

Purpose

To describe the definition of recidivism used by the Washington State Department of Corrections (WADOC) and associated measures of re-offense used by WADOC and other jurisdictions.

Summary

Recidivism remains a critical measure of performance for the criminal justice system. The Washington State Department of Corrections measures recidivism as re-incarceration within three years of release from confinement. While this three-year observation period is widely accepted, differences in definitions, data collection practices, and jurisdictional context make direct comparisons difficult. A clear understanding of WADOC's approach is essential for evaluating effectiveness and guiding decision-making.

Background

Recidivism generally refers to a person's relapse in criminal behavior following intervention for a previous criminal offense. The reduction of recidivism is considered as one of the most important measures of success – of the criminal justice system (King 2014).

Specific and consistent definitions of recidivism are necessary for accurate measurement and comparison of recidivism within and between jurisdictions, and across time. WADOC uses a standard definition of recidivism to measure its effectiveness and improve decision-making regarding programs and allocation of resources to improve public safety by positively changing lives.

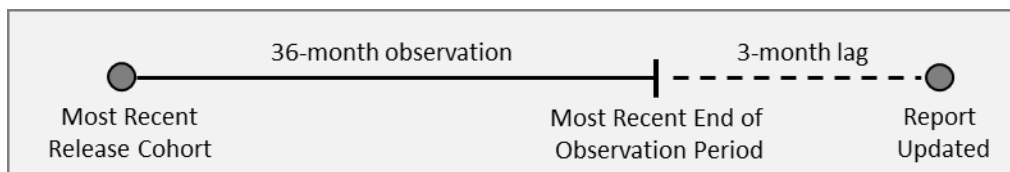
Definition of Recidivism

The following definitions and counting rules seek to provide clarity on the WADOC recidivism measure, which is the department's standard measure for reporting. This definition can be summarized as follows:

Re-incarceration in a WADOC facility within three years of release.

Along with the events of release and re-incarceration, key components of the definition include a three-year interval starting at the time of release and the specification that release, and re-incarceration occur in Washington State. A timeline for identifying the most recent release cohort from a given date is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Timeline for identifying most recent release cohort.



As an example, the three-year (36-month) observation period for the 2025 release cohort concludes at the end of calendar year (CY) 2028. The recidivism rate can't be calculated until three months following the end of the observation period due to late data entry that may impact the data. Recidivism data for the 2025 release cohort will be available for dissemination in April 2029.

Relevant Terminology

*Inmate*¹ is a specific type of admission. It includes people who are completing the confinement portion of their sentence under the jurisdiction of WADOC. The majority of people serving on an inmate admission are incarcerated in a WADOC prison, however, included in this definition are individuals in partial confinement, including reentry centers, community parenting alternative, and graduated/rapid reentry (electronic home monitoring) and individuals in other facilities, such as jail, juvenile, violator, and out-of-state facilities.

*Violator*¹ is also an admission type. This type includes people who have a violation(s) on their terms of supervision that results in a brief stay at either a jail or prison facility. Violator admissions are not included in this measure.

