**Does Reentry Court Completion Affect Recidivism Three Years After Exit?**
**Results from a Retrospective Cohort Study**

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**Abstract**: Reentry courts are a strategy to assist individuals subjected to post-release supervision in the reintegration process, but there is limited evidence on the effectiveness of these practices. The current study presents the results of a retrospective cohort study for a sample of 340 participants who exited a reentry court. Specifically, survival analyses were employed to evaluate whether participants' reentry court completion status affects their likelihood of and timing to recidivism events three years after exiting the program. The results revealed that successful program completion continues to shape recidivism outcomes up to three years after reentry court exit.

**Keywords:** Reentry court, recidivism, program evaluation, community supervision, problem-solving courts

**Introduction and Literature Review**

Beginning in the early-1970s, the United States experienced an exponential growth in its prison population. In 1973, there were approximately 200,000 individuals in prison (Travis, 2005); by 2016, 1.5 million people were in prison in America (Kaeble & Cowhig, 2018). That 650 percent increase in the number of people incarcerated in prisons in the past four decades has contributed to the United States' per capita rate of imprisonment, which is ranked the highest in the world (Walmsley, 2018).

One consequence of this increase is a similar rate of growth in the number of individuals who are leaving the penal system (Carson & Anderson, 2016). Yet, Durose, Cooper, and Snyder (2014) estimated that almost one-half of released prisoners will be re-arrested within the first year and over three-quarters within five years. Moreover, these estimates suggest that nearly one-half will return to prison in three years. Rhodes and colleagues (2016), utilizing an alternative estimation strategy, found that after 12 years of release, 33 percent of their offender-based sample returned to prison.

Reentry courts have emerged as one strategy to help individuals released from incarceration successfully reintegrate back into society, mitigate social stigmas, and reduce recidivism rates (Travis, 2005). A reentry court model broadens the judiciary's scope beyond pre-adjudication and-sentencing decisions and into post-release reentry management (Travis, 2001). Building off the successes of drug court models (Belenko, 2001; Marlowe, 2016; Marlowe, Hardin, & Fox, 2016), reentry courts empower judges to lead collaborative case management activities, convene local stakeholders to provide treatment and support services, monitor behavior, and hold individuals accountable (Travis, 2001). Through a combination of pre-release assessments, judicial oversight, behavioral contracting, procedural justice, sanction

and reward schedules, and cross-sector partnerships, reentry courts have the potential to motivate participants and support the process of behavioral change (Lindquist, Hardison, & Lattimore, 2003, 2004).

Aided in part by federal legislation and incentives, state and local jurisdictions have made investments to implement reentry courts (Pratt & Turanovic, 2019; Thielo, Cullen, Burton, Moon, & Burton, 2019). The Office of Justice Programs ([OJP], 1999) launched the Reentry Court Initiative (RCI) and delivered technical assistance to nine sites to pilot reentry court programs (Lindquist et al., 2004). Pilot sites were encouraged to adhere to OJP's (1999) six core components of reentry court programming, which included: (1) use of eligibility criteria to identify potential participants and needs assessments to develop reentry plans prior to release; (2) regularly scheduled court appearances involving judges, supervision officers, and other program participants; (3) court identification and management of local supportive services, (4) integration of citizen advisory boards and victim advocates; (5) swift and consistent sanctions; and (6) use of rewards and public ceremonies to recognize program milestones. Beyond recognition of these principles, pilot sites were to tailor their program model to target populations deemed appropriate by local justice system stakeholders (Lindquist et al., 2003, 2004).

In an assessment of the implementation of RCI, Lindquist and colleagues (2004) found that pilot sites coordinated a similar slate of services to one another. Generally, these courts included substance abuse assessment and treatment, mental health assessment and treatment, physical health services, housing placement assistance, job placement assistance, educational or vocational training, and resources to meet basic and identification needs. Reentry courts varied in their target populations, participant recruitment and placement procedures, pre-release assessment and planning activities, frequency of court appearances, duration of participation

(i.e., between six months to one year), case management strategies, collaboration across community partners, and sanction and reward schedules.

Similar program components across courts and differences between programs were detailed in an evaluation of eight reentry courts that received funding and technical assistance under the Second Chance Act of 2007 (Carey et al., 2018). This research extended the findings of the RCI evaluation in a few important ways. Second Chance Act reentry courts were similar in their use of drug testing procedures and split sentencing structures to retain judicial authority over participants. Sites diverged in the voluntary or mandatory nature of programming. Participation was voluntary in three sites, mandatory in three sites, and a hybrid between voluntary and involuntary in one site. The diversity of reentry court program models coupled with small numbers of participants at any one time have tempered the ability to understand whether the potential promise of reentry courts is realized (Carey et al., 2018; Lindquist et al., 2004; Morgan et al., 2016; Pratt & Turanovic, 2019; Thielo et al., 2019).

