

# MOST CALIFORNIA JURISDICTIONS SHOW DECLINES IN PROPERTY CRIME DURING JUSTICE REFORM ERA, 2010-2016



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October 2017

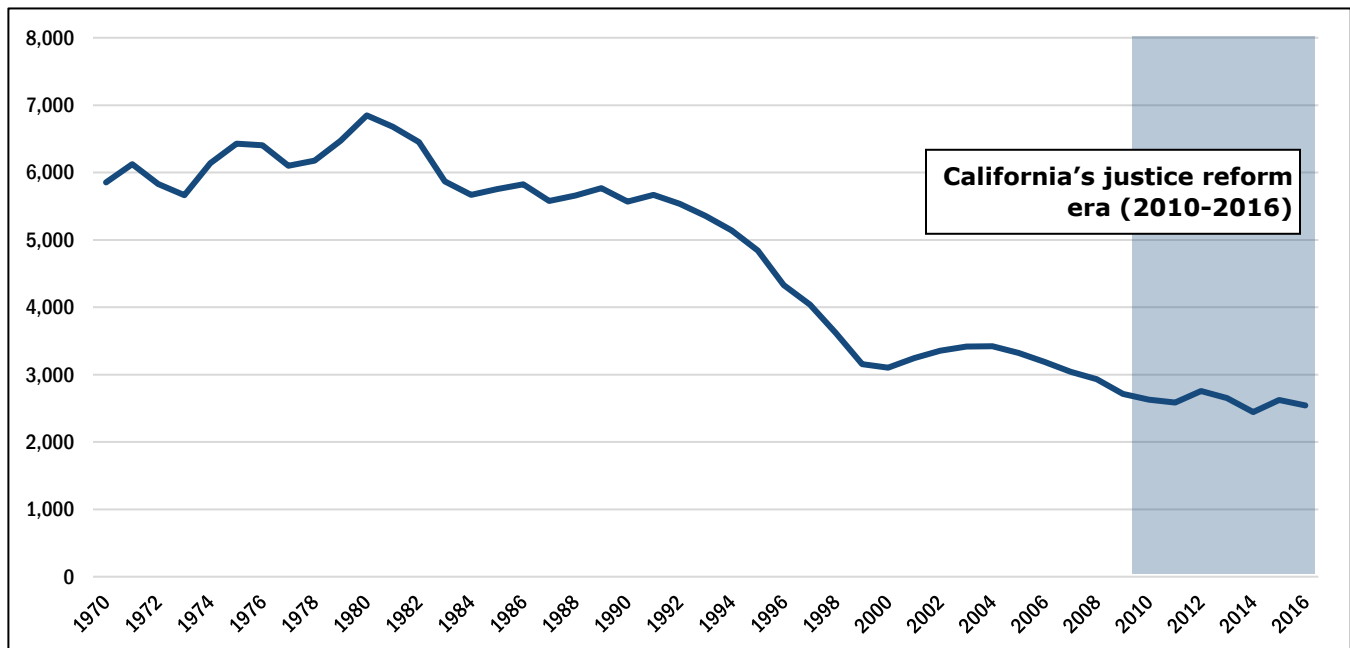
Research Report

## Introduction

From 1970 to 2016, California’s statewide rates of property crime fell approximately 57 percent (Figure 1). Most of this decline took place prior to 2000. Since then, California’s property crime rate has decreased modestly, and from 2010 to 2016, property crime rates fell more than 3 percent.

In 2012, the year following the passage of Public Safety Realignment, statewide rates of property crime increased nearly 7 percent. The following year, rates fell to nearly pre-Realignment levels, and in 2014, they declined again to historic lows. Similarly, in 2015, following the passage of Proposition 47, the state saw a 7 percent rise in the rate of property crime, fueling renewed safety fears and leading some to blame the proposition (see, for example, Zimmerman, 2015). However, these offenses fell substantially in 2016, producing a net decline across the seven-year justice reform era.

**Figure 1. Property crimes per 100,000 California population, 1970-2016**



Source: DOF, 2017; DOJ, 2017.

