The Limits of Recidivism

Measuring Success After Prison

National Academies — Sciences · Engineering · Medicine

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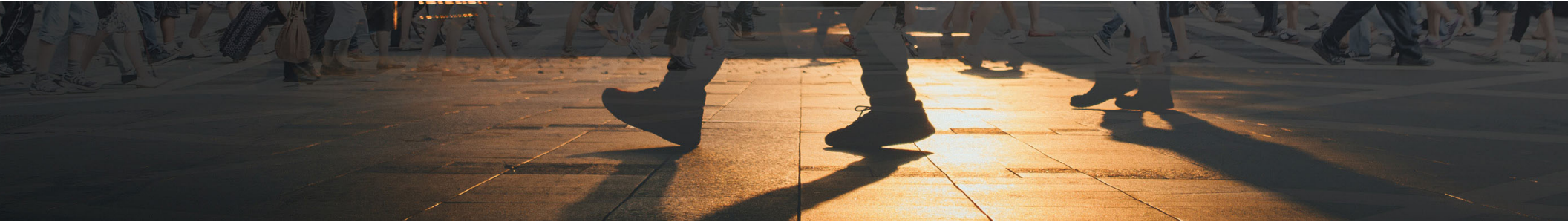Study Director

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Statement of Task

The National Academies, of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine will appoint an ad hoc multidisciplinary committee to examine the measurement and evaluation of success among people released from prison to undertake a critical analysis of the following:

1. The **strengths and limitations of current measures of recidivism**, including variation according to different individual needs and characteristics, and identification of key factors and **outcomes that are not adequately captured by this measure alone.**

2. The **correlates of positive outcomes** for individuals who do not return to incarceration and corresponding **measures of reentry from prison that go beyond the avoidance of negative outcomes**, such as crime, and consider broader measures of success (e.g., health, victimization, family attachment, educational attainment, employment, income, and civic engagement).

The Value of Lived Experience

- The unique insights of lived experience
- Valuable contributions to this this report.
- Increasing relevance and effectiveness of research, empowering marginalized populations

Listening Session Themes

- Success as occurring in multiple life domains, including education, housing, personal sense of well-being

- Success as varied, self-defined

- Recidivism is dominant as *the* measure of post-release success *and* limitations of this measure

- Need for expanded measures to better capture work already being done by correctional agencies/officials

- High rates of victimization among individuals released from incarceration

The Scope of Prison Reentry in the United States

Nearly **600,000 people** are released from state and federal prisons each year.

As of 2019, more than **6.4 million people** were on probation, in jail or prison, or on parole in the United States

1.8 million people were currently incarcerated in the United States as of 2021. Almost all of these individuals will eventually be released.
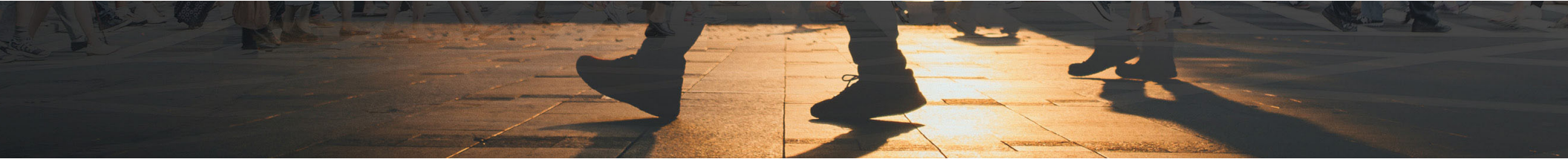
Successful reintegration is a critical measure of the effectiveness of the criminal legal system.

However, evaluating successful reentry is challenging, particularly given limitations of currently available data and the complex set of factors that shape reentry experiences.

Broadly speaking, recidivism refers to a return to criminal activity.

Limitations of Current Measures of Success

Incomplete Data

Available data presents challenges for the calculation of an accurate and complete recidivism rate. Using administrative records of arrests, convictions, and re-incarceration means that we can't count crimes that go undetected or unreported, and we may over-count crimes in areas with more strict parole policies or higher police presence.

Conclusion 1: Recidivism rates based on administrative records are an imprecise and incomplete proxy for measuring a return to criminal activity

Ignoring the Best Available Research

The use of recidivism rates to evaluate post-release success ignores decades of research on how and why individuals cease to commit crimes.

This process of moving away from criminal activity is called **desistance**. We now know that desistance often happens as part of a process that may involve setbacks.

