



Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report

Examining Recidivism

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The effectiveness of criminal justice policies and practices is often gauged by the extent to which offenders, after the imposition of punishment, continue to engage in crime. This study examines recidivism through an analysis of a nationwide survey of inmates of State prisons conducted in October and November of 1979 and sponsored by the Bureau of Justice Statistics. The following are the key findings of this survey:

- An estimated 61% of those admitted to prison in 1979 were recidivists (i.e., they had previously served a sentence to incarceration as a juvenile, adult, or both). Of those entering prison without a history of incarceration (an estimated 39% of all admissions), nearly 60% had prior convictions that resulted in probation and an estimated 27% were on probation at the time of their prison admission.
- An estimated 46% of the recidivists entering prison in 1979 would still have been in prison at the time of their admission if they had fully served the maximum term¹ of their last sentence to confinement. This group, referred to as "avertable recidivists," constituted approximately 28% of all those who entered prison in 1979.
- Recidivists were estimated to account for approximately two-thirds

Few issues in criminal justice have drawn as much scholarly and public attention as the impact of recidivism on public safety and the implications of this issue for sentencing policy. Career criminal programs and mandatory or enhanced sentences for repeat offenders are examples of policies designed to reduce the threat recidivists pose to society. This special report presents important new findings relevant to the contemporary debate on recidivism, public safety, and sentencing policy.

Perhaps the most striking finding of this report is that approximately 28% of those who entered prison in 1979 would still have been in prison at the time of their admission if they had served their maximum prior confinement sentence. Most of these "avertable recidivists" were still on parole for a prior crime when they reentered prison. The study also found that about two-fifths of all offenders admitted to prison were on probation or parole (nearly equally divided) at the time of their admission.

This study is based upon the 1979 Survey of State Prison Inmates, the most recent of two major national inmate surveys sponsored by the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Through personal interviews with 9,040

inmates in 1974 and 11,397 inmates in 1979, these surveys collected detailed information on the Nation's prisoners, including accounts of prior convictions and incarcerations. Currently, the BJS inmate surveys are the only source of criminal history information for a representative sample of inmates in the Nation's State prisons. The wealth of data contained in these surveys is available to researchers in automated form through the BJS Criminal Justice Archive. A third survey is scheduled for later in 1985.

The findings presented in this special report, combined with the results of other research, raise serious questions about the impact of probation and parole decisions on public safety and create a challenge for those who shape sentencing policy.

Studies of this type are only possible with the generous cooperation of the departments of corrections of the 50 States and the District of Columbia. The Bureau of Justice Statistics wishes to express its continued gratitude to those who have assisted its efforts to collect accurate and timely data on corrections in the United States.

Steven R. Schlesinger
Director

¹The maximum term of confinement is defined in the Inmate Survey as the maximum sentence to incarceration imposed upon an offender by a sentencing court. Often courts impose a minimum and maximum sentence so that the sentence reflects a range of duration (e.g., 1 to 3 years). For purposes of this study, the maximum of the range imposed is considered to be the maximum sentence. Note that the maximum imposed sentence is not necessarily the same as the maximum sentence allowed by the statutes of a State.

or more of the burglaries, auto thefts, and forgery/fraud/embezzlement offenses attributable to all the admissions. When their past criminal histories were examined, however, recidivists were found to be as likely as first-time admissions to have a current or prior violent offense.

- Of the estimated 200,000 offenses reported by the 1979 prison admissions,

the "avertable recidivists" accounted for approximately 20% of the violent crimes, 28% of the burglaries and auto thefts, 30% of the forgery/fraud/embezzlement offenses, and 31% of the stolen property offenses.

- Based on recidivist self-reports of how long it took them to reenter prison by 1979, it is estimated that nearly half (48.7%) of all those who exit prison will

return within 20 years of release. Most of the recidivism, however, was found to occur within the first 3 years after release: an estimated 60% of those who will return to prison within 20 years do so by the end of the third year.

- Among the recidivists entering prison in 1979, those committing new offenses of robbery, burglary, and auto theft were found to return more rapidly than those committing other crimes.

- An estimated half of the recidivists had four or more prior sentences to probation, jail, or prison. About 1 in 9 of the recidivists had more than 10 prior convictions.

- An estimated 42% of those entering prison in 1979 were on probation or parole for prior offenses at the time of their admission.

Current interest in recidivism

In recent years many State legislatures have demonstrated popular concern for the impact of recidivism on public safety by instituting mandatory prison terms or sentence enhancements for repeat offenders. Other reforms—such as determinate sentencing, sentencing guidelines, and parole guidelines—have been introduced to limit discretion and make punishment policies explicit.

Available national data indicate that the certainty of imprisonment is increasing. Table 1 shows how the certainty of imprisonment has increased for arrested robbers. The estimated probability that an arrested robber would go to prison has increased from about 24% of those arrested in 1978 to nearly 35% in 1983. In addition, rates of prison commitment from courts evidence a similar pattern of increase from 1978 to 1983. In 1978, there were 7.2 court commitments to prison for every 10,000 adults in the general population. The equivalent rates were 7.4 in 1979, 8.0 in 1980, 9.0 in 1981, 9.8 in 1982, and 10.1 in 1983.