## California’s Justice Reform Era

Since 2010, California’s justice system has undergone major reform. Beginning in 2011, Senate Bill 1449 decriminalized marijuana and, five years later, in 2016, California voters approved Proposition 64 to legalize marijuana and provide retroactive relief to those

sentenced for marijuana offenses. In 2011, the California Legislature passed Assembly Bill 109 (Public Safety Realignment), which shifted responsibility for those with non-violent, non-sexual, and non-serious convictions from the state to counties in an attempt to reduce prison populations. In 2012, California voters passed Proposition 36, narrowing the “Three Strikes” law to apply primarily to serious or violent felonies. In 2014, Proposition 47 reduced six minor drug and property offenses from felonies to misdemeanors, prompting the resentencing and release of thousands from jails and prisons across the state. Finally, in 2016, the passage of Proposition 57 ended the practice of direct file in the juvenile justice system and extended earlier parole opportunities to adults sentenced to prison for non-violent offenses. Taken together, these reforms have instituted a new paradigm in justice policy, and can be termed the “justice reform era.”

## **Methods**

Most of the major justice reforms of the past seven years have instituted changes impacting the treatment of non-violent offenses. For example, Prop 47 was intended to address the root causes of incarceration and substance abuse through investment in community-based treatment and prevention (SOS, 2014). Presumably, the effects of such a reform, with its emphasis on disrupting the cycle of frequent drug and property arrests, would apply most directly to non-violent offense rates without meaningfully impacting violent offenses. Further, property crimes comprise approximately 85 percent of all Part I offenses, largely driving statewide crime rates. Thus, this analysis emphasizes local and statewide trends in property crime, and regards them as a reliable measure of the impact of recent policy change on public safety.

Despite the relative stability of statewide trends through the justice reform era, smaller jurisdictions, including cities and counties, show substantial divergence in violent and property crime. To parse these local impacts, this analysis examines offenses reported by law enforcement agencies in 454 cities and 57 outlying areas. These outlying areas are grouped by county and include regions not encompassed by cities, as well as small agencies such as college campus and transportation authority police. San Francisco, which is both a city and county, is treated as one jurisdiction. Reported offenses are divided by the population of the reporting city, and the remaining offenses in each county by the balance of that county’s population outside cities, to produce crime rates per 100,000 population for 2010 and 2016. Excluded are smaller cities that did not report offenses in either or both 2010 and 2016, or which came into existence after 2010. The cities and jurisdictions included in this report comprise more than 99 percent of the state’s population in both 2010 and 2016.

