



Measuring Performance and Outcomes of California's Public Safety Realignment

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Background and Need

California is pursuing historic changes to its adult corrections system. In October 2011, the state shifted significant corrections responsibilities to its counties—including authority over most non-serious, non-violent, and non-sexual offenders. Motivated in part by rulings from the federal courts, this unprecedented policy shift—known as “realignment”—has generated enormous interest and concern at the state, county, and community levels.

This is the biggest shift in corrections policy in decades, affecting tens of thousands of prisoners and public safety of all Californians. But there is no funding earmarked for data collection, research, or evaluation to assess the effects of the change on recidivism, costs, and crime rates. As a result, documenting the effects of the change is challenging. There have been laudable efforts to collect summary data on a handful of measures for all 58 counties by the Chief Probation Officers of California and the California Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC). These efforts are useful but quite limited. And although some counties have contracted or otherwise enlisted the assistance of researchers to do evaluations or help develop measurement systems, these efforts are largely uncoordinated and are not leading to consistent data collection across counties. Without improved efforts at documentation, the effects of realignment—both positive and negative—will remain hidden from view. Worse, in the absence of good data these effects are apt to be characterized by anecdote, spurious correlations, or political beliefs.

Project Description

California's counties are responding to public safety realignment in a variety of ways. PPIC is in the unique position to standardize both data collection and evaluation to help shed light on successful local policies and practices. PPIC has offered both the state and the counties help to a) develop realignment-relevant data to aid the BSCC in meeting its reporting obligations and its responsibility to support counties in the implementation of realignment; b) assist counties in identifying data that will enhance county decisionmaking in the short term and management of community corrections populations in the long term; and c) provide an empirical basis for evaluating various policies in relation to public safety and other outcomes.

We will assist the BSCC in collecting data at the individual level and will track offender behavior and system responses in custody and in the community. Some data will come from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and the California Department of Justice, and some will come from county sources. PPIC has drafted a codebook on the specific measures to be collected in each category.

The proposed project will be undertaken in ten counties, which PPIC will select to be representative of the state as a whole. We have not yet finalized our selection (other than Los Angeles), but we have been in contact with a number of possible candidates. PPIC will provide all counties, regardless of their participation, access to the codebook, the supplementary instruments, and the technical knowledge gained from the project.

County Selection

The first phase in this project involves selecting counties for analysis based on their representativeness of the state as a whole and the diversity of their approaches to realignment. As a group, these counties should capture the majority of the California population and the majority of the projected realignment population. This group of counties should also approximate the state population well in terms of demographic and economic characteristics, as well as the regional and urban/rural diversity of the state.



Data Collection

The second phase of the project involves identifying the data elements needed to assess the impacts of realignment policy at the county and state level. We will seek assistance from selected counties and statewide data holders (e.g., CDCR and DOJ) in assembling an individual level dataset that includes the following data elements:

Individual Identifier: The individual identifier allows us to keep track of individuals over time and as they move through systems. The most common individual identifier is the Criminal Investigation and Identification number (CII number). However, different agencies and departments may use different individual identifiers. In the process of preparing the dataset for analysis, we may need to retain other forms of individual identifiers (such as name or address) to allow for matching across systems. Once the matching is completed, the data will be stripped of any personally identifying information.

Demographic Characteristics: The inclusion of demographic characteristics in the dataset will allow us to control for differences in population composition across counties, as well as allow us to conduct subgroup analysis. Commonly collected demographic characteristics include date of birth, gender, race and ethnicity.

Criminogenic Characteristics: Criminogenic characteristics include criminal histories and current offenses, as well as assessed risks and needs related to the likelihood of recidivism. The inclusion of criminogenic characteristics, like demographic characteristics, allows us to control for differences in population compositions across counties. We will also use criminogenic characteristics to analyze the match between the risks and needs identified and the sanctions and services received.

Sanctions and Services: Given the size of the realigned population relative to jail capacity, many counties are utilizing alternative sanctions and services to mitigate the potential risk to public safety induced by lower levels of incarceration. In addition to the time held in custody for the current offense, we will also collect any alternative sanctions imposed on the offender and any services received by the offender during the period of incarceration and/or supervision.

Recidivism Outcomes: This study captures the following three measures of recidivism: arrest, conviction and return to custody (jail or prison). The data will permit measurement on any time period (6 months, 1-year, 3-year) or any type of offending (e.g., violent, property, drug, or sexual). As a result, individual counties can select their own recidivism measures for use locally and the BSCC can create a standardized measure.

Why PPIC?

PPIC's reputation for high-quality, independent, and timely information on a range of key policy topics has made us a go-to source for engaged Californians and decisionmakers across the state and in the nation's capital. Our publications and outreach related to corrections have facilitated strong relationships with key policy communities at the state and local level, including the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation the Board of State and Community Corrections, California State Sheriffs' Association, Chief Probation Officers of California, California State Association of Counties, and the County Administrative Officers Association of California.

Findings from the research will be disseminated in a variety of ways through PPIC's strong communications program, including briefings, targeted meetings, publications, and web outreach.

Project Team

The team for this project includes policy researchers Mia Bird, Ryken Grattet, Joe Hayes, Dan Krimm, and Sonya Tafoya, communications professionals (Abby Cook, Linda Streat, and Lynette Ubois), and government affairs staff (Dave Leshner).