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From the Los Angeles Times

Drug Treatment Program Lowers Jail Population

Taxpayers are saving hundreds of millions of dollars because of Prop. 36's success, study says.

By J. Michael Kennedy

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The state's 6-year-old program that mandates treatment instead of prison sentences for drug offenders is dramatically decreasing California's jail population and saving taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars, according to a study released Wednesday.

The study, prepared by the left-leaning Justice Policy Institute in Washington, echoes another report released by UCLA earlier this month that also touted huge taxpayer savings through doing away with prison sentences in favor of treatment. That report said the program, which was passed by voters in 2000 as Proposition 36, saved California \$173 million in its first year and \$2.50 for every dollar invested since then.

The report by the Justice Policy Institute, which seeks alternatives to incarceration, said the rate of imprisonment for drug possession offenses has decreased by more than 34%. It also said that dire predictions of a rise in violent crime with the passage of Proposition 36 were unfounded.

"It really helps to put a context to the debate," said Jason Ziedenberg, the executive director of the Justice Policy Institute. "I think people need to understand how many people were in prison in 2000 as opposed to how many there are today and that there has been progress."

The release of the two reports comes at a critical juncture for supporters who contend that the \$120 million earmarked for Proposition 36 by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger when funding runs out this summer is not adequate.

They contend that, because of inflation and an increase in costs for services, the money does not stretch far enough.

"It really needs to be at \$209 million just to be bare-bones adequate," said Margaret Dooley, statewide coordinator with the Drug Policy Alliance, which is seeking an increase in funding for the program. She said she and others would descend on the capital later this month to drum up support for the additional funding, which she believed would be forthcoming because lawmakers would be unable to point to a downside.

She also said she was confident of support from the more than 60,000 people arrested but kept out of prisons and jails because of Proposition 36.

Scott Ehlers, a coauthor of the Justice Policy Institute report, said he and others believe that the next goal should be to expand the reach of Proposition 36 to include those arrested for nonviolent crimes related to drug abuse — such as theft to purchase drugs.

He also said he did not anticipate any calls for major trims in the program.

"I don't see anyone calling for a rollback by any means because I think the treatment is more cost-effective than sending people to prison," he said.

Among other findings of the report are that spending on drug treatment in the state since 2000 has doubled, and that there has been a larger increase in drug treatment clients here than in the rest of the country. Also, the California prison population of drug offenders has been reduced from 27% to 21%, close to the national average.

Ziedenisberg said the reason the Justice Policy Institute focused on California — as it does in many of its studies — is that "12% of the prison population is locked up there."

He also said lawmakers will have to face the question whether they want to pay now for expanded drug treatment or later for additional prison facilities to handle the overrun.

"The main thing is for more money to be put in," he said. "The thing we hear from people in California is that this is a good start."

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