



SANTA CRUZ COUNTY Civil Grand Jury

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Handcuffing and Transport

Can Watsonville Police Reduce Trauma?

Summary

Being handcuffed and taken to the police station, especially for a minor infraction, is a traumatic event. The trauma starts with the individual and propagates to the family and community. The Watsonville Police Department detains and transports a higher percentage of arrestees, rather than citing and releasing them in the field, compared to other law enforcement agencies in Santa Cruz County. Since transporting requires handcuffing, the Watsonville Police Department ends up handcuffing a higher percentage of individuals than other law enforcement agencies. There are simple ways to bring that number down.

The Santa Cruz County Grand Jury (**the Jury**) recommends more training with a focus on de-escalation. The Jury also recommends increased use of mobile breathalyzers and an increase in salaries to retain more experienced officers who are accustomed to using de-escalation techniques. Implementing these suggestions could lead to fewer trips to the police station and greatly reduce the trauma suffered by both the detainees and members of the community.

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Background

Research shows that handcuffing creates trauma.^{[1] [2]} For those who are arrested, this trauma can manifest in many forms, including anxiety, depression and fear. In some cases, it can lead to serious post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Additionally, handcuffing often causes physical injury including frequent damage to hands and wrists.^[3]

For minor infractions, handcuffing is not a mandated practice. Arrestees can simply be cited and released in the field, without the need for transport to a police station or a jail facility. While being detained is inherently distressing, being released in the field typically results in less trauma than handcuffing and transporting the arrestee either to jail or to the local law enforcement office.



Image of handcuffed individual^[4]

Across Santa Cruz County (**the County**), police training materials and policy documents say that handcuffing is at the discretion of the arresting officer. The practice across the County is that all those arrested and transported are handcuffed.^{[5] [6]} *Transporting requires the use of handcuffs.*

There are numerous documented cases where arrestees placed in police vehicles without handcuffs have posed a risk to the officers and themselves. Therefore, to reduce the number of people handcuffed, one should start by reducing the number of arrestees transported. This means local law enforcement agencies should cite and release in the field whenever it is appropriate to do so. Some agencies, such as the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office, do this, while other agencies do not. The Jury specifically looked into the Watsonville Police Department's (**WPD**) use of handcuffs and its practice of frequently transporting minor infraction arrestees to the WPD station.

While the Santa Cruz County Grand Jury focused on handcuffing and the transporting of detainees in Watsonville, other related issues around public contact with the police are important. Multiple sources told the Jury that activities such as robberies, gang activities, or shootings in Watsonville cause increased tension among officers, thereby putting law enforcement on heightened alert.^[7] This may influence officer response and decision-making and can lead to officers choosing a more aggressive response such as handcuffing and transport in handling misdemeanor detainees.^{[8] [9]}

Handcuffing and transport for minor infractions erodes the community's trust in officer's judgment. This heightened level of community and individual fear may lead to tension and escalation during routine stops.^{[10] [11]} Also, some members of the civilian population have had negative experiences with the entire criminal justice system, including interactions with police officers, the District Attorney's Office, the Public Defender's

Office, and parole and probation officers. Their shared experiences can add to the fear and distrust among those cited or arrested, as well as their families and the broader community.

The Jury wanted to know if training or the use of crisis intervention teams could minimize the escalation of incidents and the amount of handcuffing and transporting, specifically in Watsonville.^[12]^[13] Data shows that de-escalation techniques can reduce injuries to both police officers and arrestees, while improving community relations.^[14]

Scope and Methodology

The Jury reviewed available documents, including arrest logs and police reports, and conducted interviews to determine whether handcuffing is overused by the Watsonville Police Department for misdemeanor infractions. The Jury looked at the level of handcuffing across various police departments and the sheriff's office in the County. A key area of focus was the use of "cite and release" and whether the "release" happens at the scene or the police station. The Jury concentrated on investigating various policy and procedure manuals and training materials of the Sheriff's Office, the Santa Cruz Police Department, and the Watsonville Police Department.

The scope of this report includes the following:

- The "Cite and Release" policies of several law enforcement agencies within the County
- The "Use of Force" and "Handcuffing and Restraints" policies of several law enforcement agencies within the County
- The definitions of these terms, as defined by the leadership of these agencies
- The impact of these policies on the population involved.

The Methodology for the investigation included:

- Interviews with police department management
- Interviews with representatives of local non-profit groups who provide advocacy and support to detainees and their families
- Statutes and Guidelines
 - Policy and Procedure Manuals
 - Training Materials
- Process Documents
 - Police Reports
 - Arrest Logs
- Other:
 - Newspaper articles
 - Research articles on the trauma of handcuffing
 - Pay schedules for police officers.

