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Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report

Returning to prison

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Many persons now in prison have been there before, and many will return at some point after their next release. The number and characteristics of those who are incarcerated more than once have always been of importance to policymakers, administrators, and researchers in the criminal justice field who wish to promote public safety consistent with the needs of both offenders and society as a whole. Increasingly in recent years, they have sought better ways to use prison capacity consistent with concepts of incapacitation and deterrence.

In response to demand for State-level information on repeat incarceration, a special data collection project was undertaken in 1983 by Statistical Analysis Centers (SACs) and other agencies in various States under the sponsorship of the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS).

Allowing for interstate differences in both the scope and objectives of criminal justice statistical programs, initial analysis of the collected data shows, among other findings, remarkably similar rates of return to prison for follow-up periods of the same duration. This and other findings derived from data in this pilot project suggest that a larger scale statistical program for tracking releases would constitute an important supplement to both regular and one-time BJS projects on prisoner recidivism.

Defining recidivism

Given the diversity of legal and penal systems among the various States, as well as differences in their information and research needs, it is not surprising to find a variety of

The rate at which released prisoners return to confinement is a major consideration in the use of limited prison space and an indication of the efficacy of imprisonment as a strategy in crime control. Moreover, monitoring release populations provides an opportunity to compare behavior of offenders in confinement with that in the community environment.

Existing annual statistical programs provide a base for analyzing various aspects of prison populations: numbers and types of admissions and releases (**Prisoners in State and Federal Institutions**); detailed sociodemographic and criminal justice characteristics of persons entering and leaving State prisons in a given year (**Prison Admissions and Releases**); and detailed characteristics of persons entering and exiting parole (**Characteristics of the Parole Population**).

This report, based on special data furnished by State authorities, provides baseline information on those

offenders who are released to the community and then returned to prison at some point in the course of a specific follow-up period. These include both conditional releasees, such as parole violators, and unconditional releasees (e.g., prisoners whose terms have expired).

The most important finding from the data provided by more than 20 States for this pilot project is that close to a third of State prisoners released returned to prison within 3 years and more than a quarter were back in 2 years or less. The study identifies characteristics closely associated with probability of return to prison, including the nature of commitment offense, offender age, and number of prior incarcerations.

It is hoped that studies of this type will help in the evaluation of alternative corrections strategies such as incarceration, community-based treatment, and supervised release.

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interpretations of recidivism. In its broadest context, it properly refers to the multiple occurrence of any of the following key events in the overall criminal justice process:

- commission of a crime
- arrest
- charge
- conviction
- sentencing
- incarceration

In the order given, these six phases represent an increasingly deeper penetration by offenders into the criminal justice system, and each is an impor-

tant target for criminal justice statistics programs. As used in this report (and generally in criminal justice literature), recidivism refers to reincarceration or the return of released sentenced offenders to the custody of State correctional authorities.¹ Similarly, a recidivism rate is construed as the cumulative percentage of a prison-release population returned to prison during a specified follow-up period.

It should be noted that, because individual States collect the data upon which this study is based, persons

released from prison in one State and subsequently incarcerated in another for a criminal violation generally are not included. Consequently, the estimated extent of recidivism among prison releasees is understated to an unknown extent.

State responses in this pilot project, as well as studies from other sources, identify two basically different approaches to the study of criminal backgrounds of repeat offenders:

- asking prisoners about their past contacts with the criminal justice system (i.e., self-reports); and
- using official documents to keep track of prior incarceration and/or post-release returns to prison.

The former method was used, for example, in national-level sample surveys of prison inmates for 1974 and 1979 sponsored by BJS; the latter is the method used in this project, as well as in the BJS series on persons confined in the Nation's prisons at yearend; those admitted or released during the year, and those living in the community while on probation or parole.² Responses to requests for data for this report show that not all States systematically keep data on post-release failures, the approach to recidivism used in this analysis.³

Key finding: Similarity of recidivism rates

The most important finding from the examination of the data provided for this pilot project is a marked similarity in the recidivism rates among the 14 listed States (table 1). Close to a third of State prisoners released recidivated within 3 years, and a quarter were back in 2 years or less. The median rate for the 2-year period is 26%, which—when the lowest (Colorado) and the highest (Minnesota) rates are set aside—is only 5 percentage points above the smallest rate and 3 points below the largest. (The comparatively high rate in Minnesota, a State with a relatively low incarceration rate and a strong community corrections program, may be attributable to differences in the composition of the inmate population.)

