

# FOCUS

Views from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency

## Accelerated Release: A Literature Review

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### *Introduction*

The incarceration rate in our nation is by far the highest in the world at over 700 per 100,000 citizens. Most European nations have rates less than 175. The impact on communities—and the hardest hit are communities of color—is devastating. High incarceration rates often lead to prison overcrowding. One way to address this overcrowding is through accelerated release programs. In accelerated release programs, eligible prisoners may be released ahead of their sentenced release dates through the application of good time credit, intense community supervision, or other methods. Accelerated release programs have been implemented throughout the country in different ways and at different times. They have always been confronted with opposition by critics who claim that accelerated release poses a threat to public safety.

NCCD conducted a review of published studies to examine the accuracy of that assumption. This FOCUS presents the findings of this literature review.

### *Methods*

This literature review included more than 12 peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, state reports, policy-related reports, and national data reports, all of which evaluate accelerated release programs and their impact on public safety. The programs took place at various times over a 23-year period and in a number of states and cities in the US and Canada. The reports draw on data from 1981 to 2004.

Using a variety of databases—Rutgers University's Don Gottfredson Criminal Justice Library, the National Institute of Corrections Information Center, and the National Criminal Justice Reference Service—we searched for relevant articles in peer-reviewed publications, monographs, and state reports from 1980-2007. The search terms used singly and in combination were: early release, prison population caps, recidivism, public safety, and effect. This review covers the studies found that report on the impact of accelerated release on recidivism, excluding those with unspecified methods.

Public safety was measured through new felony convictions, criminal parole violations, technical parole violations, and return to prison data.

## Populations Studies

In general, the populations in these studies were adult males who had committed a nonviolent crime, who were eligible for parole, and thus whose crimes could be addressed in community settings. One Canadian study focused on adult women.

## Findings in Brief

- The studies revealed no significant difference in rates of recidivism among accelerated release and full-term prisoners. In fact, in some cases, early release prisoners had lower rates of recidivism than full-term prisoners. In Illinois, inmates released via Supplemental Meritorious Good Time (SMGT) had the same recidivism rates as those serving full sentences (Study 9).
- In Wisconsin, no evidence was found that release 135 days versus 90 days early resulted in a disproportionate increase in criminal activity (Study 7).
- During 18 months of follow up, offenders participating in the Florida Community Control Program had lower rates of new convictions compared to those that spent 9 months in prison (Study 10).
- In Canada, over half of the study group successfully completed their sentences in the community or successfully lived in the community for at least one year post release (Study 11).
- To address prison crowding, the Illinois DOC released 21,000 prisoners early, reducing the prison population by 10% (Study 8). New crimes by these prisoners were less than 1% of the state's crimes. The Illinois Supreme Court found the DOC had exceeded its authority in granting good time credit. Later the legislature revised early release eligibility and resumed the practice (Study 9).

## What Worked in Accelerated Release Efforts

- Selecting nonviolent versus violent offenders for accelerated release.
- Using accelerated release as an incentive for nonviolent behavior in prison.
- Allocating probation officers to maintain contact with accelerated release groups, thereby promoting accountability.
- Linking accelerated release groups to community-based services and programs concerned with housing, employment, substance abuse treatment, and mental health care.

## A Note on the Graphs

These profiles include two types of graphs, both produced by NCCD. The bar graphs show recidivism rates of different groups of prisoners involved in the studies. In many cases, the accelerated release group is compared to a control group. Rates are measured in a variety of ways. The data come from the profiled studies.

The line graphs show state crime rates for a span of years relevant to the study, including the follow up periods. These data, which are composites of violent and property offense rates, calculated by NCCD, come from sources such as the US Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), the FBI Uniform Crime Reports, and the National Crime Victimization Survey (conducted by BJS). The y-axis scale is consistent throughout.

### Early Release: Prison Overcrowding and Public Safety Implications

1

Sims, B., O'Connell, J.

Washington State Office of Financial Management



Olympia, Washington  
1979-1983

**Study group size: 1,674**

Inmates released an average of 6 months before their expected release dates.

