

Does Parole Supervision Work?

Research Findings and Policy Opportunities

Introduction

My first real job was in a parole office – “field supervision unit” as they called it. As a VISTA Volunteer developing transition programs for prisoners reentering the free world, I saw firsthand the complexities of reentry and the parole officer’s role in the process. I learned immensely from my parole and treatment staff colleagues. I was constantly impressed with their ability to both sanction and encourage parolees, particularly in the face of high caseloads and limited time, tools and resources. It was also apparent, however, in my office – as around the country – that parole

officers were driven by making their contacts and monitoring compliance with the many conditions of release. The ultimate goal – preventing reoffending, breaking substance abuse habits, and, in the end, changing parolees’ lives for the better – was often more elusive.

This job was an important, inspiring work experience for me, cementing my long-term interest in criminal justice policy and, specifically, the issue of prisoner reentry. Over the past 15 years I have changed hats, moving from practitioner to researcher. The study, entitled, *Does Parole Work? Analyzing the Impact of Postprison Supervision on Rearrest Outcomes*,¹ describes a recent attempt to assess the impact of parole supervision on recidivism. This article begins with an argument

by Amy L. Solomon



for why we should study supervision, followed by an overview of the research. It concludes with some thoughts about policy opportunities for the field, arguing that the current focus on prisoner reentry provides a timely opportunity to “reinvent” parole.

Why Study Post-Prison Supervision?

There are many important reasons to study community supervision, including:

Many people are on parole. Each year, over 650,000 individuals are released from state and federal prisons across the country (Harrison and Beck 2005). Most – about 80 percent – are released to supervision in the community following their prison stay. Parolees spend an average of 26 months on post-prison supervision (Hughes et al., 2001), and at any given time there are about 765,000 on parole (not to mention another four million on probation) (Glaze and Palla 2005).

Failure rates are high. Less than half (46 percent) of all parolees successfully complete parole without violating a condition of release, absconding, or committing a new crime (Glaze and Palla 2005). As a result, over 200,000 parolees return to prison each year (BJS 2000). Nationally, parole violators account for about one third of all prison admissions, and therefore account for a sizable fraction of many state’s correctional budgets (Jacobson 2005).

The way prisoners are released has changed substantially over time. While the majority of prisoners used to be released by a parole board, “discretionary release” has declined from about 55 percent of all releases in 1980 to just 24 percent in 2000 (Hughes et al., 2001). Mandatory releases now account for about 40 percent of all releases from prison, up from less than 20 percent in 1980. Prisoners released without supervision account for about one-fifth of all prison releases. (See “Three Study Groups” below, for more discussion about each type of release.) It is unclear how this major shift in method of release has impacted recidivism outcomes, although the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) studies indicate that more than half of discretionary parolees successfully complete their term of supervision compared with one-third of mandatory parolees (Hughes et al., 2001).

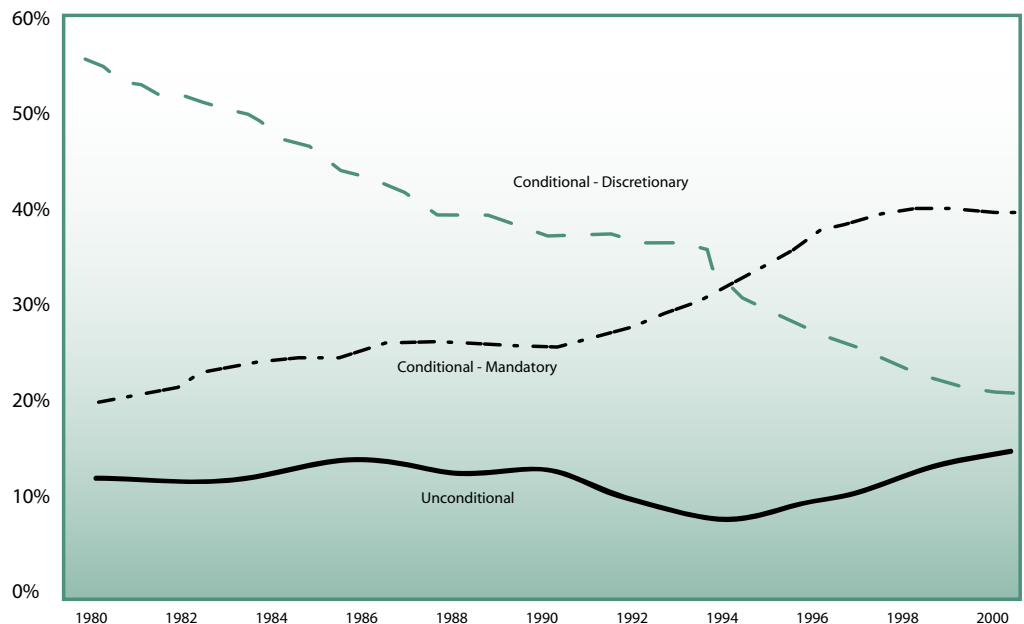
Parole supervision is implemented differently in each state. The use, duration and intensity of post-prison supervision varies significantly across

states (Travis and Lawrence 2002). In some states, virtually all prisoners are released to supervision; in others it’s less than half. Moreover, different supervision practices are employed state to state. Some states rely heavily on drug testing; others are focused on community-based responses to parole violations. A few states are experimenting with neighborhood supervision, others with Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) tracking technologies. And many states are conducting routine office visits as they always have. The bottom line is that parole practices and policies vary substantially state to state and sometimes jurisdiction to jurisdiction, providing a rich – if complex – research opportunity to document which strategies work best.

