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## Crime rates and Alaska criminal justice reform

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*Overview: Definitive conclusions about the impact of SB91 on the rate of property crimes are not possible for a number of reasons, including that 2016 data (the most recent data available) cover less than six months following implementation of the first phase of the law and that the rate of property crime was increasing before the enactment of SB91.*

**A shorter version of this article appeared in the Fall 2017 print edition.**

In July 2016, Governor Bill Walker signed into law Senate Bill 91, a bipartisan effort to rein in the state's growing cost of criminal justice and persistent problem of recidivism. Informed by decades of academic research and implementation of best practices from other states, the law was drafted based on data-driven policy recommendations made by the Alaska Criminal Justice Commission. The law includes comprehensive sentencing and corrections reforms to be implemented over time and evaluated for effectiveness. The goal is to reduce recidivism rates and prison populations and save \$380 million by 2026.

Between 1984 and 2015, Alaska's prison population grew more than 180 percent, from 1,798 to 5,095. From 1995 to 2014, prison costs grew 160 percent, from \$126 million to \$327 million. While the cost of incarcerating individuals continues to increase in Alaska, recidivism rates remain high. Approximately two out of every three individuals incarcerated return to prison within three years.

Reducing recidivism is one among many strategies for reducing overall crime rates.



Public safety is enhanced and criminal justice costs reduced when an individual does not reoffend.

Decades of research show that longer prison terms do not reduce crime rates or recidivism. Research also shows that non-custodial sanctions are often equally effective — sometimes more effective — at reducing recidivism than incarceration. Pro-

**Reducing recidivism is one among many strategies for reducing overall crime rates.**

visions of SB91 include, but are not limited to, a focus on using prison beds for serious and violent offenders and diverting nonviolent misdemeanor offenders to alternatives; revising penalties to focus on the most severe punishments for higher level offenders; strengthening probation and parole supervision, and emphasizing swift, certain and proportional incentives to comply.

Because SB91 has been in effect for a little more than a year, important provisions,

including pretrial practices and risk assessments have not yet been implemented. What has changed are sentencing guidelines for many offenses, including the reduction of sentences for minor misdemeanors and reduction of the presumptive sentencing range for non-sex felony offenses. The threshold for felony theft increased from \$750 to \$1,000. For theft under \$250, the use of incarceration has been eliminated for the first two offenses, though it is still a crime and a person convicted will have a misdemeanor on their record. Sentences for the third and subsequent offenses are limited to five days suspended and six months of probation. Restitution and a fine are also authorized sanctions.

### ► Policy & practice changes and crime rates

The question that some people are asking is whether changes under SB91 are having an impact on current crime rates.

Alaska's criminal justice reform efforts are aimed at reducing recidivism, one of many strategies for reducing crime. When

passed, the goal of SB91 was to reduce the prison population and enhance public safety through reduced recidivism. Because of the short time during which SB91 has been in effect, it is too early to tell whether it is having its intended effect. This also makes it difficult to assess its impact on crime.

To understand the effects of the policy and practice changes spurred by passage of SB91, it is necessary to take into consideration a number of factors.

**Crime is contextual.** There are different policy effects in different locations and jurisdictions. Crime in Anchorage is different from crime in Juneau and crime in Bethel is different from crime in Petersburg.

**Causes of crime are complex.** It is impossible to reduce crime to a single factor; it has multiple variables and is influenced by many factors.

**Crime is more easily understandable taking the long view.** Historical trends, highs and lows, are more easily distinguished when looking at crime over time.

