

# Parole Decisions and the Role of Institutional Factors in Successful Reentry

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One of the most important public policy and public safety decisions in the criminal justice system centers on determining which inmates are granted parole. Little is known about this process — how likely offenders are to succeed on parole and what issues are related to success/failure while on parole. The present study is an examination of how parole decisions are made and the outcomes for offenders who are either paroled or released at the expiration of their sentences in the state of Kentucky.

Previous studies have suggested that the most important predictors of recidivism are criminal histories, social achievement, age, gender, race and family factors.<sup>1</sup> However, it has also been shown that parolees are often supervised in diverse ways and parole violation/revocation rates vary significantly across jurisdictions.<sup>2</sup> National studies report three-year reincarceration rates for former inmates ranging from 25 to 41 percent.<sup>3</sup> Most recently, the Pew Center for the States reported that 43 percent of all inmates released in 2004 returned to prison within three years.<sup>4</sup> Reincarceration has been identified as most likely for offenders who are young, nonwhite, less educated and with a mental health diagnosis.<sup>5</sup>

The roles of demographics and criminal history have been the traditional focus of recidivism studies. One area that has been only infrequently examined as a factor in successful reentry has been institutional experiences. The present study is designed to draw on both existing knowledge regarding the role of demographics as well as aspects of institutional experiences to assess the roles each may play in successful community reentry for inmates, distinguishing between

**Table 1. Demographic Attributes of the Served Out and Paroled Groups**

ATTRIBUTE	SERVED OUT	PAROLED
<b>Race<sup>1</sup></b>		
White	6,655 (70.5%)	7,170 (66.6%)
Black	2,786 (29.5%)	3,597 (33.4%)
<b>Sex<sup>2</sup></b>		
Female	1,096 (11.2%)	1,582 (14.5%)
Male	8,697 (88.8%)	9,331 (85.5%)
<b>Age<sup>3</sup></b>		
Under 28	1,212 (30.8%)	1,348 (33.0%)
28 – 37	1,014 (25.8%)	933 (22.8%)
38 – 45	679 (17.2%)	544 (13.3%)
Over 45	1,032 (26.2%)	1,264 (30.9%)
<b>Drug/Alcohol Problems<sup>4</sup></b>		
None	6,385 (65.2%)	7,317 (67.1%)
Abuse causing occasional legal or social problems	141 (1.4%)	162 (1.5%)
Serious abuse or disruption of functioning	3,266 (33.4%)	3,433 (31.5%)
<b>Education<sup>5</sup></b>		
Less than high school	2,326 (61.7%)	2,119 (55.4%)
High school	1,241 (32.9%)	1,465 (38.3%)
Some college	158 (4.2%)	195 (5.1%)
College graduate	45 (1.2%)	48 (1.3%)
<b>Employed Post Release<sup>6</sup></b>		
Unemployed	8,999 (91.9%)	9,476 (86.8%)
Employed	793 (8.1%)	1,436 (13.2%)
<b>Marital Status<sup>7</sup></b>		
Unmarried	4,860 (82.0%)	7,353 (80.3%)
Married	1,070 (18.0%)	1,807 (19.7%)

<sup>1</sup> Chi-square value: 35.37, degrees of freedom = 1, p = .000

<sup>2</sup> Chi-square value: 50.06, degrees of freedom = 1, p = .000

<sup>3</sup> Chi-square value: 46.08, degrees of freedom = 1, p = .000

<sup>4</sup> Chi-square value: 8.45, degrees of freedom = 2, p = .015

<sup>5</sup> Chi-square value: 31.73, degrees of freedom = 3, p = .000

<sup>6</sup> Chi-square value: 137.6, degrees of freedom = 1, p = .000

<sup>7</sup> Chi-square value: 6.61, degrees of freedom = 1, p = .010

those who are released on parole and those who are released at the expiration of their sentences.

## Method

The study examines recidivism likelihood and correlations for all offenders released from Kentucky prisons either via parole or through the expiration of their sentences from July 2002 through December 2004. All data for this study were provided by the Kentucky Department of Corrections (KDOC). The KDOC matched these groups based on age, race, sex and original offense (n=20,877).

The variables used in the analysis include offender sex, race, age, commitment from an urban or rural county, original conviction offense as a drug offense, the inmate's last custody level while incarcerated, gang membership, education level, number of parole hearings, number of institutions where time was served, number of days served, number of prior incarcerations and whether the offender was reincarcerated. The analysis focuses on identifying differences between the attributes for offenders who served out their sentences and those who were paroled, as well as identifying the aggregate rates of success and failure (e.g., reincarceration) at the five-year point for all offenders released from prison during the two-and-a-half-year study period.