Limited research exists on the topic of parole effectiveness. Given the widespread use of parole and the diversity of practice, it is remarkable how little attention has been paid to the impact of parole on public safety. There have been a few studies comparing recidivism outcomes of parolees and unsupervised ex-prisoners, but they tend to be small, dated, or based in international settings (Ellis and Marshall 2000; Gottsfredson and Mitchell-Herzfeld 1982; Jackson 1983; Nuttal et al., 1977; Sacks and Logan 1980; Sacks and Logan 1979; Waller 1974). Although these studies measure recidivism in different ways, most find a small but statistically significant benefit from parole supervision in terms of recidivism outcomes.

More generally, most of the larger, more rigorous correctional studies and meta-analyses suggest that surveillance does little to improve recidivism outcomes, unless it is coupled with treatment >>>

Figure 1. Share of State Prisoners Nationwide Released Conditionally and Unconditionally, 1980-2000



Source: Hughes, Wilson and Beck, “Trends in State Parole, 1990-2000” and National Corrections Reporting Program



“Does Parole Work?”

A Word on the Title

There has been a good deal of criticism of our study, much of it centered on the title itself. Why? Probably because the first half of the title, “Does Parole Work?,” begs a one-dimensional answer – YES or NO – that grossly oversimplifies the issue. I concede that point (see “Limitations”). But I would also argue that the question itself is not only a fair question to ask, but a crucial one – one that every state should be asking itself. How can the criminal justice community focus so much attention on prisoner reentry and NOT demand to know if post-prison supervision – the biggest reentry intervention there is – is contributing to public safety?

interventions (Sherman et al., 1997; MacKenzie 1997; Petersilia 1998). Even intensive monitoring, involving lower caseloads and more frequent contacts, does not produce reduced recidivism (Petersilia and Turner 1993; Sherman et al., 1997). Taxman (2002) provides an excellent overview of this literature.

In sum, there are large numbers of people on parole, high failure rates, substantial variation in practice across states, and changes in release methods. At the same time, relatively little is known about whether and how supervision increases public safety. To the study authors, this context begged the question – the title of our study - *Does Parole Work?*

The Study

The study, *Does Parole Work? Analyzing the Impact of Postprison Supervision on Rearrest Outcomes*, compares prisoners released to supervision, via discretionary and mandatory release, to prisoners released without supervision. Using data from the BJS, we aimed to assess, at an aggregate level, whether parole supervision “works” at reducing crime – as measured by rearrests – among the parole population.

The study is organized around three key questions. First, do prisoners released with and without supervision differ with respect to demographics, incarceration characteristics and criminal histories? Second, do prisoners released with and without supervision recidivate at different rates? And third, if so, for whom does supervision matter most?

Three Study Groups

The study tracks outcomes for three groups: Those released via discretionary release to community supervision, those released via mandatory release to community supervision, and those released unconditionally.

(1) **Discretionary release** involves a parole board decision to release a prisoner before he has served his full sentence, serving the remainder of his sentence under community supervision. Parole boards essentially screen prisoners and use their discretion to determine who is most “ready” to return to the community. Parole boards may consider criminal histories, the incarceration offense, institutional conduct, prisoner attitude and motivation, participation in prison programs and positive connections to the community such as employment, housing arrangements and ties to family. In this article, prisoners released by parole boards are referred to as *discretionary parolees*.

(2) **Mandatory release** occurs when a prisoner has served his original sentence, less any accumulated good time credit, serving the balance of his sentence under supervision in the community. Mandatory releasees have not received a determination of fitness to return to the community from a parole board or other authority. This group is referred to as *mandatory parolees*.

Community supervision resulting from either discretionary or mandatory release is not systematically different. In most states, conditions of supervision are similar for both types of parolees, although discretionary parolees often spend more time on supervision.

(3) **Unconditional releasees** leave prison after serving their full term behind bars. These individuals were not granted early release via a parole board in states retaining discretionary parole, nor did they receive good time credit enabling mandatory early release. Therefore, unconditional releasees exit prison without any conditions of release, community supervision or reporting requirements.



Data Sources and Methodology

Our study relies primarily² on BJS data on 38,624 prisoners released in 1994 from prisons in 15 states. This sample is representative of the 272,111 prisoners released from those states in 1994 – two-thirds of all prisoners released nationwide in 1994. The states included in the BJS study are Arizona, California, Delaware, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Texas and Virginia. Due to issues with the data, Delaware is excluded from our analysis.

BJS tracked recidivism outcomes – rearrests, reconvictions and reincarcerations – for these prisoners for three years after their release. We chose to use rearrest outcomes at two years post-release instead of three to more closely mirror the average time on parole (26 months in 1999, Hughes et al., 2001). The BJS findings resulted in their landmark report, “Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1994,” by Patrick Langan and David Levin (Langan and Levin 2002).

