Study asserts that assessments of parolees' risk should consider recidivism-free time

October 13 2021

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As efforts to reverse mass incarceration rise, so does the need to supervise more individuals in the community. Faced with heightened demand, corrections agencies increasingly use risk assessment to allocate supervision and treatment resources efficiently and improve public safety. A new study examined the time individuals have spent without being arrested or returning to prison, looking at the relation between

recidivism-free time in a community and recidivism among individuals on parole supervision in Pennsylvania. The study concludes that those assessing parolees' risk should incorporate information about recidivism-free time.

The study, by researchers from Merrimack College and the University of Maryland, appears in *Justice Quarterly*, a publication of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences.

"Many agencies use risk assessment as part of reforms to reduce the cost and size of correctional populations," says Nicole Frisch-Scott, assistant professor of criminology and criminal justice, who coauthored the study. "The increasing use of actuarial risk assessment instruments in community corrections allows agencies to manage resources based on individuals' level of recidivism risk and needs for interventions. But noticeably absent from these assessments is considering the amount of time an individual remains free of recidivism."

Research on crime has long observed that past offending or lack thereof predicts future offending behavior. Recidivism-free time is not tied to any crime-related needs or treatments, and it does not require instruments to measure. In this study, researchers sought to determine whether recidivism-free time can contribute to risk prediction.

The researchers examined data from Pennsylvania, which uses a dynamic risk assessment tool, analyzing 25,000 individuals released into parole supervision from state prisons between January 2006 and December 2008. Parolees were re-evaluated annually; recidivism-free time was defined as the amount of time parolees remained in the community without rearrest or reincarceration.

They found that considering recidivism-free time explained part of recidivism changes over time, above and beyond risk assessment scores.

Therefore, considering recidivism-free time may improve risk prediction independent of annual or initial risk assessment scores. The study also found that repeated assessments of parolee risk as individuals remain in the community predicted recidivism more accurately than single pre-release risk assessment scores.

The study's authors suggest that considering recidivism-free time may be more useful for agencies that assess risk once rather than repeatedly. While repeated assessments using a dynamic risk instrument seem to predict recidivism well, there is more room for improvement when only measuring risk before release from prison.

"Our study's findings demonstrate the value of recidivism-free time and suggest its utility in decisions related to parole supervision and termination, alongside traditional risk assessments," says Kiminori Nakamura, professor of criminal justice at the University of Maryland, who coauthored the study. "Our findings also support using annual assessments over pre-release risk assessments, because the former include more information and capture variation in predicted recidivism. Given that recidivism-free time independently predicts recidivism, parole boards may want to supplement risk scores with this information."

The authors note that the study did not test the mechanisms behind the observed relation between recidivism-free time and declining risk, suggesting that compositional changes among the participants (e.g., more first-time prisoners, fewer individuals who committed drug and property offenses) and changing life circumstances (suggested by reductions in annual risk assessment scores) may explain the declining pattern of recidivism.

Moreover, the data in this study are limited to individuals on parole in Pennsylvania, which has the second-largest parolee population in the country, so the findings may not be applicable to states with more

restricted use of parole release and supervision, nor may they be applicable to states that use tools other than the particular [risk-assessment](#) tool used in Pennsylvania.

More information: Time for a Change: Examining the Relationships Between Recidivism-Free Time, Recidivism Risk, and Risk Assessment, *Justice Quarterly* (2021).

Provided by Crime and Justice Research Alliance