

American Prisons are not a Revolving Door: Most Released Offenders Never Return

The dominant narrative around recidivism in America is that most released offenders go on to reoffend and return to prison. In new research, [William Rhodes](#) argues that this impression is wrong and that two out of every three released offenders never return to prison. He argues that previous estimates about recidivism have failed to take into account the overrepresentation of returnees in prisons. Accounting for this factor, he finds that only 11 percent of offenders return to prison more than once, and that the total time that offenders actually spend in prison is overestimated as well.



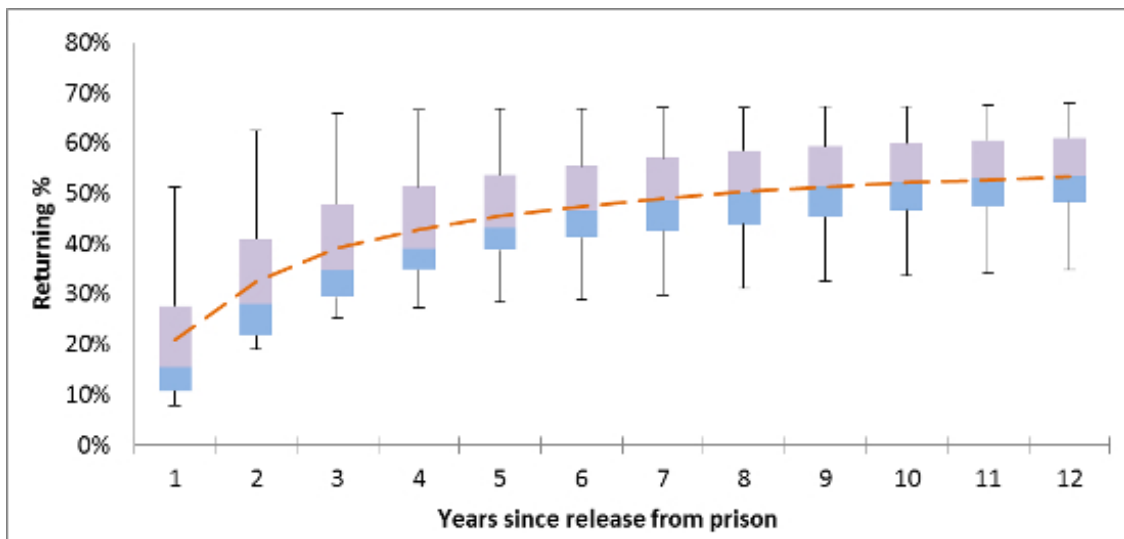
A common impression, reinforced by [recent statistical reports](#), is that most offenders released from American prisons return repeatedly. The impression is wrong. Our [analysis](#) of offenders released between 2000 and 2012 shows that two of every three never return to prison. Many others reappear just once – typically for violating the technical conditions governing their community supervision instead of for new crimes.

An analogy explains why recent statistical reports are misleading and how statistics based on prison releases and readmissions can be corrected. When performing mall intercept surveys, researchers randomly sample shoppers who appear in the mall during the period when the survey is administered and ask respondents questions such as: How frequently do you visit a mall? Obviously, frequent mall visitors are overrepresented in intercept surveys, so when they analyze survey data, statisticians weight the data to correctly represent all mall visitors.

Offenders who repeatedly return to prison are like frequent mall visitors – they are overrepresented in samples used to estimate the rate at which offenders return to prison. If a statistician fails to weight his statistics to correct for this overrepresentation, offenders will appear to be highly recidivistic: One of every two will return to prison within five years. If the statistician correctly weights her statistics, offenders appear less recidivistic: Two of every three will never return.