We used descriptive analysis to address the first two questions – whom states release conditionally versus unconditionally, and whether these groups recidivate at differential rates. To address the remaining research question, for whom does supervision matter most, we utilized a combination of multivariate regression and simulation analyses. For further information on our data sources and methodology, please refer to the full study or a more detailed technical report, on file with the authors.

Limitations

The BJS source data discussed above is by far the largest, most complete, most current dataset that exists to address recidivism of prisoners. Because BJS had captured a variable indicating how prisoners were released, and thus if they were supervised or not after release, it offered a rare research opportunity to examine the different recidivism outcomes of prisoners released with and without supervision. At the same time, the BJS recidivism study was not designed – and the data not collected – to examine the impact of supervision on recidivism. Accordingly, it is not a perfect fit, resulting in several limitations to our analysis.

Arguably the most problematic limitations are that the study could not address state-level variation or identify, across states, what types of supervision strategies are most effective. Our reliance on arrests as a measure of recidivism in lieu of actual offending is also less than ideal. Less challenging are the critiques about old data and a universe of only 14 states. These issues are summarized below.

Our study does not address state-level variation. Ours was a multi-state analysis that described a national-level story, when, as discussed above, the reality is that parole practices and outcomes vary substantially across states, and even across jurisdictions within those states. The aggregate nature of our analysis buries what are surely substantial differences at the state level relative to the outcomes associated with parole.

The analysis could not address which types of parole strategies are more effective than others. While the source data provided important information on the personal and criminal histories of released prisoners, information on the nature of supervision – such as intensity of supervision, length of supervision, reporting requirements and services received at the individual level – was not available. Our data also did not include system-level data about risk assessment tools, contact standards, caseload averages, case planning, case management strategies and neighborhood-based supervision models. Without such information, we were unable to get inside the “black box” of supervision – to consider how various types of supervision affect rearrest outcomes and assess what types of parole strategies work better than others. >>>

An important note for those interested in replicating the analysis: *When coding the*

original BJS data, we based many of

our decisions on protocols developed

by Richard Rosenfeld and Anne

Morrison Piehl, who were part of a

working group devoted to – and

resulting in a book on -- reentry and

public safety (Travis and Visser 2005).

Allen Beck from BJS was also part of

this group, and early on he identified

problems with the codes for the

release type variable. Drs. Rosenfeld

and Piehl, in consultation with staff

at BJS, created “fixes” to account for

these coding errors and we followed

their example. Data from California,

Michigan and North Carolina in

particular had to be recoded. Details

are provided in the technical report.



The analysis uses rearrests as a proxy for actual reoffending.

The BJS collected three measures of recidivism – rearrest, reconviction and reincarceration. We chose to focus on arrests as the closest proxy to offender behavior because they involve the least amount of policy interventions. Still, because rearrests reflect a combination of both criminal activity and other decisions (e.g., to report a crime, to arrest an individual, to revoke parole), those on supervision may be watched more closely by law enforcement and parole officers. Thus criminal activity committed by parolees may be more likely to be detected than by unconditional releasees.

The study relies on data that are about ten years old. Our analysis involves recidivism outcomes for individuals released from prison in 1994 and “tracked” for two years. With the emergence of prisoner reentry as a major policy focus for the criminal justice community, the corrections environment has certainly changed in the last ten years. Yet it is not at all clear that parole supervision writ large has changed dramatically in this time frame. While there are innovations occurring in many parole agencies across the country, in most states these new

approaches are implemented more on the margins than the mainstream of parole practice. Further, given the increasing demands on state budgets, caseloads may be even higher and service resources lower than was the case a decade ago. Accordingly, there is no reason to believe that replicating the analysis using release data from, say, 2003, would yield more favorable results.

The study includes data from only 14 states, e.g. the universe of the BJS recidivism study minus Delaware. While true, taken together, prisoners released from these 14 states accounted for about two-thirds of all prisoners released in 1994 (Langan and Levin 2002). It is worth noting that because California heavily influences national trends, we re-analyzed the data including all states except California. These results are reported in the “Findings” section of the article.

Findings

Do prisoners released with and without supervision have different demographics, incarceration experiences, or criminal histories?

Figure 2. Characteristics of prisoners released in 1994, by supervision status at release

	Unconditional releasees	Mandatory parolees	Discretionary parolees
DEMOGRAPHICS			
Average age at release (years)	32.7	32.6	31.9
Male (%)	93	92	90
Black (%)	55	42	54
CRIMINAL HISTORY			
Previously arrested (%)	93	94	92
Average number of prior arrests	9.6	9.5	7.5
Previously arrested for violent offense (%)	67	63	55
Prior incarcerations (prison or jail, %)	68	69	67
Average number of prior incarcerations	2.7	2.5	2.3
INCARCERATION CHARACTERISTICS			
Incarcerated for violent offense (%)	27	21	23
Incarcerated for drug offense (%)	30	31	34
Incarcerated for property offense (%)	33	35	31
Incarcerated for public order offense (%)	9	9	10
Average time served (months)	32.0	18.5	21.3

Source: Urban Institute analysis of Bureau of Justice Statistics data.

