

# Research investigates whether electing progressive US prosecutors leads to increased crime

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In the United States, the number of so-called progressive prosecutors focused on criminal justice reform has risen, but few studies have addressed the relation between these prosecutors' policies and crime rates. In a new study, researchers examined whether progressive prosecutors in the 100 most populated counties affected crime rates

from 2000 to 2020. They found that the inauguration of these prosecutors led to higher relative rates of property crime and total crime, but not to higher relative rates of violent crime.

The study was conducted by researchers at the University of Miami, the University of California Irvine (UCI), and Arizona State University (ASU). It [appears](#) in *Criminology & Public Policy*.

"All but one prior study on this topic has examined crime rates at the city level," notes Nick Petersen, associate professor of sociology and criminology at the University of Miami, who led the study. "By investigating crime rates at the county level, our study offers a more complete picture of the relation between crime rates and progressive prosecution policies across a [prosecutor's](#) jurisdiction."

In response to growing concerns about mass incarceration in recent decades, progressive prosecutors have been elected on platforms that emphasize reducing incarceration rates. These prosecutors differ from more traditional "law and order" prosecutors and typically focus on decarceration policies such as diversion from prison or jail, decriminalization of low-level drug crimes, and decreased use of mandatory minimum sentences.

In a 2022 *Criminology & Public Policy* [article](#), study co-author Ojmarrh Mitchell and colleagues noted that offices led by progressive prosecutors generally issued less harsh sentences and had fewer racial/ethnic disparities. Progressive prosecutors have been criticized for their "soft on crime" policies, and some have been recalled, impeached, or removed from office. This new study sought to answer questions about the effect of these prosecutors on crime rates, which the authors consider crucial amid debates surrounding progressive prosecution and criminal justice reform.

Researchers coded the progressiveness of prosecutors elected between 2000 and 2020 in the 100 largest U.S. counties. They used prosecutors' inauguration dates to measure changes in local crime rates, considering violent, property, and overall crime as reported by the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting program.

Compared to jurisdictions that maintained traditional chief prosecutors, areas that changed to progressive prosecutors had 7% higher relative rates of total crime, which were driven by 6.7% higher relative rates of property crime. These effects were strongest from 2013 to 2020. In contrast, violent crime rates were not statistically higher in jurisdictions that switched to progressive prosecutors over the study, although there were statistically higher relative rates of violent crime from 2014 to 2016.

The authors point out that the estimated effects are relative differences in crime trends, not absolute differences in crime. In absolute terms, crime rates fell over the study, but property and total crime rates declined more markedly in counties with traditional prosecutors. Yet for violent crimes, the election of progressive prosecutors had no reliable overall effect across the study, but it had significant effects on crime from 2014 to 2016.

Moreover, the effects of progressive prosecutors appear to vary by time in office, with relatively higher crime rates in the first decade and declining relative crime rates afterward.

"Despite concerns that the election of progressive prosecutors would lead to surging levels of violence, our findings suggest that progressive-oriented prosecutorial reforms led to relatively higher rates of property crime but had limited impact on rates of violent crime," says Mitchell, professor of criminology, law, and society at UCI, who coauthored the study. "In fact, in absolute terms, crime rates fell in jurisdictions with

traditional and progressive prosecutors."

"Given that prior research has shown that progressive prosecutors reduced [mass incarceration](#) and racial inequalities, our study indicates that higher property [crime rates](#) may be the price for these advancements," adds Shi Yan, assistant professor in ASU's School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, who coauthored the study. "Whether this is a worthwhile tradeoff is ultimately a decision for local officials and the constituencies they represent."

**More information:** Nick Petersen et al, Do progressive prosecutors increase crime? A quasi-experimental analysis of crime rates in the 100 largest counties, 2000–2020, *Criminology & Public Policy* (2024). [DOI: 10.1111/1745-9133.12666](#)

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