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Recidivism in the Republic of Ireland

IAN O'DONNELL, ERIC P. BAUMER AND NICOLA HUGHES
University College Dublin, Ireland, University of Missouri—St Louis, USA and University College Dublin, Ireland

Abstract

As prison populations increase, the need for successful reintegration of ex-prisoners becomes more pressing. The challenge of what has become known as 're-entry' has stimulated an extensive body of research, much of it concentrated in a small number of jurisdictions and concerned with levels and predictors of recidivism. The limited geographic breadth of the research effort has hindered our capacity to consider theoretically relevant questions, such as whether particular societal conditions thought to be conducive to successful prisoner reintegration (e.g. high levels of social capital and informal social control) in fact translate into lower levels of recidivism. In this article we expand the reach of existing research by exploring levels and patterns of recidivism in uncharted territory—the Republic of Ireland—and by drawing out the implications of the patterns observed there for comparative analysis.

Introduction

The integration of released prisoners back into society poses a significant challenge to virtually all nations across the globe (Travis et al., 2001; Farrall and Sparks, 2006; Wartna and Nijssen, 2006). This process is critical for several reasons including the maintenance of public safety and community vitality, controlling the costly expansion of criminal justice systems and minimizing the various collateral costs that arise when a large fraction of

123

ex-prisoners is not brought back into the fold. Much of the research activity to date has focused on recidivism (usually gauged with reference to reconviction and/or reimprisonment) among ex-prisoners in a relatively small number of countries (notably the United States, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom). Generally speaking, young males imprisoned for property offences, with extensive prior records of offending, are the most likely to be reconvicted and/or reimprisoned (e.g. Gendreau and Ross, 1979; Beck and Shipley, 1989; Broadhurst and Maller, 1990; Lloyd et al., 1994; Bonta et al., 1996; Gendreau et al., 1996; Kershaw et al., 1999; Langan and Levin, 2002; Cunliffe and Shepherd, 2007).

However, we know little about whether and how recidivism patterns vary across different socio-cultural contexts. This has adverse implications for both policy formulation and theory testing. Do patterns of recidivism in large industrialized nations reflect offending behaviour and products of the criminal justice systems unique to these nations? Do certain societal conditions that have been theorized to be particularly relevant to successful prisoner reintegration (e.g. high levels of social capital and informal social control) in fact translate into lower levels of recidivism? The objective of this article is to extend the scholarly reach into uncharted territory—the Republic of Ireland—and to tease out the implications of the observed patterns for the growing but largely undeveloped area of comparative recidivism research. We follow Braithwaite's (1989) advice in drawing on a case study to make inferences about cross-national differences. We conclude by outlining the kinds of data and research that would facilitate a more comprehensive approach to this intriguing, yet neglected, issue.

An underdeveloped knowledge base

Despite more than half a century of research on recidivism in other nations and widespread consensus as to its value, only one study has previously been conducted in the Republic of Ireland, and its scope was limited to a small sample of young male probationers in the Dublin area (Hart, 1974). This lack of attention reflects criminology's status as a fledgling discipline. The sources of data remain underdeveloped, good quality empirical research is scarce and there is little in the way of theorizing about crime and punishment. Data that are routinely collected elsewhere often do not exist or are unpublished, making it excessively laborious to pose, let alone to answer, important questions about crime and criminal justice (more generally, see O'Donnell, 2005). When information does come into the public domain it is seldom integrated. For example, the computer systems of police, courts, prisons and probation stand alone and are not configured to share details of offences or offenders.

This state of affairs makes it difficult to assemble and accumulate the basic knowledge about crime and justice issues that is required to put things into perspective for concerned citizens and to guide decisions by policy makers. Recidivism rates are central to evaluations of the efficacy of different

judicial sentences and punishments. Knowledge of the characteristics of individuals or situations most susceptible to recidivism can help policy makers to formulate better-targeted re-entry programmes. Identifying the factors associated with successful reintegration not only has benefits for individual offenders, but also has a positive impact on their families and communities. It minimizes the harmful effects of social exclusion and increases levels of trust and civic participation, components of community-wide social capital that are crucial for keeping crime rates low and for the general well-being of a community (Petersilia, 2000; Putnam, 2000).

Without systematic information on levels and predictors of recidivism, debates on crime and justice in parliament and other forums have relied on a heavy dose of speculation seasoned with a measure of folk wisdom. Among other things, this has led many key figures to believe in an often repeated but unsubstantiated overall rate of recidivism of 70 per cent and to couple this with an assertion that it is out of line with (i.e. worse than) in other European countries (e.g. National Economic and Social Forum, 2002: vii). An even higher presumed rate is thought to apply to particular classes of offenders, such as those convicted of sex crimes who are seldom, if ever, allowed early release because of the 'high risk of reoffending that such prisoners are perceived to present' (Parole Board, 2004: 4).

One of the aims of the present research is to describe levels and patterns of recidivism in Ireland based on a large-scale systematic study. We address two questions in particular, namely:

1. What is the recidivism rate for persons exposed to a prison term?
2. Do recidivism rates vary by the characteristics of offenders (e.g. age, gender, educational and employment status, recent criminal history), the offence for which they are being punished and the duration of the punishment?

As the first study of its kind, the findings should contribute to local understanding of crime and justice, and fill a void in the international repository of data on recidivism.

