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**Riverside County
District 5
Sheriff Department &
Coroner Offices
Accountability**



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Preface

Due to growing community concerns about deaths in Riverside County jails and potential conflicts of interest between the Sheriff’s Department and Coroner’s Office, our team mobilized across districts to gather insights. Our team conducted research via phonebanking, canvassing and personal stories to collect public sentiment, awareness, and attitudes toward accountability in the Sheriff Department and Coroner Office. The results reveal widespread support for reforms of independent oversight across Riverside County Jails.

Summary

During the period of **May 1st, 2025** and **June 30th, 2025**, We spoke to a total of **2301 constituents in District 5**, gathering both quantitative and qualitative data on awareness, concerns, and support for accountability in the Sheriff Department as well as support for a separation of the Sheriff Department and Coroner offices.

Why it Matters

Riverside County is experiencing a rate of in-custody deaths that exceeds counties already flagged for oversight failures.

A state audit of San Diego County jails was triggered after 185 deaths over more than a decade. **Riverside County has already seen 46 deaths from 2022-2025** — despite having a smaller population.

County	Population (approx.)	In-Custody Deaths	Deaths per 100k Residents
San Diego County	~3.3 million	185	~5.6
Riverside County	~2.5 million	46	~8.2

! *Riverside has a higher per-capita death rate than San Diego — despite San Diego already having been audited by the state.*

Hoeven, Emily. "Audit: Inmates' Lives at Risk under California Law." CalMatters, 4 Feb. 2022, calmatters.org/newsletters/whatmatters/2022/02/jail-deaths-california/.

Methodology:

- **Canvassing/Field Work:** 1,831 constituents reached in District 5 via Inland Empire United Education Fund Door-to-Door Canvass and Community Canvass; Sigma Beta Xi Youth & Family Services Canvass; and Starting Over, Inc Canvass.
- **Phone Banking:** 470 constituents reached Via Inland Empire United and Sigma Beta Xi Phonebank, covering district 5.
- **Calls to County Supervisors Office:** 26 constituents of the 470 - or 5.4%, contacted via Phonebanking **articulated** their support showing actionable engagement and willingness to directly contact officials **immediately** after introduction of the issue.
- **Personal Stories:** Collected first-hand accounts detailing resident experiences and concerns.

Qualitative Findings

“If (Riverside County) can kill 20 people in 13 months and fail to provide any information to the families impacted, fail to report those deaths to the DOJ within the 10-day mandated reporting period, continue to lie to the public about the cause of death for all these people,” Avalon Edwards, policy associate at Starting Over Inc, on enforcing standards.

Personal Connection

- Multiple constituents reported **personal experiences** with misconduct from the Sheriff Department and institutional **neglect**.
- One individual referenced **being a victim of sheriff brutality**
- A woman with a family member working as a **Correctional Officer** expressed frustration that **abuse and negligence** go unaddressed.

Former Law Enforcement Support

- A former sheriff voiced support, showing that even **insiders acknowledge the need for reform**.

Awareness Gaps & Curiosity

- Constituents asked if Riverside is the only county with the Sheriff Department and Coroner Offices combined — indicating confusion and concern over structural issues.
- Concerns of Broader Forms of Corruption

Community Support and Willingness to Engage

- One home offered to **donate or contribute to the cause**, showing emotional and tangible support.
- Health care professionals shared **firsthand accounts of corruption** in their interactions with sheriffs.



Case Spotlight: Christopher Zumwalt

In 2022, Christopher Zumwalt died in Riverside County jail custody, after exposure to tear gas or a flash grenade. His death was ruled a homicide.

- The county ultimately paid a \$7.5 million settlement to Zumwalt's family.
- Sheriff Chad Bianco dismissed the settlement's significance, stating:

"The settlement in this case is irrelevant and solely a business decision between attorneys, insurance companies, and risk management of the county. It in no way reflects on the facts of the case or points toward wrongdoing by deputies."

- Legal experts and advocates note that Zumwalt's case reflects a broader trend. According to attorney Aaron Burton:

"Zumwalt's death was part of a spike in in-custody jail deaths in Riverside County, which is why the county's legal woes continue."



