

The Impact of Jail Reduction Strategies on Community Safety Findings from Two Safety and Justice Challenge Sites

Key Study Takeaways

- **Incarceration can be avoided without negatively impacting public safety.** We found that implementation of SJC strategies was followed by declining jail bookings *without* an increase in crime.
- **In fact, recidivism rates generally decreased** following the implementation of SJC strategies in both sites, including felony and violent recidivism.
- **Less time spent in jail means greater public safety.** Our results show that shorter jail stays were associated with lower recidivism risk. By limiting the time individuals spend in jail, it may be possible for sites to reduce recidivism.
- **Racial disparities in jail bookings persisted.** While booking trends declined among both white and BIPOC individuals throughout the study period, bookings were twice as likely to involve BIPOC individuals as white individuals in both sites.

The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation launched the Safety and Justice Challenge (SJC) in 2015 with the goals of safely reducing jail populations and addressing the disparate impacts of over-incarceration on communities of color. Toward this end, selected SJC sites across the country have implemented numerous strategies, including diversion, enhanced review of those detained in jails, bail reform, tools to inform decision making, improved treatment options, re-entry strategies, and others. A growing body of evidence suggests that many sites have successfully reduced jail populations without risk to community safety.^[1]

Despite these generally positive findings, conversations around jail reduction have shifted in recent years as critics began to suggest that such reforms may have played a role in rising rates of violent crime observed across the country in the period immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic. While all crime—and violent crime specifically—has decreased in the intervening years since 2020-2021, such

concerns continue to shape national conversations around violent crime and public safety.^[2]

In an attempt to reduce reliance on incarceration without endangering the public, two SJC sites (New Orleans, LA and Lucas County, OH) implemented a range of reforms, including a validated risk assessment (the Public Safety Assessment or PSA), diversion programs, pretrial detention alternatives, and expanded treatment options. This study examined whether the jail reduction strategies implemented in these two SJC sites reduced jail populations without increasing crime or sacrificing community safety.

Research Questions

The study compared trends prior to the implementation of SJC strategies through early and late implementation periods in the two SJC sites. Specifically, we sought to answer the following research questions:

1. **Booking Trends:** Did the types of incidents that led to a jail booking look different over time? Did the profile of booked individuals change over the SJC implementation period?
2. **Crime Rates:** Did overall crime and violent crime rates change over the SJC implementation period?
3. **Recidivism Trends:** Did repeat returns to jail increase or decrease over the SJC implementation period?
4. **Criminal Trajectory:** How did time to a new booking and charging patterns change over the SJC implementation period? Were there identifiable subgroups of individuals based on criminal activity and, if so, are there differences in recidivism for these groups?

Study Design

TABLE 1. SAMPLING TIMEFRAME AND SAMPLE SIZE BY SITE

	N	NOLA 2,660	LUCAS CO. 2,798
Pre-Implementation	2017 n = 892	2015 n = 930	
Hiatus (strategies get up and running; not included in sampling)	2018	2016	
Post-Implementation 1, Early Implementation	2019 n = 873	2017 n = 936	
COVID-19 (not included in sampling)	2020	2020	
Post-Implementation 2, Late Implementation	2021 n = 895	2022 n = 932	

To answer these research questions, we compared official records on jail bookings for a felony or misdemeanor charge in the two sites across three study periods: a pre-implementation period prior to the SJC rollout and two post-implementation periods. This sampling strategy enabled us (1) to allow time for the SJC strategies to be fully implemented before the start of the post-implementation 1 period, (2) to minimize the impact of jail reduction strategies implemented at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic on our findings while still being able (3) to include post-2020 booking trends, and (4) to ensure a minimum of one year of recidivism follow-up for all samples. We selected a random subsample of individuals across the three study periods using 1:1 nearest neighbor matching without replacement to select individuals based on race, age, gender, and prior felony booking in the 2 years prior to the initial booking. The final samples are presented in Table 1.

To understand the impact of SJC reforms in the two study sites, we examined whether justice-involved individuals were booked for a new charge at one and two years after the initial booking (post-implementation 1 and 2 respectively). Analytically, we defined recidivism in several ways.

- If an individual was booked for a new charge (y/n), with breakouts for specific types of charges (i.e., felony, misdemeanor, violent; Chapter 3);
- The number of days that elapsed before individuals had a new booking and if it took longer for individuals to be re-booked following implementation of the SJC strategies (Chapter 4); and
- Any identifiable typologies of system-involved individuals that might inform future interventions (Chapter 5).