Comparative context

Our data—or any other existing data for that matter—do not permit a formal cross-national analysis of recidivism. However, Ireland is a unique social setting in which to study this issue and viewing the findings generated from our work through a comparative lens offers a good opportunity to provide insights into some broader theoretical issues that have emerged in the literature about the role of social and cultural contexts in shaping patterns of recidivism (see Braithwaite, 1989; Baumer, 1997; Deng et al., 1998; Tittle and Paternoster, 2000; Baumer et al., 2002). In particular, although during the past decade Ireland has experienced rapid economic and social change (e.g. Nolan et al., 2000; Fahey et al., 2007), there are reasons to expect that overall levels of recidivism might be lower there than observed

in other societies, especially those on which recidivism research has largely been focused.

Ireland has traditionally had relatively little crime, and more than 20 years ago was described in the literature as a 'nation not obsessed by crime' (Adler, 1983). It continues to exhibit one of the lowest rates of recorded crime in Europe (Kilcommins et al., 2004: ch. 3). The level of incarceration also remains comparatively low, at 72 per 100,000 population in 2006 (O'Donnell, 2008). When prison is used, sentences tend to be short, with more than one in three of less than three months' duration and the majority (59 per cent in 2005) under six months (Irish Prison Service, 2006: 12).

Ireland's low rate of recorded crime and relatively low reliance on formal measures of social control such as imprisonment have been linked to a variety of attributes thought to enhance collective social ties and informal social control. These include a strong commitment to the institutions of church and family, dense interpersonal networks, confidence in the police and high perceived legitimacy of other criminal justice agencies (Adler, 1983). Although cross-national research on these features is limited and has yielded somewhat inconsistent results, there is evidence that Ireland exhibits higher levels of social capital than many other nations and, in particular, the nations in which recidivism research has been concentrated (Finnish Social Science Data Archive, 2005; van Oorschot et al., 2006; London School of Economics and Political Science, 2007). Much theory suggests that such conditions should yield relatively low levels of overall crime (e.g. Durkheim, 1951/1897; Adler, 1983; Braithwaite, 1989; Putnam, 2000), and indeed as noted earlier Ireland does generate less recorded crime than many other nations. But, should these same social and cultural conditions also yield lower levels of recidivism?

Some have interpreted Braithwaite's (1989) general theory of crime and social control as suggesting that societal features such as high levels of social capital may lower recidivism rates because they foster a social environment in which sanctioned offenders either are more apt to be forgiven for their transgressions or to have the acts for which they have been punished forgotten (e.g. Baumer, 1997; Deng et al., 1998; Tittle and Paternoster, 2000; Baumer et al., 2002). In essence, in this type of social and cultural landscape, offenders, victims and other community members are more likely to be deeply embedded in relationships of interdependency and mutual obligation and, because of this, community members are prone to view offenders as total personalities rather than merely as criminals who should be excluded from social life (Braithwaite, 1989: 88–97). The idea that high levels of social capital and the like may suppress recidivism rates is a provocative addition to the theoretical literature, but to date it has received little empirical scrutiny. The few case studies that have addressed this issue have not been highly supportive (e.g. Baumer, 1997; Baumer et al., 2002).

By providing detailed information about levels of recidivism among persons released from Irish prisons, the present study contributes to existing

knowledge on whether varying societal conditions generate substantially different levels of recidivism. As we elaborate in the discussion it also illuminates the limits of using case studies to evaluate comparative hypotheses and argues for a more systematic approach to this issue in subsequent research.

Analytical approach

Sample

Our research focuses on estimating levels and predictors of recidivism for all prisoners released from Irish prisons between 1 January 2001 and 30 November 2004. These individuals were followed to 31 December 2004. Thus, follow-up periods ranged from 1 to 48 months. Hitherto, it would have been cost prohibitive to field a national-level study of recidivism in Ireland because all information relating to prisoners was handwritten into large ledgers maintained separately in each prison, with a new line for every committal and no unique prisoner identifiers. In 2000, however, the Irish Prison Service began to phase in a new computer system, known as the Prisoner Records Information System (PRIS), which centralized in electronic format a large amount of information including the reason for custody (remand or sentence), principal offence committed, recent criminal history, amount of time served under sentence, sex, age, address, marital status, education level, employment status and nationality. The data collected for our research mark the first time that researchers were granted access to PRIS.

There were a total of 19,955 releases from prison during the period covered by our research. This excludes persons detained awaiting deportation, for whom it would not be possible using locally available records to determine recidivism status after leaving the country. Those confined only on remand were also excluded, so the analyses reported below are based on the total population of persons released from prison during the study period after serving a sentence of imprisonment. Given the relatively short sentence lengths in Ireland and the fact that four years of entries into and exits from prison are considered, it is not surprising that some offenders were admitted to, and released from, prison on multiple occasions over the time frame of the study. The 19,955 unique releases from prison in our data represent 14,485 different persons.

Measuring the dependent variable

Recidivism can be measured as reoffending, rearrest, reconviction or reimprisonment, with the data coming from offender self-reports or official records. Because of the excessive financial cost associated with gathering self-report data directly from offenders and the potential invalidity of arrest

data, recidivism is most often operationalized as the percentage of persons released from prison who are reconvicted or reimprisoned for a new offence within a specified follow-up period. The data used for our research enable us to measure recidivism with reimprisonment rates. Reconviction rates are more commonly reported but the available evidence suggests that there is relatively little difference between the two measures in overall prevalence and predictive validity (e.g. Baumer, 1997). Presumably this is because most studies rely on samples of released prisoners, who by definition have a previous imprisonment and for whom a subsequent conviction (i.e. reconviction) is quite likely to result in a custodial sanction (i.e. reimprisonment).

