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Parole in NSW: Predicting Successful Completion

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PAROLE IN N.S.W.: PREDICTING SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION

(Prepared by Angela Gorta, Research Officer.)

Success or failure of prisoners released on parole is an important issue. This Bulletin reports data from a study of the characteristics and performance of 250 parolees (Gorta, Cooney, George, and West, 1982). Characteristics which predict success and failure are identified. The study suggests directions for action which might improve parole performance, although it cannot show whether release on parole has any effect on rates of reconviction.

Parole in N.S.W.

Parole refers to the release of a prisoner, under supervision, earlier than the end of his sentence. It represents a period of transition between the constant surveillance of the prisoners in an institution and the lesser supervision imposed upon a citizen in society. As discussed in the *Report of the Committee Appointed to Review the Parole of Prisoners Act, 1966*, the purpose of parole is "to assist prisoners to move back into society and lead a law-abiding existence, whilst at the same time protecting society from further crime" (1979, p. 7).

Compared with release at the completion of the sentence, this earlier release to parole has potential benefits and dangers for both the parolee and society. The main danger to society is that the parolee might commit some crime, particularly a violent crime that could not have been committed had the parolee remained in gaol. The main benefit to the parolee is that time which would otherwise have been spent in gaol can be used to re-establish his place in society. Benefits to the parolee may also be benefits to society. If, for example, this earlier release helps the prisoner's relationship with his wife, society may benefit since overseas research suggests that where marriages survive the imprisonment recidivism is considerably lower (Kemp, 1980). The time immediately following release from gaol is probably one of the most difficult a former prisoner has to face. It may be that it is at this time that the temptation to re-offend is greatest. Thus another benefit for society is that during this re-adjustment period, the parolee is subject to the surveillance and assistance of a parole officer. However, this surveillance may be seen as a disadvantage by the parolee, who, if he had completed his sentence, would have been free to re-enter society without such overt supervision.

The side-by-side existence of such potential benefits and potential dangers raises the question: "Under what conditions is parole successfully completed?"

SUMMARY

To determine the conditions under which parole is completed without incident, a wide range of information covering demographic data, criminal history and parole details were examined. As in previous studies, a number of variables pertaining to the parolees' criminal history were related to parole outcome while the majority of the demographic factors were not related. This unimportance of demographic features suggests that there are not certain "person types" who are poorer risks than others. A number of the variables pertaining to experiences on parole were found to be related to parole outcome. The importance of this previously unexplored area suggests that the conditions related to parole outcome can be modified, possibly increasing the proportion of parolees who complete their parole period without incident. While many of the factors found to be related to parole completion might be considered obvious, this was not always the case, for example, none of the factors related to either the current offence, previous adult offences or gaol experiences appeared to be related to parole outcome.

Although the parolees who completed, who were breached and who were revoked differed in many respects, eight variables were found to be adequate to reproduce these differences:

- number of instances of juvenile institutions;
- number of instances of prison;
- stability of employment history;
- marital status;
- alcohol problems during parole;
- drug problems during parole;
- employment changes during parole; and
- address changes during parole.

These eight variables formed two dimensions. The parolees who completed their parole period differed from those who were breached or those who were revoked in having less alcohol or drug problems during their parole period and having a more stable employment history. Those who were revoked had had more job and address changes while on parole, were more likely never to have married and had had a more extensive criminal history than those who were breached.

The Design of the Study

A sample of 250 parolees was obtained from the total 1283 prisoners released to parole in 1974. 1974 was chosen as a common year of release to allow a minimum of a five year follow-up period at the time of data collection.

Previous studies of parole have been limited to measuring

demographic features and criminal history, with only aspects of the latter being found related to parole outcome. Beside collecting demographic (personal status information and historical factors in personal and family history) and criminal history (previous juvenile and adult offences, current offence and prison details) information for each of the parolees, in the present study information was also collected on parole experiences. Parole files provided the sole source of data. The information collected was limited only by the detail available in the parole files. Examples of the range of information included are illustrated in Table 1.

In New South Wales there are three broad outcomes possible for a parolee. The first possibility is that the parolee may **complete** his parole period "successfully" by not being found guilty of any criminal offences or technical breaches. The second possibility is that the parolee may be reported for some offence or bad behaviour, but not be recommended to be returned to prison. Subsequently this outcome will be referred to as being "**breached**". The third possibility resembles "failure" on parole, when the parole order is "**revoked**" and the parolee is returned to prison.