The increased reliance on imprisonment is not simply a reflection of hardening public attitudes toward crime and criminals. It is also based upon the growing body of knowledge about criminal careers and the likelihood that many offenders will continue to commit crimes after they are released from prison.

For example, the Bureau of Justice Statistics recently published prison return rates based upon official records in 14 States (*Returning to Prison*, November 1984, NCJ-95700) collected over a 3-year period after release. According to this study, 14-15% of in-

Table 1. Estimated probability of imprisonment given arrest for robbery, 1978-83

| Year | (A) Number entering prison with new offense | (B) Estimated percent robbers | (C) Estimated number robbers entering prison | (D) Number UCR robbery arrests | (E) Percent of robbery arrests who are adults | (F) Number adult robbers arrested | (G) Probability of imprisonment given arrest (C/F) |
|------|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| 1978 | 123,083 | x 18.9 = | 23,263 | 148,903 | x 66.0 = | 98,276 | .237 |
| 1979 | 129,614 | x 18.9 = | 24,497 | 140,640 | x 68.5 = | 96,338 | .254 |
| 1980 | 144,209 | x 18.9 = | 27,256 | 146,270 | x 69.9 = | 102,243 | .267 |
| 1981 | 164,857 | x 18.9 = | 31,158 | 153,890 | x 71.9 = | 110,647 | .282 |
| 1982 | 183,440 | x 18.9 = | 34,670 | 157,630 | x 73.6 = | 116,016 | .299 |
| 1983 | 197,006 | x 18.9 = | 37,234 | 146,170 | x 73.7 = | 107,727 | .346 |

Notes:
 (A) Admissions received from courts plus conditional release violators with new sentences obtained from National Prisoner Statistics.
 (B) Estimated from Prison Admissions and Releases, 1981, Table 3. The proportion was assumed to be stable over the 6-year period because table 4 of that report indicated a stable 39% violent admissions for 4 of the 6 years for which data are currently available.
 (D) Obtained from FBI Uniform Crime Reports tables on total estimated arrests.
 (E) Obtained from FBI Uniform Crime Reports tables on the age distribution of robbery arrestees.

mates return to prison within the first year after release, another 10% during the second year, and another 5% during the third year; about 30% of all releases were found to return to prison within 3 years. As will be shown in this report, the self-reported rates of prison return are nearly identical (29.4% as shown in table 3) to those gathered from official records.

Analyzing the inmate survey

The Bureau of Justice Statistics has

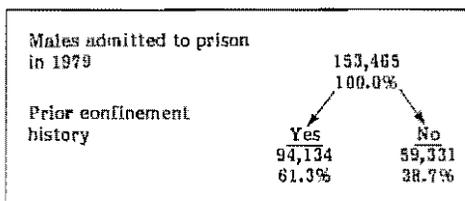


Figure 1

sponsored two nationwide surveys of inmates of State prisons. The first was conducted in January 1974 and the second in October and November 1979. Both surveys involved face-to-face interviews with large representative samples of inmates of State prisons.²

The findings presented in this report are based upon an admissions sample derived from the 1979 survey. An admissions sample was used to estimate how many recidivists entered prison and how much time had passed since their last release from incarceration. Because the survey was conducted during October and November 1979, a reference date of October 31, 1979, was chosen. Male inmates who reported entering State prison between

²The number of cases for the 1979 Survey of State Prison Inmates was 11,397.

Table 2. Location and year of last release from confinement for recidivists entering State prisons in 1979 (males only)

| Year of last release | Location of last release | | | | Total |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|
| | State prison | Jail | Juvenile facility | Other* | |
| 1979 | 18,067 | 8,842 | 2,662 | 740 | 30,311 |
| 1978 | 11,212 | 5,326 | 2,167 | 673 | 19,378 |
| 1977 | 6,923 | 3,706 | 1,139 | 506 | 12,274 |
| 1976 | 4,466 | 2,448 | 606 | 316 | 7,836 |
| 1975 | 3,869 | 1,589 | 667 | 86 | 6,211 |
| 1974 | 2,602 | 878 | 382 | 122 | 3,984 |
| 1973 | 1,735 | 618 | 414 | 138 | 2,905 |
| 1972 | 1,135 | 571 | 237 | 18 | 1,961 |
| 1971 | 967 | 509 | 116 | 45 | 1,637 |
| 1970 | 653 | 463 | 138 | 27 | 1,281 |
| 1969 | 654 | 235 | 90 | 26 | 1,005 |
| 1968 | 585 | 205 | 0 | 61 | 851 |
| 1967 | 489 | 248 | 144 | 0 | 881 |
| 1966 | 114 | 120 | 541 | 0 | 775 |
| 1965 | 326 | 241 | 38 | 88 | 693 |
| 1964 | 184 | 203 | 0 | 55 | 442 |
| 1963 | 307 | 143 | 0 | 60 | 510 |
| 1962 | 206 | 29 | 59 | 57 | 351 |
| 1961 | 170 | 91 | 0 | 32 | 293 |
| 1960 | 90 | 62 | 0 | 39 | 191 |
| 1959 and earlier | 490 | 182 | 60 | 119 | 851 |
| Total | 55,244 | 26,709 | 8,973 | 3,208 | 94,134 |
| Percent of recidivists | 58.7% | 28.4% | 9.5% | 3.4% | 100.0% |
| Median time to prison entry since last confinement | 22.4 mos. | 22.3 mos. | 22.3 mos. | 29.2 mos. | 22.5 mos. |

*Includes federal and military facilities.