The use of officially recorded data to measure recidivism is not without limitations. Reimprisonment rates underestimate the percentage of offenders who reoffend after being exposed to formal punishment because not all offences are detected and of those that are, a small proportion result in conviction and imprisonment. Thus, reimprisonment rates are best viewed as a lower bound estimate of the true reoffending rate in a society. It is important to qualify this point by noting that this measure of recidivism is biased downward in a meaningful manner. Specifically, it includes only offences that have been reported by citizens or detected by the police, which generally encompasses a significant swathe of the more serious offences, and also that have been subjected to a thorough investigative and prosecutorial process designed to determine whether a particular offender is guilty as charged. This is generally untrue of police-based measures of reoffending, such as rearrest, and is an important reason why reimprisonment has proven to be one of the more popular measures of recidivism in prior work (see case studies summarized later in Table 2).

Measuring the explanatory variables

The independent variables included in the study conform closely to those used in recidivism research internationally. The measure of age reflects the offender's age, in years, at the time of his or her release from prison. The results for specific age groups, distinguishing between those under 21, aged 21 to 29 and 30 and older are also presented. The year of release is captured with a continuous measure that reflects the actual year (i.e. 2001 … 2004) during which the offender's period of confinement ended and when the follow-up began. Dichotomous variables are used to distinguish between: male and female; married and unmarried; those with formal education and those without; Irish nationals and others; those who reported a residential address in Dublin and those who lived elsewhere; Travellers and members of the settled community. Travellers are a minority group numbering around 24,000 whose nomadic lifestyle and general impoverishment are thought to bring them into regular contact with the criminal justice system. (Little has been written about Travellers and crime, but see Bhreatnach, 2007.) The length of confinement in prison is measured with a series of dichotomous variables, subdivided into cases in which the time

served was less than three months, between three and six months, more than six months but less than twelve months and more than twelve months.

Some of the variables included in the analysis warrant a more detailed discussion. There was a non-trivial portion (3%) of persons for whom employment or occupational status was not recorded, so a series of dichotomous variables that distinguished these offenders from those who were unemployed and those who were employed at the time of committal to prison, was included. In addition, the prison records from which the data were drawn contained a substantial amount of detail about the various offences for which individuals had been sanctioned. For cases in which there were multiple offences, this information was recoded to identify the most serious one, using the counting rules outlined in the annual report of the Irish Prison Service (2006: 89). The analysis incorporates a series of dichotomous variables that permit a comparison of recidivism rates among persons whose principal crime involved violence, drugs, sex, public order, property, motoring or other matters (e.g. arson, bail violation, criminal damage, prostitution and weapons offences).

Finally, because the PRIS database was phased in from 2000, we were able to incorporate only a limited indicator of prior criminal history. Specifically, we included a dichotomous variable identifying whether or not there was a prior committal to prison between mid-year 2000 and the offender's release date. This measure reflects the extent to which there is evidence of a recent criminal history. Although it would have been preferable to use an indicator that captured a longer-term look at criminal records, we suspect that the shorter-term measure used here is a reasonable proxy for such an indicator and, indeed, the results shown below reveal that the measure used in our research behaves as such.

Statistical techniques

We used survival regression analysis (Allison, 1984; Cox and Oakes, 1984) to account for differences across persons in release dates and the duration of follow-up. Developed originally for research on mortality and morbidity, survival analysis has been used widely in studies of recidivism (e.g. Maltz, 1984). We used the Kaplan–Meier nonparametric survivor function to estimate overall levels of recidivism for sample members at monthly intervals following their completion of a prison sentence. The Kaplan–Meier procedure is a simple actuarial technique designed to ascertain the number of persons at risk of some event during a given time interval and the number of persons who experience that event during the time interval (Kalbfleisch and Prentice, 1980). From these two pieces of information, one can compute the percentage of persons at risk of recidivism at any given point in time who experience a subsequent committal to prison. In the study reported here, persons who did not experience a new period of imprisonment at the end date of our observation period (31 December 2004) were treated as censored.

To address the question of whether certain factors increased or decreased recidivism we estimated multivariate survival regression models. We experimented with several different approaches (e.g. Weibull, exponential, log normal and semi-parametric) and found that our results were substantively the same across them. Consequently, we used the Cox proportional hazards regression model, which is the most-often used survival regression technique for recidivism. This procedure provides estimates of the effects of each of the factors considered in our research, controlling for the others. We estimated the models using the statistical software Stata 9.0 which also permitted us to take account of the fact that there were clustered observations in our data (in other words, persons with multiple releases). In addition to describing the results of these models in conventional, somewhat technical, ways, we use the estimated parameters from the models to illustrate the nature of our findings by producing a series of graphs that summarize the estimated recidivism rates for persons with different values on specified attributes, adjusting for other measured differences between persons.

Key findings

Sample description

Table 1 presents descriptive information for every release from prison during the four-year study period. The minimum and maximum value for each variable is shown, along with the corresponding means. For continuous variables, the mean reflects the average value across the sample, while for dichotomous variables (those with only two possible values), the means are equivalent to proportions and, when multiplied by 100, percentages.

The social and demographic attributes of persons released from Irish prisons, as shown in Table 1, largely mirror the attributes of those released from prison in other nations. The vast majority were male (93%), unmarried (82%) and relatively young. The average age was just under 30 years, with 15 per cent under the age of 21, 44 per cent between 21 and 29 and 41 per cent over 30. Although most were deemed to be literate (90%), a majority had left school without completing any state examinations (54%) and more than half (52%) were unemployed prior to their current prison term. Fully 95 per cent were Irish nationals, with 35 per cent giving a residential address in Dublin city or county.

