



# Washington State Department of Corrections

## **RECIDIVISM REVISITED**

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## **Abstract**

The Department of Corrections (DOC) has adopted the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) definition of recidivism “any felony offense committed by an offender within 36-months of being at-risk in the community which results in a Washington State conviction” in an effort to accurately compare recidivism rates to other states and organizations, to evaluate current prison programs, and to improve planning efforts. Recidivism rates for Washington offenders peaked for those released in 2003 at 34.8 percent and have since declined to 31.1 percent for those released in 2006. Recidivism rates are impacted by re-offense behavior, risk level, law changes and measure of recidivism selected (i.e., programs, sentencing, amount of supervision after release, etc.). DOC recidivism rates do not currently include jail data hence recidivism rates are actually higher than those presented. DOC recently started collecting jail data through a joint effort with the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs (WASPC) and plan to add jail recidivism to prison data in the future. The addition of jail data will allow further comparisons with other state recidivism rates and studies.

## Recidivism Revisited

What is recidivism? The response depends on which organization you ask. The lack of a common definition makes it difficult to compare recidivism rates between different organizations and states.

According to the Webster Dictionary, “recidivism is a tendency to slip back into a previous criminal behavior pattern.” In the past, the Department of Corrections (DOC) has defined recidivism as, “a return to a DOC facility within five years as a result of a new conviction or parole violation by an offender, who either had been paroled or been discharged from such a facility (See Table 1a).”

**Table 1a: Old Method (AND as reported in Re-entry Focused Government Management Accountability and Performance (GMAP) 11/2006)**

[http://www.accountability.wa.gov/reports/safety/20061101/doc\\_offender\\_re-entry.pdf](http://www.accountability.wa.gov/reports/safety/20061101/doc_offender_re-entry.pdf)

Year Since Release	Released from Prison in Calendar Year									
	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Year 1	10.9	8.9	8.8	8.8	9.3	9.8	9.7	9.1	10.1	10.8
Year 2	8.9	9.4	9.8	9.0	9.1	10.4	9.2	10.3	11.2	11.5
Year 3	5.3	6.0	6.1	6.1	6.2	6.2	6.5	6.4	6.9	6.6
Year 4	3.5	4.6	3.8	3.9	4.0	4.3	4.2	4.6	4.5	4.9
Year 5	2.8	3.1	2.8	3.1	2.9	3.1	3.0	2.9	2.3	3.2
Total 5-Year	31.4	32.0	31.3	30.9	31.5	33.8	32.6	33.3	35.0	37.0

The drawback with this definition is the inability to compare data with states and organizations that define recidivism differently. As a result, DOC adopted the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) definition in an effort to accurately compare recidivism rates to other states and organizations, to evaluate current prison programs, and to improve planning efforts.

DOC recently updated its recidivism numbers (See Table 1b and Figure 1) using the WSIPP definition, “any felony offense committed by an offender within 36-months of being at-risk in the community

