

***Delivering Effective Interventions -
Using Reconviction Rates to Measure the Efficacy of Sentences***

Louise Cooper, Probation Board of Northern Ireland

Summary

Reconviction is the most commonly used indicator for measuring the effectiveness of court penalties in reducing reoffending. 2001 adult reconviction rates published in 2005 by the Northern Ireland Office indicated that 17% of those who received a non-custodial sentence were reconvicted within two years, while 45% of those discharged from custody were reconvicted in two years. The reconviction rate of those with statutory supervision after custody discharge was lower than those without statutory supervision.

Keywords Effectiveness; Community Sentences; Reoffending; Reconviction

Introduction

The aim of the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) is to reduce crime and the harm it does. To meet this aim, PBNI supervises community sentences for the courts; each with a detailed workplan based on individually assessed risk and need. PBNI seeks to continuously improve the effectiveness of community based sentences, delivering services which are underpinned by a framework of standards and service requirements, working in partnership with statutory, non-statutory and voluntary bodies and incorporating lessons learnt from best practice in other jurisdictions.

Reconviction rates are the most commonly used means of assessing the effectiveness of court sentences in preventing reoffending. Reconviction is not the same as reoffending, and is recognised as an undercount of reoffending. Not all crimes are reported to the police; furthermore of those crimes that are reported, there are various methods of clear up, one of which is prosecution¹. Nonetheless, reconviction remains the standard measure of re-offending.

Study Findings

The most up to date analysis of adult reconviction in Northern Ireland was published in February 2005 by the Northern Ireland Office. The Research and Statistical Bulletin (3/2005) 'Adult Reconviction in Northern Ireland' (McMullan and Ruddy, 2005) ¹ outlines the two year reconviction rates of adults (aged 17 years or more) who received a non-custodial disposal during 2001 and those released from custody into the community in 2001.

The findings are based on analysis of data from on the Police Service of Northern Ireland's Integrated Crime Information Service (ICIS). The records of 18,710 adults who received a non-custodial disposal and 703 adults discharged from custody during 2001 were analysed. The criminal careers of these individuals were then monitored for subsequent convictions over the next two years.

The reconviction rate is calculated as the percentage of offenders who were reconvicted within a given time (in this case two years) from the date of their non-custodial disposal or discharge from custody into the community (Kerr and Wilson, 2000) 2.

In summary, the analysis showed:

- 17% of those receiving a non-custodial disposal in 2001 were reconvicted in 2 years.
- The overall community supervision (community service order, probation order and combination order) two-year reconviction rate was 34%.
- 45% of those discharged from custody into the community 2001 were reconvicted within 2 years.
- 49% of those discharged from custody were reconvicted within two years, while 32% of those released on a Custody Probation Order were reconvicted within a two year period.
- The highest reconviction rate was for offenders discharged from the Young Offenders Centre (with a disposal of immediate custody), 74% were reconvicted in the subsequent two-year period. In comparison, those discharged from the Young Offenders Centre on a Custody Probation Order had a two-year reconviction rate of 43%. This finding highlights the positive impact of statutory supervision following release from custody.
- Examining both those discharged from custody and those receiving a non-custodial sentence, younger offenders had the highest reconviction rates- 30% reconviction for 17-19 year olds in the non-custodial group and 72% reconviction for those aged 17-19 in the custodial discharge group.
- Generally the greater number of previous convictions, the higher the reconviction rate (for both the non-custodial group and the custodial discharge group). 43% of the non-custodial group with 17 or more previous convictions were reconvicted within 2 years compared to 60% of the custodial discharge group with a similar criminal history.
- The highest reconviction rates were, for both groups, found to be for property offences (burglary, theft and criminal damage), 32% for the non-custodial group and 65% for the custodial discharge group. In the non-custodial group the lowest reconviction rates were for "other" offences (8%) and sexual offences (12%). In the custodial discharge group the lowest reconviction rates were for sexual offences (20%) fraud and forgery (27%) and drug offences (29%).

Conclusion

Comparing reconviction rates for different court penalties is difficult- they are a product of many factors, not only the sentence handed down. However, this research clearly indicates people under supervision are less likely to reoffend than people released from prison without supervision. This evidence is useful in considering the option of statutory post custody supervision for all young offenders. The current Review of Sentencing (ongoing in Northern Ireland) has indicated that such provisions will be considered in new legislation.

These findings also evidence that reconviction rates for those with previous convictions is generally higher than those who had no criminal history. This suggests resources should be directed towards people with more previous convictions and follows the well established principle of matching level of supervision with risk of reoffending/risk of harm.

These findings evidence the provision of a high quality probation service by PBNI, promoting the reintegration of offenders into the community and protection of the public.

A full copy of the findings can be found on the Northern Ireland Office website: www.nio.gov.uk.

Glossary

A **Probation Order** can last between 6 months and 3 years.

A **Community Service Order** may be imposed on any individual aged 16 years old or over, and is made on the basis of the number of hours which an offender must work in the community. An Order can be made for at least 40 hours and not more than 240 hours and shall be performed during the period of 12 months.

A **Custody Probation Order** is a sentence of the Court requiring an offender to serve a period of imprisonment (offence must justify 12 months or more) followed by a period of supervision in the community (the period of supervision will be 1 to 3 years commencing on date of release), and is unique to Northern Ireland.

A **Combination Order** is a sentence that combines a Probation Order and a Community Service Order. The period of Probation supervision can last from 1 to 3 years. The Community Service part of the Order can range from 40 to 100 hours and must be completed as instructed.

References

McMullan, S and Ruddy, D (2005)

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Louise Cooper is the Information & Research Manager, Probation Board for Northern Ireland.

Email: louise.cooper@pbni.org.uk