Table 1 also shows a similar pattern in the first- and third-year recidivism rates, with Minnesota again providing an obvious contrast. For both the first and third years, there is also a fairly high degree of clustering about the median recidivism rates, 14.9% and 31.5%, respectively.

As already noted, differentials in the scope and definitions used in calculating individual State recidivism

State and year of release reported	Number of releasees	The cumulative percent of prison releasees who returned to prison within		
		1 year	2 years	3 years
Colorado, 1980	1,288	8.2%	18.5%	24.1%
Georgia, 1980	6,583	14.5	26.8	34.9
Iowa, 1980	605	16.3	21.8	23.3
Massachusetts, 1976	923	18.0	28.0	32.0
Minnesota, 1980	1,133	26.0	37.0	40.0 ^a
Mississippi, 1978	1,417 ^b	13.3	23.6	27.8
Nebraska, 1979 ^c	646	14.1	22.5	27.9
New York, 1980	7,661	11.1	25.9	33.7
North Carolina, 1979	9,630 ^c	14.9	26.3	31.6
Oklahoma, 1976-1977	1,906 ^d	9.8	21.0	27.8
Oregon, 1979	1,782 ^e	17.2	27.6	32.2
Rhode Island, 1978	401 ^f	20.2	28.9	36.2
Washington, 1979	1,909	12.4	22.3	28.3
Wisconsin, 1980	1,616	16.8	25.7	31.3
Median of reporting States		14.9	26.1	31.5
Mean of reporting States		15.2	25.4	30.8

Note: Unless otherwise noted, number of releasees excludes persons being held for another agency, interinstitutional or interstate transfers, AWOLs, escapes, and deaths.
^a Data are for July 1, 1983, resulting in a 2 1/2-year follow-up period for the portion of the cohort released in the second half of 1980.
^b Estimate based on half-year total.
^c Fiscal 1978-79.
^d Figure is half of a 2-year total of 3,812, from which a 15% sample was drawn.
^e Excludes 100 inmates with offense data missing.
^f Includes prison and jail inmates, as State has an integrated jail-prison system.

rates must be weighed in drawing conclusions based on these findings, and follow-on research will continue to examine potential factors underlying observed disparity. Nevertheless, these data strongly suggest that the proportions of releasee failures among States are similar. Despite differences among States in those admitted to and/or released from prison, the proportions of those considered recidivists by individual States closely resemble each other.

Most critical period

After the first year, the greater the amount of time a releasee remains in the community without reincarceration, the less are his or her chances of returning to prison. Table 2 shows the

percentage of returnees among selected States during successive 6- or 12-month periods up to a maximum of 5 years after release from prison.

Data beyond the 3-year mark suggest that some recidivism is likely to occur at least up to 5 years after release, although at increasingly lower rates. Table 2 indicates that, on the whole, the highest risk of recidivism occurs during the second half of the first year of release, suggesting the need for maximum post-release correctional support immediately before and during that period.

Types of return

Most persons released to the community are required, as a condition of

Intervals	Colorado 1980	Massachusetts 1976	Nebraska 1979	New York 1978	North Carolina 1979	Oklahoma 1976-77	Oregon 1979	Washington 1976	Wisconsin 1980
First year	8.3%	18.0%	14.1%	12.8%	14.1%	9.8%	17.2%	16.2%	16.7%
1-6 months	2.4	*	6.5	3.8	6.5	*	7.1	*	7.4
7-12 months	5.9	*	7.6	9.0	7.6	*	10.1	*	9.3
Second year	10.2	10.0	8.4	11.3	8.4	11.8	12.4	10.6	8.9
1-6 months	5.9	*	4.2	7.0	4.2	*	8.3	*	5.6
7-12 months	4.3	*	4.2	4.3	4.2	*	4.1	*	3.3
Third year	5.6	4.0	5.4	4.9	5.4	6.8	4.6	6.9	5.6
1-6 months	2.7	*	2.5	2.6	2.5	*	2.5	*	3.7
7-12 months	2.9	*	2.9	2.3	2.9	*	2.1	*	1.9
Fourth year	2.7	4.0	*	3.5	*	5.2	*	3.3	*
1-6 months	1.8	*	*	1.7	*	*	*	*	0.4
7-12 months	0.9	*	*	1.8	*	*	*	*	*
Fifth year	*	3.0	*	3.2	*	2.8	*	2.8	*
1-6 months	0.4	*	*	1.9	*	*	*	*	*
7-12 months	*	*	*	1.3	*	*	*	*	*

