

**Research Update:**  
**Does more imprisonment lead to less crime?**

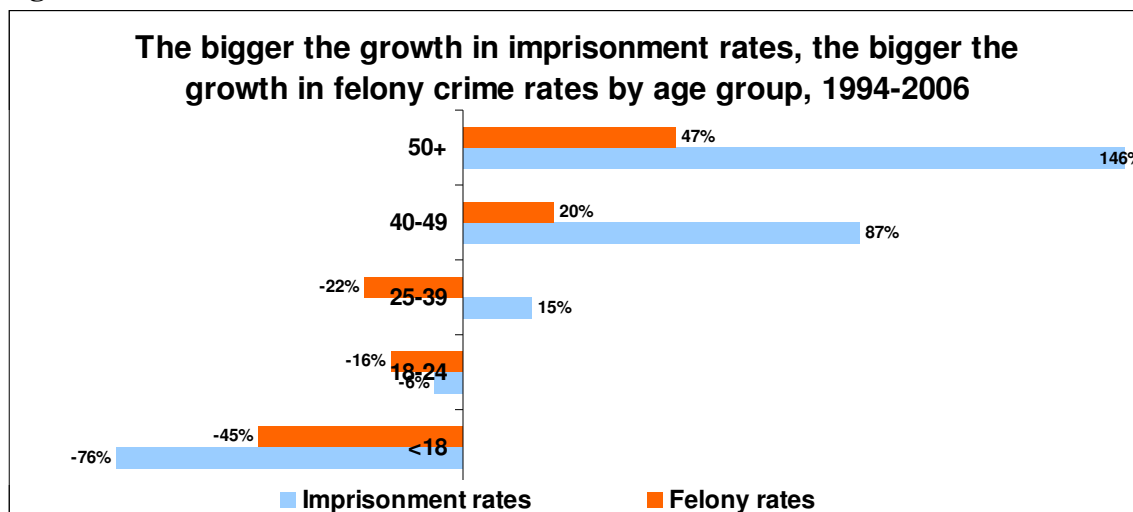
Proponents of Proposition 6, the “Safe Neighborhoods Act: Stop Gang, Gun, and Street Crime” initiative scheduled for a statewide vote in November 2008, argue that greater imprisonment leads to reduced crime. California imprisonment rates have risen since 1994, partly due to the 1994 “Three Strikes and You’re Out” law that mandated longer sentences for repeat offenders committing violent and serious crimes. If greater imprisonment reduces crime, we would expect that age groups whose imprisonment rate rose the fastest—that is, those ages that had the most criminal members removed from their populations through incarceration—would show the biggest reductions in crime. As Table 1 and Figure 1 show, the opposite is the case. In fact, ages 25 and under actually show a decrease in imprisonment over the last 12 years—and the biggest drops in both felony and violent crime. Meanwhile, ages 40 and over show the biggest increase in imprisonment, yet these ages show the biggest surges (or slowest declines) in violent and felony crime rates.

**Table 1. Imprisonment rates versus crime rates by age, 1994-2006**

<u>Change</u>	<u>&lt;18</u>	<u>18-24</u>	<u>25-39</u>	<u>40-49</u>	<u>50+</u>
Imprisonment rates	-76%	-6%	+15%	+87%	+146%
Violence rates	-41%	-26%	-31%	-2%	+11%
Felony rates	-45%	-16%	-22%	+20%	+47%

Sources: California Criminal Justice Statistics Center; California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. Rates are per 100,000 population by age.

**Figure 1**



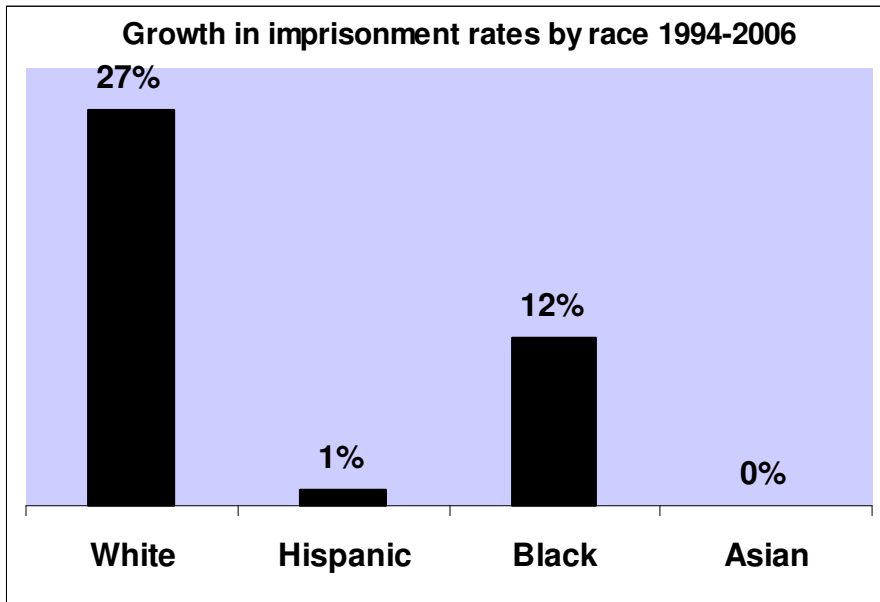
Despite popular belief, the state’s fastest growing prison population is non-Hispanic whites over the age of 30. From 1994 to 2006, the imprisonment rate for adult whites rose by 27%, versus 12% for adult African Americans and no change for Latinos and Asians (Table 2 and Figure 2).