November 1, 1978, and October 31, 1979, were selected to represent a 1-year sample of male admissions. A total of 5,357 inmates were included in the sample, representing 153,465 admissions. (For more detail on the construction and analysis of the sample, see the Methodological Note at the end of this report.)

One assumption underlying the research is that those who return most rapidly after release from confinement are the most criminally active offenders. Because the survey was conducted only among those in prison, it is not possible to describe persons who do not reenter confinement. Future studies must examine the level of criminal activity among those who continue in crime but manage to evade reimprisonment and those who disengage entirely from crime.

Estimating recidivism

Figure 1 illustrates the estimated distribution of recidivists (those with any prior adult or juvenile sentences to incarceration in a prison, jail, or juvenile facility) and first-time admissions based on the admissions sample derived from the inmate survey. An estimated 61.3% of male State prison admittees in 1979 had a history of incarceration as either a juvenile or an adult or both.

Table 2 shows where the recidivists were last confined (preceding the 1979 admission) and the year of their last release. An estimated 59% of the recidivists who entered State prison in 1979 were last incarcerated in a State prison facility (or about 36% of all 153,465 admissions that year). Substantial numbers also enter State prisons after serving time in a local jail (28.4% of recidivists and 17.4% of all admissions) or in a juvenile facility (9.5% of recidivists and 5.8% of all admissions). The median time to prison entry was about the same regardless of where the recidivists were last confined—about 22 months after release.

Assuming that those recidivists who entered prison in 1979 represent a typical admission cohort, it is possible to estimate how many releasees would be back in prison after a specified number of years. Table 3 presents a 20-year estimate of returns to prison (derived from table 2). It shows the number of inmates who reported a last release from a State prison in a particular year and reentered a State prison in 1979 (columns A and B). The total number of prison inmates released in each year (column C), is used to estimate how long (until admission in 1979) it took recidivists to reenter prison (column D). These yearly estimates are then cumulated (column E) to

Table 3. Constructing a 20-year estimate for returning to State prison

| (A) Year of last release | (B) Number entering prison in 1979 | (C) Total number released from State prisons in that year | (D) Percent returning to prison by 1979 (B/C) | (E) Cumulative return rate through year 20 | (F) Percent of total returns occurring in each year ^a |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1979 | 18,067 | 128,980 | 14.01% | 14.01% (1) | 20.7% |
| 1978 | 11,212 | 118,920 | 9.43 | 23.44 (2) | 19.3 |
| 1977 | 6,923 | 116,162 | 5.96 | 29.40 (3) | 12.2 |
| 1976 | 4,466 | 108,442 | 4.12 | 33.52 (4) | 8.5 |
| 1975 | 3,869 | 109,035 | 3.55 | 37.07 (5) | 7.5 |
| 1974 | 2,602 | 91,183 | 2.85 | 39.92 (6) | 5.8 |
| 1973 | 1,735 | 95,324 | 1.82 | 41.74 (7) | 3.7 |
| 1972 | 1,135 | 96,373 | 1.18 | 42.92 (8) | 2.4 |
| 1971 | 967 | 96,701 | 1.00 | 43.92 (9) | 2.1 |
| 1970 | 653 | 76,649 | 0.85 | 44.77 (10) | 1.7 |
| 1969 | 654 | 74,109 | 0.88 | 45.65 (11) | 1.8 |
| 1968 | 585 | 70,250 | 0.83 | 46.48 (12) | 1.7 |
| 1967 | 489 | 79,835 | 0.61 | 47.09 (13) | 1.3 |
| 1966 | 114 | 83,237 | 0.14 | 47.23 (14) | 0.3 |
| 1965 | 326 | 86,876 | 0.38 | 47.61 (15) | 0.8 |
| 1964 | 184 | 87,030 | 0.21 | 47.82 (16) | 0.4 |
| 1963 | 307 | 85,101 | 0.36 | 48.18 (17) | 0.7 |
| 1962 | 206 | 86,589 | 0.24 | 48.42 (18) | 0.5 |
| 1961 | 170 | 81,599 | 0.21 | 48.63 (19) | 0.4 |
| 1960 | 90 | 77,870 | 0.12 | 48.75 (20) | 0.2 |

Note: Column B derived from table 2. Column C derived from National Prisoner Statistics.
^a Total returns over the 20-year period.

Does not include those released from prison prior to 1960. Column F was calculated by dividing column D by 48.75 from column E.

provide the estimated proportion returning by year 20. Column F shows the proportion of all returns (over the 20-year period) estimated to occur in each year. This approach, though relying on retrospective, cross-sectional data, attempts to provide a prospective, longitudinal estimate of prison return rates. The method assumes that future releasee behavior will be similar to that of offenders released in earlier years.

These calculations show that nearly 49% of State prisoners return to prison within a 20-year period after release. Most of the recidivism, however, occurs within the first few years after release. An estimated 28.7% of those who will recidivate over 20 years return to prison within 1 year of release; 48.1% within 2 years; and 60.3% within 3 years. Clearly, the greatest risk for public safety is within the first few years after release from prison.

