

Prop 47 and its Impact on Crime in California

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

DOWN SIZ I N G O U R P R I S O N S A N D J A I L S

Can We Downsize Our Prisons and Jails Without Compromising Public Safety?

Findings from California's Prop 47

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Research Summary

Our study represents the first effort to evaluate systematically Proposition 47's (Prop 47's) impact on California's crime rates. With a state-level panel containing violent and property offenses from 1970 through 2015, we employ a synthetic control group design to approximate California's crime rates had Prop 47 not been enacted. Our findings suggest that Prop 47 had no effect on homicide, rape, aggravated assault, robbery, or burglary. Larceny and motor vehicle thefts, however, seem to have increased moderately after Prop 47, but these results were both sensitive to alternative specifications of our synthetic control group and small enough that placebo testing cannot rule out spuriousness.

Policy Implications

As the United States engages in renewed debates regarding the scale and cost of its incarcerated population, California stands at the forefront of criminal justice reform. Although California reduced its prison population by 13,000 through Prop 47, critics argue anecdotally that the measure is responsible for recent crime upticks across the state. We find little empirical support for these claims. Thus, our findings suggest that California can downsize its prisons and jails without compromising public safety.

Keywords

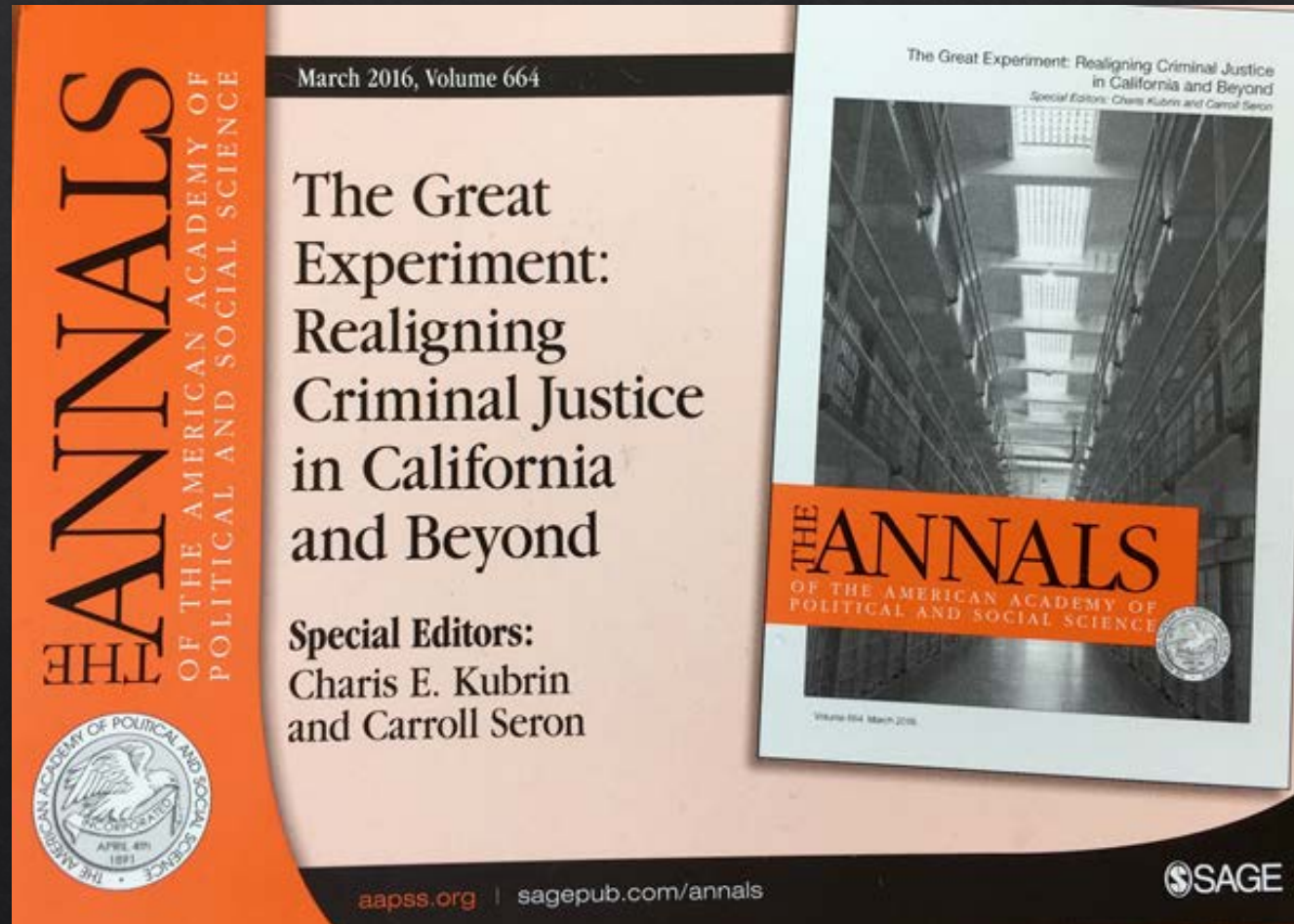
criminal justice reform, crime, prison downsizing, decarceration, California