Despite the current and expanding operation of reentry courts across the country, there are few independent and peer-reviewed evaluations available to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of the practice at the local level (Huddleston, Marlowe, & Casebolt, 2008; Pratt & Turanovic, 2019; Thielo et al., 2019). Most of what is known has been generated from descriptions of program models, self-reported results, or process evaluations (see, e.g., Close, Aubin, & Alltucker, 2008; Farole, 2003; Hiller, Narevic, Leukefeld, & Webster, 2007; Knollenberg & Martin, 2008; Lindquist et al., 2004; Miller & Khey, 2017; Thelin & Nunn, 2009). To date, only two independent outcome evaluations of reentry courts at the local level have been subject to scholarly review (see Hamilton, 2011; Ho, Carey, & Malsch, 2018). The remainder of the research literature originates from technical reports with unknown review

protocols (see, e.g., Administrative Office of the Courts, 2012; Ayoub & Pooler, 2015; Carey et al., 2018; Farole, 2003; Haight, Roof, Sherls, & Jarjoura, 2012; Hamilton, 2010; Hansel, Wall, & Kivisto, 2014; Pearson-Nelson, n.d.; Thelin & Nunn, 2009) or involve participants convicted of federal offenses (see, e.g., Close et al., 2008; Knollenberg & Martin, 2008; Taylor, 2013; Vance, 2011).

Among available local reentry court evaluations, the effect of reentry courts on recidivism is not clear. In a multi-site examination of eight reentry courts using site-specific quasi-experimental designs, one site produced consistent reductions in recidivism, four locations had null or mixed findings, and two sites increased the risk of recidivism for participants (Carey et al., 2018). Across six California sites, quasi-experimental designs indicated that reentry courts reduced returns to prison and increased the risk of re-arrest one-year post-program admission (Judicial Council of California, 2014). Quasi-experimental evaluations of the Harlem Parole Reentry Court found that participants were neither more or less likely to be returned to prison (Farole, 2003) nor were more likely to be returned to prison (Hamilton, 2010, 2011) than matched comparison groups across one-to three-year post-prison release follow-up periods. There were no differences between participants and comparison groups in the timing to a return to prison. A randomized trial of the Harlem Parole Reentry Court indicated significant reductions in multiple measures of recidivism across an 18-month post-prison release follow-up period (Ayoub & Pooler, 2015). Evaluations estimating the recidivism rate of participants of a one-year program without a non-equivalent comparison group indicated that a minority of participants will recidivate within a three-year post-prison release period (45% from Hansel et al., 2014).

One of the challenges in trying to make sense of the mixed recidivism findings is non-adherence to program stipulations. Approximately half of participants will successfully complete

or graduate from reentry courts (Thielo et al., 2019). For instance, across a six-year period, 53

percent of participants who engaged in Marion County (Indiana) Reentry Court's (MCRC) one-

year program graduated (Haight et al., 2012). A previous assessment of the same court

examining its first two years of operations found less than one third of its admissions graduate

(Thelin & Nunn, 2009). Allen County (Indiana) Reentry Court's one-year program graduated 44

percent of its participants across a three-year admission cohort (Hansel et al., 2014) and 41

percent of participants across a seven and a half year admission cohort (Pearson-Nelson, n.d.).

Harlem (New York) Parole Reentry Court's six-month program produced a 54 percent

graduation rate across a seven-year period (Hamilton, 2010, 2011). A preliminary assessment of

the Harlem Parole Reentry Court's first 44 participants indicated that half of its participants

completed the program, while the randomized control trial at the same location revealed a 60

percent graduation rate (Ayoub & Pooler, 2015). Lastly, in a multi-site evaluation of problem-

solving courts that included six reentry courts found that the graduation rate for reentry court

participants was 36 percent (Ho et al., 2018).

     A handful of factors differentiate between participants who complete reentry court

programs from those who do not complete these programs. Older participants are more likely to

graduate (Hansel et al., 2014). Participants with a high school education, general equivalency

degree (GED), or higher levels of educational attainment are more likely to graduate from

reentry courts (Hamilton, 2010, 2011; Hansel et al., 2014). Participants enrolled in drug

treatment services are more likely to graduate than those who are not engaged in these services

(Hamilton, 2010, 2011). Criminal history indicators have mixed effects on program completion.

Participants' arrest and conviction history are unrelated to graduation status (Farole, 2003;

Hamilton, 2010), while those with at least one prior arrest for a violent felony are more likely to

graduate than those who lack this arrest history (Hamilton, 2011). Those with relatively few past incarcerations are more likely to graduate in relation to participants with more commitments (Hansel et al., 2014). Participants who were ordered to at least one parole supervision term are less likely to complete (Hamilton, 2010, 2011) or are no more or less likely to complete reentry court programming (Farole, 2003).