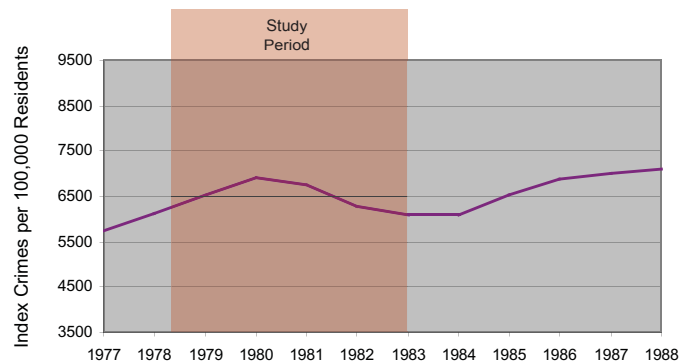
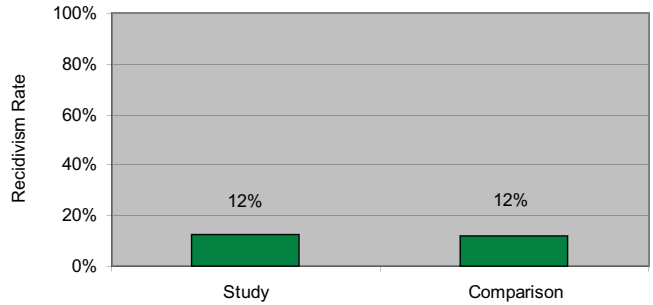
**Comparison group size: 1,867**

Inmates released during the 12 months prior to the first early release program.

**Method:** This court-mandated, longitudinal study compares early-release cohorts to a historical comparison group of inmates released between July, 1978, and July, 1979.

The effect of accelerated release on public safety, as measured by recidivism rates of those inmates, is measured at one, two, and three years following release and compared with a historical comparison group. The graph shows year one recidivism rates.

**Summary:** The state of Washington's first accelerated release programs to attempt to control inmate population size started in 1979. During accelerated release efforts, inmates were paroled prior to their sentence dates at the discretion of the state Board of Prison Terms and Paroles. Starting in 1982, legislation prohibited accelerated release of inmates convicted of treason, any class-A felony, or inmates found to be sexual psychopaths. In 1983 the law was amended to prohibit the accelerated release of inmates legally defined as violent offenders.



**Time Served in Prison and Parole Outcome: An Experimental Study**

**2**

Berecochea, J.E., Jaman, D.R.

California Department of Corrections, Research Unit 2, 1981



California  
Mar-Aug 1970

**Study group size: 564**

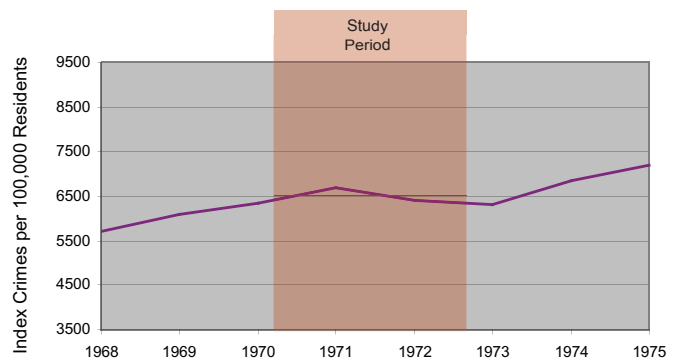
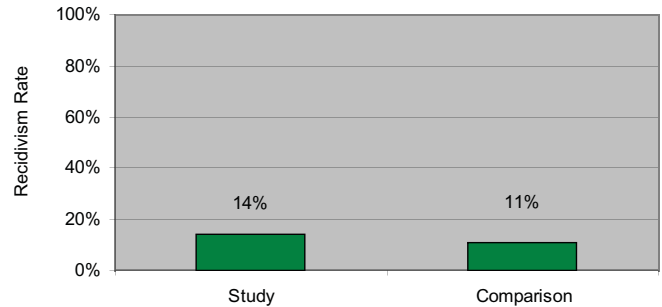
Inmates released 6 months prior to their expected release dates.

**Comparison group size: 574**

Inmates released according to the original sentence.

