



SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

Applied to Corrections



**Department of
Rehabilitation
& Correction**



Redefining the Success of Correctional Agencies Recognizing Reality and Embracing Evidence CLA Subcommittee Report

Introduction

For decades correctional agencies have been using recidivism as a key indicator of success, performance, and to evaluate program impact. However, recent research and analysis of recidivism have common themes.

- Recidivism is affected by a myriad of social forces outside the control of a correctional agency. Most notably, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has had one of the largest impacts on recidivism metrics.
- There is no single definition of, or methodology for calculating, recidivism and it is unlikely one could be agreed upon by all states.
- The various laws, policies, and practices of different states make it impossible to compare recidivism rates across jurisdictions and any of these comparisons are misleading.
- Long-term studies necessary to examine the effect of a program on recidivism are not fast enough for agencies to be responsive. These studies are still important, but shorter-term metrics of success and performance are better for managing policy with data.

Yet, all state and federal correctional agencies calculate recidivism. More importantly, it is used to measure how well agencies have performed and to conduct cross-jurisdictional comparisons such as the 2024 report by The Council of State Governments.¹

Peer-reviewed research has shown recidivism is not the correct metric to gauge a correctional agencies' success. Furthermore, COVID-19 is impacting most recidivism metrics and will do so well into the future since recidivism is usually calculated by following release cohorts for three

¹ 50 States, 1 Goal: Examining State-Level Recidivism Trends in the Second Chance Act Era. 2024. Justice Center of The Council of State Governments. <https://csgjusticecenter.org/publications/50-states-1-goal/>

years or more. Therefore, this is a perfect time to make a change to correctional agencies' metrics of success which can be used both internally and cross-jurisdictionally.

The Correctional Leaders Association (CLA) recognized the problems associated with using recidivism as a metric of success and created a committee to explore a new direction. Director Annette Chambers-Smith from the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (DRC) was asked to chair the committee, and she was joined by her esteemed colleagues: Director Andre Stancil (CO), Director Chad Dotson (VA), Secretary Kellie Wasko (SD), Director Brian Gootkin (MT), Commissioner Helen Hanks (NH), Director Wayne Salisbury, Jr. (RI), Director Bryan Stirling (SC), Secretary Alisha Tafoya Lucero (NM) and Division Director Chris Chambers on behalf of Secretary Jeff Macomber (CA). The research divisions for some of these states also participated in the process.

This committee completed a rigorous and thorough literature review on recidivism; administered a survey to all CLA member agencies; and held multiple discussions about possible metrics that could replace recidivism. The following is a summary of these activities and the recommendations of the committee.

Surveys and Literature Review on Recidivism

CLA Survey Results

The CLA survey was the most recent survey of this type and was distributed to all CLA member agencies in Spring of 2024. Representatives from 34 states responded to at least some of the questions, regarding their methodology and unique factors which could affect recidivism metrics. There also was an examination of public facing documents and reports for states which were available online. The key findings were:

- ***The definition of a recidivist is varied, whether it is arrest, reconviction, or return to prison.*** Almost half included arrests, two-thirds counted reconvictions, while the remainder counted a return to prison.
- ***The methodologies of gathering data are widely varied, including how long released populations are tracked, counting rules, and exceptions.*** It is important to note this is not a critique of these agencies, as they were all methodological decisions made for valid reasons and explained by the researchers of the respective states. Yet, they remain an indicator of how nuanced the metric of recidivism can be. Some notable examples include:

