

Decarceration and Public Safety in Washington State

The period from the 1980's through the 2010's is often described as the era of mass incarceration in the United States. Prison populations expanded for decades, driven less by short term swings in crime and more by policy choices that shaped who entered custody and how long people stayed (Blumstein, 2020). This shift was reflected in the accumulation of mandatory terms, sentence enhancements, returns to custody for supervision violations, and limited avenues for early release (Zimring, 2020).

Recently, a new era of *decarceration* has gained momentum for several reasons. Crowding strained facilities and budgets. Disparities by race and neighborhood concentrated the harms of incarceration. Further, evidence has identified that, beyond a certain level, more incarceration yields diminishing benefits for public safety, while investments in treatment, housing, employment, and community supervision can reduce recidivism at lower cost (Clear, 2009; Lee & Wildeman, 2021).

Washington entered this period with one of the sharpest prison growth trajectories in the nation. From 1980 to 2016 the state prison population rose by 332%, and from 2010 to 2018 most prisons were at or above design capacity (Washington Office of Financial Management, 2022). The population peaked in June 2018 at more than 18,000 people. Growth reflected longer sentences and fewer releases even as annual admissions decreased (ACLU, 2019).

Beginning in 2020, a mix of external shocks and state responses reshaped Washington's system. COVID-19 slowed courts and reduced admissions. In 2021, the State v. Blake decision invalidated felony drug possession and triggered releases and resentencing. Lawmakers then adopted a temporary statute that

Research Summary

Decarceration is a national effort to shrink prison populations while preserving public safety. Since 2018, Washington advanced judicial, legislative, and administrative reforms that lowered imprisonment without sustained increases in recidivism or technical violations. Using monthly administrative data and interrupted time series analyses, this study estimates the effects of four milestones: 1) COVID-19 in March 2020, 2) State v. Blake in February 2021, 3) the temporary statute followed by the permanent Blake Fix in August 2023, and 4) the statewide rollout of iCoach in June 2023. Admissions fell sharply at COVID-19, the Blake ruling had limited direct effects, the Blake Fix was followed by modest upward trends in admissions, and iCoach coincided with immediate declines and a sustained drop in technical violations. Overall, decarceration was achieved when paired with credible community supervision and reentry capacity.

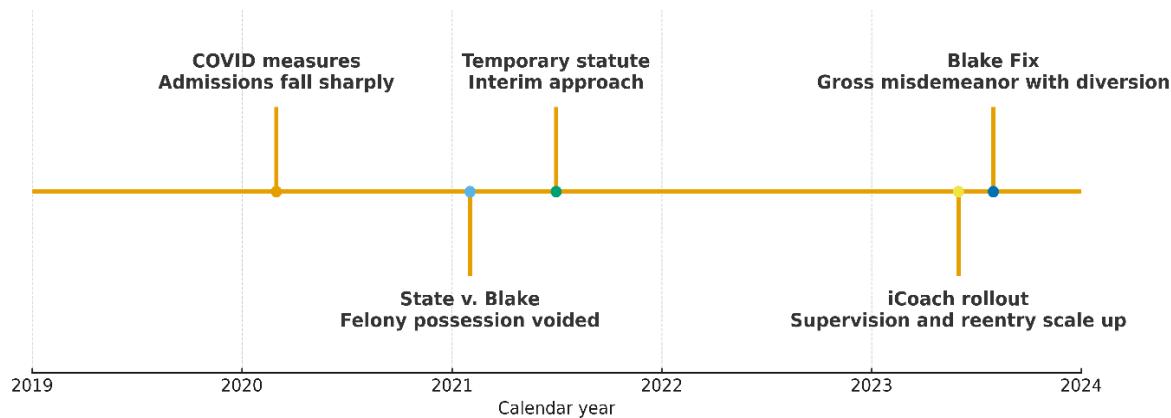
By the end of the period, re-admissions, first admissions, and violations were about 75%, 90%, and 45% lower respectively, than projected levels had no policy changes occurred. COVID-19 produced large immediate drops across outcomes, followed by a temporary rise in re-admissions as systems adjusted. Overall, the Blake decision reduced felony drug enforcement, yet the changes that followed did not produce a measurable shift in returns to prison. The Washington decarceration experience was a process, rather than a single act, and resulted in a smaller prison population with no sustained rise in recidivism or technical violations.

reclassified possession and increased diversion. Finally, the Department of Corrections (DOC) expanded community supervision and reentry capacity in 2023 (Strange & Pevey, 2023).