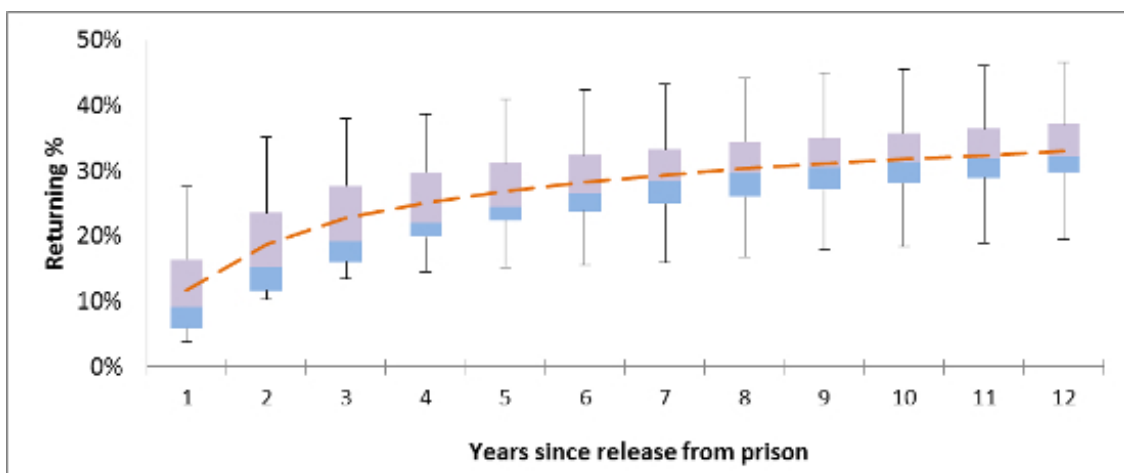
Some graphs illustrate these distinctions. Figure 1, based on data from [the National Corrections Reporting Program](#) (NCRP), shows the rate at which offenders return to prison when data are not weighted. Years since being released from prison appear on the horizontal axis. The cumulative percentage of offenders returning to prison appears on the vertical axis. The broken line is the average across seventeen states reporting from 2000 through 2012. (The figure changes little when states reporting for fewer years are included in the analysis.) The boxes show the range for the states at the 1st and 3rd quartiles; the bars show extremes. Consistent with conventional wisdom, unweighted data imply that fifty percent of offenders return to prison, typically soon after being released. Recidivism is higher in some states (California is the extreme high state) and lower in others partially because of differences in how states use prisons.

Figure 1 – Unweighted Data Show a High Rate of Returning to Prison



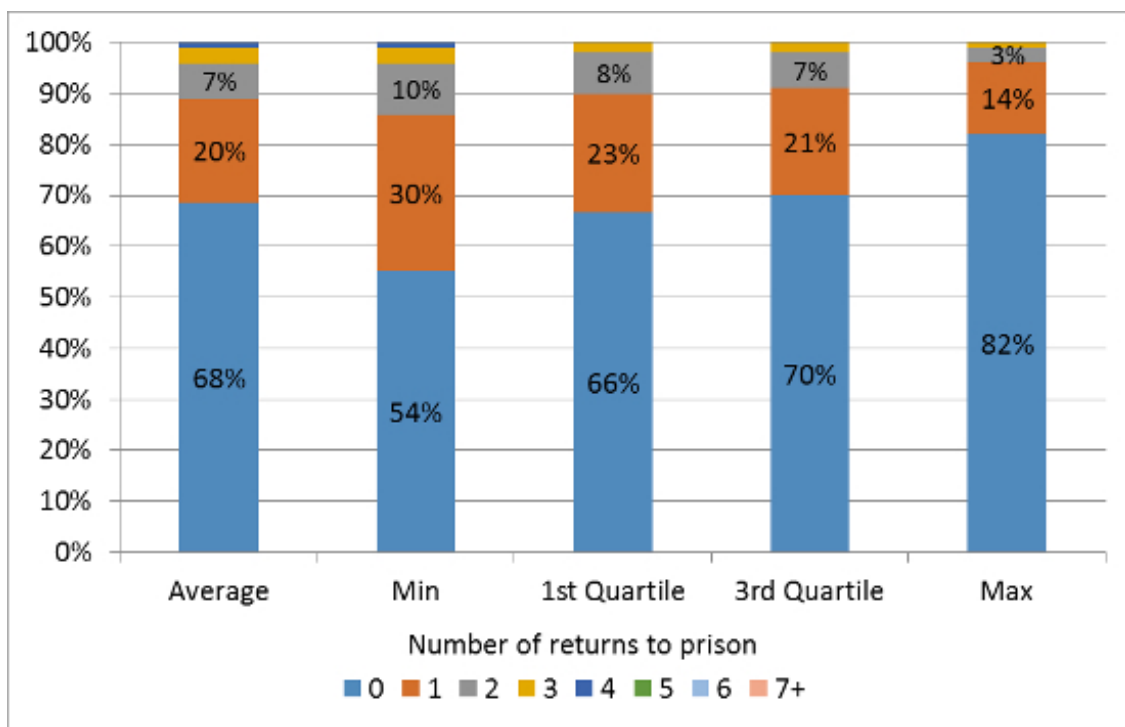
When the data are weighted to represent the population of individuals who enter and exit prison, the return rate is shown in Figure 2. According to the statistics reported in the second figure, two of three offenders will not return to prison within twelve years, and the curve is so flat in the latter years that two of three probably approximates the lifetime limit. Correctly weighting the data produces a startling change in recidivism statistics.

Figure 2 – Weighted Data Show a Lower Rate of Returning to Prison



The figures do not show the frequency of returning multiple times, but Figure 3 provides estimates. The chart reports the minimum and maximum, the 1st and 3rd quartiles, and the average across the seventeen states for offenders at risk for twelve years. The table is based on weighted data.

