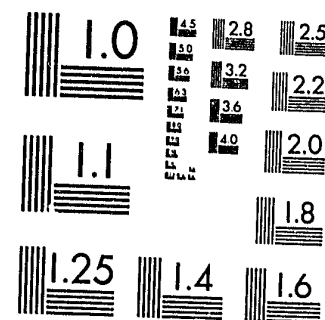


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U.S. Department of Justice
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Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report

Returning to prison

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BJS Social Science Analyst

November 1984

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 releasees 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.

Steven R. Schlesinger
Director

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. 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.

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

Table 1. Percents of releasees returned to prison, by State, year of release, and follow-up period

| 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

Table 2. Percents of releasees returning to prison over successive 6-month or longer intervals

| 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-

Table 3. Percent of releasees returned to prison during 3-year follow-up period, by type of return and State

| 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.

Table 4. Percent of conditional releasees returned on new sentence during and after official supervision, by State and year of release

| 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

Table 5. Percents of releasees who recidivated, by State and the type of offense for which originally incarcerated

| 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).

Table 6. Percent of releasees whose new offense was the same as their previous offense in two States

| 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 | Parole rule violations |
| All offenses | 57 | 29 | 12 | 16 | 19 | 12 |
| All violent offenses | 10 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 3 |
| Murder, manslaughter, negligent homicide | 4 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | * |
| Rape, sodomy, child abuse | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Assault | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Robbery | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| Other violent offenses | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| All property offenses | 13 | 6 | 4 | 3 | 9 | 5 |
| Burglary | 5 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 8 | 5 |
| Theft | 5 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Motor vehicle theft | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Forgery or fraud | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| Other property offenses | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| All statute offenses | 20 | 17 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| Driving related | 18 | 17 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Escape | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Other statute offenses | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| All drug offenses | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 |
| Parole rule violations | 11 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 |

* 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 | 36.3 | 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.

Acknowledgments

Grateful appreciation is extended to the following persons for their contributions to this report. Except as noted, they are members of criminal justice Statistical Analysis Centers (SACs) or of State departments of correction (DOC): California: Dona Good (DOC) Colorado: Tom G. Crago, Ph.D. (DOC) and Patricia A. Malik (SAC) Connecticut: Gerald Stowell (SAC) Delaware: Michael H. Rabasea (SAC) District of Columbia: Robert Delmore (DOC) Georgia: Tim Carr, Ph.D. (DOC) Iowa: Paul Stageberg and Daryl Fischer (SAC) Maryland: Catherine H. Conly and Steven C. Martin (SAC) Massachusetts: Francis J. Carney, Ph.D. (DOC) and Jennifer Panagopoulos (SAC) Michigan: Gail Light and Steve Paddock (DOC) Minnesota: Steve Coleman (SAC), Kay Krapp (Sentencing Guidelines Commission) and Mary Welfling (DOC) Mississippi: Scott Fulton and Ken Jones (DOC) Nebraska: Bruce Ayers (SAC), Karol Pitts and Laurie K. Scheuble, Ph.D. (DOC) New Jersey: Victor R. D'Illo (DOC) New York: Henry C. Donnelly (DOC) and Richard Rosen (SAC) North Carolina: David E. Jones (SAC) and Ken Parker (DOC) Ohio: Jeffrey J. Knowles (SAC) Oklahoma: Bud Clark, Steven P. Davis and Lavonna Stayloch (DOC) and Jon Steen (SAC) Oregon: Clinton Goff (SAC) and Robert Willstadter (Consultant) Pennsylvania: Craig Edelman and Phillip J. Renninger (SAC) Rhode Island: Walter J. Fontaine (DOC) Washington: John O'Connell (SAC) Wisconsin: Stephen W. Grohman and Roland Reboussin (SAC)

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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 Belkin, 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*).

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