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AB109 Realignment

- ◆ Transferred responsibility for lower-level felony offenders (triple-nons) and parolees from state correctional system to 58 county jail and probation systems
- ◆ Predictions of crime wave
- ◆ CA Legislature did not fund statewide evaluation, so no single organization was responsible for assessing costs and benefits of Realignment statewide
- ◆ What is the impact of Realignment on crime and recidivism in California?

Prior Work: AB 109 Realignment



Realignment and Crime Rates in California



Lofstrom, Magnus & Steven Raphael. 2016. "Incarceration and Crime: Evidence from California's Public Safety Realignment." ANNALS 664: 196-221.

Prop 47

- ◇ Reduced certain drug possession felonies to misdemeanors
- ◇ Required misdemeanor sentencing for several crimes including:
 - ◇ Shoplifting (where value stolen prop does not exceed \$950)
 - ◇ Grand theft (where value stolen prop does not exceed \$950)
 - ◇ Receiving stolen property (where value of prop does not exceed \$950)
 - ◇ Forgery (where value of forged check, bond, bill does not exceed \$950)
 - ◇ Fraud (where value of fraudulent check, draft, order does not exceed \$950)
 - ◇ Writing bad check (where value of check does not exceed \$950)

Overview of Study

- ◆ Examine impact of Prop 47 on crime in year following its implementation (2015)
- ◆ Identify Prop 47's causal effect on violent and property crime statewide
 - ◆ Murder, Rape, Robbery, Assault, Burglary, Larceny, Auto-Theft
- ◆ Created state-level panel dataset containing UCR Part I offenses from 1970-2015

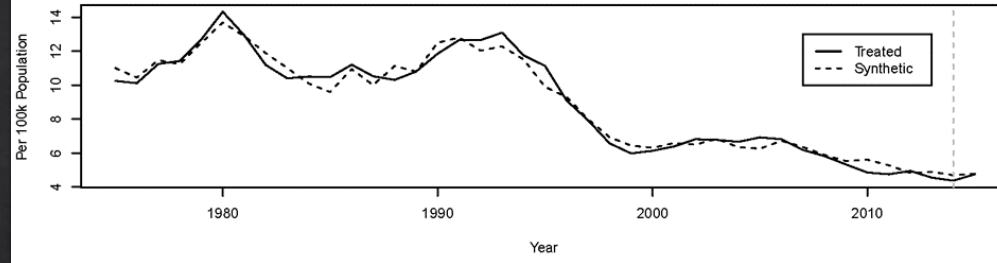
Methodology

- ◇ Natural experiment / quasi-experimental design
- ◇ Synthetic Control Group Design
- ◇ Comparison unit that approximates CA had it not enacted Prop 47
 - ◇ California vs. “Counterfactual California” / “Synthetic California”
 - ◇ Causal effect of Prop 47 = change in the distance between two time series that emerges following intervention
- ◇ Confidence in findings predicated on quality of comparison unit (Synthetic California)