Reentry court participants who graduate or receive a larger "dose" of program services produce sizable differences in recidivism outcomes in relation to those who do not adhere to programming. That is, participants will self-select and interact with program activities in different ways, which impact in-program and post-exit program outcomes. Haight and colleagues' (2012) quasi-experimental evaluation found that graduates' prison incarceration rate (9%) was lower at a three-year post-prison release follow-up than the rate of a release cohort comparison group (46%) and the rate of those who were terminated from reentry court (76%). Harlem Parole Reentry Court participants who were eligible to graduate were less likely to return to prison two and three years after release from prison in relation to the comparison group as well as those who did not complete the program (Hamilton, 2010). The Harlem Parole Reentry Court randomized trial found that completers were significantly less likely to return to prison (5%) at 18 months post-prison release in relation to those who did not complete the program (25%; Ayoub & Pooler, 2015). Although the post-exit period of observation was not standardized, an evaluation of a one-year reentry court program found a recidivism rate of 41 percent for graduates and 50 percent for non-graduates (Pearson-Nelson, n.d.). A second evaluation using a similar evaluation design indicated 26 percent of graduates and 60 percent of non-graduates recidivated (Thelin & Nunn, 2009).

Across the small body of literature on local reentry courts, most examinations of recidivism outcomes begin after participants' release from prison, continue throughout participants' engagement with the court, and extend one to two years (depending on timing of admission decisions and program duration) after participants' exit from court. Only one set of studies from Hamilton (2010, 2011) has examined a three-year post-release follow-up period. This observation window translates to a two and a half year post-exit observation period given the six-month duration of the program. Reentry courts can affect its participants, particularly its graduates, across post-exit follow-up periods when the court no longer provides supervision or support. It is also plausible for the effects of reentry courts, much like other problem-solving courts, to decay over time (see Wilson, Mitchell, & MacKenzie, 2006).

**Current Study**

The current study examines whether participants' completion status continues to affect recidivism and the timing to recidivism events across a three-year post-exit follow-up period. It is evident that reentry courts have received increased scholarly attention, but evidence supporting the practice and the various program models used remains underdeveloped. The current body of knowledge devotes little attention to the potential long-term benefits of the court after participants have exited its activities. These circumstances make it difficult to inform policy decisions to expand or constrain future implementations. The current study contributes to knowledge on reentry courts by examining long-term post-exit trends and pursuing a primary research question germane to justice system administration and practitioners: *Are participants who successfully complete the reentry court able to produce better recidivism outcomes three years after exit than those who did not complete the program?*

The local Indiana reentry court sponsoring this evaluation has been in operation for over ten years. To identify eligible participants for admission, an individual must be released through Indiana Department of Correction's (IDOC) Community Transition Program (CTP)[1] to community supervision and be recommended for the reentry court by a CTP liaison. To screen for eligibility, CTP personnel and the court review pre-sentence investigation reports, results of substance abuse and mental health assessments, and reentry accountability plans to ensure that potential participants have a primary substance use problem and are scheduled to be released to the reentry court's county. Individuals with a history of serious violent or sex crimes, diagnosed serious mental illness, and ordered to dual post-release supervision (parole and probation terms) are not eligible for participation. If a potential participant is identified and meets these criteria, the court will approve admission. Upon admission, participation in the court becomes mandatory as a condition of supervision.

The reentry court adheres to the core principles and operations of the RCI and Second Chance Act reentry courts (Carey et al., 2018; Lindquist, Ayoub, & Carey, 2018; Lindquist et al., 2003, 2004). The program combines pre-release assessment and planning, enhanced supervision, and the use of a graduated matrix of incentives and sanctions to reward compliance and sanction noncompliance. The judge and collaborative case management team acknowledges incentives and sanctions and imposes rewards or consequences in public hearings in front of court participants.

The court has a formal agreement with substance abuse treatment providers to access inpatient and outpatient services directed by certified addiction and/or mental health counselors trained in motivational interviewing and cognitive-behavioral therapeutic techniques. Nonprofits who deliver housing and employment assistance and placement are collaborators with the court.

The collaborative case management team consists of a program coordinator, case manager, parole officer, and representatives of treatment and service providers. The team generates case plans, monitors progress, counsels with the judge, coordinates services, and accesses ancillary wraparound support services as needed. Participants are subject to random drug tests while engaged with the court.

Individuals participate in the reentry court for a minimum of one-year during which participants proceed through three phases (minimum of 90 days per phase) that vary in level of supervision and program requirements. Phase One, the most intensive, requires weekly court appearances, weekly collaborative case management meetings, attendance at two group counseling sessions and/or life skills training seminars per week, and two random drug tests per week. Phase Two entails biweekly court attendance, biweekly collaborative case management meetings, participation in two group counseling sessions and/or life skills seminars per week, and two random weekly drug screenings. Participants are also encouraged to find employment and maintain suitable housing. Phase Three consists of appearing in front of the presiding judge once a month, monthly collaborative case management meetings, attendance at one group counseling session and/or life skills training per week, submitting to one random drug test, and maintaining employment and housing requirements established in Phase Two. Participants are encouraged to attend twelve step recovery meetings convened by one service provider.