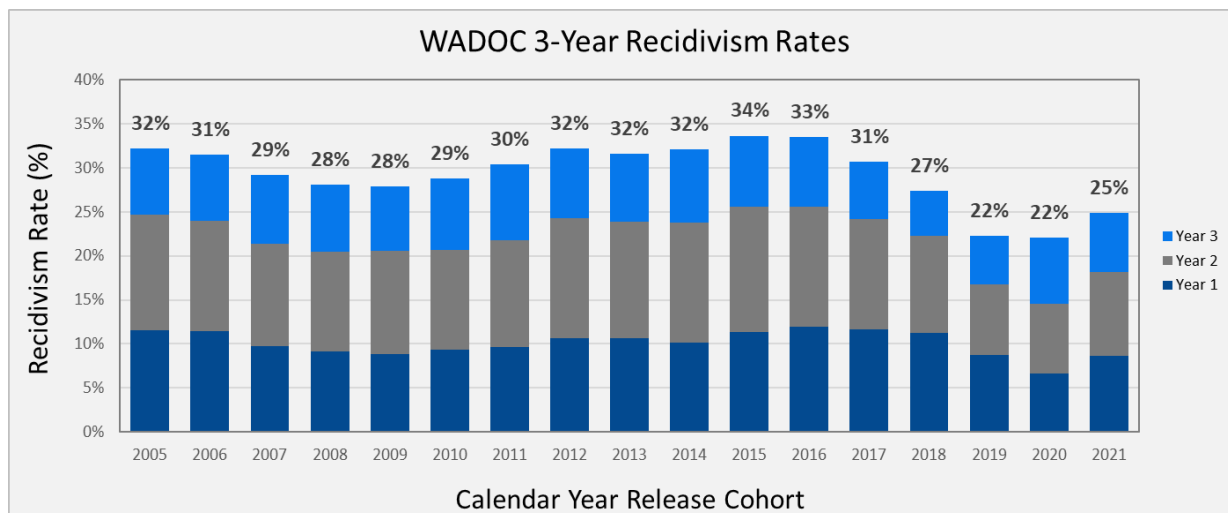
Release cohort is a group of individuals who were released from confinement during the same calendar year.

Counting Rules

Additional counting rules are applied for recidivism reporting. Individuals are only counted once each release cohort. If someone is released and re-incarcerated more than once during the same calendar year, only the first re-offense is counted. However, if they are released in a new calendar year, they are included in that release cohort. The three-year observation period is reset each time they are included in a new release cohort. Some sentences can be revoked or returned, in which case an individual may return to prison on an inmate admission. These are counted as recidivism even though no new crime has been committed. Due to data limitations, certain events that affect cohort inclusion may be missed, such as relocating out of state, loss of life, confinement in other jurisdictions, or similar circumstances.

¹ Specific code in the Department's current system of record, OMNI.

Figure 2. WADOC three-year recidivism rate for the 2005-2021 release cohorts.



Source: WADOC data, as of November 2025. NOTE: Recidivism rates are cumulative. Rates were calculated by dividing the recidivating population by the total release cohort.

