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MEASURING RECIDIVISM FOR FEDERAL OFFENDERS"

James L. Beck, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

Despite limitations noted by some criminal justice researchers, recidivism rates continue to be the common standard by which prison programs are evaluated.^{1/} Among the objections raised are that recidivism rates are too insensitive to be used as an evaluation measure (Seiter, et al., 1974), recidivism rates measure the behavior of police, parole officers, and the courts as much as the behavior of the offender (Doleschal, 1970; McCleary, 1978), and that recidivism rates alone ignore positive behavior such as employment (Maltz, 1980). As Maltz (1980) points out, however, recidivism may be a flawed measure but one is "left with the option of making do with imperfect measures or not measuring social phenomena at all." No alternative measures have yet been developed which can replace the relative ease of measurement, ease in understanding, and apparent validity of a recidivism measure. Given the present state of the art, recidivism rates are still the best measure when reduction of crime (as in rehabilitation programs) or protection of the public (as in parole decisions) are valid concerns.

The present report is an overview of recidivism rates for separate samples of offenders released during the last ten years. Where noted, some of these data have been reported elsewhere. In examining recidivism rates, a number of factors should be kept in mind. First of all, recidivism rates vary along three major dimensions: 1) how recidivism is defined (recidivism

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defined as a new arrest will be higher than recidivism defined as a return to prison); 2) the length of the follow-up period (more offenders will be arrested after five years than after one year), and 3) the population being studied (recidivism will generally be higher for youth offenders than for adults). In comparing recidivism rates between groups, all three factors (definition, follow-up period, and population) must be kept constant.

Secondly, recidivism rates (however they are defined) are only indicators used to estimate the criminal behavior of a particular offender population. With the possible exception of a few self-report studies, criminal behavior cannot be measured directly. The number of persons within a population engaging in criminal behavior must be inferred from the number of persons arrested or convicted.

Finally, a recidivism rate when used as a measure of program effectiveness is a relative measure which has meaning only in comparison to some other measure. For example, it is not particularly useful to know that a sample of releasees who participated in a prison program had a recidivism rate of 30%. It can be useful, however, if it is known that a similar group not participating in the program had a recidivism rate of 50% as measured by the same criteria.^{2/}

METHODOLOGY - SAMPLE SELECTION

Over the past decade, post-release outcome has been collected for a number of different samples. All samples include only releasees to the community^{3/} and, except where noted otherwise, offenders with a sentence of one year and one day or less are excluded. A description of the samples are as follows:

- A) 1970: A random sample consisting of 1,806 offenders released between January and June 1970 (see Hoffman and Stone-Meierhoefer, 1979; Hoffman and Stone-Meierhoefer, 1980).
- B) 1971: A random sample consisting of 1,135 offenders released between July and December 1971 (see Hoffman, Stone-Meierhoefer, and Beck, 1978; Hoffman and Stone-Meierhoefer, 1979).
- C) 1972: A random sample consisting of 1,011 offenders released between January and June, 1972 (see Hoffman and Beck, 1976; Hoffman, Stone-Meierhoefer, and Beck, 1978).
- D) 1976: The sample consists of 1,260 offenders released between July and December 1976. Although the sample was not truly random, the overall population characteristics of the sample were similar to the total release population in 1976. Therefore, the sample was included in the report (see Hoffman and Beck, 1980).
- E) 1977: A random sample consisting of 1,954 offenders released between January and March, 1977 and includes cases with sentences of a year and a day or less. This data has not been previously reported.
- F) 1978: A random sample consisting of 2,942 offenders released between January and June 1978 and includes cases with sentences of a year and a day or less. This data has not been previously reported.

METHODOLOGY - OUTCOME CRITERION

For this review, recidivism has been defined as an arrest for a new offense or a parole/probation warrant issued during the first year after release. Arrests for minor crimes such as drunk, vagrancy, or disorderly conduct are excluded. With minor variations, the same arrest information is available for all five samples reported.^{4/} For the 1970, 1971, 1972 and 1977 samples, all arrest information was collected through the FBI. For the 1976 and 1978 samples, arrest data for cases under parole supervision were collected by interviewing the probation officer. For all other 1976/1978 cases, arrest data were collected through the FBI.^{5/}