Note: Year of release may not be the same as those in table 1.
 * Data not available.

their freedom, to observe regulations concerning their conduct, whereabouts, and associations not applicable to ordinary citizens. Violation of these rules, even without commission of a new crime, accounts for a significant proportion of reincarcerations in many States.

Table 3 shows returnee data from several States participating in this pilot project and indicates that technical violations can compose as many as half or more of the total number of recidivists in a releasee cohort. Recidivists of persons released unconditionally accounted for only a small proportion of returnees in three of the four States able to provide such data; in the fourth State, however, unconditional releasees returning to prison on a new sentence accounted for 29% of all returns. The number of such unconditional releases may be a reflection of differing sentencing/releasing strategies among States.

Tracking conditionally released persons after discharge from supervision showed a continuation of recidivism. As indicated in table 4, the proportion of conditional releasees returned to prison with a new sentence is still large in the post-supervision period. These statistics, as in most other data constructs used in this report, are based on small groups of States, so that inferences drawn must be viewed as preliminary until subsequent canvasses yield a larger reporting group.

Offense patterns

Released prisoners who go back to prison differ significantly when grouped according to their original offense. Table 5, which presents data on eight States, shows that property offenders are more likely to return to prison (a median of 36.8%) than are violent of-

State and year of release	All returns	Percent on conditional release which were returned for:		Percent on unconditional release which were returned for new sentence
		Technical violation	Now sentence with or without technical violation	
California, 1977	100%	24%	74%	02%
Minnesota, 1981	100	43	46	11
Nebraska, 1980	100	37	34	29
New York, 1976	100	51	43	06

Note: Year of release may not be the same as in table 1.

State and year of release	All returns	While under supervision	After supervision
California, 1977	100%	56%	44%
Iowa, 1980	100	67	33
New York, 1980	100	63	37

fenders (31.5%). The median recidivism rate among reporting States for burglaries is the highest of all specific offenses, followed by robbery and theft. The lowest rate is for illicit drugs, followed by homicide, forgery/fraud/embezzlement, and sexual assault.

Do recidivists commit the same type of offense as that leading to their original imprisonment? On the basis of available knowledge, the answer is uncertain. Table 6 shows data reported by two States on repetition of recidivists' offenses. The most striking instance of the need for more data may be seen in the case of burglars: in State A two-thirds committed burglary again; in State B a marked majority in the burglary group were returned to prison for other crimes.

From this example, patterns of recidivist offenses may differ sharply

Offenses	California 1977	Iowa 1980	Michigan 1978	Nebraska 1980	New York 1976	Oregon 1978	Rhode Island 1979	Washington 1976	Median
Violent	*	30.4%	31.7%	27.6%	34.1%	31.3%	41.2%	*	31.5%
Homicide	*	0.0	23.1	18.8	22.0	41.7	28.6	*	22.6
Sexual assault	*	16.7	21.3	23.1	34.7	25.6	25.0	18.3%	25.6
Robbery	32.9%	41.9	36.7	28.2	41.5	31.8	45.8	30.2	34.8
Assault	25.6	40.0	31.9	33.2	26.8	29.3	41.5	26.7	31.9
Other violent	*	100.0	35.9	*	40.1	36.8	42.9	*	40.1
Property	*	24.7	38.4	36.8	44.3	33.4	49.5	31.6	36.8
Burglary	43.2	38.2	45.1	33.5	47.2	35.6	51.9	*	43.2
Theft	*	20.4	32.7	31.6	37.8	32.6	55.6	*	32.7
Forgery, fraud or embezzlement	29.2	8.0	34.3	23.5	36.4	21.8	25.0	*	25.0
Other property	*	20.6	41.1	0.0	0.0	36.5	43.8	*	28.2
Illicit drugs	25.3	0.0	19.5	23.5	18.4	18.1	55.2	18.5	19.0
Other	*	29.4	40.7	23.4	32.8	36.2	33.8	51.5	33.8

* Data not available.

among States. Illumination of this issue would undoubtedly be of great benefit to State and national criminal justice policy and planning authorities, especially in determining types of correctional resources needed to accommodate persons incarcerated more than once. Table 7 is a cross-tabulation comparing initial with recidivist offenses, providing a level of detail desirable for operational planning.