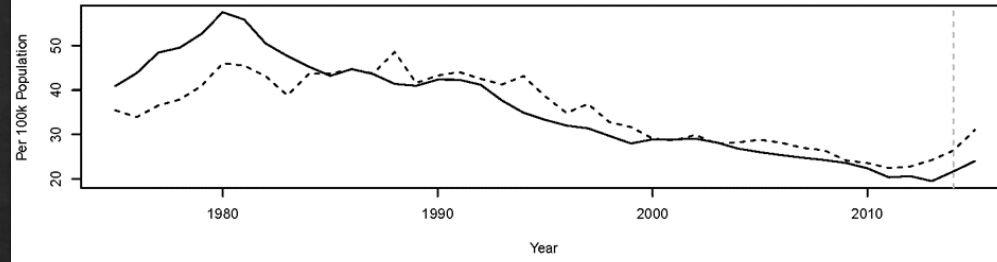
Synthetic California

- ◆ Weighted combination of donor pool states that optimally fits CA's crime trends from 1970-2014 (pre-intervention period) (N=44 years)
- ◆ Donor pool states = states which did not experience Prop 47 intervention
 - ◆ All remaining states eligible
 - ◆ Create Synthetic California for each crime type
- ◆ California vs. Synthetic California crime rates 2015

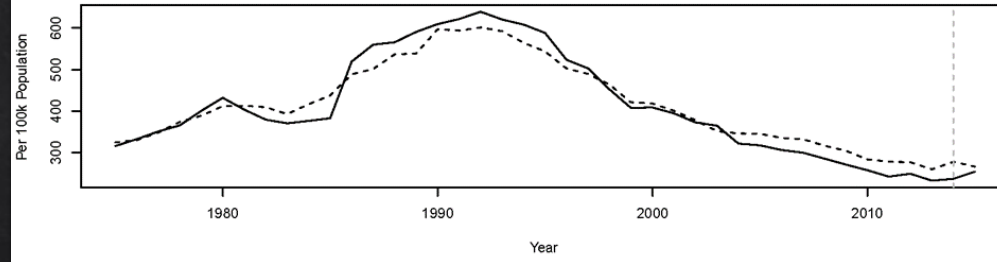
Panel A: Homicide per 100k Population



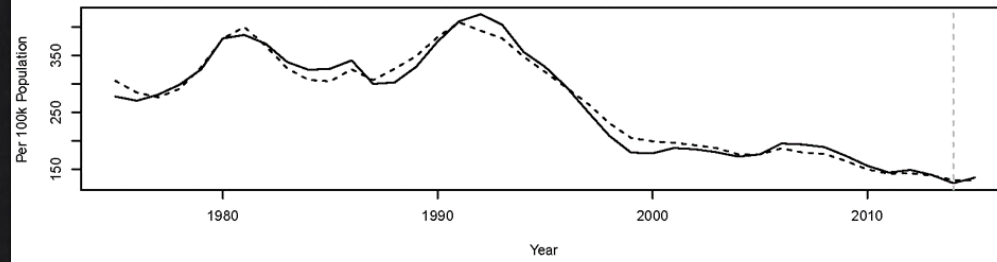
Panel B: Rape per 100k Population



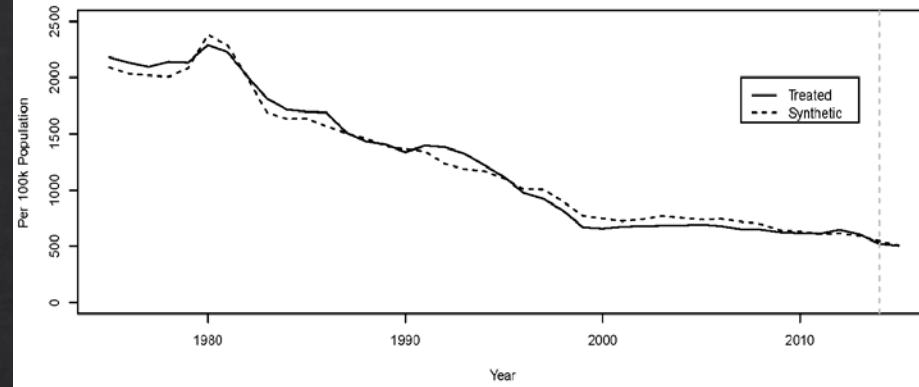
Panel C: Aggravated Assaults per 100k population



