

Post-release Supervision

EVIDENCE BRIEF

Post-release supervision orders are imposed on offenders to improve public safety and aid with rehabilitation and reintegration back into the community following time in prison. There is some international evidence that supervision reduces recidivism compared to release without any supervision; however, New Zealand evidence is limited. Supervision is most effective when it follows discretionary release, and supervision is conducted by well-trained probation officers.

OVERVIEW

- Post-release supervision orders are commonly imposed on offenders following a period of imprisonment to monitor the offenders and to aid with rehabilitation and reintegration.
- Offenders are supervised by community correctional agencies. Supervision includes regularly reporting to a probation officer and other standard conditions such as restrictions on living and working arrangements.
- In New Zealand, the large majority of offenders released from prison are subject to some form of supervision after release. The two most common forms of post-release supervision are parole and Release on Conditions.
- There is growing international evidence that post-release supervision can reduce recidivism compared to release without any supervision.
- There is limited research on the effectiveness of post-release supervision in New Zealand. Initial findings are consistent with international evidence.

- The evidence suggests discretionary release is more effective for reducing recidivism than mandatory release. The evidence considers post-release supervision mostly as a sentencing option rather than rehabilitative intervention.
- Supervision is most effective when it is conducted by well-trained probation officers who provide more intensive supervision to higher risk offenders, focus on risk factors known to be related to recidivism, and use cognitive behavioural techniques for changing behaviour.

EVIDENCE BRIEF SUMMARY

Evidence rating:	Fair
Effect size (number needed to treat):	10-50
Current spend:	\$58.47m
Unmet demand:	Not applicable

DOES POST-RELEASE SUPERVISION REDUCE CRIME?

What is post-release supervision?

Offenders can be ordered by the court or a Parole Board to serve a period of supervision in the community after release from prison. The aim of supervision is to monitor offenders as they return to the community, and assist with their reintegration and rehabilitation. The conditions and length of post-release supervision can vary considerably.

Under the Parole Act 2002, all offenders sentenced to more than 2 years in prison will have a period of supervision after release. This supervision consists of standard conditions that apply to all offenders and special conditions that are imposed on a specific offender - special conditions are discretionary (Sentencing Act 2002, s 93). If the prison sentence was more than 2 years, the offender will generally be eligible for release “on parole” after serving one third of their sentence (provided that longer non-parole periods are not imposed at time of sentencing).

The decision to release and the length of parole is determined by the New Zealand Parole Board (NZPB). Post-release supervision will be for at least 6 months and may last until 6 months after the prison sentence was due to end. About 30% of offenders are denied early release.¹ They are required to serve the entire imposed prison term, followed by a mandatory 6 months of community supervision. Unlike paroled offenders, the latter group cannot be recalled to prison if they breach the conditions of the release order.

Offenders who are sentenced to imprisonment for a term between 1 and 2 years are also automatically subject to “released on conditions” orders after serving half their sentence. For sentences of less than 1 year, the sentencing

court determines whether or not the offender will have to undergo post-release supervision.

The same standard conditions apply for parole and Release on Conditions. Offenders must regularly report to a probation officer, and undergo an assessment of their rehabilitation needs. Restrictions may also be placed on where the offender can live and work, and who they can associate with.

Challenges for assessing effectiveness

The best way to examine the effect of post-release supervision would be to compare two randomly selected groups of released prisoners, one group who completed post-release supervision, and one group released without any supervision period. However, post-release supervision is not ordered at random, and research using such an approach would be likely to create ethical concerns. Therefore, there is rarely an obvious comparison group of unsupervised offenders. Without a comparison group, it is very difficult to determine whether post-release supervision reduces recidivism.

Discretionary release regimes (e.g., parole), can provide two groups—those granted early release, and those who serve their full sentence—whose post-release outcomes may be compared. However, this comparison is generally invalid. The reason offenders are not granted parole is usually because they were assessed as being at a higher risk of reoffending than offenders who were granted early release. In New Zealand, the situation is complicated further by the fact that even offenders who are denied release must subsequently complete 6 months of supervision after their prison sentence ends, so there is no comparison group of long-serving prisoners who are not subject to any supervision after release.

