Black men have higher rates of recidivism despite lower risk factors: study

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People of color are incarcerated at disproportionately higher rates than White people, and men of all races have higher rates of recidivism. A new study that estimated the effects of risk factors for Black and White men and women found that Black men were reincarcerated more often and more quickly than all others, despite having lower risk scores on nearly all of the variables on a standardized tool that assesses risk.

The study, by researchers at Florida State University, the University of Connecticut, and the University of Iowa, appears in *Justice Quarterly*, a publication of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences.

"By looking solely at recidivism rates, we don't consider the heterogeneity of the people released from jails or prisons," explains Stephanie C. Kennedy, assistant professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Connecticut, who coauthored the study. "This view obscures the influence of race and gender on recidivism."

"In our study, the most potent predictor of recidivism was being a Black male, even though Black men had less contact with the criminal justice system and few of the risk factors traditionally associated with recidivism," Kennedy adds. "This suggests that beyond individual risk, other factors, including racism and implicit bias, as well as poverty and employment opportunities in the local community, are driving recidivism."

The study estimated the effects of various risk factors on the time it took

21,462 Black men, White men, Black women, and White women released from North Carolina state prisons from 2000 to 2001 to return to prison. The risk factors included individual-level risk factors drawn from a standardized risk assessment tool used by most state correctional systems.

Risk factors included individuals' prior convictions, financial situation, marital status, attitude (as provided by an officer's subjective opinion of the offender's motivation to change), history of drug addiction, employment in the past year and currently, high school completion or dropout, age of entry, and gender. The researchers removed the gender variable from their risk assessments and calculated the level of risk for recidivism, from minimal/low to high. The study also looked at the type of crime individuals had committed, the total number of offenses, alcohol problems, and mental health diagnoses, as well as whether individuals had children and the size of the county where they were released.

More than 58% of Black men in the study were reincarcerated in a North Carolina state prison within the 8-year follow-up period, compared to fewer than half of the White men and White women, and just over 41% of the Black women released during the same time frame. That occurred even though Black men were less likely to be identified as high risk and had lower scores on all but two risk factors that are thought to drive recidivism—age at intake and marital status.

Moreover, White women were more likely to be identified as high risk (the result of higher number of current offenses; lower rates of high school graduation, past and current employment, and financial self-sufficiency; a greater likelihood of having a history of drug addiction, alcohol problems, or to have been intoxicated at the time of arrest). But they had the lowest rates of recidivism and the longest time to reincarceration of any of the groups examined.

The ways that race and gender influenced each other served as an independent risk factor for Black men, in a way that was not reflected among other groups. The effects of all other risk factors included in the models were statistically insignificant but marginal, suggesting that these risk factors did little to meaningfully predict the likelihood of recidivism .

"In light of our findings, we need to look beyond individual-level risk and begin to explore the individual, community, and policy-level factors—including pervasive racism and increased surveillance—that result in reincarceration for people of color, and specifically for Black men," suggests Katie Ropes Berry, doctoral candidate in the School of Social Work at Florida State University, who led the study.

"As we move work to end mass incarceration, we need to offer anti-racism training at every level of the criminal justice system as a vehicle for destabilizing deeply ingrained implicit and explicit racial biases. And we need to work toward an equitable system that honors human dignity and ensures public safety."

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