To determine "under what conditions is parole successfully completed" those characteristics which were directly related to parole outcome (completed, breached or revoked) were identified.

Outcome of Parole Supervision

Of the 250 parolees whose files were studied, 138 (55%) completed their parole period without incident, 46 (18%) were breached but not revoked while the remaining 66 (26%) had their parole orders revoked and were returned to prison. Almost half (48%) of the 66 were revoked within three months of release and almost all (83%) within one year.

Factors related to Parole Outcome

Table 1 divides the range of factors examined into those related to parole outcome and those not related to parole outcome. This table illustrates the three important features of the variables found to be related to parole outcome. **Firstly**, a number of the variables describing experiences on parole were found to be related to parole outcome. The importance of this previously unexplored area suggests that the conditions relevant to parole outcome can be modified, possibly increasing the proportion of parolees who complete their parole period without incident. **Secondly**, as in previous studies, a number of variables describing parolees' criminal history were related to parole outcome while the majority of demographic factors were not related. The irrelevance of demographic features suggests that there are not certain "person types" who are poorer risks than others. That is, for example, being young or being aboriginal does not seem to influence chances of completing parole without incident. **Thirdly**, while many of the factors found to be related to parole completion might be considered obvious, this was not always the case. None of the factors related to the current offence, to previous adult offences or to gaol experiences, for example, appeared to be related to parole outcome. Thus there is no evidence to suggest that those with a history of violent offences are better or poorer risks on parole than those with a history of property offences.

Some factors which did not appear to be related to parole outcome (e.g., number of times released to parole, number of revocations, and number of escapes) may not have been related because of the small number of parolees in certain

categories. For example, most of the parolees had not escaped, therefore the number of escapes did not appear to be related to parole outcome. Table 2 outlines the differences among those who completed, those who were breached and those who were revoked, by providing a profile of each of these groups on those variables found to be related to parole outcome. Over simplifying, those who completed their parole period without incident were more likely to have been employed and not have a financial problem at the time of the offence. They had had a stable employment history in the past. Although most parolees are initially requested to report fortnightly to their parole officer, more of the minority told to report monthly (a less intensive than normal form of supervision) had a greater likelihood of completing their parole period. During the parole period they were more likely not to change address or to experience interpersonal, drug or alcohol problems than were either those who were breached or those who were revoked.

Although the majority of parolees had never married, almost half of those who were involved in a relationship (either married or de facto) were breached. Those who were breached were also more likely than either those who completed or those who were revoked to have a history of alcohol dependence.

Those parolees who were revoked had had a more extensive criminal background than the other parolees, both as juveniles (see Table 2, lines 6 to 10) and as adults (see Table 2, lines 12 to 15). The higher rates of juvenile offences included property offences (such as break, enter and steal, larceny of motor vehicle) and others including drug offences, breach of recognisance, trespass and accessory after the fact. The revoked parolees' more extensive adult criminal history can be seen by considering average number of adult convictions. Parolees who completed their parole period or who were breached had had an average of between six and seven adult convictions. However, those who were revoked had on average almost twelve adult convictions, which is approximately twice the number of convictions of the other two groups.

Those who were revoked were more likely not to be involved in a relationship (either single, separated or divorced). Like those who were breached, they were more likely initially to be told to report to their parole officer weekly. During their parole period they were more likely to have between one and five changes of address, have no job or only a small number of job changes, and like those who were breached, experience interpersonal and drug problems. Because over half of the revocations occurred during the first six months after release to parole and the rest (except two) were revoked during the next six months, those who were revoked tended to have a shorter supervision period. Those who were revoked were also more likely to have committed an offence during the parole period similar to the type of offence for which they were imprisoned.

The relationships between parole outcome and aspects of parole supervision (e.g., initial reporting pattern and changes in reporting pattern) reflect the parole officer's perception of the parolee. For example, those who were told to report weekly (a closer than normal form of supervision) had a greater likelihood of being either breached or revoked, while those told to report monthly were more likely to complete their parole period. This relationship reflects the judgment of the parole officer in deciding the extent to which the parolee was initially thought to be at risk.

Both the effect of number of address changes and the effect of number of jobs held during the parole period were confounded by the length of supervision. Many of those revoked, were revoked quite early in their parole periods. This would have limited their number of address and job changes.