Despite these challenges, a few research studies (predominantly from the United States) have examined the impact of post-release

supervision. More recent research has used robust statistical methods such as propensity score matching to create comparable groups, while other research has taken advantage of legislative or policy changes that have created a natural experimental group.

International evidence

The only meta-analysis published in this area to date focused solely on the effectiveness of parole supervision. That studyⁱⁱ found that parole supervision reduced general recidivism, but only by about 2% (which is still statistically significant).ⁱⁱⁱ Parole was found to have no significant effect on rates of violent recidivism. However, the authors acknowledged that a major limitation in their study was the absence of information about what type of supervision was provided in each study. Also, the meta-analysis only included studies from between 1980 and 2006. The majority of other research discussed below has been completed since 2006.

In the United States, a large number of offenders are released without supervision, either because they are not granted parole, or because their sentence has no supervision component. Research in states where these policies are (or were previously) in place has consistently found that offenders who are released without supervision have significantly worse recidivism outcomes than matched groups of offenders who are supervised after release.^{iv}

In general, these studies have found that unsupervised offenders are significantly more likely to be rearrested and reconvicted. Recidivism is also likely to occur quicker than for unsupervised offenders. However, the effect sizes vary considerably (anywhere from 1-36% reductions in recidivism), but are mostly towards the smaller end.^v Also, some studies suggest that recidivism is only reduced during supervision, while other studies indicate that

including parole violations in the measure of recidivism can reduce the effect size.

In many Australian states, the release regime is similar to New Zealand. A 2015 study in New South Wales^{vi} found that short-serving prisoners (less than 12 months) who were supervised were 22% less likely to be reconvicted within 12 months than a matched group of offenders who were released without supervision. Supervised offenders also took significantly longer to commit new offences, were less likely to commit serious offences, and committed fewer offences when compared to the unsupervised group. The authors described the effects as substantial, but noted that the impact declined over time. It is also unclear whether the findings can be applied to long-serving prisoners, since they only included short-serving prisoners in their sample.

Caution should be taken in interpreting these findings, particularly where parole was the focus. Despite the fact that several studies used rigorous matching techniques, it is likely that some variables relevant to both being granted parole and to recidivism were not explicitly measured. Thus, it is uncertain what proportion of the effect observed in these studies can be solely or partly attributed to the effects of post-release supervision.

New Zealand evidence

There have been no robust studies of post-release supervision in New Zealand. The nature of the release system does not lend itself to this type of analysis. However, some helpful research has been done in this area.

A 2010 report^{vii} by the Department of Corrections examined the impact of legislative changes that shifted parole away from mandatory early release for long-serving prisoners, and towards the more discretionary system that is currently in place.

The report showed that fewer offences were being committed by offenders between release date and sentence end date under the new statutory regime. However, the authors suggest that this finding was more likely a function of offenders serving a greater proportion of their sentence in prison, and better discretionary decision making by the NZPB.

The report also found some evidence that offenders who serve more of their sentence in prison do more harm on release than offenders who are released earlier. However, again, this finding is mostly attributed to release decision making (i.e., letting out lower risk offenders earlier and keeping higher risk offenders in for longer), rather than suggesting that extra supervision for early releases reduced recidivism.

At least one other study^{viii} has looked at the impact of time on parole in New Zealand. This research suggested that a longer time on parole is associated with reduced recidivism, even after controlling for the offender's risk at release. However, this study does not suggest that post-release supervision is the sole reason for the improved outcomes. It is possible that other unmeasured factors could explain both why these offenders were granted early release and why they reoffended less frequently.

WHEN IS POST-RELEASE SUPERVISION MOST EFFECTIVE?

General Principles of Effective Supervision

In some countries, the role of supervision is divided into probation and parole officers to distinguish whether the officers are supervising offenders after release from prison or on a community sentence. However, in most countries, including New Zealand, officers

supervise a mixture of released prisoners and community-sentenced offenders.

Research has identified a set of principles, skills and techniques that supervision officers should follow in order to reduce recidivism. This research generally uses both released prisoners and community-sentenced offenders. There is no evidence to suggest that these general principles of effective supervision do not apply to offenders on post-release supervision.

