

# MERCED SUN-STAR

MAY 25, 2015

## Auto theft spikes in Merced and statewide after AB 109, report says



Vehicle thefts in Merced spiked significantly – 39 percent in 2012 – a year after prison realignment was implemented, the highest total number of reported car thefts in the city over the last seven years. | Bea Ahbeck Casson Merced Sun-Star file

By Rob Parsons

A new study says vehicle thefts continue to rise California since a prison policy change in 2011 forced many local jails to release more inmates early.

The Public Policy Institute of California last week said sending low-level felons to county jails instead of state prisons created a 17 percent increase in automobile thefts in 2013.

That's similar to the spike reported in 2012.

The increase came on the heels of the 2011 Public Safety Realignment Act, commonly referred to as AB 109. The law shifted responsibility for less serious offenders from the state to the counties to help solve the state's prison overpopulation problem.

"Violent crime rates remain unaffected by realignment, and although California's property crime rate decreased in 2013, it did not drop more than in comparable states – so the auto theft gap that opened up in 2012 has not closed," the report's summary states.

Vehicle thefts in the city of Merced spiked significantly – 39 percent in 2012 – a year after realignment was implemented, the highest total number of reported car thefts in the city over the last seven years.

Those figures have since declined slightly over the last two years, but total reports remain higher than before realignment went into effect, according to police department data.

Merced County District Attorney Larry Morse II said realignment weakened the discretion local authorities have when dealing with certain crimes, including auto theft.

"Typically, on a first offense, we would've kept (the defendant) local and not sought prison time, but with someone with a history – a career thief who we know will steal again – we would've been able to seek a prison term," Morse said.

Merced police Chief Norman Andrade did not return phone calls seeking comment.

Both Morse and Merced County Sheriff Vern Warnke said the study's auto theft findings were predictable.

"It doesn't surprise me at all," Warnke said. "It's the career criminals taking advantage of these new laws."

Warnke previously confirmed that Merced County saw significant increases in its daily jail populations, which forced local authorities to release more inmates early.

Merced was one of 26 counties in the state that reported increasing the number of early releases as a direct result of realignment, according to a report this year from the California State Auditor's Office.

Jail populations statewide continued to increase in 2013 but at a much slower rate, according the analysis released last week.

*Rob Parsons: (209) 385-2482*

*Information from the Associated Press was used in this article.*