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Prisoner realignment blamed for jump in crime

By [SEAN EMERY](#)

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The overall crime rate in Orange County rose more than 9 percent after a historic overhaul of the California correctional system, police chiefs say in a study to gauge the effect of the state's "inmate realignment."

The study conducted by the local police chiefs association compared crime rates among the various Orange County law enforcement agencies for the 19 months before and after inmate realignment went into effect in October 2011.

The study says 76 percent of the local law enforcement agencies saw an increase in property crimes such as burglaries, larcenies and vehicle thefts, as well as violent crimes such as aggravated assault, robbery,

rape and murder.

The bulk of the increase came from property crimes, including a 9 percent jump in burglaries and larcenies and a nearly 20 percent jump in vehicle thefts.

Among violent crimes, only reported aggravated assaults saw an increase, about 9 percent, while the overall number of robberies, homicides and rapes dropped.

With debate raging over realignment's ultimate local effect as well as the level and allocation of funding provided by the state to handle its effects, representatives for the county's municipal police agencies say the study points to a link between the transfer of oversight of thousands of felons from state to local oversight and increasing crime.

"We've had our suspicions, but we didn't really have any evidence," said Tustin police Chief Scott Jordan, president of the Orange County Chiefs of Police and Sheriff's Association, the organization that put together the report. "I think now we have a little evidence."

However, experts caution and the chiefs acknowledge that it is too early to say with certainty whether realignment is solely or directly to blame for the apparent increase in crime.

"What we have now is just very anecdotal," said Charis Kubrin, an associate professor at UC Irvine's Criminology, Law and Society Department.

REALIGNMENT, CRIME

Faced with a prison system that had grown so overcrowded that courts ruled it violated inmate rights, the state Legislature in October 2011 instituted inmate realignment, a historic, wide-ranging overhaul of the correctional system.

Felons considered nonviolent, non-serious and non-sex offenders now serve their time at local jails rather than state prison, while eligible offenders released from state prison are supervised by county probation officers rather than state parole officials.

The largest immediate local effect of realignment fell on the Orange County Probation Department, which saw its caseloads swell as the department was sent thousands of new felons to supervise, and the Orange County Sheriff's Department, which is dealing with an influx of more inmates taking up an increasing amount of bed space in county jails.

Now, with their study, chiefs of municipal departments in the county hope to illustrate the effect realignment has had on them.

Statistics in their study show crime rose overall in nearly all Orange County cities, with the exceptions of Brea, La Habra, Laguna Beach, Newport Beach, Rancho Santa Margarita, Seal Beach and Stanton.

Garden Grove police Chief Kevin Raney said he says realignment has led to a "lack of consequences," noting that under the old system, a parole violation led to at least six months in state prison. Under realignment, probation officials have the option of sending offenders to local jails for up to 10 days, known as a "flash incarceration."

"There seems to be at least an identifiable trend in an increase in crime," Raney said. "To me, it's too early to say realignment is causing this, but I feel comfortable saying there is definitely a correlation between realignment and the increase in ... crimes in Orange County."

THE TRUE EFFECT?

Others cautioned that changes in crime rates, either up or down, are based on a variety of factors, such as demographics, the economy, drug trends, unemployment and immigration changes. Kubrin disagreed with the assertion that a rising crime rate after realignment's rollout is proof.

"What you need to determine whether realignment is causing crime to go up or down is data on whether realignment offenders committed those crimes," Kubrin said.

Several studies looking at the overall effect of realignment are in the works. Researchers at Stanford University are looking at the issue from a state level, while UCI is hoping to study the issue on a county level. However, it will be several years before their studies are complete.

Kubrin said that as well as looking at realignment offenders, a wide-ranging study would have to compare how counties allocate the state realignment funds and examine which programs are working.

"We have to remember the counties are interpreting and using the money in different ways," Kubrin said. "It's not like a one-size-fits-all plan."

Meanwhile, probation and parole officials have claimed successes under realignment.

At the county level, fewer released prisoners appear to have reoffended during the first year of realignment, compared with the 70 percent recidivism rates the state previously reported.

Orange County Probation statistics show about 15 percent of those being supervised by probation officers were subsequently convicted of new crimes, while one-third were sent back behind bars at least once on flash incarcerations.

At the state level, a California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation report indicates realignment offenders were arrested at a slightly lower rate than pre-realignment offenders and returned to prison at a significantly lower rate.

COUNTYWIDE APPROACH

Jordan and Raney said they are exploring the idea of forming a regional team focused on realignment rather than dealing with it on a city-by-city basis.

Jordan described the idea as "a team that would really become experts at what is going on in the county,

focusing on the most active repeat offenders and those absconding," which could communicate with all agencies and crime-analysis units.

A regional approach would be far from unprecedented, with past multiagency teams being formed to focus on narcotics crimes, auto thefts and gang violence. Jordan also pointed to the success of a program that teams police investigators, prosecutors and probation officers to go after the most active gangs and gang members.

The question for the police agencies would be how to fund such an effort.

In recent months, police chiefs have been angered by a decision by the Orange County committee tasked with divvying up the estimated \$66.7 million in state money that will be allocated locally for realignment in the coming fiscal year to reduce the funds set aside for local law enforcement to about 1 percent from about 3 percent.

That would leave about \$560,000 allocated to departments rather than the \$1.6 million budgeted this fiscal year. The money has been used to fund law enforcement sweeps and operations targeting realignment offenders.

Police say they are the front line in dealing with realignment offenders. Officials with other county agencies have pointed to the debate regarding whether realignment is solely to blame for rising crime rates as their reasoning for not allocating more state money to the police agencies.

"We need the resources, and we need the understanding that we are responsible for this. We are not trying to isolate ourselves; we are not unaware of the impact that this is having on all the different entities that are involved from a county standpoint," Raney said. "But I think we can show now that there is beginning to (be) the connection between realignment and an increase in crime, and we can't ignore that."

Contact the writer: 714-796-7939 or semery@ocregister.com