



Assessing the Association between Drug Decriminalization and Jail Admissions in Washington State, 2020-2022



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INTRODUCTION

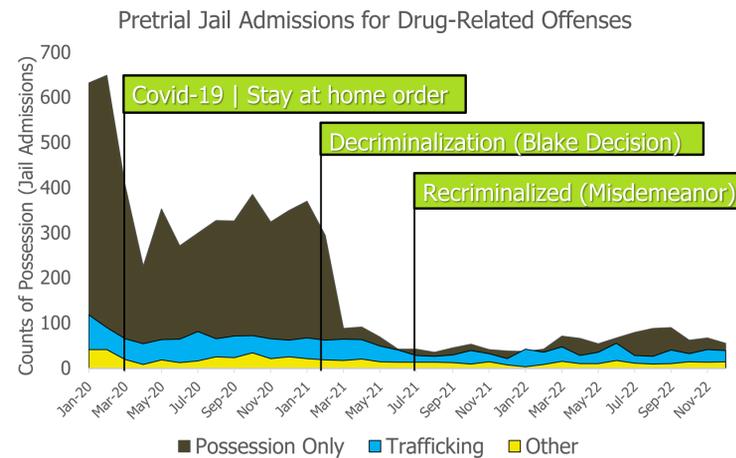
- US drug policy has evolved significantly, with states and cities shifting from the war on drugs to decriminalization, and regulation of certain drugs like cannabis and psilocybin mushrooms.
- In February 2021, the Washington State Supreme Court declared the state's longstanding drug possession statute unconstitutional, leading to several months when small quantities of drugs were decriminalized.
- Later, drug possession was reclassified as a misdemeanor (July 2021), gross misdemeanor (July 2023).
- We examined incarceration length, racial disparities, and urban-rural differences before and after decriminalization.
- We contribute evidence-based insights on drug policy reform.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What is the effect of drug decriminalization on jail admissions in Washington State?

Hypotheses:

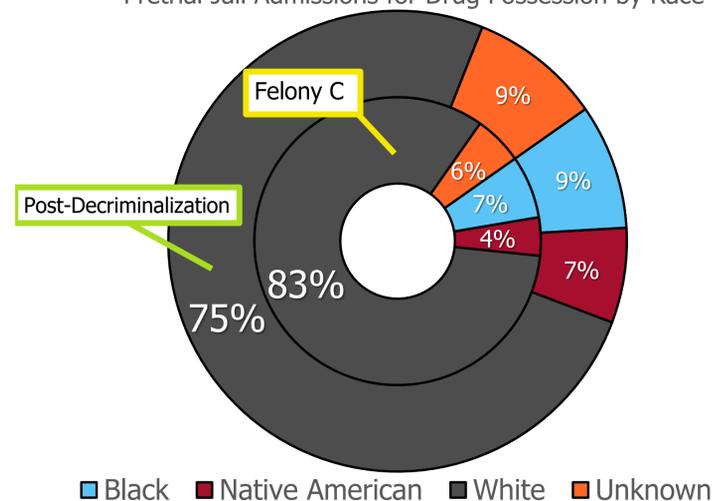
- Post-decriminalization, fewer individuals are booked pretrial.
- Post-decriminalization, individuals stay fewer days.
- Black and Native American individuals experience longer incarceration stays than white individuals.
- Compared to urban areas, in rural areas, individuals experience longer incarceration stays.



METHODOLOGY

Data	Administrative records on jail pretrial bookings and releases, provided by the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs (WASPC)
Years	2020-2022
Sample	All 39 counties, excludes Seattle Police Department
Dep. Var(s)	Monthly counts of admissions, (avg.) length of stay
Ind. Var(s)	Legal Status of Drugs: Felony C, Post-Decriminalization Metro Status: Urban, Rural (USDA RUCC codes)
Ctl. Var(s)	Sex: Female, Male Race: Black, Latine/x, White, Other
Analyses	Descriptive: Frequencies, Cross-tabulations, and z-tests for detecting differences across legal status Linear regression: Quantifies the relationship between a continuous outcome and multiple predictor variables.

Pretrial Jail Admissions for Drug Possession by Race



RESULTS:

JAIL ADMISSIONS

- Pre-decriminalization, 9% of total jail bookings were for drug possession.
- Post-decriminalization, there was a substantial drop in jail bookings for drug possession, making up just 1 percent of the total.
- Post-decriminalization, the sex composition of jail admissions changed little.

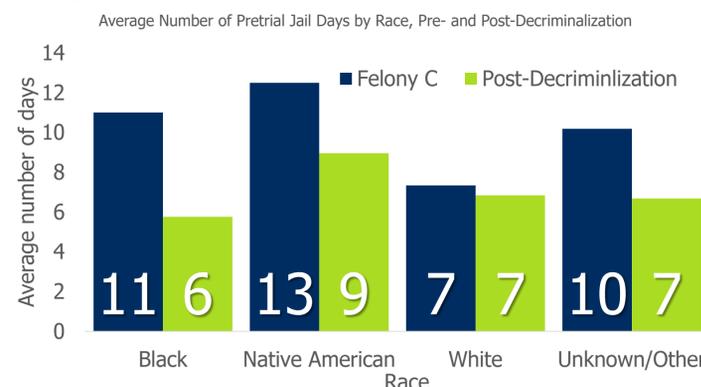
LENGTH OF PRETRIAL INCARCERATION

- Post-decriminalization: Average pretrial length of stay reduced by one day.
- Race, metro status, and gender were more strongly associated with pretrial incarceration length than the legal status of drugs.



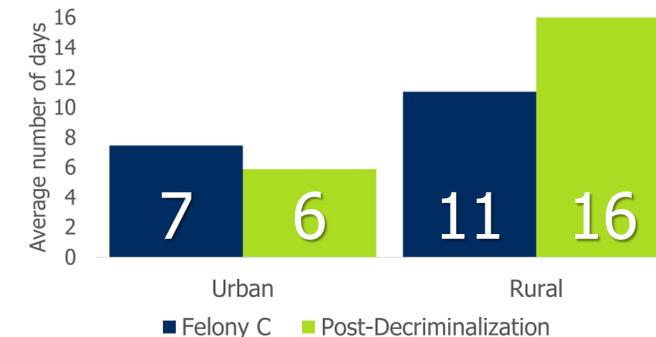
RACE BASED OUTCOMES

- Post-decriminalization, the proportion of white individuals booked into jail decreased, while the proportion of Black and Native American individuals increased.
- Following decriminalization, there was a reduction in average number of days incarcerated for all racial groups, less so for whites.



RURAL AND URBAN COUNTIES

- Overall trends in pretrial jail admissions for drug possession were similar across rural and urban counties during the study period.
- However, despite the parallel trends in admission rates, rural counties saw individuals being incarcerated for longer periods pretrial compared to urban counties, a gap that widened after decriminalization.



DISCUSSION

- The Washington State Supreme Court's Blake Decision, along with subsequent legislative responses, reflects evolving drug regulations in the U.S.
- Post-decriminalization, monthly bookings for drug possession dropped by 76%.
- Despite fewer bookings, the average length of pretrial incarceration changed minimally.
- Before decriminalization, Black and Native American individuals experienced longer pretrial incarceration compared to whites; this disparity reduced after decriminalization.
- Post-decriminalization, the length of stay for pretrial incarceration decreased in urban counties but increased in rural counties.
- Future research could explore differences in case processing and release practices across counties.

REFERENCES

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