

Recidivism of State Prisoners Released in 2008 and 2012

MATT DUROSE: Hello, my name is Matt Durose. I'm a statistician at the Bureau of Justice Statistics (or BJS). Thank you for joining the webinar.

Recidivism is a core indicator used to measure crime and describe the state of the justice system. BJS plays a key role in producing national-level statistics on recidivism. The recent studies on prisoners released in 2008 and 2012 provide new insight into this topic.

Today, I will be discussing the recent recidivism studies by BJS. The first part of the presentation will focus on the methodology used to conduct the studies. I will then discuss the findings from them.

The first one on prisoners released in 2012 with a 5-year follow-up period was based on the largest sample for a BJS recidivism study to date. The second one on prisoners released in 2008 with a 10-year follow-up period included the longest follow-up period for a BJS recidivism study to date. The presentation will conclude with a discussion on trends in recidivism based on the BJS studies. You can access the publications from these studies at BJS.gov.

BJS is often asked how is recidivism defined? It is important to understand that recidivism can be and is measured different ways.

All recidivism definitions and measures share three common traits. First is a starting event, such as being placed on probation or being released from prison. The second one is an outcome measure, such as a subsequent conviction or return to prison. And the third common trait is a follow-up period from the date of the starting event to a predefined end date, such as 3 years.

BJS recidivism reports provide multiple outcome measures, including an arrest, conviction, and return to prison following release.

BJS's first recidivism study of state prisoners was based on a cohort prisoners released in 1983. This study included a 3-year follow-up period. The next study was on state prisoners released in 1994 that also included a 3-year follow-up period.

The third national-level recidivism study by BJS was conducted about 10 years later, on state prisoners released in 2005. This study included a 5-year follow-up period. To examine how recidivism rates change with longer follow-up periods, BJS conducted an additional analysis on the same sample of prisoners released in 2005 with an extended 9-year follow-up period.

Most recently, BJS conducted recidivism studies on state prisoners released in 2008 with a 10-year follow-up and on prisoners released in 2012 with a 5-year follow-up.

BJS uses a combination of prisoner records and criminal history data to conduct its recidivism studies. The prisoner records provide prisoners' date of prison admission and release, demographic characteristics, commitment offense, and sentence length. The criminal history data include arrests, convictions, and incarcerations both prior to and following release from prison. The data also include these events within and outside of the state where the person was serving time.

The first study I will be discussing today is on a cohort of state prisoners released in 2012.

This study included the largest sample of state prisoners for a BJS recidivism study to date. It included 34 states that were able to provide the prisoner records needed to obtain the criminal history data. Thirty-four states were responsible for about 8 in 10 (or 79%) of all persons released from state prisons that year nationwide.

Among the more than 400,000 state prisoners released across 34 states in 2012, approximately 9 in 10 were male. Females accounted for 11% of the prisoners released. White prisoners comprised the largest portion of those released across 34 states in 2012, followed by black and Hispanic prisoners. Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Other Pacific Islander accounted for 1%, and American Indian and Alaska Native and other races made up 2% each.

Overall, the median age of prisoners released at the time of their release in 2012 was 33. Half of the prisoners were ages 25 to 39 at the time of release, and about a third were age 40 or older.

About 1 in 4 state prisoners released in 2012 were serving time for a violent offense. Twenty-eight percent of the prisoners were serving time for a property offense, 26% were serving time for a drug offense, and the remaining 19% were serving time for a public order offense. For prisoners serving time for more than one offense, the offense with the longest sentence length is reported here.

Forty-three percent of prisoners released in 2012 had 10 or more prior arrests in their criminal history, while 31% had 5 to 9, and 26% had 4 or fewer. Overall, the prisoners released in 2012 had a median of 8 prior arrests.

This figure provides recidivism rates based on three different measures. At the end of the 5-year follow-up period, 71% (or about 7 in 10) of the state prisoners released in 2012 had at least one arrest. In addition, 54% of the prisoners released in 2012 had a new conviction during the follow-up period.

This study also examined the percentage of persons who returned to prison. Within 5 years, nearly half (or 46%) of the prisoners released in 2012 had a parole or probation violation or a new sentence that led to a return to prison.

