

# The First Days After Release Can Make a Difference

By Richard Rosenfeld, Joan Petersilia and Christy Visser

**Authors' Note:** *Findings and conclusions reported in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.*

Almost all inmates who come out of prison need help to get a job, find a place to live, reunite with their children, find affordable health insurance, continue any mental health treatment they received in prison, and improve general life skills. A new report points to the urgency of beginning support programs and services as soon as an inmate is released. Most past research has focused on recidivism, but this new report focuses on success from a different perspective. Rather than measuring new criminal activity, it looked for something positive — avoidance of crime, or what the researchers call “desistance.” The new report comes from the National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academies and was funded by the National Institute of Justice, the research arm of the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Justice Programs.

## About the Report

The genesis of the report was a workshop held in June 2006 by the NRC Committee on Community Supervision and Desistance from Crime. There, papers were presented on topics that included promoting offender change through accountability and resource allocation for probation and parole. After the workshop, the committee held two meetings to consider revised versions of the papers presented and to develop a report based on those papers as well as on other literature in the field. Because of limited resources, the committee had to be highly selective with respect to

the populations, issues and topics covered in its report. It decided to make its focus parolees rather than the larger population of probationers. There were also several classes of offenders (such as sex offenders) that the committee did not consider explicitly, in part due to lack of research.

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## What Exactly Is Desistance?

Desistance is sustained abstinence from offending and the reintroduction of former criminals into productive society. Some researchers say people must choose not to engage in crime of their own free will, without any positive or negative reinforcements. Other researchers say desistance can be temporary, defined as a switch from serious felonies to misdemeanors. The definition used in the NRC study is one that is gaining growing acceptance in the field: Desistance is a process — not an event — in which criminal activity decreases, and reintegration into the community increases, over time.

The difference between desistance and a simple lack of recidivism is more than a semantic one. The mere absence of criminal activity during an observed period of time — which would qualify as a showing of no recidivism in other studies — is not the same as desistance. According to

the researchers, the hallmark of desistance is an eventual permanent abstention from criminal behavior.

## Who Is Successful at Desisting From Crime?

The NRC data indicate that there is no “average” parolee, so it is hard to generalize. However, it appears that parolees with short criminal records have higher rates of post-release desistance than those with long criminal histories. Similarly, releasees paroled from their first prison sentence are more likely to desist than those who have served one or more times before. Another interesting finding was that individuals incarcerated for violent offenses are more likely to desist from crime after they get out than those convicted of drug and property crimes. This proved true regardless of the parolee’s sex, age, race, or the specific type of offense committed.

## Do Programs and Services Help?

The researchers of this report disagree with the persistent belief that “nothing works” to decrease repeat offending. They believe the problem is in the expectation that every intervention will work with every individual. They note that some programs work for some releasees. The trick is matching the program to the person.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy programs had positive effects on the greatest number of releasees. Substance abuse treatment, especially when combined with frequent drug testing, was another type of intervention that worked for some people. Employment training and mentoring programs also showed promise.

## Why Is Immediate Help So Important?

The likelihood that an ex-offender will commit a new crime is highest a few months, weeks or even days after he or she is released. In addition, deaths of releasees are very common within the first weeks after they are released — more than 12 times the average for the general population. The initial period after release is thus the riskiest time for both the public and former inmates themselves.

## What Other Factors Are Important?

The research identified certain other factors, aside from programs and services, that help prevent former inmates from reoffending. A stable marriage is one; a job the releasee wants to keep is another. These findings contradict previous studies that show that individual changes (such as changes in personal attitudes, improving one's education and staying away from illegal drugs) are more important than work and family in keeping releasees on a noncriminal path. Hopefully, additional studies will clarify which factors are most salient.

## Why Does This Research Matter?

It should come as no surprise to anyone in the corrections field that after almost 30 years of steady growth in the U.S. prison population, the number of released prisoners has also increased sharply. Unprecedented numbers of former inmates now live in communities across the U.S. The latest Bureau of Justice Statistics figures show that approximately 700,000 individuals are released each year from state and federal prisons — more than 1,900 per day. In addition to concerns about public safety, successful parole programs are crucial to decreasing prison populations. High rates of parole revocation leading to reincarceration are, in fact, one of the major factors linked to the expanding U.S. prison population. Every year, about 300,000 parolees are returned to prison.

## What Is the Bottom Line?

In short, different parolees need different kinds of help. A first-timer who committed a violent crime of passion will need different assistance than a repeat drug offender. Regardless of who the parolee is, the best way to promote desistance from

crime is to concentrate supervision and services in the period immediately following release.

Read the entire report, *Parole, Desistance from Crime, and Community Integration*, online at [www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record\\_id=11988#toc](http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=11988#toc).

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