Program incentives include verbal praise from the judge and case management team, certificates of accomplishment, relaxation of conditions, transportation passes, gift certificates, and vouchers to cover or offset the costs of restitution and/or community supervision fees. Sanctions involve verbal reprimands from judge and case management team, community service orders, return to a previously completed phase, and short-term jail placements of up to three

days. The judge and case management team make decisions to discharge a participant from the reentry court. The court attempts to retain participants and prevent unsuccessful discharges. For instance, participants experiencing justice system contact will be welcomed back to the court but may be required to return to the first phase of the program. Repeated returns to previously completed phases (especially regressions to the first phase), justice system contact resulting in a revocation of supervision terms, and accumulated failures to appear may result in a program termination. Participants who exit the program without graduating are transferred to traditional community supervision and do not receive a reduction in their supervision term.

Participants are eligible to graduate if they have completed all three phases of the one-year program. The judge and case management team also determine whether a participant has successfully completed the program. Graduates attend a public ceremony. Current and past participants are encouraged to attend the ceremony regardless of exit status. Graduates transfer to traditional community supervision after exit, are monitored by relaxed supervision terms, and earn an early discharge from supervision. Graduates do not have their conviction offense expunged from their record.

**Methodology**

*Sample*

To construct a retrospective cohort design and examine the potential long-term benefits of the reentry court, a sample of all participants exposed to court operations across nearly a six-year period (January 2011 to October 2016; N= 672) was extracted from the court's record management system. A subsample of participants who (a) exited the program as successful or unsuccessful discharges, and (b) were at-risk for recidivism for up to a three-year period regardless of their exit status were drawn from the larger extract (N = 340). Adjustments for time

in custody were instituted to ensure that all of the participants in the final sample were at-risk in the community for a three-year observation period (see Belenko, Foltz, Lang, & Sung, 2004). The average duration of reentry court involvement for all participants in the final sample was 12.48 months (SD=6.49).

Participants within the sampling frame who did not have a sufficient three-year period at-risk for recidivism in the community with or without adjustments for time in custody (N=165), were still active in the program (N=109), who were referred to the program but did not participate (N=31), or who died during the study observation period (N=19) were excluded from the final sample. Two additional participants were removed from the final sample due to inaccurate program data. Last, female cases were not included due to the small number of participants who were female (N=6). While both males and females are eligible to participate in the reentry court program, the overrepresentation of males in prison contributes to the sex disparity of participants.

*Measures*

Measures were constructed from the local Sheriff's Office, IDOC records, and the internal records of the reentry court. The primary outcome measure was recidivism, which was operationalized as *return to prison* during the three-year follow-up period after exiting the reentry court. A dummy variable was created to indicate whether (= 1) or not (= 0) an individual had returned to prison for any reason. Recidivism measures were time stamped, thus allowing for the creation of measures of days to first incarceration event after program discharge. The key independent variable, *reentry court completion status*, was constructed with (= 1) indicating reentry court completers and (= 0) representing non-completers. Recall, the judge and case management team collaboratively make completion status decisions. Completers are those

participants who successfully completed the program. Non-completers were non-compliant with program rules and activities and exited the program as an unsuccessful discharge.

To account for correlates of reentry court completion and help ensure that observed relationships were not the result of demographic differences between reentry court completers and non-completers, a series of control variables were included. R*ace* refers to the racial identity of the program participant (1 = Black or 0 = non-Black). *Age* indicates participant's age at time of admission into the reentry court program. *Education progress* captures highest level of education at reentry court admission (1 = high school degree or above or 0 = no high school degree). *Employment status* refer to whether a participant was employed full or part time (= 1) or unemployed (= 0) while under the supervision of the court.

Criminal history measures include *criminal charge at admission,* which refers to the most severe conviction offense that brought participants to the reentry court. These charges were classified into the following categories: crime against property, drug crime, public order classification, and crime against person. *Total prior jail bookings* indicates the number of times an individual was previously incarcerated in the local county jail prior to entering reentry court. *Total in program jail bookings* serves as a proxy of program non-compliance and allows for the observation of whether there were differential effects on recidivism outcomes for completers and non-completers who were non-compliant with the reentry court. Lastly, *service referral* refers to whether (= 1) or not (= 0) the individual was referred to and enrolled in supplemental treatment and support services while under the supervision of the court. Services here are those external to the slate of resources made available to reentry court participants. This measure attempts to tap into the ability of participants and the collaborative case management team to access ancillary resources.

*Analytic Strategy*

The purpose of the current study is to determine whether completing reentry court is associated with return to prison during the three-year follow-up period after exiting the reentry court. Survival analyses were utilized to examine the long-term effects of exposure to and discharge from reentry court supervision and support. Kaplan-Meier and Cox regression survival estimates are presented and were censored to a three-year post-exit follow-up period. Kaplan-Meier analysis estimates unconditional survival curves, which identify the proportion of participants who did and did not recidivate across the three-year post-exit follow-up period (see Hosmer & Lemeshow, 1999). The estimates provide baseline information on the timing of recidivism. Cox regression enables the estimation of conditional models to examine the occurrence and timing of recidivism. This technique accounts for sources of bias that arise when participants did not recidivate or were censored from observations at the end of the post-exit follow-up period (see Hosmer & Lemeshow, 1999).