Previous confinement

Do the number of incarcerations before the last admission affect the likelihood of recidivism among prison releasees? Data obtained on this question were extremely limited and, because of the importance of such data in assessing correctional planning, should be accorded more emphasis in follow-up inquiries made to the States for systematic submission of data. Data on North Carolina's 1979 releasees show that the likelihood of recidivism is indeed greater for multiple offenders:

Recidivated within 36 months

All releasees	31.6%
No prior prison commitment	24.8
One or two priors	37.1
Three or more priors	42.7

The rate of recidivism among Massachusetts' 1980 cohort of returnees within a year of release also increased with the number of prior imprisonments (see page 4).

Offenses	State A		State B	
	Same offense	Different offense	Same offense	Different offense
All offenses	43%	57%	36%	64%
Nonsexual assault	14	86	0	100
Robbery	46	54	32	68
Burglary	66	34	40	60
Theft	17	83	29	71
Forgery, fraud, or embezzlement	19	81	46	54
Illicit drugs	60	40	25	75

Table 7. For Oregon, the number of returns to prison, by type of offense at last admission and type of offense for which returned

Last admission offense	Return offense						
	All offenses	All violent offenses	Murder, manslaughter, negligent homicide	Rape, sodomy, child abuse	Assault	Robbery	Other violent offenses
All offenses	574	77	6	22	8	39	2
All violent offenses	126	28	1	11	2	12	2
Murder, manslaughter, negligent homicide	20	2	1	0	0	1	0
Rape, sodomy, child abuse	23	10	0	8	0	1	1
Assault	22	2	0	1	0	1	0
Robbery	54	12	0	2	1	9	0
Other violent offenses	7	2	1	0	0	0	1
All property offenses	274	28	3	6	2	17	0
Burglary	160	17	1	4	1	11	0
Theft	58	4	2	0	1	1	0
Motor vehicle theft	38	4	0	1	0	3	0
Forgery or fraud	17	3	0	1	0	2	0
Other property offenses	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
All statute offenses	68	7	0	1	2	4	0
Driving related	42	3	0	0	2	1	0
Escape	10	3	0	1	0	2	0
Other statute offenses	16	1	0	0	0	1	0
All drug offenses	23	3	1	0	0	2	0
Parole rule violations	83	11	1	4	2	4	0

Last admission offense	Return offense					
	All property offenses	Burglary	Theft	Motor vehicle theft	Forgery and fraud	Other property offenses
All offenses	148	67	33	24	21	3
All violent offenses	18	6	6	2	3	1
Murder, manslaughter, negligent homicide	0	0	0	0	0	0
Rape, sodomy, child abuse	4	2	1	1	0	0
Assault	1	0	0	0	1	0
Robbery	11	3	5	0	2	1
Other violent offenses	2	1	0	1	0	0
All property offenses	95	44	19	18	14	0
Burglary	48	31	7	7	3	0
Theft	14	5	7	0	2	0
Motor vehicle theft	22	6	4	9	3	0
Forgery or fraud	10	1	1	2	6	0
Other property offenses	1	1	0	0	0	0
All statute offenses	12	6	2	2	1	1
Driving related	7	3	1	2	0	1
Escape	1	0	1	0	0	0
Other statute offenses	4	3	0	0	1	0
All drug offenses	3	0	2	0	1	0
Parole rule violations	20	11	4	2	2	1

