

## California superior courts crisis

The California Superior Courts are currently facing a significant crisis primarily driven by severe budget cuts initiated during the Great Recession of 2008. These budget reductions have led to the closure of over fifty courthouses and the dismissal of approximately four thousand court employees, resulting in a major shortage of staff and resources. This has made it increasingly difficult for citizens to access timely and fair judicial proceedings. Reports indicate that residents are experiencing unacceptable delays, with some civil cases taking up to five years to reach trial, and many individuals have faced prolonged wait times for divorce settlements or landlord-tenant disputes.

The crisis is particularly acute in rural areas, where the impact of courthouse closures has forced people to travel long distances to access legal services. As a result, there are growing concerns about violations of citizens' constitutional rights to a speedy trial. Efforts to improve the situation include modernizing court technology and case management systems, but the judicial branch remains underfunded, constituting only 1.4% of California's budget for the fiscal year 2016–17. The ongoing challenges highlight the need for continued advocacy and reform to ensure that the justice system can effectively serve all Californians.

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**Published In:**

2023

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The California budget cuts of 2008 caused a ripple  
California Superior Courts have endured a period o

which has had dire consequences for the citizens of the state. Seemingly, courts have no longer been able to "deliver fair and timely access to justice." The state closed fifty-two courthouses and reduced services. In certain communities, people have had to travel great distances to attend court. Assistance such as self-help law centers has been reduced or closed throughout the state. Reports indicate that because of the crisis, citizens have been denied justice and their constitutional right to a fair and speedy trial.

## Brief History

Recession-driven cutbacks have negatively affected California Superior Courts. The differences vary by county, and rural regions suffer the most. The California courts system faced a crisis in the 1970s, during which citizens experienced similar delays. As a result, lawmakers implemented policies to accelerate trial dates. In the 1990s, the county court systems unified under the state and installed a computerized system, improving things dramatically and painting a sharp contrast to the 2010s. After the state economy plunged in the 2000s due to the [Great Recession](#), steep cuts were made to the judicial budget, creating the host of problems that have been reported by citizens and news outlets alike.

A Judicial Council of California investigation into California's superior courts systems revealed startling inefficiencies in the system. Residents throughout the state have had to wait for unacceptably long periods of time to have their day in court, resulting in delayed justice and even justice denied. An *NBC News* report noted, for example, that a civil [divorce](#) in San Francisco has taken up to five months compared to the expected four to six weeks; family law cases have taken eight months to be put on the court calendar in Sonoma County; and an uncontested divorce in Alameda County took a year and six months to complete.

## Overview

The crisis in the California Superior Courts has largely been propelled by budget cuts. According to the Judicial Council of California investigation more than two hundred courtrooms and fifty courthouses have closed, while thirty courts reduced hours of operation of their public-service counters. Furthermore, the state has dismissed approximately four thousand court employees. Nonetheless, staff shortages have caused many of the court delays.

Legal experts say these problems have hindered the judicial process. Some [civil cases](#) will not go to trial. California has faced violations of their constitution; the situation has been particularly dire when it comes to people who have died waiting on court dates, and some people who have filed for divorce, file a small claim, or argue a landlord-tenant case. In Alameda County, citizens have filed complaints noting that because of the backlog of unprocessed cases they were unable to remarry. In Los Angeles County, citations have sometimes waited a year to go to trial. The crisis has been so severe that at one point there was a pile of cases on the floor of the clerk's office. Exacerbating the budget cuts is the court system.

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Kern County, which operated with a \$32.9 million shortfall in 2015, provides another example of a budget crisis hampering the court system. Kern County has not been able to staff judges, and many cases have waited in the queue because there have not been enough judges to oversee them. The county courthouse was closed, and another nearby courthouse was open one day a week. Witnesses, peace officers, and alleged victims have had to travel to other court locations for cases to be processed. It is hoped that the updates to technology made in the aftermath of the recession will help expedite court cases and clear the backlog.

In her 2016 State of the Judiciary, California chief justice Tani G. Cantil-Sakauye noted that, in addition to the budget cuts that the California judiciary has endured in the wake of the recession, the superior courts' case-management systems were woefully outdated. California Superior Courts had forty-eight case-management systems, making it nearly impossible for courts to coordinate with one another. Forty courts have since updated old computer systems, a streamlining process that Cantil-Sakauye said will go a long way to improving the court system. She also noted the superior courts system has downsized considerably to deal with the budget crisis. However, the judicial branch accounts for only 1.4 percent of California's budget for the fiscal year 2016–17, leaving the possibility of continued budgetary issues for the court.

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