**Method:** In this study, a randomized group was selected for a reduced sentence. The accelerated release (study) group served 31.3 months on average, while the comparison group served 37.9 months. Outcomes were monitored at 12 and 24 months post release. The graph shows year one recidivism rates.

**Summary:** "A reduction of six months in prison terms has *no statistically significant* effect upon recidivism on parole within the first two years following release." The study group members did not differ from those in the comparison in their likelihood of returning to prison, whether by a court conviction, for a new felony, or as a result of a parole violation short of a new conviction.

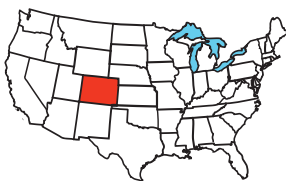


**Early Release**

**3**

Malak, P.A.

Colorado Division of Criminal Justice, 1984



Colorado  
Feb-Mar 1983

**Study group size: 126**

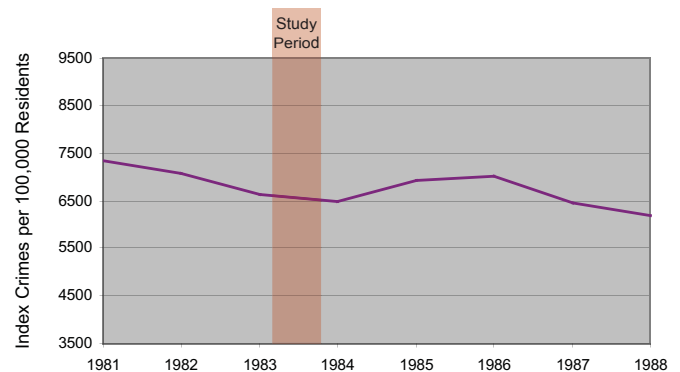
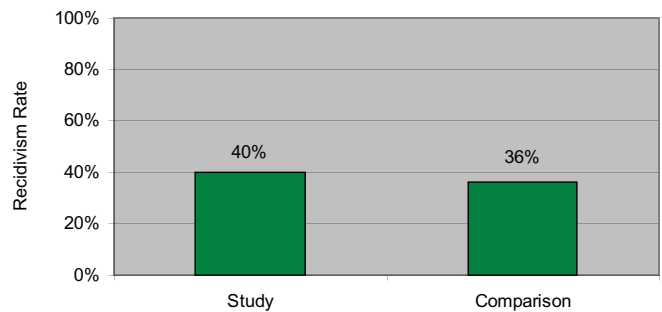
Inmates released following *People vs. Chavez*, in which the Colorado Supreme Court ruled that inmates must be granted good time credit for pre-sentence confinement.

**Comparison group size: 131**

Inmates serving a full term.

**Method:** This is a case comparison analysis of recidivism rates measured by rearrest between accelerated release prisoners (study) and determinate sentence release prisoners (comparison) during February and March, 1983. Rearrests were measured at 8 months post release (shown in graph).

**Summary:** Those released prior to their sentence dates as a result of the *Chavez* ruling were not significantly more likely to be arrested for another crime than prisoners released according to determinate sentences; 39% of the study group were arrested compared to 36% of those serving a full term.



**Results of Early Release: Study Prompted by Passage of HB 685** Leonardson, G.  
Montana Board of Crime Control, 1997

4

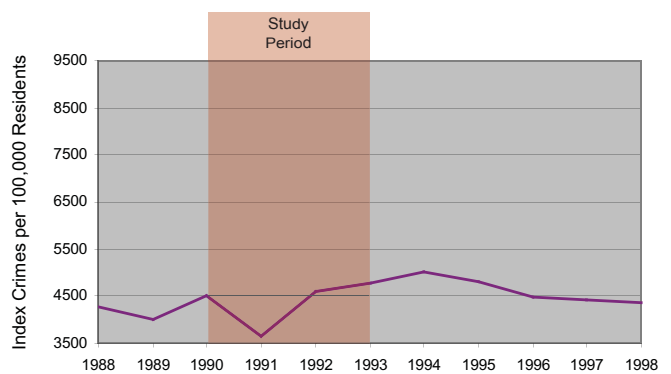
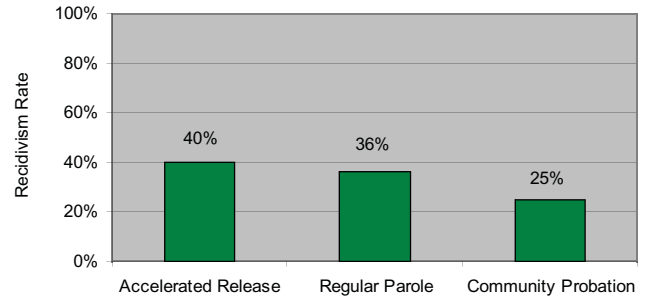