- Nearly all states tracked recidivism for 3 years, but some also did so for 5 years, and one tracked a 20-year return analysis. One state only tracked releases for 1 year.
 - Some states did not count anyone released to an out- of- state detainer, or anyone who did not have at least a one-year minimum sentence.
 - One state did not count a re-incarceration for a crime committed while incarcerated.
 - A handful of states only calculated recidivism rates for individuals who were released onto supervision. Those who were not released to supervision were not counted or tracked.
 - Some states only tracked and calculated new crime rates.
 - A few states do not include technical violations because they are diverted to jails or some other community based correctional facility.
- ***How a person was supervised after release was even more complex and was one of the largest contributors to recidivism (via technical violations and crime detection).*** Since community supervision strategies, laws, and policies vary so widely it is reasonable to conclude that no two states have the exact same practices. Some notable examples include:
that
 - The percentage of released population subject to community supervision varied greatly between states, with some states supervising all the released populations, while others only supervised a fraction of releases.
 - The length and intensity of community supervision also differed greatly. Some systems only monitored individuals for a year, others as long as five. Furthermore, funding, caseloads, and supervision strategies all varied between states. This was complicated further in states which did not combine correctional facility administration and community supervision into one department or agency.
 - ***The determined level of risk and propensity for violence of the populations both in prison and on community supervision varied greatly between states.*** Both factors increase the likelihood of recidivism. So, for example, if one prison system is comprised of 25% high risk/violent incarcerated individuals and another is comprised of 75% high risk/violent incarcerated individuals then the recidivism rate will be higher in the latter state because of the composition of their population.

- The percentage of the prison populations who were incarcerated for violent crimes as defined FBI Part 1 varied widely. From as low 3% of the overall population to as high as 76%.
 - Nine (9) states had 50% or less of their population incarcerated for FBI part 1 violent crimes.
 - 17% of responding states reported the proportion of violent individuals incarcerated has not changed in the last decade. Thirty-eight (38) percent reported up to a 10% increase in violent individuals, and 45% said the proportion increased by more than 10%.
- ***Changes to sentencing laws and diversionary efforts are some of the most powerful factors affecting recidivism rates.***
 - The variation in state sentencing and legal reforms were extensive and nuanced, not counting policy changes regarding supervision and revocation. It would take thousands of hours of analysis to determine the impact of all the reforms and changes.
- ***Nine states noted that the COVID-19 pandemic was the single greatest factor impacting recidivism.*** This was attributed to the shutdown of numerous parts of the criminal justice system including courts, but also some policing efforts and especially probation supervision actions. This question was not asked specifically however and when the results were presented to the committee, the consensus was that this was obviously true almost everywhere.
- ***Two thirds of the states who completed the survey already had different metrics of success they had been developing.*** These included, but were not limited to:
 - New Crime Returns or Reduction in Criminal Severity
 - Education, Recovery, Vocational Programming Participation
 - Post-Release Employment and/or Wages
 - Post-Release Housing
 - Post-Release Programming
 - Use of Social Programs Post-Release including Medicaid Enrollment

Literature Review

The two most recent and widely regarded studies about recidivism as a metric for performance and success were from PEW Trusts in 2011² and the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine in 2022³. Additional literature review notes cited directly in this paper are listed in the end notes!

The 2011 study from PEW Trusts provided factual support to draw the following conclusions:

- 1) A state's recidivism rate is the result of numerous variables, most outside the control of correctional agencies. As such, recidivism should not be used solely to judge a correctional system's performance.**

“Policy makers should exercise caution, however, before merely accepting low or high recidivism numbers as evidence of successful or failing correctional programs. A low recidivism rate does not always reflect the use of sound release preparation and supervision strategies. By contrast, they also may be the by-product of a wide range of other factors, such as policies that send low-risk offenders to prison instead of granting probation, which is likely to result in a low rate of reoffending but at a higher cost. Moreover, beyond the justice system, recidivism rates can be influenced by larger social and economic forces. Therefore, any evaluation of recidivism data must include an understanding of this broader context and the larger policies and practices that drive the numbers.”
2011 Pew Trusts

Additional literature review by the committee identified some of these community factors outside the control of a correctional agency such as:

- Economic instability and poverty which also leads to poor nutrition, insufficient health care, relative deprivation, and housing instability.ⁱⁱ

² <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2011/04/12/state-of-recidivism-the-revolving-door-of-americas-prisons>

³ <https://www.nationalacademies.org/news/2022/04/recidivism-is-inadequate-measure-of-success-after-prison-new-measurements-and-national-standards-are-needed-says-new-report>

- Low quality education in environments which have social discrimination, inequality, bullying, and violence. All of which can lower graduation rates.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Poor or limited access to healthcare, including mental health.^{iv}
- Unstable home environments whether it is internal violence and abuse, or neighborhoods with higher rates of violence, unsafe air and water which expose them to harmful contaminants such as lead.^v
- Lack of a functional social support network in the family and community leading to reduced social bonds.^{vi}
- Drug and alcohol abuse combined with a lack of access to recovery services.^{vii}

Most of these factors, if not all, have for decades played a role in shaping a person who comes under the control of a correctional agency.