## **Local Variations in Property Crime**

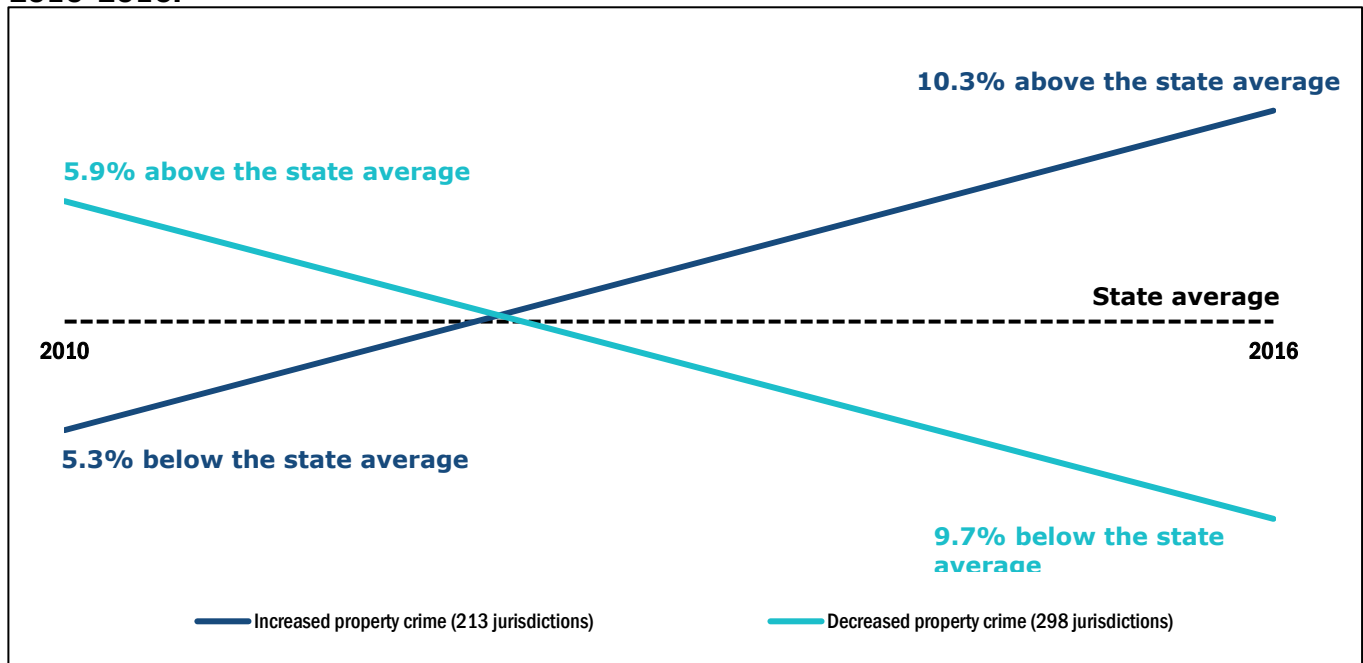
Across California cities, crime trends appear highly localized. Of the 511 cities and local areas included in this analysis, 210 showed rising rates of total crime, with an average increase of 12.3 percent from 2010 to 2016, and 301 showed decreasing rates of crime, with an average decline of 16.5 percent (see Appendix A). A majority of jurisdictions (283, with 22.3 million people) also showed decreases in violent crime. For property offenses, 213 jurisdictions reported increases, with an average rise of 12.8 percent, and 298 showed declines averaging 18.1 percent.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the supplemental appendices for a comprehensive list of the 2010 to 2016 property crime rate changes for all counties and local jurisdictions.

The cities reporting declines in crime were diverse, ranging from Fresno, Sacramento, and San Diego to scores of rural communities, but were disproportionately comprised of those with higher pre-reform era rates of crime. These declining jurisdictions reported 2010 levels of property crime that were 12.6 percent higher than the rates of jurisdictions that later showed crime increases. However, by 2016, jurisdictions with declining crime reported property crime rates that were 18.3 percent lower, on average, than the jurisdictions that reported an increase in crime. That is, the approximately half of the state with property crime improvements from 2010 to 2016 experienced trends nearly 31 percentage points better relative to the other half of the state experiencing worsening property crime trends (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Deviation from the average rate of property crime per 100,000 population in jurisdictions with rising rates of property crime compared to those with declining rates, 2010-2016.**



Source: DOF, 2017; DOJ, 2017.

The trends also were inconsistent by crime (Table 1). For example, from 2010 to 2016, 327 cities and jurisdictions with a combined population of 27.2 million reported increased vehicle theft rates, while 170 cities and jurisdictions with a combined population of 11.9 million showed decreased vehicle theft rates. For burglary, the opposite trend prevailed: 141 cities and jurisdictions with a combined population of 6.9 million had increased rates, while 367 cities and jurisdictions with a combined population of 32.2 million showed a decrease. Assault, homicide, robbery, and theft also showed varied trends. Vehicle theft was the only Part I offense for which most jurisdictions with a majority of the population showed increased rates of crime.

**Table 1. Jurisdictions showing increased and decreased crime rates from 2010 to 2016 by Part I offense**

Offense	Number showing crime increase	Percent showing crime increase	2016 population	Number showing crime decrease	Percent showing crime decrease	2016 population	Number with no change or not reporting
Homicide	79	15%	13,448,528	189	37%	18,897,164	243

Robbery	177	35%	9,912,254	303	59%	29,052,956	31
Assault	220	43%	19,276,150	283	55%	19,789,044	8
Burglary	141	28%	6,905,445	367	72%	32,181,697	3
Vehicle theft	327	64%	27,152,490	170	33%	11,894,592	14
Theft	217	42%	19,075,762	294	58%	20,013,728	0

Source: DOF, 2017; DOJ, 2017.

