

# The Limits of Recidivism: Measuring Success After Prison

## Recommendations for Private Funders

With nearly 600,000 people released from state and federal prisons annually, private funders that support reentry programming and research 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 recidivism — or tracking whether an individual returns to crime. Recidivism is a critical measure used to assess the effectiveness of the criminal legal system and to inform funding decisions, yet the measure faces 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:

### RECIDIVISM IS A CRITICAL, BUT LIMITED MEASUREMENT

Administrative data used to calculate recidivism rates is limited in ways that warrant particular care by anyone making use of recidivism rates. For example, recidivism rates cannot include undetected crimes and may capture technical parole violations that do not constitute crimes, such as missing a meeting or training program.

### MEASURING REENTRY IS COMPLEX AND CHALLENGING

Emphasis on recidivism ignores progress in other domains that is essential to social reintegration. Post-release outcomes should be examined through the lens of overall healthy adult development — measuring across multiple life domains, including education, employment, housing, family and social support, mental and physical health, civic and community engagement, and well-being — in addition to criminal activity.

### RECOGNIZING STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO REENTRY

People released from prison face significant barriers to societal reintegration, including ongoing penalties for previous criminal behavior. They may encounter local or state policies that exclude them from accessible housing or social safety net programs. New measures of facilitators of and structural barriers to post-release success are needed, with particular emphasis on the experiences of historically marginalized groups, as systemic disparities exacerbate barriers along race, gender and socioeconomic lines.

### CURRENT USE OF RECIDIVISM IS UNSUPPORTED BY RESEARCH

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. The length of time since release and decreasing frequency and severity of criminal activity can signal progress toward desistance of crime — but only measuring new negative contacts with the criminal justice system fails to capture such progress.

## INFORMING RESEARCH FUNDING PRIORITIES

Though not aimed directly at private funders working in the reentry space, the below recommendations could inform funding priorities, communications with stakeholders, expectations of grantees, and evaluations of funded work. At a minimum, reentry researchers, policy makers, and practitioners should:

1. Specify the limitations of the data used to measure recidivism;
2. supplement current recidivism measures with measures of desistance from crime; and
3. Identify structural barriers to post-release success, with special attention to historically marginalized population groups.

The committee recommends that researchers expand efforts to measure post-release success, including through reviewing existing measures and developing and validating new measures that

1. 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;
2. 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.

## COMMITTEE ON EVALUATING SUCCESS AMONG PEOPLE RELEASED FROM PRISON

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## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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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This Consensus Study Report is available from the National Academies Press | (800) 624-6242 | <http://www.nap.edu> | <http://www.nationalacademies.org>

## A PATH FORWARD

Private funders are important players in both funding reentry programs as well as supporting research on recidivism rates, and thus have a vested interest in improving our understanding about whether and how individuals successfully reintegrate into their communities. The report encourages private funders to support efforts to dramatically expand the data currently collected on recidivism along with the methods available to measure reentry success.

## EXPECTATIONS OF GOVERNMENT AND POLICYMAKERS

Federal agencies, including the National Institute of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, among others, should convene interdisciplinary research advisory panels to assess measurements for post-release success; and request grant proposals to review those measures and develop new ones as needed. Governmental and private support should be directed 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.

To read the full report, please visit  
<http://www.nationalacademies.org/claj/>

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