In previous studies, recidivism was defined as new commitment of 60 days or more or a return to prison as a technical violator within two years after release. This criterion is available for the 1970, 1971, and 1972 samples and has been reported elsewhere. For this report, however, an arrest rather than a conviction criterion has been used because most arrests recorded by the FBI for the later samples do not show a disposition. For example, 60% of all arrested offenders in the 1978 sample have an arrest without a disposition. In addition, only a one year follow-up period is presently available for the 1976, 1977, and 1978 samples. For all samples, a uniform follow-up period has been used calculated from the date of release from the institution or CTC.^{6/} Eventually, both the 1977 and 1978 samples will be updated to include arrest information for at least three years after release.^{7/}

For all samples, cases with missing data are excluded from the analysis. Less than 3% of the cases were missing for the 1970, 1971, 1972 and 1976 samples, about 10% were missing for the 1977 sample, and about 6% for the 1978 sample.

RESULTS - ARREST OUTCOME

The results (see Table 1) show that the recidivism rate as measured by an arrest (or a violation warrant issued) within one year after release has declined during the past decade. Excluding short sentence cases, the percent of offenders who avoided rearrest increased from 67.8% in 1970 to 75.7% in 1978 (significant at the .001 level). Conversely, the recidivism rate (percent rearrested) dropped from 32.2% in 1970 to 24.3% in 1978.

While there was a significant decline in rearrest rates between 1970 and 1978, the difference appears to be due to a change in population characteristics over time as measured by the Salient Factor Score. The Salient Factor Score is a statistical device used by the U. S. Parole Commission to assess risk of recidivism.^{8/} The score is available for all of the 1970 through 1976 cases, but is only available for 72% of the 1977 and 85% of the 1978 cases with outcome data. Both those with and without missing scores have nearly identical recidivism rates so the missing data should not bias the results.^{9/}

Using the four risk categories identified by the Salient Factor Score (see Table 2), it is apparent that while the overall recidivism rate has dropped between 1970 and 1978, the recidivism rate within the categories has remained relatively stable. The drop in recidivism over time is due more than anything else to a change in risk level.^{10/} For example, between 1970 and 1978 (excluding short sentence cases), the percent of offenders avoiding rearrest increased from 68% to 76%. At the same time, the percent classified as "poor" risks by the Salient Factor score dropped from 30% to 15% (significant at the .001 level).

While the risk that a released offender will be rearrested has decreased during the last decade, the seriousness of the commitment offense has increased. For example, between 1968 and 1978 (Federal Prison System, 1978) the proportion of auto theft commitments within the federal population dropped from 25% to 5% while robbery commitments increased from 13% to 25%. Auto thieves have previously been found to be high risk offenders (see Hoffman and Beck, 1974).

This increase in the seriousness of the commitment offense is also reflected in the seriousness of the arrests that occurred after release. While offenders in the 1978 sample were less likely to be arrested after release, if they were arrested, they were more likely to be involved in a serious arrest. For example, 20% of those arrested in the 1970 sample had an arrest for a "violent" offense (homicide, kidnapping, rape, assault or robbery) compared to 27% in the 1978 sample (significant at the .01 level).

SUMMARY

The major findings of the report are as follows:

- The percent of offenders with no arrest or warrant issued during the first year after release increased from 67.8% for 1970 releasees to 75.7% for 1978 releasees (statistically significant).
- As indicated by the Salient Factor Score, the increase in favorable outcome is due to changes in population characteristics. For example, the percent classified as "poor" risks by Salient Factor Score dropped from 30% in 1970 to 15% in 1978 (statistically significant).

- While the risk that a released offender will be arrested has declined during the last decade, other data reported by the Federal Prison System has shown that the seriousness of the commitment offense has increased. For example, between 1968 and 1978, the proportion of auto theft commitments has dropped from 25% to 5% while robbery commitments increased from 13% to 25%.
- Although offenders released in 1978 were less likely to be arrested than offenders released in 1970, if they were arrested, the offense was more likely to be serious. 20% of those arrested in the 1970 sample had an arrest for a "violent" offense compared to 27% in the 1978 sample (statistically significant).

Future research will examine recidivism rates for follow-up periods of longer than one year. Both the 1977 and 1978 samples will be periodically updated to include follow-up periods of at least three years. A final report is targeted for the fall of 1981.