Montana  
1990-1993

**Study group size: 667**  
The Montana legislature enacted HB 685 to cap the prison population, in part by decreasing the average time spent in prison.

**Method:** This study draws on historical information on persons in the accelerated release, regular parole, or community probation (“intensive supervision program”). All were surveyed after 12 months of supervision.

**Summary:** After 12 months, 40% of the accelerated release group was sent back to prison, compared to 36% of the regular parole prisoners. Furthermore, the community probation recidivism rate was 25%.



**Release Outcome Study: Early Mandatory Release** Eisenberg, M.  
State of Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles,  
Division of Budget and Planning, 1985

5

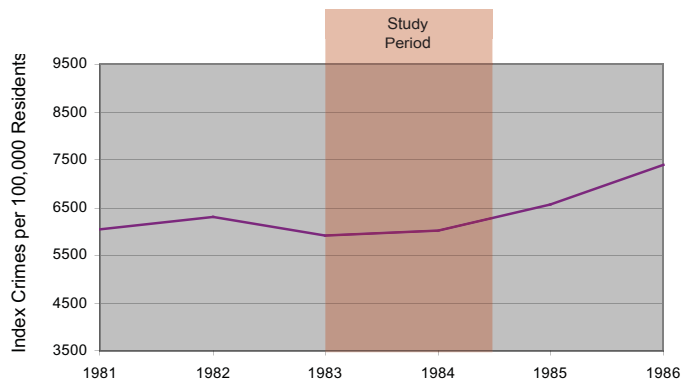
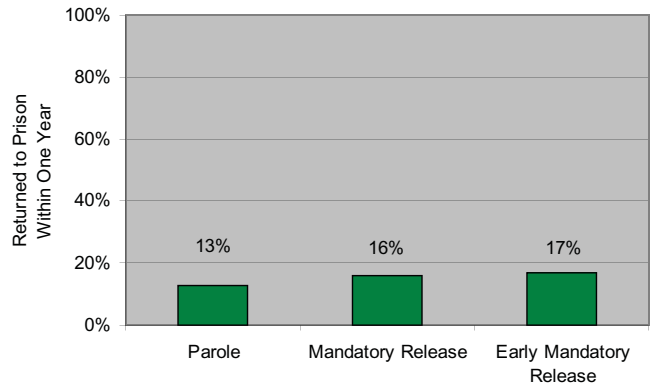


Texas  
Jan-Jun 1983

**Study group size: 2,072**  
55% were parolees, 16% were mandatory release cases, and 29% were early mandatory release cases (Board authority to release selected inmates up to 180 days early).

**Method:** This was a systematic review of a sample of cases released from the Texas Department of Corrections between January and June, 1983. All released prisoners were monitored one year post release.

**Summary:** The return rate to the Department of Corrections was similar among the mandatory release and early mandatory release cases. A large percentage of early mandatory release cases with reports of violations or arrests did not result in a return to prison.



### Identifying Parole Candidates among Mandatory Release Inmates

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Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services  
Wisconsin Parole Board, 1984