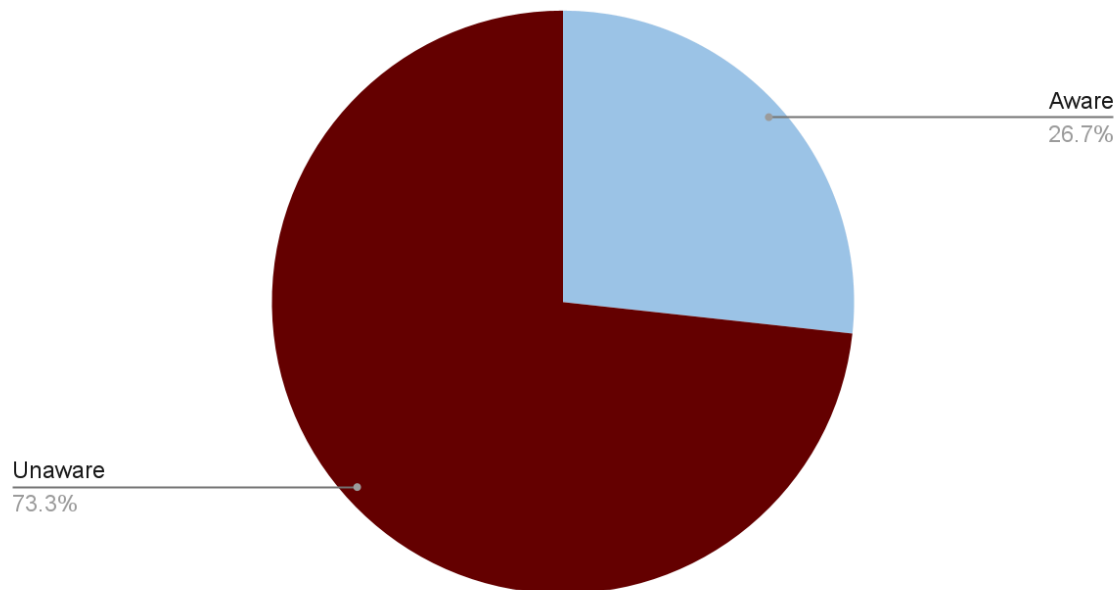
Quantitative Findings

Lack of awareness

- *Have you heard about the growing number of deaths in Riverside County jails?*
- *Transparency and accountability are key for public safety. Did you know that the sheriff department and the coroner office are the same?*

73.3% of the 2,301 constituents surveyed were unaware of the number of in-custody deaths or the lack of accountability in the Sheriff Department and Coroner Offices.

Awareness



Why it matters:

Political Liability: Constituents build distrust in public officials due to a lack of transparency. The more people learn, the angrier they may get if no action is taken. Acting now will restore trust and support of leadership as it demonstrates commitment to transparency.

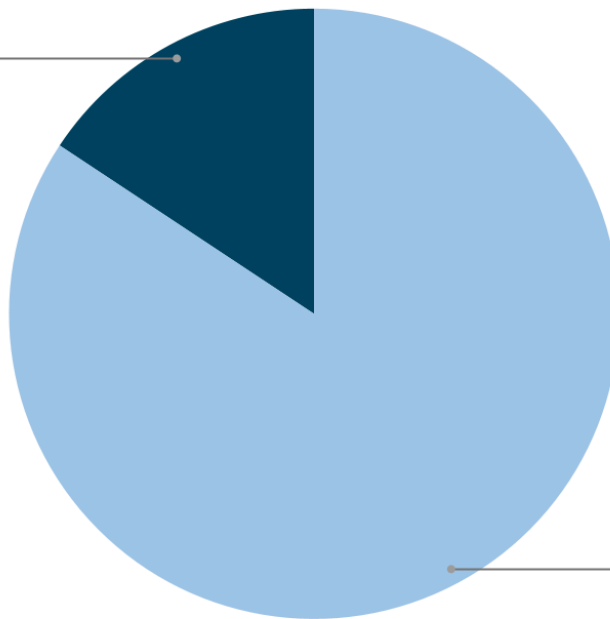
In Support of an Oversight Committee

- *Do you believe sheriff department accountability would be good for riverside county residents?*

84.3% of 2059 constituents that **responded**, (75.36 % of 2301 constituents), were in support of an Oversight Committee.

Oversight Committee

Don't Support
15.7%



Support
84.3%

Why it matters:

Representation: clear evidence of strong support for an oversight committee and ignoring it **risks backlash** and erodes credibility as a representative of the people. Focusing on public safety and transparency is persuasive for voters.

Preventative: Unresolved public concern may cause public discourse.

Growth: Opportunity for alignment with public opinion.