Last admission offense	Return offense						
	All statute offenses	Driving related	Escape	Other statute	All drug offenses	Drug possession only	Parole rule violations
All offenses	57	29	12	16	19	12	273
All violent offenses	10	3	2	5	4	3	66
Murder, manslaughter, negligent homicide	4	1	1	2	1	*	13
Rape, sodomy, child abuse	2	1	0	1	0	0	7
Assault	1	0	0	1	1	1	17
Robbery	3	1	1	1	2	2	26
Other violent offenses	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
All property offenses	13	6	4	3	9	5	129
Burglary	5	1	3	1	8	5	82
Theft	5	3	2	1	0	0	34
Motor vehicle theft	3	2	1	0	0	0	9
Forgery or fraud	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Other property offenses	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
All statute offenses	20	17	0	3	0	0	29
Driving related	18	17	0	1	0	0	14
Escape	1	0	0	1	0	0	5
Other statute offenses	1	0	0	0	0	0	10
All drug offenses	3	1	1	1	3	2	11
Parole rule violations	11	2	5	4	3	2	38

* Data not available.

Recidivated within 12 months

One prior imprisonment	22%
Two priors	27
Three or four priors	36
Five or more priors	40

Despite the limitations of these data, it appears that releasees with increasingly larger numbers of prior incarcerations may be increasingly more likely to be recidivists.

How does length of time served in prison relate to subsequent recidivism? Different answers from the data supplied by the two States reporting on this question further confirm the need for additional data. Data from State A show that those with the longest time served are most likely to recidivate:

Time served	Recidivism rates
24 months or less	21.5%
More than 24 months	32.5

On the other hand, data from State B show that recidivism rates were higher among those with shorter time served:

Time served	Recidivism rates
Less than 12 months	43.6%
More than 4 years	29.8%

Another key question is how the level of confinement in prison relates to likelihood of subsequent recidivism. Again the two States reporting data on this question present different outcomes, another indication of a need for more data on an issue of great importance to policymakers and prison administrators:

	Recidivism rates by security level in releasing institution:	
	State A	State B
Maximum	14.3%	38%
Medium	26.7	32
Minimum	28.7	26
Pre-release center		15

Sociodemographic variables

Broad patterns of the relationship between recidivism and age are depicted in table 8, although based on various categories from only a few States. As might be anticipated from the generally high concentration of incarcerated populations in the under-30 age group, table 8 shows that the younger the age at release, the higher the likelihood of being returned to prison before the end of the 3-year follow-up period.

Data from five States reporting on the sex of recidivists show that in all but one State, Massachusetts, the proportion of recidivists among males was substantially higher than for female releasees (table 9).

Table 10 shows recidivism rates for releasees grouped by race; consistently lower rates are observed for white releasees. However, for both race and sex, it is not known the degree to which compositional differences across these groups (such as age, offense, or criminal history) may be contributing to the observed difference in recidivism rates.

Conclusions

Analysis of special-project data on recidivism obtained from Statistical Analysis Centers and other sources of State criminal justice information yielded important findings. These pertain both to the subject-matter itself and to the usefulness of a regular data program to provide a continuing measure of persons released from prison and returned.

About 20 States provided data on the various aspects of recidivism developed in this report. As already noted, some findings are necessarily tentative because they are based on information from relatively few States.

Table 8. Percents of releasees returned to prison within 3 years, by age at release, State, and year of release

Age groups	Massachusetts ^a 1980	New York 1976	Rhode Island 1977
All ages	26.0%	33.7%	38.4%
Under 25	31.0	43.0	45.0
25-29	28.0	36.8	32.0
30 and older	17.0	30.0	31.0
Nebraska 1980			
All ages	27.9%		
Under 27	33.5		
27 and older	21.9		
North Carolina 1979			
All ages	31.6%		
Under 30	34.0		
30 and older	26.8		

^a Massachusetts follow-up is for 1 year.

Table 9. Percent of releasees returned to prison within 3 years, by sex, State, and year of release.

State and year of release	Percent of all males released who returned to prison	Percent of all females released who returned to prison
California, 1977	31.4%	19.3%
Georgia, 1980	35.3	16.8
Massachusetts, 1980	27.0	23.0
New York, 1976	36.5	12.1
N. Carolina, 1979	31.6	22.5

Note: Year of release may not be the same as in table 1.

