

The Limits of Recidivism: Measuring Success After Prison

Recommendations for Policy Makers

With nearly 600,000 people released from prisons annually, policy makers at the federal and state level have a vested interest in understanding whether and how individuals released from prison will successfully reintegrate into their communities. Current efforts to evaluate post-incarceration success focus on tracking whether an individual returns to crime – referred to as recidivism. Recidivism is a critical measure used by policymakers to assess the effectiveness of the criminal legal system and to inform funding decisions, yet the measure faces a number of serious limitations.

Recognizing these 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 report, *The Limits of Recidivism: Measuring Success After Prison*, finds that current measures of success for individuals released from prison are inadequate. The committee's findings include the following:

CURRENT USE OF RECIDIVISM IS UNSUPPORTED BY RESEARCH

Administrative data used to calculate recidivism rates is limited in ways that warrant particular care. Reliance on recidivism rates to evaluate post-release success ignores decades of research on how and why individuals cease to commit crimes. Desistance from criminal activity is a gradual process that may involve setbacks. Reductions in frequency and seriousness of criminal activity and increases in time between release from incarceration and a criminal event can signal progress toward desistance from crime. Recidivism ignores these positive signs

MEASURING REENTRY IS COMPLEX AND CHALLENGING

The emphasis on recidivism rates ignores the value of progress in other domains essential to social reintegration and personal well-being. To more clearly assess reentry success, post-release outcomes should 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 wellbeing. Individuals released from prison also face significant barriers to success across these domains, including ongoing penalties for previous criminal behavior.

The committee recommends that, to ensure more precise and accurate use of the construct of recidivism, policy makers should:

1. Specify the exact actions taken by legal authorities (arrest, revocation, conviction, incarceration) included in the measures;
2. Clarify the limitations of the data used to measure these actions;
3. Supplement binary recidivism measures with measures of desistance from crime, including the frequency and seriousness of future offenses, and the length of time until a new offense; and identify structural barriers to post-release success, with special attention to historically marginalized population groups.

GRANTS AND RESEARCH

The following recommendations could inform policy design, funding priorities, expectations of grant recipients, and evaluations of funded programs. The committee recommends that researchers expand efforts to measure post-release success, including through reviewing existing measures and developing and validating new measures that: evaluate post-release success across multiple life domains, including personal well-being, education, employment, housing, family and social supports, health, civic and community engagement, and legal involvement; and measure facilitators of and structural barriers to post-release success across life-domains in ways that reflect the particular needs and experiences of historically marginalized groups.

A PATH FORWARD

Despite significant challenges, better data can inform policy development and evaluation and ensure more effective programming for those in or recently released from prison. Policy makers play a key role in improving data collection related to recidivism by supporting funding for public agencies and private organizations whose missions are central to the success of persons released from prison. These bodies can facilitate the development of more robust measures of post-release success, improvements in the quality of data available to measure post-release success, data-sharing across policy domains, and the development shared national measures of post-release success.

COMMITTEE ON EVALUATING SUCCESS AMONG PEOPLE RELEASED FROM PRISON

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This Consensus Study Report Recommendations was prepared by the Committee on Law and Justice based on the Consensus Study Report *The Limits of Recidivism: Measuring Success After Prison* (2022).

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THE ROLE OF FEDERAL AGENCIES

The National Institute of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Bureau of Justice Assistance, National Institutes of Health, among others, should convene interdisciplinary research advisory panels to assess measurements for post-release success; request grant proposals from researchers and practitioners, in collaboration with formerly incarcerated persons, to review existing measures and develop and validate new ones as needed; and consider questions relevant to the measurement of post-release success in existing survey protocols and data collection efforts. Governmental 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.

Increasing funding for agencies that measure post-release success will inform the development of effective policies to enhance the health, safety, and security of formerly incarcerated persons and their communities.

To read the full report, please visit
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