Prior to the survival analyses, univariate statistics are produced to describe the sample of reentry court participants. Bivariate tests of mean and proportional differences between reentry court completers and non-completers were conducted and reported in the text. This portion of the analysis highlights the ways in which completers self-selected and differentiated themselves from non-completers. Measures of *age, total prior jail bookings,* and *total in program jail bookings* underwent log transformations in Cox regression models to correct for skewed univariate distributions. All of the control variables were included in the Cox regression equation to mitigate observed between group differences and their potential effect on recidivism.

**Results**

*Sample Description*

Table 1 provides the univariate statistics for the control variables used in the analyses. The average participant was a 26-year-old Black male. A majority of participants had a high school degree or above, obtained employment while under the court's supervision, and entered the program with a conviction of drug crime. In terms of service referral, about one out of every two participants was referred to and enrolled in supplemental treatment services. Participants had a median total of 5 prior local jail bookings before entering reentry court. While under the supervision of the reentry court, participants' averaged one additional jail booking.

[Insert Table 1 near here]

*Court Completion*

Less than one-half of participants (40.3%) graduated from the reentry court. Completers averaged 13.78 months (SD=3.66) in the program compared to 11.60 months (SD=7.73) for non-completers. Of the demographic controls, tests for mean or proportional differences indicated that the two groups diverged from one another with regard to *age* ($t(338) = 4.04$, $p<.001$), *education progress* ($\chi^2$ $(1, N=335) = 18.33$, $p<.001$), *employment status* ($\chi^2(1, N=340) = 19.18$, $p<.001$), *criminal charge at admission* ($\chi^2(3, N=331) = 20.37$, $p<.001$), *service referral* ($\chi^2(1, N=340) = 21.35$, $p<.001$), and *total in program jail bookings* ($t(338) = -6.82$, $p<.001$).

Reentry court completers were older than non-completers. Completers were more likely to attain a high school degree, be employed full or part time, and be referred to and enrolled in supplemental services compared to non-completers. Furthermore, a significant difference was present in criminal charges between those who completed the program and their counterparts. Larger proportions of non-completers were convicted of property and public order crimes in relation to completers. Alternatively, more completers were convicted of drug crimes than non-completers. Lastly, completers had fewer in program jail bookings.

*Effect of Reentry Court on Recidivism*

Across the three-year follow-up period after exiting reentry court, about one in every four participants (26.5%) returned to prison. Reentry court completers were found to possess significantly lower return to prison rates relative to the non-completers ($\chi^2$ (1, N=340) = 25.79, $p$<.001). Twelve percent of completers returned to prison, while 36 percent of non-completers were returned.

Figure 1 presents the Kaplan-Meier survival curves for the two groups of participants. There are clear and significant differences between completers and non-completers, with larger proportions of completers avoiding recidivism over time (Log-rank $\chi^2$ (1, N=340) = 27.7, $p$<.001; Wilcoxon $\chi^2$ (1, N=340) = 30.11, $p$< .001; Tarone-Ware $\chi^2$ (1, N=340) = 29.98, $p$< .001). On average, non-completers returned to prison 221 days faster than reentry court completers in the three-year post-exit follow-up period ($M_{NC}$=838.94, SE=27.32 and $M_C$=1060.34, SE=10.93).

[Insert Figure 1 near here]

At one-year post-exit, 20 percent of non-completers had returned to prison. None of the completers had returned to prison within this period. At two-year post-exit, nearly one in every three non-completers (29.6%) returned to prison, compared with 4 percent of completers. The differences between reentry court completers and non-completers remained relatively stable from the two-years post-exit mark through the end of the three-year post-exit follow-up period.

Table 2 presents the results from a Cox equation that regressed return to prison on the reentry court completion status, net of control variables. Features to note in the table are the signs of the regression coefficients. A positive beta coefficient (*b)* means that the return to incarceration risk is higher and thus time to the incarceration event is shortened. In contrast, a

negative *b* can be interpreted as a longer time to return to incarceration. The results reinforce the findings of the Kaplan-Meier analysis. Completion status had a significant influence on post-exit recidivism risk. Participants who completed the reentry court were less at risk for a return to prison compared to non-completers. The relative hazard of recidivism decreased by 67 percent $[(1 - 0.33)*100 = 67]$ for completers given the survival trends for non-completers. If participants experienced a recidivism event across the post-exit follow-up period, the timing to recidivism occurred much more quickly for non-completers. Completers benefited from a significant delay in their return to prison. The Cox regression results also indicated that the risk of return to prison was significantly reduced for Black reentry court participants in relation to non-Black participants. Across the post-exit follow-up period, Black participants had a 54 percent lower hazard of recidivism than non-Black participants $[(1 - 0.46)*100 = 54]$. None of the remaining control variables were related to recidivism.

[Insert Table 2 near here]

**Discussion**

A large proportion (95%) of incarcerated individuals in prisons return to the community (Hughes & Wilson, 2002). The fundamental goal for reentry court programs is to successfully reintegrate returning citizens. Although there are some available findings to suggest that reentry courts can affect participants, the broader body of evidence on the ability of reentry courts to reduce returns to prison and other forms of recidivism remains inconclusive. The combination of diverse program models, program completion rates, and research designs using one- to two-year post-prison release observation periods to monitor recidivism has made it difficult to draw conclusions about reentry courts as an evidence-based practice.