Investigation

The Jury's investigation looked at the use of handcuffing people for misdemeanors across the County and how the Watsonville Police Department handcuffed individuals at a higher rate than the other law enforcement agencies.

Policy Discussion

Department policy manuals for law enforcement agencies within the County are available online.^{[15] [16] [17] [18]} The policies of the [Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office](#) and the police departments of the major cities within the county appear to be nearly identical. They are based on templates from Lexipol.^[19] Lexipol is an entire risk management solution for public safety and local government that has developed comprehensive and continuously updated policies for public safety agencies.

The policy quotes shown in the sections below come from the [Watsonville Police Department Policies and Procedures Manual](#). Note that the wording is identical to the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office's Policies and Procedures and the Santa Cruz Police Department's Policies and Procedures.

Transporting Requires Handcuffing

The Jury specifically looked at how arrestees for a misdemeanor crime are treated. A misdemeanor crime is less serious than a felony crime and doesn't carry the potential to be sentenced to a California state prison. It is described as a crime where the maximum sentence is no longer than one year in a county jail.^[20]

The WPD citing and releasing policy begins with policy 420.1, PURPOSE AND SCOPE, which states: "This policy provides guidance on when to release adults who are arrested for a criminal misdemeanor offense on a written notice to appear (citation) and when to hold for court or bail."^[16] The Jury investigated how this policy is carried out in practice.

Policy 420.2 states, "It is the policy of the Watsonville Police Department to release all persons arrested on misdemeanor or other qualifying charges on a citation with certain exceptions (Penal Code §853.6)." The policy goes on to state: "... adults arrested for a misdemeanor offense, including a private person's arrest, shall be released from custody on a citation (Penal Code § 853.6)."^[16] The Jury investigated how those exceptions are carried out and what "released from custody" means in practice.

The Jury reviewed more than 50 misdemeanor reports provided by the WPD, covering the period of May 2024. There are certain types of misdemeanors in which arrestees are automatically taken to jail, a hospital, or a sobering center, a practice that seems to be consistent across jurisdictions.^[21] The Jury did not investigate these.

In reviewing arrest logs and police reports, the Jury noticed that the WPD was less likely to release at the scene, compared to other jurisdictions for the following misdemeanors:

- Shoplifting or theft^{[22] [23] [24]}
- Vehicle code violations, including bicycle violations^{[25] [26]}
- Driving Under the Influence (**DUI**)^{[27] [28] [29] [30]}

- Trespassing or homeless issues^{[31] [32]}
- Outstanding warrants.^{[33] [34] [35] [36]}

The Jury noticed that for all of the above infractions, the WPD usually took people to the WPD station rather than releasing them at the scene. In contrast, arrest logs from other law enforcement agencies within the County indicate those agencies more frequently release on citation at the scene rather than handcuffing and transporting.^[37]

The WPD stated that all people arrested are handcuffed.^[38] After talking to other agencies, Jurors realized that this means that all people who are *transported* are handcuffed.^[5]

Being Handcuffed Is Traumatic

According to Lexipol, “Handcuffing generally constitutes a use of force and the application of the handcuffs must be reasonable.”^[39] The Los Angeles Police Department articulates its approach to handcuffing as follows: “Discretion in Handcuffing: The decision to handcuff a person is not based on rigid criteria. It is determined by the nature of each situation as perceived by the officer. To ensure the effective and appropriate use of handcuffs, it is necessary to place the responsibility for handcuffing with the involved officers.”^[40]

There are well-documented mental and physical adverse effects from handcuffing. The palpable fear of “What’s next?” can lead to actions that escalate the encounter. Unreasonable use of force, in this case, handcuffing and transport, is seen as punishment. That punishment is not administered by other local law enforcement agencies. According to Police Officer Standards: “It is illegal and immoral for peace officers to use their authority and position to punish anyone. When peace officers become law breakers by engaging in acts of “street justice” they lose public trust and support.”^[41]

Options for Release Without Handcuffing

Law enforcement agencies have various options for handling minor infractions. These options help reduce community impressions of unfairness.

Cite and Release Without Transporting

There are incidents in which someone is retained in handcuffs and then later released at the scene with or without a citation. This is up to the officer’s discretion. There are clear cases where handcuffing is warranted, such as if an officer observes fighting, domestic violence, or weapons. However, individuals detained for minor incidents like shoplifting, trespassing, and bicycle violations (and some minor automobile violations) are not regularly handcuffed by other law enforcement agencies within the County.^{[22] [23] [25] [31] [32] [42]}

The Jury noticed that several of these types of incidents often resulted in handcuffs being used by WPD officers.