Policy timeline

Washington's recent policy sequence (see Figure 1) began with COVID-19 emergency measures in March 2020 that slowed court processing and reduced admissions (Collins, 2022). In February 2021 the *State v. Blake* decision invalidated the state's felony drug possession statute, resulting in the immediate release of 1,336 people from jails and prisons statewide and required revisiting more than 10,000 sentences among those under DOC supervision (Collins, 2023). A temporary statute (Blake Fix) was passed in July 2021 that lowered the severity of drug possession charges and increased diversion efforts (Inslee, 2023).¹

Figure 1. Washington State Decarceration Milestones



In June 2023 the DOC completed a statewide rollout of iCoach, a supervision and reentry model that emphasizes structured case planning, staff training, graduated responses in the community, and reintegration support prior to, and post-release. iCoach represents a significant investment in reintegration services as planning and funding began in 2018, five years prior to the program being fully implemented (Strange & Pevey, 2023).

Current study

It is important to understand not only whether the prison population declined but also how changes affected correctional and community outcomes. Therefore, we assessed whether Washington's sequences of decarceration altered the correctional pathways that drive population size and composition, namely 1) re-admissions for a new offense, 2) first admissions, and 3) technical violations (TVs) while on supervision. We estimated both the immediate population change at each milestone and the change in the monthly trend that followed. Different policy changes were examined to identify their separate impacts for the three groups. Specifically, we compared outcomes across a) emergency period during COVID-19, b) judicial change with *State v. Blake*, and c) the carefully formulated implementation of iCoach. Distinguishing among these types clarifies what changes caused the most meaningful reductions in prison size without compromising public safety.

Data and methods

We gathered administrative data from Washington State Department of Corrections to create monthly counts of re-

admissions, first admissions, and technical violations from January 2018 through August 2023. Controlling for average daily population, we conducted an interrupted time series, which compares post intervention outcomes to their own pre-intervention trends, separates immediate shifts from sustained changes in outcomes, and accommodates multiple policy events while accounting for seasonal and other variations.

¹ This statute was passed into permanent law in August 2023.

Key findings

For each policy time-period, we assess whether there were changes in admissions/TVs immediately following the onset of the interruption (level change), and whether there was sustained month-by-month change (trend change). Policies can cause an immediate change that eventually fades or reverses, however, some changes start small and build over time. Therefore, we report a slope value (b); when reporting an outcome change, the slope reflects the change in number of people in the month of the interruption. When the slope is reported for a trend change, it represents the average difference in the number of people each month. We also indicate if an effect is significant, which is indicated by a probability (p value) of less than 0.05. This signals that the identified change is due to the policy under examination rather than random chance.

1. COVID produced immediate declines, followed by a rebound in readmissions

COVID-19 triggered large immediate drops in both admission types and TVs, reflecting expedited releases, diversion, and slowed court processing. After the initial drop, re-admissions rose month to month at a rate of roughly 10 additional admissions per month ($b = 10.2$; $p < .01$), while first admissions and TVs showed no sustained change.

2. The Blake decision did not significantly increase re-admissions or first admissions

The Blake decision did not significantly alter re-admissions or first admissions. TVs showed a nearly statistically significant temporary dip ($b = -112.9$; $p < .06$) that did not persist, consistent with prior work suggesting that a sharp increase in releases can overburden community resources, resulting in fewer violations being detected while the system adjusts.

