For too long, Los Angeles County ("the County") has viewed public safety exclusively through a policing and incarceration lens and poured billions of limited public resources into failing solutions. Over the past 20 years, the County has dramatically increased the budgets of its Sheriff’s Department and Probation Department. These decisions were made despite evidence that policing and incarceration do not significantly impact crime rates and a mandate from the majority of Californians to decrease reliance on incarceration and punitive responses to public health and safety issues.

The County has not adequately invested in the community-based infrastructure that is required to holistically address the root causes and symptoms of crime and violence. Instead of sufficiently funding youth and community development, creating employment opportunities, addressing homelessness, treating mental health issues, or providing treatment for drug dependency, the County continues to flood resources to the Sheriff’s Department and Probation Department, which have long histories of abuse, ongoing issues of brutality and a lack of transparency and accountability.

Today, in addition to the billions of dollars the County spends on the Sheriff's Department and Probation Department annually, the County plans to dedicate at least an additional $2.3 billion to the construction of two entirely new jails. Strikingly, $2.3 billion is seen as a conservative estimate of the total cost. With the repayment of bonds, expenditures could total $3.5 billion or more. In 2013, the County contracted with a private firm to develop a comprehensive jail expansion plan. Yet the County continues to proceed with its jail expansion plan without reassessing need, ignoring recent shifts by the state to move away from carceral solutions and towards justice reinvestment.

This budget brief details the historical, current, and proposed investments in criminalization and incarceration by L.A. County. It then highlights alternative investments in community-based public safety solutions that would provide sustainable development for residents, while simultaneously addressing the root causes of health and safety inequities in the County.
Since 2000, combined allocations to the Sheriff’s Department and Probation Department have increased by $2.2 billion. Sheriff’s Department allocations have increased by $1.7 billion and Probation Department allocations have increased by $575 million.

Since 2000, combined allocations to the Sheriff’s Department and Probation Department have increased as a proportion of the total budget, from 11.8 percent in 2000-2011, to 12.9 percent in 2017-2018.

Since 2000, combined allocations to Sheriff’s Department and Probation Department increased by 122 percent, while the total budget grew by 102 percent.

Since 2000, the combined Sheriff’s and Probation Departments’ budgeted positions increased by 4,051. The Department of Mental Health’s budgeted positions increased by 2,400.

In the 2017-2018 budget, the Sheriff’s and Probation Departments have more than four and a half times the number of budgeted positions than the Department of Mental Health.\(^\text{17}\)

2017-2018 Final Adopted Budget

Sheriff’s Dept + Probation Dept: $4.1 billion  
Department of Mental Health: $2.3 billion  
Affordable Housing Program: $40.7 million  
Homeless and Housing Programs: $73.5 million  
Department of Workforce Development, Aging, and Community Service: $123.9 million  
Measure H Special Tax Fund: $266.2 million
In addition to the billions of dollars the County spends on the Sheriff’s Department and Probation Department every year, it now plans to dedicate an additional $2.3 billion to the construction of two new jails. This is a conservative estimate of the total cost, which could be as much as $3.5 billion with the repayment of bonds, and would also require an estimated $400 million annually in operational costs. In 2017-2018, net county costs for Sheriff’s Department capital projects total $125 million. Nearly $110 million are costs associated with the Men’s Central Jail Replacement and the Mira Loma Detention Center which will become a women’s jail under the jail expansion plan.

How did we get here?

Throughout the last few decades, California has added thousands of new criminal laws that drive resources towards criminalization and incarceration. Moreover, L.A. County has recently channeled hundreds of millions of state AB109 realignment dollars back to the Sheriff’s Department and Probation Department, instead of directing them into communities as deliberately contemplated by advocates and elected officials. However, no conclusive research has indicated that either increased policing or incarceration has a meaningful impact on crime reduction efforts. In fact, research has shown that incarceration has zero impact on crime.

Jurisdictions within L.A. County have experienced varied and diverging crime trends since 2010. However, one countywide constant is the steadily increasing Sheriff’s Department and Probation Department budgets and the underinvestment in community resources. This reality is compounded by the aggressive enforcement of criminal statutes by police and prosecutors, many of which simply criminalize poverty and mental health issues. As a result, L.A. County jails are filled with people who are often desperately in need of care--and certainly not cages.

A majority of people in L.A. County jails have mental health issues, drug dependencies, or are criminalized because of their economic circumstances. For example:

- The majority of L.A. County’s incarcerated population is there for nonviolent offenses (about 63 percent of the incarcerated population). These offenses are often a result of efforts to survive without resources, a home, or community support services.
- Twenty-eight percent of the total population incarcerated in L.A. County jails have mental health needs, which are only exacerbated by jail. Nationally, an estimated 64 percent of jail inmates have mental health needs. Nearly 44 percent of people in L.A. County jails diagnosed with a “serious mental health illness” are Black.
- In Los Angeles (the largest city in L.A. County) arrests of homeless people have increased at a faster rate than the growth of the Los Angeles homeless population (21 percent versus 37 percent from 2011 to 2016). Today, one in every three homeless people have been arrested--17 times the arrest rate among the total city population.