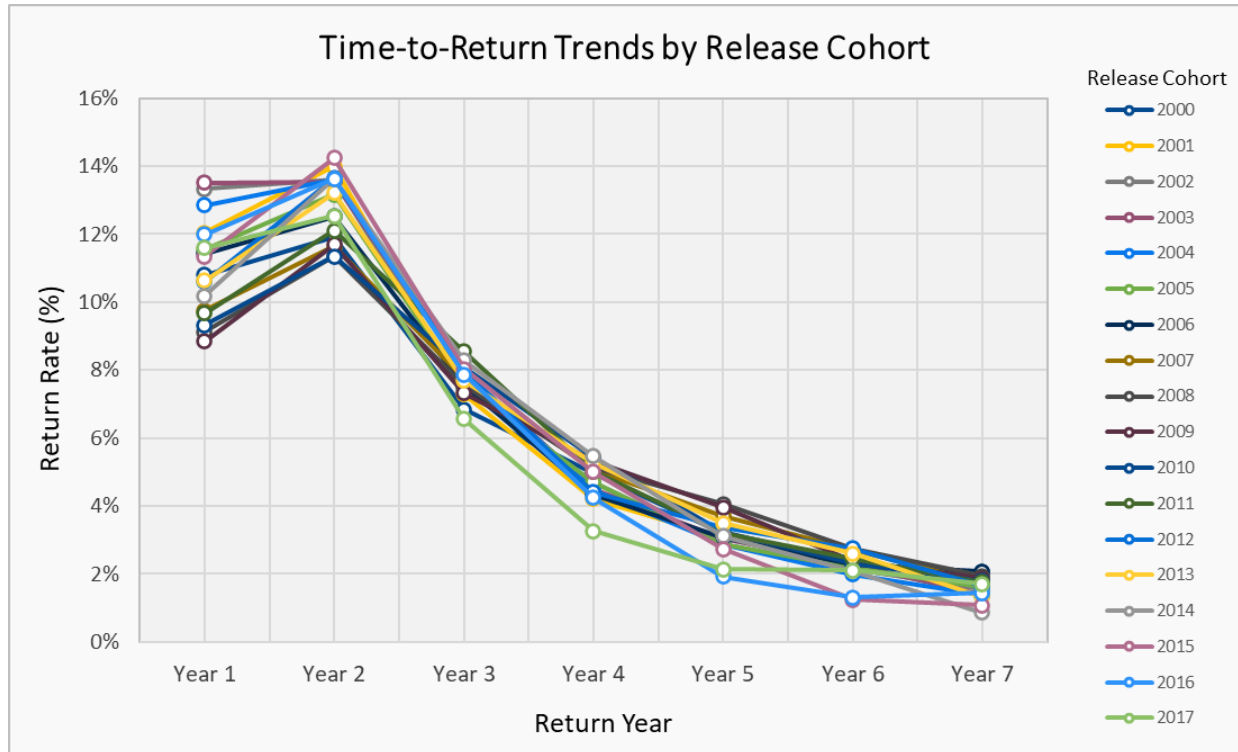
Rationale and Historical Definitions

The Research and Data Analytics Unit at WADOC provides rigorous evaluation of the standard definition of recidivism to ensure the accuracy of department measures. Prior to 2010, recidivism rates were calculated over a five-year span and included violators (Evans 2010). To compare recidivism rates to other state and federal corrections agencies, WADOC adopted the Washington State Institute for Public Policy’s (WSIPP) definition of recidivism (Drake 2010). WSIPP’s definition, reconviction for any misdemeanor or felony, had its limitations within WADOC because it required external data.

WADOC’s current definition improves accuracy and responsiveness to requests for recidivism data and does not rely on data share agreements with external partners to determine recidivism rates.

The three-year observation period was selected for the standard definition to align with contemporary criminological practice as it is “the most common measure of recidivism,” according to Pew researchers (Gelb 2018). It allows for more timely measurement than longer observation periods, without compromising data integrity. WADOC recidivism data shows that, on average, nearly 75% of recidivating events occurred in the first three years over the course of a seven-year period. Figure 3 illustrates this trend in time to return for the 2000-2017 WADOC release cohorts. Return rates are highest during the three years immediately following release. By the third year, return rates begin to trend downward.

Figure 3. WADOC trends in return rates by time-to-return and release cohort (2000-2017).