## Conclusion

In the current public safety landscape, in which offense rates are vacillating around all-time lows, reforms including Public Safety Realignment and Prop 47 cannot be reliably attributed to increases in crime. In recent years, CJCJ researchers have relied on these local discrepancies to study the impacts of individual reforms on crime. Analyses conducted following the passage of Public Safety Realignment found that counties with a larger population returning from state prison reported more favorable crime trends than those with fewer returns to local custody (CJCJ, 2014; 2015). Likewise, two studies on variations in crime following Prop 47 found that cities and counties with greater reductions in their incarcerated populations did not experience greater increases in crime (CJCJ, 2016; 2016a). Single-year swings in crime occur naturally, and temporary increases just after a major reform are often balanced by decreases the following year. In any case, several years of data are required to dependably relate policy reform to trends.

The state's stable crime rates over the recent seven-year period of major criminal justice reform are the product of offsetting local increases and decreases. It is not clear how blanket, statewide reforms, in and of themselves, could produce such differing results across a large number and wide variety of jurisdictions and across the major index offenses. It demonstrates the importance of not relying on outlier data or anecdote to set public policy.

It also sets up models for study as to what local policies might be effective in reducing crime. Why did San Jose show a 29 percent increase in vehicle theft rates from 2010 to 2016, while the City of San Diego had a 15 percent decline? Why did San Francisco have a 35 percent rise in property crime rates during this period, while the City of Sacramento's fell by 28 percent? We might expect large fluctuations in crime in small jurisdictions, where a few additional offenses would produce big changes in local rates, but not in larger cities.

Jurisdictions that showed decreased rates of crime during the reform era actually had considerably higher rates of property, violent, and total crime in 2010 than jurisdictions that showed increases during this period. However, by 2016, the two sets of jurisdictions had switched places, and those with decreasing crime rates during the reform period now tend to have much lower rates of property, violent, and total crime than those showing increased rates. This indicates that more than half of the state's jurisdictions, especially those with high crime rates before the reform era, may have devised policies and practices that have been successful in continuing to effect reductions in crime. Given this contrast, local policies and conditions are worth studying for their comparative impacts on managing and treating the root causes of offenses at the community level.

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## Appendix A

### Rates and percent changes in rates of Part I offenses for jurisdictions showing increased versus decreased crime rates, 2010-2016

	All Part I crimes		Violent crimes		Property crimes	
	Increasing jurisdictions	Declining jurisdictions	Increasing jurisdictions	Declining jurisdictions	Increasing jurisdictions	Declining jurisdictions

Change, 2016 v 2010	12.3%	-16.5%	26.0%	-14.0%	12.8%	-18.1%
Offense rate, 2010	2,952.2	3,207.4	385.2	483.5	2,485.1	2,797.3
Offense rate, 2016	3,314.3	2,677.6	485.4	415.9	2,802.2	2,290.1
Offenses, 2010	552,149	591,876	61,896	101,970	471,372	508,787
Offenses, 2016	647,452	523,585	81,471	92,768	556,076	440,722
Population, 2010	18,702,736	18,453,710	16,067,038	21,088,360	18,968,041	18,188,405
Population, 2016	19,535,094	19,554,396	16,785,491	22,302,891	19,844,434	19,245,056
<b>No. of jurisdictions</b>	<b>210</b>	<b>301</b>	<b>227</b>	<b>283</b>	<b>213</b>	<b>298</b>
<b>% of jurisdictions</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>58%</b>

Source: DOF, 2017; DOJ, 2017. Notes: Cities with violent offense increases and decreases do not sum to 100 percent because the City of Bradbury in Los Angeles County reported no violent crimes in either 2010 or 2016. Violent crime rates exclude rape because the definition was broadened in 2013 and law enforcement agency reporting of rape offenses did not become consistent until 2015.

**Please note:** Jurisdictions submit their data to the official statewide or national databases maintained by appointed governmental bodies. While every effort is made to review data for accuracy and to correct information upon revision, CJCJ cannot be responsible for data reporting errors made at the county, state, or national level.

**Contact:** For more information about this topic or to schedule an interview, please contact CJCJ Communications at (415) 400-5214 or [cjcjmedia@cjca.org](mailto:cjcjmedia@cjca.org).