A binary (yes/no) measure of whether someone has committed a crime can't capture signs of desistance such as a reduction in seriousness of crime, or increased time between crimes.

Conclusion 2: Measures of desistance from crime offer a more accurate and realistic account of changes in criminal activity after release from prison.

Recommendation 1

To ensure more precise and accurate use of the construct of recidivism, researchers, policy makers, 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.

Missing Progress in Key Reintegration Domains

Defining success in terms of abstention from crime ignores progress in domains essential to reintegration including education, health, family support, housing, and employment.

Conclusion 3: Meaningful measures of success traverse multiple life domains including a heightened sense of personal well-being, which is best measured through self-report surveys and validated assessment instruments

Recommendation 2

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.

Missing the Role of Structural Factors in Shaping Reintegration

Recidivism rates also fail to capture the important role of structural factors – such as systemic inequalities in access to housing and employment - in shaping post-release outcomes.

Conclusion 4: The existence of community and policy facilitators of and barriers to success can be documented in studies that link data on post-release success to local socioeconomic conditions, policies that restrict access to employment, housing, and public benefits, and structural inequalities that disproportionately affect historically marginalized populations

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 Need for Shared Measures

Currently, we lack shared measures that allow comparison of reentry success across states or programs, or across policy domains.

Conclusion 5: Uniform national standards for measuring success among individuals released from prison would augment the comparability of program evaluations and the utility of administrative and other data across multiple policy domains. The development of a website containing core measures and instruments would hasten the eventual development of uniform measurement standards. These efforts can be supported by federal agencies and private foundations committed to improving success for persons released from prison

Recommendation 4

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 should (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.

Recommendation 4 (continued)

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 role of qualitative as well as quantitative research in the development of these measures; and

- The eventual development of uniform national standards for measuring post-release success.

Summary and Conclusion

- Current binary measures of recidivism do not adequately reflect the continuation or cessation of criminal behavior and should be augmented by measures of desistance from crime that, at a minimum, account for changes in the frequency and seriousness of criminal activity.

- Post-release success is multifaceted and cannot be adequately measured by indicators of criminal involvement alone.

- Persistent group inequalities require that measures of post-release success take into account the needs and experiences of historically marginalized populations.

- The perspectives of persons with lived experience of incarceration and practitioners need to be part of all efforts to improve and implement new measures of post-release success.

- Improving measures of post-release success will benefit formerly incarcerated persons, the communities to which they return, and society as a whole by supporting policies to facilitate post-release social integration, enhance personal well-being, and improve public safety.
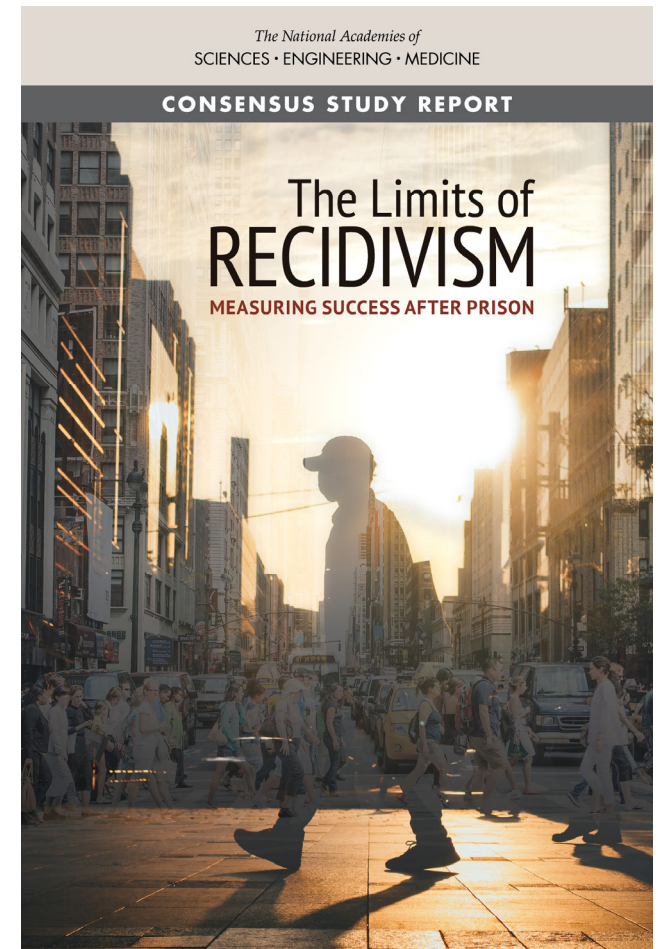
Thank You!