Wisconsin  
1980-1982

**Study group size: 1,433**

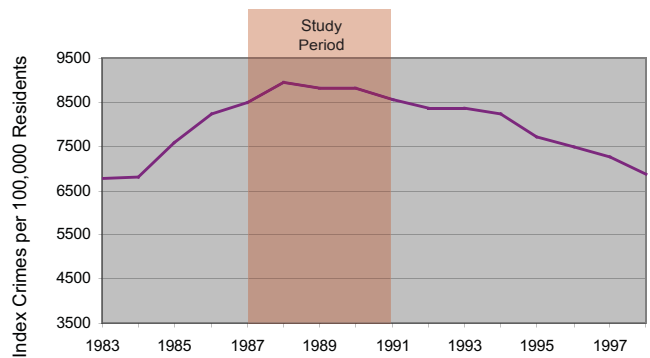
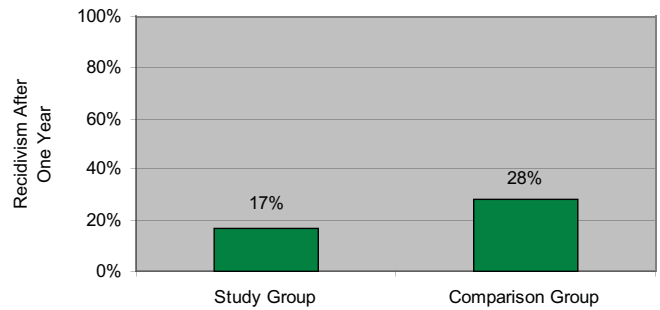
Inmates released through discretionary parole.

**Comparison group size: 1,867**

Inmates released through mandatory release program.

**Method:** This study was conducted by selecting inmates with characteristics considered ideal for discretionary parole. Of the comparison group, 85% were released on their mandatory dates. The other 15% were released 90 days early through the Special Action Release Program.

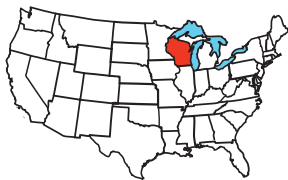
**Summary:** Inmates who received the discretionary parole (study group) were much less likely to be returned to prison for criminal activity during the one-year follow up period than inmates who received a mandatory release (comparison group).



### Special Action Release: Three Year Follow Up

7

Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services  
Wisconsin Division of Corrections, 1985



Wisconsin  
1981

**90-day group: 606**

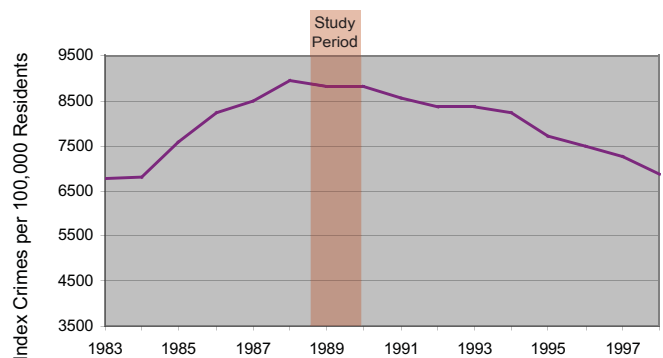
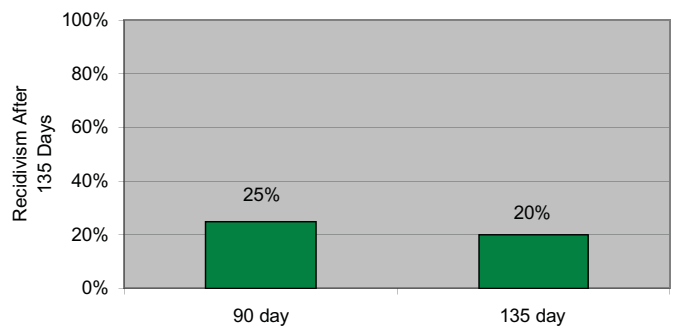
Prisoners released 90 days early earned under Special Action Release.

**135-day group: 286**

Prisoners released 135 days early earned under Special Action Release.

**Method:** This is a case comparison among two Special Action Release (SAR) groups: 90-day accelerated release and 135-day accelerated release. Behavior was observed 6 and 12 months post release. SAR was meant to reduce institutional crowding through the release of carefully selected prisoners.

**Summary:** No evidence was found that accelerated release extension from 90 to 135 days resulted in a corresponding increase in criminal activity.



### Using Early Release to Relieve Prison Crowding: A Dilemma in Public Policy

8

Austin, J.

*Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 32 No.4, October, 1986



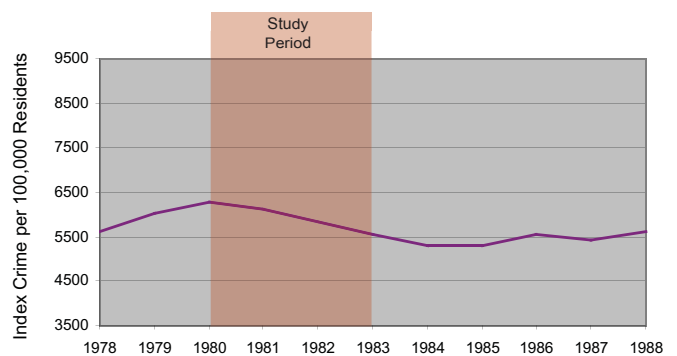
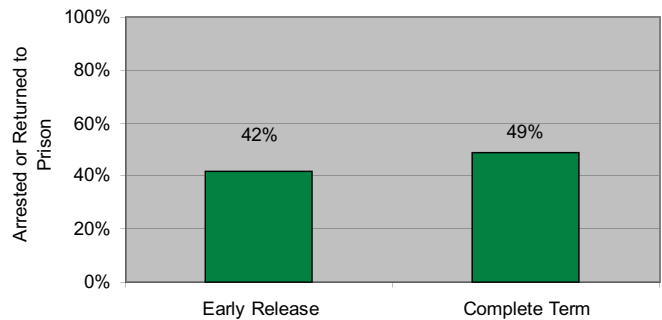
Illinois  
1979-1983

**Study group size: 1,202**  
Inmates released during accelerated release period.

**Comparison group size: 355**  
Inmates who served their full terms.

**Method:** This was a longitudinal study of a random sample of prisoners in accelerated release programs and those completing full terms. Almost 21,000 prisoners were released over 3 years.

**Summary:** Prisoners released early did not have a higher probability of arrest or return to prison than those who had served a full prison term. Institutional conduct, severity of current offense, prior criminal history, and age at release were better predictors of recidivism. By 1983 the Illinois prison population was reduced by approximately 2,500 as a direct result of early release.



### The Effectiveness of Reduced Prison Terms on Public Safety and Cost: Evaluation of the Illinois Supplemental Meritorious Good Time Program

9

Austin, J., Boylard, M.

National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 1993



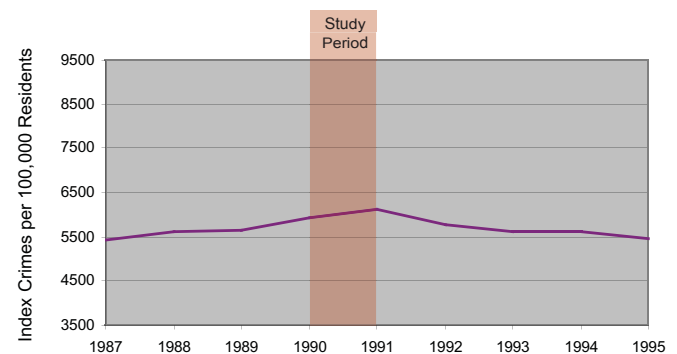
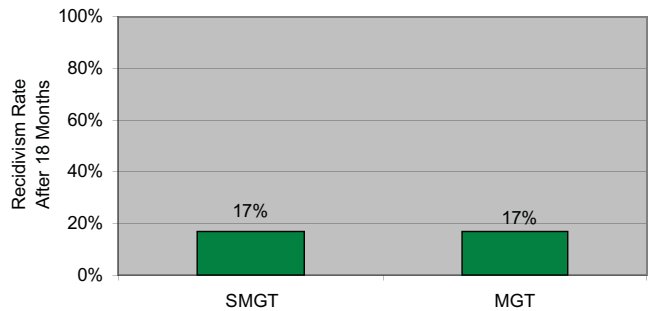
Illinois  
1990

**Study group size: 4,640**  
Inmates who were awarded Supplemental Meritorious Good Time (SMGT, 180 days).

**Comparison group size: 251**  
Inmates who received Meritorious Good Time (MGT, 90 days).

**Method:** This was a random review of cases of inmates awarded (SMGT) by December, 1990. Cases were monitored for arrests or returns to prison, for both new crimes and violations of parole, during 12 months post release.