As illustrated in Figure 2, there are statistical differences across groups, but generally there are not large substantive differences. The average age at release for all three groups was 32 or 33 years old, and the vast majority of releasees was male. Just over half of unconditional releasees and discretionary parolees were black, compared with about 40 percent of mandatory parolees.

In terms of criminal histories, more than 90 percent of each group had been arrested in the past. Unconditional releasees and mandatory parolees, however, had slightly higher average numbers of prior arrests than discretionary parolees. We also looked at prior arrests for violent crimes as an indicator of potential risk to the community upon release. Larger shares of prisoners released unconditionally had previously been arrested for a violent offense than had mandatory parolees, with discretionary parolees the least likely to have been arrested for a violent offense in the past.

About two-thirds of each group had been confined to prison or jail in the past, two to three times on average. In terms



of their most recent incarceration offense, about one-fourth of each group had been incarcerated for a violent offense, about one-third for a drug offense, another one-third for a property offense, and about ten percent for a public order offense. Finally, unconditional releasees served substantially more time behind bars, suggesting they may be more disconnected from positive social networks than their supervised counterparts.

Do prisoners released with and without supervision recidivate at different rates?

Sixty-two percent of unconditional releasees were rearrested at least once over two years, compared with 61 percent of mandatory parolees and 54 percent of discretionary parolees. Individuals in each group had between two and two and a half rearrests, on average, during the two-year period. These findings mirror unpublished analysis by BJS of a 1983 release cohort tracked for an earlier recidivism study. BJS found that 62.3 percent of conditional releasees were rearrested within three years, compared to 64.8 percent of unconditional releasees (Petersilia 2002).

First Rearrest Offenses

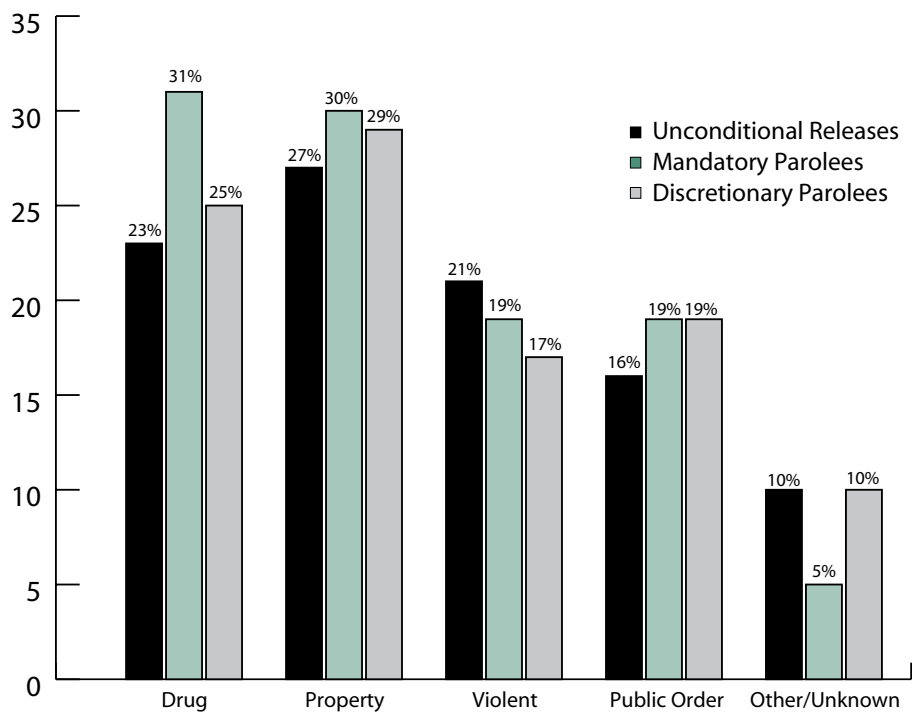
We examined offense types of those rearrested at least once. Similar shares of all three groups were first rearrested for property offenses, while a somewhat higher share of mandatory parolees were first rearrested for drug offenses, and a slightly higher share of unconditional releasees were first rearrested for violent crimes (Figure 3).

It is important to note that a small subset of public order offenders were actually charged with technical violations as their new offense. Most also had a concurrent charge for another offense, or were charged with a new offense before or after the technical violation. In other words, very few individuals (340 in the original sample) were rearrested only for a technical violation, and arguably many of those involved an underlying crime. In any case, since our study was published we have re-analyzed the data, excluding all rearrests for technical violations. Rearrest outcomes for unconditional and mandatory releasees barely changed, if at all; rearrest rates for discretionary parolees went down slightly (1.5 percentage points).

Comparing Similar Individuals

Because the three release groups were not identical on available attributes, we conducted regression analysis to control for these

Figure 3. First rearrest of prisoners who were rearrested at least once, by supervision status at 1994 release



differences. The results indicated that when comparing two individuals with similar demographics and criminal histories, their rearrest outcomes — based exclusively on their supervision status — differed only slightly. Specifically, when all other variables were controlled for, 61 percent of both mandatory parolees and unconditional releasees were expected to be rearrested at least once over two years, as compared to 57 percent of discretionary parolees.