Table 10. Percents of releasees returned to prison within 3 years, by race, State, and year of release

State and year	All races released	White releasees	Percent that returned to prison of: Nonwhite releasees		
			All nonwhite	Blacks	Other races
California, 1977 ^a	*	27.9%	*	33.5%	36.5% ^b
Georgia, 1980	34.9%	31.0	*	37.0	*
Massachusetts, 1980 ^c	26.0	25.0	*	28.0	*
Nebraska, 1980	27.9	25.2	32.6%	*	*
New York, 1976	35.6	31.5	*	38.3	34.3 ^d
Rhode Island, 1976-77	41.6	40.1	*	47.9	15.4 ^e

Note: Year of release may not be the same as in table 1.
* Data not available.
^a Males only.

^b Mexican-American.
^c Massachusetts follow-up is for 1 year.
^d Puerto Rican.
^e Based on a very small number (11).

The most important substantive finding is the marked similarity among the States in the proportions of releasees who are sent back to prison within 3 years, with the return rates for most States being close to the median rate for all States. Proper validation of this pattern requires follow-up data collection to permit periodic comparisons; nevertheless these data are substantial enough to warrant solid confidence in this result.

A second finding of importance to the understanding of recidivism is the proportion of releasees who return while still under supervision compared with that for releasees sent back after completing the supervision period but still within the 3-year follow-up period. Data from a small number of States show that in some States a third or more may be returned for criminal violations occurring after the completion of supervision.

For policy and planning purposes, these recidivism patterns raise a question whether alterations to existing programs designed to ease the transition from prison to the outside community have the potential for affecting recidivism rates.

It is expected that any further examination of the data needs for follow-up analysis on this recidivism report will stress issues surrounding the high rates of recidivism among habitual perpetrators of certain property crimes, especially burglary and theft. Other issues of importance include the length of the follow-up period in tracking releasees, the types of releasees to include and exclude from follow-up cohorts, and the comparative merits of sample versus complete universes in recidivist studies.

Methodology

Data elements and limitations. One of the principal objectives in this pilot project was to determine actual and po-

tential State statistical resources available for supporting research on recidivism, whether in the form of existing tabulations or computerized datasets.⁵ For this reason structured questionnaires to elicit data on detailed substantive issues were not used. Rather, States were asked to indicate the kind of information they had bearing on recidivism and whether it could be collected, if necessary, and forwarded to BJS to be used in the preparation of a State-based report on the subject.⁶

Among the initial respondents, 15 States indicated a capability and interest to participate in the recidivism project and estimated what cost, if any, would be incurred in providing the data. Of these, 11 were asked to develop and forward their proposed information packages to BJS. While a few States provided data on recidivist arrests and convictions, the category common to virtually all respondents was reincarceration rates among cohorts of prison releasees.

The follow-up periods used by some of the 11 States invited to participate were subsequently found to be short of the minimum 3 years deemed necessary as a tracking period for this project. Consequently, comparable data were requested from additional States to assure a large and representative enough group to permit some basic generalizations. In all, the States included in this report are more or less evenly distributed among the various regions of the country.

Types of release. Partially because of open-ended solicitation, only a few States differentiated their figures to permit identification of the basic types of release. Among releases, there are three basic types, two conditional and one unconditional:

- Conditional
 - Parole
 - Supervised mandatory release
- Unconditional
 - Expiration of sentence

If commutations or suspension of sentence were reported, they were included as unconditional releases.

Among other release types included in this report, court-ordered releases were usually but not always provided by the States. Releases not generally included were persons to be handed over to serve other sentences (including out of the State), transfers to other prisons or agencies (e.g., hospital and State police), temporary absences, persons awaiting hearing on a release violation, escapes, and deaths. Among States providing data for this report, differences in types of releases covered do not substantially affect overall comparability.

Despite evidence of broad uniformity among States in the classification of prison releasees, judgments about similarities and dissimilarities must take into account differences in the application of rules for the supervision of conditional releasees, whether on parole or supervised mandatory release. Violations of these rules or conditions of release are known as technical violations—as distinguished from new crimes—and can result in reincarceration. Violations tolerated in one State might trigger revocation in another. Therefore, higher rates of recidivism in the latter type of jurisdiction should not necessarily be construed as evidence of less successful correctional strategies.