These cumulative return rates estimated from self-report data are consistent with the return rates obtained from official records noted earlier (see *Returning to Prison*, November 1984, NCJ-95700). The correspondence between these two data sources suggests that offenders reliably report information on their recent confinement histories. (By the third year official-record estimates are that 30% of those released will have returned to prison compared to 29.4% derived from the inmate survey.) The reliability of the self-report data is indicated even for prior releases occurring many years earlier. In their study of 1956 Federal releasees, Kitchener, Schmidt, and Glaser found that 47.4% of those exiting prison received confinement sentences

of a year or more within 15 years of prison release, nearly identical to the 47.6% estimated here (see table 4).

Age and time to prison return

Table 5 shows the rates of prison return by age at last release. The younger the releasee, the higher is the rate of prison return within the first year. While an estimated 21.8% of those 18 to 24 years old at release return to prison within the first year, 12.1% of those aged 25 to 34 at release, 7.1% of those aged 35 to 44, and 2.1% of those aged 45 and over do so within the first year. Similarly, through 7 years after release nearly half (49.9%) of those aged 18 to 24 at release will have returned to prison, compared to 12.4% of those 45 and over at release. Interestingly, offenders released from

Table 4. Comparison of prison return rates through year 15: Inmate survey and Kitchener, Schmidt, Glaser followup

| Number of years after release | Cumulative return rate | |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|
| | Inmate survey estimate | Kitchener, Schmidt, Glaser |
| 1 | 14.01% | 8.56% |
| 2 | 23.44 | 26.09 |
| 3 | 29.40 | 34.22 |
| 5 | 37.06 | 41.22 |
| 10 | 44.77 | 46.67 |
| 15 | 47.61 | 47.44 |

Note: The Kitchener, Schmidt, Glaser follow-up was conducted with 927 inmates released from Federal prisons in 1956 and tracked through FBI rap sheets and contact with local arresting authorities to obtain dispositional information. The return definition used for comparison (parole violation or new sentences to confinement of more than 1 year) was used to approximate closely the return-to-prison definition used for the inmate survey. Data were supplied by Annesley Schmidt (see Kitchener, et al., 1977).

prison at age 45 and older demonstrate a relatively stable pattern over time, with between 1% and 2% returning to prison each year. These data indicate that the most rapid failures after release occur among the youngest releasees. Consequently, the estimate that 14% of those released from prison will return within 1 year masks considerable variation across the different age groups.

Offense and time to prison return

Table 6 shows, by offense, the median time to prison return for recidivists who received sentences for new crimes (excluding those returned as parole violators only). Estimated median return times for those committing new offenses of burglary (19.7 months), auto theft (20.3 months), and robbery (21.1 months) were the most rapid rates of prison reentry. By contrast, median prison return times for those committing murder (38.9 months), drug offenses (37.0 months), and assault (32.1 months) were the longest.

Table 6 also shows the proportion of those returning to prison within 20 years who do so in the first year after release for each offense type. Those committing new offenses of burglary, auto theft, and robbery have the highest proportions of first-year failures.

Prison entry and prior sentence

Another way to examine recidivism is to distinguish recidivists who entered prison in 1979 who would still have been incarcerated at the time of their admission had they fully served the maximum term of their last confinement sentence (whether in a prison, jail, or juvenile facility). Those whose prior sentence would have extended beyond their 1979 admission date are referred to as "avertable recidivists." By contrast, those whose 1979 admission to prison would not have been affected by their prior confinement sentence are called "nonavertable recidivists." Those who had never received a prior confinement sentence are defined as "first-timers."

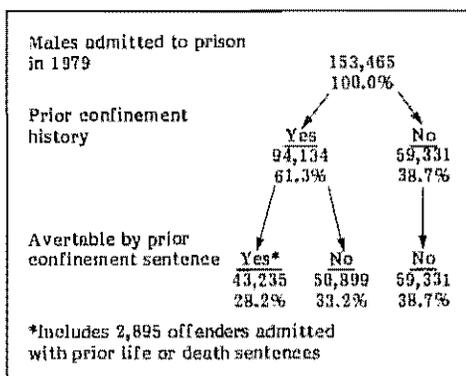


Figure 2

Table 5. Cumulative rates of return to prison by age groups

| Number of years after prison release | Age at last release from State prison | | | | | Median age of those returning |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------|-------|------|----------|-------------------------------|
| | 18-24 | 25-34 | 35-44 | 45+ | All ages | |
| 1 year | 21.8% | 12.1% | 7.1% | 2.1% | 14.0% | 23.5 years |
| 2 | 34.2 | 21.3 | 14.0 | 3.7 | 23.4 | 25.5 |
| 3 | 41.1 | 27.9 | 18.3 | 5.7 | 29.4 | 26.3 |
| 4 | 44.8 | 32.7 | 22.4 | 7.9 | 33.5 | 27.2 |
| 5 | 47.8 | 37.0 | 26.3 | 9.7 | 37.1 | 27.8 |
| 6 | 49.4 | 40.8 | 30.2 | 10.8 | 40.0 | 28.6 |
| 7 | 49.9 | 42.8 | 34.0 | 12.4 | 41.7 | 32.4 |