Summary of Factors Related to Parole Outcome

It was found that the information provided by all of these measures could be retained by considering a smaller number of them. For example, "number of adult convictions", "number of times in prison", "number of adult sentences exceeding one week" and "total time spent in prison" are all related to parole outcome, but since these measures are closely interrelated, knowing information about all of them tells you no more than knowing information about any one. Discriminant analyses were used to choose **which** group of variables would best discriminate among those who completed parole, those who were breached and those who were revoked.

Although, as described in Table 2, the three groups of parolees differed in many respects, the discriminant analyses revealed that the following subset of eight variables was adequate to reproduce the differences:

- Number of commitments to juvenile institutions;
- Number of instances of prison as an adult;
- Stability of employment history;
- Marital status;
- Alcohol problems during parole period;
- Drug problems during parole period;
- Employment changes during parole period;
- Address changes during parole period.

Two dimensions were necessary to adequately describe group differences (see Figure 1). The first related primarily to experiencing **alcohol and drug** problems during the parole period and **stability of employment history**. This dimension differentiated between the completed and the other two groups. That is, parolees who completed their parole period without incident tended to differ both from those who were breached and those who were revoked in having a more stable employment history and in experiencing fewer drug or alcohol problems during their parole period. Those who were breached differed from those who were revoked on the second dimension which reflected criminal background (**number of commitments to juvenile institutions and number of instances of prison as an adult**), **marital status, employment and address changes** while on parole. Table 3 provides the weightings of these factors on the two dimensions.

The appearance of two dimensions rather than one has an important implication: the processes leading to a breach report without revocation are in some ways different from those which end in revocation. Put another way, minor breaches are not just a less serious form of the situations which produce revocation.

Social Networks

Over one-third of the parole files contained no information about the parolee's social networks, that is no information concerning support from, for example, family, friends or known criminals during parole. Initially the measure of social networks was excluded from the discriminant analyses because of the large number of missing cases.

Where information was available, those who associated with criminals (e.g., known criminals, other parolees,

family or spouse with a record or is on parole) were more likely to be revoked than those whose social networks did not include criminals. For completeness, a model was analysed which included this measure of social networks. Complete information was available on only 148 cases which, as a group, differed from the total group as it contained proportionally fewer of the revoked group. The results from this analysis showed that social networks adds significantly to the separation among the groups and contributes to the dimension defined by employment stability and problems on parole.

Other Measures of Parole Outcome

In the preceding analyses, three possible parole outcomes have been considered: completed (having been neither breached nor revoked), breached (but not revoked) and revoked. Different ways of categorizing parole outcome were also considered. Firstly, those who were "revoked" were compared with those who were "not revoked" (both those who completed and those who were breached). Secondly, those who were revoked for breaches were compared with those who were revoked for further offences.

When those who were "revoked" were compared with those who were "not revoked", previous criminal history, stability of employment history, current employment patterns and drug associated problems were the factors which primarily distinguished between these two groups. Alcohol problems, marital status and accommodation pattern while on parole were less important in discriminating those who were returned to gaol from those who were not revoked. This is in keeping with the previous analysis in which alcohol and drug problems during parole and employment stability separated the completed group from the breached and revoked groups; the other variables differentiated those who were breached from those who were revoked. The weighting of factors on this dimension are presented in Table 3.

None of the eight factors which were found adequate to distinguish between those who completed, those who were breached and those who were revoked, were able to differentiate between those who were **revoked because of a breach of conditions** and those who were **revoked for committing a new offence**. That is, those who were revoked for a breach of conditions did not differ from those who were revoked for committing an offence in terms of any of: number of commitments to juvenile institutions, number of instances of prison an adult, employment stability, marital status, experiencing alcohol or drug problems during the parole period or employment or address changes during parole.

Implications and Cautions

At least some conditions which influence parole outcome are open to change if effective ways to intervene can be found. Upon release to parole it is not too late to influence the number of jobs and address changes, or alcohol or drug problems experienced while on parole. Marital status largely depends both on the parolee's marital status prior to incarceration and if married; the efforts made to maintain the marriage both while in prison and while on parole. It would seem that if some or all of these factors were influenced positively, the success rate of those on parole may be increased.

