

Large reductions in prison population can be made without endangering public safety

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A paper published in the journal *Criminology & Public Policy* addresses one of the most important crime policy questions in America: Can prison populations be reduced without endangering the public?

That question was examined by researchers who tested the impact on public safety of California's dramatic efforts to comply with court-mandated targets to reduce prison overcrowding

The results showed that California's Realignment Act, passed in 2011, had no effect on aggregate violent or property crime rates in 2012, 2013 or 2014. When crime types were disaggregated, a moderately large, statistically significant association between realignment and auto theft rates was observed in 2012. By 2014, however, this effect had decayed, and auto theft rates returned to pre-realignment levels.

The [paper](#), "Is Downsizing Prisons Dangerous? The Effect of California's Realignment Act on Public Safety," was authored by Jody Sundt, associate dean and associate professor at the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis; Emily Salisbury, an associate professor of criminal justice at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas; and Mark Harmon, an assistant professor in the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice in the Hatfield School of Government at Portland State University.

"The results provide evidence that large reductions in the size of the prison population can be made without endangering the overall safety of

the public," Sundt said. "Three years after the passage of the Realignment Act, California crime rates remained at levels comparable to what we would predict if the prison population had remained at 2010 levels."

According to the paper, within 15 months of its passage, realignment reduced the total prison population by 27,527 inmates and saved \$453 million.

Realignment substantially reduced the size of the prison population by shifting responsibility for certain groups of offenders to local jurisdictions.

The researchers found that with a mixture of jail use, community correction, law enforcement and other preventive efforts, California counties have provided a comparable level of public safety to that previously achieved by state prisons.

That's a far cry from what was believed in the mid-1970s, when the U.S. prison population began a steady climb that continued until 2010, the first time in 30 years the number of inmates declined.

The prison buildup was based on the premise that incarceration improves public safety, the researchers wrote in the paper. As the buildup began, some argued that the nation had a clear choice—build more prisons or tolerate higher rates of violent crime.

Confidence in the utility of incarceration was so great that policies to increase sentence lengths and punish a range of crimes with imprisonment were pursued with vigor over several decades by every jurisdiction in the United States, the researchers wrote.

"This issue is complicated, but I think the safety effects of prison have

been oversold," Sundt said. "Many of the estimates of the effectiveness of incarceration were based on a comparison to doing nothing. The estimates tend to be too optimistic because they are not really comparing the preventive effect of prison to other options that are available for addressing crime."

The research study did not address the best ways to reduce prison populations, but Sundt said, "If we want to reduce the size of the prison population, we should think about who we are currently sending to prison and whether we can supervise them as effectively or perhaps more effectively in the community."

Another consideration, Sundt said, would be to consider "how we can reduce the length of stay in a way that balances the [public safety](#) and accountability desires of the public with the economic and social costs of prison. We can reduce sentences in ways that are rational and recognize the risk that offenders pose."

"For the first time in decades, it appears that a window of opportunity for justice reform is opening to allow for a reevaluation of the effectiveness and wisdom of policies that have created the largest [prison population](#) in the world," the researchers wrote.

More information: Jody Sundt et al. Is Downsizing Prisons Dangerous?, *Criminology & Public Policy* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/1745-9133.12199](#)

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