2) *A comparison of state recidivism rates is to be approached with great caution and would require rigorous analysis of all the contributing factors, and these extend beyond methodology and definition.*

“A state’s rate is the product of numerous variables, and valid interstate assessments are possible only with careful study and analysis of the wide range of unique conditions affecting corrections agencies in each state.” 2011 Pew Trusts

Producing rigorous reviews of multiple states and applying exacting methodologies requires significant resources and can take years, even a decade or more. An example of one such report is the Special Report in 2021 from the US Department of Justice about recidivism in 24 states⁴. This was a thorough exacting analysis with an explanation of the methodology taking five full, double columned pages. Recidivism was defined and examined using half a dozen different models and definitions. This type of research is valuable, but correctional leaders and the elected officials who appoint them, cannot reproduce these kinds of studies constantly without great expense, nor can they wait ten years to reach final conclusions. Correctional agencies must be nimbler

⁴ [Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 24 States in 2008: A 10-Year Follow-up Period](#). 2021. US Department of Justice.

and more dynamic. Waiting ten years to see if a policy or program was effective both inside a state and cross-jurisdictionally is not practical.

For example, a new Director could begin with an agency and implement new strategies to affect recidivism in their first year. Then, a group of incarcerated people would have to be exposed to the fully implemented programs and services in the second year. In the third year there would be a large enough release cohort to study the effectiveness of these strategies. These individuals would be tracked in years four, five, and six, with a report published late in the seventh year. If those strategies were ineffective, there would not be an indicator of this until a minimum of five years had passed.

Furthermore, the ability to compare metrics across states is necessary to benchmark and learn from each other's successes and setbacks. The metrics of success for correctional agencies should be easily measured across jurisdictions with simple and clear definitions and methodologies.

The 2022 study from the National Academies was titled "The Limits of Recidivism: Measuring Success After Prison". The report found many of the same issues identified by PEW Trusts, but they also made the following conclusions:

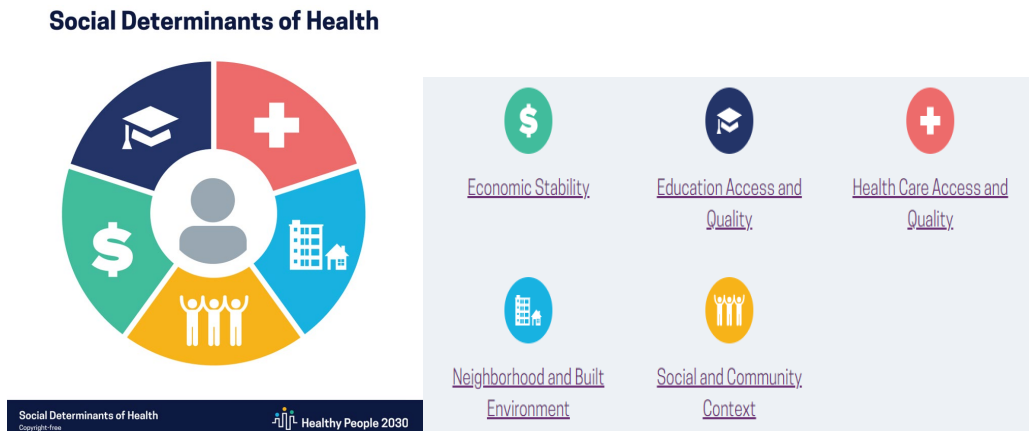
"...the current measures of success for individuals released from prison are inadequate. The use of recidivism rates to evaluate post-release success, for example, ignores significant research on how and why individuals cease to commit crimes, as well as the important role of structural factors in shaping post-release outcomes.

