

Measuring Recidivism at the Local Level: A Quick Guide

Purpose Statement: This guide is designed to help local jurisdictions select a useful recidivism measure. The guide discusses recidivism and its utility as a data measure, identifies common measures of recidivism, and reviews data sources for recidivism measurement; additional measures of success to consider when calculating recidivism are also discussed.

What is recidivism?

Recidivism refers broadly to reoffending, and common measurements of recidivism include rearrest, reconviction, reincarceration, or a supervision violation (for individuals on probation or parole). *Recidivism rates* measure the frequency with which individuals reengage with the criminal justice system. There are multiple ways to measure recidivism and each measure relies on a somewhat different definition of reinvolvement, thus providing a different picture of the problem at hand. No matter what recidivism measure (or combination of measures) a jurisdiction employs, it is important to collect and analyze these data routinely and consistently to examine system functioning, effectiveness, costs, and trends. Recidivism also represents a critical area of interest for criminal justice stakeholders, elected officials, prospective funders, and the general public.

Why measure recidivism?

Recidivism measures can provide local criminal justice systems with the information needed to examine their crime problems and the performance of solutions they choose to implement. Reoffending has relevance for public safety as well as resource and cost implications related to incarceration and other criminal justice costs.¹ Both matter, but you might look at different data points depending on which you wanted to focus on. For example, from a public safety perspective, the most important consideration is the type or severity of the offense. From a resource implication perspective, the amount of court time consumed and the average length of time in custody for recidivists would matter more. Recidivism rates can indicate which subsets of the criminal justice population interact with the criminal justice system the most, and detailed recidivism data can provide jurisdictions with a better understanding of the timing of recidivism and the types of offenses committed among populations of interest.

Tracking recidivism rates of program participants can serve as a valuable indicator of program performance when compared to recidivism rates for like groups (i.e., is program participation associated with lower recidivism); they can also be used to examine the influence of criminal justice policies (i.e., is enhanced supervision associated with lower recidivism rates). It is important to remember that jurisdictions should be cautious in using recidivism rates as a sole measure of program success, as programs may target or attract individuals with a high likelihood of reoffense (as measured through risk to reoffend screeners) or certain needs (as measured through a needs assessment). If jurisdictions want to compare the target population's outcomes to the general population, data—such as risk scores—should be used to ensure the comparison groups are valid (e.g., comparing high-risk target population clients to high-risk individuals in the general population). Programs also have goals beyond recidivism reduction, such as GED attainment or computer skills development, successes that may contribute to recidivism reduction but are not captured directly by the simple evaluation of recidivism rates.

¹ Alongside the cost of incarceration, additional costs for consideration include expenditures related to policing, court processing, and community supervision. For more information about calculating marginal costs, see Vera Institute of Justice's *A Guide to Calculating Justice-System Marginal Costs*, available at: <http://www.vera.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/marginal-costs-guide.pdf>

What are the benefits and limitations of different measures of recidivism?

Recidivism may be measured at each point in the criminal justice system, including arrest, booking, conviction, and incarceration. Table 1 addresses some of the benefits and limitations of each measurement. Ultimately, the use of multiple measures will provide the most comprehensive perspective on local recidivism patterns.

Regardless of the definition(s) selected, it is critical to use consistent measures of recidivism over time in order to draw meaningful comparisons. Recidivism rates differ from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, often depending on how they are calculated. Thus, local criminal justice stakeholders should proceed with caution when comparing their local recidivism rate to those of other jurisdictions.

Table 1: Recidivism Measures		
Measure	Key Features	Limitations
<u>Rearrest</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Captures most broad view of interactions with criminal justice system • Available relatively quickly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires reliable linkage to police data within jurisdiction • Arrests that occur outside of jurisdiction are not captured (unless access to statewide database is available) • Charges may be dropped or changed, or individual acquitted
<u>Rebooking</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measureable when jail system is only data source • Available quickly • Includes pretrial, sentence, and revocation bookings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Charges sometimes dropped or individual acquitted • Excludes arrests that do not result in jail booking • Excludes offenses committed in other jurisdictions
<u>Reconviction</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measures only charges that result in conviction, thus eliminating cases in which charges were dropped or the individual was acquitted • Captures convictions that may not result in custody time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires reliable linkage to court data systems • Conviction data has the longest lag because you have to wait for adjudication to conclude, which makes it more challenging to use for management decisions • Does not capture resources consumed presentence

What time frames should be used to measure recidivism?