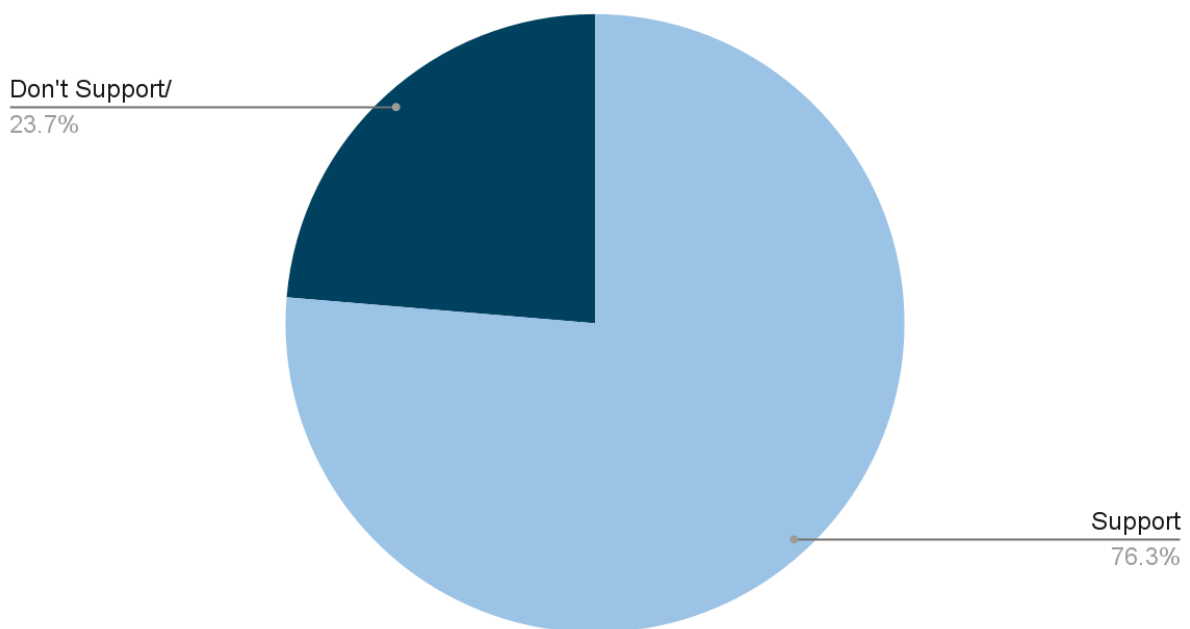


In Support of Separation

- *Would you support the separation of the sheriff department and coroner office?*

76.34% of 1753 (nearly 3 out of 4) constituents that **responded** supported separation of the sheriff department and coroner offices.

Separation



Why it matters:

Weight: Constituents want a **real fix** that ensures **objective investigations of in-custody deaths**, not oversight by the very department under question.

Equality: Shows fairness towards both the public and law enforcement.

District 5 accounted for **11 of the 46 in-custody deaths** reported countywide between 2022 and 2025.

District 5 In-Custody Deaths

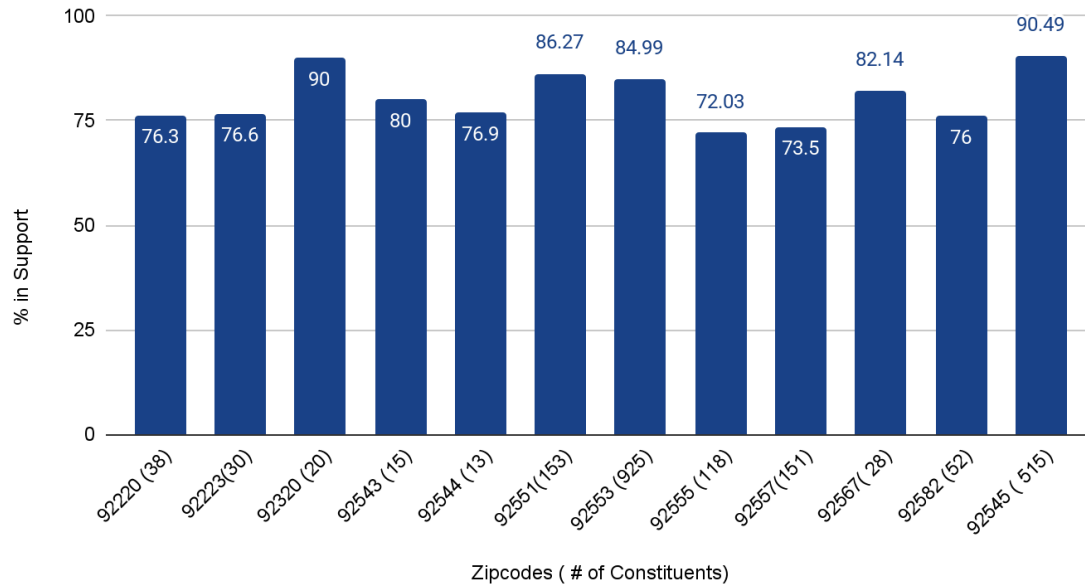
Name	Custody Status	DOD	Manner	Means
Edward Thomas Clark	Sentenced	4/26/2020	Natural	Covid-19
Rosendo Encarnacion Echevarria	Sentenced	9/8/2020	Homicide	Assault
Christopher Zumwalt	Awaiting Trial	10/25/2020	Homicide	Tear gas-Grenade
Ekwan Terrence Allen	Awaiting Trial	2/21/2021	pending investigation	pending investigation
Abel Cruz	Booked - Awaiting Trial	5/1/2022	Natural	Not Applicable
Yareth Villagomez	Booked - Awaiting Trial	6/20/2022	Accidental	Drug Overdose
Tavae Fernon Stalks Walker	Booked - Awaiting Trial	8/27/2023	Pending Investigation	Pending Investigation (latest update 2023)
Charles Darren Giurbino	Other	11/4/2023	Pending Investigation	Pending Investigation (latest update 2023)
Mack Luther Price	Awaiting Trial	04/19/2024	Pending Investigation	Pending Investigation (Latest update April 2024)
Steve Deleon Gonzalez	Other	09/07/2024	Homicide	Assault
James Dennis Hirt	Awaiting Trial	12/25/2024	Homicide	Pepper Spray by Correctional Officer