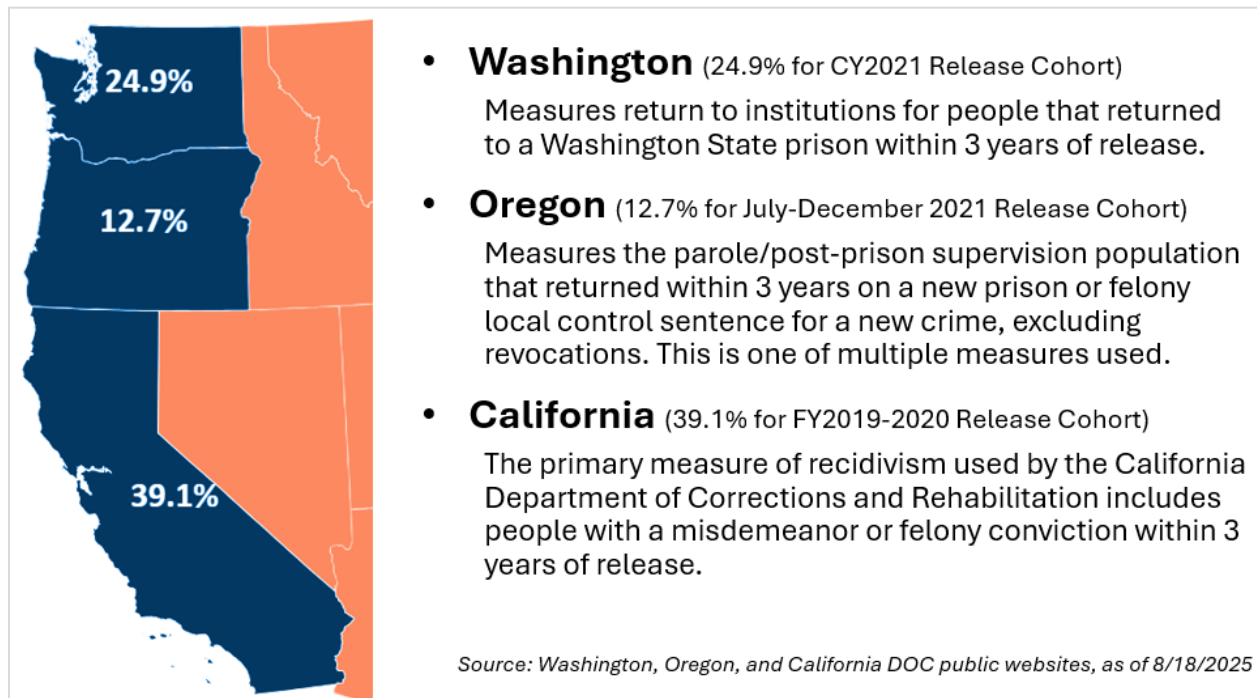
Source: WADOC data, as of November 2025. NOTE: Rates reflect the year the recidivating event occurred based on release dates.

Comparison to Other Jurisdictions

Comparing recidivism across jurisdictions can be problematic, and caution should be exercised when interpreting comparative rates. This is due, in part, to varying definitions of recidivism events, which will understandably produce disparate results (Ostermann 2015). Differences in recidivism outcomes can also be driven by factors beyond corrections agencies, including legislation, public policy, and the practices of law enforcement, prosecutors, and the courts (Mosher 2011).

Across jurisdictions, recidivism events typically fall into one or more of the following categories: re-arrest, reconviction, re-incarceration, and revocation (Urban 2015). As shown in figure 4, California’s recidivism rate is much higher than Washington and Oregon’s. However, these rates are not comparable because of how recidivism is defined in each state. California’s primary recidivism measure includes people with a misdemeanor or felony conviction within three years of release, and release cohorts are based on the fiscal year. Oregon includes releases to parole or post-prison supervision for people that returned in three years with prison or felony local control sentences for a new crime, and release cohorts are based on six-month periods. Washington defines recidivism as re-incarceration within three years of being released, including revocations and returns, and release cohorts are based on calendar years.

Figure 4. Comparing disparate measures of recidivism in California, Oregon, and Washington.



Source: Washington, Oregon, and California DOC public websites, as of 8/18/2025.

Several nationwide studies on recidivism have been conducted and may help us understand trends at the local level. The National Corrections Reporting Program followed the 2000-2011 release cohorts from state corrections agencies in all fifty states and shows an average three-year return-to-prison rate of 40% (Rhodes). Using similar data across thirty states, an updated Bureau of Justice Statistics report analyzed re-arrest data for the 2005 release cohort and concluded that 44% of individuals were arrested at least once within one year of release, 68% within three years, and 83% (five out of six) within nine years (Mariel). The study also discovered an average of five arrests per person during the nine-year period.

These differences in counting between jurisdictions further emphasize the importance of understanding how recidivism is calculated when interpreting data. Various legal contexts and overall rates of return in other states may necessitate different observation periods or definitions of who counts for recidivism. For WADOC, the definition of “re-incarceration in a WADOC facility within three years of release” allows the department to remain responsive and comprehensive when evaluating programs and measuring progress.

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