Table 6. Median time (in months) to prison return and percent returning in first year after release by new admission offense (in 1979)

| New admission offense | Median months to prison return | Percent returning in first year after release ^a |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Violent | 27.9 | 24.3% |
| Murder | 38.9 | 17.2 |
| Rape/sexual assault | 28.6 | 15.1 |
| Robbery | 21.1 | 29.4 |
| Assault | 32.1 | 22.3 |
| Property | 21.9 | 26.4 |
| Burglary | 19.7 | 30.1 |
| Auto theft | 20.3 | 29.8 |
| Forgery/fraud/embezzlement | 27.6 | 21.7 |
| Larceny | 24.9 | 23.3 |
| Stolen property | 27.7 | 24.9 |
| Drugs | 37.0 | 21.5 |
| Public order/other | 27.6 | 23.5 |
| All crimes | 26.0 ^b | 25.1 ^b |

Note: Excludes those admitted as conditional release violators without new sentences.

^a Percent of all those returning over 20 years who return in first year after release.

^b The median time to prison return and the proportion returning in the first year after release are different from tables 3, 4, and 5 because conditional release violators without new offenses have been excluded. Conditional release violators had a median time to prison return of 12.6 months; the effect of this group would be to decrease the median (to 22.4 months) and increase the percent returning in the first year (to 28.7%).

Figure 2 illustrates the estimated distribution of avertable recidivists, nonavertable recidivists, and first-time admissions of males entering State prisons in 1979. First-timers constituted an estimated 38.7% of those entering prison in 1979; nonavertable recidivists were an additional 33.2%; and avertable recidivists were 28.2% of admissions. Thus, about 46% (28.2%/ 61.3%) of the recidivists entering prison in 1979 would not have been free to commit their most recent offense if they had served their entire prior sentence to confinement. Some of the recidivists returned to prison not with a new sen-

tence but for violating the conditions of a prior release. Among those admitted to prison in 1979 with new sentences, first-timers were estimated to be 40.6% of the total; nonavertable recidivists were 34.5%; and avertable recidivists were 24.9% (table 7).

Table 8 provides the admission offense distribution for those entering prison in 1979 with new crimes only (excluding conditional release violators) by the three admission types. (Because some inmates were convicted of more than one crime, there are more admission offenses—200,189—than persons admitted with new offenses—145,993.) As the table illustrates, an estimated 24.4% of the admission offenses were committed by avertable recidivists, including 20.3% of the violent offenses and 27.9% of the property offenses. The proportion of violent crimes committed by avertable recidivists was highest for assault (23.2%) and robbery (22.2%). With respect to property crimes, the avertable recidivists were estimated to account for 28.3% of the burglaries, 28.2% of the auto thefts, 30.3% of the forgery/fraud/embezzlement offenses, 27.1% of the larcenies, and 30.8% of the stolen property offenses.

Table 8 also shows that first-timers are overrepresented (i.e., they represent a larger proportion of a particular offense category than of all admissions) for violent crimes such as murder, rape, and robbery. By contrast, the two recidivist groups are overrepresented for property offenses. The recidivists represent an estimated 59.4% of the admissions with new offenses but account for 67.3% of the burglaries, 67.4% of the auto thefts, and 70.8% of the forgery/fraud/embezzlements.

These data suggest the importance of both the seriousness of the current offense and the prior criminal record in the imprisonment decisions of courts.

Table 7. Distribution of 1979 admission types with and without new sentences

| New sentence status | Admission types | | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|--------------|---------|
| | Non-avertable recidivists | Avvertable recidivists | First-timers | Total |
| Number entering in 1979 | 50,899 | 43,235 | 59,331 | 153,465 |
| Without sentences for new crimes | 549 | 6,923 | 0 | 7,472 |
| With sentences for new crimes | 50,350 | 36,312 | 59,331 | 145,993 |
| Percent of total with new sentences | 34.5% | 24.9% | 40.6% | 100.0% |

For those with no prior record, it is generally the most serious offenses that result in imprisonment. Conversely, for those with extensive criminal histories, a less serious offense may be adjudged imprisonable. Thus the likelihood of going to prison is related to both the seriousness of the current offense and prior record and is consistent with the theory of retributive social debt justice (see Boland and Wilson, 1978).³

The prevalence of violence among those entering prison

The above data might suggest that recidivists mainly commit property offenses. Indeed, as table 9 shows, 55.9% of the nonavertable recidivists and 59.5% of the avertable recidivists entered prison in 1979 for a nonviolent crime. If, however, offenses associated with prior incarcerations are also considered, then the prevalence of violence among the two recidivist groups rises to more than a majority. As table 9 shows, an estimated 56.8% of the nonavertable recidivists and 53.7% of the avertable recidivists have been incarcerated for a violent offense at some time over their criminal careers. These proportions are not significantly different from the estimated 54.5% of the first-timers incarcerated for a violent offense. These data suggest that recidivists are as likely as first-time prison admissions to have committed violent crimes. In addition, these data indicate that violent offenders are more numerous in the current prison population than is often reported by studies that fail to consider prior criminal history.

