

# Crime rates may fluctuate depending on authority in charge

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In 2011, the U.S. Supreme Court forced California to deal with the massive overcrowding in its prison system. The resulting reform shifted administrative and budgetary responsibility for low-level criminals from the state prison system to county jails. As a result, local California jails now face more overcrowding than ever, and local law enforcement is saddled with additional costs for imprisoning arrestees.

A new study evaluating the exact opposite reform in Israel, published in the *Journal of Public Economics*, offers insight into the long-term impact of the California experiment. In their research, Dr. Itai Ater of Tel Aviv University's Recanati Business School, Dr. Yehonatan Givati of Hebrew University, and Dr. Oren Rigbi of Ben-Gurion University examined the impact of transferring authority over jails from the [police](#) to the Prison Authority made on arrests and crime in Israel.

According to the study, crime dropped as a result of the reform largely because the police – feeling less budgetary pressure – felt free to arrest more suspects, many of whom would have gotten off in the past with a warning. Based on the results of the study, Dr. Ater predicts that the California reform may result in an increase in the crime rate.

## Broad-Based Research

Basing their study on Israel Police data, the researchers evaluated every criminal arrest in Israel between September 2006 and September 2009: a

total of 153,960 arrests and 95,521 arrestees. In addition to the arrest data, the researchers analyzed each of the nearly 834,000 crimes reported to the police during the same time period.

Between April 2007 and January 2008, control over jails in Israel was transferred from police departments to the Prison Authority. Police officers who manned the jails and budgets associated with the jails also became the responsibility of the Prison Authority. This transfer took place gradually, region by region, allowing Dr. Ater and the researchers to identify arrest and crime trends.

Once police departments no longer bore responsibility for arrestees' room and board, arrests went up by about 11 percent, Dr. Ater says. Arrestees were also held for longer periods of time, even though the newly added captives were arrested for less serious crimes.

Feeling less pressure on their budgets, [police departments](#) started arresting not only those suspected of lesser crimes, they also started arresting people less likely to be charged at all in the end. But some of the new arrests were valid, and reported crime dropped by 4 percent after the reform.

## **Beyond the Jails**

"Though we focus on law enforcement agencies in this paper, we believe that there are other settings, characterized by comparable underlying forces, to which our findings might apply," said Dr. Ater. "In a hospital, for instance, bottlenecks are likely to occur at the interface between the emergency department and internal wards, because the decision whether to accept a patient into the ward is subject to the ward's approval. Our study can help provide insight into many fields grappling with the same budgetary issues.

"It's true that unfortunately the reform has seen an increase in innocent people being charged – because more arrests automatically means more faulty arrests," said Dr. Ater. "But the trade-off has had a generally positive outcome in lowering crime rates."

But what does all this suggest for California, where control over prisons shifted in the other direction, closer to local law enforcement?

"Using the same logic of organizational responsibility from the case in Israel, the shift in California will likely lead to fewer arrests, reducing budgetary pressures to be sure," said Dr. Ater. "However, it may also result in an increase in crime rates."

Dr. Ater is continuing to study the link between police incentives, police activity, and [crime](#).

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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