

# Crime after Proposition 47 and the Pandemic

When Proposition 47 passed in 2014, California reclassified certain drug and property offenses from felonies to misdemeanors and created a [misdemeanor shoplifting](#) category. With Prop 47 approaching its 10-year anniversary, PPIC entered into a year-long effort to delve into the impact of the reform on crime in the state—spotlighting the effects of decreases in incarceration and enforcement. However, interventions to respond to COVID-19 may have had larger consequences for California’s public safety.

Today, several legislative proposals, as well as Proposition 36 on the 2024 ballot, seek to increase penalties for some property and drug offenses by allowing prosecutors to charge them as felonies. California has been a leader on [criminal justice reform](#), and PPIC has used rigorous methods to examine the effects of these efforts for over a decade. This policy brief and its larger report do not assess Prop 36 or recently enacted or proposed legislation but frame Prop 47 and the pandemic within this dynamic period of reform.

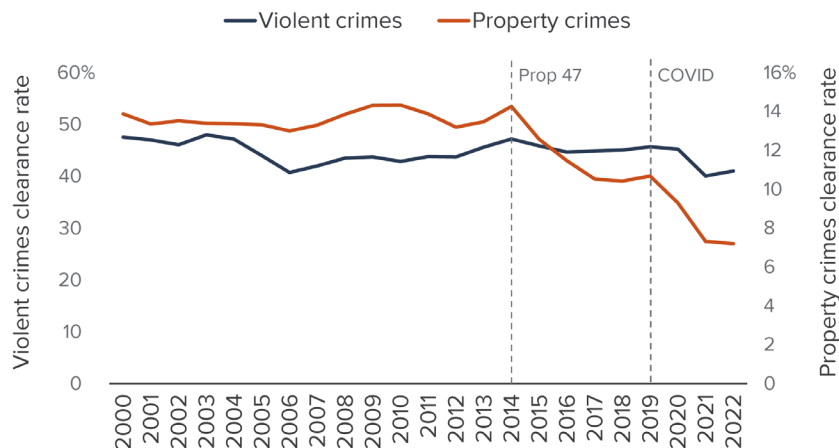
## Which crimes were affected by Prop 47 and pandemic interventions?

Some property crime went up as incarceration and larceny clearance rates went down after California implemented Prop 47 changes and adapted to the pandemic. Clearance rates refer to crimes that lead to arrest and referral for prosecution—in other words, solved crimes—and signal the likelihood of apprehension. Cleared violent crime has stayed relatively stable for nearly two decades.

A decrease in drug arrests—in the wake of Prop 47 reclassifications and due to pandemic circumstances—is not linked to higher violent or property crime.

Cleared property crimes dropped to 115,000 two years after Prop 47 passed, or by 15 percent. With fewer larcenies solved, burglary rose (2.9%), as did auto theft (1.7%) and larceny (1.1%). Larceny is theft without force or threat of force. The Prop 47 changes to nonviolent offenses reduced prison and jail populations, which pushed up both auto thefts and car break-ins by close to 4 percent.

### Cleared property crimes—or solved property crimes—dropped after Prop 47 and the pandemic



Source: California Department of Justice (CADOJ) Crimes and Clearances file.

Note: Clearance rate is the share of reported crimes for which police make an arrest and refer the arrestee to prosecution.

Post-pandemic, cleared property crime dropped further, to 7 percent—signaling that a person is half as likely to be apprehended for property crime today than in 2014. Fewer larcenies were cleared, leading to more car accessory thefts (7.3%) and car break-ins (3.9%). Moreover, the falling rate of solved burglaries drove up commercial burglaries (3.2%). In response to pandemic health risks, the counties reduced jail populations, which nudged up auto theft (1.6%) and commercial burglary (2.1%; a category that captures second-degree burglary incidents of entering a commercial building and stealing merchandise valued over \$950). While statistically significant, changes in both periods are a small fraction of the total rise in crime.

## What was the impact on retail theft in particular?

Due to fewer cleared larcenies, shoplifting decreased by 2.2 percent post-Prop 47, according to PPIC's estimates. This surprising finding may reflect that retailers tend not to report this crime in places where fewer larcenies are cleared—that is, when it may not lead to consequences. Alternatively, officers may report some retail theft as commercial burglary; the rise in commercial burglaries (3%) after larceny clearance rates fell aligns with this theory.

Commercial burglaries increased by 5.3 percent post-pandemic when jail populations and cleared burglaries fell. This recent increase is not offset by fewer reported shoplifting incidents.

## How did the reform and the pandemic affect enforcement and incarceration?

When the state applied Prop 47 changes to criminal offenses, felonies became a smaller share of property crime arrests, falling from 65 to 55 percent. During the pandemic, both felony and misdemeanor drug and property arrests fell; by 2022 misdemeanor arrests were 40 percent below pre-pandemic rates. As of 2022, arrests had fallen to 718,000.

Jail and prison populations declined by about 13,000 due to Prop 47—which provided an estimated state savings on incarceration of \$800 million to date that was then directed into local programming. The state and counties presumably saw even bigger savings when the jail and prison populations fell by 45,000 amid the pandemic.

## What strategies should California consider for preventing crime in the future?

Although crime in California still sits near historic lows, some crimes have been edging up in recent years. Compared to the nation, property crime jumped in California after both Prop 47 and the pandemic; violent crime diverged over the last decade, with the sharpest deviation at the start of the pandemic.

Research consistently finds that a higher likelihood of being caught is more effective at preventing crime than harsher penalties or longer sentences. Efforts to strengthen public safety may need to begin with addressing the [continued decrease in law enforcement staffing](#). The number of sworn officers in California has shrunk by 10 percent, a shortage that may be linked to fewer cleared property crimes.

On the other end of the criminal justice spectrum, California should seek evidence-based alternatives to jail and prison. [Cost-effective strategies](#) may involve interventions among at-risk youth, people with behavioral and substance use challenges, and other targeted groups.

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Source: Adapted by Stephanie Barton from [Crime after Proposition 47 and the Pandemic](#), by Magnus Lofstrom and Brandon Martin.