The emphasis on recidivism as the primary metric to evaluate post-release success also ignores progress in other domains essential to the success of individuals returning to communities, including education, health, family, and employment."

Therefore, the research is clear that recidivism is not where we need to focus our metrics for success. Instead, we should focus on the items listed in the National Academies report, as well as dozens of other reports, including one from The Harvard University Institute of Politics in 2019⁵. These areas of focus include education, health, housing, community, family/social networks, and employment.

⁵ "Successful Reentry: A Community-Level Analysis." 2019. The Harvard University Institute of Politics Criminal Justice Policy Group. Zhang; Srinivasan; et. al.

These factors are undoubtedly familiar to most criminal justice practitioners. However, during the committee’s review of all relevant literature, we found a strong correlation between what we should be using as metrics and the Social Determinants of Health as published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).⁶



There is no re-inventing of the wheel required to begin this transformation, and we can collaborate with other agencies, NGO’s, and community partners to improve the overall Social Determinates of Health in the context of both the community and a correctional setting. By using a common language, and building on what we already know, we will be able to collaborate more effectively. Furthermore, we will be able to monitor these new metrics in time periods as short as one to six months and make appropriate adjustments as needed. If what one agency is doing is not showing the same positive results, they can benchmark with other agencies whose metrics show a better performance and potentially gain best practices. Most importantly, we can adjust quickly and meet emerging needs and changes in our population. These metrics will also not be influenced as much by external factors such as sentencing laws, diversionary programs, community supervision strategies, and all the other factors identified in this report as having an impact on recidivism metrics.

Reaching this conclusion, the next step for the committee was to propose metrics in the areas where we could make a significant impact and ensure the following:

- 1) The efforts we take and the metrics we use are supported by peer reviewed studies which indicate they can reduce crime after release.

⁶ <https://health.gov/healthypeople/priority-areas/social-determinants-health>

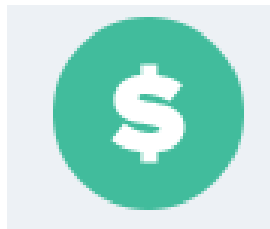
- 2) The metrics are designed in a clear manner where cross-jurisdictional comparisons are not subject to external social forces or different methodologies of calculation.
- 3) The metrics assist an agency in assessing internal performance over time and address drop-off in performance.

The Social Determinants of Health Applied to Corrections (SDHAC)

Correctional agencies can provide programming and services which have been proven by peer reviewed research to improve the outcomes associated with the Social Determinants of Health as published by the CDC. This includes both programming and services for incarcerated populations as well as those released to the community.

The goal of publishing this report is so all correctional agencies can begin to examine the data they have and provide their ideas for metrics. Then, we can reach a consensus on which metrics will be published for comparative purposes; respecting some agencies will want to have additional internal metrics of their own.

The following are some of the SDHAC metrics which have been proposed for consideration.



Economic Stability

Research: A recent study using Ohio prison and employment data indicates that stable post-prison employment reduces recidivism significantly as compared to those who had marginal employment (Kolbeck et al., 2023).

Metric 1: **The percentage of people released from prison in a calendar year who received wages within the first full quarter of release.**

Metric 2: **The percentage of people released from prison in a calendar year who received wages within the first year of their release.**

Metric 3: The percentage of people released from prison who received wages in at least three out of four quarters in their first year.



Education

Research: A study in 2015 by the University of Cincinnati⁷ found that participation in prison programs, including college, general education, and vocational reduced recidivism 5-16% depending on the type of program, the sex of the individual participant, and other programming taken by the individual. The study also found that some combinations of different programs and education, such as college and recovery services, had the strongest effects.

A meta-analysis by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in 2023⁸ examined the impact of educational programs in prisons. They reviewed 750 research papers related to prison education programs going back to 1980. Seventy-eight (78) of the studies examined the impact of these programs on areas such as recidivism, post-incarceration employment, and wages after incarceration. They concluded the following:

- Participation in any form of education program leads to a decrease of 14.8% in recidivism, although the more recent studies found a decrease of around 7%. Therefore, they estimate that for every 1,000 incarcerated individuals who are served by education, there is a corresponding reduction of 70-150 recidivists.
- Participating in education programs increased the likelihood of being employed after release by 7-8%.