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TABLE 1
PERCENT WITH NO ARREST OR WARRANT ISSUED

| YEAR OF RELEASE | FOLLOW-UP PERIOD EXCLUDING SHORT TERM CASES ^a | | | FOLLOW-UP PERIOD INCLUDING SHORT TERM CASES ^a |
|-----------------------|--|-----------|-------------|--|
| | ONE YEAR | TWO YEARS | THREE YEARS | ONE YEAR |
| 1970 (N=1,806) ... | 67.8% | 53.2% | 45.8% | — |
| 1971 (N=1,134) ... | 67.6% | 56.2% | 51.6% | — |
| 1972 (N=1,011) ... | — | 59.5% | — | — |
| 1976 (N=1,260) ... | 71.9% | — | — | — |
| 1977 (N=1,458) ... | 76.3% | — | — | 78.3% (N=1,954) |
| 1978 (N=2,329) ... | 75.7% | — | — | 76.9% (N=2,942) |

^aShort term case is defined as a sentence of one year and one day or less.

TABLE 2
PERCENT WITH NO ARREST OR WARRANT ISSUED BY SALIENT FACTOR SCORE (SFS) CATEGORY^a

| SAMPLE | SALIENT FACTOR SCORE CATEGORY | | | | TOTAL | Mean SFS ^b |
|--------|-------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| | Poor | Fair | Good | Very Good | | |
| 1970 | 51% (N=532) | 64% (N=472) | 76% (N=483) | 91% (N=319) | 68% (N=1806) | 5.41 |
| 1971 | 51% (N=321) | 60% (N=318) | 78% (N=295) | 91% (N=201) | 68% (N=1135) | 5.40 |
| 1976 | 56% (N=256) | 63% (N=237) | 73% (N=470) | 92% (N=297) | 72% (N=1260) | 6.28 |
| 1977 | 59% (N=124) | 64% (N=210) | 80% (N=430) | 92% (N=293) | 78% (N=1057) | 6.67 |
| 1978 | 54% (N=303) | 67% (N=440) | 79% (N=637) | 89% (N=588) | 76% (N=1968) | 6.59 |

^aExcludes cases of one year and one day or less.

^bHigher score indicates a lower risk of recidivism.

FOOTNOTES

1. For this report, a recidivism rate is defined as a dichotomous outcome measure that divides individuals into two groups, "success" or "failure", based on some definition of what constitutes "success" or "failure". For a general discussion of outcome criteria used in criminal justice evaluations, see Blair, et al. (1977).
2. The concept of statistical significance also comes into play. The level of statistical significance will tell you to what extent an observed difference could have occurred by chance.
3. Releasees to a detainer or for deportation are excluded.
4. Certain minor differences in the outcome criteria are present. In the 1976/1977/1978 samples, a case was counted as having favorable outcome if a warrant was issued for a technical violation; for the 1970/1971/1972 samples, a case was counted as having favorable outcome if a warrant was issued but later withdrawn. Also, for the 1976/1977/1978 samples, cases who died during the follow-up period were excluded. In the 1970/1971/1972 samples, deceased individuals were counted as having favorable outcome unless they died while committing a criminal act. These differences involve very few cases and should not have any significant effect upon the results.
5. There are two FBI data systems that record arrests for federal offenders. One is the FBI "rap sheet" system which is a manual record of all major arrests incurred by an offender. The second, called "Computerized Criminal Histories" (CCH), contains basically the same information as the "rap sheet" but is a computerized system. Almost all FBI information reported here was manually coded from the FBI rap sheet. The major exception was the 1977 sample which was entirely coded from CCH by means of a computer process called the "Automated Outcome System" developed by the Federal Prison System in cooperation with the FBI.
6. For example, a one year follow-up period counts all arrests that occurred during the first year after the date of release.
7. The 1976 sample will not be updated to include information beyond one year after release. The 1976 sample was not a recidivism study as such, but was drawn for the specific purpose of evaluating Community Treatment Centers (see Beck, et al., 1978).
8. On the basis of factors found to be related to recidivism, the Salient Factor Score identifies four risk levels: "poor", "fair", "good", and "very good". For a description of the Salient Factor Score and its use in parole decision-making, see United States Parole Commission (1980).
9. The Salient Factor Score for the earlier samples was coded by research staff, while the scores for the 1977 and 1978 samples were calculated by Parole Commission Hearing Examiners at the time of the parole hearing. Missing scores for the 1978 sample will eventually be coded by research staff.
10. Using the 1970 and 1978 samples as a basis for comparison, the drop in recidivism is not statistically significant when Salient Factor Score is controlled for.

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