Key Takeaways

Jail bookings declined in both sites from the pre- to post-implementation periods.

Overall, findings indicated that bookings following the implementation of SJC strategies involved more serious current charges (i.e., felony and violent charges) as well as a more serious criminal history (i.e., prior felony booking) in both sites (see Table 2).

TABLE 2. CHANGES IN BOOKING TRENDS, PRE- TO POST-IMPLEMENTATION 2

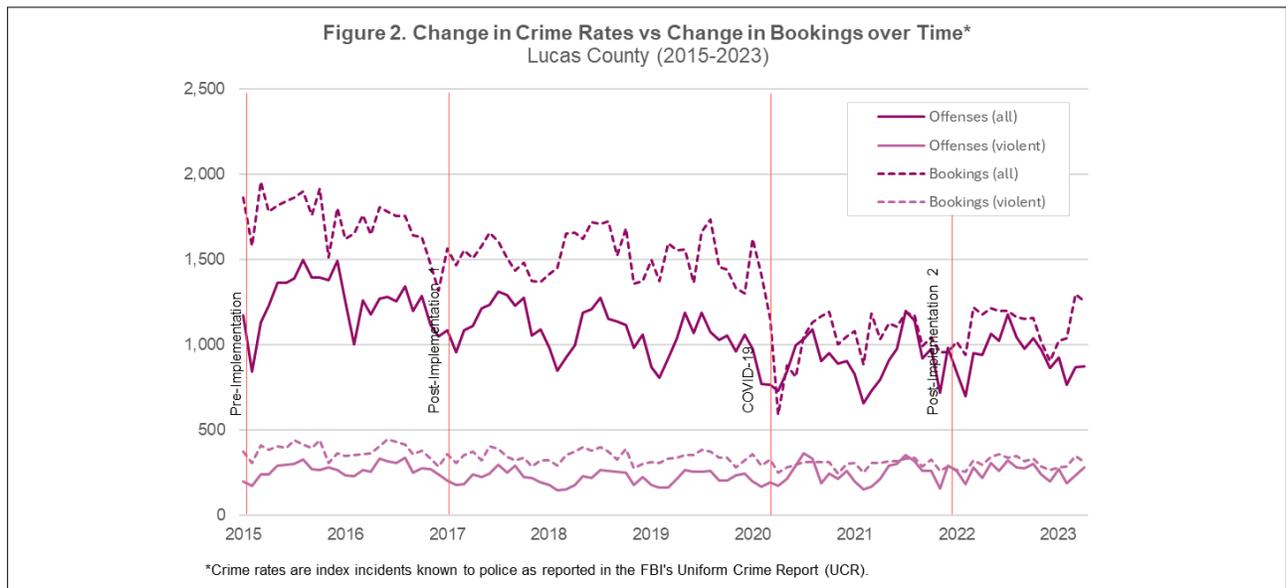
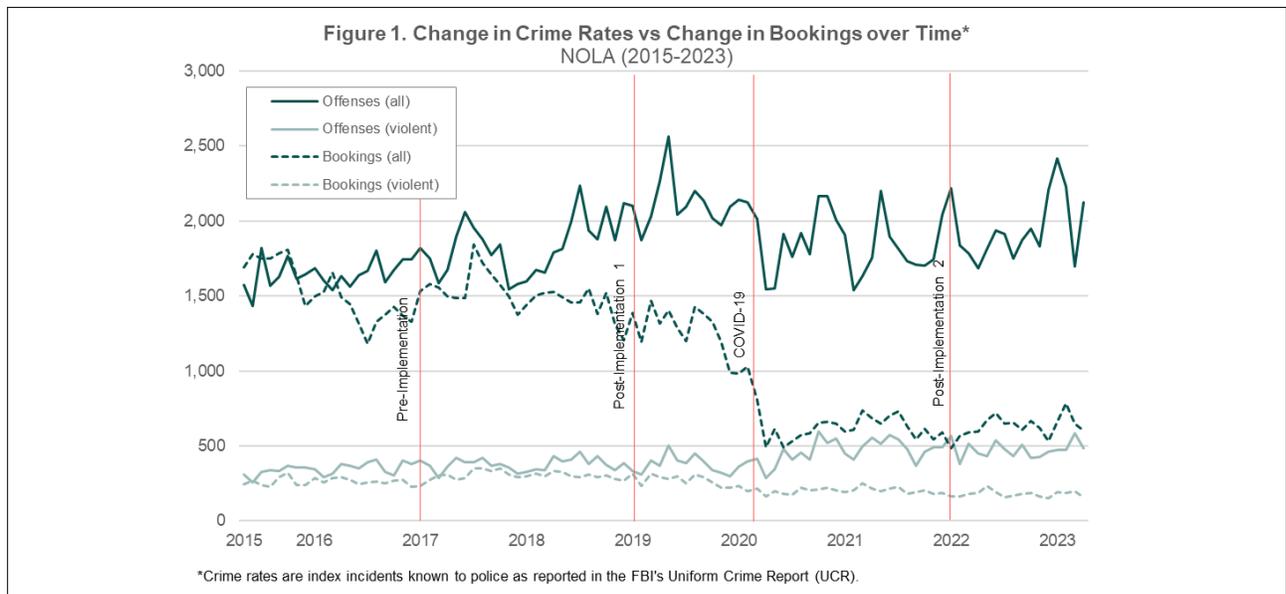
	NOLA	LUCAS CO.
Change in proportion of individuals booked on a felony charge	up 1%	up 7%
Change in proportion of individuals booked on a violent charge	up 12%	up 9%
Change in proportion of individuals booked with a prior felony charge	up 2%	up 1%

