RESEARCH BRIEF

EVIDENCE —
— BASED
POLICING • •
• • • CENTRE

Neighbourhood crime & recidivism

— Purpose

This brief provides a summary of a study which analysed whether the level of crime in a neighbourhood was associated with whether men released on parole to that neighbourhood were reimprisoned for a new offence.

— Why is it important?

It might be assumed that releasing offenders on parole into neighbourhoods with high crime rates would increase the likelihood that those individuals would reoffend. Information about neighbourhood crime might then be used to inform criminal justice decisions about offenders' addresses. This research sought to test whether this assumption is valid for the most serious reconviction outcome (reimprisonment), for high risk parolees in New Zealand.

This study was also the first research into the relationship between particular individual and neighbourhood factors and recidivism in Australasia, thus making an important contribution to the international evidence base which until now has been US-centric.

— What was the approach?

Data on 280 high-risk male parolees returning to neighbourhoods throughout New Zealand between 2010 and 2013 were analysed to determine whether neighbourhood-level crime in their release neighbourhoods predicted whether they were reimprisoned for a new offence within 12 months of release. Four different categories of neighbourhood crime were tested: dishonesty, violence, property damage, and drugs and anti-social. Crime rates were calculated as the number of offences per 1,000 population in the neighbourhood (Census Area Unit).

The study controlled for other variables shown by other studies to be associated with crime or recidivism. Variables relating to the individual offenders were all static risk factors: age, ethnicity, age at first conviction, days served in prison and the number of parole conditions to which they were subject upon release. Variables relating to the release neighbourhood were based on the NZ census and included: deprivation, unemployment, percentage of residents who had moved there in the past 5 years, percentage living in own home, percentage born overseas, ethnic diversity, and income inequality.

Regression models were used to control for these variables and isolate any association between each neighbourhood crime type and recidivism.

— What were the findings?

Neighbourhood crime and recidivism

None of the neighbourhood crime rates predicted whether or not this group of high risk parolees was reimprisoned in the 12 months following release, when controlling for other variables.

Other predictors of recidivism

Of the individual variables, only number of parole conditions predicted reimprisonment (when controlling for the other variables): the more conditions, the less likely to be reimprisoned.

Of the neighbourhood variables, only percentage born overseas and diversity were statistically significant predictors of parolee recidivism (again, controlling for the other variables). Consistent with some prior research, parolees were more likely to be reconvicted if released to more diverse neighbourhoods. However, parolees were less likely to be reconvicted when released to neighbourhoods with higher proportions of people born overseas. Previous research has shown that neighbourhoods with larger immigrant communities have higher levels of social cohesion and collective efficacy, factors associated with reduced levels of crime, which could also explain the reduction in recidivism in such neighbourhoods.

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What does this mean?

The results of this study suggest that, at least in the NZ context, releasing high-risk parolees to high crime neighbourhoods may not increase their risk of the most serious recidivism outcome, imprisonment for a new offence.

However, the study only measured reoffending in general, rather than reoffending for specific crime types. It remains possible that specific neighbourhood contexts and opportunity structures that are conducive to specific types of offending could increase the odds of an offender reoffending in specific ways, which may not be apparent when looking at reoffending across all offences at once. It is also possible that the lack of association between crime opportunities in the immediate neighbourhood and recidivism found in this study reflects a greater general criminal mobility in NZ. Recidivism could thus still be influenced by crime opportunities in the wider environment rather than immediate neighbourhood of release.

A further potential explanation for the lack of association between neighbourhood crime and recidivism is that reoffending was measured as reimprisonment. Less serious reoffending that did not result in prosecution or prison sentence was not captured in the present study and requires exploration in future research.

The finding that parole conditions serve as a protective factor has implications for Corrections policy and practice. It also raises further research questions to explore the association between recidivism and different types of conditions, and other dynamic variables not measured in the present study.

The findings of this study in relation to other individual and neighbourhood predictors of recidivism, being at odds with some prior US based research, also highlight the importance of context-specific research.

Where to from here?

Further research is needed to explore the relationship between other individual and neighbourhood factors, crime opportunities (including in the wider environment), and recidivism, for:

- specific crime types,
- other types of recidivism (any, violent)
- offenders at lower levels of reoffending risk,
- offenders released without the protective benefits of parole conditions demonstrated in this study,
- offenders with more or fewer rehabilitative vs. restrictive conditions,
- offenders who underwent intensive rehabilitation in prison or not,
- other measures of recidivism, such as arrests, charges, or convictions.

Further reading

Breetzke, G., Polaschek, D. & Curtis-Ham, S. (2019). Does crime count? Investigating the association between neighbourhood-level crime and recidivism in high-risk parolees. *Applied Geography, 102*, 20-27.

Acknowledgements

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