DUI - Release on Scene

When someone is stopped, whether on the street or while driving, on suspicion of being under the influence or driving under the influence, there is a concern for everyone's safety. Officers usually perform field sobriety tests and often take breath samples. With full testing conducted at the scene, releasing the individual to a responsible party becomes feasible. This approach is commonly practiced by other local law enforcement agencies.

As it stands today in Watsonville, individuals suspected of being under the influence are usually taken in handcuffs to the WPD station for further breath or blood testing to confirm the blood alcohol levels.^{[27] [43] [44]} If a responsible person is available, the inebriated individual is released to their care. If no responsible party is available, the person is handcuffed and transported to the sobering center, hospital, or jail, as appropriate.

DUI - Start and Finish in the Field

When an inebriated person is transported, their car may be impounded.^{[30] [44] [45]} This compounds the problems and financial costs faced by the individual and their families. If all breath testing occurred on the scene, there would be less need for handcuffing and transport.^[46] The Jury found that the WPD could put a breathalyzer in every patrol car for slightly more than \$100 each.^{[47] [48]}

If a responsible person can come to the scene, fewer cars would need to be towed. For officers, this could reduce the needed paperwork, put officers back on patrol sooner, as well as reduce expenses and trauma for the arrestees.

Opportunities and Challenges

The Watsonville Police Department is an evolving agency. The following sections examine improvements aimed at better supporting the community.

De-escalation Techniques and Training

According to the document, [The Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Task Force On 21st Century Policing](#), "Law enforcement agency policies for training on use of force should emphasize de-escalation and alternatives to arrest or summons in situations where appropriate."^[49] Also, California Senate Bill 230 requires guidelines for de-escalation alternatives to the use of force.^[50]

People who work in the community have noted that officers' fears often keep them from using de-escalation techniques.^[51] Officers who lack de-escalation training may come to a situation as if they're in charge and then act in an aggressive manner.^[52] The Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (**POST**) found that "over about 18 months, the rate of use-of-force per month fell consistently with each sequential cohort of officers trained" in de-escalation techniques.^[14]

Watsonville Police say that all WPD training includes some sort of de-escalation-type scenario.^[53] However, the Jury could find no evidence that the POST de-escalation

training course “[De-escalation Strategies and Techniques for California Law Enforcement](#)” is used by the WPD.^[54] This training material states, “De-escalation achieves control verbally before it should be accomplished physically.”

“Donut Hole” in Officer Experience Years

In general, seasoned officers with more experience and training are more likely to use de-escalation techniques, including releasing on site.^[14] Unfortunately, the WPD has few officers with 3 to 13 years’ experience because of the “donut hole effect.”

The “donut hole effect” was caused by the California Public Employees’ Pension Reform Act (**PEPRA**), which was approved in 2012 and took effect on January 1, 2013.^[55] According to local law enforcement, this led to a donut hole in years of experience in the WPD force.^[56] Officers hired before 2013 have better benefits and are less likely to move to another agency than those hired after 2013. As a result, newer officers often seek other employment and eventually take jobs in the San Francisco Bay Area, where the pay and benefits are better.^[57] Below are some salary comparisons for new officers. The gaps widen with more years of experience.

Table 1. Annual Salaries Comparison

Agency	Trainee	5 Years Service
Watsonville PD Officer	\$94,663	\$124,440
Santa Cruz County Sheriff Deputy	\$101,330	\$122,620
San Jose PD Officer	\$111,000	\$164,570

Source: Pay schedules from Watsonville Police Department, Santa Cruz County Personnel Department, San Jose Police Department^{[58] [59] [60]}

Starting salaries for the Santa Cruz County Sheriff’s Office are 7% more than the WPD. The San Jose Police Department pays officers 17% more than WPD. Commuting to San Jose can be a 100-mile round trip. While there is an emotional cost to the commute time, many officers feel that the commute is worthwhile given the higher pay.

Note that the salary gap increases with five years of service. The San Jose Police Department pays 30% more than the WPD pays for officers with five years of service. This could be a major issue for officer retention.

Cultural Improvements at the WPD

“Protect and Serve” has historically been the motto of many police departments. At the WPD, attitudes have evolved. The department’s motto could now be said to be “Protect the Vulnerable From Harm.”^[61] There is a new belief within the WPD that police should treat all involved in the incident “like they’re your own family member.”^[62] The vulnerable include everyone involved in an incident, including those arrested.

The attitude that “everybody is treated with dignity and respect” coming from the top at the WPD is a good step towards improving community relations.

