

U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs  
National Institute of Justice  
The Research, Development, and Evaluation Agency of the U.S. Department of Justice

## Recidivism

Recidivism is one of the most fundamental concepts in criminal justice. It refers to a person's relapse into criminal behavior, often after receiving sanctions or undergoing intervention for a previous crime.

**Sanctions** are administered by federal, state or local jurisdictions and include all punishments that are available to the jurisdiction, such as fines, forms of community supervision and imprisonment. **Interventions** are programs such as drug treatment, employment training or cognitive therapies.

**An individual recidivates when he or she commits a crime at any time during or after the intervention or sanctioning process.**

### National Statistics on Recidivism

Bureau of Justice Statistics recidivism studies that surveyed offenders released from prisons in 1983 and 1994 found high rates of recidivism among released prisoners.

- Of the 108,580 prisoners released from prisons in 11 states in 1983, nearly 63 percent were re-arrested within three years, 47 percent were convicted of a new crime, and 41 percent were returned to prison or jail.
- Among nearly 300,000 prisoners released in 15 states in 1994, 68 percent were re-arrested within three years, 47 percent were convicted of a new crime, and 25 percent were recommitted to prison with a new sentence.

Within three years, 52 percent of the released prisoners in the 1994 study were back in prison either because of a new crime or because of a parole violation (such as failing a drug test or missing a parole appointment). This post-prison recidivism was strongly related to arrest history—within three years of their release, 41 percent of prisoners with one prior arrest were re-arrested, but 82 percent of those with more than 15 prior arrests (18 percent of all released prisoners) were re-arrested. [1]

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**Next Section: Why Recidivism is a Core Criminal Justice Concern.**

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#### Notes

[1] From Bureau of Justice Statistics special reports: [Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1983](#), by A.J. Beck, and B.E. Shipley, April 1989, NCJ 116261, and [Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1994](#), by P.A. Langan and D.J. Levin, NCJ 193427.

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