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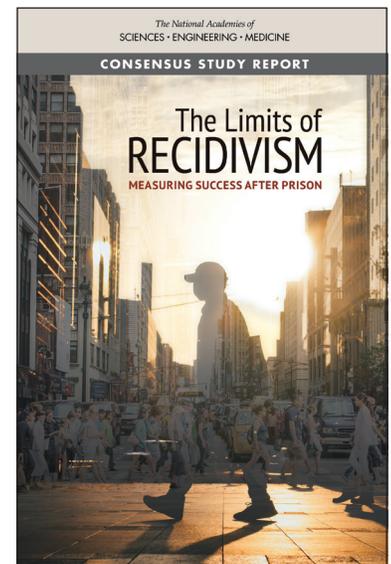
The Limits of Recidivism: Measuring Success After Prison

Nearly 600,000 people are released from state and federal prisons annually. Whether these individuals will successfully reintegrate into their communities has been identified as a critical measure of the effectiveness of the criminal legal system. However, evaluating the successful reentry of individuals released from prison is a challenging process, particularly given limitations of currently available data and the complex set of factors that shape reentry experiences.

Recognizing these significant challenges, Arnold Ventures asked the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine to convene an expert committee to examine the measurement of success among people released from prison. The resulting committee, whose expertise included criminology, law, medicine, political science, sociology, economics, and statistics, had a twofold task: (1) examining the strengths and limitations of current measures of recidivism, defined as an individual's return to criminal behavior; and (2) identifying the correlates of positive outcomes for people who do not return to prison based on measures that extend well beyond recidivism.

The committee, in its report *The Limits of Recidivism: Measuring Success After Prison*, finds that the current measures of success for individuals released from prison are inadequate. The use of recidivism rates to evaluate post-release success, for example, ignores significant research on how and why individuals cease to commit crimes, as well as the important role of structural factors in shaping post-release outcomes. The emphasis on recidivism as the primary metric to evaluate post-release success also ignores progress in other domains essential to the success of individuals returning to communities, including education, health, family, and employment. The report also highlights the unique and essential insights held by those who have experienced incarceration and proposes that the development and implementation of new measures of post-release success would significantly benefit from active engagement with individuals with this lived experience.

In addition to these conceptual limitations, available administrative data present challenges for the calculation of an accurate and complete recidivism rate. Administrative records reflect specific criminal legal system actions, such as arrests, convictions, and incarceration. They do not capture crimes that are not detected by legal officials and may mismeasure group differences in crime because of variations in police presence and activity, such as drug enforcement. They also misrepresent the process by which persons cease to engage in criminal behavior.



MEASURING THE CESSATION OF CRIMINAL ACTIVITY

Research on desistance from crime demonstrates that the cessation of criminal activity is generally a gradual process that may involve setbacks. Reductions in the frequency and seriousness of criminal activity, and increases in the time between release from incarceration and a criminal event can all signal progress toward eventual desistance. These positive signs are ignored by binary (yes, no) recidivism rates that simply measure whether or not a new arrest, conviction, or incarceration occurred.

RECOMMENDATION 1: To ensure more precise and accurate use of the construct of recidivism, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners should (a) specify the exact actions taken by legal authorities (arrest, revocation, conviction, incarceration) included in their measures, (b) clarify the limitations of the data used to measure these actions, and (c) supplement binary recidivism measures with measures of desistance from crime such as the frequency and seriousness of offense, and length of time until a new offense.

MEASURING SUCCESS IN REENTRY

Measuring the successful reentry of individuals into communities is complex and challenging. The emphasis on recidivism rates frames post-release success solely in terms of crime control and neglects the value of progress in other domains essential to social reintegration and personal well-being. To more clearly assess reentry success, the report recommends that post-release outcomes be examined through the lens of overall healthy adult development across multiple life domains in addition to crime control: education, employment, housing, family and social support, mental and physical health, civic and community engagement, and a personal sense of well-being. Current measures of recidivism and desistance do not encompass this broader conception of success after release from prison.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Researchers should review existing measures and, as needed, develop, and validate new measures to evaluate post-release success in multiple domains—personal well-being, education, employment, housing, family and social supports, health, civic and community engagement, and legal involvement.

Individuals released from prison face significant barriers to success across multiple life domains, including ongoing penalties for previous criminal behavior. For example, they may return to a community without adequate employment opportunities or training programs or lack access to substance use treatment or mental health counseling. They may encounter local or state policies that exclude them from accessible housing or social safety net programs. Furthermore, systemic disparities exist along lines of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and geography in barriers to post-release success and in access to needed services and supports.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Researchers should review existing measures and, as needed, develop new measures of facilitators of and structural barriers to post-release success in multiple domains, including personal well-being, education, employment, housing, family and social supports, health, civic and community engagement, and legal involvement. These measures should reflect the particular needs and experiences of historically marginalized groups.

The evaluation of success is also complicated by the lack of shared definitions and methodologies. As a result, it is difficult to reliably compare recidivism rates (or other post-release outcomes) across different programs or different jurisdictions. Uniform national standards for measuring success among individuals released from prison would support program evaluations and improve the utility of administrative and other data across multiple policy domains.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Congress should consider funding the National Institute of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Bureau of Justice Assistance, National Institutes of Health, and other federal agencies and centers whose missions are central to the success of persons released from prison to (a) convene interdisciplinary research advisory panels to assess data, methods, and recommendations for measuring post-release success; (b) request grant proposals from researchers and practitioners, in collaboration with formerly incarcerated persons, to review existing measures of success and develop and validate new measures as needed; and (c) consider questions relevant to the measurement of post-release success in existing survey protocols such as the American Community Survey and data collection efforts in other domains such as education, labor, and health. Private foundations committed to improving success among persons released from prison should support this evaluation independently or in partnership with federal agencies. Governmental and private support should be directed, at a minimum, to the following issues:

- The quality of records from legal and other social institutions used to monitor post-release success;
- The utility and feasibility of linking records across multiple administrative domains;
- The utility and feasibility of linking existing administrative data with instruments measuring personal well-being;
- The development of a website containing core measures of success across multiple administrative domains; and
- The eventual development of national standards for measuring post-release success.

A PATH FORWARD

Despite significant challenges, the report outlines numerous opportunities to improve the measurement of success among individuals released from prison. Better data can play a key role in informing policy development and ensuring more effective programming for those in or recently released from prison. Given the rehabilitative function of prisons and the extensive network of reentry supervision and programming, improved measurement can also enable correctional and reentry leaders to better identify program and policy impacts, document successes, and refine best practices. The report’s recommendations, if implemented, will contribute to policies that increase the health, safety, and security of formerly incarcerated persons and the communities to which they return.

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For More Information . . . This Consensus Study Report Highlights was prepared by the Committee on Law and Justice based on the Consensus Study Report *The Limits of Recidivism: Measuring Success After Prison* (2022). The study was sponsored by the Arnold Foundation. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization or agency that provided support for the project. Copies of the Consensus Study Report are available from the National Academies Press, (800) 624-6242 or <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/26459>.

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