As noted earlier, we re-analyzed the data in order to determine the extent to which California was influencing the results. The recidivism findings change when California is excluded, but not dramatically: The predicted probability of rearrest for unconditional releasees rises to 63 percent, compared with 60 percent for mandatory parolees and 56 percent for discretionary parolees.

Interpreting the Differences

Mandatory parolees, who today account for the largest share of released prisoners, fare no better with supervision than similar prisoners released without supervision in terms of rearrest outcomes. While discretionary parolees are somewhat less likely to be rearrested, this difference is relatively small considering that parole boards are selecting the “best risks” for release.

Clearly there is a value judgment being made here, in characterizing a four percentage point difference as “relatively small,” differing “only slightly.” In the criminal justice arena, where reductions in recidivism >>>



Is Discretionary Parole the Answer?

Whether one perceives a four percentage point difference as large or small, all can agree that discretionary parolees were rearrested at a lower rate than their mandatory parole and unconditionally released counterparts. That given, some would contend that discretionary parole should be re-expanded to more states and prisoners (Rosenfeld 2005; Petersilia 2003). But discretionary release is arguably a "solution" with a ceiling. By allowing parole boards to choose the lower-risk, more-ready prisoners for release, the implication is that higher-risk, less-ready individuals stay incarcerated longer. The unintended consequence of this policy is that those higher-risk, less-ready prisoners may be released with little or no supervision at the end of their sentence. In other words, while discretionary release

are stubbornly hard to come by, some will see this same difference and determine it evidence that parole does work.

Because parole boards take into account factors such as a prisoner's attitude and motivation level, institutional conduct, preparedness for release and connections to the community – important factors that our model could not control for -- I would expect this group to be substantially, rather than marginally, less likely to recidivate. The suggestion here is that the lower rearrest rates may be largely due to who is selected for discretionary release rather than discretionary supervision itself, which is not systematically different than mandatory supervision across states

For Whom Does Supervision Matter Most?

Certain prisoners appear to benefit more from supervision than others in terms of rearrest outcomes. Specifically, females, individuals with few prior arrests, public order offenders and technical violators were less likely to be rearrested if supervised than their unsupervised counterparts (Figure 4). For example, the likelihood of rearrest for a female parolee is 51%, as compared to 67 percent for a similar female released without supervision. There is a similar pattern for public order offenses, although not as pronounced.

Those who had a combination of these characteristics – typically lower risk, lower level offenders – yielded even greater benefits. It is possible that these individuals are more responsive to the sanctions and services provided by supervision given their minimal prior involvements with the justice system.

Conversely, supervision did not appear to improve rearrest outcomes for some of the higher rate, more serious offenders – arguably those who warrant supervision most. The

Figure 4. Predicted probability of rearrest two years after release, by supervision status at 1994 release

	Unconditional releasees (%)	Mandatory parolees (%)	Discretionary parolees (%)
OVERALL	61	61	57
Male	60	62	58
Female	67	51	51
Black	68	67	61
Non-black	54	56	53
Few prior arrests	53	49	44
Medium prior arrests	59	57	52
High prior arrests	68	70	66
Low release age	61	60	57
Medium release age	62	62	58
High release age	52	53	48
Violent offense	55	56	55
Property offense	68	67	62
Drug offense	56	61	54
Public order and other offense	65	57	55
New sentence	56	58	54
Revocation + new sentence	59	62	53
Revocation (technical)	71	68	63

Source: Urban Institute analysis of Bureau of Justice Statistics data. See "Methodology" section of original study for definitions of characteristics shown in figure.



expected rearrest rates for those incarcerated for a violent offense is about 55 percent, whether one is supervised or not. The likelihood of rearrest for a mandatory parolee with high prior arrests is 70 percent, compared with 66 percent for discretionary parolees and 68 percent for unconditional releasees.

It is notable that technical violators released unconditionally have higher expected rearrest rates than any other release group. The policy implication is that responding to technical violations by reincarcerating violators for the remainder of their sentence does not solve the problem. When these individuals are then re-released from prison without supervision, they are highly likely to be rearrested – even more so than their counterparts who are released to supervision.

How Does Supervision Affect the Largest Release Groups?

Few prisoners have a combination of characteristics likely to yield either the highest or lowest benefits from supervision. In fact, the public safety impact of supervision is minimal and often nonexistent among the largest shares of the release cohort – males convicted of property, drug and violent offenses who account for 80 percent of 1994 releases. As illustrated in Figure 5, supervision impacts rearrest outcomes differently based on the incarcerating charge.