- Estimates show that up to ten percent of the 8,000 to 10,000 people released from L.A. County jails each month end up homeless and living on the streets. Similarly, those with mental health issues and drug dependency who are processed through the L.A. County jail system are also likely to find themselves re-arrested and re-incarcerated.

Instead of investing in police and jails, the County should be investing in resources like housing, drug treatment, and mental health supports--public safety investments that will truly enable communities to thrive.
The 1811 Eastlake Project in Seattle, Washington provides housing, mental health, and drug abuse and alcohol dependency treatment for men and women with chronic alcohol addiction who are experiencing homelessness.

**Costs:** Operating costs were $1.1 million while saving the city $4 million by cutting residents medical expenses, county jail bookings, sobering center usage, and shelter usage. Annual average costs per person while homeless, the year before moving in, were $86,062. By comparison, it costs $13,440 per person per year to administer the housing program.

**Impact:** Residents have access to: state-licensed mental health and substance use disorder treatment; onsite health care services; daily meals and weekly outings to food banks; case management and payee services; medication monitoring; and weekly community-building activities. Presently, this project serves 75 men and women who are experiencing chronic alcoholism.

The Cook County Community Triage Center in Illinois helps to stabilize people experiencing an acute mental crisis and provides an alternative to incarceration. People can walk-in or the police can drop off people.

**Cost:** The program was started with $3 million from Cook County Health and Hospitals along with some federal and community grants.

**Impact:** It is estimated that about 20 percent of the people in Cook County Jails have a mental disorder. The Community Triage Center gives people who are having a mental crisis somewhere to go apart from jail. They can either be referred by family or taken and dropped off by the police, which is done at the police officer’s discretion.

Before 2000, Miami-Dade County had the nation’s largest jail population of mentally ill people. But in 2000, they implemented a mental health diversion program that cut back the re-offense rate to 20 percent — 55 points below Los Angeles’. The program in Miami was so successful that the city actually closed a jail.

L.A. County law enforcement officials even took a $18,000 trip to Miami and saw firsthand its success in diverting mentally ill arrestees into treatment, which was part of the group’s “best practices” tour around the nation. L.A. Sheriff’s officials met with Miami’s top brass and received detailed guidance about the steps required to establish a comprehensive mental health diversion program, but thus far, nothing appears to have come of it.
Where do we go from here?

L.A. County has the strategic opportunity and moral obligation to increase investments that address the root causes of health and safety inequities, while reducing the criminalization budgets of the Sheriff’s Department and Probation Department.

These interventions include:

★ Canceling the $3.5 billion jail expansion plan and redirecting that money towards sustainable public safety and health investments
★ Fully funding the Office of Re-entry and Diversion, which implements criminal justice diversion for those with mental and/or substance use issues and provides re-entry support
★ Expanding youth centers and programs
★ Investing the resources necessary to provide a holistic community mental health infrastructure (which were promised in the 1980s and never delivered)
★ Redirecting 50 percent of the Sheriff’s AB109 budget to community-based alternatives
★ Supporting community-based organizations with training on how to access County funds for their services and streamline the process for community-based organizations to acquire County funds
★ Creating mental health alternative custody pilot programs administered through the County Department of Public Health

The strong public mandate and moral imperative for systemic reform of the criminal justice system in Los Angeles provides an opportunity for lawmakers to address the root causes of crime and violence and stop investing in failing solutions.

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About the Authors

JUSTICELA is a partnership of organizations working with directly impacted communities fighting to realize the promise of diversion and re-entry through a justice reinvestment strategy for Los Angeles.

THE CENTER FOR POPULAR DEMOCRACY is a national network of community organizations working to create equity, opportunity, and a dynamic democracy through a pro-worker, pro-immigrant, racial and economic justice agenda.

LAW FOR BLACK LIVES is a network of over 3600 radical lawyers, law students, and legal workers committed to helping build the power of Black communities and organizers.
1. It should be noted that this is not a complete analysis of the L.A. County, rather an example. In addition, the numbers cited in this brief use departmental or program spending as outlined by the adopted budget, not total spending by function.


3. Voters have approved a series of de-incarceration and supportive services measures including Proposition 57, Proposition 58, and Proposition H. 


11. Ibid.


23. “2017-18 Final Budget,” County of Los Angeles, 265.


25. Maria Cramer et al, “There may be no worse place for mentally ill people to receive treatment than prison, yet a growing number end up in the ‘new asylums.’”


33. Ibid.


37. Ibid.


39. Maria Cramer et al, “There may be no worse place for mentally ill people to receive treatment than prison, yet a growing number end up in the ‘new asylums.’”


42. Youth Justice Coalition data from 2015 Rand Corporation study.


49. Ibid.


51. Ibid.


53. Ibid.