Geographic Distribution

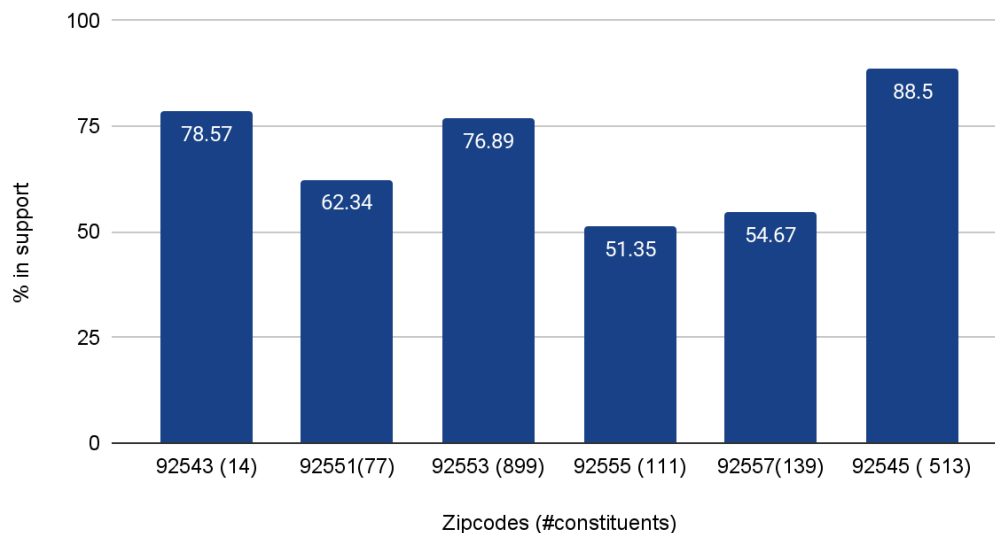
Below are graphs representing % in support based on the individual zipcodes and the # of constituents that **responded**:

D5 Support of Oversight



Important Context: The following graph shows support for the separation of the Sheriff Department and Coroner Offices based on a subset of zip codes. This question was introduced midway through outreach efforts and was not asked across all canvassed areas.

D5 Support of Separation



Conclusion

The data shows both qualitative and quantitative evidence to support widespread concern among constituents about current sheriff department and coroner office practices and support for reforms.

Forming an Oversight Committee would **address systemic issues** highlighted by both data and stories as well as **Restore public trust**.

*“Death in Sheriff’s Custody Leads Riverside County to Pay \$7.5-Million Settlement.” Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles Times, 21 May 2024,
www.latimes.com/california/story/2024-05-21/riverside-county-pays-7-5-million-settlement-death-in-custody.*

*Hoeven, Emily. “Audit: Inmates’ Lives at Risk under California Law.” CalMatters, 4 Feb. 2022,
calmatters.org/newsletters/whatmatters/2022/02/jail-deaths-california/.*