**Summary:** There was very little difference in the return-to-prison rates between the MGT and SMGT samples. The vast majority of the rearrests were for nonviolent misdemeanors.



## Evaluation of the Florida Community Control Program

10

Wagner, D., Baird, C.  
National Institute of Justice, 1993



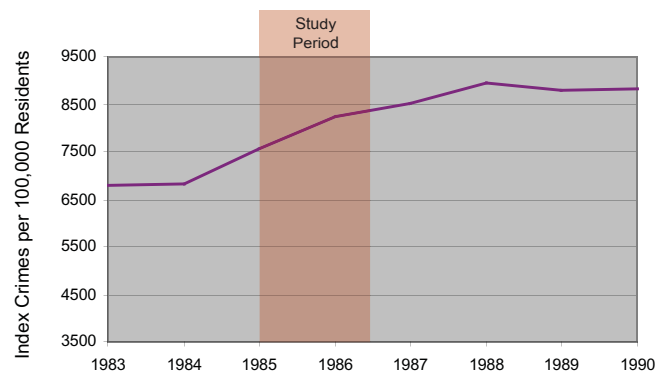
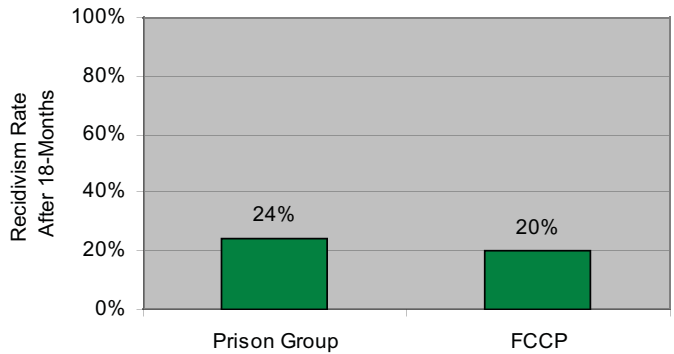
Florida  
1985

**Study group size: 630**  
Cases of defendants who were placed on FCCP.

**Comparison group: 630**  
Cases of defendants who were sentenced to prison.

**Method:** The Florida Community Control Program (FCCP), first implemented in 1983, is an intensive supervision, house arrest, prison diversion program designed to alleviate institutional crowding while ensuring public safety. Cases were monitored 18 months post release.

**Summary:** After 18 months, only 20% of the FCCP group was convicted of a new offense, compared to 24% of similar offenders who spent an average of nine months in prison. This program was most effective for drug offenders; only 11% of drug offenders sentenced to FCCP were convicted of new offenses, compared to 27% of those sent to prison.



## Predictors of Conditional Release among Substance Abusing Women Offenders

11

Verbrugge, R., Nunes, K., Johnson, S., Taylor, K.  
Correctional Service of Canada, 2002



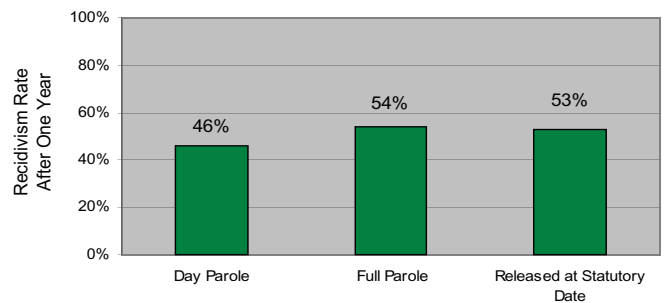
Canada  
2002

**Study group 1 size: 353**  
Prisoners granted a conditional release and placed on day parole.

**Study group 2 size: 41**  
Prisoners granted a conditional release and placed on full parole.

**Comparison group size: 89**  
Prisoners released on their statutory release dates.

**Method:** This is a case review of women who were serving or had recently served federal sentences under the supervision of the Correctional Service of Canada. Conditional release was day parole, full parole, and statutory release.



**Summary:** Revocation was defined as admission to federal custody after conditional release and before warrant expiry. At the end of the follow-up period, of those prisoners that completed their sentences in the community, in both study groups combined, 52% had remained out of prison after one year.