The objective of this research was to extend the available literature by examining the potential long-term effects of a reentry court. Specifically, the current study examined whether participants who completed a reentry court continued to benefit from their experience in relation to those who were exposed to the court but did not receive full dosage of the program model. Recidivism outcomes and the timing to recidivism events were assessed using a three-year follow-up period after exiting the court.

The results demonstrate that a reentry court can affect recidivism outcomes well after participants exit. Participants who completed the reentry program continued to benefit from their interaction with the reentry court even though they were no longer supervised by the court or receiving its treatment, support, and referral services. The advantages afforded to program completers were most pronounced in the first post-exit year. None of the completers experienced a return to prison across this interval. Participants' completion status continued to serve as a protective factor for graduates over time, but completers and non-completers began to demonstrate similar return to prison patterns (as indicated from Kaplan-Meier survival curves) two years after exit from the court. Although the majority of program completers and non-completers were not returned to prison, the insulating effect of the court on completers began to decay toward the end of the observation period.

To place these findings in context, the return to prison rate in the follow-up period for reentry court completers (12%) diverges substantially from not only Durose and colleagues' (2014) and Rhodes and colleagues' (2016) return to prison estimates (50% and 33%, respectively) but also IDOC's statewide three-year post-release return to prison rate of 34 percent (IDOC, 2017). Among non-completers of the reentry court, the return to prison rate of 37 percent is largely consistent with national and Indiana recidivism estimates. In tandem, these

findings indicate that a local reentry court can reduce the risk of a return to prison if and only if participants complete program requirements.

Open empirical questions remain on how to improve reentry courts' graduation rates. Forty percent of participants successfully completed the reentry court program in this study. This result is slightly lower than the anticipated graduation rate of 50 percent found in the available literature. Yet the estimate deduced from this study remains within the neighborhood of the results of other reentry court evaluations (Ayoub & Pooler, 2015; Haight et al., 2012; Hamilton, 2011; Ho et al., 2018). To put this graduation rate in a broader perspective of problem-solving courts, consider the results of drug courts, which possess a strong research foundation and have stimulated the creation of reentry courts (Thielo et al., 2019). Belenko's (2001) review of eight separate drug court programs reports an average 47 percent graduation rate, ranging from 36 percent to 60 percent. Moreover, according to a 2014 National Drug Court Institute (NDCI) survey, it reported an average graduation rate of 59 percent, ranging from 50 percent to 75 percent (Marlowe et al., 2016).

Although the current study reports post-exit recidivism results, some preliminary insights can be inferred from bivariate differences between completers and non-completers. Older participants, those with at least a high school education, and those who took advantage of the supplemental treatment and support services offered by the court's case management team were more likely to exit the program as a successful completion. These findings are consistent with the results of other reentry court evaluations, which found relationships between completion status and participant age, education, and engagement in services (see, e.g., Hamilton, 2010, 2011; Hansel et al., 2014; Ho et al., 2018). Mirroring the inconsistencies found in the literature on the relationship between participants' criminal history and completion status (see, e.g., Farole, 2003;

Hamilton, 2010, 2011; Hansel et al., 2014), the results of this study indicated that participants' conviction charge at admission contributes to reentry court completion. Participants who entered the court with a conviction for a drug crime were more likely to complete the program, especially in relation to those convicted of crimes against persons, property offenses, and public order offenses. Yet, there was no association between participants' frequency of previous incarcerations at the local county jail and completion status.

The findings of this study also extend the literature by establishing two additional factors correlated with the successful completion of a reentry court program. Participants employed full- or part-time were more likely to complete the program. Additionally, participants with fewer in-program jail bookings tended to graduate from the reentry court. In tandem, these factors serve as relevant signals that program participants have differentiated or are beginning to distance themselves from their peers during program activities and may be on their way toward desistance (see Bushway & Apel, 2012). These self-selection mechanisms contribute to the significant differences in post-exit recidivism and timing to recidivism events between completers and non-completers.

From a policy perspective, the correlates of completion status and the effect of this status on recidivism suggest that non-completers need a more appropriate type of intervention to facilitate the transition to the community than what the local reentry court provided. Creating screening processes and admission policies that ensure individuals who are most likely to benefit from reentry court are eligible and enrolled, working to increase treatment motivation before and after release, and ensuring reentry court programs offer proper wrap-around services that meet a full range of needs are practical ways to improve reentry court completion rates.

Despite efforts to construct an adequate retrospective research design, there are limitations that should be considered when interpreting the overall results of this study. For example, the ideal approach to studying the effect of a reentry court on recidivism would be to conduct a prospective randomized control experiment in which subjects were randomly assigned to either a reentry court or traditional case processing and observed across short-and long-term outcomes. Random assignment was not used to structure admission decisions. Instead, program staff made an admission offer to eligible participants who, in-turn, opted-in or out of the program. After entry, participants also interacted with the reentry court in a variety of ways that are not entirely clear (e.g., length of time reentry court participants spent in each program phase). The self-selection of participants into completers and non-completers was the focus of the present study. Indeed, the completer and non-completer samples were not similar on all of the available control variables. Multivariate regression models attempted to minimize observed pre-existing differences between participants through statistical controls. Future research seeking to offer a rigorous test of the effect of a reentry court on recidivism should expand the present methodology to integrate a non-equivalent comparison group or, ideally, design and execute a randomized experiment to account for selection processes.

