



The Impacts of California's Correctional Reforms on Recidivism

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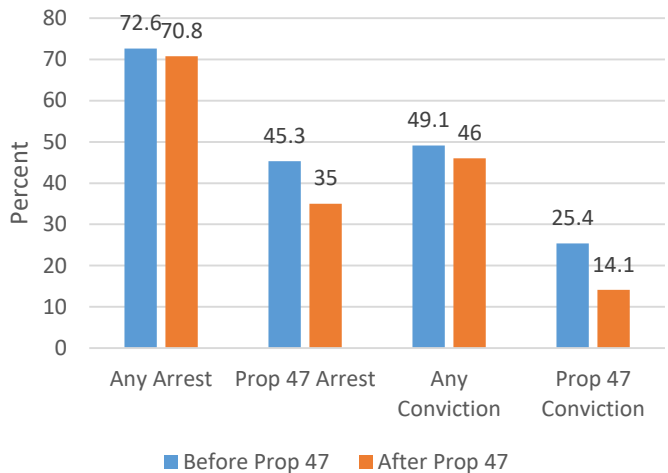
Professor Grattet assesses the impact of California's historic efforts to reduce reliance on incarceration, focusing specifically on whether people released from custody fare better in terms of rearrest and reconviction.

California has experienced significant changes in its criminal justice policies over the last decade. Most notably, in 2011, the state adopted public safety realignment (AB 109), which shifted the management of lower-level offenders from the state prison and parole system to county jail and probation systems, and then, in 2014, voters approved Proposition 47 (Prop 47), which downgraded selected drug and property felonies. These changes have reduced the incarceration footprint of the state by lowering both prison and jail populations. But the reforms also promised to reduce recidivism of previously prison eligible offenders. I consider evidence from a study of how California's correction reforms are unfolding in 12 California counties.

Key Findings:

- AB 109 had modest effects, some positive and some negative, on recidivism, with considerable variation across offender groups, recidivism measures, and counties. Although there has not been uniform improvement in recidivism outcomes, there have also not been dramatic upsurges in criminal activity among individuals released from custody. Moreover, the prison population dropped by 27,000 inmates in the first year under AB 109, which means the state reduced reliance on the most expensive resource in the criminal justice system—a prison bed—without substantially negative impacting public safety.
- Prop 47 modestly reduced recidivism among individuals convicted of the offenses defined by the proposition both in terms of rearrest and reconviction. These overall declines were driven by substantial reductions in rearrest and reconviction rates for Prop 47 offenses. Our findings suggest that the proposition reduced both arrests by law enforcement and convictions resulting from prosecutions. However, we are unable to distinguish between the effect of the reform on reoffending from its effect on the practices of criminal justice agencies. Like AB 109, also contributed to a reduction in the prison population, but also reduced county jail populations across the state.

Figure 1 - Two year rearrest and reconviction rates are lower after Prop 47



Implications for Policy

AB 109 and Prop 47 represent California's attempt to reverse decades of high levels of incarceration and, if that were the sole goal, they should be regarded as a success. Prison and jail populations are at the lowest levels they have been in two decades or more. Crime remains at historic lows. Recidivism outcomes are somewhat mixed, but remain stubbornly high, even where declines in rearrest and reconviction have occurred. The implication for both AB 109 and Prop 47 is that future reductions in recidivism are contingent upon the implementation of services, sanctioning strategies, and alternatives to incarceration that both reforms promised to do. The verdict on whether the state and the counties can succeed in doing so is yet to be delivered.

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