Turning to the offence and punishment attributes of our sample, we see in Table 1 that the number of persons released did not vary substantially across the four years covered by our study with about one-quarter released in each year. Nine per cent had been imprisoned for defaulting on a fine, which had served as the initial punishment for their offence. Forty-two per cent had previous prison experience (either on remand or having served a sentence). The type of crime for which members of our sample were most likely to have been imprisoned was violence (27%), followed by

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for persons released from prison in Ireland, 1 January 2001–30 November 2004 (N = 19,955)

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Social and demographic attributes			
Male	.00	1.00	.93
Age at release	15.47	89.68	29.96
Age under 21	.00	1.00	.15
Age 21 to 29	.00	1.00	.44
Age 30 and older	.00	1.00	.41
Unmarried	.00	1.00	.82
No formal education	.00	1.00	.54
Literate	.00	1.00	.90
Traveller	.00	1.00	.02
Unemployed	.00	1.00	.52
Employed	.00	1.00	.45
Employment status unknown	.00	1.00	.03
Irish national	.00	1.00	.95
Dublin residential address	.00	1.00	.35
Offence and punishment attributes			
Release year			
2001	.00	1.00	.24
2002	.00	1.00	.25
2003	.00	1.00	.27
2004	.00	1.00	.24
Previous prison experience	.00	1.00	.42
Sentenced for fine default	.00	1.00	.09
Held on remand	.00	1.00	.30
Sex offence	.00	1.00	.02
Violent offence	.00	1.00	.27
Drug offence	.00	1.00	.13
Property offence	.00	1.00	.13
Motoring offence	.00	1.00	.22
Public order offence	.00	1.00	.10
Other offence	.00	1.00	.13
Confinement < 3 months	.00	1.00	.56
Confinement 3 to 6 months	.00	1.00	.14
Confinement 6 to 12 months	.00	1.00	.12
Confinement > 12 months	.00	1.00	.18

motoring offences (22%), drug (13%), property (13%) and other offences (13%). Public order offences accounted for 10 per cent of the sentences included in our study, and just over 2 per cent had served time for a sex crime.

Although all members of our sample had by definition served a sentence of imprisonment, almost one-third (30%) were held on remand as part of their confinement period. Factoring in both time on remand and time serving

their sentence, a majority (56%) spent less than 3 months incarcerated. But longer sentences were also common, with 18 per cent serving more than 1 year prior to their release.

Levels of recidivism

Figure 1 reveals rates of recidivism for the total sample. As noted earlier, rates were computed using the Kaplan–Meier survivor procedure and reflect the percentage of persons reimprisoned at intervals ranging from 1 to 48 months, which captures the full range of follow-up times covered in our study. The graph shows that reimprisonment rates accelerated steadily for the first few months following release, and more than one-quarter (27.4%) were reimprisoned within one year. Just over 45 per cent were reimprisoned within three years, and almost half (49.2%) were reimprisoned within four years, by which time it appears that the trend line has begun to flatten.

The existing data and research do not support a comprehensive comparative analysis of recidivism rates, but the available evidence does permit us to consider whether recidivism rates for persons released from prison in Ireland differ substantially from those observed elsewhere and, if so, whether they differ in ways consistent with the logic of Braithwaite's (1989) arguments, as outlined earlier. Building on the review reported in Baumer et al. (2002), Table 2 presents adult reimprisonment rates from a selection of studies conducted since the early 1980s. This shows that approximately 30 to 50 per cent of persons released from prison in most nations are reimprisoned for a new offence within 3 to 6 years of release. Although the quality of the evidence base makes it somewhat precarious to draw firm conclusions, it seems clear that Ireland does not yield reimprisonment rates that are appreciably lower than those observed in other nations, as might
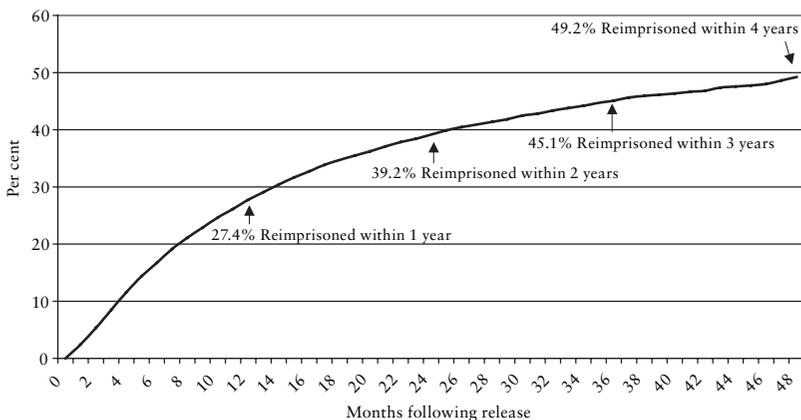

Figure 1   Recidivism rates for persons released from a sentence of imprisonment in Ireland, 2001–4 (*N* = 19,955)

Table 2. Reimprisonment rates among adults released from prison: a comparative perspective

	Release period	Follow-up (months)	Reimprisoned (%)
Australia			
Steering Committee (2006)	2002–3	24	38
Jones et al. (2006)	2001–2	27–39	41
Roeger (1994)[b]	1986–7	42	43
Broadhurst and Maller (1990)[b,c]	1975–87	72	48
Broadhurst et al. (1988)[b,c]	1975–84	72	48
Canada			
Bonta et al. (1996)[b]	1983–4	36	49
Holosko and Carlson (1986)[a]	1977–81	24	33
Finland			
Finnish Criminal Sanctions	1993–2001	24	45
Agency (2004)		48	57
		60	59
		72–108	62
Iceland			
Baumer et al. (2002)	1994–8	36	28
		60	49
Japan			
Japanese Ministry of	1992	60	50
Justice (1999)			
Malta			
Baumer (1997)	1976–94	72	32
New Zealand			
Spier (2002)	1995–8	12	25
		24	37
		60	51
Scotland			
Cooke and Michie (1998)	1989–91	24	47
		36	51
		48	53
United States			
Langan and Levin (2002)[b]	1994	36	52
Joo et al. (1995)[a]	1984–8	36	22–36
Adams et al. (1994)[b]	1990–1	14–36	21–5
Donnelly and Bala (1994)[a]	1972–88	60	23
Beck and Shipley (1989)[b]	1983	36	41
Rauma and Berk (1987)[b]	1980–1	60	51
Wallerstedt (1984)[a]	1981	36	30
West Germany			
Ruether and Neufeind (1982)	1973	36	30

