

Editorial: Controversial inmate-reduction plan is working

By The Bee Editorial Board

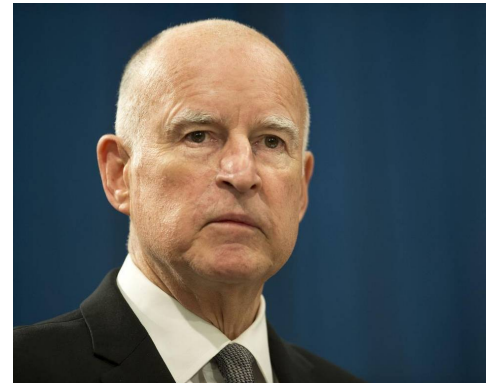
Gov. Jerry Brown has big plans for building high-speed rail, fixing California's water system and battling climate change.

Whether he will succeed with any of those undertakings in his last term in office remains to be seen. But Brown is entitled to a feeling of accomplishment for his criminal justice realignment, as are the county officials who are making it work.

During the first two years of Gov. Jerry Brown's inmate realignment plan, violent crime in California fell to a 46-year low. | Hector Amezcua
Sacramento Bee

Politicians are hesitant to declare success when it comes to criminal justice changes, understandably so. At any time, a felon who otherwise would be in jail could commit some heinous act.

But a Public Policy Institute of California report released May 19 shows that in its first two years, criminal justice realignment did not lead to greater violent crime, even though 18,000 criminals who otherwise would have been in prison were on the streets. The study says auto theft did rise, perhaps attributable to the change. But other property crime fell.



In 2011, the first year of Brown's third term as governor, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a lower court's order forcing the state to vastly reduce the prison population. Brown responded with a plan that sent criminals convicted of lighter-weight crimes to counties and gave counties money to provide various programs.

The Democratic-controlled Legislature approved Assembly Bill 109 in party-line votes, while Republicans saw an opportunity to make political gains by warning then, as some do now, that there would be a surge in crime.

The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation held 160,700 inmates in 2011. That number will dip to below 128,000 next year, spurred in part by the voter-approved Proposition 47, which reduced drug possession and property crime sentences. California prisons are 2,200 inmates below the court-imposed goal that prisons be at no more than 137.5% of maximum capacity.

The PPIC report says Proposition 47, which was passed by voters last November, may alter the trend. But in 2013, the second year of realignment, violent crime fell 6.4%, to a 46-year low. The drop in violent crime nationally was less precipitous, 5.1%. The California homicide rate fell 8% in 2013.

"From a cost-benefit perspective, incarceration does prevent some crime, but at current rates its effect is very limited," says the report by PPIC researchers Magnus Lofstrom and Steven Raphael, a UC Berkeley professor.

The report urges more preventive strategies, such as early childhood programs, intervention for high-risk youths, increased policing and cognitive behavioral therapy.

The San Francisco-based policy institute's report comes as most presidential candidates advocate for criminal justice policies that do not embrace mass incarceration of offenders. Brown is not a candidate, but his criminal justice realignment program could help point the way for other parts of the nation, and that's something of which he can be

proud.