Specifically, supervision does not play much of a role among those incarcerated for a violent offense (roughly one-fifth of the released population). Discretionary parole does seem to benefit property offenders (roughly one-third of the released population), although predicted rearrest rates for mandatory parolees are virtually the same as >>>

Figure 5. Predicted probability of rearrest two years after release for largest release groups, by supervision status at 1994 release

PREDICTED PROBABILITY OF REARREST (%)				
	Percent of 1994 release cohort	Unconditional releasees	Mandatory parolees	Discretionary parolees
PROPERTY OFFENDERS				
Young males	11.7	68	67	62
Medium males	8.5	68	68	63
Older males	10.5	59	60	53
DRUG OFFENDERS				
Young males	10.7	55	61	54
Medium males	8.0	55	62	55
Older males	9.7	45	54	45
VIOLENT OFFENDERS				
Young males	8.5	55	56	56
Medium males	5.4	55	58	57
Older males	7.4	45	49	47

Source: Urban Institute analysis of Bureau of Justice Statistics data. See “Methodology” section of full report for definitions of age groupings.

enables to states choose lower-risk candidates for release, it is still critical to have an effective supervision component for those higher risk individuals who may never pass the “readiness” test and may in fact warrant supervision most of all. At the same time, there may be important lessons from the discretionary release process that could be transferred to post-release supervision. For example, there may be ways other than a parole board appearance to stimulate good behavior and better prepare a greater share of prisoners for release to the community. Jeremy Travis (2005) introduces an innovative twist on good time credits, suggesting to transform it into something prisoners must earn by participating in treatment and training and preparing for their return to the community. This idea could be implemented within the current legal framework and offers prisoners a tangible, meaningful incentive to use the time behind bars productively.



for unconditional releasees. On the other hand, the predicted rearrest rates for drug offenders are the same for discretionary parolees and unconditional releasees, while mandatory parolees actually have higher rearrest rates than the other two groups

Discussion

Unanswered Questions

What these findings tell us is that the big picture warrants attention. The analysis suggests that on balance, looking at a group of large states, parole has not contributed substantially to reduced recidivism and increased public safety. The public safety contributions of parole need to be carefully examined and, more importantly, improved.

At the same time, the study does not conclude that parole can't work. In fact it may work quite well in certain states and jurisdiction. But our study could not address how parole was practiced in various states, nor its level of success in specific places. As discussed above, parole practices and policies operate independently in each state, and vary substantially from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. A rich research opportunity exists to study various models and determine which practices are associated with the best outcomes (Piehl 2005).

As discussed above, our study could not get inside the "black box" of supervision. We did not have the data to address what types of parole strategies work better than others. Specifically, we could not take into account what impact various factors – such as the length, type or intensity of supervision, assessment tools, access to programming and treatment, caseload size and contact standards – had on recidivism outcomes.

While the research did shed light on the types of individuals who benefit most from supervision, the important next step is to figure out why parole works for some better than others and how similar gains could be realized for larger subsets of the parole population. Conversely, the finding that the higher risk, more serious individuals benefit least from parole supervision has confounded many experts who expect higher risk individuals to be most impacted by supervision, as they are by treatment. All of these issues warrant further study.

Supervision in Perspective

While the analysis is imperfect and the remaining questions substantial, the implication that parole may not be particularly effective at reducing reoffending should not come as a surprise to many in the field. For years, community corrections leaders have alluded to a "broken" system³ (Petersilia 2003:193) in need of "a major overhaul" (Jacobson 2005: 148). According to Petersilia (2003:12), "No one believes that the current prison and parole system is working."

Little hard evidence exists as to why supervision may not be as effective as it could be, but the realities of parole point to some clues.

To begin with, supervision in most cases is quite minimal. Parole officers' caseloads average 70 parolees apiece, translating to one or two 15 minute meetings a month (Petersilia 2003). While lower caseloads do not ensure success (Taxman 2002), such high caseloads make it virtually impossible (Rhine et al., 1991). Additionally, parole officers are typically based in downtown offices far from the communities where their parolees reside, and therefore lack the context and relationships that neighborhood-based supervision – similar to community based policing – could provide.

Supervision today is more surveillance-oriented than was once the case, despite that research shows it takes a mix of treatment and surveillance to change offender behavior (Petersilia 2003; Sherman et al., 1997). Additionally, the response to parole failure is often a failure itself. In many states responses to violations are inconsistent and inappropriate to the seriousness of the infraction, therefore diminishing any deterrent value and costing the public millions in reincarceration costs (Jacobson 2005).

Over the last decade several groups of practitioners and academics have examined these issues, as well as the future of community corrections. In the late 1990s, the Office of Justice Programs (Department of Justice) held a two-day meeting of about 50 community corrections practitioners to rethink community supervision and community safety. They determined that the field was at a critical crossroads, facing both "a moment of vulnerability" and "a moment of opportunity" (Dickey and Smith 1998). Around the same time but over a longer period, a group of a dozen prominent practitioners met under the auspices of the "Reinventing Probation Council." After three years of deliberation, they issued an bold, candid, forward-thinking report, entitled *Transforming Probation Through Leadership: The Broken Windows Model* (Reinventing Probation Council 2000). It argued that probation should adopt a community-centered, public safety-oriented approach similar to the "Broken Windows" law enforcement model.

More recently, the Re-Entry Policy Council issued bi-partisan consensus statements aimed at improving prisoner reentry. Some two dozen recommendations address parole specifically, from the release decision to responses to parole violations (Report of the Re-Entry Policy Council 2005). Many of the ideas emanating from these groups are also consistent with the sentiments of correctional experts who were interviewed by Joan Petersilia (Petersilia 2002). According to Petersilia, there is substantial agreement that a new supervision model should be community-based, focus on the highest risk offenders, deliver appropriate treatment as well as sanctions, and include an array of intermediate sanctions in response to technical violations.

