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Recidivism: The Effect of Incarceration and Length of Time Served

SUMMARY

Offenders may reoffend after they return to the community. This reoffense behavior is known as recidivism. The effect of prison or jail sentences on recidivism is an important issue to those concerned with public safety and the cost-effectiveness of putting convicted offenders in prison. Opinions are divided between those advocating longer sentences in the interest of public safety, and those advocating shorter sentences with the assumption that incarceration, or longer prison terms, will not reduce recidivism rates.

This paper summarizes the theories and the empirical studies on this issue. Study findings indicate that the effect of incarceration (versus other sentencing options) and sentence length on recidivism is complex and is likely to be offender-specific. For some offenders, incarceration and longer confinement seem to increase the risk of recidivism. For other offenders, the likelihood of reoffense will either be unaffected or reduced by longer terms of incarceration. Furthermore, early-release programs do not appear to affect overall recidivism rates.