

Evaluation of Reentry Initiatives – What is Missing?
Carl Wicklund
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I. Definition of reentry is too limited

Reentry is often viewed as the return to the community from federal or state correctional facilities. Thus, most evaluations of reentry are focusing on the return of adult and juvenile offenders to the community from prisons or state juvenile correctional facilities. The vast majority focus on adults. Most of the attention is focused on the “serious and violent offender.” However, of the nearly five million adults nationally being supervised in the community by correctional agencies, nearly 85 percent are on probation.¹ Most of these people have spent some portion of time in local jails either as part of their sentence or as a result of a violation of supervision conditions. There are a larger number of individuals who have been incarcerated in local jails on pre-trial status. Juveniles may spend time in detention facilities pre-adjudication. Additionally, both adult and juvenile offenders may be removed from the community and placed in residential programs for mental health, substance abuse or correctional programming.

Returning to the community after spending time in lock-up or residential treatment can present many of the same problems as a return from prison. For example, individuals who spend at least 30 days in jail may find they have lost their job, their place of residence and public assistance. Juveniles may be denied entrance into the school setting in which they were previously involved.

A large percentage of our prison population is people who have failed to comply with conditions of probation. Effective reentry practices with probationers can help reduce the prison population.

In short, reentry outcomes of probationers and pre-trial detainees need to be given consideration if we ever hope to have a positive impact on prison crowding.

II. Recidivism as a measure has significant drawbacks

First, one must define recidivism. Is it a new conviction, a new arrest, a technical violation or reincarceration? Or is it all of the above? If so, how is it possible to understand the importance of recidivism figures? All of the aforementioned measures have been and are used to define recidivism. The lack of one clear definition of recidivism has created a mishmash of statistics that at best is confusing and at worst helps create public policies that have spread fear and wasted taxpayers' money. Without a clear understanding of what recidivism figures entail, recidivism statistics are not helpful and may be

¹ There is another approximately 600,000 juveniles on probation.

harmful. Statistical Analysis Centers could help the field take a big step forward nationally by embracing a primary definition of recidivism. Other secondary definitions would then need to be delineated when the results are reported.

Also, raw recidivism figures by themselves have limited value to the corrections field. Typically, recidivism measures the success of a policy, practice, program or initiative without considering structural and political contexts in which the recidivism occurs. In other words, what are the factors that may or may not have had an impact on recidivism? For reentry, one could ask, what are the extra-supervision elements affecting recidivism? In order for recidivism figures to be helpful, evaluators need to drill down to determine and separate those variables that are having an impact on recidivism. Control-group experimental design needs to be accompanied by a thorough process evaluation to help determine the role of different variables.

The following represents some of the factors/variables that alone or in combination will have an impact on recidivism:

- The availability and effectiveness of vocational, educational and treatment programs in the prison, jail or other facility. The continuity of these services after release should be considered as well.
- The length of time a person spends incarcerated or removed from the community. Does it matter if a person is removed for less than 30 days? Less than a year? Less than five years?
- The attitude, professional orientation and training of the supervising probation or parole officer. If the officer doesn't believe an offender can change, it is likely he/she will not make much of an effort to help him/her change. If an officer sees his/her primary purpose as to tail `em, nail `em and jail `em, it is likely he or she will have no tolerance for missteps by the offender and recidivism figures for that officer will likely be high. Conversely, if the officer believes an offender can change and has been trained in evidenced-based practices that are designed to bring about positive change, yet balances his/her efforts with offender accountability, the recidivism results are more likely to be better.
- The type and amount of training provided to supervision officers. Does the type and amount of training have an effect on recidivism?
- The conditions of supervision placed on an offender by a releasing authority (e.g., parole board) or judge. Poorly conceived conditions of supervision can be a setup for failure. Are the conditions realistic, relevant and/or supported by research? Can the supervising agency effectively monitor and enforce the conditions? If not, is it likely the agency will be unable to effectively respond to an offender's compliance or noncompliance with the conditions?
- As with the probation or parole officer, the attitude and therapeutic orientation of treatment providers can have a significant impact on the success of an offender. Also, the appropriateness of a given treatment program for an individual can affect the treatment outcome. For example, is the approach gender or culturally appropriate? Are the

appropriate treatment programs even available for a given population of offenders (e.g., substance abuse treatment for women who have been victimized)? The quality of the programs must also be considered. Are programs evaluated for effectiveness in general and for specific populations?