Notes:
[a] Includes persons reimprisoned for new offences only.
[b] Includes persons reimprisoned for new offences and technical violations of parole orders.
[c] Broadhurst et al. (1988) and Broadhurst and Maller (1990) discuss only the overall reimprisonment rates (for 108 and 120 months, respectively) for their samples; the 6-year reimprisonment rates reported in this table were derived from the survival probability curves presented in these studies.

be expected on the basis of Braithwaite's theory, an issue to which we return in the discussion.

Predictors

We now turn to an assessment of predictors of recidivism risk among persons released from prison in Ireland. Figure 1 describes recidivism for a large number of released prisoners who differ on several characteristics, including age, gender, prior criminal history, crime type and release year, to name a few. Given this, one question prompted by Figure 1 is whether recidivism rates vary across groups and according to the nature of the punishment to which offenders were exposed. For example, are recidivism rates higher or lower among persons in certain age categories, persons released during particular years or those who serve shorter sentences? To explore whether these factors, and others, are related to recidivism, we estimated proportional hazards regression models in which we examined simultaneously the effects of several offender, offence and case characteristics on the likelihood of recidivism.

The results of these estimations are presented in Table 3. We show for each variable the estimated coefficient (β), the standard error associated with that estimate (SE), the value of a Wald statistic that assesses whether the coefficient estimate is statistically significant, and the anti-log (Exp(β)) of the estimated coefficient. The latter are particularly intuitive in describing the magnitude of the effects of the given predictor since they can be converted easily to give the percentage change in the likelihood of reimprisonment for each incremental change or difference in the independent variable (i.e. 100(Exp(β)–1)).

Table 3 indicates that recidivism rates in Ireland were significantly higher among males, younger persons, those with less formal education, the unemployed and the illiterate. These patterns are strikingly similar to what has been found in virtually all previous studies of recidivism across a wide range of social and cultural contexts. Interestingly, Travellers were not significantly more likely to be reimprisoned. We also see that reimprisonment is more likely among Irish nationals than foreigners, and it is significantly higher among those who were held on remand as part of their confinement and who had a prior prison committal in the recent past.

The results also show that, again in conformity with the international picture, sex offenders released from Irish prisons were significantly less likely to be reimprisoned than other types of offenders, at least in the short term. Further, and again consistent with much of the published research, we see that property offenders (the reference group in the regression models displayed in Table 3) were most likely to be reimprisoned. To illustrate these and other differences in reimprisonment rates across offence types in a more visually appealing manner, we used the coefficients from Table 3 to generate predicted probabilities of imprisonment at 36 months by principal offence, adjusted for differences in other factors (following Hosmer and Lemeshow, 1999).

Table 3. Proportional hazards models for reimprisonment among persons released from Irish prisons, 1 January 2001–30 November 2004 (N = 19,955)

Independent variables	Model 1			
	β	SE	Wald	Exp(β)
Male	.183	.057	3.20*	1.201
Age at release	−.023	.002	−11.95*	.977
Unmarried	.067	.039	1.71	1.070
No formal education	.177	.028	6.27*	1.194
Literate	−.112	.049	−2.28*	.894
Traveller	.050	.082	.610	1.051
Unemployed	.257	.029	8.89*	1.293
Employment status unknown	.269	.082	3.30*	1.309
Irish national	.638	.106	6.05*	1.893
Dublin address	−.197	.030	−6.53*	.821
Release year	−.078	.014	−5.40*	.925
Previous prison experience	.675	.028	23.99*	1.964
Sentenced for fine default	1.273	.038	33.57*	3.571
Held on remand	.441	.032	13.73*	1.554
Sex offence	−1.157	.165	−7.02*	.314
Violent offence	−.082	.042	−1.96*	.922
Drug offence	−.198	.048	−4.15*	.821
Motoring offence	−.494	.046	−10.64*	.610
Public order offence	−.294	.054	−5.44*	.746
Other offence	−.685	.057	−11.96*	.504
Confined 3 to 6 months	−.255	.041	−6.20*	.775
Confined 6 to 12 months	−.218	.044	−4.99*	.804
Confined 12 months or more	−.244	.044	−5.58*	.784
Wald chi-square			3165.37*	

*$p \leq .05$, two-tailed test.

Figure 2 shows that about 18 per cent of the 488 persons who had served time for a sex offence (as the principal crime type) were reimprisoned within 3 years of release, compared with more than 45 per cent of persons who completed a sentence for a violent or property offence. Persons who had served time for other crimes fell between these extremes. These results are similar to those reported in recidivism research in other nations (see Baumer, 1997 for a review). There were relatively small differences between males and females. The coefficient for gender in Table 3 translates into a predicted probability of reimprisonment within 48 months that is about 5 percentage points higher for men than for women. Taking a similar approach we see fairly large differences across the 3 age categories considered. In fact, our model suggests that (adjusted) reimprisonment rates within 48 months of release are 50 per cent higher for offenders under 21 than offenders age 30 and older (i.e. 60% versus 40%).

