Research *at a glance*

The Relationship between Length of Incarceration and Recidivism

Time incarcerated is weakly related to recidivism, but may be more important to the prediction of re-offence severity.

Why we did this study

There is considerable debate in the literature regarding the link between sentence length and recidivism. Consistent with a specific deterrence perspective, some research findings support the perspective that longer sentences will deter future re-offending. In contrast, others have found either no link or criminogenic effects, whereby longer sentences result in more re-offending.

In recent years, proposed and implemented changes to Canadian laws have adopted deterrent approaches to prevent criminal behaviour and recidivism. This research was conducted to determine whether Canadian federal correctional data can shed further light on the debate.

What we did

This study examined the link between the length of time served in a federal institution and recidivism occurring both before and after warrant expiry. Further, this study also investigated whether time served is predictive of the severity of re-offence. These research questions were explored based on a cohort of offenders released from federal institutions on the first term of their sentence between April 1, 2009 and March 31, 2011.

What we found

The findings demonstrated that, prior to warrant expiry, there was a weak relationship between number of months incarcerated and revocation with an offence, when controlling for age at release, Indigenous ancestry and criminal risk. Specifically, for each additional month of incarceration, there was a 1% decrease in the risk of revocation with offence. No such relationship was found after warrant expiry.

Examinations of re-offence severity indicated that as length of time incarcerated increased, so too did the severity of post-warrant expiry re-offences. In contrast, there was not a significant relationship between time served and severity of the re-offence that occurred prior to warrant expiry.

Some interesting results with respect to Indigenous offenders were noted. Specifically, while Indigenous offenders tended to have higher rates of returning to custody (with or without an offence), the severity of the offences leading to these returns were lower than for non-Indigenous offenders, particularly in the pre-warrant expiry period.

What it means

No consistent findings demonstrating a relationship between sentence length and recidivism were found in the current study and, where a relationship exists, it was weak. From a deterrence perspective, this obviously raises the question of whether the costs associated with lengthier incarcerations are worth a relatively small overall reduction in risk.

These results also suggest that the influence of time served on the severity of re-offences depends on whether the offender is under supervision. Behaviours post-warrant expiry are not scrutinized by a parole officer or others involved in offenders' supervision. As such, offenders' behaviours following warrant expiry may reflect their unencumbered likelihood of engaging in criminal behaviour. This suggests that community supervision mitigates the criminogenic effects of time served incarcerated and dissuades more severe forms of re-offending.

Differences noted with respect to returns to custody for Indigenous offenders may reflect factors which were not examined such as different case management strategies related to Indigenous ancestry. However, future research would be required to replicate and explore these findings further.

For more information

Rubenfeld, S. & Shanahan Somerville, M.C. (2017). *The relationship between length of incarceration and recidivism* (Research Report R-389). Ottawa, Ontario: Correctional Service of Canada.

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