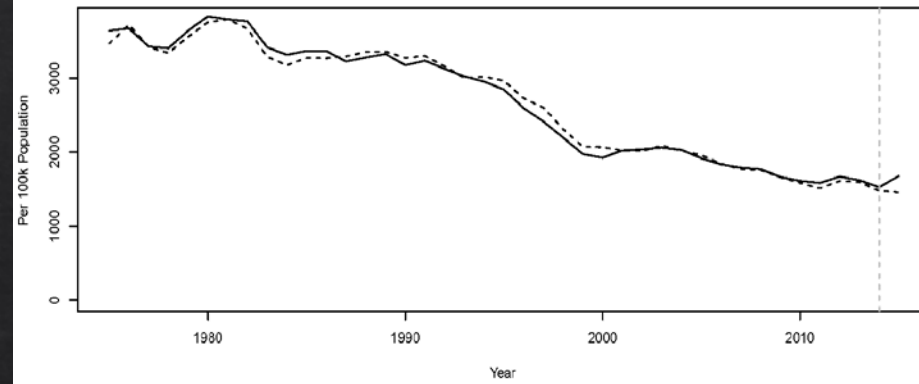
Panel D: Robbery per 100k population



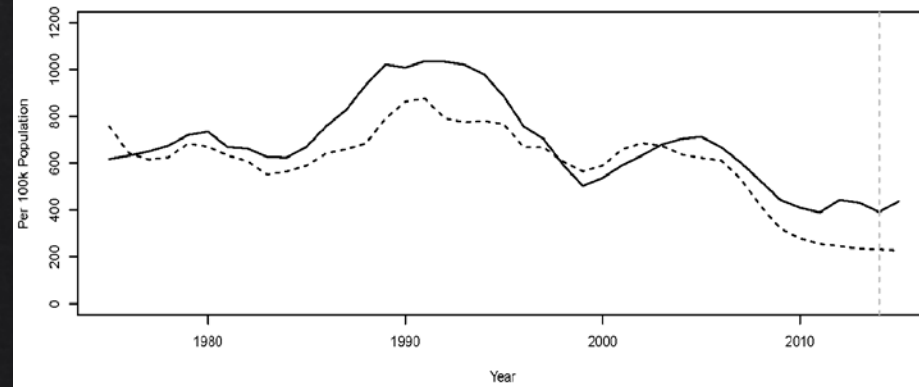
Panel A: Burglary per 100k population



Panel B: Larceny Thefts per 100k population



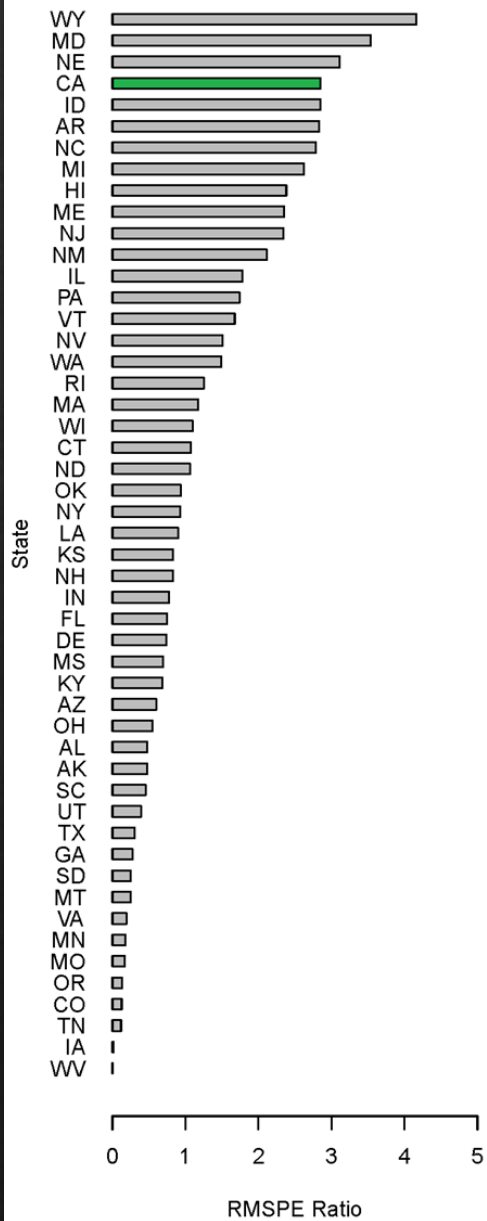
Panel C: Motor Vehicle Thefts per 100k pop



