

Evaluating Success Among People Released from Prison

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JUSTICE
TECH LAB

What outcomes am I interested in?

- Recidivism
 - Subsequent arrests, convictions, and incarcerations
 - **These are costly for all involved!**
 - Individuals, their families & communities, taxpayers
 - Types of charges associated with each of the above
 - Allows cost-benefit analysis (murder is more costly than robbery is more costly than larceny is more costly than trespassing)
 - Both **probability** of any criminal justice contact, and **number** of contacts
 - A change in the latter can be meaningful and cost-effective, even if the probability of any contact does not change
 - Number of days incarcerated (jail or prison) is particularly valuable because each day is so costly
 - An intervention that reduces days incarcerated can quickly pay for itself

What outcomes am I interested in?

- Other measures of reintegration can also be interesting:
 - Employment - days worked, earnings
 - Education - enrollment/completion
 - Housing security - living in own home/with friends/in shelter
 - Health - mortality
- A big caveat:
 - Recidivism is important and costly — it is the primary outcome of interest
 - Other measures can help us understand mechanisms - why aren't our interventions reducing future criminal justice contact?
 - But they're not the reason we're here!
 - Many studies use survey data considering many other measures alongside recidivism — find effects on that other stuff but not on crime
 - To avoid hurting program providers' feelings?
 - Because a paper with stars is easier to publish?
 - This is counterproductive — not least because testing multiple hypotheses can lead to false positives

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What data should we use?

- Administrative data are increasingly available at the local, state, and federal level
 - These data are valuable because:
 - They avoid concerns about sample attrition (no need to track down people from the treatment and control group for surveys)
 - Accurate measure of a meaningful outcome — arrest, charge, conviction, incarceration, disciplinary infraction, technical violation, etc.
 - This is an imperfect proxy for actual criminal behavior but is an accurate measure of criminal justice contact
- Admin data are now available to measure all outcomes of interest on previous slides
 - Some datasets are easier to get than others — but this is now part of our job!
 - No excuse not to at least try

The main constraint is not data

- If our goal as a research community is to improve individual outcomes after prison, the main constraint is not data
- The main constraint is a dearth of rigorous, well-identified studies measuring the causal effects of interventions on individuals' outcomes
 - We need to get better at testing our hypotheses, and iterating on interventions until they work

We need better research designs

- There are way too many studies comparing “treated” individuals who volunteered for or were carefully selected to participate in some reentry program, with a “matched comparison group” of people who did not volunteer or were not selected
 - Groups are matched on observable characteristics like age and gender and criminal conviction
 - Most of these studies find that people in the treated group were more successful than those in the comparison group
 - **Is this due to the program, or unobservable baseline differences between the individuals (motivation, desire to change)?**
 - Impossible to know!
 - What do we learn from these studies? Anything?