Typically, researchers consider recidivism in six-month, one-year, and three-year time frames (Lyman and LoBuglio 2007). This time period begins after an individual is released from jail (not at admission or booking). Many jurisdictions find it useful to calculate an annual recidivism rate (i.e., the number of people who are released and reoffend in a given year) so that they can draw local year-to-year comparisons.

What are common data sources for measuring recidivism?

The location of source data is dependent on the measure chosen to track recidivism. While some data can be collected through county-level agencies, more robust data measurement can be accomplished through linkage with surrounding county, state, and even national data systems. While it can be possible to obtain access to another jurisdiction’s data, it can also be more difficult to search using common identifiers and ensure that the extracted data pertain to the appropriate individuals.

A local criminal justice data hub or warehouse that collects and integrates data across local justice agencies helps streamline ongoing analysis. However, developing a data hub is a long-term, resource-intensive

investment. Alternatively, a lead collection entity (whether a university or research organization with strong data capacity) can serve as a virtual data hub and regularly collect criminal justice data for ongoing analysis.

Table 2: Data Sources		
Measure	Required Data Source	Additional Data Sources
<u>Rearrest</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local law enforcement data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> City, county, and state-level police data, FBI National Crime Information Center (NCIC) data
<u>Rebooking</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local jail data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> City and surrounding county jail data
<u>Reconviction</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local court data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> City, surrounding county, and state-level court data

What are additional ways to better understand recidivism?

While rearrest, rebooking, reconviction, and reincarceration rates provide a basic set of data to measure recidivism, researchers and practitioners alike recognize the need for additional measures to better understand elements of recidivism, such as the nature of new offenses and when they occur. Coupled with the basic data measures addressed above in Table 1, Table 3 lists additional recidivism measures that local jurisdictions may wish to consider.

Identifying an appropriate comparison group is necessary in order to interpret recidivism rates for program participants. Care should be taken to ensure that the comparison group is comparable to the treatment group in key respects, particularly risk to recidivate, criminal history, and demographic characteristics. Much as a hospital that serves patients who tend to be sicker will find it difficult to match the health outcomes of a hospital that sees healthier patients, recidivism outcomes for high-risk offenders in programs cannot be directly compared to outcomes for low-risk offenders.

Table 3: Additional Recidivism Measures Pre-release v. Post-release
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offense type (violations v. new crime, property/drug/person/traffic) Offense severity (felony v. misdemeanor) Length of stay Time to rearrest Frequency of reoffense

Particularly for high-risk offenders, changes in the type of offense, offense severity, time to rearrest, and length of stay following reincarceration can all signify real progress. Programs that target high-risk offenders may not see a significant drop in the aggregate number of program participants who reoffend, but important progress may still occur. For example, program participants may remain arrest free for a longer period of time following release, and return less frequently or for less serious charges that require shorter lengths of stay. Since high-risk offenders commit a disproportionate amount of all crime, even a small reduction in recidivism for high-risk offenders could lead to a significant crime reduction.

For more information on defining and measuring recidivism, see:

- Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators. 2009. *Defining and Measuring Recidivism*. http://ojj.la.gov/ojj/files/CJCA_Recidivism_WhitePaper.pdf
- La Vigne, N., Neusteter, S. R., Lachman, P., Dwyer, A., and Nadeau, C. 2010. *Justice Reinvestment at the Local Level: Planning and Implementation Guidebook*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. <http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/412233-Justice-Reinvestment.pdf>
- Lyman, M., and LoBuglio, S. 2007. “‘Whys’ and ‘Hows’ of Measuring Jail Recidivism.” *American Jails* March/April: 9-18. http://www.urban.org/reentryroundtable/lyman_lobuglio.pdf
- Uchida, C. D., LoBuglio, S., Flower, S., Piehl, A., and Still, T. 2009. *Measuring Jail Recidivism in Montgomery County*,

Maryland. <http://www6.montgomerycountymd.gov/content/docr/pdfs/finalrecidivismreport-dec-16-2009.pdf>