The cumulative arrest percentage of prisoners released in 2012 varied by age. Overall, younger persons were arrested at higher rates than older persons following release. Eighty-one percent of state prisoners who were age 24 or younger at release in 2012 were arrested within 5 years, compared to 74% of those ages 25 to 39, and 61% of those age 40 or older.

Persons released from prison with more prior arrests in their criminal history were arrested at higher rates during the 5-year follow-up period. Fifty-five percent of prisoners released in 2012 with 4 or fewer prior arrests were arrested during the 5 years following release, compared to 70% of those with 5 to 9 prior arrests and 81% of those with 10 or more prior arrests.

This study also examined the types of offenses the prisoners released in 2012 were arrested for during the follow-up period. As previously discussed, 71% were arrested for any type of offense within 5 years. This overall rate includes persons who were arrested for more than one offense.

Twenty-eight percent of prisoners released in 2012 were arrested for a violent offense within 5 years. In addition, one-third were arrested for a drug offense during the follow-up period. More than half were arrested for a public order offense.

Beyond those measures discussed so far, this study examined recidivism from other perspectives. For instance, about 1 in 10 prisoners released in 2012 were arrested in a state other than the one that released them. In addition, an estimated 1.1 million arrests occurred among the more than 400,000 prisoners released in 2012 during the 5-year follow-up period.

Another recidivism measure included in this study was the annual arrest percentage. This is measured as the percentage of all prisoners released in 2012 who were arrested during a particular year in the follow-up period. For instance, 37% were arrested during the first year following release in 2012. By comparison, 26% of the prisoners released in 2012 were arrested during their fifth year following release.

I'd now like to shift the discussion to another recent BJS recidivism study with a 10-year follow-up period.

This study had the longest follow-up period for a BJS recidivism study to date. It included more than 400,000 prisoners released across 24 states in 2008. Prisoners released in these states accounted for 69% of all prison releases nationwide that year. Before discussing the patterns in the annual arrest percentages from this 10-year recidivism study, I'd like to step back to show a figure with the patterns from the 5-year study on prisoners released in 2012. The annual arrest percentage declined from 37% in Year 1 to 26% in Year 5.

Though they follow different cohorts, this 10-year study on prisoners released in 2008 and the 5-year study on prisoners released in 2012 both show a decline in the annual arrest percentage between Year 1 and Year 5.

However, the longer follow-up period of 10 years for the 2008 cohort shows the annual arrest percentage continued to decline from Year 5 to Year 10. Overall, about half as many prisoners released in 2008 were arrested in Year 10 as in Year 1.

This study provided insights into the decline in the annual arrest percentages during a 10-year period. Overall, females had lower arrest rates than males from Year 1 to Year 10. Among prisoners released in 2008, 44% of males were arrested in Year 1, while 22% were arrested in Year 10. Thirty-four percent of females were arrested in Year 1, while 19% were arrested in Year 10.

So, have the recidivism rates of prisoners changed over time? To examine this question, BJS conducted an analysis of the prisoners released in its last three recidivism studies, including prisoners released in 2005, 2008, and 2012. This analysis was based on prisoners released in the 19 states that were included in all three studies.

Among prisoners released across the 19 states, the percentage arrested for any type of offense within 5 years following release declined from 77% of those released in 2005, to 75% of those released in 2008, to 71% of those released in 2012.

While the percentage of prisoners arrested for any type of offense within 5 years was lower among those released in 2012 than among those released in 2005, the percentage arrested for a violent offense within 5 years did not differ significantly between the prisoners released in 2005 and the prisoners released in 2012. Of the prisoners released across the 19 states, 28% of those released in 2005 were arrested for a violent offense, and 28% of those released in 2012 were arrested for a violent offense.

Recidivism research is a key component of BJS's statistical collections that span the criminal justice system. As discussed, the recent studies included the largest number of states and longest follow-up period for a BJS recidivism study to date. The statistical reports on these recidivism studies are available at BJS.gov for an in-depth look into the wide range of measures discussed today. You can also subscribe to receive notices when new research on topics of interest becomes available.

If you have any questions about these studies, I can be reached at the email address on the screen (Matt Durose, Statistician, matt.durose@usdoj.gov). Thank you again for joining this webinar.