Act Funding that was meant to support communities most impacted by the pandemic to pay for Sheriff’s office renovations and furniture.



Orange County Sheriff-Coroner Don Barnes has consistently put the health and safety of people incarcerated in OC jails in peril. Last year, three people died in OC Sheriff’s custody in just two months; a grand jury report found that 44% of deaths in OC jails may have been preventable. A federal court found that the Sheriff put medically vulnerable people at substantial risk of harm from COVID-19. And for two years, the Sheriff has forced people incarcerated in OC jails to subsist on cold, and often moldy and rotten bologna sandwiches.

## Movement Towards Checking the Sheriff



For years, California has been making slow progress towards checking the power of Sheriffs:

**SB 54 (2018)** – Limited Sheriffs’ powers to collude with Immigration & Customs Enforcement

**AB 1185 (2020)** – Authorized County Boards of Supervisors to establish Sheriff Oversight Boards

**AB 937 (2022) (introduced)** - Would clearly prohibit Sheriffs from transferring people to ICE

**AB 1608 (2022) (introduced)** – Would separate the offices of the Sheriff and Coroner

**There’s still much more to be done to hold Sheriffs accountable and limit their excessive powers.**