The Jury found that every incident in Watsonville triggers the WPD to send out an anonymous survey about the public’s experience.^[63]^[64] These surveys are reviewed weekly.^[64] Sending surveys and carefully considering the responses improves transparency.

Another area of improvement is the use of Body Worn Cameras (**BWC**).^[65]^[66]^[67]^[68] Officers and community members feel that the use of BWCs has greatly reduced both real and perceived issues with officer conduct. For every use of force incident, BWC footage is reviewed by several officers in the management chain.^[67] This evidence is stored in an international law enforcement database. Per Lexipol guidelines, the review of BWC footage should include all use of handcuffs.

The WPD has instituted a training module titled “Why’d You Stop Me?”^[69]^[70]^[71] This training promotes positive interactions between community members and the police. This unique program increases transparency in policing to eliminate unnecessary escalations.

While these positive changes are commendable, handcuffing and transporting at the WPD are still at a higher rate than other law enforcement agencies within the County.

Conclusion

The main function of California’s Civil Grand Juries is to promote transparency and accountability within departments and agencies of local government.

The following recommendations from the Santa Cruz County Grand Jury will help the Watsonville Police Department more effectively and efficiently engage with the people of Watsonville. This will reduce trauma for those cited for minor infractions and the other community members involved and will also improve relations with the community. Ongoing and straightforward communication between officers and the people they serve leads to officers being seen as positive role models and prevents crime.

Findings

- F1.** While handcuffing is discretionary, Watsonville Department police officers tend to overuse handcuffing, even when a person is released at the scene.
- F2.** The WPD handcuffs and transports a much higher percentage of misdemeanor violators to department headquarters than other law enforcement agencies within the County.
- F3.** All local law enforcement agencies handcuff individuals transported to police departments, hospitals, sobering centers, or the County jail.
- F4.** In Watsonville, second or third breath testing is done at the Police Department, requiring handcuffing for transport. If more breath testing were done in the field, fewer people would be transported to the WPD.
- F5.** De-escalation training reduces the use of force, including handcuffing.
- F6.** Instead of “Protect and Serve”, Watsonville Police say their motto is now “Protect the Vulnerable From Harm.” The WPD also says “everybody is treated with dignity and respect,” and they treat everyone “like they’re your own family member.”
- F7.** The WPD has a lower retention rate of officers with more than five years of experience.
- F8.** The WPD salaries are at least 17% lower than the San Jose Police Department salaries.
- F9.** Officers with more years of service in the department have better relationships with the community and more experience in de-escalation, leading to fewer negative interactions.

Recommendations

- R1.** The Watsonville Police Department should update training materials and provide additional training about cite and release, so that more individuals are released in the field, and thereby reducing the number of people transported to Watsonville Police Headquarters. This should be completed by June 30, 2026. (F2, F3)
- R2.** While the WPD does include de-escalation training in some courses, the Watsonville Police Department should require all officers to take the Police Officer Standards and Training De-escalation Training by June 30, 2026. (F5, F9)
- R3.** The Watsonville Police Department should update training materials and provide training around handcuffing discretion so that more individuals are released on the scene without being handcuffed. This should be completed by December 31, 2025. (F1)
- R4.** The Watsonville Police Department should install in every patrol car a certified breath testing apparatus so that multiple breath tests are completed in the field and fewer DUI misdemeanors are transported to WPD. This should be completed by December 31, 2025. (F4)
- R5.** The Watsonville City Council should add incentives and raise officer total compensation for those with experience of zero to 15 years by 10% to 30% to reduce attrition, especially in regards to those officers with more than five years of experience. This should be completed by June 30, 2027. (F7, F8, F9)
- R6.** The Watsonville Police Department should institute quarterly meetings with community groups to strengthen relationships with the community. These meetings should begin by October 1, 2025. (F9)

Commendations

- C1.** The Santa Cruz County Grand Jury believes that the management of the Watsonville Police Department is truly concerned about the safety of everyone in Watsonville. This is demonstrated by their desire to protect the vulnerable from harm and treat everyone with respect. (F6)

Required Responses

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Findings</i>	<i>Recommendations</i>	<i>Respond Within/ Respond By</i>
Watsonville City Council	F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, F8	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5	90 Days / September 16, 2025

Invited Responses

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Findings</i>	<i>Recommendations</i>	<i>Respond Within/ Respond By</i>
Watsonville Police Department Chief of Police	F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, F7, F9	R1, R2, R3, R6	60 Days / August 18, 2025

Definitions

- **WPD:** Watsonville Police Department
- **DUI:** Driving Under the Influence
- **PEPRA:** California Public Employees' Pension Reform Act
- **BWC:** Body Worn Cameras.
- **POST:** Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training

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