March 12, 2018

On March 7, 2018 the University of California, Irvine issued a press release detailing the findings of our study, “Can We Downsize our Prisons and Jails without Compromising Public Safety? Findings from California’s Prop 47,” forthcoming in the peer-reviewed journal Criminology & Public Policy. The study is the first systematic analysis conducted of the measure’s statewide impact since its 2014 implementation. We find that Prop 47 had no effect on violent crimes including homicide, rape, aggravated assault and robbery. Prop 47 also did not impact the property crime of burglary. We find that larceny and motor-vehicle thefts did exhibit small increases in response to Prop 47, but these findings fail post-estimation tests that would allow us to make a causal association. On March 9 the Association of Deputy District Attorneys (ADDA) issued a statement in response to the study findings. The ADDA statement reflects some confusion and misunderstanding about various aspects of the study as well as claims that are unsubstantiated. Below we respond to specific points raised in the statement.

“The authors, in what they admitted was a “quasi-experimental” study, invented a synthetic control group to compare California’s crime rate to this “synthetic” California.”
- First, a quasi-experimental study is the absolute best methodological option in this context. Quasi-experimental research is similar to a traditional experimental design or randomized controlled trial but lacks the element of random assignment to treatment or control conditions. In the current case, this makes perfect sense because, for obvious reasons, criminologists cannot randomly assign units (e.g., states) to treatment (e.g., Prop 47 intervention) or control (e.g., no Prop 47 intervention) conditions. Stated alternatively, absent randomization which is not feasible in this context, we apply the best, most appropriate method to study the impact of Prop 47 on crime. This is, in fact, a strength of the study.
- Second, we did not “invent” a synthetic control group rather it was empirically determined by the data using an optimization algorithm that finds the best combination of states that make up Synthetic California. In other words, our approach was entirely data driven.

“The authors led with an initial concession—that there were upticks in crime across California the year after Prop 47 was enacted.”
- This was not a “concession” as claimed. Rather, in the paper we simply review data on crime rates in the year following Prop 47. If there were no increases observed in 2015, we would have no reason to investigate whether Prop 47 was responsible for those increases.

“Apparently, no conclusion could be drawn by the authors based on the uptick in crime and the reductions in incarcerations.”
- This was not the focus of our study. Our study set out to answer one fundamental question: did Prop 47 have an impact on violent and property crime in the year following its implementation? We find that it did not.
“The study did not consider drug offenses at all. Instead, it examined ‘Part 1’ crimes which include homicide, rape, aggravated assault, robbery, burglary, auto theft and larceny...it was irrelevant to consider its [Prop 47’s] impact on homicide, rape, aggravate assault and the other Part 1 crimes that Prop 47 never addressed.”

- It was not irrelevant at all. In fact, as we outline in the study, the vast majority of criticism aimed at Prop 47 speaks generally about its impact on violent and property crime of all types. We find this particular criticism ironic in light of previous statements made by the ADDA itself that Prop 47 “has fueled a rise in property crimes” https://www.laadda.com/prop-47-proponent-acknowledges-likelihood-felony-consequences-will-deter-crime/ and that both violent and property crime rates are up precisely because of Prop 47 https://www.laadda.com/spinning-explain-away-increase-crime-rates/. Case in point is a video made by Michele Hanisee, author of the ADDA’s statement, titled “Impacts of AB 109, Propositions 47 and 57” posted on the ADDA’s website where she discusses Prop 47’s impact in relation to violent and property crime trends: https://www.laadda.com/impacts-ab-109-propositions-47-57-michele-hanisee/ (this discussion begins around minute 8 of the video and continues for several minutes). In short, by focusing on a variety of both violent and property crimes, our study addresses these very claims. Once again, we find that such claims are not empirically supported.

“What were the results of the study on the rise in larceny crimes in 2015? Not surprisingly, the study showed that ‘Prop 47 did have an impact’ and ‘the larceny effect appears significant.’ So—Prop 47 had ‘an impact that is large’ on larceny offenses!”

- Unfortunately, this is an incomplete interpretation of our findings regarding larceny. As we mention briefly in the press release and explain in detail in the paper, our initial model suggests that larceny more than any other offense category may have experienced an increase following Prop 47. However, when we subject this finding to standard post-estimation tests, we are unable to reach a definitive causal conclusion regarding Prop 47’s impact on larceny. In particular, the finding was sensitive to alternative compositions of Synthetic California. Thus, we are unable to reach our goal of identifying a causal effect on larceny.

“To no one’s surprise, Prop 47 was found to have no effect on crimes that were not changed by Prop 47.”

- This is not true. We found that Prop 47 did not have an impact on burglary, larceny, and auto-theft in the year following its implementation. As noted earlier, Prop 47 was presumed to be linked to increases in these (as well as other) crimes as made clear in statements published by the ADDA on its website.

“If Prop 47 was supposed to reduce crime rates through community treatment and rehabilitation it has arguably failed. Crime rates, the study concedes, went up. The authors note that California’s recidivism rates ‘remain stubbornly high today, even as prison and state parole populations have dropped dramatically.’”

- Crime rates going up (or down for that matter) do not tell us anything about Prop 47’s impact on crime so that argument is not compelling. Likewise, high recidivism rates for the state as a whole do not tell us anything about the specific recidivism rates of Prop 47ers. In both cases, one must conduct a proper evaluation to determine Prop 47’s role in crime upticks and recidivism. Concerning the former, we do exactly this in our study.
To be clear, our study finds that Prop 47 was not responsible for the uptick in crime statewide. Concerning the latter, a definitive conclusion awaits proper evaluation.

“Perhaps the authors should read their own study again.”
  - Condescending statements of this sort should have no place in this discussion. We recently offered to sit down with members of the ADDA and discuss our study in greater detail, addressing any and all questions they have but so far the ADDA has not taken us up on our offer. The offer still stands.

Charis E. Kubrin and Bradley J. Bartos