Moreover, some evidence suggests that supervision officers' understanding of offender readiness to change their behaviour improves probation outcomes.^{ix} The ability of supervision officers to systematically measure and respond to offender readiness better enables offenders to engage in a therapeutic environment and benefit from treatment.

The research shows that community supervision is most effective when the general principles of risk, need and responsivity (RNR) are followed.^x These principles state that higher risk offenders should receive more intensive supervision, the supervision should target risk factors known to be related to recidivism (and relevant for that individual offender), and should deliver supervision using cognitive behavioural techniques.

The research has also identified the supervision officer skills and techniques that are most effective at reducing recidivism. These skills, are referred to as "core correctional practices" "include effective use of authority, prosocial modelling, problem-solving strategies, use of community resources, and interpersonal relationship factors."^{xi}

A 2015 meta-analysis^{xii} of 10 studies shows that offenders supervised by officers who had received specific training in these practices have a recidivism rate approximately 13% lower (a small but statistically significant effect) than offenders supervised by officers who had not received the training.

In general, supervision is less effective when supervision officers are more focused on enforcement of sentence/release conditions, do not focus on relevant risk factors, and use a confrontational approach as opposed to 'firm but fair' interpersonal style.^{xiii}

Type of Release

There is some research pointing to aspects specific to post-release supervision that are particularly effective at reducing recidivism.

Studies in both the United States^{xiv} and Australia^{xv} have found that supervision is more effective for offenders who were granted discretionary release, when compared with those granted mandatory release. Although these studies use statistical matching to create fair comparison groups, it is likely that unmeasured selection variables may explain part or all of this finding (e.g., the reason the offender was granted discretionary release rather than mandatory release may be the same reason they did not reoffend).

WHAT OTHER BENEFITS DOES POST-RELEASE SUPERVISION HAVE?

Cost savings

It is considerably cheaper to supervise offenders in the community than it is to keep them in prison. Therefore, the major potential benefit of post-release supervision is that it can result in substantial cost savings.

The savings made by not serving a full term in prison must be offset against any costs that result from both the supervision period and any additional reoffending that occurs before the end of the offender's sentence (i.e., during time that would have been spent in prison if they had not been released early). It is very difficult to

measure this cost because it is almost impossible to know whether reoffending would have simply been delayed by spending extra time in prison.

In New Zealand, the Department of Corrections found that substantial cost savings were made by reducing the amount of harm done during the supervision period. However, it is difficult to know how much of this saving can be attributed to post-release supervision. This saving was also entirely offset by the increased costs that resulted from the legislative changes in 2002, which led to more offenders serving a greater proportion of their sentences in prison.^{xvi}

Internationally, a few studies have attempted to estimate the amount saved by a post-release supervision regime. One study from the state of Kentucky in the United States, estimated that the introduction of post-release supervision saved almost \$30 million in 27 months.^{xvii}

These studies indicate that post-release supervision associated with no increase in recidivism will result in substantial cost savings because of the savings from reducing the use of imprisonment.^{xviii} Post-release supervision which reduces recidivism leads to even greater savings because of the costs of reoffending that are avoided.

Prison behaviour and programme engagement

There is some evidence that prisoners behave better and are more likely to attend and complete rehabilitation programmes when they have a chance of being released early.^{xix} Completion of rehabilitation programmes while in prison is suggested as one reason for why post-release supervision reduces recidivism.^{xx}

CURRENT INVESTMENT IN NEW ZEALAND

Release vs. Prison

Releasing offenders onto supervision costs less than keeping them in prison. In 2014/15, 3,934 offenders in New Zealand were released onto conditions, and 1,970 offenders were released onto parole.^{xxi} However, it is almost impossible to quantify the cost savings of these two release regimes. Release on Conditions is legislatively mandated – it is an “extra cost” imposed by the sentencing judge. Therefore Release on Conditions does not generate any cost savings. Robust evaluation needs to consider the above difficulties when assessing a positive return on investment.

EVIDENCE RATING AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Each Evidence Brief provides an evidence rating between Harmful and Strong.

