

We are still largely in the dark as to whether incarceration reduces recidivism.

One of the aims of prison is to reduce recidivism. Daniel P. Mears, Joshua C. Cochran, and Francis T. Cullen find, however, that research tells us little about the effects of prison on offending. They argue that if we want more effective punishment policy, we need better research on the conditions under which incarceration reduces recidivism or achieves other goals.



During an era in which policymakers have advocated for evidence-based policy, there is scant evidence that incarceration reduces recidivism. Since the 1980s, the United States embarked on a historically unprecedented trajectory of incarceration, with the correctional system growing from approximately 2 to 7 million. Now, more than 600,000 inmates are released to communities every year, and over two-thirds are estimated to be rearrested within three years of release.



What has been the return on investment? The benefit in the form of reduced crime rates is uncertain. No end of research has sought to explain the rise and fall in violent crime from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s. (Property offenses had been declining for years.) Yet, few clear or compelling answers exist. Incarceration may have reduced crime rates but it may have had little effect.



The benefit of mass incarceration in the form of greater public satisfaction also is uncertain. Policymakers claimed that the public clamored for greater retribution. Public opinion polls indeed showed that the public expressed grave concern about crime during the late 1980s on into the 1990s. However, that did not mean that the public wanted a doubling or tripling of investment in corrections. The polls also showed that the public supported rehabilitation. Regardless, to date, the public has not expressed greater satisfaction with criminal justice.

The benefit of incarceration in the form of reduced recidivism is uncertain as well. Reviews consistently identify critical shortfalls in research, such as a failure to use appropriate comparison groups. For example, a study might compare individuals in prison with those on probation, yet not take into account the fact that the two groups likely differ greatly from one another in their propensity to reoffend.

When we focus only on the most credible empirical research, the first and most significant finding is that too few studies exist to draw any clear conclusion about the benefit of prison in reducing recidivism. The second is that prison seems more often than not to have a “criminogenic” effect, that is, it increases recidivism. The third is that prison sometimes appears to reduce recidivism somewhat.

This situation is remarkable given that much of the “sell” for incarceration centers on the idea that it can make the public safer and that the benefit is self-evident. How exactly might it reduce offending? Most theories of crime point to factors that typical prison experiences do nothing to address. Prisons primarily house people. So why would a stay in one make a convicted felon less likely to offend? Perhaps there is a deterrent effect. That could be. Any such effect, however, might be offset by associating with other criminals, losing employment or the prospect of a job, the severing of ties to family, friends, and community, and limited or no treatment for drug abuse or mental health problems.

When one carefully reviews prison studies, the pessimistic view that we “know too little” becomes, unfortunately, even more justified. Consider but a few of the pressing policy questions on which research remains almost entirely silent.



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How does the nature of the prison experience affect recidivism? Most research on recidivism involves what researchers term “black box” studies, which seek to estimate the effect of prison, but not the aspects of the prison experience that contribute to any identified effect. That matters because then we have no basis for knowing whether an estimated effect can be generalized. For example, a study might find that prison in a given state appeared to increase recidivism as compared to what would have happened if any individual was placed on probation. Can we feel confident that prison “doesn’t work” elsewhere? No. Perhaps the state offers no programming, abuses inmates, enforces rules unfairly, and so on. It should be unsurprising, then, if the researchers identified a criminogenic effect.

What we want are studies that examine the black box not only of prison but also of the alternative sanctions that exist. Prison might be more effective than badly run intensive probation but far less effective than well-run intensive probation.

What is the effect of prison when an individual has experienced one or more other sanctions? No one knows. Here, again, we confront the “black box” problem. Prior punishments may have been inappropriate and poorly implemented, which may reduce the likelihood that a subsequent stint in prison will achieve much. Conversely, prior sanctions may have been appropriate and well-implemented. How does the effect of prison differ in these two scenarios? No one really knows even though these differing scenarios confront our courts on a daily basis.

What is the effect of prison when it occurs in conjunction with some form of post-release supervision? The familiar refrain surfaces—by and large, we don’t know. Research typically has not investigated the “black box” of prison, alternative sanctions, or post-release supervision.

What is the appropriate comparison group when studying the effects of prison? Any study worth its salt wants to use an appropriate comparison group for estimating the impact of prison on reoffending. That sounds simple enough but proves to be quite difficult because we typically don’t know what would have happened to the prisoners. Would they have been put in jail? Placed on probation? Intensive probation? Boot camp? Or any of a myriad of other so-called “intermediate sanctions”? To date, most research on prison effects ignores this issue by lumping all non-prisoners into one group.

How does prison’s effect on recidivism vary across different groups? Prison may well have different effects for some groups, and its effect may vary depending on the area to which an ex-prisoner returns. For example, juveniles might be more adversely affected by prison and inmates who return to high-unemployment areas might

be more likely to recidivate.

Rational punishment policies will remain out of reach without a firmer grasp on what exactly we get when we punish. What society needs is research that can identify the conditions under which prison—and a host of other punishments—reduce offending. The next step then will be to identify the financial and social costs associated with each. Only then will we begin to obtain the punishment that best improves public safety.

*This article is based on the paper “[Incarceration Heterogeneity and its Implications for Assessing the Effectiveness of Imprisonment on Recidivism](#)” by Daniel P. Mears, Joshua C. Cochran, and Francis T. Cullen, in *Criminal Justice Policy Review*.*

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