

Recidivism in Western Australia

1. Background

Crime research has undertaken a paradigm shift in recent decades from a reactive to a proactive focus on crime prevention. Examining the factors that lead to reoffending is an important aspect of crime prevention, given that reoffending individuals represent a substantial proportion of all crime committed.¹

Definitional Issues

It should be noted that there is no clear or consistent definition of what constitutes recidivism. For example, recidivism may be defined as an individual being re-arrested, or having a court appearance, or being sent to prison.² It may also be based on self-reported information. There are positives and negatives of each approach, with self-reported data for example being vulnerable to the interviewee misleading the interviewer or failing to recall information, however it may provide a more accurate picture given that many criminal acts are never reported to the police. The length of time will also impact on recidivism estimates, with studies using timeframes from as little as one year to as long as 10 years. Hence, recidivism rates will vary considerably depending on the data source and time frame specified.

Therefore, it is overall important to clearly describe the method of data collection and analysis undertaken so that comparisons can be made against studies using a similar methodology.

Factors Contributing to Recidivism

A number of studies have identified specific risk factors for recidivism. These include:

- Aboriginal Status (Aboriginal individuals are far more likely to reoffend, with one Western Australian study finding that 80% of Aboriginal offenders are re-arrested in a 10 year period)³
- Age (younger individuals are more likely to be re-imprisoned compared to older individuals)⁴
- Offence Type (individuals with property offences are more likely to reoffend compared to other offence types)⁵
- Lifestyle Factors (drug use, unemployment, low educational attainment, and mental health issues are all associated with higher likelihood of recidivism)⁶

¹ For example, an American study examined the crime history of 10,000 individuals born in 1945. Chronic reoffending individuals represented 6 per cent of the cohort but over half of the crime committed.

² Payne, J. *Recidivism in Australia: Findings and Future Research* (2007). Australian Institute of Criminology, Research and Public Policy Series (No. 80)

³ Broadhurst R & Loh N 1995. Re-arrest probabilities for the 1984–1993 apprehended Western Australian population: a survival analysis. *Journal of quantitative criminology* 11(3): 289–313.

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics. *An analysis of repeat imprisonment trends in Australia using prisoner census data from 1994 to 2007* (2010). ABS Catalogue no. 1351.0.55.031.

⁵ *ibid*

Gender has also been suggested to be a factor contributing to recidivism, with males more likely to reoffend, however findings so far have been contradictory and therefore inconclusive.

Prison based factors, such as the completion of treatment programs, have also been researched extensively. Studies have found that a prison sentence by itself increases the possibility of reoffending; however a prison offence in combination with relevant treatment programs (e.g. drug treatment, sexual offender treatment) will reduce the possibility of recidivism.⁷

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The 2013 report from the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Report on Government Services⁸ shows Western Australia to be in the middle of the pack (and lower than the Australian average) when it comes to the two-year rate of return to prison.

Prisoners released during 2009-10 who returned to corrective services with a new correctional sanction within two years (per cent)

	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	Aust
Prisoners returning to:									
— prison	42.5	35.1	37.7	36.1	29.1	36.4	40.8	52.4	39.3
— corrective services	46.9	44.6	43.1	49.8	41.3	48.0	56.1	53.2	46.1

Prisoners released who returned to prison under sentence within two years (per cent)

	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	Aust
2007-08	43.0	35.5	33.6	42.3	33.2	36.0	..	44.8	38.8
2008-09	42.9	34.0	37.9	44.7	32.2	36.4	..	47.3	40.0
2009-10	42.4	33.7	33.5	45.3	30.2	31.7	..	47.9	38.5
2010-11	43.3	37.1	35.2	44.2	29.8	36.2	na	47.1	39.8
2011-12	42.5	35.1	37.7	36.1	29.1	36.4	40.8	52.4	39.3

Figure 1

Two tables taken from the 2013 COAG Report on Government Services, illustrating reporting of WA recidivism.

The COAG data suggests that recidivism in WA declined by 8 percentage points between the 2010/11 and 2011/12 reporting periods.

2. Purpose of the review

The purpose of this review will be to identify whether recidivism has altered over the last five years and determine the cohorts/prisons where recidivism is highest and lowest. The review will also examine the Department's ability to monitor the effectiveness of its interventions aimed at reducing recidivism.

⁶ Payne, J. Recidivism in Australia: Findings and Future Research (2007). Australian Institute of Criminology, Research and Public Policy Series (No. 80).

⁷ Marsh, K., Fox, C. and Sarmah, R., Is custody an effective sentencing option for the UK? Evidence from a meta-analysis of existing studies, *Probation Journal*, 2009, 56: 129-151.

⁸ SCRGSP (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision) 2013, *Report on Government Services 2013*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.

3. Terms of Reference

- What has been the overall trend in recidivism rates over the past five years?
- What are the respective recidivism rates for each prison in Western Australia?
- Which personal factors are most associated with recidivism?
- What offender treatment programs are available to prisoners to reduce recidivism and how is the Department monitoring the effectiveness of these programs?
- What cohort/s are receiving or not receiving offender treatment programs and how does this impact the recidivism rate?

4. Methodology

- Review Department data used to inform recidivism rates in annual and COAG reports⁹.
- Conduct a multivariate statistical analysis¹⁰ of variables associated with recidivism.
- Interview relevant Head Office staff on their policies/plans/programs to reduce recidivism rates.
- Review Department evaluations of policies/plans/programs aimed at reducing recidivism

Scope

- This audit will be restricted to adult recidivism rates.
- Our analysis will assess recidivism using the same definition as COAG, being the two-year return rate of sentenced prisoners to prison (including those released on parole and those whose parole orders were cancelled).

⁹ If this is not possible, manual extraction of release data will be attempted which will have a significant impact on the timeframes of this audit.

¹⁰ This is an analytical method that takes into account multiple explanatory factors in a single predictive model – it is superior to simpler bivariate methods (e.g. correlation) as it can examine the impact of a specific factor while controlling for the impact of others. While a host of studies have found that Aboriginal status is an important predictor of recidivism, one study found that after controlling for other factors such as education, drug use, gender, age, and offence history, Aboriginal status became non-significant.