



ORANGE COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT

SHERIFF-CORONER DON BARNES

Public Safety Outlook 2026

Sheriff Don Barnes

Orange County remains one of America's safest communities, thanks to the dedicated work of our first responders and the strong partnerships we have with community organizations, businesses, and our elected representatives. Maintaining that safety requires continued action against evolving threats, including crime, terrorism, border security challenges, malicious drone activity, cyberattacks, and transnational criminal organizations, particularly as our region prepares to host the FIFA World Cup, America 250 celebrations, and the LA28 Olympic Games. Outlined below is my perspective on these challenges and the solutions needed.

Crime and Community Quality of Life

Passage of Proposition 36 in November 2024 provided the first meaningful reversal of California's decade-long failed experiment with decriminalization of drug and property crimes. Proposition 36 increased accountability for repeat retail theft offenders and drug traffickers, while also establishing treatment-mandated felony provisions designed to address addiction and reduce homelessness. In Orange County, we have utilized this tool with over 10,000 bookings on Proposition 36 charges. These efforts have helped maintain our low crime rates in Orange County. Unfortunately, the treatment efforts have been hindered by the Governor's failure to provide the necessary funding to carry out these critical programs. I join public safety leaders across the state in urging the Legislature to fully fund Proposition 36 in the State's final adopted budget for Fiscal Year 2026-27.

As we work to make Proposition 36 a success, we continue to be proactive in addressing homelessness. The strategy of outreach and enforcement has helped us reduce the number of encampments and mitigate their impacts on our community. Such a proactive strategy has also helped those with addiction-related homelessness. This year, the annual report of homeless deaths produced by the OC Sheriff's Coroner Division shows a 25% decrease in deaths from 508 in 2023 to 378 in 2024. This is largely driven by a decline in drug overdose deaths.

A looming concern regarding mental health and public safety are the challenges associated with those deemed incompetent to stand trial. For defendants found mentally incompetent to stand trial, California relies on a conservatorship system that is intended to provide treatment while protecting public safety. State hospital bed space for these individuals is severely limited, and counties like Orange (despite being the state's third most populous) have access to only a fraction of the capacity needed. The Legislature must take immediate action to expand the number of state hospital beds. A failure to act could result in dangerous individuals being released back into communities.

Foreign and Domestic Terrorism

Terrorism remains a significant public safety concern. The November 2025 attack against National Guard members in our nation's capital is a painful reminder of what can result from unforeseen acts of terror. Likewise, the recent attack at Bondi Beach in Australia is something we never want to witness on the beaches of Orange County. Yet, without sustained vigilance and continued investment in security, such a tragedy could be a real possibility.

Experience has shown that the most effective strategy for preventing terrorism is seamless coordination and timely information sharing among local, state, and federal partners. This was

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demonstrated by the successful disruption of a terrorist plot by an anti-government extremist group planning a series of bombings targeting multiple locations in Orange County and Los Angeles on New Year's Eve. The FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) played a critical role in identifying the threat, overcoming jurisdictional boundaries, and ensuring information flowed freely across agencies. Because of this collaboration, bureaucratic barriers were eliminated, and the investigation led to the arrest of those responsible before any harm could occur. Members of Orange County law enforcement agencies have been part of the FBI JTTF for several years.

The Orange County Sheriff's Department will continue to lead the Orange County Intelligence Assessment Center, which serves as an important hub for sharing information on emerging threats. The federal government can best support these efforts with continued funding for the State Homeland Security Grant Program and the Urban Area Security Initiative. The State of California can best support this effort by stopping the practice of taking portions of these funds before they are sent to local agencies.

Cyber Threats and Technological Developments

Cyber crime and cyber attacks continue to escalate year after year. The FBI's 2024 Internet Crime Report documented a 33% increase in reported financial losses from offenses such as phishing, extortion, and data breaches, with total losses reaching \$16.6 billion. In 2024 alone, the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) received 859,532 complaints. Of those, approximately 256,256 victims reported financial losses, with an average loss of \$19,372 per individual.