This study was also limited to utilizing the administrative data collected by the reentry court who sponsored the study. Variables that might have directly or indirectly measured the reentry court's "black box" of operation may not have been captured. Local justice agencies that helped to sponsor this research did not collect these data prospectively or with the study's interest in mind. Future studies should seek to expand from the set of variables used in this study and integrate alternative collections to acquire more comprehensive and complete data. At minimum, future research should integrate measures of participants' needs, especially the result

of screenings and assessments related to substance use, mental health, and/or co-occurring conditions. Participant processing metrics also need to be captured to examine relationships between length of time reentry court participants spent in each program phase, in-program non-compliance, detailed program discharge information, alternative reentry court outcomes, and recidivism outcomes. Studies that integrate measures on reentry court processing will provide a more complete understanding about reentry court dose-response relationships, program discharge decision-making, and recidivism. Overall, there is a need for more standardized collection and consistent tracking of reentry court data and performance indicators.

In addition, due to constraints of the datasets and the retrospective nature of the study, the measure of recidivism used in this study represent the most conservative reoffending measure as defined by Rydberg and Grommon (2016) in relation to other measures of reoffending. An incarceration measure of recidivism captures how the criminal justice system responds to criminal behavior rather than addressing the presence or absence of criminal behavior (Maltz, 1984). Records needed to create alternative measures of recidivism were not available. Indiana does not track statewide re-arrest or reconviction measures of recidivism (Justice Center, 2018), and the county and court could not produce these records. Future research should construct recidivism measures of re-arrest and differentiate between technical and new offense violations that may result in an incarceration.

One key question for reentry courts moving forward is to determine if recidivism is the only appropriate outcome to monitor. Problem-solving court literature has started to move beyond recidivism as a primary outcome measure and now recognizes alternative key measures, which are more germane to their missions and goals, such as treatment retention rates, reduction in crime severity, education and employment attainment, sobriety, stable housing, or compliance

with program requirements (Porter, Rempel, & Mansky, 2010). If recidivism indicators are the only measures by which reentry courts are judged, the emphasis on rehabilitation and encouraging therapeutic progress in reentry courts is obscured.

Lastly, the present study is limited in that it evaluates a single reentry court in Indiana. Recall, the court's program involves mandatory participation once admitted and requires a one-year commitment. While there were no differences in the graduation rates by participants' race, Black participants had significantly lower risk of recidivating and longer delays to recidivism events than non-Black participants net control variables and regardless of completion status. This suggests that the court's structure, service delivery, resources, and staff may have created a therapeutically responsive setting that benefitted Black participants. Although similar findings have been generated from evaluations of other types of problem-solving courts (Atkin-Plunk & Armstrong, 2016; Atkin-Plunk, Peck, & Armstrong, 2019), this result may be an idiosyncratic feature of the current setting. Results must be interpreted with these court elements in mind and should not be generalized to or interpreted as being representative of all reentry courts.

**Conclusion**

In the end, knowledge about the effect of reentry courts is in its early stages, and as such, few definitive statements can be made about the model until more studies are conducted. The results of this study suggest that this reentry court does reduce risk of return to prison for participants who successfully completed the program for up to three years after exit, which adds evidence to support the promise of the reentry court model. The idea that completers make the greatest gains and non-completers follow a different trajectory holds true in the current study. The differential rate of recidivism between the participants remains relatively constant across a three-year post-exit follow-up period. The findings highlight the need for reentry court

participants to receive the full dosage of a court's program to achieve beneficial recidivism outcomes. The next challenge will be to answer critical *what* and *how* questions; *what* policies and practices need to be in place to maximize the rate of completion and *how* do reentry courts deliver program components with high fidelity to enhance participants' ability to graduate. Future research and replications should aim to compensate for the limitations noted in this study and continue to refine reentry court best practice as additional evidence becomes available.

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**Note**

1. CTP, enacted into law in 1999 by the Indiana state legislature, allows eligible state inmates to be transferred to a community corrections program or other program of supervision 60 to 180 days prior to their release date. Upon successfully completing the CTP program, participants are released to parole or probation (IDOC, 2018).