These policy discussions and interviews reveal a broad consensus among seasoned practitioners and academics that community supervision can and should work, but that change is necessary. Parole



has the potential to make a big contribution to public safety and successful reentry. The fact that parole officers have the legal authority to set and enforce rules for a high risk population, to coerce – and access – treatment and training for parolees, is largely under appreciated. To borrow from the Reinventing Probation Council, “As a matter of social policy, [community supervision] occupies the borderland between law enforcement and human services. As a justice system sanction, [community supervision] is invested with wide-ranging leverage to influence the conduct of offenders. Its strength lies in its authority and capacity to repair broken lives and hold offenders accountable for the harm their actions have caused to victims and communities” (Reinventing Probation Council 2000:3).

Policy Opportunities

This section outlines some broad opportunities for the paroling profession. None of these ideas is particularly original. In fact, most echo recommendations of the groups discussed above. Some of these proposals have research backing; others are testable and should be evaluated. While the ideas themselves are straightforward, implementation would be complex and difficult, requiring enormous change, especially in terms of organizational culture. Perhaps that is why more parole agencies have not put into practice more of these approaches, despite the fundamental consensus among many in the field. But the time to experiment with reinvention is now. If nothing else, the Urban Institute study calls into question the efficacy of “business-as-usual.” And importantly, the national policy interest in prisoner reentry affords a rare window of opportunity for parole to test out new strategies in the name of improving prisoner reentry and reintegration outcomes.

Agency Level

Starting at the top, parole should **adopt a mission that puts public safety first** (Reinventing Probation Council 2000; Kleiman 2005). The field should be clear about its purpose and own the recidivism problem, even if it is not responsible for all of it.

Parole agencies should operationalize this mission by **setting – and being accountable for – explicit public safety benchmarks** (Reinventing Probation Council 2000; Kleiman 2005). Following the lead of the policing profession, parole agencies should set performance goals that aim to reduce reoffending rates by a specific amount. In the probation context, Beto, Corbett and DiIulio (2000) suggest the goal that only 10 percent of all probationers commit a new crime within three years. The Reinventing Probation Council argues that “embracing [such a] goal as a benchmark against which to measure the performance of the field serves as a bold yet necessary step in addressing the crisis afflicting probation” (Reinventing Probation Council 2000:6). While that specific statistic may be unrealistic in the parole context – maybe the target is closer to 40 or 50 percent – defining success in such a way would be a sea change. It could both raise parole’s credibility with the public and signal to line staff that controlling crime among parolees is possible.

Parole agencies should also **take full advantage of what the research community has found to be effective** (Bogue et al., 2004; Burke 2004; Bureau of Justice Assistance 2004). As discussed elsewhere in this journal, evidence-based practices represent a body of knowledge about programs and interventions proven to reduce recidivism.⁴ Despite the empirical base, few agencies implement these principles in their mainstream supervision practices.

Given the substantial treatment, health, housing, education and employment needs of the parole population, it is also essential for parole to **partner with other agencies** – such as community health care providers, housing authorities and workforce development boards – who are now recognizing aspects of the reentry problem as their own (Report of the Re-Entry >>>

Parolee Attitudes

Interviews with parolees for the Urban

Institute's Returning Home study suggest

parolees are respectful of the their

parole officers, open to help, and

have high expectations about the

assistance they anticipate (La Vigne

and Kachnowski 2005; Visher et al., 2004;

Visher et al., 2003). About nine out of

ten parolees believe their parole officer

treats them with respect, is trustworthy

and acts professionally. The vast majority

express wanting help from their parole

officers finding jobs and expect their

parole officer to be helpful with their

transition. Unfortunately, they expect

more than is often delivered. Only about

half said their parole officer had actually

been helpful and thought supervision

would help them stay out of prison.



Policy Council 2005; Reinventing Probation Council 2000; Bureau of Justice Assistance 2004; Petersilia 2003; Travis 2005; Burke 2004). Collaborating with other agencies is a way to expand the capacity of parole without necessarily having to develop and pay for it alone.

Supervision Strategies

In terms of supervision strategies, parole agencies should:

Align supervision resources with the risks, placing a premium on the highest risk offenders, the highest risk places, and the highest risk time for offending (Report of the Re-Entry Policy Council 2005; Reinventing Probation Council 2000; Petersilia 2002; Petersilia 2003; Travis 2005; Burke 2004). There is broad consensus – supported by evidence-based principles – to focus resources on high risk populations. The fact that the Urban Institute study indicated parole was least effective with this population should only heighten concerns that the highest risk parolees may not be receiving the right interventions in the right dosage levels. High risk places are those neighborhoods with the most returning offenders and/or the highest crime rates. And the highest risk times are known to be the first days, weeks and months after a prisoner is released (Travis 2005; Langan and Levin 2002). Focusing both surveillance and treatment resources where the risks are highest should ensure that the resources invested have the greatest impact.