3. The Blake Fix coincided with modest upward trends in both admissions streams

Figure 2: Re-admission Trend

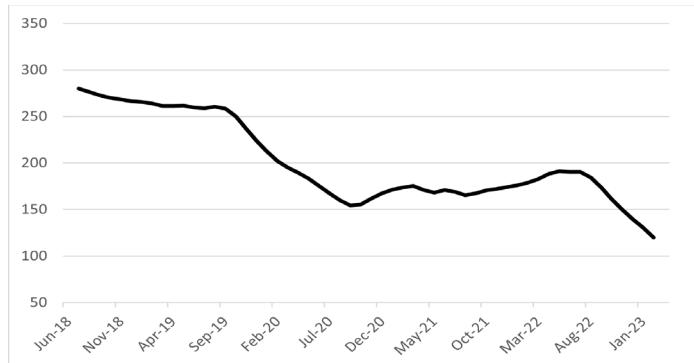


Figure 3: First Admission Trend

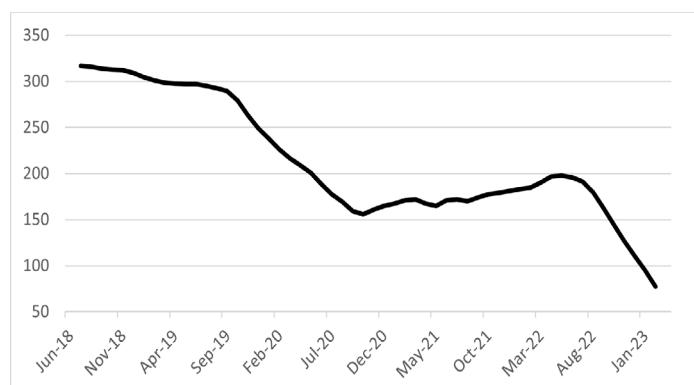
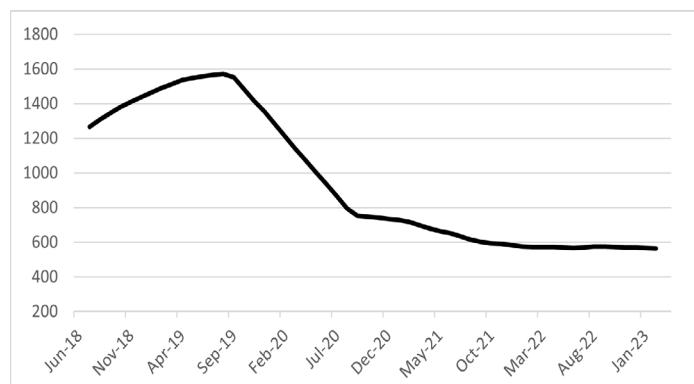


Figure 4: Technical Violations Trend



Following the Blake Fix, the trend in re-admissions increased by about three admissions per month ($b=3.2$; $p<.01$) and the trend in first admissions increased by a similar amount ($b=2.8$; $p<.01$). Notably, while re-admissions and first admissions did increase due to reinstating the drug possession statute, the upward trend in admissions is very small relative to the number of individuals released following the Blake Decision, reflecting the lower

severity of drug possession charges and increased diversion efforts.

4. iCoach corresponded to immediate declines and a sustained improvement in supervision outcomes

At the start of the iCoach implementation period, re-admissions ($b = -34.4$; $p < .05$) and first admissions ($b = -38.6$; $p < .05$) fell immediately and TVs began a sustained downward trend ($b = 13.0$; $p < .05$). Notably, re-admissions began to trend downward, although the decrease did not reach statistical significance, which, in part, is due to the lack of observation period following iCoach implementation.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings show that a state can reduce prison populations while holding public safety steady. However, this positive effect is more likely when legal reform is paired with investment in community reintegration. The early pandemic period delivered the largest and most immediate reductions in admissions and violations as courts slowed, and releases accelerated. Yet, while modest, the rebound in re-admissions that followed underscores a central lesson. Rapid population change without matching reentry services and supervision bandwidth can strain release and community resources, and manifest as increased returns to custody even while overall admissions remain lower.

The Blake decision greatly narrowed the footprint of felony drug enforcement but ***did not produce a measurable shift in returns to prison of first-time admissions into prison.*** That pattern is consistent with a change in offense classification that altered the mix of cases entering the system while leaving the supervision environment largely unchanged. In other words, evidence presented here suggests that less severe enforcement of drug possession does not erode public safety.

The Blake Fix illustrates that point. Reintroducing a lower-level drug statute with mandated diversion created slight upward pressure on both first admissions and re-admissions, likely through renewed sanctioning for people with repeated possession convictions. Diversion remains a valuable route away from custody, yet the overall population effect depends on who is diverted, who is sanctioned, and how long people stay when they are incarcerated.

The iCoach rollout shows that administrative capacity is a powerful policy lever. A clear management model, organized case planning, and investment in robust staff training and reintegration support coincided with immediate decreases in admissions and a sustained decline in technical violations. Simply, when officers and service partners have the time, tools, and options to stabilize people in the community, fewer people cycled back to prison for either new crimes or supervision missteps.

Sequencing also matters. The COVID-19 shock arrived before community capacity was in place, and the system absorbed a difficult transition period. Later, as iCoach matured and diversion pathways were clearer, the results stabilized. Future reforms should consider staging legal and administrative changes in a way that avoids overwhelming courts, jails, or community providers. In practice that means building supervision and treatment access before, or alongside, release activity and coordinating with prosecutors, public defenders, and the courts to prevent bottlenecks.

Overall, Washington's experience shows that decarceration is a process, rather than a single act. Emergency release and court slowdowns drove the first large shift, a judicial decision reset drug enforcement, the legislature reestablished a lower-level drug statute with diversion, and corrections invested in supervision and reentry capacity. The net result was a smaller prison population with no sustained rise in recidivism or violations, providing a practical route for other states seeking correctional reform.

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