Consistent with observations in other nations, one of the strongest predictors of recidivism in Ireland during the study period was the presence of
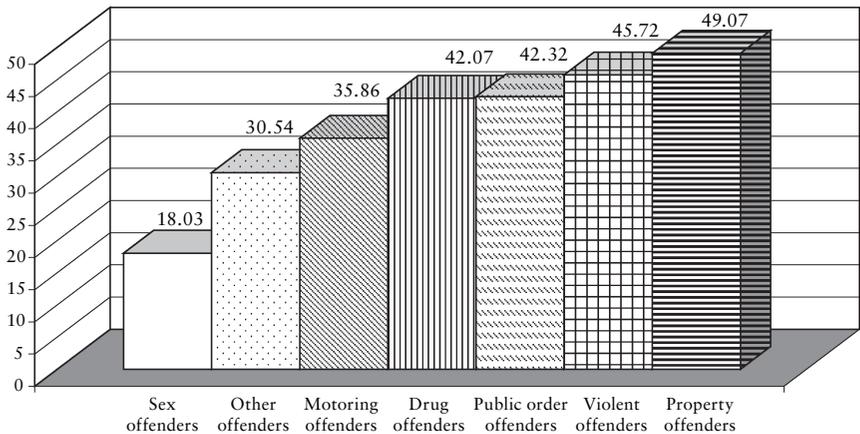
Figure 2   Percentage of offenders reimprisoned within 36 months following the completion of a sentence, by principal offence type, 2001–4

a previous sentence, measured as a prior committal to prison. By the end of the maximum follow-up time of four years, after adjusting for other factors, our analysis predicts that about 60 per cent of those with prison experience in the recent past will be reimprisoned compared to about 36 per cent of those without. Thus, our study reinforces the finding that youth and a prior criminal history are among the strongest predictors of recidivism.

Previous research on recidivism has revealed mixed conclusions on the role of time served in shaping the likelihood of further offending. Our findings suggest a non-linear pattern for this relationship. Specifically, those who served less than three months were significantly more likely to be reimprisoned following release than those who served longer. This is consistent with the logic of specific deterrence, and would lead to the conclusion that longer sentences would reduce recidivism. However, the coefficients for the time served variables also indicate that there is a strong diminishing return on the tendency for longer sentences to yield lower recidivism rates. We see no such significant differences in reimprisonment between those who served three to six months, six to twelve months or more than twelve months. This suggests that implementing longer sentences (beyond three months) would have limited, if any, impact on aggregate recidivism rates.

There are two other noteworthy patterns. *First*, controlling for a wide array of factors, persons who served a prison term for defaulting on a fine (about 9% of the total) exhibited significantly higher reimprisonment rates than those who received an immediate sentence of imprisonment. In the former cases, the initial sanction was a fine but the consequence of defaulting on payment was custody. As shown in Figure 3, looking at the full follow-up period we estimate that fine defaulters are two times more likely to be reimprisoned than those who were imprisoned for an offence straight away (85.4% versus 42%).

Second, recidivism rates were significantly lower among those who gave a Dublin address (city or county) compared to those who give addresses anywhere else. In fact, as shown in Figure 4, by the end of the 48-month follow-up period, those from the Dublin area exhibited reimprisonment rates that were about 8 percentage points lower than those from elsewhere. Although not substantial in absolute terms, this is a statistically significant difference and it is intriguing that it emerges even after accounting for differences across geographic areas in the composition of persons released from prison, the types of offences for which they served time and the length of their confinement.
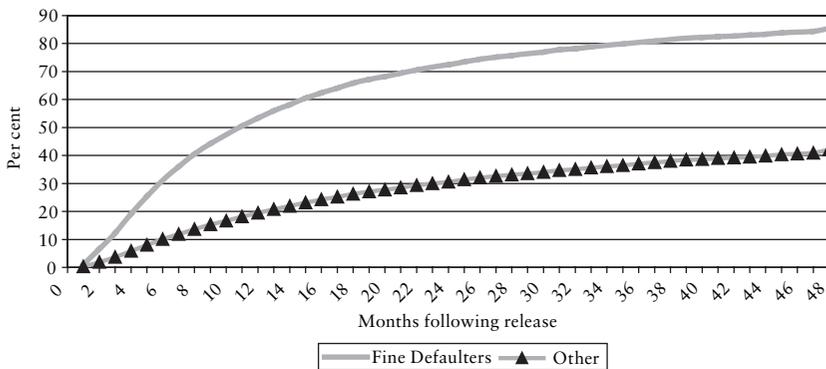

Figure 3   Recidivism rates for persons released from a sentence of imprisonment in Ireland, by fine default status, 2001–4 (N = 19,955)
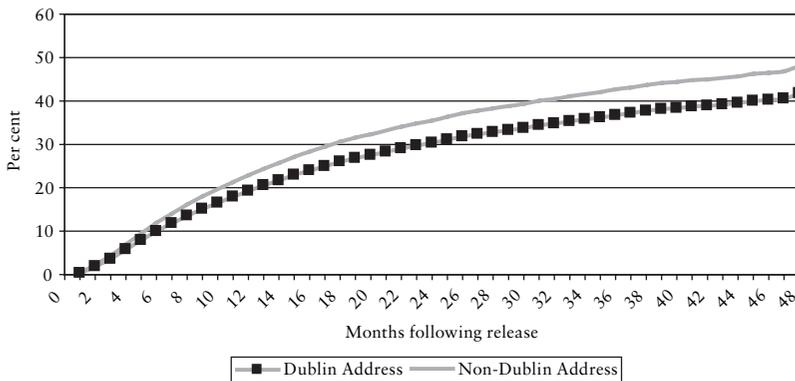