**Table 1.** Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N=340)

|  | % / M (IQR) |
|---|---|
| Black | 86.2% |
| Age | 25.86 (6.61) |
| High school degree or above[a] | 56.1% |
| Employed full or part time | 56.5% |
| Criminal charge at admission[b] |  |
| *Public order classification* | 11.5% |
| *Drug crime* | 51.4% |
| *Crime against property* | 22.7% |
| *Crime against person* | 14.5% |
| Referred to services | 51.2% |
| Total prior jail bookings | 5.00 (6.00) |
| Total in program jail bookings | 1.00 (4.00) |

M, Median; IQR, Interquartile Range

a. Education progress was missing for some participants; N=335

b. Criminal charge at admission was missing for some participants; N=331

**Figure 1**. IDOC Recidivism: Cumulative Proportion Surviving (N=340[a])
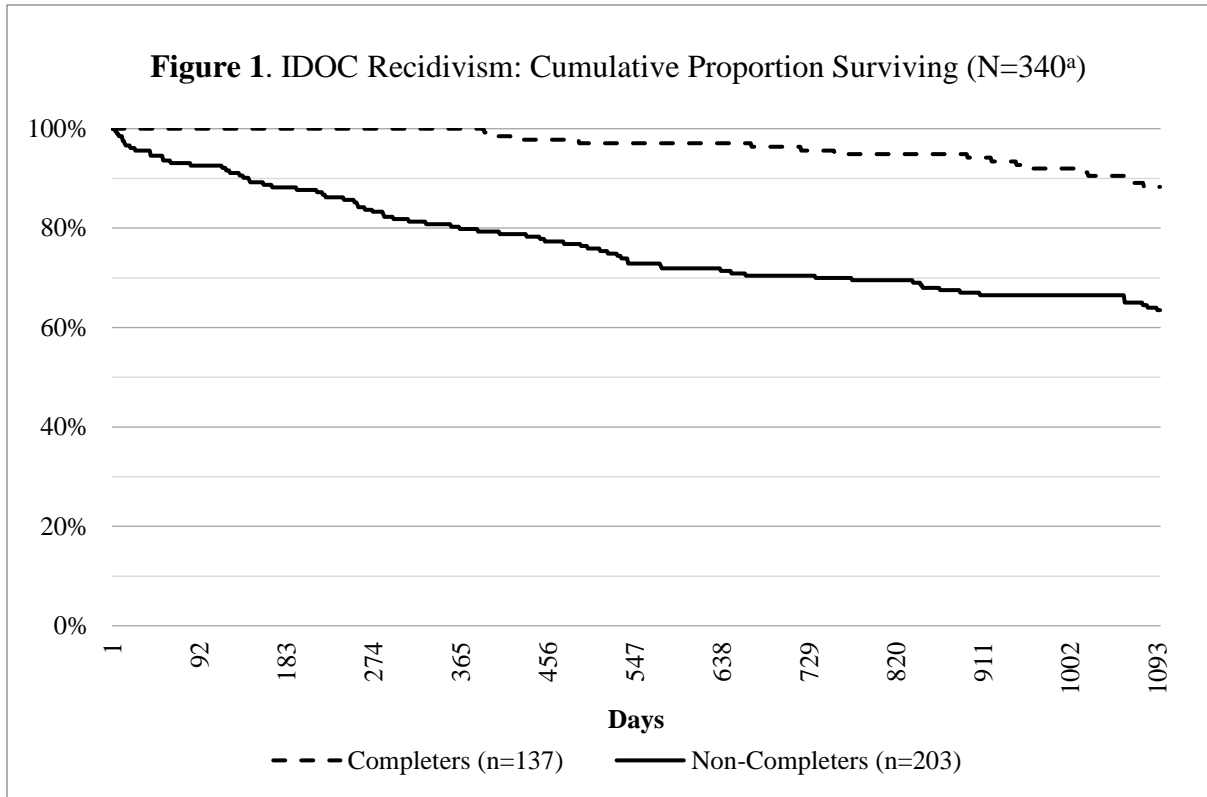


[a.]Figure 1 represents unconditional survival curves generated from the Kaplan-Meier analysis.

**Table 2.** Cox Regression Model: Completers Return to Prison Risk (N=326[a])

| | $b$ | SE | HR |
|---|---|---|---|
| Completed reentry court | -1.11*** | 0.31 | 0.33 |
| Black | -0.78** | 0.29 | 0.46 |
| Age[‡] | -2.97 | 1.94 | 0.05 |
| High school degree or above | -0.22 | 0.23 | 0.80 |
| Employed full or part time | 0.09 | 0.24 | 1.10 |
| Criminal charge at admission[b] | | | |
| *Public order classification* | 0.67 | 0.48 | 1.94 |
| *Drug crime* | 0.68 | 0.44 | 1.97 |
| *Crime against property* | 0.29 | 0.41 | 1.34 |
| Referred to services | -0.29 | 0.27 | 0.74 |
| Total prior jail bookings[‡] | 0.59 | 0.44 | 1.81 |
| Total in program jail bookings[‡] | 0.21 | 0.32 | 1.23 |
| *Model summary* | | | |
| -2 log likelihood | | 924.12 | |
| $\chi^2(df)$ | | 45.24*** (11) | |

**p< .01, ***p< .001

HR, Hazard Ratio; SE, Standard Error

‡ Log transformation occurred to correct skewed univariate distribution

[a.]Given that "education progress" and "criminal charge at admission" measures were missing for some participants in the dataset, a total of 14 cases with these missing values were dropped in the analysis.

[b.]Reference: Crime against person