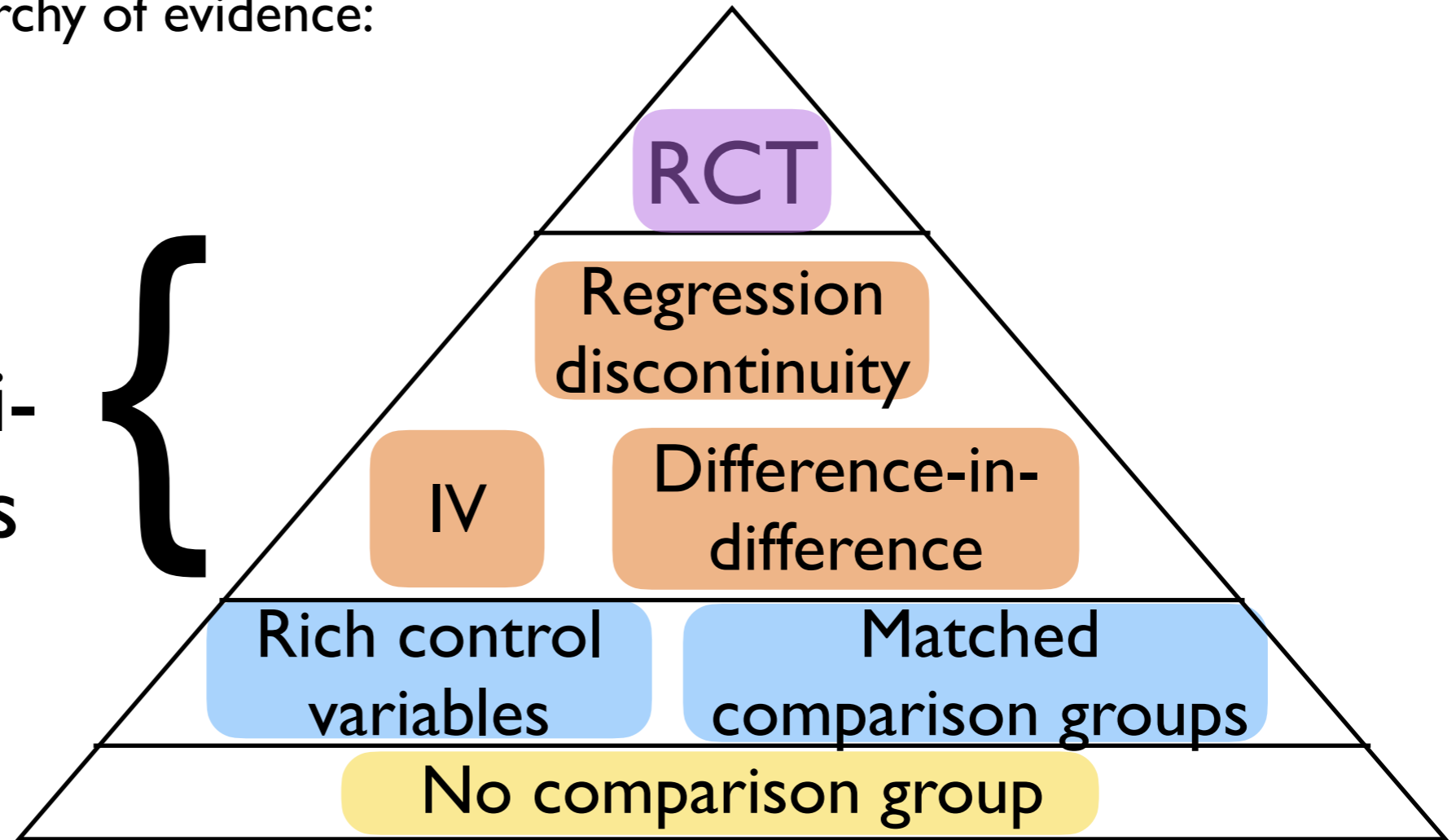
Hierarchy of evidence

- In this research area, I often hear people talk about our research design options as being RCTs or quasi-experimental designs
 - The latter group includes everything else, from careful, well-implemented regression discontinuity designs or careful difference-in-difference studies, to the matched comparison groups I just described
 - As a community, we have to get better at differentiating between these quasi-experimental options

Hierarchy of evidence

- My view of the hierarchy of evidence:

Compelling
natural/quasi-
experiments



- In all cases, identifying the causal effect depends on some assumptions
 - It is researchers' responsibility to convince readers that those assumptions hold
 - As you move up the pyramid, such assumptions are (usually) more plausible
 - Those studies should be given more weight

A quick example: Wrap-around services

- Popular intervention: Wrap-around services for those leaving prison
 - Studies based on matched comparison groups find beneficial effects
 - RCTs find null or detrimental effects
 - **We should not describe this body of evidence as “mixed”**
 - The best evidence suggests that such programs (as currently implemented) are ineffective and possibly detrimental
 - RCTs highlight selection bias plaguing the other studies



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Point/Counterpoint

WRAP-AROUND SERVICES DON'T IMPROVE PRISONER REENTRY OUTCOMES

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Point/Counterpoint

“EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY” SHOULD REFLECT A HIERARCHY OF EVIDENCE

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Thank you!

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