The follow-up period. The length of follow-up period used to measure recidivism ranges widely from 1 year to as many as 18 or more. There is no generally accepted standard period for this purpose.

The 1-year follow-up period that Massachusetts has used to measure recidivism was found by its criminal justice analysts to be as clear an indicator of recidivist trends in that State as those based on longer periods, with the added advantage of providing policymakers with information based on relatively recent data.⁹ Following a 1956 sample of Federal prisoners for 18 years showed that by the end of the period the original cohort had accrued a 63% failure rate (although it included as failures persons sentenced to jail and those on probation, groups not generally included in State recidivism measurements).¹⁰

Many criminal justice agencies have adopted a 3-year follow-up period for measuring recidivism statistics, largely because of a recommendation by the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals. Some States responding to the BJS request for recidivism data provided

longer or shorter follow-ups, but the 3-year period was used for this report to include as many States as possible.¹¹

Underlying all considerations about the appropriate follow-up period is a pragmatic question: at what point in the post-release period is social reintegration successful from a programmatic and budgetary point of view?¹² Based on experience from this pilot effort, including input by SACs and other State criminal justice agencies, alternative follow-up periods might be considered for the future.

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¹ Useful insights on the varying approaches and issues on the subject of recidivism are found in the following references, among others: Daniel Glaser, *The Effectiveness of a Prison and Parole System*, 1964; Jacob Bekin, Alfred Blumstein, and William Glass, "Recidivism As a Feedback Process: An Analytical Model and Empirical

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² A BJS Special Report, *Career Patterns in Crime* (June 1983), presents a detailed discussion of the differences in and examples of "self-report" and "official documentation" studies. It also discusses retrospective studies (e.g., past criminal histories) and prospective studies (e.g., tracking prisoners forward in time).

³ Details on interstate differences in the approach to meeting data needs for studying recidivism are provided in a recent report by Dallas Miller, "A Survey of Recidivism Research in the United States and Canada," Massachusetts Department of Corrections, Publication 13709, July 1984. Based on these findings, about three-fifths of the States relied mainly on post-release data and one-fifth on prior incarceration statistics on committed prisoners, while another fifth did not systematically keep recidivism data for such research purposes.

⁴ See, for example, the findings of a study of probation programs proposing basic reclassification of persons in that status and concentration of program resources on those posing the highest risk of failure. (James L. Collins, Charles L. Usher, and Jay R. Williams, "Alternatives to Regular Supervision of Low-Risk Probationers: A Study in Baltimore," *Popular Government*, 50, no. 1, Fall 1984, Institute of Government, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.)

⁵ This report is the third of three based on data supplied through a special data request to State Statistical Analysis Centers in 1983. Findings from the other two have been published as BJS Special Reports, *Time Served in Prison* (June 1984, NCJ-93924) and *Sentencing Practices in 13 States* (October 1984, NCJ-95399).

⁶ A related objective was to discover opportunities to increase States' interest and participation in the Offender-Based Transaction Statistics (OBTS) program, the main BJS-sponsored program for obtaining and publishing standardized and comparable data on the basic events of the criminal justice process at state-level. The most recent report of this program was the BJS Bulletin, *Tracking Offenders* (November 1983, NCJ-91572).

⁷ Important data and analysis on rearrests provided by two States will be especially useful as data bases for designing special programs on arrest as recidivism, as well as for refining OBTS criteria.

⁸ The officials directly involved in providing data for this report are listed in the acknowledgments.

⁹ Daniel P. LeClair, *Varying Time Criteria in Recidivism Follow-Up Studies: A Test of the "Cross-Over Effects" Phenomenon*, Massachusetts Department of Corrections, Publication No. 13103, February 1983.

¹⁰ Kitchener, et al., op. cit., pp 9 ff.

¹¹ The 3-year measure was also used in the Uniform Parole Reports series as the follow-up period in developing national-level recidivism rates for the 1975 parole entry population (see *Characteristics of the Parole Population, 1978*).

¹² For an overview on concepts of a "new pragmatism" in corrections, see Peter P. Lejins, General Report, Proceedings of the Fifth International Colloquium, International Penal and Penitentiary Foundation, *New Trends in Criminal Policy*, Syracuse, Italy, February 15-19, 1982, Bonn, West Germany, 1984.

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