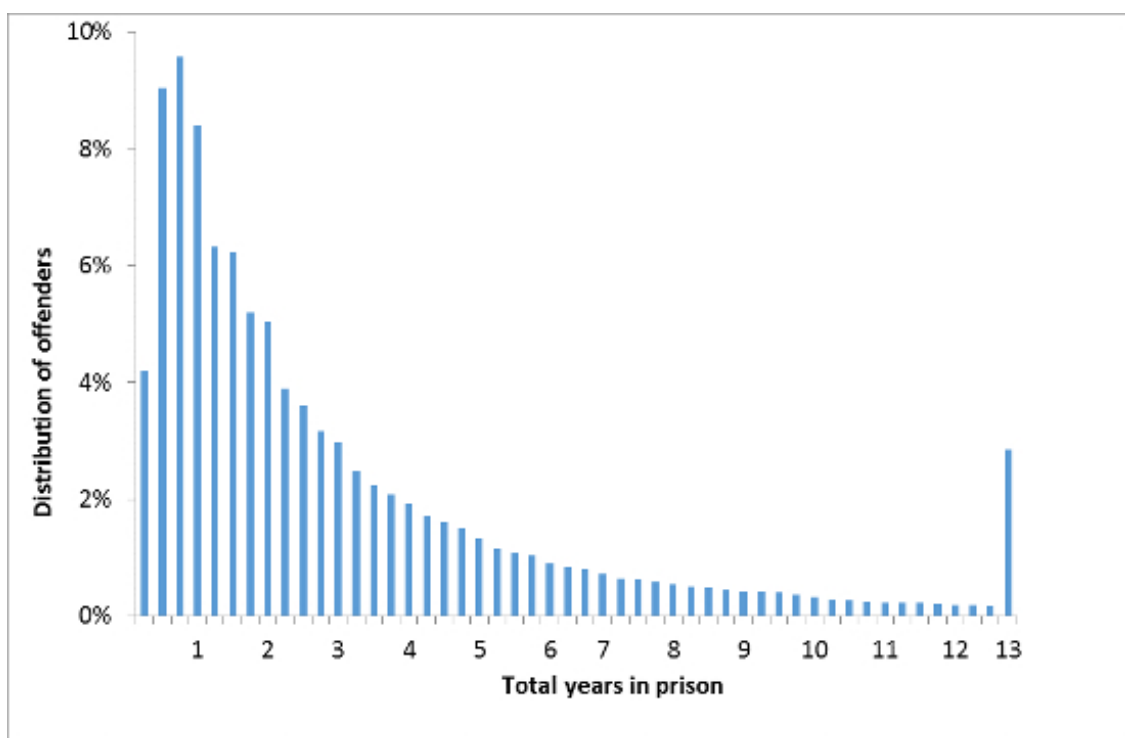
Figure 3 – Frequency of returning to prison over twelve years based on weighted data



Consistent with figure 2, about two of every three offenders (68 percent) never return to prison. Another 20 percent return just once. The NCRP data are not definitive but it appears that most of these one-time returns are for violating the technical conditions governing community supervision rather than for new crimes. Importantly, only one in ten offenders (11 percent) returns to prison multiple times.

Of course repeated visits to prison may be rare because prison terms are so long that little opportunity exists to exit prison, recidivate and reenter prison, and then exit again, but Figure 4 suggests otherwise. The figure shows the distribution of total time spent in prison across the seventeen states for everyone who was eighteen or older as of 2000. (The NCRP excludes juvenile records.) For example, if an offender spent two years in prison for one term and three years for a subsequent term, the offender would have spent five years in prison between the beginning of 2000 and the end of 2012.

Figure 4 – Distribution of Time Spent in Prison over Thirteen Years



A small proportion of offenders, those who commit the most heinous crimes such as murder and rape, spend the entire thirteen-year period in prison, but most offenders spend considerably less time. If earlier recidivism studies imply that a large proportion of offenders spend most of their lives in prison, this figure suggests otherwise. Prison disrupts lives but apparently it does not consume them.

State and federal authorities may send too many offenders to prison; prison terms may be too long; and correctional resources might be better spent. These statistics do not inform the debate on those topics. But we contest the common perception that American prisons are a revolving door serving to cycle offenders through multiple terms until offenders get too feeble to victimize the public. The evidence is that most offenders serve their time and then avoid serious entanglement with the criminal justice system. Rather than asking the question of why so many offenders fail following release from prison, a more important question may be why so many offenders succeed and how corrections can promote success?

*This article is based on the paper, [‘Following Incarceration, Most Released Offenders Never Return to Prison’](#), in *Crime & Delinquency*.*

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