Comparing recidivists and first-timers

Table 10 compares the two recidivist groups and first-timers across nine variables. There are no significant differences between the recidivists and the first-timers with respect to race, educational attainment, marital status, and alcohol use at the time of the offense. More substantial differences exist for age at prison admission, military service, employment record, family member incarceration history, and drug use.

The recidivists tend to be older than those entering prison for the first time in 1979. They are also more likely to have been unemployed at the time of their arrest, to have a family member who had been incarcerated, and to have used illegal drugs. Prior use of heroin was significantly more prevalent among the two recidivist groups: 24.2% of the

³This has been referred to as the theory of retributive social debt justice. The theory predicts that those in prison with the least criminal history will have the most serious offenses and those with the most criminal history will have the least serious offenses.

Table 8. Offense distribution of 1979 admissions with new sentences by admission type^a

| Offense | Admission types | | | Total | Number of offenses |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|--------------|-------|----------------------|
| | Non-avertable recidivists | Avertable recidivists | First-timers | | |
| Percent of conviction offenses accounted for by each admission type | | | | | |
| All crimes | 34.8% | 24.4% | 40.8% | 100% | 200,189 ^c |
| Violent | 32.4 | 20.3 | 47.4* | 100 | 79,391 |
| Murder/manslaughter | 27.1 | 15.7 | 57.2* | 100 | 7,469 |
| Rape/sexual assault | 24.9 | 18.7 | 56.4* | 100 | 10,300 |
| Robbery | 32.5 | 22.2 | 45.3* | 100 | 35,331 |
| Assault ^b | 40.3* | 23.2 | 36.5 | 100 | 17,020 |
| Other violent | 29.9 | 12.9 | 57.2* | 100 | 9,271 |
| Property | 38.4* | 27.9* | 33.7 | 100 | 84,169 |
| Burglary | 39.0* | 28.3* | 32.7 | 100 | 40,381 |
| Auto theft | 39.2* | 28.2* | 32.0 | 100 | 6,740 |
| Forgery/fraud/embezzlement | 40.5* | 30.3* | 29.2 | 100 | 10,691 |
| Larceny | 34.9* | 27.1* | 38.0 | 100 | 17,095 |
| Stolen property | 35.9* | 30.8* | 33.2 | 100 | 5,062 |
| Other property | 42.5* | 18.0 | 39.5 | 100 | 4,260 |
| Drugs | 30.4 | 24.3 | 45.2* | 100 | 17,634 |
| Public order/other | 32.9 | 26.3* | 40.8 | 100 | 18,995 |

Note: As shown in table 7, nonavertable offenders are 34.5% of the admissions with new crimes, avertable offenders are 24.9%, and first-time offenders are 40.6%. Items marked with an asterisk on this table indicate where an admission type is overrepresented for a particular offense relative to their distribution among all admissions.

^a Excludes 7,472 revoked conditional release violators.

^b Includes attempted murder.

^c The number of offenses exceeds the number of offenders because some offenders have more than one conviction offense. The number of offenders with new crimes was 145,993.

nonavertable recidivists and 28.0% of the avertable recidivists reported regular use of heroin at some time in the past.

Prior military service also presents an interesting contrast between the two recidivist groups and the first-timers. The three groups are equally likely to have served in the military, but of those who did serve, recidivists are more likely than first-timers to have received an unacceptable discharge or a sentence to confinement. In fact, about a quarter of the recidivists who served in the military spent some time in military confinement.

Although significant differences can be seen between recidivists and first-timers with respect to age, military service record, employment, family involvement in crime, and drug use, there seems to be little difference be-

tween the avertable and nonavertable recidivists for the nine variables considered here. One minor exception is age. Although the median ages for the two recidivist groups are nearly the same, a significantly larger fraction of nonavertables are under 22 years old. The fact that the two recidivist groups are generally similar suggests that it would be quite difficult to discriminate between them for the purposes of prospective prediction.

Entry to prison from probation and parole

As indicated in table 11, an estimated 41.6% of all those entering State prison in 1979 were on either probation or parole for prior offenses at the time of their admission. The two categories were almost equally divided: 21.1% of those entering were on probation and 20.5% were on parole or some other

Table 9. Prevalence of violence among those entering prison in 1979

| | Admission types | | | | | | Total number |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|--------------|----------------------|--------------|
| | Nonavertable recidivists | | Avertable recidivists | | First-timers | | |
| | Number | Percent of this type | Number | Percent of this type | Number | Percent of this type | |
| 1979 admissions | | | | | | | |
| Total admitted in 1979 | 50,899 | 100.0% | 43,235 | 100.0% | 59,331 | 100.0% | 153,465 |
| Admitted in 1979 for a violent offense | 22,429 | 44.1 | 17,512 | 40.5 | 32,339 | 54.5 | 72,280 |
| Admitted in 1979 for a nonviolent offense, but previously incarcerated for a violent offense | 6,489 | 12.7 | 5,698 | 13.2 | — | — | 12,187 |
| Total incarcerated at some time for a violent offense | 28,918 | 56.8 | 23,210 | 53.7 | 32,339 | 54.5 | 84,467 |

Note: These data include conditional release violators whose current offense(s) is considered

to be the offense(s) for which they were last confined preceding their conditional release.

form of conditional release. This suggests that improved selection for probation (versus prison) could possibly avert as much crime through incapacitation as proper selection for parole or other conditional release. Further research on the crime rates of probationers and parolees is necessary to establish this point.