**Table 2. Change in California imprisonment rates by race, 1994-2006**

<u>Imprisonment</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>Hispanic</u>	<u>Black</u>	<u>Asian</u>
Change	+27%	+1%	+12%	0%

Source: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitations. Rates are imprisonments per 100,000 population by race.

**Figure 2**

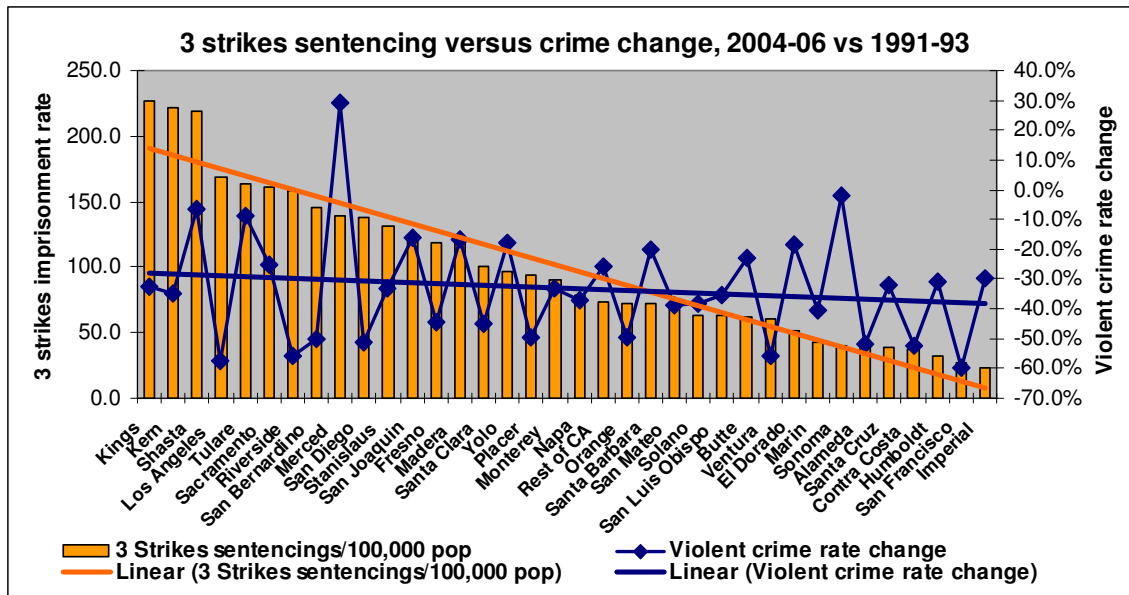


California whites over age 30, the group with the fastest-rising imprisonment rate, show the slowest declines in felony and violent crime rates over the period. In fact, younger age groups of all races and ethnicities show declines in both violent crime and felony arrest rates since 1999, the time period cited by Proposition 6 advocates. Felony arrest rates increased during that time period, and the greatest increase in incarceration was among older non-Hispanic whites and older African American populations. Prison populations also reflect these demographic changes in crime, which result from police, prosecutor, and criminal court decisions about what people are arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced to prison.

Finally, around 41,500 offenders have been sentenced to prison under California’s Three Strikes law since its enactment in 1994. If more imprisonment reduces crime, we would expect those counties that used the Three Strikes law the most would experience the greatest declines in crime. As Figure 3 shows, that is not the case. Counties varied widely in their use of the law, with Kings and Kern counties imposing approximately 10 times more imprisonments under the Three Strikes provisions than did Imperial and San Francisco counties. However, the trend lines (the straight orange line averaging Three Strikes sentencing rates and the straight blue line averaging violent crime changes) show the counties that rarely used the “Three Strikes” law

actually experienced somewhat larger declines in violent crime from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s.

**Figure 3**



In fact, the six counties that used the law the least—Imperial, San Francisco, Humboldt Contra Costa, Santa Cruz, and Alameda—experienced declines in violent crime, homicide, and all serious crime averaging 45%, 43%, and 31%, respectively. Meanwhile the six counties that used the law the most (six times more per capita than the six lowest counties)—Kings, Kern, Shasta, Los Angeles, Tulare, and Sacramento—had lower declines for violent, homicide, and all serious crimes averaging 36%, 27%, and 36%, respectively.

Detailed analysis rebuts the thesis that harsher sentencing accounts for California’s decline in crime since 1994. Counties that relied heavily on incarceration, as well as demographic groups that were incarcerated at higher rates, did not show the largest declines in violence or crime. In fact, those counties and demographic groups experienced higher rates of violent and serious crime.

For more information on Proposition 6, review recent articles at the below noted links:

<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-ed-6prop26-2008sep26,0,186375.story>

<http://www.ocregister.com/articles/prop-government-state-2171619-crime-local>

[http://www.mercurynews.com/editorials/ci\\_10610014?nclick\\_check=1](http://www.mercurynews.com/editorials/ci_10610014?nclick_check=1)

[http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20081001/news\\_lz1ed1bottom.html](http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20081001/news_lz1ed1bottom.html)

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