The cyber threat landscape is further complicated by rapid advancements in and widespread access to artificial intelligence (AI) tools. The malicious use of AI to perpetrate fraud, spread disinformation, and exploit children poses a serious risk to public safety. Recent studies have documented the growing use of AI-generated content to produce child sexual abuse material (CSAM). The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) reported a staggering 1,325% increase in CyberTipline reports involving generative AI, from approximately 4,700 reports in 2023 to more than 67,000 in 2024.

The Orange County Sheriff's Department continues to be engaged in efforts to combat cyber crime through the Cyber Crime Investigations Unit. The national strategy to address cyber crime would be enhanced by consolidating responsibility for cybersecurity in one agency. Currently, responsibility for cybersecurity is fragmented across numerous federal agencies, resulting in overlapping authorities, inconsistent priorities, and a lack of clear accountability. Establishing a single lead agency with clear authority and responsibility for cybersecurity would improve coordination with state and local law enforcement, streamline decision-making, and enhance accountability.

As federal leaders determine our nation's strategy for the emergence of AI, it is important the safeguards are in place to protect the public, especially children. Legislation like the Enhancing Necessary Federal Offenses Regarding Child Exploitation (ENFORCE) Act, the Sentencing Accountability for Exploitation Act (SAFE Act), Ending Coercion of Children and Harm Online Act (ECCHO Act) and Stop Sextortion Act target online criminal networks and increase accountability for those who use CSAM to extort and coerce children.

In addition to cyber threats, other technological developments also present concern. The misuse of drones poses a growing and significant security challenge for local communities. Unauthorized drone activity has disrupted mass gathering events, interfered with wildfire suppression efforts,

violated protected privacy, intimidated communities, and facilitated the delivery of contraband into correctional facilities. The recent passage of the Safer Skies Act in the FY 2026 National Defense Authorization Act marked an important milestone by granting counter drone authority to local law enforcement agencies. The Orange County Sheriff's Department is actively working to ensure we have trained personnel and the equipment necessary to protect our community, events, and infrastructure from the malicious drone threat. It is vital that Congress and the Administration accelerate the deployment of counter-drone technology and provide locals with access to training and resources.

Transnational Criminal Organizations

Efforts to secure the border have curtailed the mass, unvetted entry of individuals into our country and disrupted the flow of narcotics. Even with this important accomplishment, transnational criminal organizations—including organized burglary crews and drug cartels—continue to pose a serious threat to public safety in our local communities. In 2024, cities patrolled by the Orange County Sheriff's Department experienced a total of 219 residential burglaries. Of those incidents, more than half (115) are suspected to be linked to South American Theft Groups (SATGs). These cases were connected through arrests, shared modus operandi, and video surveillance. Notably, just 15 of these burglaries resulted in a combined loss of \$2.25 million to Orange County residents. While data from 2025 is still under review, we believe SATGs remain a significant and ongoing concern.

SATGs—particularly those originating from Chile—have used the Visa Waiver Program to enter the United States and commit crimes. Sheriffs across the country have urged that Chile be removed from the program. While the Administration and the Chilean government have taken steps to improve vetting and oversight, the most effective way to eliminate this vulnerability is to end the waiver altogether.

The destructive impact of drug cartels has been felt nationwide for decades, but their activity has been especially deadly in recent years. Cartels have driven America's fentanyl epidemic, claiming thousands of lives. Although annual fentanyl-related deaths are declining, we must remain vigilant. Cartels are highly adaptive and continue to pivot, seeking new ways to expand and exploit illicit markets.

A critical component of Orange County's efforts to disrupt the drug supply chain is our participation in drug enforcement efforts like the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) program. HIDTA supports coordinated, multi-jurisdictional law enforcement operations. Funding for HIDTA has remained flat for several years, leading to reductions in local narcotics teams. The proposed HIDTA Enhancement Act would preserve the program's current structure while increasing resources for state and local operations. Strengthening HIDTA, combined with renewed federal action against drug cartels, would significantly enhance our ability to dismantle these dangerous organizations.

The challenges outlined above are complex, interconnected, and increasingly consequential, but they are not insurmountable. Orange County law enforcement agencies remain well positioned to meet these challenges, provided policymakers at the local, state and federal level pursue the kind of policies proven to support our public safety mission.