



Public Safety Realignment and Crime Rates in California

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SUMMARY

California's corrections realignment plan quickly and significantly reduced the state's prison population. The reduction, motivated by a federal mandate, was achieved by sentencing lower-level offenders to county jails rather than state prison and by giving counties, rather than the state, most of the responsibilities for parolees. Although county jails absorbed many of the offenders affected by the legislation, realignment markedly decreased the overall reliance on incarceration in California. Currently, about 18,000 offenders, who in past years would have been in either prison or jail, are not serving time behind bars (Lofstrom and Raphael 2013). This large increase in "street time" among former prison inmates has raised obvious concerns about crime.

We find that California's crime rates increased between 2011 and 2012—violent crime went up 3.4 percent and property crime went up 7.6 percent. These rates vary widely across the state, with California's ten largest counties generally seeing greater increases in crime than in the state overall. However, despite this pattern of increase, crime rates remain at historically low levels in California today.

How does realignment relate to the recent uptick in crime? Our analysis of violent crime finds no evidence that realignment has had an effect on the most serious offenses, murder and rape. The evidence on robbery is more uncertain, with a possible indication of a modest increase related to realignment. California's overall increases in violent crime between 2011 and 2012 appear to be part of a broader upward trend also experienced in other states.

By contrast, we find robust evidence that realignment is related to increased property crime. In terms of overall property crime, we estimate an additional one to two property crimes per year on average for each offender who is not incarcerated as a result of realignment. In particular, we see substantial increases in the number of motor vehicle thefts, which went up by 14.8 percent between 2011 and 2012. Our estimates translate to an increase in the motor vehicle theft crime rate of about 65 more auto thefts per year per 100,000 residents. In a comparison with other states, California had the highest increase in this area. This increase, of about 24,000 auto thefts per year, reverses a declining trend in this theft rate and brings it back to 2009 levels.

Because California still houses more prisoners than the federal mandate will ultimately allow, we also look at how further reductions in the prison population could affect crime rates. Our analysis suggests that, on average, further reductions are likely to lead to somewhat greater effects on crime, in the range of 7 to 12 percent more property crime than the property crime numbers we have estimated for 2011–2012.

When we compare the costs of incarceration to those of alternative crime-reducing strategies, we find that incarceration is an expensive way to maintain public safety. We suggest that these alternative strategies are likely to provide improved outcomes at lower costs. In particular, our analysis suggests that more crimes, between 3.5 and 7 times as many, would be prevented by spending an additional dollar on policing rather than on prison incarceration. As realignment continues to unfold, California should consider safer, smarter, and more cost-effective approaches to corrections and crime prevention.

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