Figure 4   Recidivism rates for persons released from a sentence of imprisonment in Ireland, by area of residence, 2001–4 (N = 19,955)

Discussion

This study was the first to examine levels and predictors of recidivism among persons released from Irish prisons. The results have implications both for national policy formulation and the broader comparative literature on recidivism that has begun to take shape in the past decade. Many policy makers and other commentators in Ireland assumed the recidivism rate to be exceptionally high, at or above 70 per cent. Our analysis indicates that, in fact, the figure is quite a bit lower: about half of those released from prison in Ireland were reimprisoned within four years. This provides an important, empirically generated, baseline to inform the public dialogue about crime and punishment and from which to gauge the relative efficacy of interventions aimed at facilitating reintegration and reducing recidivism.

Two findings from our analysis have particular salience for policy makers in Ireland. The first relates to sex offenders and the parole process. At present there is virtually a blanket ban on any early release for sex offenders. This makes it difficult to incentivize them to participate in treatment programmes. However, we know that periods of parole are typically short, measured in months rather than years, and that sex offenders are unlikely to recidivate soon after release (Friendship and Thornton, 2001). If the assessment of risk is to play a role in the determination of parole then this must redound to the advantage of sex offenders. (Of course there are political considerations here too as all decisions about early release lie ultimately with the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform; the role of the Parole Board is limited to making recommendations. Neither should we underestimate the extent to which underreporting and prosecution failure are particularly problematic for this crime type. It may be that sex offenders are better at avoiding capture than others involved in criminality.)

The second area where the policy implications are clear relates to fine defaulters, whose return to prison was almost inevitable. The strategies for diverting fine defaulters from prison are well known and were rehearsed in the report of a parliamentary committee (Sub-Committee on Crime and Punishment, 2000). There are several reasons why solving this problem might be taken more seriously as a result of this research. If fine defaulters were kept out of prison the overall rate of recidivism would be reduced from 49 per cent to 42 per cent (see Figures 1 and 4). Furthermore, the number of prisoners released each year would fall by 9 per cent. Finally, the cost savings would be considerable. As these are individuals who have committed minor offences and who judges were prepared to leave at liberty in the first place, there is no real threat to public safety. Surely this is a package of benefits that will exercise an irresistible appeal?

We found that ex-prisoners with a Dublin address were significantly less likely to be reimprisoned than those from other parts of Ireland. This finding is somewhat surprising in light of the vast literature that has documented higher overall levels of crime and disorder in urban centres

(e.g. Fischer, 1995). Yet, one can imagine that certain elements that are key to successful social reintegration following a prison sentence—widespread access to jobs and drug treatment, close proximity to family and other social supports—are more readily available for those from relatively large urban areas, especially major cities like Dublin.

But there are other possible interpretations of these trends, including differential use of prison across time and space for convicted offenders, and more research is needed to draw definitive conclusions. Spatial and temporal variability in recidivism risk has rarely been examined in the research literature (but see Ekland-Olson and Kelly, 1993; Travis et al., 2001; Kubrin and Stewart, 2006) and to our knowledge prior research has not considered whether recidivism rates are significantly different in large urban areas than elsewhere. Our findings suggest that pursuing these issues in greater depth would be a worthwhile venture.

This article also contributes to the growing international knowledge base on levels and predictors of recidivism by confirming the robustness of factors revealed across a wide variety of national contexts. It is by now well established that recidivism rates decrease with age; that recidivism is more likely among males than females; that it is most likely among persons imprisoned for property offences and least likely among sex offenders; and that the risk increases with the number of prior convictions and sentences of imprisonment. Studies have also documented higher recidivism among offenders who are unemployed, have less education and who are unmarried. Comparisons of the role of sentence length are more difficult to assess, as findings from past work are inconsistent both within and across jurisdictions. Nevertheless, the non-linear relationship between time served and recidivism observed in our data on persons released from Irish prisons also has precedent in the literature (Orsagh and Chen, 1988). The overall rate of recidivism found in Ireland is in line with what one observes across other nations in which similar research has been conducted (see Table 2). The comparative picture that emerges is that reimprisonment rates are relatively stable across nations and, perhaps most pertinent, the rates observed in Ireland clearly are not significantly lower than observed elsewhere.

The results for Ireland further illuminate an intriguing pattern that diverges from theoretical expectations that have been derived from Braithwaite's (1989) arguments about sociocultural context and crime. Braithwaite's (1989) theory is very general and supports several complex hypotheses about crime and social control, but as others have suggested, one of the implications of his general theory is that certain societal features—notably strong social interdependencies and high levels of collective participation and social capital—should yield both lower overall crime rates and lower recidivism rates because of a preponderance of *informal* social control and because sanctioned offenders will be less likely to be categorically stigmatized as 'offenders' and more likely to be socially supported as 'persons' upon release (e.g. Baumer, 1997; Deng et al., 1998; Baumer et al., 2002).

Braithwaite was not the first to suggest that high levels of social capital and strong informal social controls may yield lower crime rates (e.g. Durkheim, 1951/1897), and there is a long history of comparative empirical research that provides persuasive evidence affirming this idea (e.g. Clinard, 1976; Adler, 1983; Messner and Rosenfeld, 1997; Savolainen, 2000). But, even though it was not the focus of his work, Braithwaite (1989) pioneered the idea that recidivism rates may vary substantially across societies, and in particular that they may be significantly lower in contexts characterized by high levels of social capital and strong informal social controls. We lack the systematic and comprehensive comparative research needed to evaluate this idea thoroughly. But drawing on evidence Braithwaite (1989: 108) himself endorsed as a useful starting point (i.e. case studies), with the possible exception of China, it does not appear that high levels of social capital and other communitarian societal features yield significantly lower recidivism rates.