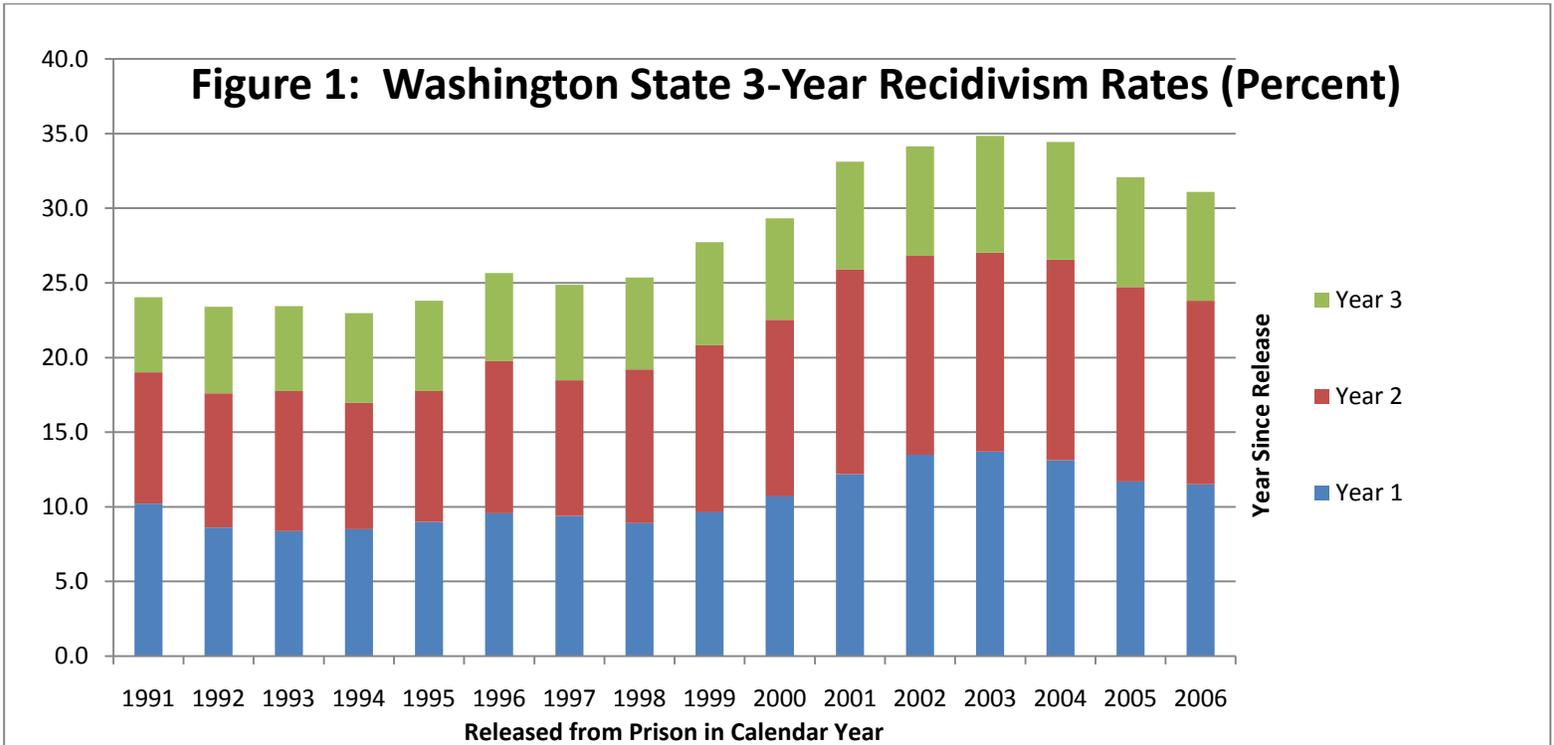
which results in a Washington State conviction” (Elizabeth Drake, Steve Aos, & Robert Barnoski, (January 2010) *Washington’s Offender Accountability Act: Final Report on Recidivism Outcomes*, WSIPP #10-01-1201).

**Table 1b: New Washington State Recidivism Rates for All Offenses (Percent)\***

Year Since Release	Released from Prison in Calendar Year															
	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Year 1	10.2	8.6	8.4	8.5	9.0	9.6	9.4	8.9	9.6	10.7	12.2	13.5	13.7	13.1	11.7	11.5
Year 2	8.8	9.0	9.4	8.5	8.8	10.2	9.1	10.3	11.2	11.8	13.7	13.3	13.3	13.4	13.0	12.3
Year 3	5.1	5.8	5.7	6.0	6.0	5.9	6.4	6.2	6.9	6.8	7.2	7.4	7.8	7.9	7.4	7.3
Year 4	3.6	4.3	3.7	3.7	3.9	4.3	4.2	4.6	4.5	4.9	4.2	4.6	4.4	4.5	4.7	
Year 5	2.9	3.0	2.8	3.1	2.9	3.1	3.0	2.9	3.1	3.2	3.0	2.9	3.0	2.8		
<b>Total</b>	<b>30.5</b>	<b>30.7</b>	<b>30.0</b>	<b>29.8</b>	<b>30.6</b>	<b>33.1</b>	<b>32.0</b>	<b>32.9</b>	<b>35.3</b>	<b>37.4</b>	<b>40.3</b>	<b>41.6</b>	<b>42.3</b>	<b>41.7</b>		

\*Recidivism rates are impacted by re-offense behavior, law changes and measure of recidivism selected (i.e., programs, sentencing, amount of parole supervision, etc.).

\*\*Revised Data



The new definition of recidivism does not include re-incarceration due to parole violations. The 5-year recidivism rate for offenders released in 1999 varies depending on the definition used; the old definition shows 2.3 percent recidivating and the new definition shows a rate of 3.1 percent, or a 0.8 increase (See Table 1c). DOC also calculated recidivism by crime type in order to cross-check the accuracy of the methodology and results (See Table 2). WSIPP uses a three year follow-up for their definition, because the fourth and fifth years are fairly consistent and stable; additionally, WSIPP reports recidivism rates by crime type and includes jail data (<http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/rptfiles/10-01-1201.pdf>). DOC recidivism rates do not currently include jail data hence recidivism rates are actually higher than those presented.