⁷ [“Evaluation of Ohio’s Prison Programs”](#), Latessa et.al

⁸ “Are Education Programs in Prison Worth It? A meta-analysis of the highest quality academic research.” 2023. Schuster and Stickle. Mackinac Center for Public Policy
S2023-01 ISBN: 978-1-942502-64-7

- They also examined these impacts based on the type of education depicted in the graph below:

Graphic 1: Effects on Recidivism and Employment by Education Type

Education Type	Effect on Recidivism	Effect on Employment
ABE	-6.30%	1.47%
Secondary	-7.17%	1.21%
Vocational	-9.37%	5.54%
College	-27.70%	10.50%

Metric 4: The impact of education and job training programs on wages for those who secure employment after release.

Metric 5: The number of incarcerated persons each year who received High School Equivalency (HSE) services and those who achieved HSE.

Metric 6: The rate at which persons without high school equivalency (HSE) at the time of admission to prison attain equivalency during their incarceration (must have at least one year of incarcerated time).

Metric 7: The number of incarcerated persons each year who received Career Technical Education (CTE) as well as the number of persons who received certification.

Metric 8: The number of incarcerated persons each year who received Job Apprenticeships (JA), as well as the number of persons who received certification.

Metric 9: The number of incarcerated persons each year who participated in College (CO) courses, as well as the number of persons who received certification.

Metric 10: The percentage of incarcerated persons who were eligible for earned credit and were involved in an earned credit⁹ program during the calendar year.

Metric 11: The percentage of first-time releases who were eligible for an earned credit completion award¹⁰ and received one prior to release.



Healthcare Access and Quality

Research: A 2024 study completed jointly by the Ohio Department of Medicaid and the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction determined that the speed at which persons are enrolled in Medicaid upon release effects recidivism and arrest. Therefore, Ohio’s Medicaid pre-enrollment can lower the risk of re-incarceration by 10% and reduce the chance of arrest within 12 months by 9% if the person is enrolled before release or within 30 days thereafter. Even more importantly, these results had more impact for black enrollees thereby reducing some societal disparities in health care access.

Metric 12: The percentage of individuals released directly to the community who are eligible for Medicaid pre-enrollment and are successfully enrolled either before or within 30 days after release.¹¹

⁹ This term is used in Ohio and is contained in the report for illustrative purposes only. Earned credit programs in Ohio allow incarcerated persons to reduce their sentence by participating in high quality programming such as Recovery, Mental Health, Cognitive Behavioral, Educational, and Vocational.

¹⁰ This term is used in Ohio and is contained in the report for illustrative purposes only. Each state may or may not have similar program classification. Earned credit completion is given to individuals who complete education, recovery, job training, or cognitive behavioral programming or certification. A completion credit can be up to 90 days per program, no to exceed a total of 15% of the overall sentence.

¹¹ The authors of this report recognize Medicaid is not the same across all states and therefore this is an illustrative metric to address healthcare needs of Reentry populations.



Neighborhood Environment

Research: Ohio developed the Violence Predictor Risk Assessment (VPRA) in 2021 and then rolled it out to all regions in June of 2022 as part of the Targeted Violent Offender (TVO) program. The assessment uses information from other validated tools (Ohio Risk Assessment System) as well as other data-informed violence prediction models (Ohio’s Security Classification System). The VPRA identifies a percentage of the people on supervision in the community who represent the highest risk of committing a violent offense. These individuals are more closely monitored in cooperation with multiple agencies to identify behaviors which may threaten the safety of those in the community. It is a pro-active supervision model which focuses on violations which are associated with threats to public safety. Research and review of the VPRA and the TVO program are ongoing, but local law enforcement credits the VPRA as an effective tool in reducing crime and violence in Cleveland.