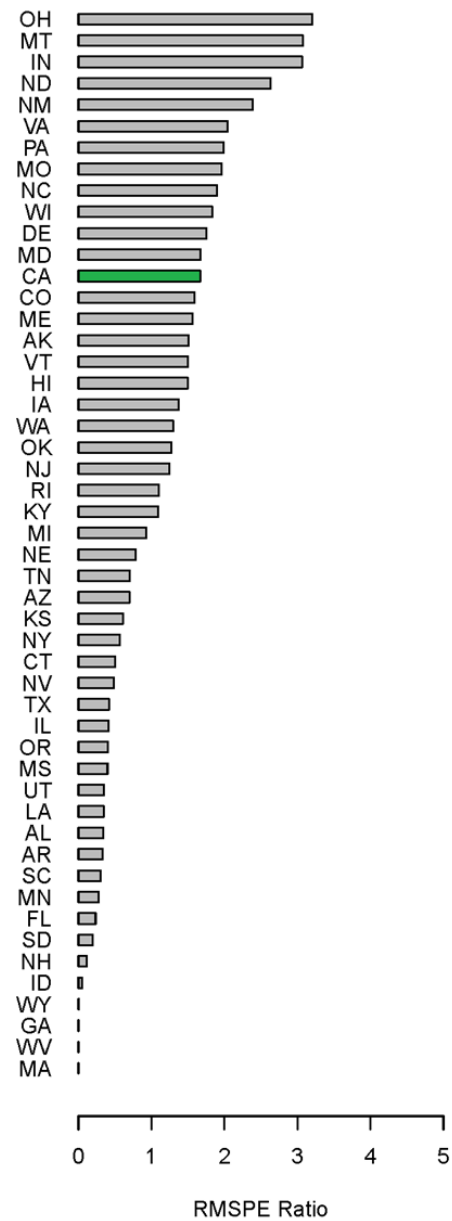
Post-Estimation Test #1

- ◇ 1) Insample placebo test
 - ◇ Finding for CA large relative to other states?
 - ◇ Pretending we don't know which state enacted Prop 47, we construct synthetic control groups for every other state and estimate effect of Prop 47 on crime in 2015 for each state
 - ◇ Since CA is only state that enacted Prop 47, it should produce biggest finding
- ◇ Larceny and motor vehicle theft