**Performance Audit of the Implementation of Control Release Supervision Administered by the Florida Parole Commission and the Department of Corrections**

12

Florida Office of the Auditor General  
Tallahassee, Florida, 1994

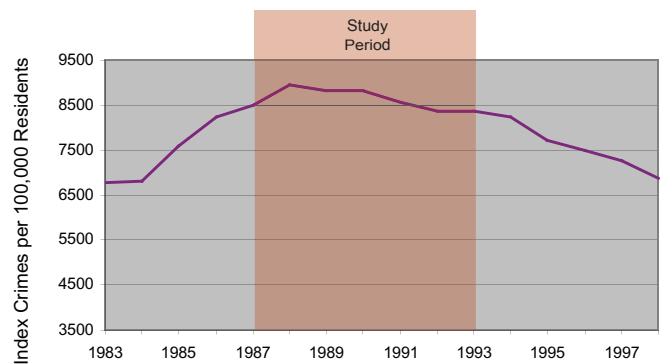
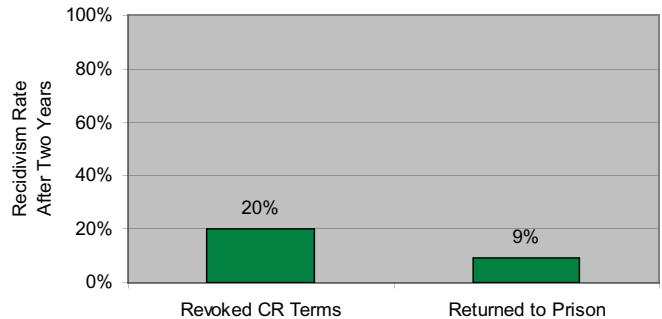


Florida  
1987-1993

Group 1 size: 32,064  
Group 2 size: 7,481  
Group 3 size: 13,895

**Method:** This is an audit review of offender release data from FY 1987-88 through FY 1992-93, with specific regard to control release implemented in 1990. Group 1 was released to control release supervision, in which the offender is subject to limited supervision and control, with few available resources. Group 2 was released to probation or community control. Group 3 was released with no supervision. Groups are combined in the graph.

**Summary:** The use of control release increased the percent of inmates who were subject to post-prison supervision from 35% in 1987-88 to 72% in 1992-93. Additionally, control release allowed the state to extend its supervision over felony offenders by more than twice the average length of time spent in prison.



**The Effectiveness of Early Parole to Substance Abuse Treatment Facilities on 24-Month Criminal Recidivism**

13

Zanis, D., Mulvaney, F., Coviello, D., Alterman, A.I., Savitz, B., Thompson, W.  
*Journal of Drug Issues*, Vol 3 No 1, 2003



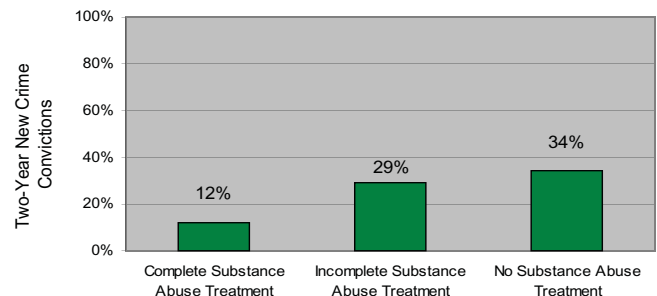
Northeastern Urban Jail\*  
n.d.

Study group size: 495  
Jail inmates released to substance abuse treatment.

Comparison group size: 74  
Jail inmates paroled without treatment.

**Method:** This was a study of 569 prisoners who met the criteria for substance abuse or dependence, had no other psychiatric disorders, and had served at least half of their sentence. Each parolee had to complete a minimum of 6 months in an Intensive Outpatient Program or a Non-hospital Residential Program.

**Summary:** Prisoners released without treatment had the highest rate of new crimes after 2 years. Of prisoners released to the



treatment program, 37% completed the minimum of 6 months of treatment. This group had the lowest rate of new crimes. The group that had incomplete treatment fell between the other two.

\*Study funded by the city of Philadelphia.