Being breached is not merely a less serious form of the situations which lead to revocation. It would be interesting

to learn the role of parole officers' assumptions and policies in producing these differences. Eight factors were found to discriminate among parole outcomes. **How** these factors relate to outcome is not clear. It is possible, for example, that having alcohol or drug problems during the parole period leads to breaches of the conditions of the parole order or offences which in turn lead to revocation. Alternatively these eight factors may reflect strategies used by the parole officer. That is, those parolees with alcohol or drug problems may attract greater attention or receive closer supervision and so increase detection of breaches. Of these, those with shorter criminal histories and a stable job and family life may be merely breached, while those with longer criminal histories, a number of job and address changes and no spouse or defacto may be revoked.

It is important to realise that parole files were the sole source of data for this study. This presented two methodological problems. While supplying a wealth of information that was, for the most part, readily available, reliance on one such source prevented characteristics not recorded there (e.g., the rapport between officers and client) from being considered. Reliance on parole files presented a further problem. The information in these files is not recorded in any standard format. Thus it limited the possibility of some measures which were not often recorded (e.g., information on the parolee's social networks missing in one-third of the files) from contributing to the final list of discriminating variables. In addition, parole files only provide one side of the story. Given the importance of experiences on parole, it would be interesting to find out more about the parolee's perceptions of his parole period. Bartholomew (1972) in reviewing a Canadian study of prisoners' perceptions of parole expressed the need for more such consumer-oriented research. The information available in the parole files did not cover the parole process (cf. England, 1963). None of the variables recorded was a direct measure of the parole process, so any failure (or success) must appear to be the failure of individuals. If the process is at fault, this would show up here as characteristics of the parolees who are more likely to be "let down" by the faulty process.

Despite these points of caution, this study has quantified the relationship between experiences while on parole and parole outcome. The importance of experiences during the parole period stresses the importance of both parole and parole supervision. As discussed in the Report of the Committee Appointed to Review the Parole of Prisoners Act, 1966 the purpose of parole is "to assist prisoners to move back into society and lead a law-abiding existence, whilst at the same time protecting society from further crime" (1979, p. 7). This study has identified the areas of : employment, accommodation, marital relationship, alcohol and drug problems as important areas with which the parole officer can assist the parolee. Parolees with such problems require special efforts to assist them to successfully complete parole. Effective assistance would be far more constructive than keeping such "higher risk" individuals in gaol.

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Figure 1: Plot of group averages on discriminant functions