To read or download a copy of the report, please visit:

http://nationalacademies.org/limits-of-recidivism

For more information about the study or dissemination activities, please contact:
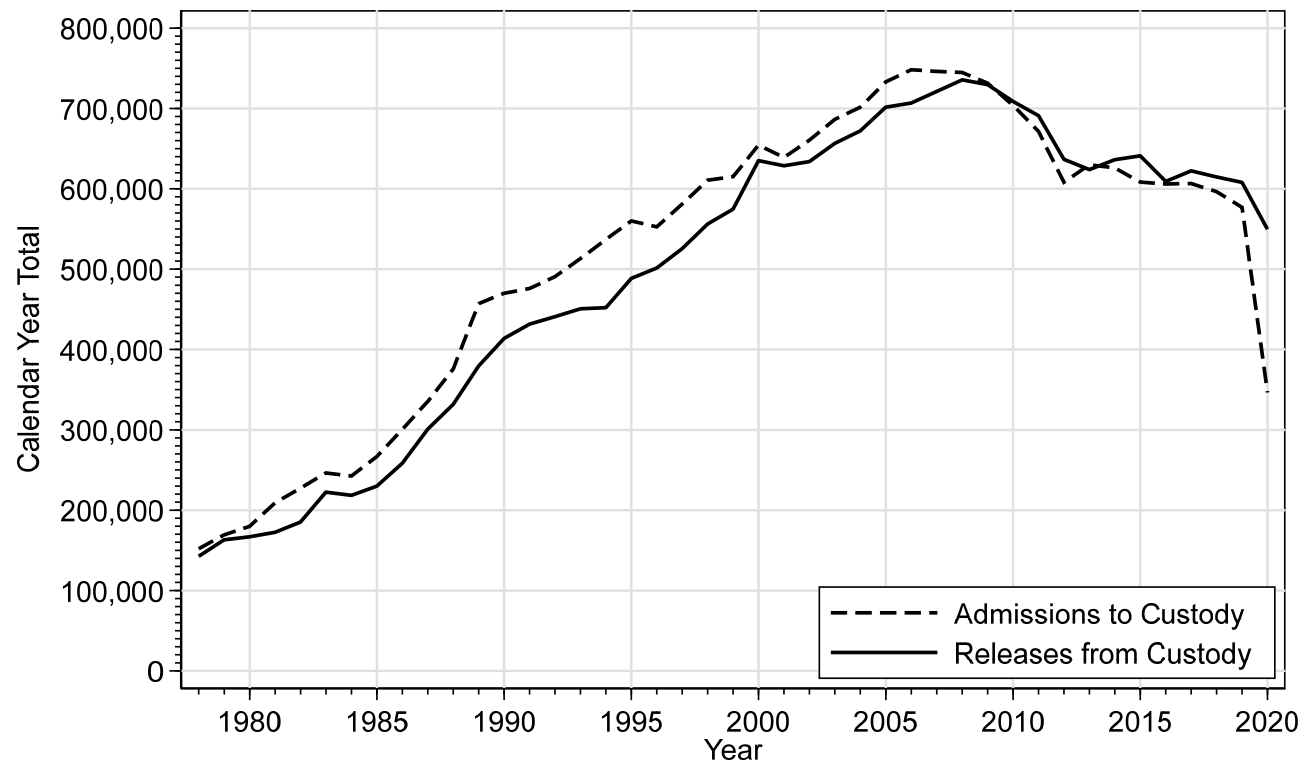
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Appendix

Annual admissions to releases from, state and federal prisons

Our Approach & Guiding Questions

- How should "success" be defined for persons released from prison?

- What are feasible standards for post-release success and how are they related to standards of success for the general population?

- Do current measures of recidivism adequately capture the multiple dimensions of success and the multiple purposes of the criminal legal system, including crime reduction, rehabilitation, and justice for crime victims and survivors?

- Do current measures of recidivism draw on the best available knowledge about how desistance from criminal behavior occurs?

- What are the results of current widely cited studies of recidivism, and how have rates of recidivism based on these studies changed over time?

- What are the chief limitations of current recidivism measures?

- How do recidivism, desistance, reentry, and success differ by race, gender, and other salient identities?

- How do or should measures of post-release success differ across these groups?

- How should the needs of policy makers and service providers for a feasible method