Table 11 also indicates that an estimated 27.1% of those who entered prison for the first time in 1979 were on probation for a prior conviction at the time of their admission. Thus, "first-timers" (in terms of admission to prison) are not necessarily "first offenders." This is shown in greater detail in table 12. An estimated 59.4% of the first-timers have at least one prior conviction resulting in a sentence to probation; 29.1% have two or more such prior convictions. In fact, 38.7% of the admissions are serving their first confinement sentence, but only 16.1% of admissions (about 1 in 6 inmates) have no prior convictions.

The recidivists generally have more than three times as many prior convictions as the first-timers. Nonavertable recidivists were estimated to have a median of 4.3 prior convictions compared to a median of 4.6 for the avertable recidivists entering prison in 1979. By contrast, first-time admissions were estimated to have a median of 1.3 prior convictions. In fact, nearly 1 in 10 (9.5%) of the nonavertable recidivists and 1 in 8 (13.8%) of the avertable recidivists were estimated to have more than 10 prior convictions.

Conclusion

The results presented in this study add to the growing body of knowledge of the impact of recidivists on crime and corrections. An estimated three-fifths of those admitted to prison in 1979 had previously served a sentence of incarceration as a juvenile, adult, or both. Although the recidivists were more likely than the first-timers to enter prison for a nonviolent offense, the prevalence of violence was found to be the same for both groups when criminal histories were taken into consideration. Many of these recidivists had long criminal records: about half had 4 or more prior sentences to probation, jail, or prison, and 1 in 9 had more than 10 prior sentences.

Even more striking than these results is the finding that nearly half of the recidivists who entered prison in 1979 would still have been in prison at the time of their admission if they had fully served the maximum term of their last confinement sentence. These "avertable recidivists" were estimated to account for a quarter of all the of-

| Characteristics | Admission types | | | Total |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|--------------|------------|
| | Non-avertable recidivists | Avertable recidivists | First-timers | |
| Number of admissions | 50,899 | 43,235 | 59,331 | 153,465 |
| Age at admission (cumulative) | | | | |
| 18 years old or less | 4.0% | 1.2% | 5.1% | 3.6% |
| 20 or less | 15.6 | 18.4 | 22.2 | 17.0 |
| 22 or less | 29.1 | 21.5 | 41.6 | 31.8 |
| 24 or less | 40.5 | 37.0 | 55.1 | 45.2 |
| 26 or less | 52.4 | 49.0 | 65.3 | 56.6 |
| 28 or less | 65.1 | 66.1 | 75.6 | 69.5 |
| 32 or less | 74.9 | 76.4 | 82.4 | 78.2 |
| 36 or less | 83.4 | 87.0 | 88.3 | 86.3 |
| 40 or less | 90.0 | 91.8 | 91.5 | 91.1 |
| 50 or less | 96.4 | 97.7 | 96.9 | 96.9 |
| 51+ | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| Median age | 25.6 years | 26.2 years | 23.2 years | 24.9 years |
| Race | | | | |
| White | 50.7% | 55.9% | 54.7% | 53.7% |
| Black | 46.5 | 41.2 | 42.6 | 43.5 |
| Other | 2.8 | 2.9 | 2.7 | 2.8 |
| Education | | | | |
| 0-6 years | 6.8% | 4.3% | 5.3% | 5.2% |
| 7-8 years | 12.8 | 12.6 | 8.3 | 11.0 |
| 9-11 years | 51.6 | 48.0 | 49.4 | 49.7 |
| 12 years | 20.8 | 23.2 | 25.0 | 23.1 |
| More than 12 years | 8.7 | 12.0 | 12.0 | 10.9 |
| Median | 10.2 years | 10.4 years | 10.5 years | 10.4 years |
| Marital status | | | | |
| Married | 26.2% | 26.1% | 25.2% | 25.8% |
| Widowed/divorced/separated | 23.3 | 24.2 | 18.5 | 21.7 |
| Never married | 50.5 | 49.7 | 56.3 | 52.5 |
| Military service | | | | |
| Percent with military service | 22.9% | 21.3% | 26.8% | 24.0% |
| Percent of those serving with undesirable/bad conduct/dishonorable discharges | 29.5 | 23.5 | 11.6 | 20.4 |
| Percent of those serving who were sentenced to confinement in the military | 25.9 | 23.7 | 10.8 | 18.8 |
| Employed prior to arrest | | | | |
| No | 28.0% | 28.8% | 22.5% | 26.1% |
| Full-time | 60.0 | 61.9 | 66.0 | 63.2 |
| Part-time | 12.0 | 9.3 | 10.7 | 10.7 |
| Family member ever incarcerated | 40.7% | 39.8% | 27.3% | 35.3% |
| Drug user | | | | |
| Ever use heroin regularly | 24.2% | 28.0% | 11.4% | 20.3% |
| Use heroin month before arrest | 10.9 | 13.8 | 5.5 | 9.5 |
| Under influence any drug at time of offense | 35.7 | 37.0 | 29.1 | 33.7 |
| Under influence heroin at time of offense | 7.9 | 10.4 | 3.5 | 6.9 |
| Alcohol use | | | | |
| Drinking at time of offense | 52.2% | 48.8% | 49.2% | 50.1% |
| Very drunk at time of offense (percent of those drinking) | 39.3 | 36.1 | 33.4 | 36.1 |

| Status at admission | Admission types | | | Total |
|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|--------------|---------|
| | Non-avertable recidivists | Avertable recidivists | First-timers | |
| Number of admissions | 50,899 | 43,235 | 59,331 | 153,465 |
| Percent of admissions on each type of supervision | | | | |
| No supervision | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| Probation | 66.7 | 28.8 | 72.9 | 58.4 |
| Parole/other conditional release ^a | 25.5 | 7.8 | 27.1 | 21.1 |
| | 7.8 | 63.4 | — | 20.5 |

