Recidivism Rates: An Incomplete Picture

State Department of Corrections
Social Finance

Executive Summary:

- Analyzing State Department of Corrections (DOC) data from 2010-2014, we find that recidivism rates accelerate over time, with the majority of cases occurring between the first and second year since original release from jail.
- Analyzing risk factors for recidivism, violent crimes have the lowest recidivism rate (9.4% within a year, 34.5% within three years), while public-order crimes display the highest rates (14.7% within a year, 48.5% within three years).
- Risk scores indeed correlate with recidivism rates. Individuals at high risk (23.5%) are more than twice as likely as medium risk individuals (10.2%) to be incarcerated within a year.
- However, it is not clear how risk scores are constructed. Violent crimes are overrepresented in high-risk individuals (52.3%) compared to medium risk (24.1%).
- From a data equity perspective, there is no information available on the race and socioeconomic status of incarcerated individuals. This paints an incomplete picture of the drivers of recidivism and how to address it.
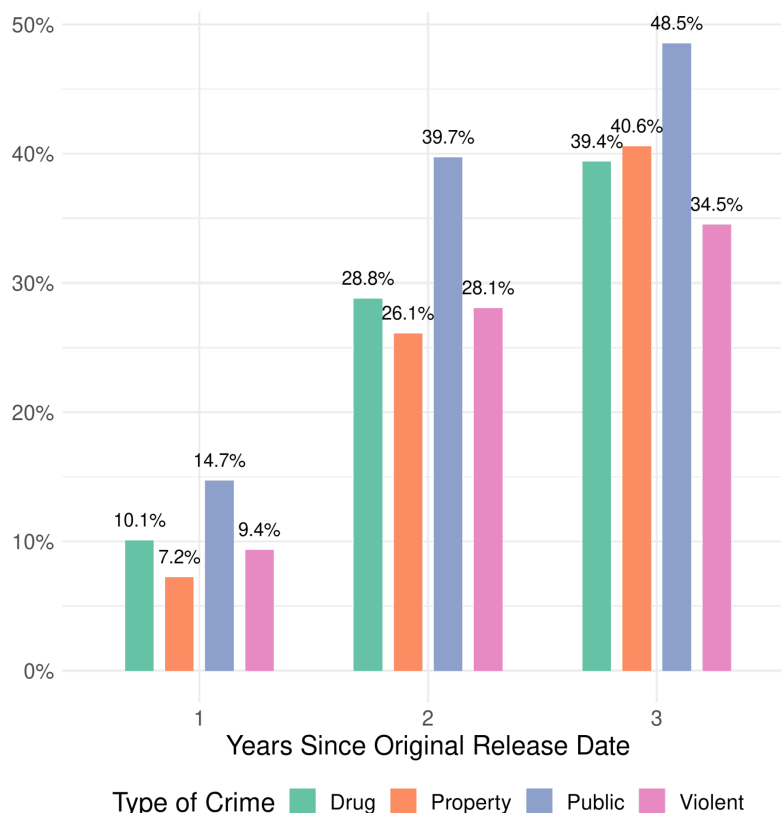
Report Findings:

In collaboration with the State Department of Corrections (DOC), Social Finance has produced an analytical report on recidivism rates for the District of Columbia. The report covers data from 2010-2014, following the trajectory of formerly incarcerated individuals originally released in 2010.[1] We focus on immediate aftermath of release, analyzing recidivism rates within 1-3 years of release. Our findings demonstrate the fragility of freedom. Within three years, over half of individuals (51.4%) released in 2010 are expected to be in prison. The majority of rearrests occur between the first and second year since release.

We explore how the types of crime and risk classifications provided by the DOC can explain these findings. Individuals incarcerated for violent crimes have the lowest recidivism rates, with 9.4% incarcerated within a year, and 34.5% within three (Figure 1). The highest recidivism rates are found for individuals originally put in jail for public-order crimes, which include disorderly conduct or soliciting. Over 14 percent of these individuals are incarcerated within a year, and 48.5% within 3 years. This finding highlights how individuals who are not committing violent crimes may be particularly

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[1] Our sample comprises 387 individuals released from incarceration in the year of 2010.Details on how data was treated are provided in Appendix A.

vulnerable to recidivism, raising questions regarding the underlying factors driving them back to prison.

Figure 1. Recidivism Rates by Original Crime Type (2010-2014)

Risk scores provided by the DOC suggest that individuals who are at higher risk may be more likely to return to prison.[2] Individuals at high risk (23.5%) are more than twice as likely as medium risk individuals (10.2%) to return to prison within a year. Within three years the gap narrows, with a 58.3% recidivism rate for high-risk individuals, compared to 48.5% for medium risk individuals. This analysis raises questions regarding how these risk scores are constructed. Our team has found that violent crimes are overrepresented in the high risk (52.9%) compared to the medium risk score (24.1%), although the data suggests that these individuals are less likely to return to jail. Additionally, public-order crime is underrepresented in the high-risk score data as well.

Overall, our recommendation for the DOC is to understand what is driving recidivism rates for individuals who are engaging in public-order crimes. Additionally, greater details should be provided on how risk scores are constructed, as well as how these may evolve over time. Finally, from a data equity perspective, it is important to highlight how incomplete the picture of recidivism is. Gathering more data on the socioeconomic status and race of incarcerated individuals would enable us to better understand what is driving recidivism, and how to better address it.

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[2] More details on risk score are provided in Appendix B.

Appendix A: Data Processing

The State Department of Corrections (DOC) presented a few quality issues. First, there were cases in which the sentence date was later than the release date (32 cases). We have removed these cases from our analysis.

Second, risk scores were not unique for each individual. Our team has opted to drop cases in which risk scores differed, resulting in the elimination of 19 records.

Finally, individuals in our data faced multiple charges. Of the 387 individuals released in 387, seven of them faced multiple charges. This meant that disaggregating recidivism rates by crime rates presented a challenge regarding which charge to consider. The analyst team has decided to maintain these cases and present recidivism rates considering each charge separately.

Appendix B: Risk Score Analysis

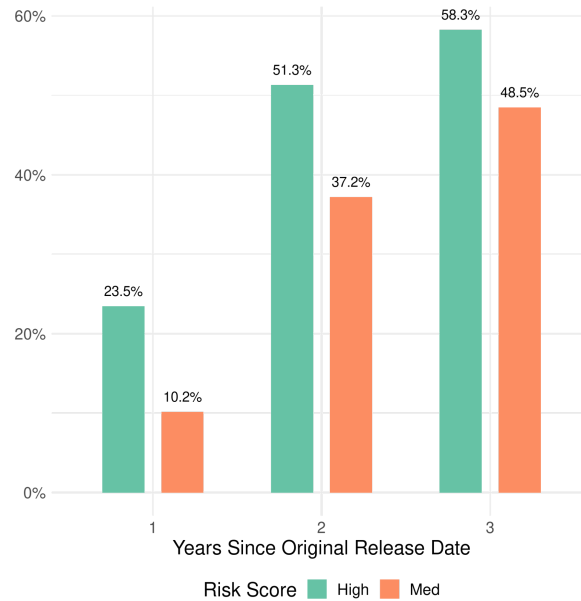Risk scores were provided by the DOC.

Figure A.1. Recidivism Rate by Risk Score

Figure A.2. Type of Crime by Risk Score