THE IMPACT OF JAIL REDUCTION STRATEGIES ON COMMUNITY SAFETY

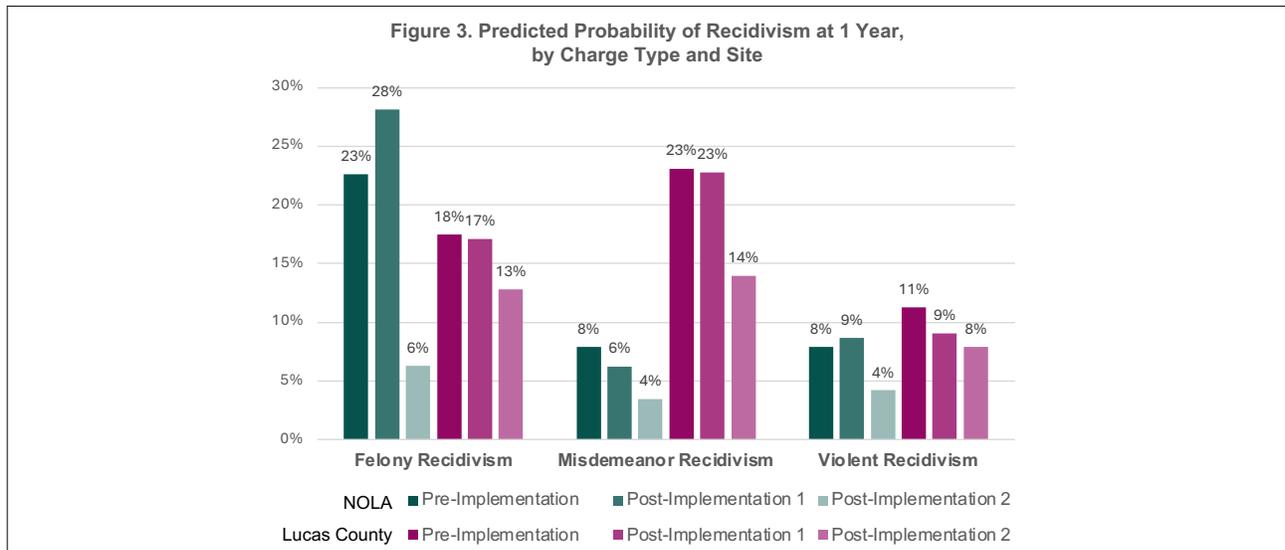
Given that the implementation of a validated risk assessment tool (the PSA) was a key strategy for reducing jail populations in both sites, it follows that individuals with lower-level charges would be the most likely to be diverted from the justice system. That is, because the PSA is meant to identify those with lower risk of recidivism, it makes sense that sites using this tool might be more inclined to forego booking for these lower risk individuals (e.g., those facing nonviolent and misdemeanor charges, those without a history of felonies).

Trends in monthly bookings showed a steady decline throughout the study period.

