

Editorial: Adding jail space should be last resort

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[California](#) counties have a green light to decide how they will spend new money from the state for "realignment." Starting this month, individuals convicted of low-level felony offenses will be sentenced to the counties, instead of to state prison.

That puts pressure on counties to re-examine how they handle two very different populations:

- Those who have been arrested and accused of a crime, but are awaiting trial.

The aim should be to make sure defendants show up for trial and don't pose a threat of new crime during the period between arrest and trial. The [U.S. Supreme Court](#), in an opinion written by law-and-order conservative Justice [William Rehnquist](#), has ruled that pretrial detention in jail should be a "carefully limited exception."

- Those who pleaded guilty to or have been convicted of a crime.

The aim should be punishment and rehabilitation, so that when offenders return to the community after serving a sentence they do not commit new crimes.

Unfortunately, our [county jails](#) have become filled disproportionately with people awaiting trial – two-thirds of the current jail population. With realignment, counties should be figuring out how to free up jail space for sentenced offenders.

Toward that end, every county supervisor in [California](#) should read "[Jail Population Management](#): Elected County Official's Guide to [Pretrial Services](#)" by the National Association of Counties., available at <http://calrealignment.org/about-us/september-21st-conference>.

This piece – showing how counties can reduce their pretrial jail populations significantly through screening and supervision in the community – was part of a Sept. 21 conference in [Sacramento](#) that highlighted promising programs and strategies for realignment.

To shift direction away from simply expanding jail space – costing \$100 a day vs. about \$2.50 a day for pretrial screening and supervision – it will be up to elected [county supervisors](#) to show leadership.

[Santa Clara County](#), for example, is not proposing to spend any of the new state money for more jail beds. [Yolo County](#) is proposing to spend 30 percent of its allotment for more jail beds.

In contrast, a divided Sacramento County panel is asking county supervisors to spend a whopping 49 percent of the state allotment to add 275 more jail beds. Supervisors should send this back to the committee to determine if this is really necessary or could be avoided with better management of existing jail capacity.

The upshot is that counties should not reflexively rush to expand jail space. Realignment should provide the impetus to try more promising strategies first – and add jail beds only as absolutely necessary in the future.

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