^a Includes persons admitted as escapees.

fenses for which the 1979 inmates were convicted—including 22% of the robberies, 23% of the assaults, and 28% of the burglaries.

parole decisions, and the incapacitative effects of imprisonment.

Findings of this type are directly relevant to issues of sentencing policy,

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Table 12. Prior conviction history at time of entry to State prison in 1979

| Number of prior convictions | Admission types | | | |
|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------|---------|
| | Non- avertable recidivists | Avertable recidivists | First-timers | Total |
| Number of admissions | 50,899 | 41,235 | 59,331 | 153,465 |
| Percent of each admission type with prior convictions | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| No prior convictions | 0.0 | 0.0 | 40.6 | 16.1 |
| 1 prior conviction | 10.1 | 14.2 | 30.3 | 19.2 |
| 2 | 19.1 | 16.0 | 15.3 | 16.8 |
| 3 | 17.0 | 13.1 | 5.3 | 11.3 |
| 4 | 13.6 | 10.9 | 2.7 | 8.6 |
| 5 | 8.5 | 8.6 | 2.1 | 6.0 |
| 6-10 | 23.2 | 23.4 | 2.6 | 14.7 |
| 11-20 | 7.7 | 11.1 | 0.8 | 5.9 |
| 21+ | 1.8 | 2.7 | 0.3 | 1.4 |
| Median number of convictions per offender | 4.3 | 4.6 | 1.3 | 2.9 |

Note: Prior conviction history is defined as the sum of all prior juvenile or adult sentences to probation, jail, prison, or juvenile facilities.

Methodological note

The weighted estimate for the study sample of 5,357 was 153,465. Census data place the number of males admitted to State prisons during 1979 with sentences longer than 1 year at 147,957. Because the inmate survey estimate included all males admitted (regardless of sentence length), some of the difference between the two numbers could be accounted for by offenders who were admitted with sentences of less than 1 year. Analysis of the survey sample yielded an estimated 149,628 inmates admitted to prison in 1979 with sentences longer than 1 year. This difference of 1,671 between the two measures of prison admissions could be

attributed to the fact that this study design equates the 12 months prior to October 31, 1979, with the 12 months of calendar 1979.

To assess the representative validity of the study sample, the self-reported race, age, and offense data of the sample were compared to the same data for admissions to prison in 1981 derived from official records in 33 jurisdictions (1981 is the only year for which published data are available; see *Prison Admissions and Releases, 1981*, Sept. 1984, NCJ-95043). Appendix A shows that the two groups are quite similar in terms of the distributions of age and race (official records often classify Native Americans and Asian/Pacific Islanders as white). Offense distributions, however, are significantly different for the two data sources; the inmate survey reflects a higher proportion of violent offenders. The reasons for such differences may relate to the representativeness of the 33 States for which data were available, the years being compared, or the rules under which offenses may have been recorded.

All differences reported as significant in the text were tested at the 90% confidence level (1.6 standard errors).

| Appendix A. Comparison of 1979 sample survey admissions to 1981 State prison admissions ^a | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|
| Characteristic | Sample survey 1979 | Official records 1981 ^a |
| Number of cases | 5,357 | 109,223 |
| Weighted estimate | 153,465 | |
| Race, total | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| White | 53.7 | 55.5 |
| Black | 43.5 | 43.5 |
| Other | 2.8 | 1.0 |
| Age, total | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| 17 or less | 1.4 | 1.3 |
| 18-24 | 44.0 | 43.2 |
| 25-34 | 37.3 | 38.9 |
| 35-44 | 11.3 | 11.5 |
| 45-54 | 4.2 | 3.8 |
| 55+ | 1.8 | 1.4 |
| Median age | 25 | 25 |
| Offense distribution total | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| Violent, total | 46.4 | 38.5 |
| Murder/manslaughter/ attempted murder | 9.3 | 7.1 |
| Rape/sexual assault | 5.5 | 4.3 |
| Robbery | 22.3 | 18.9 |
| Assault | 8.2 | 6.9 |
| Other | 1.1 | 1.2 |
| Property, total | 39.9 | 48.0 |
| Burglary | 23.2 | 27.2 |
| Larceny | 5.8 | 9.0 |
| Auto theft | 2.8 | 1.5 |
| Forgery/fraud/ embezzlement | 5.0 | 5.9 |
| Other | 3.1 | 4.4 |
| Drugs, total | 8.1 | 7.7 |
| Public order/other, total | 5.6 | 5.8 |

^a From official 1981 records from 33 States.

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