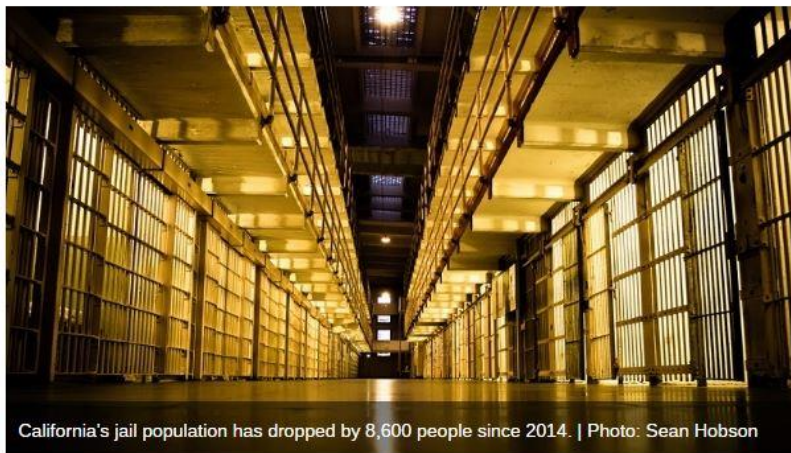




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California Funds New Prisons Despite Law to Reduce Inmates



California's jail population has dropped by 8,600 people since 2014. | Photo: Sean Hobson

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“Californians didn’t vote for Prop 47 so that we could reduce prison populations just to begin building new jails,” said an opponent of the plan.

California officials voted on Thursday to divert US\$500 million to open new jails, replacing jail beds with medical and mental health beds.

Criminal justice and civil rights activists protested the decision, which counters the purpose of the popular Proposition 47, passed last year to re-classify low-level felonies to misdemeanors and redirect funds to reduce recidivism.

“Californians didn’t vote for Prop 47 so that we could reduce prison populations just to begin building new jails,” said Kim Carter, executive director of Time for Change Foundation, in a press release from Californians United for a Responsible Budget.

According to Carter, the Board of State and Community Corrections, responsible for the vote, “should take the money they want to spend on jails and build some affordable housing,” she said, adding that “Reducing recidivism and increasing public safety means people need access to housing and jobs, not jail beds.”

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Prop. 47 aims to reduce prison populations in a state with severe overcrowding, designating extra funds to programs like “school truancy and dropout prevention, victim services, mental health and drug abuse treatment.”

At the same meeting, the BSCC began forming a committee to decide the distribution of Prop. 47 funds. Activists against jail expansion submitted their 14 candidates, all formerly incarcerated experts on substance use treatments, reentry programming, housing and mental health treatment. Currently the BSCC is largely made up of opponents of Prop. 47.

Though the BSCC announced that it would fund the new jail projects with funds from another bill, its administrative powers were expanded last month by Governor Jerry Brown. Proponents of Prop. 47 worry that it would look to using their own funds, and community members of the cities in question, spread across 15 counties, fear less funds for local social services.

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Other states that passed similar laws have seen crime rates decrease, but a year into passing Prop. 47, crime rates vary across the state, according to a report released by the American Civil Liberties Union on Tuesday.

While some law enforcement authorities proposed innovative diversion programs, others escalated arrests to account for a perceived rise in petty crime. The report accounted for the differences in the priorities of officers and their departments.

The effects of Prop. 47 are too early to measure, but it is estimated to lower prison costs by US\$150 million this fiscal year. The BSCC measure would eliminate 310 jail beds, but it would add 196 new ones, which some worry would not fulfill their definition of mental health treatment.

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