## Results

Table 1 presents the demographic attributes of the served out and paroled offenders. All of the attributes are significantly different between the two groups with the exception of whether the original offense was in an urban or rural county. As shown, offenders who served out their sen-

**Table 2. Demographic Attributes of the Served Out and Paroled Groups**

ATTRIBUTE	SERVED OUT	PAROLED
<b>Gang Involved?<sup>1</sup></b>		
No	9,642 (98.5%)	10,615 (97.3%)
Yes	150 (1.5%)	297 (2.7%)
<b>Original Offense<sup>2</sup></b>		
Drug	2,649 (27.1%)	4,958 (45.4%)
Violent	2,250 (23.0%)	1,547 (14.2%)
Property	1,010 (10.3%)	1,750 (16.0%)
Theft	1,404 (14.3%)	1,178 (10.8%)
Other	2,476 (25.3%)	1,478 (13.5%)
<b>Offense Location<sup>3</sup></b>		
Rural	5,839 (59.6%)	6,627 (60.7%)
Urban	3,954 (40.4%)	4,286 (39.3%)
<b>Mean Values</b>		
Number of parole hearings <sup>4</sup>	1.67	2.00
Number of prior incarcerations <sup>5</sup>	1.54	2.05
Number of days served <sup>6</sup>	1084	1227
Number of institutions served in <sup>7</sup>	2.71	3.28

<sup>1</sup> Chi-square value: 35.59, degrees of freedom= 1, p= .000  
<sup>2</sup> Chi-square value: 1243.95, degrees of freedom = 4, p= .000  
<sup>3</sup> Chi-square value: 2.61, degrees of freedom = 1, p = .106  
<sup>4</sup> t-value: 22.4, degrees of freedom = 18851, p = .000  
<sup>5</sup> t value: 19.9, degrees of freedom = 19259, p= .000  
<sup>6</sup> t-value: 8.18, degrees of freedom = 20702, p= .000  
<sup>7</sup> t-value: 29.2, degrees of freedom = 20696, p= .000

tences were more likely to be white, male, less educated, unemployed, gang members and convicted of violent offenses. Paroled offenders were more likely to be under the age of 28, identified severe drug/alcohol problems, were married, were convicted of drug offenses, had more parole hearings, served more days incarcerated and served time in more institutions.

In a comparison of reincarceration within five years of release, Table 2 shows that paroled offenders are significantly more likely to be reincarcerated within five years than offenders who served out their sentences. A total of 54.8 percent of

offenders were reincarcerated within five years, with 62.8 percent of parolees and 40.5 percent of serve-outs returning to prison. Those who had served out their original sentences and were reincarcerated primarily came back to prison for conviction on a new offense (35.5 percent), although 4.1 percent returned for other administrative reasons. Most often, the reincarceration of parolees was for a parole violation (51 percent), with only about one in nine (11.8 percent) reincarcerated for a new offense.

**The study examines recidivism likelihood and correlations for all offenders released from Kentucky prisons either via parole or through the expiration of their sentences from July 2002 through December 2004.**

Table 3 shows the percentages of reincarcerated offenders by the offense for which they were reincarcerated. Of the offenders that served out and were reincarcerated, the most frequent type of offense was a drug offense (36.9 percent) followed by “other” (25.2 percent), theft (15.9 percent), violent (12.2 percent) and property offenses (9.8 percent). Of the parolees who were reincarcerated, again the most frequent offense leading to reincarceration was a drug offense (46.1 percent). “Other” offenses (16.4 percent), theft (15.4 percent), violent (12.7 percent), and property (9.4 percent) offenses were markedly less frequent.

## Discussion

The results of this preliminary analysis indicate a number of significant differences between inmates granted parole and those allowed to serve their full sentences. Although those who serve out may have profiles suggesting a greater degree of involvement in criminal subcultures and higher risk of reincarceration, they are actually less likely to be reincarcerated within five years. Among those who are paroled, not only is

supervision directly linked to an increased likelihood of reincarceration, but also (not surprisingly) offenders with more and more diverse institutional experiences are more likely to be reincarcerated for a violation of parole. Interestingly, while parolees are less likely to be identified as having severe substance abuse problems prior to their original incarceration, they are more likely to return to prison for drug offenses.

The results of this study suggest that while it may be important for parole decisions to be based on important characteristics such as age, marital status and presence/severity of substance abuse problems, these factors may actually be less important than the institutional experiences of offenders in predicting successful community reentry. The results of this study indicate that the actions of parole supervision and a more diverse set of experiences while incarcerated are linked to a greater likelihood of reentry failure. Both paroling authorities and other scholars are encouraged to consider how these findings may be important for both making release decisions and assessing if and how diverse sets

of indicators may explain reentry success or failure.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Gendreau, P., T. Little and C. Goggin. 1996. A meta-analysis of the predictors of adult offender recidivism: What works! *Criminology*, 34(4): 575-607.

<sup>2</sup> Austin, J. 2001. Prisoner reentry: Current trends, practices and issues. *Crime & Delinquency*, 47(3): 314-334.

<sup>3</sup> Beck, A.J., and Shipley, B.E. (1989). *Recidivism of prisoners released in 1983*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

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<sup>4</sup> Pew Center on States. 2011. *State of Recidivism: The revolving door of America's prisons*. Washington, D.C.: The Pew Charitable Trusts.

<sup>5</sup> Grattet, R., J. Petersilia and J. Lin. 2008. *Parole violations and revocations in California*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice.

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**Table 3. Reincarceration: Served Out and Paroled Groups**

ATTRIBUTE	SERVED OUT	PAROLED
<b>Reincarcerated</b>	40.5%	62.8%
<b>Reincarceration</b>		
New offense	35.5%	11.8%
Return to prison (Recommitment or parole violation)	4.0%	51.0%
<b>Reincarceration Offense<sup>1</sup> (New Crime Only)</b>		
Drug	36.9%	46.1%
Violent	12.2%	12.7%
Property	9.8%	9.4%
Theft	15.9%	15.4%
Other	25.2%	16.4%

<sup>1</sup> Chi square value: 46.63, degrees of freedom = 4, p = .000