**Table 1c: Difference (New and Old Method)**

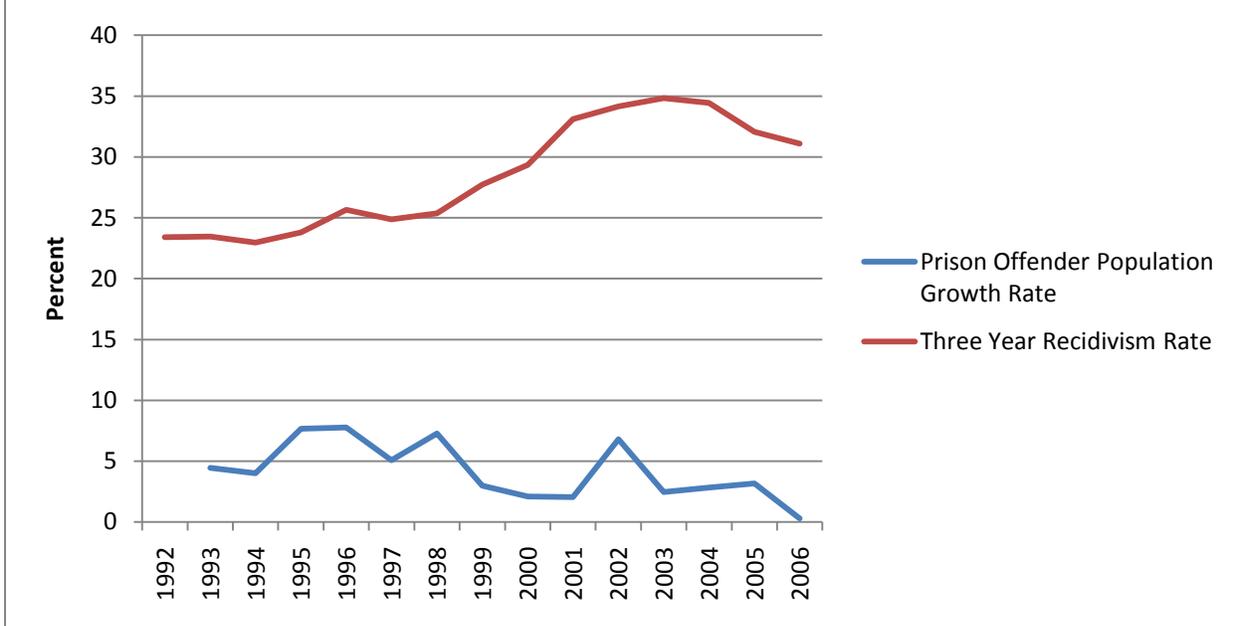
Year Since Release	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Year 1	-0.7	-0.3	-0.4	-0.3	-0.3	-0.2	-0.3	-0.2	-0.5	-0.1
Year 2	-0.1	-0.4	-0.4	-0.5	-0.3	-0.2	-0.1	0.0	0.0	0.3
Year 3	-0.3	-0.2	-0.4	-0.1	-0.2	-0.3	-0.1	-0.2	0.0	0.2
Year 4	0.1	-0.3	-0.1	-0.2	-0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Year 5	0.1	-0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.8	0.0
Total 5-Year Difference	-0.9	-1.3	-1.3	-1.2	-0.9	-0.8	-0.6	-0.4	0.3	0.4

