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The Rise of Progressive Prosecutors in the United States: Politics, Prospects, and Perils

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Keywords

progressive prosecutors, reformist prosecutors, criminal justice reform, courts, sentencing

Abstract

Throughout much of the United States, progressive chief prosecutors (PCPs) have campaigned for office by pledging to end mass incarceration and reduce disparities therein. In this review, we summarize the progressive prosecution movement and the evidence base concerning PCPs. We attribute the rising number of PCPs to a disjuncture between the criminal justice policy preferences of state-level policymakers and voters. Although voters, especially in urban areas, prefer reforms aimed at reducing excessive punitiveness and increasing fairness, state-level policymakers have been reluctant to enact such reforms. PCPs bridge this gap by using their authority to implement local reforms without altering state laws. We detail the number of PCPs leading prosecution in urban counties, examine their characteristics, discuss the controversies surrounding PCPs, and critically review the emerging body of evidence concerning the influence of PCPs on sanctioning and public safety.