Supervise parolees in their home neighborhoods (Report of the Re-Entry Policy Council 2005; Reinventing Probation Council 2000; Petersilia 2002; Petersilia 2003; Travis 2005). There is good reason to end “fortress” parole that takes place in an office between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. (Reinventing Probation Council 2000). Following the lead of police, community-based parole officers would be responsible for geographically-based caseloads, getting to know their neighborhood resources and high-risk areas, and would thus be in a better position to meaningfully assist and sanction parolees on their caseloads. By supervising parolees where they live, fostering relationships with those who know them best, parole officers could play an enhanced role in making places safer.

Emphasize both surveillance and treatment (Report of the Re-Entry Policy Council 2005; Petersilia 2002; Petersilia 2003; Taxman 2002). The research speaks clearly to the point that it takes a mix of surveillance and treatment to reduce recidivism most effectively (Sherman et al., 1997). Parolees should be assessed to identify risks and needs, in accordance with evidence-based principles, and be provided appropriate treatment, training and services. Even when parole can not directly provide the services, they should access and connect parolees to appropriate interventions and mandate their involvement.

Prioritize – and communicate – only rules and conditions that can be realistically monitored and enforced (Kleiman 2005). Conditions of release should be few, tied to positive expected outcomes and tailored to individual risks and needs. Moreover, these rules and the consequences for breaking them must be explicitly communicated if they are to impact offender behavior. In other words, parolees need

to know the ground rules and expect them to be enforced if conditions are to help deter reoffending (Kennedy 1998; Kleiman 1999; Harrell et al., 1999; Taxman 2002).

Instill swift, certain, consistent, predictable responses to failures (Burke 2004; Report of the Re-Entry Policy Council 2005; Reinventing Probation Council 2000; Petersilia 2002; Kleiman 2005; Travis 2005). The research literature suggests that to be effective, punishment should be immediate and predictable, with clear, enforceable consequences for violations (Burke 1997; Harrell et al., 2003; Taxman et al., 1999). This ideal is far from actual practice in many states, where parolees may violate conditions without being caught or may be caught several times but receive nothing more than a warning, and then a seemingly random violation results in their return to prison for the remainder of their sentence. This recommendation is dependent both on parole policy about responses to violations and, importantly, the availability of intermediate sanctions in the community.

Introduce a range of incentives to induce and reward successes (Travis 2005; Report of the Re-Entry Policy Council 2005; Burke 2004). Research indicates that incentives and positive reinforcements may be more effective than negative sanctions (Andrews et al., 1990). Concrete incentives such as increasing curfew hours or reducing the number of contacts could serve to motivate parolees to comply with conditions and stay on the right track. Ultimately, parolees should be allowed to earn their way off parole early by achieving certain milestones such as keeping a job and staying sober (Travis 2005; Farabee 2005).

Looking Forward

In closing, there is a major opportunity to reform parole, or “reinvent” it in the words of others (Corbett 1996; DiIulio 1997; Dickey and Smith 1998; Rhine and Pappozzi 1999; Reinventing Probation Council 2000; Lehman 2001; Petersilia 2002). While parole generally is not producing large, visible reductions in crime among its caseload, it has the potential to do so. In many ways, the situation is reminiscent of the policing profession in the 1980s, when crime was high and confidence in the police was low. The public expected police to catch and arrest criminals – to react, but surely not prevent crime. Similarly, we count on parole officers to catch parolees. Missed appointments, failed drug tests and of course new crimes may all result in parole violations and a return to prison. But few expect parole to actually deter and *prevent* new crimes from occurring.

Community policing has shown us what is possible: We now expect police to help keep communities safe. In many ways parole has advantages over their policing colleagues in the task at hand: Parole officers know specifically who to watch – their caseloads – and they have legal authority over them. Moreover they can set rules for these individuals and implement a system of sanctions and incentives to help coax good behavior. These are powerful tools that should be strategically employed, not minimized.

At the same time, supervision should not be expected to single-handedly reform former prisoners. More broadly, parole agencies must



work together with their prison and community-based colleagues to prepare inmates for release, help parolees navigate those first critical hours and days of freedom, and connect those motivated to jobs, treatment, healthcare, housing and a supportive network of family and friends. Supervision is only part of the reentry solution – but a very important part.

Given the national momentum on the topic of prisoner reentry, there is a real opportunity – if not obligation – to think big and expect more from parole. There is no better time than now to improve supervision and make it deliver on its potential to reduce crime, particularly among the highest-risk individuals who warrant it the most. >>>

Endnotes

¹ *Does Parole Work? Analyzing the Impact of Postprison Supervision on Rearrest Outcomes* is available in full at <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=311156>. For a copy of the technical report, please contact the authors directly.

² We also used data from the Census Bureau and National Corrections Reporting Program

³ The full statement from Joe Lehman, former Commissioner of the Washington State Department of Corrections, was, “We have a broken parole system. Part of the problem is that parole can’t do it alone, and we have misled the public in thinking that we can – hence the frustration, and the cries to abolish parole. We don’t need to abolish parole, but a new model is sorely needed.”

⁴ See National Institute of Correction website for a series of papers that discuss evidence-based practices and principles in the community corrections setting (<http://www.nicic.org/Library/019342>).

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