The evidence on recidivism in China is of uncertain quality and has not yet been subjected to rigorous scrutiny, but reports suggest reconviction and reimprisonment rates below 15 per cent (Li, 1992; Deng et al., 1998). The low rate has been linked to high levels of communitarianism and social capital, which are presumed to be linked to a high degree of readiness among the Chinese to live nearby, employ and more generally accept offenders who have been released from prison. Yet, cross-national survey data indicate that, compared to other nations, the Chinese are highly opposed to having criminals or drug addicts as neighbours (European Values Study Foundation and World Values Survey Association, 2006), and of course there are other features of this vast country's penal and social arrangements that could suppress recidivism (e.g. Dutton, 1992; Epstein and Wong, 1996). Thus, even if the reported figures for China's recidivism rate are valid, it is not necessarily the case that they have arisen because of communitarian social features.

Notwithstanding the possible exception of China, the evidence from available case studies suggests that most nations that appear well organized for generating distinctively low recidivism rates fail to do so, despite yielding low overall crime rates and using prison relatively infrequently. For example, the best available data for Japan, the nation singled out by Braithwaite (1989) as ideally communitarian and heavily invested in reintegrative shaming, exhibits a reimprisonment rate of about 50 per cent (Japanese Ministry of Justice, 1999). Clearly, this is not significantly lower than observed elsewhere as might be expected if Japan was uniquely well organized to reintegrate ex-prisoners socially. Similar conclusions can be drawn from the evidence for other places widely considered to exhibit high levels of social capital, including Scandinavian societies. Baumer et al. (2002) document, for instance, that despite being strongly organized along communitarian lines and relying heavily on informal shaming as a means of social control, rates of recidivism in Iceland were not lower than in countries that did not share these characteristics.

The findings for Ireland add another nation to the mix that scores relatively high in terms of the available stock of social capital and informal social control. These features appear to generate low levels of crime but levels of recidivism in Ireland are not much different to those found in other nations that have higher crime rates and are often characterized as being less communitarian in nature. This pattern could arise because, as Baumer et al. (2002) suggest, even though communitarian social features theoretically should promote high levels of reintegration, places with such features also may share with other societies the need for symbolic elements of social exclusion, which is perhaps met by a relatively high recidivism rate (see also Cohen, 1985; Komiya, 1999).

However, there are other possible interpretations of these patterns (e.g. Baumer, 1997), which underscore the limits of the case study approach and the need for a more expansive research agenda. For example, the trend could reflect a kind of selection artefact, whereby the prison release samples used for recidivism research in low crime societies have a greater representation of persons with a higher propensity towards repetitive criminal behaviour. For instance, persons in low recidivism offence categories (e.g. murderers and sex offenders) may comprise a larger fraction of prison release samples in high crime societies, and those in high recidivism offence categories (e.g. burglars and thieves) may be better represented in places with relatively low crime rates. This type of pattern would, relatively speaking, push down recidivism rates where crime is high and elevate them where crime is low, giving the appearance that recidivism rates in such disparate places are fairly similar even though, if one controlled for differences across societies in the composition of prison release samples, recidivism rates might be lower in the high communitarian, low crime nations.

The question of whether and how rates of recidivism vary across nations is an important one, and while national case studies can be useful for building comparative knowledge, a significant advance in our understanding will require a more systematic research approach that attends to some neglected theoretical and methodological issues. There are several features of societies that may shape recidivism levels beyond those articulated by Braithwaite (1989) and emphasized in recent empirical work. These include factors associated with the nature of punishment, the availability of programming (e.g. jobs, drug treatment, etc.) in prison and upon release aimed at enhancing the likelihood of successful reintegration and other social and cultural features (e.g. public perceptions of ex-prisoners and the degree to which people are willing to accept living near or employing ex-prisoners). Methodologically, we are in need of recidivism data that are gathered in more co-ordinated ways, with studies from different nations using similar definitions and measures of recidivism, and also similar methodological techniques.

Along these lines, it is noteworthy that there is currently an effort underway to field large-scale recidivism studies in several European nations simultaneously. This initiative proposes to utilize a consistent format for

data capture, measurement and analysis (Wartna and Nijssen, 2006). If coupled with cross-national survey data that describe social and cultural conditions in good detail (e.g. the World Values Survey, the European Values Survey), this is precisely the kind of endeavour needed to deepen the reservoir of knowledge about how particular societal conditions help or hinder the ability of released prisoners to turn away from crime.

Acknowledgements

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IAN O'DONNELL is Professor of Criminology in the School of Law, University College Dublin, Ireland. His most recent (co-authored) books are *Child Pornography: Crime, Computers and Society* (Willan, 2007), *Crime, Punishment and the Search for Order in Ireland* (IPA, 2004) and *Prison Violence: The Dynamics of Conflict, Fear and Power* (Willan, 2003).

ERIC BAUMER is Associate Professor of Criminology at the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Missouri—St Louis, USA. He has conducted major recidivism studies in three small European nations (Malta, Iceland and the Republic of Ireland) and his work has appeared in leading journals including *Criminology*, the *British Journal of Criminology*, *Theoretical Criminology* and the *American Journal of Sociology*.

NICOLA HUGHES is a research student at the Institute of Criminology, School of Law, University College Dublin, Ireland. She is investigating the extent of recidivism and desistance among juveniles recently released from prison.