**Table 2: Washington State 3-Year Recidivism Rates by Offense Type (Percent)**

Offense Type	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
<b>Violent Offense</b>	<b>21.3%</b>	<b>19.2%</b>	<b>21.7%</b>	<b>21.8%</b>	<b>21.3%</b>	<b>22.0%</b>	<b>22.2%</b>	<b>22.5%</b>	<b>24.1%</b>	<b>26.0%</b>	<b>25.5%</b>	<b>26.1%</b>	<b>26.9%</b>	<b>24.5%</b>	<b>25.0%</b>	<b>23.8%</b>
MURDER	13.0%	0.0%	2.5%	4.3%	8.8%	1.7%	2.3%	8.8%	2.1%	8.9%	4.2%	3.1%	9.0%	4.7%	6.9%	5.4%
MANSLAUGHTER	7.6%	5.8%	4.7%	6.9%	10.7%	6.1%	7.0%	9.6%	10.0%	9.7%	6.7%	5.8%	0.0%	1.6%	3.7%	6.0%
SEX CRIME	15.0%	12.1%	9.7%	10.7%	7.1%	4.6%	6.3%	6.6%	8.7%	7.6%	6.2%	10.0%	7.7%	7.5%	11.5%	9.8%
ROBBERY	32.6%	27.3%	35.2%	32.6%	30.1%	34.2%	29.8%	30.0%	28.8%	37.2%	25.7%	27.4%	29.5%	26.6%	23.4%	20.6%
ASSAULT	24.0%	26.3%	28.0%	30.2%	29.9%	31.7%	33.3%	31.1%	32.8%	33.9%	35.6%	34.8%	35.1%	31.9%	32.5%	30.8%
<b>Property</b>	<b>51.1%</b>	<b>49.7%</b>	<b>48.1%</b>	<b>46.3%</b>	<b>47.6%</b>	<b>52.1%</b>	<b>49.5%</b>	<b>46.1%</b>	<b>49.2%</b>	<b>50.2%</b>	<b>53.4%</b>	<b>55.1%</b>	<b>53.3%</b>	<b>52.0%</b>	<b>45.6%</b>	<b>43.7%</b>
<b>Drug</b>	<b>25.1%</b>	<b>24.3%</b>	<b>22.3%</b>	<b>21.5%</b>	<b>22.4%</b>	<b>24.6%</b>	<b>23.3%</b>	<b>25.6%</b>	<b>28.8%</b>	<b>31.4%</b>	<b>37.8%</b>	<b>38.4%</b>	<b>39.5%</b>	<b>38.0%</b>	<b>33.3%</b>	<b>29.9%</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>44.4%</b>	<b>47.1%</b>	<b>44.4%</b>	<b>30.4%</b>	<b>57.1%</b>	<b>48.8%</b>	<b>39.3%</b>	<b>45.3%</b>	<b>53.0%</b>	<b>50.0%</b>	<b>49.2%</b>	<b>45.6%</b>	<b>49.3%</b>	<b>43.3%</b>	<b>46.7%</b>	<b>43.2%</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>24.0%</b>	<b>23.5%</b>	<b>23.5%</b>	<b>23.0%</b>	<b>23.8%</b>	<b>25.7%</b>	<b>24.9%</b>	<b>25.4%</b>	<b>27.8%</b>	<b>29.3%</b>	<b>33.2%</b>	<b>34.3%</b>	<b>35.0%</b>	<b>34.3%</b>	<b>32.2%</b>	<b>31.2%</b>



**Figure 2: Prison Offender Population Growth Compared with Recidivism Rate by Year**



Recidivism rates are calculated using the number of offenders reoffending within 3 years of release divided by the total number of offenders released. An important factor affecting these calculated rates involves the size of the offender population released into the community, along with the risk level of the offenders released. If these two numbers are small, recidivism percentages can change dramatically from year to year. For example, in Table 2, the number of offenders released each year with a murder, manslaughter and other offense is small, so any insignificant amount of re-offense or non-offense behavior can change recidivism rates dramatically for those categories. A recidivism rate for violent offenses was created to remove this data issue and also allow comparison to other organizations.

**Table 4: 3-Year Recidivism Rates for Offenders in 1994 from the BJS Study Compared to Washington State (Percent)**

State	Return to Prison with New Crime	Return to Prison with Technical Violation	Total Return to Prison
California	27	39	66
Florida	27	26	53
Illinois	32	6	38
New York	27	29	56
North Carolina	34	14	48
Texas	15	11	26
15 States in BJS Study	25	27	52
Washington State	23	25	48

In the past, we could not access Washington State jail data for DOC offenders. DOC recently started collecting jail data through a joint effort with the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs (WASPC) and plan to add jail recidivism to prison data in the future. The addition of jail data will allow further comparisons with other state recidivism rates and studies, along with looking at differences in technical violations and new crimes with controls for offender characteristics (See Table 4 ([http://ucicorrections.seweb.uci.edu/pdf/bulletin\\_2005\\_vol-1\\_is-1.pdf](http://ucicorrections.seweb.uci.edu/pdf/bulletin_2005_vol-1_is-1.pdf)); Ryan G. Fisher (2005), *Are California's Recidivism Rates Really the Highest in the Nation?*, UC Irvine Center for Evidence-Based Corrections; and Patrick Langan and David Levin (2002), *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1994*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, NCJ 193427). In a study of 15 states, Washington State 3-year prison re-entry rates for 1994 were close to average (See Table 4).

States' parole supervision laws impact these recidivism numbers; California supervises all offenders released from prison and Washington supervises 85 percent of released offenders. Texas supervises about 75 percent of their offenders released from prison, North Carolina 60 percent, and Florida 40 percent. Using this new definition of recidivism will allow DOC the opportunity to compare recidivism data with other organizations and states, and respond to recidivism research questions from internal, academic, and professional sources. Further, DOC can improve its evaluation of offender programs offered by the department.