

Jail Populations, Violent Crime, and COVID-19

Findings from the Safety and Justice Challenge

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In response to the rapid spread of COVID-19 in 2020, jails across the U.S. implemented emergency strategies to reduce jail populations and mitigate the virus's spread. This included releasing people pretrial while they awaited their case resolution. At the same time, public data show that violent crime and homicides have increased nationally. These increases have put a spotlight on criminal legal reform efforts, with growing public discourse in some political and media circles suggesting that reforms are causing these increases. While the recent uptick in violence is real, this analysis shows that, on average, cities and counties implementing jail population reform efforts successfully reduced jail populations without jeopardizing community safety.

Pretrial Release: Releasing individuals from jail while their criminal case is ongoing, pending the disposition of one or more of their booking charges. People may be released on pretrial status via bail, bond, supervision, or release on own recognizance (no bond or supervision required).

To explore whether increases in violent crime were related to the pandemic and criminal legal reforms, the CUNY Institute for State & Local Governance (ISLG) analyzed violent crime, incarceration, and rebooking data from sites participating in the Safety and Justice Challenge (SJC), a nationwide initiative to safely reduce jail populations. This data provided comprehensive information on individuals booked into and released from jail over time, allowing ISLG to capture trends in rebooking outcomes in sites with varying geographies, populations, and jail sizes. The rebooking analysis covers data through April 2021, which is more recent than many well-established data sources.

KEY FINDINGS

There is no link between SJC jail population reforms and the uptick in violent crime.

All 23 SJC cities and counties in this analysis decreased their incarceration rate between 2019 and 2020, when the pandemic emerged. Changes in violent crime varied across cities and counties, and larger decreases in jail populations were not always associated with increases in violence.

People released after jail population reforms were no more likely to return to jail than individuals released before reform began.

About three out of four people released on pretrial status were not rebooked into jail. This has remained consistent from 2015 to 2020, before and after reform efforts began, as well as after COVID-19-related strategies were implemented.

Only 2% of people released pretrial were rebooked into jail with a violent crime charge.

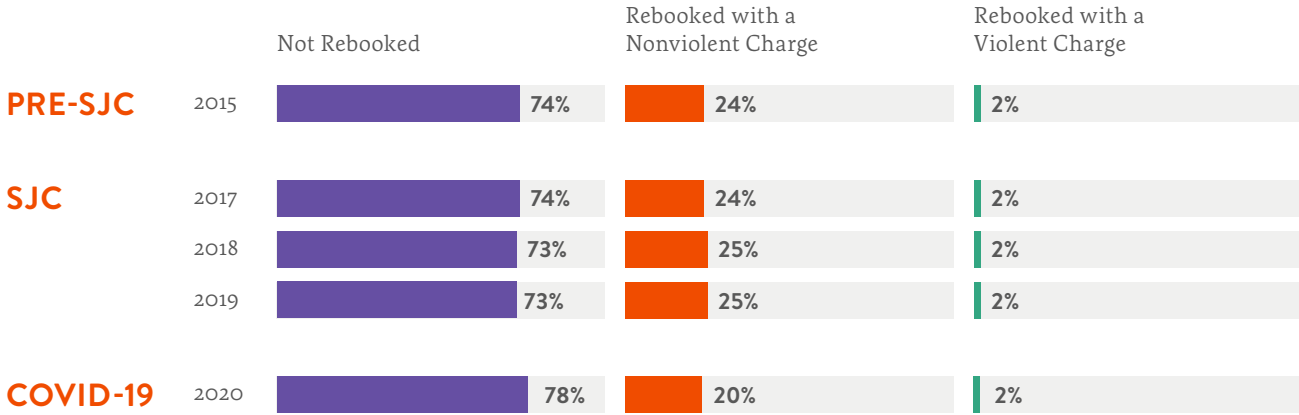
Consistently over time, a very small share of people released on pretrial status were rebooked within six months for a violent charge, the same rebooking rate as before reform began.

Less than 0.1% of people released pretrial were rebooked into jail on a homicide crime charge.

In other words, over 99 percent of people released on pretrial status were not rebooked on a homicide charge within six months.

LESS THAN 3 PERCENT OF PEOPLE RELEASED ON PRETRIAL STATUS WERE REBOOKED ON A VIOLENT CRIME CHARGE.

Violent Crime Charge Rebooking Outcomes of Individuals Released on Pretrial Status within Six Months (Average Across SJC Cities and Counties), 2015 to 2020



CONCLUSION

- The public narrative that jail population reform leads to an increase in violent crime makes for attention-grabbing headlines, but it is not backed by any evidence-based research. While the recent uptick in violent crime is real, it is happening across the country in cities and counties with and without reform efforts, in communities with both progressive and traditional prosecutors.
- This harmful discourse distracts from genuine attempts to understand the true causes of rising

violent crime, particularly homicides. More research is needed to unpack the increases in violence during a time of even more pronounced disparity in the U.S. as communities recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Advancing equitable and thoughtful criminal legal reform is possible without compromising safety. To suggest otherwise without evidence undermines the harms of incarceration on individuals, their families, and communities.



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The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation launched the Safety and Justice Challenge (SJC) in response to the misuse and overuse of American jails. The SJC Network includes cities, counties, and states committed to rethinking local criminal legal systems with innovative solutions that are data-driven, equity-focused, and community-informed.