► **Has SB91 affected Anchorage crime rates?**

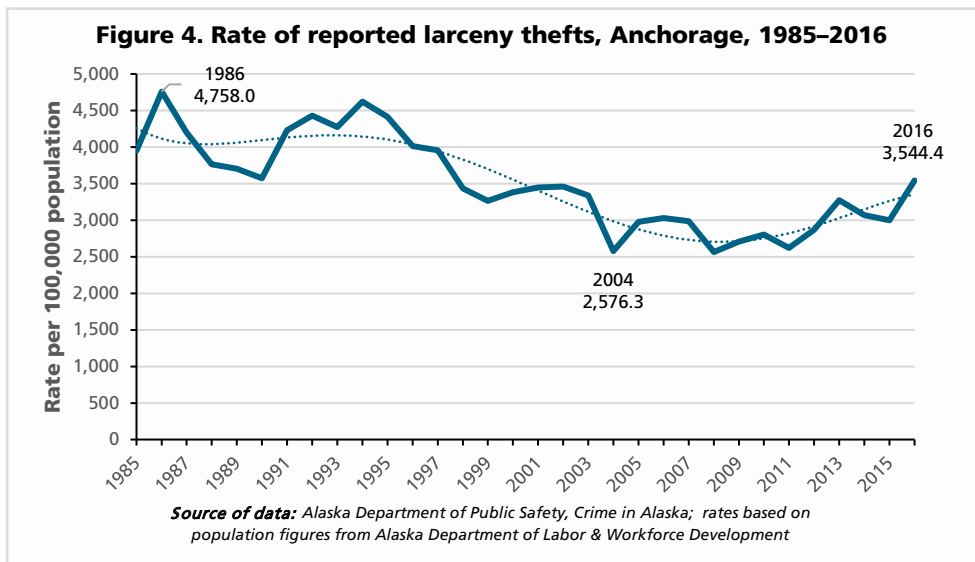
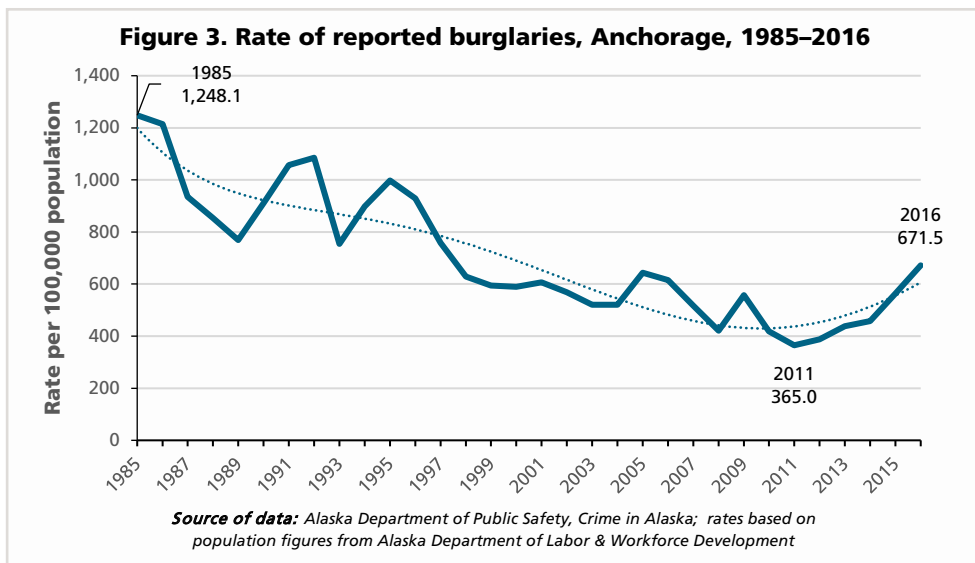
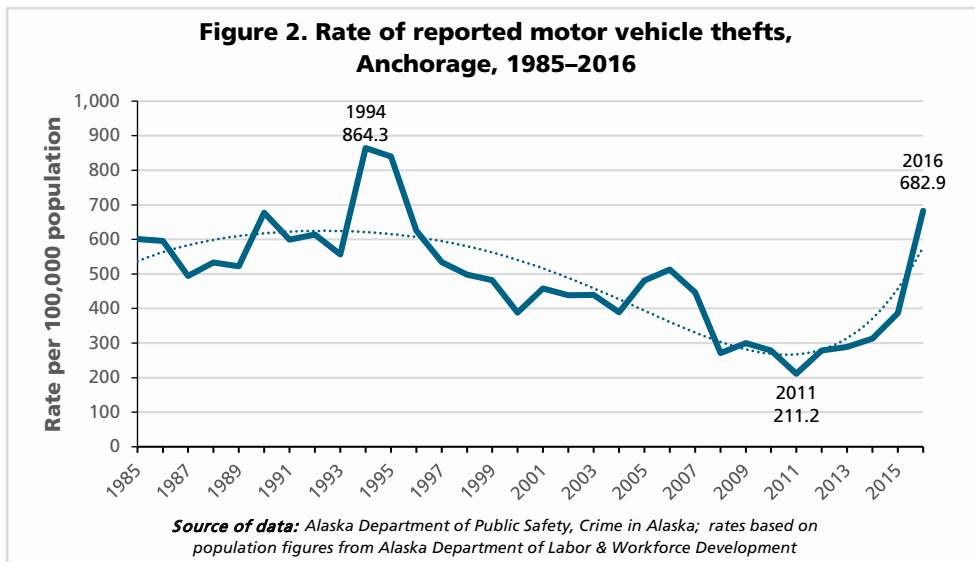
Looking at historical crime rates in Anchorage from 1985–2016 for shoplifting, burglaries, motor vehicle thefts, and larceny thefts, 2016 rates are neither the highest nor lowest over the last 30 years.

Shoplifting incidents reported to the police spiked in 1986 to a rate of 1,438.4 per 100,000 population (3,347 reports) and dropped to a low in 2004 of 489.0 (1,354 reports). In 2016, Anchorage had a rate of 678.8 shoplifting reports per 100,000 (2,030 reports), trending downward since 2013 (Figure 1).

Motor vehicle thefts reported to the police peaked in 1994 at a rate of 864.3 per 100,000 and fell to a low of 211.2 in 2011. Rates have gone up since 2011 to 682.9 in 2016 (Figure 2).

Burglaries reported to the police between 1985–2016 show a high in 1985 of 1,248.1 per 100,000, dropping to a low of 365.0 per 100,000 in 2011. Rates have climbed since 2011. In 2016, the rate of burglaries reported reached 671.5 per 100,000 (Figure 3).

Larceny thefts reported to the police reached a low of 2,576.3 per 100,000 in



2004, down from a high of 4,758.0 in 1986. Since 2004, thefts have gradually increased to 3,544.4 in 2016. The 2016 rate is still more than 1,000 less than the highest rate during this period. (Figure 4).

During the 30 years for which these rates have been calculated, Anchorage has experienced a variety of economic highs and lows, as well as staffing and policy changes in the justice system, which includes police, courts,

and corrections. It is impossible to assess the impact of any single variable on the crime rate at any given time.

Definitive conclusions about the impact of SB91 on current Anchorage property crime rates are not possible given that 2016 data (the most recent data available) cover less

than six months following the implementation of the first phase of the law. What the data presented do show is that rate of property crime was increasing for years prior to the passage of SB91.

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*Statistical Analysis Center and Alaska Justice Information Center (AJiC). In October, AJiC released, "Alaska Results First Initiative: Adult Criminal Justice Program Benefit Cost Analysis." (See the AJiC home page at [www.uaa.alaska.edu/lajic](http://www.uaa.alaska.edu/lajic).) Pamela Cravez is editor of the Alaska Justice Forum.*