Panel A: Larceny

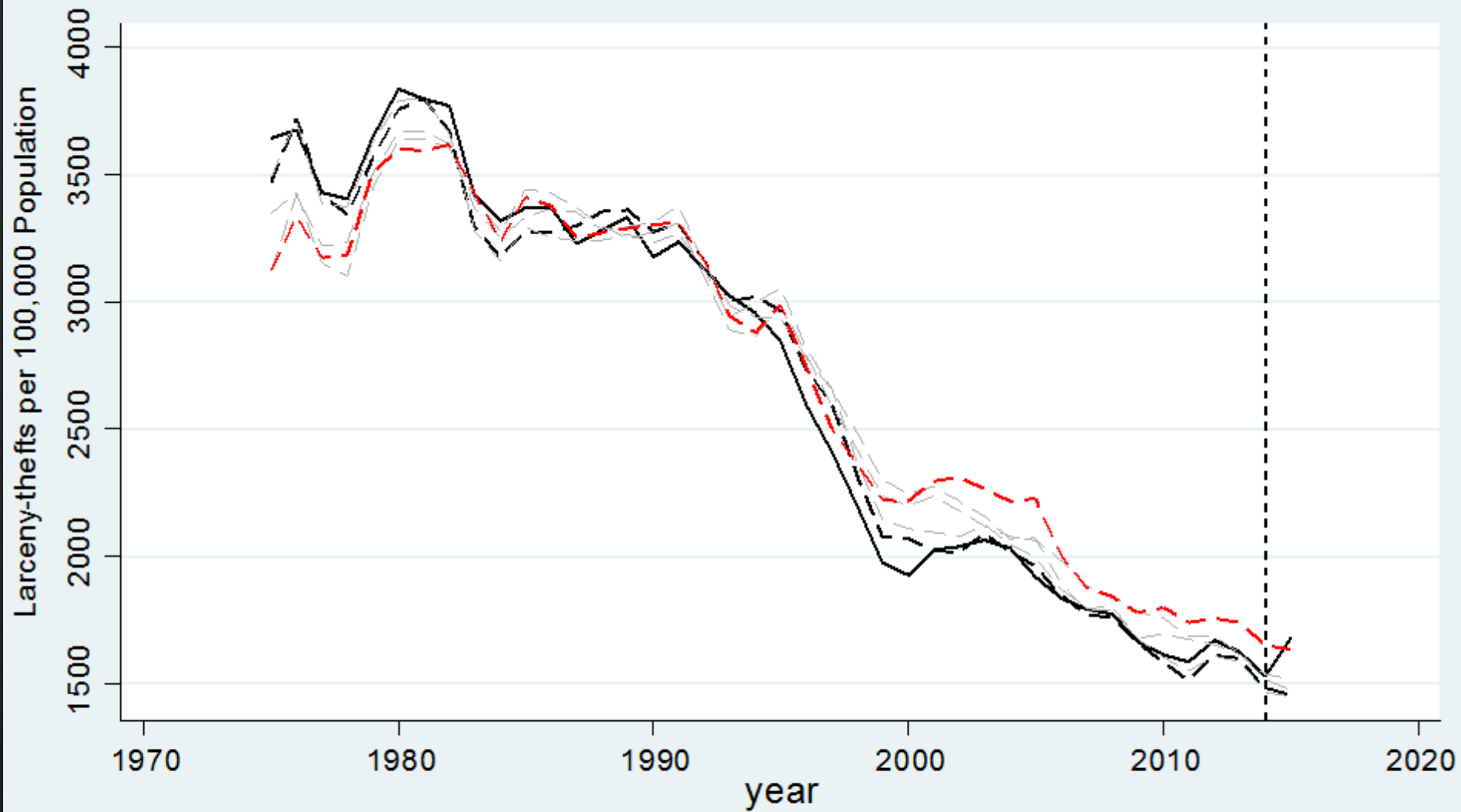


Panel B: Motor Vehicle Theft



Post-Estimation Test #2

- ◇ 2) Leave one out test
 - ◇ Evaluates whether finding is sensitive to changes in Synthetic California
 - ◇ Iteratively exclude donor pool states contributing largest weight to Synthetic California until all original donor pool states with non-zero weights excluded
 - ◇ Larceny = NY, MI, NV, NJ
 - ◇ Synthetic California comprised of different set of donor pool units than in original model
 - ◇ Does finding for larceny remain?



— California (Actual)

- - - Synthetic California (Baseline, No Restrictions)

- - - Alternative Synthetic Controls (donor pool units iteratively removed)

- - - Synthetic California (NY, NV, MI, & NJ excluded)

Conclusion

- ◇ No evidence of statistically significant robust increase for any UCR Part 1 Index Crimes in year following Prop 47's enactment
- ◇ We can downsize our prisons without risking public safety

Further Considerations

- ◆ Single post-intervention observation- are estimated effects permanent, temporary, accruing, or decaying?
- ◆ Some concerned about increasing drug offenses and other social ills (e.g., homelessness), which we do not have data for
- ◆ Statewide analysis may mask important variation at the local level (e.g., counties, cities or communities)