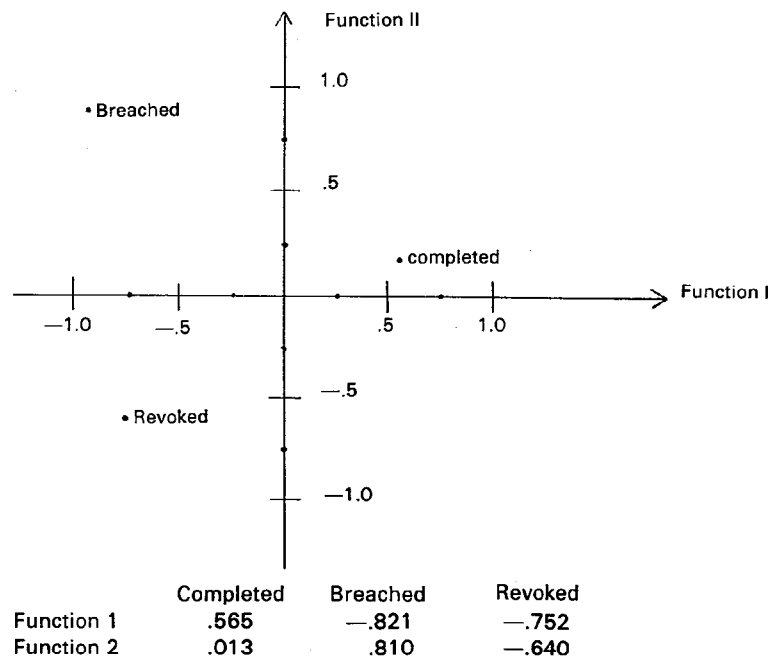


Table 1: Factors related to parole outcome

Type of Variable	Factors related to parole outcome	Factors not related to parole outcome
1) DEMOGRAPHIC		
a) Personal status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * marital status, * employment at time of offence, * having a significant financial problem at the time of the offence, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * age, * country of birth, * being aboriginal * number of children or having responsibility for children, * highest level of schooling completed, * having attempted trade training, * type of employer (government, private or self), * whether occupation at time of current offence was the same or different from usual occupation, * living arrangements at time of the offence.
b) Other background factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * history of alcohol dependence, * stability of employment history 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * separation of parents * death of parents, * psychiatric or emotional problems, * being placed in an orphanage, * group affiliations or club membership.
2) CRIMINAL HISTORY		
a) Juvenile offences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * number of juvenile offences, * number of commitments to juvenile institutions, * number of juvenile sentences exceeding one week, * number of offences "against property, not elsewhere contained". * number of "other" offences, * number of "orders relating to the care and protection of children". 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * age at first juvenile or first juvenile criminal conviction, * major juvenile offence, * number of fines, bonds or periodic detentions, * type of juvenile institution, * outcome of juvenile probations
b) Adult offences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * number of adult convictions, * number of times in prison, * number of adult sentences exceeding one week, * total time spent in prison 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * number of times released to parole * number of revocations * number of escapes * type of previous adult offences
c) Current offence		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * length of period spent in prison prior to release on parole, * whether or not the current offence was similar to previous juvenile or adult offences, * number and type of charges taken into account, * total sentence, * non-parole period set.
3) PAROLE DETAILS		
a) Release to parole	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * initial frequency of reporting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * parole deferment * recommendations in the parole report * special conditions placed on parole
b) During parole	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * change in reporting pattern, * number of address changes, * number of jobs held, * length of unemployment during parole, * interpersonal problems, * alcohol problems, * drug problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * financial problems * accommodation problems * marital problems * type of accommodation on release
c) Parole outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * length of supervision prior to termination * whether any offences committed during the parole period were similar to the offence for which the parolee had been imprisoned. 	

Table 2: Differences among those who completed, those who were preached and those who were revoked

Variable	Parole Outcome			Total
	Completed	Breached	Revoked	
Demographic				
1 * Marital status (% married or defacto)	28	39	12	26
2 * Employed at time of offence (% employed)	66	40	38	54
3 * Financial problem at time of offence (% Yes)	37	63	64	47
4 * History of alcohol dependence (% Yes)	35	58	31	38
5 * Stability of employment history (% stable)	56	22	22	41
Criminal history factors				
6 * Number of juvenile offences (x)	3.20	3.32	5.57	3.85
7 * Number of commitments to juvenile institutions (x)	0.64	0.93	1.66	0.96
8 * Number of juvenile sentences exceeding one week (x)	0.67	0.93	1.66	0.98
9 * "offences against property, not elsewhere contained" (% with such offences)	45	45	64	50
10 * "Other offences" (% with such offences)	11	9	26	15
11 * "Orders relating to the care and protection of children" (% with such offences)	9	18	24	15
12 * Number of adult convictions (x)	6.65	6.67	11.80	8.01
13 * Number of times in prison (x)	2.20	1.48	4.16	2.58
14 * Number of adult sentences exceeding one week (x)	2.19	3.35	4.16	3.84
15 * Total timespent in adult institutions (x, months)	16.0	13.1	30.2	19.22
Parole factors				
16 * Initial frequency of reporting (% monthly)	23	13	13	19
17 * Number of address changes (% with no changes)	28	11	18	22
18 * Number of jobs held (% with 0-2)	45	39	68	51
19 * Experiencing interpersonal problems (% Yes)	47	71	76	59
20 * Experiencing alcohol problems (% Yes)	12	52	31	24
21 * Experiencing drug problems (% Yes)	1	12	11	5

Table 3: Standardised Discriminant Function Coefficients *

Variable	Measurement of Parole Outcome			
	Completed, breached, revoked		Revoked, not revoked	Revoked for offence, revoked for breaches
	Function 1	Function 2		
● Number of commitments to juvenile institutions	-.288	-.387	-.473	-.486
● Number of instances of prison	-.180	-.389	-.398	-.381
● Stability of employment history	-.620	.050	-.338	-.339
● Marital status	-.051	.474	.299	.292
● Alcohol problems during parole	.606	-.281	.236	.230
● Drug problems during parole	.616	.080	.494	.500
● Address changes during parole	-.235	.334	.072	.079
● Employment changes during parole	.040	.634	.487	.485
Canonical correlation	.556	.424		

* The larger the standardised discriminant function coefficients (S.D.F.C.) the stronger the relationship, that is, the more the variable adds to the ability to separate the criterion groups when the contribution of the other variables is taken into account.