Declines in bookings were not matched by increases in crime (see Figures 1 and 2). **There were significant racial disparities in monthly bookings.** BIPOC individuals were consistently overrepresented in bookings across the study period in both sites.

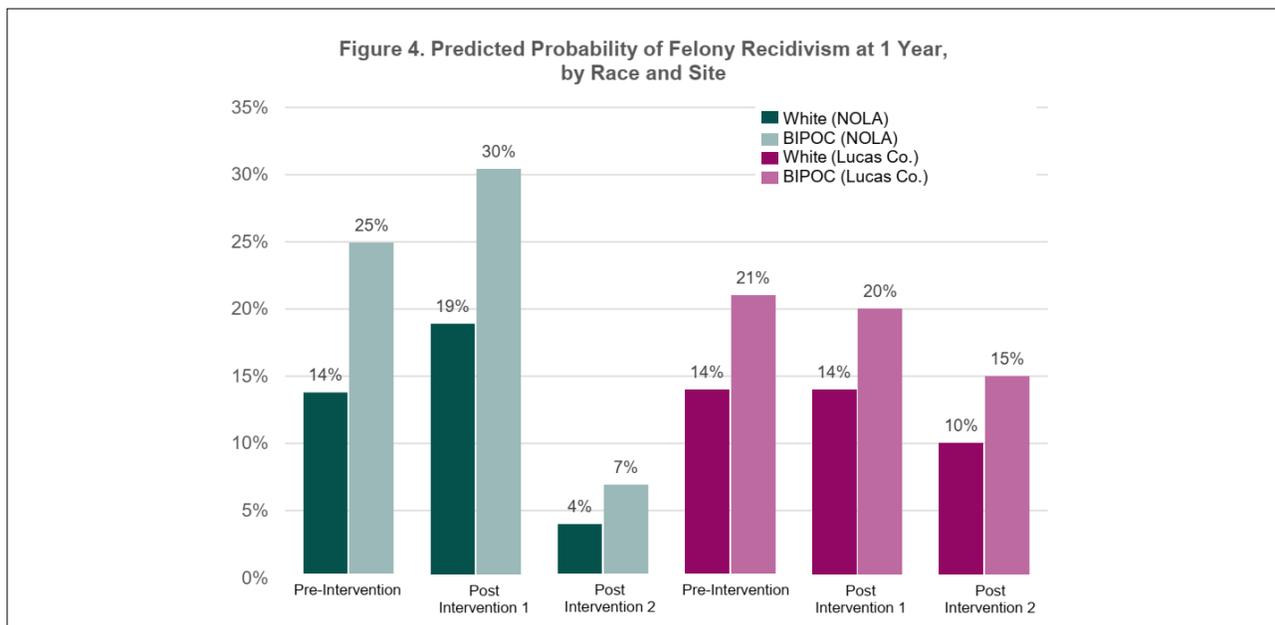


Overall, recidivism fell following implementation of SJC strategies (see Figure 3). In New Orleans, an initial increase in recidivism was followed by declining felony (23% to 6%) and violent recidivism (8% to 4%; misdemeanor recidivism consistently declined). In Lucas County, recidivism was initially stable, but felony (18% to 13%) and misdemeanor (23% to 14%) recidivism declined in the later implementation period (violent recidivism consistently declined, 11% to 8%). **These results suggest that reductions in jail populations in these sites did not compromise community safety.**



Those with prior bookings had greater odds of future bookings. Given the sites’ implementation of the PSA, which includes prior criminal history (convictions) as a risk factor, it is perhaps unsurprising that those with a recent criminal history (booking) are more likely to be booked on future run-ins with law enforcement. It is also worth noting that recidivism is not solely a measure of *behavior*, but a measure of who is more likely to be arrested and booked. However, it is worth noting that those with a history of felony bookings in the two years prior to their initial booking did *not* have greater odds of a new violent incident.

In both sites, **white individuals had significantly lower odds of recidivism than BIPOC individuals.** This trend holds across all three time periods and for new felonies, misdemeanors, and violent offenses. Figure 4 illustrates the disparities in probability of a booking on a new felony charge.



In both sites, the proportion of those spending *zero* days in jail on the initial case increased over the life of the SJC initiative. In terms of the amount of time spent in jail on the initial case, the (small) majority of all samples spent some time—but less than one week—in jail. The percentage of individuals spending no time in jail increased from 24% (pre-implementation) to 35% (post-implementation 2) in NOLA; it increased from 27% to 31% in Lucas County.