Harmful	Robust evidence that intervention increases crime
Poor	Robust evidence that intervention tends to have no effect
Inconclusive	Conflicting evidence that intervention can reduce crime
Fair	Some evidence that intervention can reduce crime
Promising	Robust international <i>or</i> local evidence that intervention tends to reduce crime
Strong	Robust international <i>and</i> local evidence that intervention tends to reduce crime

According to the standard criteria for all Evidence Briefs¹, the appropriate evidence rating for Post-Release Supervision is Fair.

This rating reflects the fact that although there is growing international evidence to suggest that post-release supervision reduces recidivism, there are methodological limitations of that research, and there has been no robust research conducted in New Zealand.

As per the standard definitions of evidence strength outlined in our methodology, the interpretation of this evidence rating is that:

- There is some evidence that interventions can reduce crime
- Interventions may be unproven in New Zealand or be subject to conflicting research
- Intervention may benefit from trial approaches with a research and development focus

- Robust evaluation needed to confirm interventions are delivering a positive return and to aid in detailed service design.

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FIND OUT MORE

Go to the website

www.justice.govt.nz/justice-sector/what-works-to-reduce-crime/

Email

whatworks@justice.govt.nz

Recommended reading

Wan, W. Y., Poynton, S., & Weatherburn, D. (2015). Does parole supervision reduce the risk of re-offending?. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 49(4), 497-511

Solomon, A. L., Kachnowski, V., & Bhati, A. (2005). *Does parole work? Analyzing the impact of post-prison supervision on rearrest outcomes*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Justice Policy Center.

Bonta, J., Rugge, T., Scott, T. L., Bourgon, G., & Yessine, A. K. (2008). Exploring the black box of community supervision. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 47(3), 248-270

¹ Available at www.justice.govt.nz/justice-sector/what-works-to-reduce-crime/

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- ⁱ Golden et al 2006.
ⁱⁱ Bonta et al 2008.
ⁱⁱⁱ Chadwick et al 2015.
^{iv} Kuziemko 2013, Ostermann and Hyatt 2016, Ostermann and Matejkowski 2014, Ostermann 2011, Ostermann 2012, Ostermann 2013, Ostermann 2015, Ostermann et al 2015, The Pew Charitable Trusts 2013, The Pew Charitable Trusts 2014, Schlager and Robbins 2008, Solomon et al 2005, Veysey et al 2014, Vito et al 2015.
^v Bonta et al 2008.
^{vi} Wan et al 2015
^{vii} Department of Corrections 2010.
^{viii} Polaschek 2017.
^{ix} Ugwudike and Raynor 2013, Golden et al 2006, Veysey et al 2014, Dowden and Andrews 2004, Trotter and Evans 2012.

Citations

- ^x Bonta and Andrews 2016.
^{xi} Dowden and Andrews 2004.
^{xii} Chadwick et al 2015.
^{xiii} Trotter and Evans 2012.
^{xiv} Solomon et al 2005.
^{xv} Stavrou et al 2016.
^{xvi} Department of Corrections 2010.
^{xvii} The Pew Charitable Trusts 2014.
^{xviii} Chadwick et al 2015, Vito et al 2015, Ostermann 2013, Ostermann 2015, Harvell et al 2016, Golden et al 2006, The Pew Charitable Trusts 2013, The Pew Charitable Trusts 2014, Washington State Institute for Public Policy (2015).
^{xix} Kuziemko 2013.
^{xx} Kuziemko 2013.
^{xxi} Department of Corrections 2015.

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SUMMARY OF EFFECT SIZES FROM META-ANALYSES

Meta-analysis	Treatment type/population	Outcome measure	Reported average effect size	Number of estimates meta-analysis based on	Percentage point reduction in offending (assuming 50% untreated recidivism)	Number needed to treat (assuming 50% untreated recidivism)
Bonta et al. (2008)	Parolees vs. non-parolees	General recidivism	$\Phi = .022^*$	26	0.02	50
Bonta et al. (2008)	Parolees vs. non-parolees	Violent recidivism	$\Phi = .004$	8	0.0	-
Chadwick et al. (2015)	Supervision by specially trained officers vs. normal supervision	General recidivism	OR = 1.48*	10	0.1	10

* Statistically significant at a 95% threshold

Φ =phi coefficient (variant of correlation coefficient)

OR: Odds Ratio