- The policies and attitudes of local law enforcement agencies and officers toward returning offenders. Do they assist or hinder the adjustment of an offender?
- The turnover rate of supervising officers, treatment providers or others engaged in working with the offender. Instability in positive relationships can have a negative impact on one's ability to successfully function and cope.
- The attitude of the community regarding returning offender(s). Is the community generally supportive, neutral or against the return of an offender? Is the offender returning to a community or neighborhood that is likely to present illegal or antisocial influences? Are there sufficient prosocial refuges (e.g. faith-based organizations, recreational alternatives).
- The tolerance level of releasing authorities, judges or supervision agencies. Political pressure placed on these decision makers can skew their willingness to allow missteps by an offender. They may also effectively force the supervising officers to give an unnecessary amount of attention to some offenders and not others. One state agency has recently implemented a zero tolerance policy that requires officers to report every violation of supervision conditions (no matter how insignificant) to the sentencing judge. For example, some decision makers will violate and revoke the probation or parole of offenders who suffer a drug or alcohol use relapse while awaiting a treatment opening or while in treatment. Relapse is an accepted setback for drug- and alcohol-dependent individuals.
- The tools available to enable supervision and treatment practices. Are electronic tracking or monitoring tools available to the supervision agency and how do they have an impact on recidivism? What types of drug testing procedures are utilized? Are there shared information systems among correctional facilities, law enforcement, the courts and the supervision agency? Are tools like polygraph used in treatment protocols?
- General factors associated with high and low violation rates in a given jurisdiction. Is there an association between violation rates and recidivism? What types of violations are being committed and how many in each category?
- The availability of resources in the community. Are there housing options? Are there ways to be gainfully employed? Are there educational opportunities? Is there public transportation? Are there childcare services? Are there treatment alternatives? Whether or not an offender is able to secure stable housing and employment and be involved in appropriate treatment can have a significant impact on success.

III. What is the role and effectiveness of risk and need assessment instruments in successful reentry?

How well are assessment tools effectively predicting risk for a given population or offense type? Are the highest risk offenders receiving the highest level of monitoring? Are needs assessments ensuring offenders receive the services indicated? Is consideration given to acute – dynamic risk factors (those factors that are specific to an individual offender and may conditionally raise the risk of reoffending – e.g., a domestic violence offender receiving notice of divorce proceedings). Have assessment instruments been validated considering the population for which they are used?

III. Effective reentry involves both science *and* art

When a program or initiative appears to be successful (whether evaluated or not), it is often referred to as a “best practice.” The elements of the program or initiative may then be adopted by another jurisdiction with limited success. This may occur even when the practices are supported by research.² Thus, elements of the program or the science alone do not produce the results one had hoped. The human factor or the art of implementing the practices cannot be overlooked. Proper training and knowledge are required. Well-developed skills need to be utilized. A balance of optimism, well-defined personal boundaries, a supportive attitude and firm expectations is necessary. Supportive and helpful supervision of staff must be in place. The backing of agency leadership is essential. Thus, it is probably more accurate to state that there are not “best practices,” but there are research-supported program elements that are performed by dedicated, knowledgeable, skilled and passionate people. It is for this reason it is important to conduct process evaluations along with any experimental design process.

IV. Cost-benefit analysis

There have been few cost-benefit analyses of correctional programs or interventions. Ideally all reentry initiatives would consider the value of the implemented program or practices.

² Commonly referred to as evidence-based practices