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The Changing State of Recidivism: Fewer People Going Back to Prison

Data show the number returning 3 years later is down by nearly a quarter

Trends in recidivism were analyzed using the [National Corrections Reporting Program \(NCRP\)](#), an administrative data set of prison admissions and releases. The federal Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) collects data submitted voluntarily by state departments of corrections and parole. At least 38 states have provided some data going back to 2000, with additional states providing data in more recent years.

NCRP data include records from 2000 to 2015 that link prison admission and release records for states with reliable prison inmate identifiers. That creates a panel data set that allows analysts to track an individual's terms of prison admissions and releases over time. This term file is the data set used in this analysis. Only 23 states provided data for the entire 2005-15 time frame, so the study was limited to these states.

States included in the analysis

- | | | |
|---------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Arizona | 9. Mississippi | 17. Rhode Island |
| 2. California | 10. Missouri | 18. South Carolina |
| 3. Colorado | 11. Nebraska | 19. Tennessee |
| 4. Florida | 12. New York | 20. Texas |
| 5. Georgia | 13. North Carolina | 21. Utah |
| 6. Indiana | 14. North Dakota | 22. Washington |
| 7. Kentucky | 15. Oklahoma | 23. Wisconsin |
| 8. Minnesota | 16. Pennsylvania | |

Because of incomplete state data in the NCRP for the three years under study, the report used the National Prisoner Statistics (NPS) data set to calculate percentages of all released prisoners in the 23 states. These states represent 68 percent of released prisoners in 2005, 69 percent in 2010, and 67 percent in 2012.

	Year of release		
	2005	2010	2012
Releases in 23 study states	451,618	458,482	392,130
Releases in all states	662,215	663,490	588,597
23 states—% of all releases	68%	69%	67%

To ensure that results were not altered by problematic data, Pew engaged in validity checks. Data were compared with the National Prison Statistics (NPS) data set. None of the 23 states with NCRP data for 2005-15 were eliminated because of inconsistencies with NPS.

Rates of recidivism were analyzed by identifying whether an individual released in 2005, 2010, or 2012 had a new admission to prison after release, and the year of this admission. Publicly accessible data do not include the month or day of admission or release; recidivism in this report therefore is based on year of admission and year of release. Admissions in the same year as a release are considered a return to prison.

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Differences between the Pew and BJS recidivism studies

In the past, BJS has included data on returns to prison in its reports on recidivism of people released in 1994 and 2005. The [2018 report](#) on the 2005 cohort, however, includes only rearrests. For its report, BJS used a sample of approximately 70,000 prisoners (out of over 400,000) released from 30 states that were chosen because their departments of corrections could provide the fingerprint-based identification numbers needed to link the criminal history records to released prisoners. Pew does not have access to individual-level FBI criminal history records and therefore is unable to collect information on rearrests.

The BJS study includes only those sentenced to one year or more, whereas Pew has included all released prisoners in each year. Also, NCRP does not capture data on individuals who were released from prison in one state and who may have been incarcerated subsequently in another state. BJS' access to additional data sources allowed its report to include out-of-state reincarceration data. Additionally, BJS removes from its study individuals who have died, which is information that Pew cannot access.

For calculating date of return to prison, Pew used the year of new admission. In the [2014 BJS report](#) on the 2005 cohort, recidivism was calculated based on the date of arrest that led to reincarceration — generally a longer time frame, given the time necessary to adjudicate cases. The BJS study reports the following reincarceration rates:

Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 30 States in 2005: Patterns From 2005 to 2010 (BJS, 2014)

Time from release to arrest leading to return to prison	12 mos.	24 mos.	36 mos.	48 mos.	60 mos.
Return to prison rate	30.4%	43.3%	49.7%	52.9%	55.1%

As this table shows, there were only small differences in Pew's and BJS' return-to-prison recidivism numbers for the 2005 cohort resulting from these differences of measurement.

Understanding the recidivism decline

Determining causal relationships to explain the drop in recidivism rates was outside the scope of this analysis. However, Pew wanted to investigate the extent to which differences unrelated to changes in post-release practices could account for differences in rates of return. This might include differences in the individual characteristics of prisoners, changes in sentence length of those released, or the relative number of releases from each state. Pew used a regression model to control for race, gender, original sentence length, original offense, age at release, and the state with jurisdiction. This analysis showed that being released in 2012, compared with being released in 2005, is associated with a .42 reduction in the log odds of being readmitted to prison by the end of the third year, holding all those variables constant. This can be roughly translated to a 10.5 percent reduction in the probability of returning to prison after controlling for these variables, compared with an 11.5 percent reduction without these controls.

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Figure 1

Small Differences in Prisoner Characteristics for Those Released in 2005 and 2012

Offense category, gender, and age for those released in respective years

Selected characteristics of prisoners released from 23 states in 2005 and 2012		Percentage of group		
		Released in 2005	Released in 2012	Difference
Original offense	Violent	22.6%	25.6%	3.0%
	Property	30.4%	29.6%	-0.8%
	Drugs	30.9%	26.6%	-4.3%
	Public order	14.2%	17.1%	2.9%
	Other/unspecified/missing	1.9%	1.2%	-0.8%
Gender	Male	88.2%	87.9%	-0.4%
	Female	11.8%	12.2%	0.4%
Age at release year	18-34	52.8%	53.2%	0.4%
	35-54	44.0%	41.0%	-3.0%
	55+	3.2%	5.8%	2.6%

Source: [National Corrections Reporting Program, 1991-2015: Selected Variables](#), DS1 Term Records

Note: Differences were calculated from the raw, unrounded figures.