Metric 13: **The percent of supervision violations resulting in a return to prison that are for behaviors which threaten public safety.¹²**

Metric 14: **The distribution of proactive supervision violations for behaviors which threaten public safety.**

¹² These behaviors include, but are not limited to, weapons possession, threats, domestic violence, assaultive behavior, contact with victims/minors when prohibited, and violations of protection orders. The increased monitoring of TVOs results in a higher frequency of these types of violations.



Social and Community

Research: A 2012 study by the Urban Institute of Ohio’s Supportive Housing program designed to reduce homelessness for reentry populations found that participants were 40 percent less likely to be arrested and 61 percent less likely to be reincarcerated.¹³

A 2005 meta-analysis of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy programs found the reductions in recidivism are 20-30% in high quality CBT programs.¹⁴

Metric 15: **The percentage of persons under supervision who are living at a residential address after release.**¹⁵

Metric 16: **The percentage of persons who were moderate to high risk for re-offending who received at least one CBT program.**

Conclusion

Research has proven recidivism has many limitations and it is a macro level data point which factors in correctional programming along with a myriad of other variables. If correctional agencies focus on using metrics that address the social determinates of health, they will be more effective at improving outcomes. This is because they will be monitoring the specific outputs of their agencies, such as college degrees or cognitive behavioral therapy, and will thereby know when there is a need for improvement.

Recidivism is also impossible to compare across jurisdictions. There is no amount of collaboration which can ever achieve a cross-jurisdictional comparative model because the

¹³ <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/25716/412632-Supportive-Housing-for-Returning-Prisoners-Outcomes-and-Impacts-of-the-Returning-Home-Ohio-Pilot-Project.PDF>

¹⁴ “The Positive Effect of Cognitive Behavioral Programs for Offenders: A Meta-Analysis of Factors Associated with Effective Treatment. 2005. Journal of Experimental Criminology. Nana A. Landenberger; Mark W. Lipsey

¹⁵ Ohio is currently limited by the availability of easily accessible and reliable data to assess the housing status of those not under community supervision.

differences between states go beyond methodology or counting rules. Finally, COVID-19 impacted recidivism metrics starting in 2020. When combined with inflation and other major societal forces, COVID-19 artificially decreased recidivism metrics. When those forces are alleviated, there may be bumps in recidivism rates which may be misinterpreted as failed correctional policies. The time is now to change the metrics we use to assess performance and success of those we supervise.

There is ample research to prove certain prison programs, policies, and services can have a greater impact than others. These are the areas where agencies should be collaborating with each other. These metrics can provide faster feedback, thus allowing policy makers to shift strategies or resources. They also can be tied directly to work duties correctional staff complete every day, thereby increasing the chance of staff buying into the notion that they can transform the lives of the people under their supervision.

The same areas we need to focus on are the same areas other societal institutions, such as healthcare, are focusing their resources as well. This is because all the relevant research points in that direction. By making a shift now, and changing the narrative on correctional success, we will improve correctional outcomes. We will be able to provide our political leaders and the citizens of our respective states with clear data to demonstrate the need for investing in the most effective programs and services for those who will be returning to society so we can reduce crime and victimization in our communities.

End Notes

ⁱ [Measuring Recidivism](#). 2008. National Institute of Justice

[A systematic review of criminal recidivism rates worldwide: 3-year update](#). 2020. National Library of Medicine

[Recidivism and Reentry](#). Prison Policy Initiative

[Eight Key Consideration for Successful Implementation of New Medicaid Reentry Policies](#). 2020. The Health and Reentry Project

ⁱⁱ Bottino C, Fleegler E, Cox J, Rhodes E. The relationship between housing instability and poor diet quality among urban families. *Academic Pediatrics*. 2019;19(8):891–898. doi: 10.1016/j.acap.2019.04.004

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^{iv} [Reducing the Economic Burden of Unmet Mental Health Needs | CEA | The White House](#)

^v [About Adverse Childhood Experiences | Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\) | CDC](#)

^{vi} [Social connectedness as a determinant of mental health: A scoping review - PMC \(nih.gov\)](#)

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^{vii} Adapting Evidence-Based Practices for Under-Resources Populations. SAMHSA. [Adapting Evidence-Based Practices for Under-Resourced Populations \(samhsa.gov\)](#)