Those individuals who spent more time in jail on the initial booking were more likely to have a new booking. While there are likely other considerations at play, it is worth considering that by reducing the time spent in jail, it may be possible to reduce the likelihood of recidivism. In addition, those booked on charges related to substance use are less likely to have a new booking in both sites.

Individuals booked during later reform period had lower risk of recidivism within one year compared to those booked before reforms—that is, there *were* changes in criminal trajectories following SJC strategies. These findings suggest reductions in jail populations did not compromise community safety.

Implications for Practice

In general, our findings suggest that jurisdictions can safely decrease jail populations without undermining community safety. Despite rhetoric linking the criminal justice reforms of recent years to crime spikes—real or imagined—this study found no evidence that the jail reduction reforms adopted in these sites led to increases in violent crime. In fact, the findings show less recidivism in the post-reform periods across all charge levels. The well-established damages created by overreliance on jail—including exposure to violence, trauma, and harm to the

mental health of those detained in jails to financial and structural costs to families and communities—can be minimized by strategies like the ones implemented in these sites without the feared rising crime rates.

Further, these findings have several practical implications for practitioners and jail reform efforts:

- Racial disparities persisted in these sites even as bookings overall declined, indicating general movement to reduce jail populations is not sufficient to reduce racial disparities in those populations. As previous research on SJC strategies has shown, adopting strategies that successfully cut the number of people in jail does not *necessarily* eliminate racial disparities—in some cases, such efforts have even exacerbated disparities.
 - **Implication:** Jurisdictions must intentionally develop strategies targeting these disparities—for example, by using data to identify whether there are specific charge categories that drive disproportionate bookings for Black individuals and developing targeted strategies for those charges.
- The strategies implemented in these sites (including decision making informed by a validated risk assessment tool) reduced the use of jail without endangering public safety. Reducing jail populations and increasing investment in community supports can have lasting and positive impacts on families and communities.
 - **Implication:** A validated risk assessment can support decision makers—judges, prosecutors, community corrections, and others—to make informed decisions about setting bail, conscientious use of detention, and appropriate supervision and service connections. These tools can help jurisdictions prioritize who remains in custody while moving to reduce jail populations overall.
- Shorter stays in jail were linked to lower risk of recidivism.
 - **Implication:** Jurisdictions should limit jail stays where possible—both at the sentencing and pretrial stages.
- Those booked on charges related to substance use (drug charges in NOLA; DUI in Lucas County) had a lower risk of recidivism in both sites. The approaches implemented in these sites may be particularly promising for those with underlying substance use issues.
 - **Implication:** Exploration of the local strategies and resources specific to the needs of these populations may be informative for targeted recidivism reductions in other jurisdictions.

- Those individuals in more “generalist” categories—i.e., those booked on a diverse range of criminal charges at booking—had higher rates of recidivism.
 - **Implication:** This may suggest a need for additional programming to address root causes of criminal behavior. Again, further exploration of the specific strategies and resources implemented in these sites may shed light on areas for improvement in working with those who have more of a generalist charge history.

Limitations and Next Steps

The study period saw overlapping implementation of several jail reduction strategies in both sites—SJC strategies, responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, and unrelated jail reform efforts. Consequently, it is impossible to directly link changes in bookings or criminal activity to any specific SJC strategy. Despite our inability to tease out the specific mechanisms at work, the consistency of the trends across these sites suggest that jail reductions can be accomplished without sacrificing community safety. Future research would benefit from strategy-level data (e.g., PSA scores), longer follow-up periods, and arrest-level data to better isolate the impacts of specific jail reduction strategies.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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[1] E.g., see CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance. 2021. *Jail Decarceration and Public Safety: Preliminary Findings from the Safety and Justice Challenge*. New York, NY: ISLG. Dabruzzo, D. *New Jersey Set Out to Reform Its Cash Bail System. Now, the Results Are In*. Houston, TX: Arnold Ventures. The Philadelphia District Attorney’s Office. 2019. *Prosecutor Led Bail Reform: Year One Transparency Report*. Khan, S., E. West, and S. Rosoff. 2024. *Lowering Jail Populations Safely Before, During, and After COVID-19: Updated Findings on Jail Reform, Violent Crime, and the COVID-19 Pandemic*. New York, NY: ISLG.

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[2] E.g., See the *FBI’s Quarterly Uniform Crime Report (UCR), Q2, January-June 2024*.