



PRESS RELEASE

Contact Information:

Caitlin Kizielewicz

412-554-0074 | caitlin@asc41.org

**In Two U.S. State Prosecutors' Offices, Progressive Prosecutors' Case Management
Resulted in Less Severe Outcomes for Defendants
*Differences Were Based on Communities, Office Size***

The criminal justice system in the United States is known for its broad scope and its disproportionate impact on Black and Hispanic communities. Advocates of the progressive prosecution movement place prosecutors—key drivers of the scale of criminal punishment—at the center of criminal justice reform, seeking to capitalize on lead prosecutors' discretion and power with the goal of ending mass incarceration and promoting racial justice.

In a new study, researchers examined how charging and plea-bargaining practices as well as racial and ethnic disparities in two jurisdictions changed when progressive prosecutors replaced more traditional administrations. They found that progressive prosecutors handled cases in ways that resulted in less severe outcomes for all defendants, with differences based on the communities in which the courts operated and the size of the offices.

The study, by researchers at Indiana University (IU) Bloomington and the University of California (UC) Irvine, appears in a special issue of *Criminology & Public Policy*, a publication of the American Society of Criminology, focused on prosecutors and prosecutorial decision making.

“Our findings show how progressive prosecution unfolds in very localized ways and how organizational factors shape how reform is carried out,” says Rachel Bowman, assistant professor of criminology and criminal justice at IU Bloomington, who led the study. “Our study considered how differences in organizational context, leadership style, and the role of supervisors in translating reform priorities explain variation in outcomes.”

Using data collected as part of the Local Prosecution Reform project, which ran from 2022 to 2025, researchers drew on case-processing records from two state prosecutors' offices in two U.S. states. They supplemented these data with interviews with prosecutors, which highlighted differences in how prosecutors perceived their role in addressing racial disparities as well as jurisdictional differences in how lead prosecutors' reform priorities were communicated and implemented.

Both offices were led by prosecutors who ran on progressive prosecution platforms and replaced more traditional prosecutors. Although the platforms were similar, the communities differed: One had more than a million residents, was majority-White with a large Hispanic/Latino population, and had a violent crime rate well above the national average and median household income below the national average; the other was also majority-White but was smaller, and had a violent crime rate below the national average and a median household income above the national average.

Prosecutors in both jurisdictions made case-processing decisions that led to less severe outcomes: Case dismissals and felony downgrades were more common and plea offers were more generous than under the prior administration, the study found. But the magnitude of these changes differed between the two offices, with more notable changes to charging and plea-

bargaining practices in the smaller office.

The reduction in punitiveness applied evenly across racial and ethnic groups. However, because prosecutors inherit racial and ethnic disparities in their caseloads, so-called race-neutral reforms may be insufficient to address inequality meaningfully, according to the authors. Progressive prosecutors seeking to promote racial justice may need to pair general reductions in punitiveness with more proactive, race-conscious strategies to correct for injustices they inherit in their caseload and closely monitor how reform priorities are communicated and implemented, they suggest.

Among the study's limitations, the authors note that the COVID-19 pandemic might have affected both the increased likelihood of cases being declined or dismissed and the rise in felony downgrades in both jurisdictions. In addition, the researchers' decision not to identify the jurisdictions in the study limits the extent to which their results can be compared to other areas.

"Prosecutors have the power to shift established practices, but the extent of change depends on context, including office size, leadership style, and the alignment of supervisors with reform priorities," says Jon B. Gould, dean of UC Irvine's School of Social Ecology, who coauthored the study. "Court reforms that are effective in one community may be ineffective in another."

Adds Belén Lowrey-Kinberg, researcher at UC Irvine, another coauthor: "Our findings suggest that prosecutors can reduce the disproportionate impact of the criminal justice system on Black and Hispanic communities through general reductions in the severity of charging and plea-bargaining practices, an important step toward a more racially just society. As for the inequalities embedded in their caseload, prosecutors have an opportunity to make corrections, but only if they are willing to look beyond the individual case file to see the larger racial context."

The study was funded by Arnold Ventures.

###

Summarized from *Criminology & Public Policy*, *Progressive Prosecution in Context: Examining the Impact of Prosecutorial Administration Change on Case-Processing Patterns and Racial Disparities*, by Bowman, R (Indiana University Bloomington), Lowrey-Kinberg, B (University of California Irvine), and Gould, JB (University of California Irvine). Copyright 2026 The Authors. All rights reserved.