

Crime is up, and Fresno County law enforcement leaders blame Prop. 47

By John
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Fresno police Chief Jerry Dyer discusses the effects of Proposition 47 on crime in the city during a Fresno County Bench Bar Media panel discussion Wednesday, Jan. 14, 2015, in Fresno.

HOWARD K. WATKINS — Special to The Bee

These are challenging times for local law enforcement, as officials have been forced to adjust to prison realignment, which shifts the incarceration and supervision of nonviolent, non sex-offending criminals from the state to counties.

Just when law enforcement officials were adjusting to those changes, however, along came Proposition 47, which was approved by voters in November and reclassified some property and drug crimes from felonies to misdemeanors.

This change has greatly reduced the number of county jail inmates, but is also being blamed for an increase in crime, the the county's top three law enforcement officials said Wednesday.

"I don't think we are ready to handle what is going to come out of (Prop.) 47," new Fresno County District Attorney Lisa A. Smittcamp told a Bench Bar Media meeting Wednesday at the Downtown Club. "The initial numbers are frightening."

Fresno police Chief Jerry Dyer concurred in comments to the same group, as did Fresno County Sheriff Margaret Mims in a later interview.

The Prop. 47 changes went into effect immediately after its passage.

In the first 10 months of 2014, Dyer said, auto theft was down 26%. In November, it was up 7.8%, and in December 9.8%. Burglaries showed similar trends, the chief said.

For Dyer, this message isn't new. A month ago, he was already sounding the alarm on Fresno's crime increase.

"We have done nothing different," he told Bench Bar Media attendees. "We have to believe this is the result of Prop. 47."

Mims told the Bench Bar Media gathering that jail releases went from an average of 70 daily during the height of the nation's economic downturn when jail floors had to be closed, to 30 daily after prison realignment, down now to around four a day — and sometimes none. The average daily inmate count in the jail has gone from 2,900 to 2,500, and jail bookings have dropped from around 100 daily to 60.

But Mims is no fan of Prop. 47. She says property crime in Fresno County has spiked since its passage.

"Just because they're not in jail doesn't mean they don't need to be there," said she in an interview.

And Smittcamp said that while the jail overcrowding issue may be waning, the crime problem is not. It is still vital, she said, to find help for people who once would be put in jail, but are now just getting citations thanks to Prop. 47.

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